

**A Trans-American Dream: Lupe Vélez and the Performance of Transculturation**

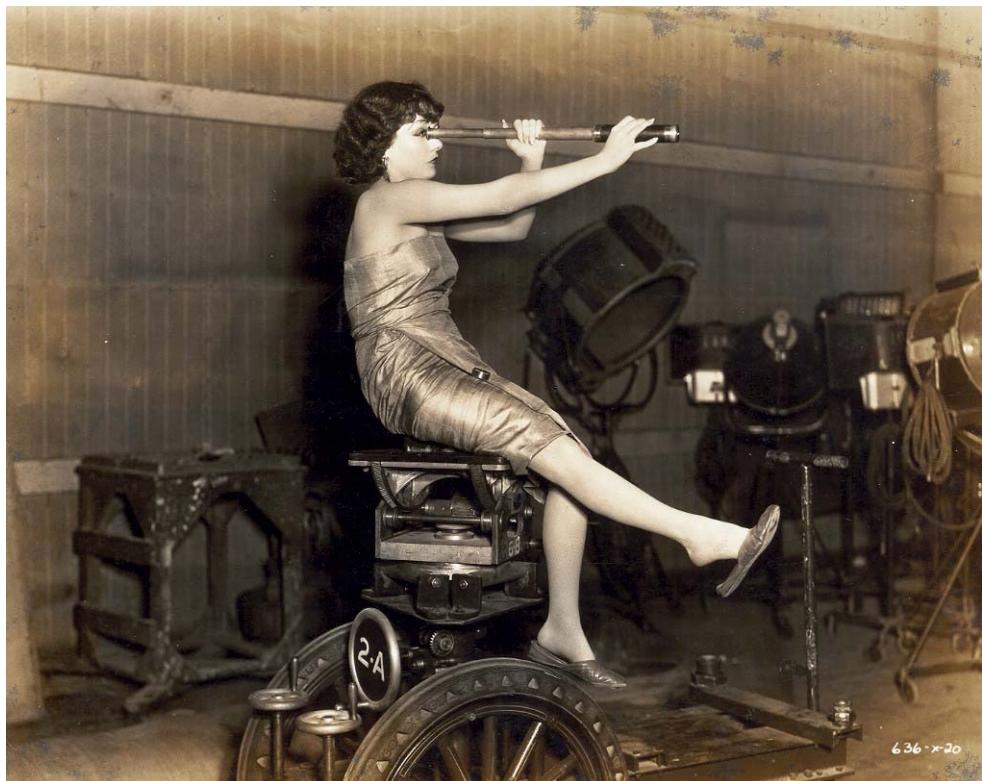
**By**

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## Acknowledgements

My dissertation is about a real person. This study is entirely predicated on the existence of Lupe Vélez and on the amazing tenacity with which she insisted on occupying a place in the public sphere. I might not have finished this project if not for a certain contract I somehow entered. I selected Lupe Vélez as the protagonist of my dissertation after having seen her impersonations (*High Flyers*, 1937) on youtube. I resolved that if Lupe would turn out to be the worthy, rewarding subject I believed she might be, I would work to do right by her. Lupe Vélez has held up—no, she has far exceeded—her end of the bargain. I was, and am, continually inspired by her grace, her humor, her intelligence, and her courage. I only hope I have held up *my* end of the bargain... so far. I know that Lupe and I aren't finished with each other yet.

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~ Uncle Matt Lindsay, speaking to his wife, Della ( <i>Mexican Spitfire's Elephant</i> , 1942)	316
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## Abstract

This dissertation documents the career, persona(e), and cultural memory of the Mexican actress, Lupe Vélez (1910-1944). In addition to offering analyses of Vélez films, I draw on archives of news and fan discourse produced between 1925 and 1999 out of Mexico, Mexican American Los Angeles, and the Anglo-hegemonic United States. *A Trans-American Dream* shows how Lupe Vélez came to signify, within cinematic and public discourse, the Mexican/U.S. contact zone.

I explore Vélez's work chronologically, documenting each phase of her career(s) in North America: her celebrity within Mexican popular theater, her stardom in Hollywood silent cinema, her transition to talking pictures, her work on the Broadway stage, her transition to Hollywood B-class comedies, her two Mexican films, her death, and the posthumous appropriation of her persona in popular discourse and in queer underground film.

My dissertation 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 representations. Vélez's varied personae amount, I argue, to a set of industry *performances* of transculturation. I employ the term *transculturation* (Fernando Ortiz, 1940), with an emphasis on its double valence, recognizing the distinct operations of her national (Mexican mestiza) and her transnational (Mexican American) instantiations of transculturation. Vélez was deployed—and she deployed herself—on the front lines of multiple discursive battlefields. She came to signify contestations of race, class, ethnicity, gender, and marriage. She fought for her cultural inclusion within industries that mobilized her precisely to publicly “include her out.” Thus in her wake lies the opportunity to reconceptualize Hollywood's historical function as mass-cultural mediator.

My project moves beyond the reductive “Spitfire” characterization—a trope invented for Lupe Vélez in order to define and contain the U.S. Latina image—to reveal Vélez as emblematic of a more profound phenomenon: the creative adaptability that defines her as a truly transcultural agent. This study of Lupe Vélez — a “minor” (and “minority”) star — joins those that seek to broaden the practice of star scholarship by trans-valuing the terms by which we assess individual public prominence.

## **CHAPTER 1**

### **Introduction**

Lupe Vélez had a gift for traversing borders. At fifteen she crossed the Mexican border to attend a convent school in San Antonio, Texas. When her family was displaced by the revolution she returned to Mexico. Finding her economic circumstance radically altered, like so many of her compatriots in these tumultuous years, she negotiated that border between economic stability and material hardship. Still a teenager, Vélez traveled to Mexico City to find a job in FAL department store—the metropolis’s shiny new icon of modern global capitalism. Like the heroine of a modern legend, Vélez emerged from behind the sales counter to become an overnight sensation in the city’s popular musical, or *revista*, theater. Post-revolutionary *revista*, itself, manifested as a border-spanning hybrid between emergent Mexican mass culture, Hollywood-inflected consumer culture, and European traditions of stage performance. Within the culture-clash that was the *revista* stage, Vélez trained in a craft that forms the basis, I argue, of her staying power within the US cultural imagination: a performance-based persona that defied—and at its most productive moments, *mocked*—stable signification.

Crossing the Mexico border to the U.S., Lupe Vélez would pass from stage to screen (repeatedly), silent cinema to sound, drama to comedy. Her discursive representation would shift between exotic pet, modern girl, and foreign vixen; her screen venues would move from A-movie to B. Vélez travelled from Hollywood to New York to London to Mexico and back to Hollywood. Ultimately she would usher her own

passage from life to death. Following her suicide she would pass from relative obscurity to “tragic-camp” emblem, avant-garde curiosity to queer icon, egregious stereotype to object of academic rumination. Lupe Vélez has multiple histories; Lupe Vélez has even more.

### “I am just Lupe”

Names, once they are in common use, quickly become mere sounds, their etymology being buried, like so many of the earth’s marvels, beneath the dust of habit.

~Salman Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses*, 217 (quoted in Blythe, 1991, 221)

To name is to “own.” and to own is to forget origins [...] all naming is geographically and culturally centered.

~Martin Blythe (1991, 223)

“I am not wild, I am just Lupe”

~Lupe Vélez



Figure 1: Lupe, Gary and a *wild* American eagle

In 1929, when Gary Cooper presented his girlfriend, Lupe Vélez, with a pair of pet/wild American eagles for her birthday, it was speculated that the gift was in honor of Vélez’s “wild nature.” The gesture was understood as a play on the impossibility of domesticating these two unlikely “love birds.” Characterized with terminology ranging from “spitfire”

to “wildcat” to “tigress,” charges of *wildness* had stuck to Lupe Vélez since her arrival in Hollywood. Alicia I. Rodríguez-Estrada, writing one of the early scholarly studies of Vélez, cites an oft repeated anecdotal account of the actress’s own response to such characterizations: Vélez’s declaration, “I am not wild, I am just Lupe” is understood as an effort by the actress to explain away her own reputation as a “firebrand” (1997, 476).<sup>1</sup> The declaration, coming itself in a defiant “fiery” voice, articulates more spirit than purpose.<sup>2</sup> In referencing her own name in explanation of her perceived persona, was she punning?

“Lupe,” it was popular to advise at the time, “rhymes with Whoopee.”<sup>3</sup> Was Velez (read “Vél•léz”) playing on words? “I’m not wild, I’m just loopy”? Was the phrase intended to read near in significance to “I’m just nutty?” or “I’m just crazy”? Perhaps. But it would not signify as such when read with the proper Spanish pronunciation. If Vélez’s words had appeared in translation in the Mexican press, likely the syntax would have been transcribed with the anglicized pronunciation, as was a

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<sup>1</sup> Rodríguez-Estrada cites James Robert Parish’s *RKO Gals*, a popular press source that is often cited by Vélez scholars, especially those writing in the 1990s. Parish writes “[f]ollowing the completion of *Wolf Song* Cooper bestowed a pair of golden eagles on Lupe, a gift sent to him by a Montana fan. The press wanted to know if these love birds symbolized Lupe’s unbridled passion for Cooper. ‘I am not wild,’ Lupe replied, ‘I am just Lupe’ (1974, 598, n\*). See, also, Cal York, “Gossip of all the Studios,” *Photoplay*, April 1929, 47-48. Under a the phot (figure 1), York writes: “Lupe is finding [the eagles] a little difficult to care for on the old Velez estate. So she has finally decided to ship them to the zoo in Mexico City, where eagle-handling facilities are said to be excellent” (47). The coverage ended with a prediction: “Speaking of Lupe, it is the consensus of opinion that she and Gary Cooper will be married at an early date” (48)

<sup>2</sup> Throughout this project I attempt to take nothing said in the fan press, and certainly nothing presented as a direct quote, at face value; I present its significance for the fact of its circulation and, on occasions such as this one, I may assume veracity for the sake of argument. In this instance, I am treating the statement, “I am just Lupe,” as, if not firmly attributable to Vélez, entirely consistent with her press persona. That is to say, whether or not she made the statement, she would have been believed to have said it (Just as Parish and Rodríguez-Estrada believe she said it). Her reputation for being “herself” was part of her popularity, part of what made her compelling.

<sup>3</sup> Busby Marquis, “Looke! Lupe! Whoopee!: ‘Wild Mark’ spends a quiet evening at Lupe’s Mexican ménage.” *Photoplay*, March 1930, 45, 135. Gladys Hall, “Whoopee! Lupe!!” *Motion Picture Magazine (MPM)* July 1928, 59. I cite these two pieces as typical of the “training” the fan press offered in regarding Vélez’s name—including its pronunciation—and her persona. Hall opens her piece: “Lupe Velez [...] pronounces her name Loopy Vellers.”

frequent practice within Mexican fan discourse. In *Filmográfico*, or *Revista de Revistas*, for example, one might read Vélez quoted: “no soy salvaje, sólo Lupi”... or even “sólo Liupi.”<sup>4</sup>

Lupe does not rhyme with Whoopee.

Vélez’s deferring to her own name, “Lupe”—however we imagine her own pronunciation or inflection—as an explanation of her own “nature” or of her perceived public persona, thus takes on the function of a transnational/bilingual riddle. Pursuit of her meaning becomes all the more vexing, and intriguing, by the fact that Vélez, if we are to take English-language discourse at face value, had a “habit” (Winchester, 1934) of referring to herself in the third person, i.e., “all the Americans are so nice to Lupe/i.” Was Vélez’s “habit” to refer to herself as *Lupi* in the third person? Did she use the pronunciation of her parents or that of her fans? Referring to herself with proper Spanish pronunciation, “Lupe” ran the risk of confusing the (Anglo) journalist transcriber.

*Lupi* rhymes with Whoopee.

I imagine Lupe Vélez, being “heard” (read) to use her own name—“aloud,” in the third person—to be simultaneously identifying with and *un*-identifying herself, distancing

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<sup>4</sup> In Mexican fan periodicals “Lupi” or “Liupi” was frequently used when Vélez was discussed in her Hollywood context. It was often, though not always, used in an unflattering manner. Jaime Luna, for example, is commenting on the “irony” of the title of “vuestra Lupi’s” next Spanish-language film, *Hombres de mi vida* (*The men in my life*, 1932). Luna employs “vuestra Lupi” [your (plural) Lupi] as a sardonic play on the ubiquitous discursive “nuestra Lupe,” which was employed as an expression of pride and affection. Jaime Luna, “Cunatísimos Cinematicos,” *Filmográfico*, Sep 1932, unpaginated. The jab is all in “fun,” we might suppose; just five months earlier Vélez graced the cover of *Filmográfico*’s inaugurate issue (April, 1932).

“El Panorama de Hollywood,” another *Filmográfico* column, employs “nuestra ‘Liupi’” without insult (eg. Feb 1933, unpaginated). “El Panorama” discusses Vélez as an ardent fan of boxing and Mexican boxers. See, also, *Revista de Revista*, Mar 1932, 17-18. This article (of which the title and first pages have been lost) again invokes “Lupi” sardonically, as the author uncritically recirculates Hollywood’s exaggerated stories of Vélez’s romantic conquests.

Within my research findings, the Mexican American newspaper of Los Angeles, *La Opinión*, used “Lupi” only very occasionally and only when reprinting articles in translation from English.

herself from, her Anglo-mediated persona.<sup>5</sup> In other words, each third person reference she uttered to indicate the person Lupi (that rhymes with Whoopee) included an inherent suggestion that that person—or that persona—is someone other, is not her “I.” Vélez’s performative self-definition, “I’m just Lupi,” subtly, paradoxically, acknowledges the limitations of the “self-actualizing” function that the statement would seem to claim. The performance of the *Anglicized* version of her name, in the third person, becomes, in effect, a performance of paradox—a performance of the impossibility of her situation. She performed this maneuver only in English. In the many interviews she gave over the years to the Spanish-language press, Vélez is never quoted as referring to herself in the third person in Spanish.

With a self-insistent statement like, “I’m just Lupe,” Vélez takes ownership of her singular persona—her singular subjectivity—yet she does so with a certain ambivalence. In this utterance, she claims the right to define herself even as she dodges her opportunity or responsibility for clarification. The *right* of self-definition, of personal expression, is held higher in value than an act of *actual* self-definition; claiming that right, then, becomes the personal expression in and of itself (thus illustrating, I might suggest, just how “American” Vélez—or the-persona-know-as-Lupi—had become). In claiming the privilege of self-identification, she claims an inheritance of the American dream. Her arrival in the United States has ostensibly empowered her to reinvent herself. Her success in Hollywood, a town of empowered immigrants (immigrant studio “moguls”

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<sup>5</sup> I am here gesturing toward, and yet stopping short of, invoking José Esteban Muñoz’s (1999) theory of “disidentification(s).” Considering Vélez’s modes of self-referentiality, I want to suggest that she is “enact[ing her] hybrid self” (Muñoz, 1). At the same time, however, the circumstances of that enactment are so numerous and varied, in context and signification, that I am reluctant to categorize Vélez’s “Lupi” practice as Muñoz’s disidentifying “performance of politics.”

empowered via the very apparatus of representation<sup>6</sup>) within a nation of immigrants, appears to grant her license to patent and broadcast that reinvention.

Latina/o and cinema historians alike know that Vélez's life story reads closer to classic tragedy than immigrant fairy tale. Nevertheless we return to her with the recognition that she was a foundational figure in the invention of something; her legacy is singular, unique, remaining undefined and continually—purposefully—contested.<sup>7</sup> What Vélez “invented” or established, I argue, is an embodied transcultural “contact zone” (Mary Louis Pratt, 1992), a polyvalent site of transnational discourse. Vélez embodied and focalized a transnational relationship—or set of relationships, generative if imagined relationships—between Mexico, Mexican-America, and the Anglo dominant United States. She did not accomplish this border negotiation by herself; her image was a transnational product mobilized by an industry that was profoundly invested in the idea of (inter)nationalism, and thus in the potential currency of “transcultuation.” Hollywood’s internationalism was, itself, consistently performative.

As a “sign-system,” Vélez’s signification was consistently undergoing a process of radical readjustment, just as were the signifying systems defining both Mexican and U.S. identity in the early decades of the 20th century. Accounting for such a burden of representation then begs the question of personal agency within the concept of

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<sup>6</sup> Excellent work has been done of the role of the Hollywood “mogul” who are immigrants or the children of immigrants: work by Mark Winokur, Ella Shohat, Allen Larson, among others, as will be discussed in chapters 3 and 4 of this dissertation.

<sup>7</sup> I am tempted to suggest that Vélez “invented” something along the lines of the round-the-clock public performance. Vélez was, as Lady Gaga recently described herself, “a show without an intermission” (Ben Sisario, “Lady Gaga Album Zooms to Megahit Status,” Arts Beat, a *New York Times* Blog, May 31, 2011: <http://artsbeat.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/05/31/lady-gaga-album-zooms-to-megahit-status/>).

Henry Jenkins (2007, 127) posits a related thesis: “Velez (*sic*) might be read as a prototype for contemporary female stars, from Madonna to Annie Sprinkle, who have proclaimed their pleasure in their bodies—a pro-sex activist before her time, doomed to suffer the rejection of a more puritanical age.” I am convinced that Jenkins’s work overstates—and mis-reads the origins of—Vélez’s “pro-sex” persona.

*performance* with which I am working. The second clause of this project's title, "Lupe Vélez and *the Performance of Transculturation*," means to resists the suggestion that Vélez is, specifically or individually, *the "performer."* While Vélez is, in her persona(e) and in her craft, performative, as will be discussed and analyzed throughout this study, I will argue that her performative persona makes her an especially valuable *product* for the social and cultural forces—entities, industries, including but not limited to Hollywood—that deploy her for a multitude of national and gendered "acts." Vélez's performance of Lupe/i was not singular in signification, indicative of an individual subject. Vélez is not just Lupe—or just Lupi. Bearing a heavy burden of representation, she would never be liberated from the vexations of national identification.



Figure 2: *Inquietud*

### ***Inquietud... and the nature of star study***

"Wild" was a term in English-language discourse consistently invoked to characterize Lupe Vélez. "Tempestuous" and "temperamental" were equally common descriptors. In Spanish-language discourse, however, the reigning term was, unquestionably, *inquieta*. Vélez was not the only *señorita inquieta* circulating in the public imagination; young

women of the era's global youth culture were often so described.<sup>8</sup> But Vélez was emblematic of the term. On July 10, 1932, *La Opinión*, the Spanish-language newspaper serving the Mexican descent population of Los Angeles, visually represented "inquietud" with a photo that may or may not, in fact, be a photo of Vélez.<sup>9</sup> The image is of an unnamed "spitfire"—an apparently free-spirited, overtly sensual woman. *Inquietud* is decidedly female.

*La Opinión*'s embodied *inquietud* (figure 2) is shown from head to toe, but not on her feet. Her kicked-up feet are in shadow and difficult to discern, thus emphasizing her sensuous body in horizontal approach toward the viewer/camera. She holds herself momentarily still but in a pose—almost feline—that defies stillness. Nothing appears to anchor her body, save the picture's frame, which she almost appears to be grasping. Eyes half closed, toothy smile, she faces the camera directly but does not confront it. *Inquietud* is a woman enjoying... herself, for the pleasure of the viewer.<sup>10</sup> If the photo is not a Vélez simulacrum, then it is a photo of an anonymous woman whose look—and attitude—reads as an *embodied* Vélez simulacrum.

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<sup>8</sup> In Mexican illustrated weeklies, 1925-1926, Vélez was known for her stage persona, "the jazz soprano," (la tiplecita 'jazz'). The term, *inquieta*, in that context, linked her to Hollywood female stars of the "jazz" era.

<sup>9</sup> "Inquietud," *La Opinión*, 10 July 1932 (Sunday supplement, unpaginated). Each week (in the early 1930s), *La Opinión*'s Sunday magazine ran three double-page spreads of photographs. The first, the page on which this photo appeared, consisted of artistic photos or reproductions of artwork. The second pictured Mexican American citizenry, usually in celebration of marriages or of notable Mexican American families or individuals. The last was of current Hollywood celebrities or, less often, stills from Mexican films.

<sup>10</sup> This high-contrast reproduction, taken from microfilm, may exaggerate the extent to which the image appears to be floating, unanchored, though with no visible horizon line, I read "ungrounded" as an aspect of the image's significance nonetheless.



Figure 3: Lupe Vélez, circa 1930 (for *Inquietud* comparison)

*Inquietud*, by dictionary definition and in common usage, is by no means synonymous with *carefree* or even *uninhibited*. Literally translatable as *restless*, *anxious*, *vexed*, or *uneasy*, the term, outside of an entertainment context, can be used as a gentle euphemism for a child's hyperactivity or an adult's emotional or psychological unease or even instability. *Inquietud* is also likely to be employed in a description of the "artistic temperament." In short, *inquieta* is itself an unstable nomination and a nomination of instability. It was used in discourses sympathetic to Vélez as well as ones that were highly critical. While we may be unable to entirely reconstruct the signification of *inquieta* in the 1920s and 30s, in reference to Vélez, this photo leaves a compelling trace. Attractive, provocative, slightly scandalous, it suggests autonomous sexual agency coupled with public accessibility, if not promiscuity (a concept *qua* indictment that will come up repeatedly in a variety of contexts throughout this study). Whether or not Vélez was *inquieta* in the "disquieted" dictionary sense, the terms of her stardom were certainly restless, anxious, vexed, uneasy. This study of her stardom, in fact, suffers a degree of *inquietud*. It could not be otherwise.

Following Richard Dyer's *Stars* (1979), a study to which any scholarly star treatment is indebted, I approach Vélez not as an individual subjectivity but as a "star text" (2-3). I seek to "read" that star text for its ideological effect in historical context by immersing my analysis in the historical situation of the various audiences that "read" her star text in its own environment. This is not to say that I seek to analyze Vélez through period spectatorship or reception. Rather, I approach Vélez by way of the social, cultural and ideological locations wherein her reception took place. As Dyer writes, "star images function crucially in relation to *contradictions* within and between ideologies, which they seek variously to 'manage' or resolve" (38, emphasis added). Vélez was the rare transnational star text constructed conspicuously on—that is, as a sign system representing—the highly contested physical and conceptual border that ostensibly demarcated the global North and South. As such, she carried a burden of representation that, ever increasingly, I argue, came to function as a placeholder for irresolvability itself.

Subsequent to Dyer's foundational monograph, scholars such as Christine Gledhill (et al, 1991), Gaylyn Studlar (1996, 2001), and Adrienne McLean (2004), productively augment Dyer's methodology by considering fan discourses in relation to star texts, thereby insisting on two sets of texts, two discursive spheres of analysis. This intertextual model, which assumes a fan interest in the star as human or "social subject" (Clark, 1995, xi) challenges the initial star study model by refusing the supremacy of the filmic text (which privileges role over actor) as the object of analysis. The star then becomes a doubled, circularly reciprocating persona(e) negotiated between industry (or industries, in the case of Vélez) and reader/spectator. The inevitable public interest in the

star as “real person” thus triangulates the relationship beyond the already complex manner of the circulating on- and off-screen personae, allowing for what Danae Clark calls the star’s “triple articulation (person, persona, parts[played])” (11).<sup>11</sup> My approach minimizes speculation regarding Vélez’s actual personhood, though I take quite seriously the great extent to which there was/is significant spectatorial investment in defining the “real” Lupe Vélez.

I share Clark’s interest in challenging the conventions of star study; that is, I distance my methodology from the “aesthetic tradition” that “indulg[es] in the pleasure derived from fetishizing stars as objects” (8-9).<sup>12</sup> Clark’s book, a Marxist economic study of stardom in its industrial context, critiques star studies for reinforcing an “actor auteurism” by studying “exceptional” individuals while eliding the factors constitutive of, and thus naturalizing, the terms of exceptionalism. The fact that Vélez’s career is remembered as un-exceptional—that is to say, that she remains outside the pantheon of singularly iconic images—does not preclude her from the realm of scholarly star study as practiced to date. Excellent examples of “minor star” studies include, for example, Victoria Sturtevant’s study of Marie Dressler (2009), Caryl Flinn’s study of Ethel Merman (2007), Daisuke Miyao’s study of Sessue Hayakawa (2007), Yiman Wang’s

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<sup>11</sup> Clark does not accept the theoretical legitimacy of the “persona” leg of this triple articulation. By refusing the difference between the “real star” and the star persona, she seems to foreclose on the use-value of systematically generated and ritually consumed fan discourses. This seems inconsistent with her interest in Barry King’s work (1987). But Clark is arguing against the prevailing momentum of Studies of reception, that is, against the idea that (as she sums up reception study), “the ultimate site of the star’s significance was located with the viewer” (10). Clark’s work theorizes the conditions of actor labor in order to release star study from the “trap” of the “‘star image’ versus ‘real person’ binarism” (11).

For an interesting and enlightening perspective on the “real” Vélez, see Fregoso, 2003, 111-125.

<sup>12</sup> The star-study in the Dyer tradition is less likely to aestheticize the star, than to overestimate the extent to which “resistant reading” is readily available within the industrially designed star text. Thus running the risk of too optimistically “resolving” the negotiation of contradiction that Hollywood would often leave profitably ambivalent. (See Clark, 9-10, and Pam Cook, *Screen* 1979/80, 87). My resistance to the “aesthetic tradition” does not necessarily distinguish my work from other star study. McLean’s work stands out, for example, for its analysis of aesthetics and labor in the process of physical and discursive star “building.”

work on Ana May Wong (2008), and Joanne Hershfield's work on Dolores Del Rio (1998, 2000).<sup>13</sup> Each of these works concentrate on a singularly iconic—thus “exceptional”—figure within a certain delimited category, be it generation (Marie Dressler), genre acting (Ethel Merman), or ethnicity, the latter constituting by far the largest category of “minor star” scholarship.<sup>14</sup>

In the realm of Latin@ stardom, important work has been done quite recently by Mary Beltrán (2009) and Priscilla Peña Ovalle (2011). If I were to speculate as to why Vélez is not analyzed in either Beltran's or Peña Ovalle's sets of case studies, I would offer that Vélez's persona does not hold stable enough throughout her career to crystallize into a single coherent chapter-length argument. Relatedly, when chapters or single essays on Vélez have been published, they invariably focus on one delimited period within her professional life, usually the *Mexican Spitfire* film series (RKO, 1939-1943). Here the foundational work of Charles Ramirez Berg (1990, 2002) and Rosa Linda Fregoso (2003), along with later studies by William Anthony Nericcio (2007) and Henry Jenkins (2006), are exemplary. Victoria Sturtevant's inspired essay, “Spitfire: Lupe Velez and the Ambivalent Pleasures of Ethnic Masquerade” (2002), stands out for its focus on Vélez's role in one relatively obscure film, *The Half-Naked Truth* (RKO, 1932), produced in a transitional period of her professional trajectory. Treatment of Vélez

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<sup>13</sup> I was introduced to the term “minor star study” in an email correspondence with Yiman Wang (Feb. 5, 2011).

<sup>14</sup> Diane Negra, *Off-White Hollywood* (2001), is foundational in this sense. Its influence on my own approach will be discussed in Chapter 2.

Jeffrey M. Pilcher's excellent book, *Cantinflas and the Chaos of Mexican Modernity* (2001), is probably the star study to which my own approach sits in closest proximity. Though as a *major* star in the Mexican industry, rather than Hollywood, Cantinflas (Mario Moreno) is in a separate category. Pilcher's work will be discussed in Chapter 1, especially for its contribution to our understanding of the *carpas* (tent theaters) and their contribution to Mexican theatrical and cinematic comedy.

as a specifically transnational/transcultural star, however, remains almost entirely absent from Vélez scholarship to date.<sup>15</sup>

As I have implied, studies of “minor stars” invariably map out along the lines of “minority star” study and thus tend to stay within the cultural spheres of reception wherein these stars retain minority status—i.e. the Anglo-hegemonic United States. Stars become “exceptional” within that status, usually through their participation in exceptional films. Which returns us to Clark’s critique of star study for its complicity in star fetishism, auteurism, and the indulgence of the “aesthetic tradition.” Vélez, I will unapologetically submit, participated in very few, if any, roundly exceptional films (although she worked with several of the most “exceptional” early studio-era directors). She was not deployed to mine a particular genre or mode of character representation that garnered sustained popularity or critical acclaim. She was not elevated on a consistent set of terms, be they industrial or cultural terms, for any lengthy period of time.<sup>16</sup>

Responding to Vélez’s representational instability, this project builds an alternative scaffolding by which to approach Vélez’s deployment as a Mexican woman on the Hollywood screen. Invoking a richly ambiguous phrase that historian Amy Kaplan culls from the 1901 Supreme Court’s designation of the territory of Puerto Rico, I suggest

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<sup>15</sup> At this writing, Vélez’s compelling image has been used on the cover of three edited anthologies (Jameson and Armitage, 1997; Gural-Migdal and Singer, 2005; Mendible, 2007) and one monograph (Jenkins, 2007). Yet despite this scholarly proliferation of images, Vélez’s transnational story has not yet been told. Essays that account at all for Vélez’s reception in Mexico rely heavily on Gabriel Ramírez’s biography (1986). Ramírez’s work, an important resource, is a brief and generalized overview. Moisés Vásquez Corona’s book for young adults (1996) is a shorter treatment still. Discrepancies, in facts and in tone, between the two books indicate that neither is representative of the “Mexican perspective” on Vélez. Two essays have been written taking up Vélez in *La Opinión*, the Spanish-language newspaper in Mexican American Los Angeles, both of which look at the treatment of Vélez in comparison to that of Dolores del Rio. My own findings depart from those of both Alicia I. Rodríguez-Estrada (1996) and Brian O’Neil (2000), as will be discussed in Chapters 2 and 3.

<sup>16</sup> The closest her work comes to this description would be in the *Mexican Spitfire* films, which is presumably why these have received significant scholarly attention. But those films, even, are decidedly unstable in their signification.

that Vélez was produced as an “unincorporated territory” of the U.S. entertainment industry. Vélez, like the territory of Puerto Rico, according to the court’s chief justice Edward Douglas White, was “foreign in a domestic sense” (Kaplan, 2002, 10-11). In other words, I am arguing, Vélez was variously presented as *ours* but not as *one of us*.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, just as Kaplan argues the U.S. imperial adventures abroad inevitably involved an element of anarchy at “home,” Vélez became a stand-in for, or a personification of, the anarchy of a diffuse border. Whether off screen, by way of her reputation as “wild,” or on screen by way of her unstable signification, Vélez was *our* Other star. The persistent attempt to narrativize Vélez’s persona was an attempt to rationalize and *domesticate* (in both the national and the household senses of that word) the repressed anarchy that imperialism engendered.

Lupe Vélez’s anarchic persona—or rather her varied personae—makes her a particularly productive object of historical study. Within the context of Hollywood cinema studies, there is almost no broad aspect of cinema history that Vélez’s case study does not inform: the grand stage prologues that transformed a silent movie from a discreet text to an evening’s entertainment of intertextual elaboration; the transition to sound and its impact on foreign stars (the conventional narrative of which is destabilized by Vélez’s continued success); the various phases and mandates of the production code which are inadequately described by the terms “pre-code” and “classical era”; the studios’ productions of foreign language films in the early thirties; the relationship between screen comedy and vaudeville; the emigration of players from stage to screen;

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<sup>17</sup> The designation puts Puerto Rico in a perpetually “probationary American” political position analogous to the cultural position that Matthew Frye Jacobson theorizes as “probationary whiteness” (1998). The difference being that Puerto Ricans were not collectively “white” enough to qualify for that category on political (or, arguably, cultural) terms.

the industrial function of the series programmer (serialized b-movies) and the dynamics of b-stardom; the 1960s underground cinema's ironic appropriation of classical Hollywood modes of representation. I list these industrial dynamics and cinema history milestones without turning specifically to issues of embodied representation. Scholars before me have elucidated the great extent to which Vélez's case informs twentieth century representations of ethnicity, "race," nation, gender (and, I would add to these, the as of yet under-theorized matter of age). Each topic listed above—sound, stage, censorship, comedy, performativity, appropriation—is integrally intertwined with representation of ethnicity, race, nation, gender and generation. Dynamics of industry, technology and genre have been too often studied with sporadic, selective or otherwise un-thorough attention to markers of difference (Shohat, 1994). Studying Vélez we are afforded a perspective on industries and star systems by way of a figure who is not only a bearer of markers of difference but, in the "final" analysis, has been judged by cinema history as *otherwise* "unexceptional." She is remembered as *difference* and not as *star*. This project accepts, and in fact embraces, that history.

I embrace Vélez's unexceptional location in history based not on its accuracy but on its productivity. Vélez does not conjure up images of the perfect, the divine, the unimpeachable. To a large extent she is not about what Hollywood cinema held up but what it put down. We have few "stars" through which we can record what Hollywood did *not* sanctify. Let us make use of them rather than re-suffer anxiety for their marginalization. Let us instead acknowledge—and more importantly, illuminate—their *inquietas* status within the industry. Clark points out that the field of cultural studies helped broaden the definition of star study (2). My own move to de-aestheticize star

study means approaching stardom as capital, as a commodified product consumable within a multitude of discursive processes. As a transnational star, Vélez was a transcultural *product*.

### **Transcultural Counterpoints I: Tobacco / Sugar... Fidelity / Promiscuity**

The concept privileged with my title, “transculturation,” comes originally from the theory of the Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz. Ortiz coined the term in his book, *Contrapunteo cubano del tabaco y azúcar* (1940, *Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar*; seeking to highlight Ortiz’s engagement with the commodity, I hereafter reference the book as *Tobacco and Sugar*), to describe a process of cultural contact and cultural mixing that manifests as reciprocal exchange. As Bronislaw Malinowski writes in his introduction to Ortiz’s book, the neologism “transculturation” describes, “an exchange between two cultures, both of them active, both contributing their share, and both cooperating to bring about a new reality of civilization” (1940, ix). I offer this abbreviated Malinowski summation as it encapsulates precisely the problematics of Ortiz’s formulation: transculturation theory is vulnerable to charges of excessive optimism regarding colonial “exchange.” Ortiz’s theory has been justifiably taken to task for masking the physical and cultural violence of colonial oppression and imperialism (Rama, 1982). However, between the critique the theory has incurred on the one hand and, on the other hand, the intellectual enthusiasm with which transculturation has proliferated as a fluid category of social and cultural phenomena,<sup>18</sup> the specific material and economic landscape surrounding Ortiz’s original objects of study has been largely eclipsed. Ortiz theorized the socio-economic dynamics of two global/Cuban

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<sup>18</sup> For a thorough account of the theory’s evolution, as well as a critique of the evolution and an account of Rama’s intervention, see Taylor (1991), Pratt (1992), and Trigo (2000).

commodities: tobacco and sugar. As this study seeks to mobilize transculturation in an economic/industrial as well as a cultural context, it returns to Ortiz's initial turf. And just as Ortiz follows his two commodities from their transcultural national location into the international market arena, so too will I address Vélez as a *product* of transcultural origin and a *commodity* with transnational circulation.

Rafael Rojas's work (2005), which purposefully historicizes Ortiz's legacy, draws attention to the pair of prefatory essays published in the first edition of *Tobacco and Sugar*, which provide two ideologically distinct frameworks for approaching Ortiz's theory.<sup>19</sup> The first of the essays is Malinowski's afore-mentioned introduction; the other is the book's short prologue, written by Cuban historian Herminio Portell Vilá. Malinowski's introduction elaborates the significance of Ortiz's transculturation concept.<sup>20</sup> Portell Vilá's introduction critiques the injustices wrought by the transnational economics of the sugar industry. Of the two, Malinowski's essay has served to define, to a large extent, *Tobacco and Sugar*'s theoretical legacy. I will outline the distinct stakes at work in these two essays, beginning with Malinowski and the legacy his interpretation presaged, in order to situate my own usage of Ortiz's concept.

Following Malinowski, Diana Taylor defines Ortiz's transculturation as, "the fusion of the indigenous and the foreign to create a new, original cultural product" (Taylor, 1991, 91-92). Taylor emphasizes the term's mandate to complicate and

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<sup>19</sup> A symposium on the legacy of Fernando Ortiz was held in 2000. Papers from that symposium were published in the volume, *Cuban Counterpoints: The Legacy of Fernando Ortiz* (eds. Font and Quiroz, 2005). Three of my sources on Ortiz—Rojas, Jean Stubbs, and Patricia Catoira—participated in that symposium. I feel intellectually indebted to the symposium participants, organizers, and funding institutions. The resulting anthology has enabled me to mobilize Ortiz for this project.

<sup>20</sup> Malinowski was a British-Polish anthropologist whose academic work, until his death 1942, was done at Yale University in the United States. He was himself highly invested in Ortiz's transculturation theory. His introduction, as Rojas explains, underscores the epistemological intervention that Ortiz and Malinowski were, together with others, enacting within the field of anthropology. See Rojas, 2005, 66-67.

challenge the concept of *acculturation*, which implies the acquisition of dominant culture by the colonized. In contrast to acculturation, transculturation describes a negotiative process and, doing so, is credited for challenging euro-centrism. Taylor cites Malinowski when she writes that “[transculturation] is not merely an uneasy fusion of two belief systems held simultaneously, a ‘mosaic.’ Rather, it accounts for the historic specificity and artistic originality of the *new* cultural phenomena” (92, emphasis mine). For Taylor, as for Malinowski, transculturation is significant for seeking not to erase the factor of *loss* (“disculturation”) within that “uneasy” negotiation of newness. As Taylor points out, though (and as subsequent scholarship will later underscore), Ortiz resists quantification of that “loss” (material, cultural, embodied), in order to underscore the creative potential of the exchange over its destructive impact. Here is where Ortiz is open to criticism for excessive optimism. It is the potential—indeed obligatory—creativity recognized through the concept of transculturation that has taken Ortiz’s theory from the realm of economics to the realm of cultural expression, especially within studies of literature, music, theater and performance. Taking this leap—from the Ortizian product, to Malinowski’s artistic originality, to the realm of cultural production—Ortiz’s concept has been profoundly influential—and much debated<sup>21</sup>—in cultural studies scholarship on the Americas. As Rafael Rojas’s discussion of the Malinowski versus the Portell Vilá introductions makes clear, however, the tension between what is mobilized in this leap (creative cultural phenomena) and what is left behind (the function of transnational capital and the outsourced commodity, which interests Portell) was inherent from the theory’s inception.

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<sup>21</sup> For a recent, thorough, transnational review of literature contributing to the transculturation debate, see Abril Trigo, “Shifting Paradigms,” 2000.

In distinct counterpoint to Malinowski, Portell Vilá uses his five-page prologue to critique the sugar industry and the political/economic imperialism the industry materialized, specifically calling out contemporaneous protectionist shifts in U.S. agriculture policy—tariffs and quotas that put a punishing economic squeeze on Cuba—enacted under the FDR administration (1940, xvi). While Portell praises Ortiz for confronting the sugar industry, his own indictment is far more pointed than is that of Ortiz. Ortiz's characterization of “sugar” is, indeed, critical: the product is advanced by foreign capital, sustained by low-wage Cuban labor and the cheap annexation of land, and generates rewards reaped primarily by foreign investors. Sugar, Ortiz theorizes, generates “a *centrifugal* economic force” in that the profits generated on Cuban soil land far from the site of production (69-70). But Ortiz's sugar is theorized in the abstract; exploitative specifics are attributed to the (foreign) nature of the product itself, rather than to its transnational capitalist industry.

Tobacco, an indigenous crop, represents Ortiz's counterpoint to sugar's foreign roots. A product of spontaneous, organic transculturation, tobacco is, the narrative tells, a product evolving organically from autochthonous custom into an industry where the (Spanish) grower and (African) worker are, together, representative of a wisely managed, Cuban “planned economy.”<sup>22</sup> With global trade returning rewards to Cuba, tobacco (in the form of cigars) circulates with a *centripetal* economic force (69). As Jean Stubbs (2005) and Patricia Catoira (2005) both point out, though, the power differential governing dynamics of labor versus capital in tobacco production (which divide across racialized categories, the categories that define the product as “transcultural” in the first

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<sup>22</sup> It is important not to be confused by (Portell's) “planned economy” phrasing; neither Ortiz nor Portell Vilá were Marxists. In binary opposition to the foreign invasion of sugarcane, tobacco represents a preferred mode of capitalism whereby Cuban nationalism is protected. See Rojas, 67-68.

place) make clear the fact that the difference between tobacco and sugar—in terms of their transcultural economic “forces”—are differences based on a nationalist, rather than a culturalist, perspective.<sup>23</sup> For Stubbs, Ortiz’s tobacco transculturalism models a “utopian vision” that, while not real, remains “a beacon to many” (107).<sup>24</sup>

Ortiz, to be fair, did not theorize the two dynamics as operating in quite the mutually exclusive relationship that his counterpoint title suggests. Cuban tobacco, he warned, was in danger of being swallowed by a centrifugal force akin to that of the sugar model. As Rojas interprets the text, Ortiz thought the cautionary sugar narrative might intervene to save the production of the Cuban cigar from the centrifugal forces of exploitative global capital. Ortiz is enacting an optimistic version of his own theory, using his rhetoric to negotiate a reciprocal *transnational* relationship with the United States in the spirit of the period’s Good Neighbor Policy.<sup>25</sup> In other words, Ortiz’s theory is as much about the desire for a redeemed transculturation—an exportable transcultural dream—as it is about its two specific products or industries, arguably more so. For Ortiz’s theory mobilizes a Cuban nationalist *transcultural* dynamic, the blending of African and Spanish populations (erasing the fact that native Cubans disappeared, as a

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<sup>23</sup> Patricia Catoira’s “Transculturation à la Ajiaco: A Recipe for Modernity” (2005), broadly critiques Ortiz collective body of work which, she argues, not only glosses over the violence of colonialism but masks the persistence of racism in Cuba. For Ortiz on the explanation of owner versus labor, see *Tobacco and Sugar*, 83.

<sup>24</sup> As Alicia Arrizón writes, “transculturation cannot be examined without also thinking about mestizaje because one affects the other in the process of articulation” (2006, 5). Cultural hybridization versus mixed-race identities becomes the second double valance (along with *intra-national* versus inter-national transculturation) that scholars have productively interrogated in order to remobilize Ortiz’s theory. See, also, Diana Taylor (1991), Abril Trigo (2000) and Mary Louis Pratt (1992).

<sup>25</sup> The Good Neighbor Policy (GNP) was a federal policy intended to foster improved relations between the U.S. and Latin America. It nominally went into effect in 1933, though it didn’t really take shape until the war heated up in Europe. The policy was strengthened in an effort to consolidate anti-fascist allies across the Americas. In 1939, Hollywood was enlisted to help with the public relations angle. I discuss this period in my fourth chapter. For more on the GNP that includes the Hollywood context, see Seth Fein, Penee Bender, Catherine Benamou. For some discussion of Lupe Vélez as a GNP figure, see López (1993), O’Neil (2001).

distinct culture, in the 16<sup>th</sup> century) as a model for a *transnational* dynamic, one whereby Cuba could maintain national autonomy within a global marketplace.

Lupe Vélez's star text, as an “unincorporated” transcultural phenomenon whose industrial representation reflects dynamics of the outsourced commodity (and one shaped, to an extent, by the Good Neighbor Policy era, the economic dynamics of which Rojas sees as having profoundly inscribed the text of *Tobacco and Sugar*), affords an opportunity to further interrogate the complicated valences of transculturation theory. To locate Vélez in the transculturation narrative, I follow Rojas's suggestion that Ortiz's theory is most coherently presented in its allegorical form (68-9). As archetypal characters, Ortiz's “Don Tabaco” represents Cuban loyalty, transcultural fidelity. “Doña Azúcar” is promiscuous, anti-national. Sugar is sensuous; tobacco is virile. Having gendered his archetypes, Ortiz then predicts the union of his centrifugal and centripetal economic forces, that is, a “marriage” of tobacco and sugar that then begets a third (*inquieta*) commodity: rum. Ortiz writes:

It may be one day the bards of Cuba will sing of how alcohol [rum] inherited its *virtues from sugar* and its mischievous qualities from tobacco; how from sugar, which is mass, it received its force, and from tobacco, which is distinction, its power and inspiration; and how [rum], the offspring of such parents, is *fire, spirit, intoxication, thought and action* (93, emphases mine).<sup>26</sup>

But if tobacco was an exploitative industry from the start, as both Catoira and Stubbs document, and one that exploited a product originally cultivated by an indigenous population that was no longer in existence as a culture, then the entire “centripetal force” idea, as free from centrifugal tendencies, is an abstract economic ideal operating without a stable analogue.

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<sup>26</sup> Onís translates *rum* as *alcohol*, here I defer to Ortiz's original *rum* for clarity.

It is the cultural economics of Ortiz's theory—the “nature” of Ortiz's commodity within the operations of transnational capital—that I strive to reanimate in this study of Lupe Vélez. Hollywood cinematic texts, products of a highly systematized, immanently commercial U.S. culture industry, operate with a transnational dynamic that cannot be broadly characterized by either a centripetal or centrifugal model. Certainly, from the U.S. perspective, their circulation was centripetal, bringing rewards back to the U.S. and back to Hollywood. What is more, the images they proliferate—narratives resolving to assure national integrity and unity that are (“universally”) consumable within other (ostensibly) coherent nations—would seem to present Hollywood cinema itself as an idealized transcultural system, offering products of distinct quality to be enjoyed the world over. Like Cuban rum, Hollywood can be seen as balancing quality and distinction (tobacco) with mass appeal (sugar). The more complex issue at hand, though, is how foreign stars' participation in Hollywood, as “products” of their countries and cultures of origin, circulated on the international marketplace of moving images. How does Hollywood stardom impact a star's signification within her communities of origin? And how does her star text operate should she, as Vélez did, attempt to translate her stardom to the cinema industry of her nation of origin?

Lupe Vélez was a transcultured “product” of Mexico. Because her stage persona, developed within *revista* theater, reflected Spanish, French and U.S. stagecraft (along with a considerable Hollywood influence) to a far greater measure than it registered Mexican indigeneity, “transculturation” is a more apt description of Vélez as a stage phenomenon than is the concept of *mestizaje* (or “racial” blending).<sup>27</sup> Vélez's name,

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<sup>27</sup> *Carpas*, the tent theaters springing up in revolutionary and post-revolutionary Mexico City, also contributed to the regional transculturation represented by the *revista* phenomenon. *Carpas* can certainly be

Guadalupe, on the other hand, carried a *mestizaje* identity that her light complexion belied—a *mestizaje* identity that was erased by the favored U.S. pronunciation of her name: “Lupi.” Just like tobacco and/or sugar, Vélez was a complex amalgam that could be mobilized to represent both the problematics and the pleasures of transculturation, depending on the mobilizer’s perspective or agenda. And in just the way that Ortiz measured the virtues of tobacco versus sugar, Vélez’s “virtues” were measured, within and without Mexico, on the basis of (national) loyalty versus promiscuity.

Ángel Rama’s response to Ortiz’s theory (1982) intervenes to define transculturation squarely in the context of modernity and of modern, state-based capitalist economies. Rama challenges the assumed “spontaneity” that characterizes Ortiz’s formulation of cultural exchange, seeking to denaturalize processes of reciprocal influence and, in so doing, theorize a process of transcultural *selection* responsive to the exigencies of state, social and economic forces (Rama, 30). Furthermore, approaching transculturation as a specifically modern operation, Rama insists such cultural selection be understood in light of modern imperialist economies and *transnational* market logics. Rama theorizes a “popular urban transculturation” (Trigo, 2000, 88), which enables the term to speak to both *revista* theater, as a function of national transculturation, and to the cinema industry, as a mediator—or performer—of *transnational* transculturation.<sup>28</sup>

Three of the five chapters of this dissertation address, though not exclusively, Hollywood modes of representation. I approach Hollywood—cognizant of its proximity

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described as a phenomenon of mestizaje. Unlike some *revista* players, however, Vélez did not emerge from the *carpas*.

For discussion of mestizaje versus transculturaltion (versus hybridity) in theorizing intranational and international dynamics of contact and mixing, see Trigo, 2000.

<sup>28</sup> I am indebted to Abril Trigo’s essay, “Shifting Paradigms: From Transculturation to Hybridity, a Theoretical Critique” (2000), for its lucid differentiation of the concepts of national transculturation, “modernizing transculturation,” and transnational transculturation.

to the Mexican border—as a polyvalent “contact zone” (Pratt, 2008, 6-9), a site of transnational transculturation with a number of faceted fronts. Hollywood of the studio era evolves as a thoroughly rationalized cross-selection process that, just as Rama’s model predicts, mediates difference according to exigencies of state, social and imperial forces. While the multiple cultural and social collisions with which this project contends are variously reflected within Hollywood films, they are also mediated by way of extra-textual discourses which, themselves, are sites of mediation between reception, fandom, and industry agendas. It is often within extra-textual discourses that the fears and desires associated with both national and transnational transculturations are most overtly articulated.

This project, then, is launched in the spirit of a transcultural, intertextual discourse analysis. I analyze Vélez-related discourses of the twentieth century—from 1925 to 1999—using, films, studio generated discourse, fan-magazine discourse, and celebrity “news.” Additionally, I make use of broader culture production and discourse—Broadway and revue theaters, literature, and trends in popular music—to locate Hollywood production as one of a network of mass culture industries. As a star of the stage as well as the screen, Vélez’s career illuminates the traffic of images between two culture industries that shared reciprocal influence even as each of their respective domains of cultural currency were in considerable flux. Furthermore, the contexts of Vélez’s popular and critical responses continually remind us that global media is instantiated locally, and thus variously. We know that, for example, a Vélez film signified on one set of registers in the English-language discursive arena, on another in the Mexican American population of Los Angeles, and on a third in Mexico proper. Yet a

paradigm theorizing national or even transnational signification must be fluid enough to account for additional registers of class, metropolitan proximity, and varying instantiations of *mestizaje*.

While *Tobacco and Sugar* does not offer a guidepost at each transcultural turn this project will face, Rojas points to a passage where Ortiz's gendered transcultural archetypes are characterized in a counterpoint that will be particularly useful in identifying how analogous economic forces operated in the entertainment industries. Ortiz writes:

In trade, for our tobacco, the whole world is a market, yet our sugar has only one market. Centripetal and centrifugal. Cubanity and foreignness. Sovereignty and colonialism. *High Crown and humble sack* (Ortiz, 7, as quoted in Rojas, 68).<sup>29</sup>

Considering this final counterpoint (which in other passages is similarly discussed as the opposition between a product of quality distinction versus a product of mass homogenization) helps us consider the (intoxicating) cinema industry as, like rum, the union of “high crown” literature and theater with the “humble sack” of vaudeville, variety and nickelodeon (all of the latter having come under suspicion, in the early decades of the twentieth century, as too “ethnic” and class inflected). Cinema—along with *revista* theater, in the Mexican context—had a taming function in relationship to “low” culture and a massifying function in relation to its “high” culture counterpoint. The stakes of both processes—taming and massification, were consistently folded together with, and mutually dependent upon, the cultural construction of the nation. In the U.S. context, that meant the cultural construction of Americanness, whiteness and ethnicity. We will see how the “taming” of Lupe Vélez—as a “lowborn” Mexican figure whose tenacious commitment to the U.S. culture industries bought her an international, mass-cultural

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<sup>29</sup> Onís's 1947 translation of this passage reads, “the proud cigar band against the lowly sack.”

passport—becomes a key site for the instantiation of a contest over “American” whiteness. Vélez personified the Mexican-American border in a way that did no other Mexican figure from the period. She was herself an embodied contact zone.

## **Transcultural Counterpoints II: Anarchy / Domesticity**

Amy Kaplan argues in *The Anarchy of Empire in the Making of American Culture* (2002) that “international struggles for domination abroad profoundly shape representation of American identity at home (1).” Kaplan is mobilizing post-colonial theory to address historical specifics of U.S. culture(s)—including American (hemispheric) geographies in relation to “American” (national) identifications. Theorizing American imperialism as a set of mutually traumatizing encounters, she traverses the Ortizian terrain of transculturation. Writing that “cultural phenomena we think of as domestic or particularly national are forged at the crucible of foreign relations,” Kaplan is speaking to a range of “cultural phenomena” within which cinema is but one, albeit one crucial, node (1). Kaplan’s argument points to the need to synthesize Hollywood’s various nation-building functions. Lupe Vélez’s Hollywood archive allows an examination of the way in which film exportation played simultaneously nationalist and nationalizing functions; Hollywood worked to consolidate the American image at home in order to export a strong and coherent image abroad. If we understand Hollywood as an imperial project (Shohat, 1991; Vasey, 1997) and simultaneously bear in mind Kaplan’s argument that imperialism’s incorporations of the foreign are inherently disruptive (anarchic) to domestic stability, we begin to map the crucial function of Hollywood’s negotiation of the American Southwest. Hollywood’s handling of its own proximate border came with a mandate to screen for the world the U.S. self-image of its

cohesive modernity, its racial purity, its whiteness. At the same time, however, Hollywood screened idealized representations of the U.S.’s “exceptional” imperial strategy; U.S. adventures abroad, including its partial annexation of Mexico, were to be seen as instructive, civilizing instances of domination not to be confused with the aggressive imperialism of the “Old World,” as practiced by England, France and Spain (Kaplan, 95-99). In the discursive enactment of such a domination strategy, the domestic national sphere is symbolically articulated by way of a coherent and homogeneous domestic familial sphere.

Connecting family and thus femininity with the establishment of “civilization,” especially as concerns the West and the myth of hearth and harmony as a component of frontier manifest destiny, Kaplan makes productive use of the double meaning allowed by the term “domestic,” documenting the extent to which the metaphor of marriage is consistently invoked in political and cultural 19th-century discourses of expansion. Important for our purposes, Kaplan documents that, in arguments both for and against the annexation of Mexico, “visions of imperial expansion as marital union carried within them the prospect of racial amalgamation” (27).<sup>30</sup> In the context of U.S. transculturation, the marital union metaphor, that is, the suggestion of racial amalgamation that would bear progeny, came as a particularly vexing *literal* prospect. Thus, in the Southwest U.S. context, symbolic metaphor and social policy would meet: the women’s (domestic) sphere is charged with policing the borders of domestic civility in senses both familial and national. Kaplan locates this meeting in the context of 19th century literature and social policy. Hollywood cinema mines this same territory, allegorically as quasi-historical reference, for decades into the studio era. Most importantly, for our purposes,

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<sup>30</sup> See also Doris Sommer, *Foundational Fictions: The National Romances of Latin America*, UCP, 1991.

the cult of “Spanishness,” occurring in the late 1920s and early ‘30s, repurposes the narrative of rescue by which “Spanish” women were liberated from a “barbarous” (or “wild”) non-white Latin America in a particularly “exotic” and compelling cinematic trend. The screen representation of Lupe Vélez, a figure whose public persona was never disconnected from her Mexicanness, moved variously between the poles of white Spanish *señorita* to be rescued and barbarous Other to be held at bay.

As specifically ”American” concepts of marriage were in profound flux in the 1920s and 30s, Hollywood star figures (predictably, in accordance with Dyer’s model) became cultural negotiators of an ideological adjustment to changing modes and expectations of romance. To a great extent, the shifts that took place in the process of defining “modern” U.S. marriage involved the negotiation of ethnicity in relation to whiteness, the same terms by which the U.S. had negotiated its imperial adventures. Thus it is not surprising that the changing social, cultural and political terms on which marriage negotiated immigration—including the cultural construction of romantic heteronormativity as well as homogeneity—become crucial in tracking the ideological function of Lupe Vélez as a Hollywood star text. Vélez became so useful in signifying nuptial potentials and problematics that she was deployed to do so rather promiscuously (and here I gesture toward “promiscuity” as used in the international sense of *Doña Azúcar*: sugar). She was also deployed competitively. The consistent competition for men (usually Anglo) in her films constructs her representation in relation to other female images, and thus other women actors. The specter of anxiety—anxiety not devoid of fascination and excitement—around Vélez’s supposedly competitive, or “aggressive,” “promiscuity” plays out off-screen as well as on.

Esther Gabara (2008) uses the term *promiscuity* to indicate a baroque discursive practice that speaks, and is constituted, across a spectrum of post-revolutionary Mexican culture. Gabara is referring to Mexico's *revistas*, illustrated weekly magazines of the revolutionary period that were produced and consumed by a demographic ranging from elite modern and modernist cultures to the amalgamated "popular" which, itself, negotiated autochthonous, nationalist and mass cultures. This same function of cultural "promiscuity" Gabara identifies in the *revista* press describes, not coincidentally, *revista* musical theater, the genre that gave Vélez her start. Vélez came of age, personally and professionally, in a time and place where—as Rama's transculturation highlights—promiscuous textual border crossing, in the form of cultural appropriation, imitation and (neo)baroque mixing, was a piece of international modernity itself.

As could conceivably be said of sexual promiscuity (and was said, by José Vasconcelos in his seminal essay, "La raza cósmica" ("The Cosmic Race," 1925), cultural promiscuity was as productive and creative as it was anxiety-inducing. Gabara theorizes the cultural "promiscuity" of mass culture as being as profoundly constitutive of Mexican modern identity as was *mestizaje*. Not surprisingly, like sexual promiscuity, cultural promiscuity was discursively bound to the feminine (i.e. the feminization of culture) and to prostitution, on literal as well as figurative grounds. Vélez, as a border-crossing subject—that is, as nationally *disloyal*, as *undomesticated*—manifested associations with both promiscuity and sex work that permeated her signification. That particular sign system (Vélez-as—"whore") registered in discourses off screen as well as on-screen, discourses that became perpetually mutually "informative." And implications of promiscuity crossed borders, circulating within and between her representation in the

U.S., Mexico,<sup>31</sup> and (perhaps most vehemently) Mexican American Los Angeles.

### Vélez’s “Identities-in-relation”

Readers familiar with Vélez discourses, popular or scholarly, know the intense interest that tracked her personal (sexual) and marital relationships over the years of her career. Vélez’s marriage to Johnny Weismuller, along with her earlier non-marriage to Gary Cooper, stands as the aspect of her life (not including her death) most remembered and discussed. This study does not bemoan or even challenge the hierarchy of values upon which her signification was founded but, rather, seeks the broader significance of those sign systems themselves in the context in which they made meaning. Vélez “made meaning” in Hollywood through her juxtaposition to her Hollywood partners and colleagues. By submitting that Vélez’s personae are most productively analyzed in relation to the personae of others, my project, again, departs from the conventions of star-centered scholarship, proposing an alternative to the aesthetic of singular exceptionalism.

I approach Lupe Vélez as a set of identities-in-relation after the manner in which Ella Shohat theorizes “ethnicities-in-relation” (Shohat, 1991). As Shohat argues, “ethnicity” is necessarily understood as perpetually relative. Ethnic identity is a “peripheralizing strategy premised on an implicit contrast of ‘norm’ and ‘other’” (215). Writing of ethnicity and cinematic representation, Shohat seeks to theorize ethnicity out of isolation: “[i]n a multiethnic society communities are necessarily implicated—economically, historically, politically, and culturally—in one another, subjected to permeable boundaries of identity” (216). Crucially, Shohat shows how ethnic markers, as

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<sup>31</sup> In her second Mexican film, what turned out to be her final film, Vélez portrayed the archetypal “whore,” Emile Zola’s *Nana* (1880) in a film by that name (*Naná*, Mexico, Gorostiza, 1944). The casting choice is especially interesting given that she was, by then, about two decades too old for the part. *Naná* is discussed in my final chapter.

deployed in visual or discursive representation, “mask contradictions of class, race, and gender, as well as the interdependency of histories and even identities” (216). Thus Shohat employs the term ethnicity,

“... to refer to a spectrum of identities and differences, all ultimately involving questions in inequalities of Power. [...] Ethnicity does not constitute a fixed entity or category expressing a national, essential difference, but rather a changing set of historically diverse experiences situated within power relations” (216).

Resonant with Matthew Frye Jacobson’s explication of his concept of “probationary whiteness” (1998), Shohat’s work seeks to illuminate the ideological effect of representations of “*provisional* ethnic and racial identities at particular moments in history, articulated in relation to parallel and opposing collectivities” (Shohat, 217, emphasis mine)

Over the course of her Hollywood career, Vélez’s racial/ethnic signification was highly fluid on screen; it was perpetually provisional in a way that approximates metonymically Shohat’s ethnicities-in-relation. Through Lupe Vélez we are able to analyze a “spectrum of identities and differences, all ultimately involving questions of inequalities of power.” Each of Vélez’s relationships, just as Shohat predicts regarding ethnicity, are bound up with the narration and representation of marked differentiation and power positioning, often with markers of “race” and class variously masked or naturalized. Relatedly, almost every Vélez film turns on unstable values constructing notions of family, kinship and marriage. In the 1930 film, *East is West* (Universal), Vélez plays a young Chinese girl “on the auction block” in her home country. Once she is “saved” from China and taken to San Francisco by (Anglo) Billy Benson (Lew Ayers), with whom she falls in love, the ending becomes a happy one—with marriage as its idealized resolution—when convoluted plot machinations reveal the Vélez character to

not be Chinese after all. The contrivance, obviously negotiating miscegenation anxiety and the concept of “race suicide,” plays out with particular irony given Vélez’s history of ethnic and racializing images and portrayals, on screen and off: in *East is West*<sup>32</sup> Vélez is “discovered” to be “white”—a discovery that will be subtly or unsubtly contradicted in her every film thereafter.

Of the various modes of relationship by which we understand Vélez’s representational identity, marriage is undoubtedly the most significant. Whom Vélez marries, and on what ethnic (masking racialized) terms, are consistently central to the meaning made by her films and by her celebrity. In what can be read as a particularly astute repurposing of the iconography of the stakes at play during the Cooper years, Vélez successfully, if only momentarily, seizes the agency to narrate her own version of marital desire. In March of 1931 she bought herself a wedding band and began regularly wearing it in public. The press initially assumed it was a tactic to generate publicity rumors that she and Gary Cooper had at last gotten married. Vélez told a simpler but, by then, far more interesting story: that she bought herself a wedding band and began regularly wearing it. As reported in *Motion Picture Magazine*, for example (which here indulges its usual penchant for exaggerating accented syntax): “why shouldn’t I wear eet?... I bought eet and paid for eet, din’ I?”<sup>33</sup> With this performative act and her frank explanation, Vélez rhetorically challenges the legitimacy of the institution—marriage—that operates as her assimilatory hurdle/gateway. To buy and wear her own coveted

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<sup>32</sup> *East is West* was reproduced in Spanish, during the brief era of Hollywood’s foreign language film production, as *Oriente es Occidente* (1930), with Vélez again as Ming Toy and Barry Norton (born in Argentina as Alfredo Carlos Birabén) as Billy Benson.

<sup>33</sup> “News and Gossip.” *MPM*. March 1931: 36, 40. See, also, “Indiscreciones,” *Revista de Revistas*, May 1, 1932. When the news made it to Mexico, it was said that Vélez insisted that this self-invested wedding ring practice “was an old custom within her family.” The writer responded: “well, alright... and now it’s Loretta Young that is wearing a ring. She says she bought herself, too.”

symbol of feminine and sexual legitimacy was to throw into anarchistic chaos the very conventions designed to tame and stabilize her sexual practice. As Hollywood persisted in attempting to contain Vélez as “foreign in a domestic sense,” she symbolically flouted the entire arrangement, not by rejecting it but by *unilaterally* (thus ironically) embracing the exaltation of married status. Moreover, with the simultaneous exhibition of two most American of public exercises—(a) material consumption, as an expression of (b) defiant and irrepressible individuality—she redeployed the signifiers of America’s most sacred institution of containment by way of the two most privileged American expressions of liberation.

Though marriage is one centrally significant mode of relationship under analysis in this project, the Vélez-in-relation principle is not limited to sexual relationships. And while several of the relationships this dissertation tackles are as familiar as is her association with Cooper or Weissmuller (such as her supposedly antagonistic relationship with Dolores del Rio, for example), heretofore understudied associations prove equally fruitful under sustained consideration. My project analyzes Vélez-in-relation to such diverse figures as Celia Montalván, Jimmy Durante, Lawrence Tibbett, Jetta Goudal, Delia Magaña, Arturo de Córdoba, Shirley Temple, Greta Garbo. In short, I mobilize the Vélez-in-relation principle by way of three overlapping categories of juxtaposed associates: those she was linked with sexually (men), those with whom she was associated competitively (women), and those she was known to mimic (often, though not always, women).

### **The Performative: When Vélez is *not* Lupe**

LUPE VELEZ bought a leather belt at a saddle shop the other day for Johnny Weissmuller. Garbo has one just like it,” said the clerk. “Yass,” said Lupe, and instantly

drooped her eyelids, set her mouth in weary lines and then and there *became* Garbo. Hollywood has few mimics to equal Lupe. Down at Palm Springs, teaching Lupe how to ride a bicycle, Johnny was wearing the belt.

*Motion Picture Magazine* 1933 (emphasis in the original).<sup>34</sup>

In double counterpoint to Vélez's insistence on "being herself," on the one hand—"just Lupe"—and to her predicament of being deployed in other people's stories, on the other hand—defined inevitably in relation to other more stable personae—Vélez became well known for her ability to *do* just about anyone else. We might think of impersonation as the embodied act of Vélez *herself* putting her own identity in relation to that of others, thus grabbing the reins of the star system's penchant for playing one personality off of another. Vélez concedes to the star system yet, in certain limited instances, like her performative flouting of the symbol of the wedding ring, she manages to introduce, within that system, terms that are distinctly her own. Looking at the limits of these instances, however, it becomes clear that her performance does not signify industrial agency, precisely, but articulates the ambiguous location of her subjective position.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> "All the Gossip of the Stars and the Studios," *Motion Picture Magazine*, March 1933: 37.

<sup>35</sup> I am moved to invoke Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and name Vélez's wedding ring performance as one of "queer practice." Sedgwick identifies the foundation of queer practice as a function of, "the ability to attach intently to a few cultural objects [...] whose meaning seems mysterious, excessive, or oblique in relation to the codes most readily available to us, [which] became a prime resource for survival. We needed for there to be sites where meanings didn't line up tidily with each other, and we learn to invest these sites with fascination and love (1993, 3, quoted in Muñoz, 78).



Figure 4: Table napkins become white gloves as Vélez mimics Lilyan Tashman<sup>36</sup>

In certain instances, Vélez was able to unveil for display precisely the terms of the star system that were used to exclude her. Paradoxically, such “triumphs” came with the performed acknowledgement that she would not be triumphant. Her impersonation of Garbo, for example, was an ironic gesture of grandiosity with a subtly self-deprecating affect. Despite the observation that Vélez instantly “became” Garbo, the reader’s picture could hardly be merely that. Vélez “became” a *morena* Garbo, a Mexican Garbo, with a Mexican accent on her Nordic affectation. The irony of the supposedly peripheral Lupe imitating the icons of high modern mass culture made her impersonations compelling even beyond the appeal of her talent for likeness and satire. They simultaneously mocked and flattered the center that was bordered against her. And thus they carried a currency that lived in the retelling. Stories of Vélez’s imitations proliferated in the press, thus

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<sup>36</sup> Uncredited illustration in Sara Hamilton, “Funny Feuds of Hollywood.” *Photoplay*, March 1933, 32. “First of all, there’s Lupe Vélez. Seems Lupe is constantly getting herself into high-class feuds. [...] Of course you remember the time Lupe wrapped her arms to the elbows in white napkins at the Embassy and pretended she was Lil Tashman in long white gloves. And did Lil burn?”

Hamilton begins her memory of Vélez’s “high-class feuds” with a rehearsal of the Vélez/Goudal exaggerated antagonism, which is oft enough repeated that it comes up my chapters 3, 4 and 5.

developing a discursive currency that eventually, after some years, helped propel Vélez's impersonations to the screen.<sup>37</sup> But Vélez's talent for impersonation was rooted in the craft she developed on the stages of *revista* theater in Mexico, where it brought her great notoriety and, arguably, helped propell her across the northern border in 1927. It is in post-revolutionary Mexico City, on the stages of *revista*, that my narrative begins.

Chapter 2 documents the discursive footprint of *la niña Lupe*, *la tiplecita* "Jazz" (the girl Lupe, the little jazz soprano), tracking her brief stardom on the stages of Mexico City's *revista* ("revue" or popular musical) theater in 1925. In published discourse to date, only the two Vélez biographies (Gabriel Ramírez, 1994; Moisés Vázquez Corona, 1996), look at Vélez's work in the *revistas*. My first chapter reaches beyond biographical account for a sustained analysis of cultural forces that shaped, and then responded to, the steep arc of Vélez's popularity on the Mexican stage. The theater pages of Mexico City's weekly illustrated journals—*El Universal Ilustrado* and *Revista de Revistas*—provide the best extant source material documenting Vélez's (self-)production and reception on the *revista* stages. Not coincidentally, it is in the pages of these same journals that cultural parameters of *Mexicanidad*—in relation to the old (European) and new (U.S.) imperial worlds—were being openly contested and negotiated. I follow the overnight sensation occasioned by Vélez's theatrical debut, which, with her parodic performance of the personae of her celebrated *triple* (soprano) colleagues, launched a "fever of imitation" on the city's stages, leading to her unofficial christening as "*la triple 1925*." This phenomenon occurred to the chagrin of Vélez's *triple* peers (that is, Vélez's stage colleagues, whose impersonated personae launched Vélez on

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<sup>37</sup> Vélez's star impersonations appeared in *High Flyers* (Edward F. Cline, RKO, 1937), *Honolulu Lu* (Charles Barton, Columbia, 1941) and *Redhead From Manhattan* (Lew Landers, Columbia, 1943), extremely obscure films all, then and still.

her stage career). For that matter, not every *revista* fan (or *Illustrado* reader) was gratified to see the “Jazz” soprano—who to many personified a Hollywood-inflected foreign challenge to post-revolutionary Mexico’s consolidation of national identity—held up by the prominent *cronistas* on that very basis. If Vélez was ultimately unable to defend her triple-of-the-year title, she discursively catalyzed a new manner of stardom/celebrity that was equally compelling.<sup>38</sup> Prefiguring her later Hollywood positioning in relation to her compatriot Dolores del Rio, Vélez, in a stage and print rivalry with another beloved *tiple*, Celia Montalván, becomes Mexico’s first celebrity antagonist.

While Hollywood cinema, in the 1920s had a powerful influence on Mexican popular cultural, the transnational conversation was dialogical. Popular theater was modern Mexico’s mode of speaking (back) to the global influences—movies, jazz, and European-style cabaret—impacting Mexico in the crucial period of that country’s revolutionary national project. As the chapter argues, just as Vélez’s provocative “Jazz” persona was a product of revolutionary transition, her high-profile stardom—simultaneously and paradoxically—posed a palpable threat to the stability of the Mexico’s post-revolutionary national project.

When Vélez emigrates to Hollywood, Mexico’s illustrated weeklies sustain their attention, offering an intellectually critical perspective on Vélez’s Hollywood production and persona that will be in contrast to Mexico’s monthly periodicals—*Filmográfico* and

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<sup>38</sup> Ageeth Sluis’s recent essay, “Bataclanismo,” is the first serious study of Mexico City’s *revista* theater published in English. It gives us a solid sense of one aspect of musical theater, the “ba-ta-clán,” from a visual culture perspective. It does not, however, address the importance of the individual personas of the *revista* stars, as such, or speak to their discursive, gendered impact within the popular entertainment of the emergent middle-class. For studies of Mexican-American *revista* in English, see Nicolas Kanellos (1982, 1984, 1987). For Spanish-language *revista* scholarship, see Armando de María y Campos (1956) Carlos Monsiváis, (1982), and Alejandro Ortiz (2005).

*Cinema Reporter*, which are close to Hollywood-style fan journalism—emerging in the early 1930s. These two sets of Mexican discourse pose two perspectives that are, in turn, distinct from the perspective of the Mexican (American) daily newspaper of Los Angeles, *La Opinión*. My next three chapters track Vélez's stardom in Hollywood by placing this range of Mexican national/nationalist perspectives in conversation with hegemonic English language discourse.

Chapters 3, 4 and 5 collectively cover Vélez's Hollywood years, 1927 to 1944, but seek to resist the Hollywood perspective as a privileged lens on these years. I use a triangular network of Vélez-related discourses as viewing devices trained on three locations of history, including but not limited to Hollywood film and cinema history. Vélez discourse offers a set of three simultaneously developing perspectives (Anglo/hegemonic, Mexican and Mexican American) on a complicated set of political, economic and cultural moments. These chapters reorganize a sometimes familiar Hollywood landscape, setting it at some remove from the familiarity of popular hegemonic memory.

Milestones of the Hollywood industry—the transition from silent to sound cinema, the institution and enforcement of the Production Code, Hollywood's participation in the Good Neighbor Policy—get a fresh look by way of the circumstances of Vélez's stardom. I look at both the innovation of sound film and the gradual institutionalization of the Production Code and as being directly responsive to of the cultural defining of U.S. nationhood. As such, both are highly implicated in the cultural definition of “American” citizenship, “American” gender construction and, relatedly, the regulation of coupling, sexuality and marriage.

Chapter 3 spans the traumatic transformation by which the globalizing “roaring twenties” gave way to a reversion to nationalism that came with Depression-era 1930s. Hollywood’s cinema’s eroticization of marriage in the 1920s often took the form of a romanticization/appropriation of female ethnic difference in an effort to erotically charge the concept of sexual difference; Hollywood in the 1920s initially held out for Vélez a measure of potential assimilation, that is, a measure of American cultural citizenship based on a probationary “white” status (Jacobson). Both sound cinema and the Code played a (more or less self-conscious) role in imaging a ever more consolidated “white” U.S., defined in contrast to its foreign Others. Vélez’s insistent Mexicanness begins to narrow in representational signification during, and in direct relationship to, discursive response to her high-profile “mixed” romance with the Gary Cooper, her co-star in her fourth Hollywood feature, *Wolf Song* (Paramount, 1929). The three year Vélez/Cooper liaison affords analysis of public discourse—both filmic and fan discourse—concerning immigration, coupling, marriage and procreation. As the Vélez/Cooper relationship continued, unsanctioned by marriage, Vélez’s probationary assimilation is revealed to have been a temporarily cracked window. An apparent foreclosure on her potential for U.S. assimilation coincides with the increasingly xenophobic climate that settled into U.S. culture with the early years of the Depression.

The trauma of the Depression years impacted Vélez’s image from the Mexican and Mexican-American perspective as well. The period had a devastating impact on the economy of Mexican American Los Angeles, leading to a period of repatriation and deportation. Spanish-language print discourse provides a tangible measure of the cultural tensions taking place within and between urban Mexico and Mexican American Los

Angeles. Though the contexts are highly distinct, Vélez comes in for controversy in these cultural contexts as well, and on terms that run parallel to discourses of the hegemonic United States. Constructions of coupling and marriage are being reconfigured in relation to perceived threats to stable national identity and allegiance. Intensified effort towards cultural protectionism occasioned a discursive pattern whereby Vélez is consistently framed as exemplary of the threat that “going yankee” (Serna, 2006) posed to “traditional” *mexicanidad*.

With the entrenchment of the Depression, Vélez’s representational signification was measurably altered. Vélez’s work on Broadway in the ’30s, however, suggests that California’s gradual narrowing on the delimitations of whiteness was not so quickly or patently adopted in the Northeast. It was by way of Broadway that Vélez made her transition to comedy. With the process of her return to Hollywood, the translation of her stage comedy back to the screen reveals a newly conceived framework for Vélez’s representation, which, however, translated to a structure for the sidelining of her representation. For, despite her refurbished comedic persona, Vélez’s screen potential eventually diminished almost entirely. Crashing the *Hollywood Party* (MGM, 1934), playing herself, Vélez performs a screened battle for her professional citizenship. For she was, in this period, systematically “included out” of the increasingly heterogeneous family of cinelandia and, symbolically, excluded from the American melting-pot dream. This era’s version of transculturation—performed by the industry, via Vélez—was a performance of the impossibility, the inevitable failure, of any sustained U.S./Mexican *cultural intimacy*. Vélez’s exclusion from the parameters of Americanness was

performed through the impossibility, even ridiculousness, of Vélez as a romantic partner.<sup>39</sup>

Central to Chapter 4 is analysis of “Vélez-in-relation” to the Italian actor, comedian and jazz pianist, Jimmy Durante. The ethnic/racial duo: the Italian/Catholic Durante con/contra the Mexican/Catholic Vélez gains considerable momentum. The “couple” enjoyed a hit on Broadway before returning to the screen to make four filmed comedies together. In each of the films, Durante, though ambiguously “ethnic” is de-latinized by way of contrast to the racialized Vélez. Thus Durante finds his way “in” (however awkwardly and comedically) and Vélez is “included out.”

This chapter again attends to parallels in the constructions of citizenship in the Anglo U.S. and the Mexican (American) contexts. Vélez’s stage work brought her increased sympathy within the discourses of her compatriot communities. Mexico, and especially Mexican American Los Angeles, enthusiastically received indications that Vélez was ready to leave Hollywood for good and turn entirely to theater. Yet the comedic roles that brought her back to the screen—in which her representation evolved, in some measure, toward more progressive, *ironic* performances of her own unacceptability—sustained her reputation as a troublesome figure in Mexican descent Los Angeles, especially in terms of critical, as opposed to popular, reception. Just when Vélez appears to have been entirely included out of Hollywood, her venture in to Mexican production significantly boosts her currency in Mexico and reframes her

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<sup>39</sup> I am here inspired by Doris Sommer’s inquiry as to “...*why* eroticism and nationalism become figures for each other... and... *how* the rhetorical relationship between heterosexual passion and hegemonic states function as a mutual allegory, as if each discourse were grounded in the allegedly stable other” (1991, 31). I will repeatedly return to the perpetual paradox of Vélez’s discourses of intimacy: on U.S. terms, cross cultural marriage was seen as signifier for successful transculturation; her potential as married served as the measure for her star currency. On Mexican terms, however, pursuit of Anglo American marriage was highly controversial (at least within public, top-down discourse), and was often understood as a form of betrayal.

position in the Mexican descent colony of Los Angeles. Vélez's popularity shows us that the Mexican descent community's nationalist identification is coming under challenge. Mexican/Mexican American mass culture's interest in Vélez finally appears to trump the elite's operations of cultural protection.

Chapter 5 tackles the entire series of eight "Mexican Spitfire" films (RKO, 1939-1944) along with a small set of less discussed films of the early 1940s. I approach the film series, first, by way of the "fighting words" that defined Lupe Vélez in discourse of the late '30s. Vélez's specifically combative persona of these years is largely constructed off-screen, by way of the antagonistic relationships "judiciously built up" (as one *Motion Picture Magazine* writer admits) between her and two co-starring sparring partners of the distant and recent past, respectively: Jetta Goudal and Johnny Weissmuller. Vélez's character in the series, Carmelita Fuentes/Lindsey, was founded I argue, on precisely this embattled positioning; the series, in turn, attempts to negotiate between the "include her out" trajectory of Vélez's roles earlier in the decade, and the mandate of inclusion introduced with Hollywood's participation in President Roosevelt's Good Neighbor Policy. Mexico and Mexicans posed a vexed image as Good Neighbor figures, as the Policy was disingenuously decoupled from the issues of immigration and miscegenation.

The *Mexican Spitfire* series solidified Vélez's personae as perpetually probationary wife, a position that naturalizes her as somehow almost-but-not-quite eligible for the benefits of U.S. citizenship. During the series's later years, Columbia Pictures managed to utilize Vélez in Good Neighbor productions that were far more optimistic towards Vélez's cultural inclusion than were RKO's degenerating *Mexican Spitfire* films. Vélez's last U.S. film, *Redhead from Manhattan*, is arguably her richest role/performance since

the establishment of her career as comedienne. *Redhead* pictures Vélez in a dual role as sisters: an eager immigrant “rube” on the one hand and a sophisticated, South American / New York stage performer on the other. With Vélez playing both Rita and Elaine Manners, the self-reflexive destabilization of both characters becomes a revelation of star text construction. Moreover, in the performance of two people, Vélez is able to embody—finally, in this all but lost film—a figure of transculturation.

The present study is limited to twentieth-century discourses. This project does not advance an analysis of Vélez-related discourses or signifying systems operating in the present moment. Rather, this historical analysis offers a picture of why and how Vélez has become largely lost to us, offering perspectives on social and cultural history that we we may have similarly lost or neglected.

In the late 1950s an unattractive fictional representation of Vélez’s suicide was authored by the avant garde filmmaker, Kenneth Anger. The story circulated by way of Anger’s idiosyncratic—yet highly popular—series of tabloid literature, *The Hollywood Babylon* books, before metastasizing into various (re)appropriations. Extant Vélez scholarship tends to bemoan the fact that the actor’s posthumous representation has acquired a cultural currency eclipsing that of her own cinematic texts. Chapter 6 analyzes Vélez’s posthumous queer appropriation, as produced in the texts print and film texts of filmmakers Anger, Andy Warhol, José Rodríguez-Soltero and Rita González. Pop Art, in the hands of both Anger and Warhol, functions as a self-conscious contact zone of sorts between “high” and mass culture, art and industry. Thus an economically articulated theory of transculturation—one cognizant of Ortiz’s centripetal and centrifugal *economic*

forces—remains productive. Though such economic forces were negotiated around aesthetic rather than regional cultural nodes, neither race nor ethnicity was irrelevant to this “postmodern” negotiation. The Vélez texts allow for a window on postmodern cultural production that neither erases nor succumbs to the hegemony of whiteness. Anger’s and then Warhol’s revisionist histories of classical Hollywood gave rise to subsequent post-postmodern revisions of those revisions, those of José Rodriguez-Soltero and, later, Rita González. Despite the prevalence and variety of discourses exalting liberation and “cultural freedom” in the ‘60s, the re-imagined Vélez—and, by extension, the image of the Mexican American woman—was, I argue, viscerally exploited as a vehicle for the liberatory expression of others (even Others). In earlier decades, Vélez representational function became trapped, in part, by the representation of her “fiery” and “aggressive” discourses of personal freedom, by her battle for the right to be “just Lupe.” In death as in life, Vélez legacy became trapped by the discourses of “liberation” that mobilized but never freed her.

### **The Broken Record:<sup>40</sup> “Dolores, Sí; Lupe, No”**

They even had to open the uppermost galleries at the Philharmonic for that Spanish Night last week, and Spanish combs in long hair flourished throughout the audience. So did Spanish shawls [...]. Dolores Del Rio, in a black, much befilled tulle skirt and a tight fitting black lace bodice, was properly dignified and prima-donnish. But I was sorry for Lupe Velez, who was introduced as being “a glass of champagne” and “full of pep.” The poor girl had to live up to that and no one ever worked harder at being violently peppy.

Alma Whitaker, “Sugar and Spice,” LAT July 8, 1928, C19

In the course of preparing my final chapter, researching the reception of queer underground film in Los Angeles, I was fortunate to interview Kevin Thomas, the film

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<sup>40</sup> This is a play on the title of a Vélez film, *The Broken Wing* (1931), which was banned in Mexico for its denigrating representation of the state. Dolores del Rio’s film, *The Dove* (1931), was also banned that year.

critic of the *Los Angeles Times* who made underground film a regular feature of his cinema beat in the 1960s. We spoke of “camp sensibility,” of Maria Montez, queer iconization, Lupe Vélez and—eventually, inevitably—Dolores del Rio. Thomas had a story to tell of an interview he did in the late 1970s with *la bella* “Lolita.” It was a story I had heard before.

If there is one aspect of Vélez discourse that remains consistent—whether she is discussed in Mexico or in the U.S., in Spanish-language discourse or English, in scholarly, popular or (I repeatedly find) conversational discourse—it is the insistence on a comparison to be made between Vélez and del Rio. Historically Vélez tends to come out on the short end of such a comparison, found wanting on a number of fronts. Each time scholars revisit the comparison its conclusiveness is reinscribed; Vélez’s dismissal, her historical erasure, is affirmed, for tokenism tends to organize cultural memory to mark the singular, the first, the most, the “best.”

The summation of the Vélez/del Rio counterpoint might be typified by way of one convenient anecdote, oft repeated, which may or may not be based on fact. The story is compelling, regardless of veracity, in part because it defers to the judgment of Mexican women-of-a-certain-age for its rhetorical credibility. The initial published version comes from the screenwriter Budd Shulberg’s Hollywood memoir, *Moving Pictures* (1981). Schulberg, son of Paramount producer B.P. Shulberg, tells of a train trip to Mexico City he took with his family when he was in high school (which places the anecdote around 1930). It seems there were two “elderly” women on the train, sisters who were “highborn and rich...”.

We knew they were upper class because they were so snooty you could almost hear them sniff as Mexicans with brown skins (*mestizos* with Indian blood) passed them in the corridors. For the first day they sniffed at us just like they did all the others. But when

they heard my father was the grand *jefe* of a Hollywood movie studio, they decided to strike up a conversation.

This is a tale from a rolling “contact zone.”<sup>41</sup> As Schulberg tells it, the conversation that took place relied on a limited vocabulary, a “contact language,” one might say (Pratt), furnished by Hollywood; there was no shared language between Schulberg’s family and the Mexican sisters beyond the names of Hollywood stars.

‘Dolores del Rio?’ asked the elder of the two sisters. She spoke the name in Spanish with an air of infinite refinement. We all looked at each other in astonishment. Father responded with the social charm that was one of his trademarks, ‘Yes, Señora, we know Dolores del Rio.’

The ladies nodded to each other and the conversation continued.

Lupe Velez?’

‘Yes, Señoras,’ my father smiled his most ingratiating smile, ‘we also know Lupe Velez.’

The aged sisters shook their heads and made polite clucking noises of disapproval.

‘Dolores del Rio, *si*,’ said the elder. ‘Lupe Velez, *no!*’

Del Rio, *sí*, Velez, *no!*’ her sister seconded the verdict.

We felt like we were selling poor Lupe short but, after all, this was a long journey down through the cactus country and the parched plains of the Sonora and one had to be sociable. So we nodded in agreement.

Schulberg tells of the same phrases being repeated between the otherwise mute parties each time they met on the train. Although the Spanish pronunciation of “Dolores del Rio” impressed him, Schulberg makes no mention of pronunciation regarding Lupe Vélez’s name. Only that “[p]oor, hot-tempered, lovable Lupe didn’t get a single vote all the way to Mexico City.” And so the young Shulberg was compelled to ask his father why the two women might feel this way about the respective Mexican actresses. His father reportedly gave him the following explanation:

Dolores... was a daughter of the Mexican aristocracy, her father was a banker. Her mother was one of the Asunsolos, distinguished in the arts. But Lupe’s mother had been a walker of the streets. [...] Lupe herself made her theatrical debut in the raunchy burlesque houses of the city. Stagedoor Juanitos panted for her favors and Mama Velez would sell

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<sup>41</sup> It is worth noting Schulberg’s claim of expertise regarding the train’s diverse population as well as his strain to place his family, and himself, specifically, on the correct side of any class or race-based bias there in operation. The fact that neither position really holds up is beside my immediate point in the retelling of his story, though it supports a larger point of Vélez being consistently deployed in service of the opportunistic positioning of other public figures.

her for the evening to the highest bidder. Her price soared to thousands of pesos. Hence, Dolores, *sí*, Lupe, *no!*

Of course this train tale (minus this final “colorful” explanation for the disparity in cultural/national currency<sup>42</sup>) is the story that Kevin Thomas passed to me in our phone conversation. He had picked up the tale when he had once interviewed del Rio, back when she was in town for the premiere of what would be her final film, a Mexican/USA co-production titled *The Children of Sanchez* (1978). Del Rio had apparently told Thomas a version of the story herself in the course of that interview, which took place three years before Schulberg’s book was published. It was a personal anecdote. Or that is how Thomas remembered it, thirty-two years later, to have been presented.<sup>43</sup> Del Rio herself had overheard, or at least was willing to attest to, the now historical words of her compatriots: “Dolores del Rio, *si*; Lupe Vélez, *no!*”

To the extent to which this project revisits the Lupe/Lolita comparison, it is in the interest of elucidating the implications of “Dolores, *si*; Lupe, *no*,” not in discerning any relative veracity of the polemical positioning. Vélez and del Rio were both professionally successful Mexican stars who were, in U.S. fan discourse, presented as a fascinating study in likeness and contrast. As Alma Whitiker’s sentences in this section’s epigraph illustrates, hegemonic U.S. discourse, particularly in the context of the Hollywood 1920s

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<sup>42</sup> Discussion of sex work—in legend, in discourse, in the abstract, and in Hollywood and Mexican film—will surface in every chapter of this dissertation.

Shulberg includes three other Vélez anecdotes in his memoir. Two take place at the Hollywood Legion Boxing matches, a favorite Hollywood haunt for the stars on Fridays nights. Vélez, as we will have occasion to see, was a fan of the fights, especially of the Mexican boxers. Here is Schulberg: “I heard the screaming, I saw our Mexican sexpot, hysterical Lupe Velez, pounding the apron of the ring, watched the terrible wound on his face grow larger and larger....” (236). The other Vélez invocation, which is much cruder (I say by way of warning), begins with (an omitted) reference to Gary Cooper’s anatomy. Shulberg continues: “it was the local gossip that during [Cooper’s] romance (as we used to call it) with Lupe Velez, the Mexican pepper pot was so jealous of her prized possession that she would meet him at the door when he came home from the studio, unbutton his fly, and, spirited primitive that she was, sniff suspiciously for the scent of rival perfumes.” (266).

<sup>43</sup> I want to reiterate my thanks to Kevin Thomas for granting me an enlightening telephone interview which also informs my final chapter.

cult of foreignness, tended to frame the two as offering a complete “range” of *señorita personae*, conveniently packaged in mutual opposition: the demure versus the aggressive, which veers into the chaste versus the promiscuous, ambassador versus immigrant (Sturtevant), “Spanish” versus Mexican. The consistent juxtaposition of Vélez and del Rio hides its own tracking of rigid class politics as well as ethnic and racialized “differences” manifesting as persistent specters resting (too comfortably, still) in discourses regarding the two stars.

I end this introduction with another extended Vélez/del Rio anecdote, one rooted in Los Angeles of the late 1920s, which is more formally historiographic and draws on the contact zone of English- and Spanish-language newspapers. As will become clear in Chapters 3 and 4, two spheres of discourse—two papers of record, *La Opinión* and the *Los Angeles Times*—are mutually (asymmetrically) impacted by transcultural exchange. My intention, here, is to expand the transcultural scope of the Vélez/del Rio comparison/contrast, illuminating how the polemic signified—and has continued to signify—a kind of “chaste” versus “promiscuous” Mexicana stardom, Tobacco versus Sugar.

In her path-breaking study of Los Angeles’s primary Spanish-language newspaper, *La Opinión*, historian Francine Medeiros draws on the Vélez/del Rio juxtaposition to illustrate the paper’s Mexican nationalist alliances, which were often vividly expressed by way of individual figures well known to *la colonia mexicana*. Medeiros briefly identifies one incident as exemplary of how the promotion of national (Mexican) pride became a part of what she points to as the paper’s practice of cultural reinforcement, as operating in the face of U.S. Anglo-based pressures toward assimilation. Medeiros writes:

“... *La Opinión* did not hesitate to severely criticize people who disassociated themselves from Mexican heritage or citizenship. Hence, Dolores Del Rio epitomized stardom in the eyes of *La Opinión* because she identified as a Mexicana. Conversely, Lupe Vélez, a young artist who insisted she was Spanish, was chastised and disavowed in print (1980, 79).

Scholars familiar with the discursive distinction maintained between the del Rio persona and that of Vélez, might be surprised to read such a characterization. For, unlike del Rio,<sup>44</sup> Vélez was rarely mis-identified as “Spanish.” Medeiros’s supporting footnoted references an incident taking place in 1927, shortly after Vélez arrived in Hollywood. The “Spanish” association had indeed been made, in the pages of *Los Angeles Times*, but very probably not by Vélez herself. The *La Opinión* piece that Medeiros cites was published in the paper’s second edition on the same date, March 2, 1927, as a *Times* piece, which likely ran in an edition released the previous night. I refer to a brief item covering Vélez’s stage appearances at the *Music Box Revue*. Vélez is introduced as follows:

Lupe Vélez, Spanish beauty who made her debut in Louis O. Macloon’s “New Music Box Revue” starring Fanny Brice, last night, will do a special number tonight in honor of Nellie Revell and the Baby Wampas stars who will be Fanny Brice’s guests at that performance. Senorita Vélez has been offered a long term contract by Mr. Macloon, but it

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<sup>44</sup> The following are four accounts of Del Rio being referred to as “Spanish” in the *Los Angeles Times* in these years. In the first example, “Spanish” is used to modify a positive adjective that (typical of bias) is not likely to be used as a characteristic descriptive of Mexico or Mexicans—in this case, “hospitality”: “Lovely Senora del Rio, whose Spanish hospitality is fast placing her in the front ranks, socially as well as professionally, is known as one of the most charming hostesses of Hollywood” (Isabel Stuyvesant, “Society of Cinemaland” *LAT*, Dec 6, 1925, C30). “Spanish hospitality” is used much like “Spanish beauty” is used in the Vélez instance. Shortly after *La Opinión* takes Vélez to task, three more instances involving del Rio show up in *LAT* pages:

“Everyone who has seen Dolores Del Rio in ‘What Price Glory’... wonders how she, so thoroughly Spanish, gives such a remarkable performance as the Little French girl, Chamaine, it is said” (anon., “Training Gives Actress French accent in Role,” *LAT* April 3, 1927). Finally, “Dolores Del Rio, a Spanish Senorita, interprets the role of the Russian peasant girl [...]. Miss Del Rio was educated in Madrid Spain.” “Nationalities Represented in Tolstoy Drama,” *LAT* Apr 28 1927, A8. “Ramona Found to be True Modern, Says Finis Fox.” *LAT* Oct 2 1927, C12, “The Spanish Dolores Del Rio is to be the Spanish Ramona. Edwin Carewe, brother of Finis Fox, and of Indian blood, too, is to direct.” This piece is particularly ironic as “Spanish” in this instance is used incorrectly in reference to both screen (the Ramona character) and life (del Rio). For more on how Helen Hunt Jackson’s *Ramona* (1884), a novel brought multiple times to the screen, “romanticized a false past” representing a revisionist history of California,” see DeLyser, 2003. Also see Jacobs, 2001. For more on del Rio’s association with “Spanish” and/or “Castilian” aristocracy, see, also, Hershfield (200, 10).

is doubtful if she will be able to accept the offer because of other engagements (“STAR INVITES GUESTS,” *LAT*, Mar 2, 1927, A9).

There was no interview associated with the *Times* piece and no quotations. Yet that day, Vélez was taken to task in *La Opinión* for the mis-identification. The piece, titled “The Betrayal [traición] of Lupe Vélez,” carried a subtitle: “having been contracted by the ‘Music Box’ in Hollywood, she is announcing herself as ‘Spanish Beauty.’” As the piece reads, “Spanish beauty” is in English and in quotes. The writer, L. F. Bustamante, accuses Vélez of having renounced her country of origin. Her treasonous self-identification was contrasted at length with descriptions of the “loyal patriotism” of several other notable Latin American figures.<sup>45</sup> The incident marked a rare occurrence wherein a topic originating in the entertainment section found its way directly onto the editorial page: the very next day, the editors seized on the opportunity to, as Medeiros writes, “chastise and disavow” Lupe Vélez. The editorial, titled “‘Spanish’ People” (printed in English—thus implying hostility toward the act of speaking English—with scare quotes on “Spanish”), accuses Vélez of disassociating from “her origin, her cradle [of birth, *cuna*], her color and everything.” The possibility that the entire incident was based on a mistake—a common enough mistake (or “mistake”<sup>46</sup>) within the English-language press (*pace* Alma Whitaker in this section’s epigraph)—was not considered.

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<sup>45</sup> Dolores del Rio, Ramon Novarro, Ricardo Bell, Virginia Fábregas, Lupe Rivas Cacho (“a tiple valued equally or above Vélez”)... among other figures identifying various circumstances of Latin American heritage.

<sup>46</sup> The common error was rooted in ignorance and/or complacency, if not bias. In a contemplative piece five years later, Gabriel Navarro writes about the (mis-)use of “Spanish” for Mexican (or Guatamalan, Argentinean, Chilean et cetera.) in the English-language press. Navarro offers a useful nuance that has perhaps been lost to us over years of nomenclature: “to consider us ‘Spanish’ does not mean in the least a confusion between us and our brothers of the Iberian Peninsula, The North Americans call natives of Spain ‘spaniards’ and make the distinction ‘Spanish’ for all that are hispanico, that is to say, those that proceed from the Spanish, covering, with this word, our twenty republics, plus one under the rule of Don Niceto Alcalá Zamora [then Spain’s Minister of War]. Consequently, by such a dictionary definition we are ‘Spanish’ so much less in the mind of the yankees, who tend to simplify everything.” The topic of the piece is the false representation of Mexicans, citing images of the *china poblana* and the *charro tapitío*. (Gabriel Navarro, “Impresiones Fugaces,” *La Opinión*, June 26, 1932, p.7).

Vélez was not yet a Hollywood star, though she would have been a known (and controversial) figure among those of the elite who had occasion to follow developments in the burgeoning popular theater culture of Mexico City. Vélez's Mexican reputation preceded her (just as an image of del Rio's high social and political affiliations proceeded her). Thus she was deployed in the Mexican American press—*early* and often—as a cautionary example in counter-illustration of high cultural principle.

Six months after the Music Box incident, on September 16, 1927, *La Opinión* published a piece featuring, as the headline read, “Five Mexicans that contribute prestige to our country.” The piece features Lupe Vélez along with del Rio, Ramon Novarro, Ernesto Guillén and Luis Alonso. As the article makes plain, the latter two male actors are better known as Donald Reed and Gilbert Roland, respectively. The paper apparently saw no tension in the fact of the male actors using Anglicized names for the screen.<sup>47</sup>

This study of the courses of Lupe Vélez’s career(s) will elucidate multiple forces of transculturation revolving around variously shifting epicenters. Centrifugal or centripetal forces will fluctuate gradually or they will change dramatically. The *perception* of such forces’ directions will shift as cultural or economic realities or expectations shift. Forces of repurposing and transvaluation will mean that the signification of Vélez “commodity” dynamics become altered as, for example, the terms of what “brings prestige” to a nation, region, or cultural demographic inevitably fail to remain stable. The terms of history and

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<sup>47</sup> It is with far greater ease, now that the historical *Los Angeles Times* is word-searchable, that I can follow up and identify the source of the “Spanish Beauty” flap. I am grateful to Medeiros for having cited the May 3 piece, which I might have otherwise missed. However, I would like to clarify that the piece that Medeiros cites as the patriotic opposition to the Vélez chastizement, appearing under the headline “Five Mexicans that contribute prestige to our country,” *does* include Vélez as one of those prestigious five. *La Opinión* did, indeed, tend to place del Rio and Vélez in oppositional discursive frameworks, but the binary set-up was not expressed as starkly or simply as later scholarship tends to imply.

cultural memory change, as well, within a decade—or two—or over the course of half a century.

One aspect of Vélez’s public image remains constant over the three-quarters of the twentieth century treated in this dissertation: her *inquietud*. The reductive “Spitfire” designation—a trope invented for Lupe Vélez in order to define and contain the U.S. Latina image—fails to circumscribe the spectrum of Vélez personae that my research has uncovered. Vélez, *la artista inquieta*, is emblematic not of a “type” but of a complex phenomenon: the creative adaptability that defines the truly transcultural agent.

## CHAPTER 2

### ***Nuestra Lupe, La Tiplecita “Jazz” (Our Lupe, the little jazz soprano)***

In late August 1927, a profile of Lupe Vélez originating from the U.S. fan-magazine *Photoplay* appeared in Spanish translation in the pages of *El Universal Ilustrado (El UI)*, one of Mexico City’s popular illustrated weekly journals.<sup>48</sup> For its U.S. readers, the piece had offered a first glimpse of the unknown young Mexican actress just before her triumphant debut in Douglas Fairbanks’s *The Gaucho* (F. Richard Jones, UA, 1927). For its Mexican readers, the celebrated theater figure—*la tiplecita jazz*—was therein blithely reduced to a mere cantina dance. The item was published without editorial comment. While *El Universal Ilustrado*’s readership would immediately recognize the multiple falsehoods at work in the *Photoplay* piece—their own recent memories of Vélez’s ubiquitous image still so vivid—they would wait two weeks for a responsive critique, finally penned by *El UI cronista*, Adolfo Piembert.<sup>49</sup> Piembert writes with open disdain for the fact that “los yanquis assume *teatro frívolo* amounts to the equivalent of a dance hall or a cantina...” and he admonishes *Photoplay* for its characterization of her—their—country: “the seething turbulent Mexico of incessant warfare.” “Little Mexican Lupe” was a caricature of poverty and religiosity (“her ‘excessively fervent’ prayers, having

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<sup>48</sup> “La ‘Niña Lupe’ a través de los periodicos yanqui (traducido fielmente sin comentarios),” El UI, August 25, 1927.

<sup>49</sup> Unlike the majoritarian *Photoplay* readership, readers of *La Opinión*, Los Angeles’s Mexican American newspaper of record, would, likewise, be familiar with Vélez’s high profile in Mexico City’s *revista* theater.

been so generously answered by Hollywood's deity of silver screen stardom, meant that 'the Vélez family' would eat"<sup>50</sup>). As gratifying as was Piembert's commentary, the two-week wait may have felt punishing to Vélez fans, a punctuation of the fact that Vélez, emblematic as she was of Mexico City's cosmopolitan *chica moderna*—complete with bobbed hair, painted lips, and Lincoln automobile—could have been so deftly transformed, with the crossing of the northern border, to a personification of "untamed" naïveté.



**Figure 5: La niña Lupe, 1925**

<sup>50</sup> "Two Girls Who Got the Breaks," *Photoplay*, Sep 1927, 43. The *Photoplay* article has Vélez contributing to the characterization of her family's (and thus her nation's) disparate circumstances: The article reads: "Lupe prayed, her mamma, her sister and her six Chihuahua dogs all prayed. 'For,' explains Lupe simply, 'if I did not get the part, we did not eat.'"

I am, at this writing, unable to reconcile the fact that Piembert seems to have translated the *Photoplay* article (in August 25, 1927) even before it was published in *Photoplay* (Sept 1927). Piembert published his rebuttle on Sept 10, 1927. I found no *Photoplay* article, prior to the September piece, which so precisely fits Piembert's translation/critique.

To her Mexican fans, Vélez was remembered, first, as *una primera tiple* (a first soprano) of the capital city's *revista* (popular) theater. This is the Lupe Vélez, "la niña Lupe," at the heart of this chapter (figure 5). It is the same Vélez that Mexico's celebrated gay *Contemporáneo* poet and essaying, Salvador Novo, remembered in *Nueva Grandeza Mexicana* (1946), his paean to the postrevolutionary city that witnessed the glory of his youth... and of hers. For Novo, Vélez remained emblematic of the performative imitation and mockery that is inexorably associated with a now rather obscure hybrid phenomenon of 1920s' Mexican popular culture, the "Ba-ta-clán":

We Mexicans have a special talent for imitation, which flourishes most obviously in our good ear for music. But I believe the one that had the greatest and most lasting influence was *Ba-ta-clán*. The very word remained with us to express its essence in other types of show. For the first time it shows us pretty, naked, lissom girls, whose voices did not matter.... Its precedent allowed us the discovery, from behind the counter of the *Fal Stores* on the corner of Gante and Madero... of the aggressive, beautiful and determined young girl, who reduced the addicts of the *Lírico* to howling frenzy when she bawled out *Blue Beard* and mounted the catwalk, back to the public, and gave her gluteal region an incredibly swift and violent rotary motion, which was her personal interpretation of the hawaiian hula-hula... She used to the full her very Mexican talent for mockery. Her name was Lupe Vélez (Trans. Lindsay, 1967, 49).

Vélez's brief stage career left no extant texts. It is through illustrious chroniclers, such as Novo and his *cronista* (journalist) peers, that I explore the traces of her theater world. I analyze the Vélez persona through the illustrated weekly journals of the day, *Revista de Revistas* and, especially, *El Universal Ilustrado* (*El UI*), which, owing to recent scholarship that I explicate below, we can privilege as documentation of the capital's dynamic network of popular and elite cultural discourses of the postrevolutionary era. It is through a structured cacophony of voices, then, that I seek to place Vélez's theater career in the context of its vibrant and chaotic historical moment, elucidating her participation in crucial post-revolutionary discourses of national and cultural contestation. The specific function of impersonation in Vélez's work—which is of a piece with the

performativity operating in *revista* as a genre and yet uniquely articulated in the body of Vélez's work—instantiated a resignification of gender enactment that both informed and upset the era's prescriptive concepts of nation, class, ethnicity and “race.”

This chapter argues that Vélez, as emblematic *chica moderna*, was as much a product of Mexico's revolutionary moment as she was a perceived threat to the Mexican national project. As a woman storming the barricades of cultural citizenship, her iconic persona within Mexico's emergent mass culture eerily foreshadows the position she would later hold within U.S. cinematic and cultural discourses: an embattled figure. The “intervention” that Vélez enacts within Mexican *revista*, then, becomes crucial to our later analysis of her representation—and indeed the representation of *la mexicana*—in Hollywood films and fandom.

### **Revista and the Primera Típica**

The term *revista* performs a double signification: translatable as “revue,” a useful analogy can be drawn between *revista* and European or U.S. versions of vaudeville or musical/comedy/variety theater; translated as “magazine,” *revista* theater signals the genre's topical subject matter and the timely nature and broad range of its content. In the post-revolutionary era, *revista*—arguably the privileged entertainment serving the emergent mass culture of Mexico City's middle class—proliferated dramatically.<sup>51</sup> I emphasize *revista* as middle class rather than “popular” entertainment, though it was informed and enriched by the influence of the popular within the genre's hybrid roots. While having a strong cultural and material association with the pre-revolution *zarzuela*, the Spanish theater of light opera, *revista*'s development in post-revolutionary Mexico

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<sup>51</sup> For *revista*'s influence and evolution, see María y Campos; for the “two faces” of popular culture, *cultura popular* vs *cultura de masas*, see Gabara (2008, 145, 127-29).

evolved through close contact with the Mexican *carpas*, outdoor tent theaters that functioned as (more properly “popular”) entertainment for the working classes and the poor.<sup>52</sup> Being conversant with the light-theater scene burgeoning internationally, *revista* mediated the *local* experience of an ever-encroaching *global* modernity. In the revolutionary period, *revista* theater evolved in response to decidedly national social/political concerns while also negotiating the local experience of influential international dynamics. These were the tumultuous years in Mexico leading up to the consolidation of power under the Sonoran “Dynasty” (the northern politicians that would form the foundation for the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional*, or PRI). As much as audiences expected cultural production to respond to the social and political realities of their lived experience, they hungered as well for distraction from the weight of the times. *Revista*, alternately referred to as *teatro frívolo*,<sup>53</sup> creatively negotiated these two, seemingly contradictory, desires. As a counterpoint to the political commentary and comedic satire that constituted *revista*’s more substantive content, colorful and “baroque” musical segments provided the relief of frivolity. It was the wry, witty charm and candid sexuality provided by the *tiples* that most succinctly underscored *revista*’s tone of irreverence while it pleased and entertained in its own right. In fact, as Carlos Monsiváis points out, the irony of crucial matters of local and national policy being treated within a highly sexualized space was, in itself, politically provocative in its irreverence (Monsiváis, 60-65).

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<sup>52</sup> For more on the *carpas*, see Merlin (1995) Pilcher (2001) and Arrizón (1999, 31-35).

<sup>53</sup> The terms *revista* and *teatro frívolo* appear to be used more or less interchangably in discourse of the 1920s. *Frívolo* is useful in underscoring *revista*’s distinction from traditional dramatic theater or *teatro serio*, though the literal frivolity of productions that directly appropriated the French Ba-ta-clan should be contrasted with the more satirical and irreverent “frivolity” of productions such as Roberto Soto’s work (more about Soto to follow). Following Sonia León Sarabia (2008), I will employ the term “*revista*” unless the context suggests otherwise.

The *primera tiple*, the female star of the *revista*, was recognized as a gifted dancer, singer and actor. Above all, though, each *tiple* came to be identified by the individual personality she affected, a persona that tended to stay with her off-stage. The era offered, for example, *la tiple folklórica* (Lupe Rivas Cacho), *la tiple* “flirt” (María Teresa Renner), *la tiple vacilón* (the teasing or joking soprano, Delia Magaña), and *la tiple gatita* (the little she-cat, a sexualized expression for the indigenous female street vendor, María Conesa).... these personae represented categories, representational “types,” more or less culturally accepted. In effect, *tiple* personas collectively articulated a recognizable national iconography, a staged ontology, of the modern *Mexicana*.<sup>54</sup> The performative nature of this ontological system should be stressed, lest we confuse the *tiple*’s own social status with that of her constructed persona. For example, *gatita* is an often derogatorily term for a specific “type” of street vendor: a female peasant migrant to the city, typically Indian but often *mestiza* and always poor. Theatrically, she is a representational trope, portrayed by a *tiple* who is not Indian. Conesa, who was born in Spain, provides the iconic example but there are others. Conesa was not someone who would be confused with a *gatita* in “real” life.<sup>55</sup>

The development of performed identities was part of the *revista* cultural tradition and accounted for much of the basis on which these stars were appreciated, exalted and financially compensated. Furthermore, the function of self-reflexivity inherent to *tiple* identity play was augmented by competitive imitation; the *tiples*’ performance of each

<sup>54</sup> For period discourse on the *tiples*, see “on dit... gossip de la semana: El origen de las especies,” *El UI*, June 18, 1925, p34. Vélez is here described as *la tiple embrionaria* (the soprano in embryo) that “garnered applause with the force of imitation.”

<sup>55</sup> Her association with the trope began with her role in *La Gatita Blanca*, though she would also portray the lead in *La India Bonita*, a *revista* about the winner of the first India Bonita Beauty pageant (more will be said about the india bonita pageant later in this chapter); See Rick López (2006, 314, 322-3). For more on *mexicano* types, especially the *pelado* (the “country bumpkin” new to the city) for example, see Pilcher (39-41).

other's personae overtly foregrounded the constructed nature of their gendered/nationally-coded identities. In 1925 and '26, such imitation reached a heightened level of intensity, owing largely to Lupe Vélez's impersonations of her colleagues and to the imitations she reciprocally elicited.

### Ba-ta-clán and Revista's Bataclanization

In 1925, Madame Berthe Rassimí succeeded where Emperor Napoleon III had failed, by conquering Mexico, not by force of French arms, but rather through the beauty of French legs. — Jeffrey M. Pilcher, *Cantinflas and the Chaos of Mexican Modernity* (2001, 20).

Vélez got her start in the period of *revista*'s "bataclanization." I implement the term to describe the dynamic taking place within the year or so immediately following the debut of the French import production, *Voilá Paris: La Ba-ta-clán*, in the respectable venue of El Teatro Iris. Two female entrepreneurs—one Mexican, Esperanza Iris, and one French, Madame Berthe Rassimí—together "conquered" the city of Mexico with a bomb of feminine flesh, launching a theatrical spectacle that proved to be a turning point in Mexico's entertainment culture.<sup>56</sup> Rassimí's production (her name would be forever associated with the nascent sub-genre) showcased scantily-clad (*desnuda*), French female performers who paraded in a choreographed group harmony that, as Ageeth Sluis suggests, seems to have anticipated racy, pre-code Hollywood productions of Busby Berkeley. Judging by the pictures in the popular magazines of the day, however, Rassimí's production would have Berkeley's work looking rather conservative by comparison.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Ageeth Sluis maintains the production initiated nothing less than the transforming of Mexico City's public life and public space (2010).

<sup>57</sup> The Spanish word, "desnuda" translates as "nude" but is often used to mean "insufficiently clothed." From what I understand, there was actually less outright toplessness in Mexico than was practiced in Paris. Incidentally, the only fully topless photo I encountered in the magazines I researched was one of the African-American (turned French) performer, Josephine Baker. Such racialized discrepancies gesture

“Ba-ta-clán,” as a variant on French cabaret tradition exported for consumption in Mexico, is exemplary of the globalized nature of 1920s modern culture industries. In Mexico’s post revolutionary period, popular imports drew anxious but highly creative attention. For just as foreign “invasions” on the cultural front produced excitement, they also engendered defensiveness in some quarters and—more productively—critique, parody and satire. By way of the established *revista* theater, ba-ta-clán spawned a number of domestic responses, from the crassly imitative to the parodic, some of which drew more popular attention, even, than had Madame Rassimí’s explosive debut. Though certainly elaborate musical segments were a staple of *revista* fare before the ba-ta-clán influence, ba-ta-clán productions differed formally from established Mexican *revista*, even aside from the heightened skin factor. Most significantly, Ba-ta-clan privileged group spectacle over individual performance; in ba-ta-clán, the role of “first sopranos” typically became less important than the collective visual spectacle of the chorus (*tiples segundas*). Likewise, I should add, the significance of individual male roles and actors declined in relation to the degree of ba-ta-clán influence, as did the factor of sustained narratives and directly politically content. These changes were neither minor nor uncontroversial.

When Armando de María y Campos states that *bataclanismo* “revolutionized” *revista* theater, then, he is not speaking of politics. In fact, María y Campos holds to the broad generalization that *bataclanismo* de-politicized *revista* (1956, 297), but adds that it stylistically altered the genre via the sensation caused by the large chorus of *tiples*

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towards a provocative commentary on sexual objectification and exoticism of the Other in the Mexican theatrical context, a matter about which, especially as played out in *revista*, certainly deserves more research. Thanks to my colleague in American Culture (UM), Tayana Hardin, for a perspective on Baker and on nudity in the French Cabaret of the period.

*segundas*, and the number of appropriations it spawned. Sonia León Sarabia (2008), however, intervenes to emphasize the significance of the Mexican *parodies* over that of the profuse copycat productions and even, for that matter, over the famed French original. For León Sarabia, *revista*'s “revolutionary” turning point is located in the first of the truly Mexican bataclanesque appropriations, a decidedly satirical spectacle launched by the prolific entrepreneurial team that was actor/director Roberto Soto and producer José Campilla, *Mexican Rataplán* (45-49). Vélez joined *El Rataplán*, her second revista, in progress as the production rode the momentum of its immediate popularity; she had been invited on board after her sensational debut in another popular ba-ta-clán satire, the provocatively titled, *¡No lo tapes! (Don't Cover It!)*. Before undertaking the trajectory of Vélez's specific theatrical contribution, we need to step back to place the complex *Rataplán* phenomenon in juxtaposition to the French ba-ta-clán, and within the broader realm of its historical context.

The Soto/Campilla production began under the name, *Voilá Mexique: El Rataplán*, and later became known as, *Mexican Rataplán*. Even this evolution in naming speaks self-reflexively of the production's complex hybridity: The initially underscored French association with Rassimí's production eventually morphs towards a *yanqui* association (“Mexique” transforming to “Mexican” rather than “Mexicana”), thus invoking the influence of U.S. cinema and jazz culture on Ba-ta-clán/Rataplán aesthetics. The Bataclanization of revista was reflective of an emergent mass theater culture—a “modern” autochthonous culture of sorts—that was as specific to post-revolutionary Mexico as it was unapologetic in its flaunting of international influences and references.

María y Campos's perception of Soto's politics as diminished would seem to run counter to the significance of the revue's title. Jeffrey Pilcher and Ageeth Sluis both point out the significance of "rataplan" as loose translatable to "the rat plan" or "the rat manifesto," with "-plan," in Mexican Spanish, signifying a political program or position. Thus *Voilá Mexique: El Rataplán* becomes "Here's Mexico: The Rat Manifesto." In fact, María y Campos's own account of certain cuadros – "acts" or "sequences" in this context – within *Voilá Mexique: el Ra-ta-plán*, actually infer that its political references, while layered under "frivolity," carry the same simultaneous sting/wink that accorded Soto his long-sustained reputation as an astutely political theater player.<sup>58</sup> *Revistas* that followed Soto's prototype for appropriative parody moved to restore the significance of character, narrative and topical content that French ba-ta-clán eclipsed. This is not to say that María y Campos's observations are off base. In comparison to productions prior to the French project, *revista*'s bataclanization does accompany substantial shifts in the genre, not the least being the shift in the *primera tiple*'s textual function from one that is directly engaged in political commentary to one that carries a politics of gender and sexuality, and thus a conceivably "diluted" political significance.

I use the term "bataclanization" to indicate the spectrum of productions that ranged from the entirely French-influenced copycat to the fully parodic, "rataplanesque" Mexican appropriation. I want to underscore the discursive significance of this range of bataclanesque innovations—particularly the variables at play signifying the genres' perceived *mexicanismo* (Mexicanness)—in order to quantify *revista*'s socio-political relevance under the ba-ta-clán influence. This relative sense of national/cultural authenticity has everything, in the long run, to do with the reception of *revista*'s

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<sup>58</sup> For more on Soto's career, humor and politics, see León Sarabia (2008) and Pilcher (2001, 17-23).

bataclanization and the individual reception of performers associated with the phenomenon, particularly Lupe Vélez.

Ageeth Sluis documents evidence—crucially important at this juncture—that *revista* productions were beginning to incur censorship. In the Plutarco Elías Calles administration, *revista* productions were likely to face state reprisal on the basis of political criticism while enjoying a pass regarding nudity and sexual innuendo (475). It seems quite likely, then, that shifts in *revista*'s overt political engagement owe as much to changes in policing as to ba-ta-clán's stylistic practices.<sup>59</sup> Noting the multiple layers of irreverent impersonation central to these productions, a mode of citational representation that was not instigated with bataclanization but that was enhanced by it in productions like Soto's *Rataplán*, one can appreciate the *tiple*'s role in what I posit as a *performance* of frivolity. That is to say, bataclanization ushered in a complex citational process (Parker and Sedgwick, 1995) by which, to stay with Soto's *Rataplán* as the emblematic example, a playfully “authentic” *Mexicanized* version of what was seen as specifically *foreign* frivolity becomes a metacritique of the rigid nationalism that was becoming pervasive under the Elías Calles regime.<sup>60</sup> Following Monsiváis, I would suggest that ratcheting up the flesh quotient provides a way to “dilute,” and thus, at least in some instances, paradoxically protect, a degree of political critique (1982, 73).

*Mexican Rataplán* proved more popular than its French inspiration and was ultimately as much of a force for the proliferation of *Bataclanismo* as was *Voilá Paris*.

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<sup>59</sup> See, also, Pilcher (2001, 18) on evasion of censorship through improvisation.

<sup>60</sup> I am invoking Parker's and Sedgwick's work on performativity as a citational practice wherein the act of citation becomes a performative utterance, a speech act, in the Austinian sense (2-3). Relatedly, Monsiváis's analysis almost seems to play down the specifics of the ba-ta-clán influence as such, reminding us that *bataclanismo*'s identifiable markers – nudity, spectacle, irreverence, irony, self-conscious “frivolity” – were all elements within *revista*, to varying degrees, before the genre's bataclanization.

The outsize popularity and critical acclaim accompanying *Rataplán* led to dozens more productions that spring and summer.<sup>61</sup> While it is difficult to form a sense of the quality of each subsequent satire, as such, and while we might expect the novelty of satire and the impact of critique to suffer with repetition of form and style, it is clear that the Mexicanization of the French ba-ta-clán stylistic elements offers rich and complex chains of signification. Araceli Rico speaks of localized versions of Bataclanesque costumes—playful, kitschy always sexy—that utilized iconic signifiers of the “new world”: fruits, feathers, grasses, goards and other natural materials (Rico, 103, 106-7). Exemplary of ba-ta-clán’s localization, too, are the many photos published in the illustrated journals showing legions of *segundas tiples* “Mexaplanas” (another creative neologism) dressed in tiny *serapes* with, apparently, nothing underneath. Such costuming at once honors Mexican regional specificity while playing self-consciously on the concept of primitivism and modernity’s periphery, a concept symptomatic of the emergent middle-class culture’s ambiguous global positioning. By performing the (sexualized) peripheral, Mexican cultural producers were taking ownership of a “modern” perspective, registering identification with the Euro/(North)America metropole, and thus claiming—as “center”—their own urban position. Such practice also meant, as constitutive corollary, a power-grab of sorts in the staging of indigeneity: a national identity constructed in distinct contrast to Mexico’s “pre-modern” Other.

It was the rataplanesque satire, *¡No lo tapes!*, opening June 29, 1925, that saw the debut—the overnight sensation—of Lupe Vélez. Sluis refers to Vélez as “bataclanismo’s

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<sup>61</sup> Sluis call it an “instant classic” (474). Some Ba-ta-clan / Rataplan productions that followed include: *La herencia del Rataplán*, *Don Juan Bataclán*, *Rataplonomanía*, *Don Catarino en el Rataplán* (León Sarabia, 49) *Desnudas para Familias* (Prida, 178) *La Fiebre del Bataclán* (Sluis, 475) *Kiss-Kiss, Oui-oui, Yes-yes, Rac-rac* (Rico, 107-8).

first real star” (475). While this nomination is accurate as far as it goes, its narrow terms are misleading. I would argue, instead, that the phenomenon of Vélez’s stardom speaks more to the evolution of *revista* than to the ba-ta-clán sub-genre *per se*. We might say that Vélez was a *tuple bataclana* – even “the” *tuple bataclana* – though she was not referred to as a “bataclana” in any direct respect at the time. She was, without qualification, *una primera tuple*. I make this point to underscore that, while her stardom is associated with the ba-ta-clán influence and, especially, the rataplanesque parody, Vélez was a *revista* star, and one that achieved a prominence attained by only a handful of her colleagues at the time.

## The Fever of Imitation

A celebrated writer, a master juggler of the figurative and the metonym, commented with detached restraint on the current era, which is so favorable to the expansive spirit:

“We live in a golden age. No one respects anymore those odious words ‘yours’ and ‘mine’ and, in this sweet communion of ideas, flower daisies of talent without need of transplant. Property [*propiedad*] will be slowly destroyed as though devoured by moths.”

Argos, “On dit... gossip de la semana,” *El Universal Ilustrado*, Sep 10, 1925.

“Argos,” one of the regular cultural columnists writing for *El Universal Ilustrado*, borrows a fanciful analogy to reflect on the ba-ta-clán phenomenon and its impact on *revista* theater, so starkly apparent in September of 1925.<sup>62</sup> For Argos, it was Lupe Vélez who is credited with (some would, instead, see her be blamed for) the creative

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<sup>62</sup> Argos, “On dit... gossip de la semana,” *El Universal Ilustrado*, Sep 10, 1925. “Argos” is a pseudonym for Carlos Díaz Dufóo, Sr., a playwright with an elder-statesman association with the “Group of Seven” authors (for more on the pseudonym, see Ruiz Casteñeda and Márquez Acevedo, 229-231; for more on Díaz Dufóo, including his affiliation with Comedia Mexicana in 1936, see Magaña Esquivel, 43-44). I believe it quite likely that Argos’s “escritor festivo,” is Díaz Dufóo, himself. Such an invocation would be characteristic of the kind of inside joking that the writers enjoyed with their pseudonyms.

“Argos” (Argus, in English) is understood to be taken from the myth of the giant with 100 eyes, all the better to see the broad mix of culture and anecdote about which he wrote in his weekly column. The column’s title, “On dit... gossip de la semana,” mixes French, English and Spanish, likewise indicating its international scope of vision; Argos wrote of events in Paris, Madrid, New York, Hollywood. In this time period, 1925-26, a large percentage of Argos’s writing was devoted to the personalities of the popular theater, especially the *triples*.

cannibalization of “propriety” (appropriate in both senses of the English-language term) that ensued. Argos’s column, carrying the sub-heading “the fever of imitation,” continues:

It is the [Teatro] Lírico that is at this moment the theater of imitations and, as such, is the object of great emulation. Is this theater not a concave reflection of the unforgettable Ba-ta-clán? There, it was the emphatic success of our *compañerita*, *Lupe Vélez*, who was the first to imitate—as an artistic possibility—her *compañeras*.... Before, the practice of imitation was discrete and timid. [...] The applause stolen by Lupe Vélez initiated a drive towards improvement, continuing on the path of imitation (*ibid.* emphasis added).

Let us look, finally, to Vélez’s opening night, the event to which Argos refers.

Vélez’s debut as *primera tiple* occurred just weeks after Rasimi’s *Voilá Ba-ta-clán* opening. *¡No lo tapes!* was produced by Pablo Prida Santacilla, Carlos M. Ortega and Castro “el güero” Castillo. This prolific trio commanded top-tier clout, close to par with Roberto Soto’s company in *revista* cultural currency and equally long lived. In casting the untried Vélez, “los muchachos,” as they were known, were judged to be in violation of the “rules” of the syndicate, an actor’s guild of sorts, organized by established performers. According to Prida Santacilla, and as later reported by Gabrielle Ramirez, Vélez, though announced on promotional material, was “officially” barred from performing on stage. It was from the floor, then, that she made a cheeky appeal directly to the audience, immediately winning their enthusiastic support and thereby earning her an unequivocal right to the stage (Prida, 178; Ramirez, 29-30). In his memoir of his life in the theater, Prida Santacilla recalls Vélez as performing with a new “personal lexicon” that immediately intrigued the public. Her “ambition and fearlessness,” according to Prida, proved more than adequate to compensate for her “lack of knowledge” of the theater. Characterization of Vélez’s inexperience, however, is somewhat contradicted by Prida’s own memory of the night in which Vélez pointedly (“boldly [sangresamente]”) impersonated the popular *tiples* of the day, a skill available only to one who had intimate

familiarity with the personalities of the stage (178-179). The perceived audacity of her debut underscores the fact that “*la niña Lupe*”—co-constitutive of Vélez’s lack of actual stage experience—held neither the ethnic profile nor the elite socio-economic class status that (still) comprised *revista* theater culture.

### **La Niña Lupe**

Vélez (María Guadalupe Vélez Villalobos) enjoyed a middle-class childhood.<sup>63</sup> Like thousands of others, her family’s economic stability was disrupted during the revolutionary period. When wartime financial hardship forced her departure from the convent school she had been attending in San Antonio, Texas, Vélez returned to Mexico and moved, with her family, from San Luis Potosí to Mexico City where her job—in the modern new department store, FAL—accounted for a significant portion of the family’s income (Ramírez, 25-7).<sup>64</sup> Though frequently referred to as *criolla* (white, Mexican-born), she was noted as carrying a “native” Mexican identification owing to her name. The Virgin of Guadalupe, whom the Christian name Guadalupe (or Lupe) exists to honor, is a specifically New World figure associated with *mestizaje*.<sup>65</sup> This was no small matter at a time when the majority of beloved female theater figures, even within the “popular” *revista* were still those born abroad. Lupe Rivas Cacho, having come out of the *carpas*,

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<sup>63</sup> I might say upper-middle-class if I were to locate an actual average or median wealth/income in the era prior to the revolution. Surely the family’s position was one of privilege, and yet not representative of the privilege known by the elite artistic culture of the city. On the one hand she was educated in the U.S., on the other hand, she was uneducated by elite standards. Thus she was foreign enough to be suspect, but did not carry the old-world status of Europe; her foreignness remained classless and thus not readily or traditionally transferable in the city’s cultural circles. For the prevalence of high-born, usually Spanish *tiples* in the era, see Prida Santacilla.

<sup>64</sup> Ramírez (1986) is the best source of biographical information on Vélez, though documentation and references are thin.

<sup>65</sup> *Criolla* was often not a particularly positive term (it gets used in reference to Vélez more often in later years when she is coming under suspicion, [within the more elite journals, as a Hollywood sell-out](#)). References to the name “Lupe,” however, recognized the name as an element of *lo mexicano*. Such references were made in a consistently positive context.

provides a non-elite, (also light-complexioned) precedent in the pantheon of *tiples*. As the quintessential *tiple folklórica*, though, Rivas Cacho's class and femininity registered with tradition (albeit a highly constructed romanticized tradition, coming in the form of *la china poblana*<sup>66</sup> (figure 7). Carrying the globalized persona of "modern girl," Vélez's new-world identity was, indeed, new. Biographies of Vélez recount the pretty, young clerk stealing off to the theater in the evenings and, once home among her sisters, imitating the songs, dances and personae of those she sought to emulate. Vélez did not rise through the ranks of the relatively anonymous *tiples segundas* or, for that matter, the proliferating choruses of bataclanesque *cariátides vivientes* (living carytids; Rico, 97); she had no experience as part of a *revista* company and no background in the *carpas*. Far from a lack of "knowledge" of the theater, though, what Vélez possessed was the potentially subversive knowledge of the autodidact infiltrator (figure 6).

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<sup>66</sup> For more on *la china poblana* and images of *la Tehuana*, see Rick A. López (2002, 2006). Hershfield, also, writes on the *china poblana*, (2008, 127-133), framing the figure as a nationally domesticated instance of *la chica moderna* (not to be confused with the globalized "modern girl" of Weinbaum et al (2008). For more on Rivas Cacho, see Dueñas (1994).



Figure 6: Vélez 1925, the autodidact infiltrator



Figure 7: Lupe Rivas Cacho, la tiple folklórica

If Vélez was unique in having migrated straight from behind the department store sales counter (think Clara Bow in *It* [Paramount, 1929]) to the coveted *tiple* pantheon, she

was more so for having so soon come to inhabit, however briefly, that pantheon's pinnacle position. Her stardom not only flew in the face of artistic/professional values of dedication, craft and training but, more broadly, challenged a culture that valued the gentle decorum and humility of its women. As has been noted, Vélez's name was rarely in print without her moniker, *la tiplecita Jazz*, which indicated her youth and her distinctive, *inquietante* dancing style. She was consistently associated with dancing "the Charleston" and thus, again, linked with the 1920s' flapper and the cultural influence of the U.S. and of Hollywood cinema.<sup>67</sup> Vélez's rapid rise to stardom, even, suggests a specifically Hollywood-style spectacle, including a "star-struck" public reception, marking a clear shift in the exigencies of cultural prominence in Mexican artistic culture.

It was two months after her debut that Vélez joined Soto's *Voilá Mexique: El Rataplán*. Working with Soto on this production multiplied the force of her star currency and reinforced her association with parodic comedy. It also happened to team her up with the era's then most beloved *tiple*, "the soprano with the enchanting smile," Celia Montalván. From all press accounts, it was far from a harmonious sisterhood. In fact *cronistas*, eerily anticipating the discursively fueled "rivalries" between Vélez and Dolores del Rio (and, for that matter, Vélez and Jetta Goudal, Simone Simon and Tallulah Bankhead), seemed to relish opportunities to draw attention to *tiple* animosities.<sup>68</sup> Montalván, who became an object of Vélez's impersonations, was a

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<sup>67</sup> It is likely that she learned the Charleston in Texas when in school there, though she was not the first Mexican theater performer to bring the dance to the Mexican stage. See Nicolás Kanellos on "la Chata" Noloesca (1984; 1990, 93-5).

<sup>68</sup> Vélez had a *tiple* ally in la *tiple cómica*, Teresa Renner. "Argos" writes a funny little scene in one of his columns (he jokingly refers to his brief, fictional dialogue as *teatro sintético*—see below for more on the *Estridentistas' teatro sintético*), imagining a conversation over a chess game in which Vélez and Renner gossip about Montalván and Celia Padilla (Argos, "On dit.... gossip de la semaine," *El UI*, dec 17, 1925, 20). Renner later came to stay at Vélez's home for a time, perhaps to try her luck in Hollywood cinema? "Chismes de Hollywood," *Cinema Reporter*, Dec 1932.

voluptuous star who perfectly articulated the Mexican standard of feminine charm and beauty of the time. The pairing underscored the fact that Vélez, singularly, embodied an affront to conventional Mexican femininity in a fundamental physical sense: her “deco body” was boldly, unabashedly skinny (Prida, 176; Monsiváis, 81).<sup>69</sup>



Figure 8: Celia Montalván, 1925

I do not want to suggest that Vélez’s appearance and “style”—as a feminine instance of cosmopolitan modernity, one iteration of this globalized era’s internationally iconic “modern girl”—would have resonated as entirely unfamiliar within Mexico City’s emergent mass culture; certainly it would not have done in the context of the arts and

<sup>69</sup> Sluis argues the “deco body” as a social intervention wherein “form” trumped “color” or “race,” yet pictures of “*las girls bataclanas*” in the illustrated journals are overwhelmingly light-complected. The multitudes of deco illustrations of bataclanas, too, are overwhelmingly white. Sluis’s single illustration of a brown skinned deco body—one representing neither a pelona nor a bataclana—is not convincing as an indication that the deco body could be seen as a function of *mestizaje*; it seems, rather, to suggest an abstract ideal, attainable in illustrated form only. This assessment is supported by Gabara’s argument regarding *las artes públicas*, as an agent of class and cultural mixing that is still limited in its progress towards the acceptance of actual “racial” *mestizaje* (2008, 144, 169).

entertainment culture. *Típles* generally sported bobbed hair (a phenomenon taking place with the *pelonas*, about which more below). By 1925, even the “flapper” mode of dress, while certainly a subject of discursive controversy in cosmopolitan settings, would scandalize neither the theater audience nor the readership of the weeklies. Owing to the proliferation of the photograph, as Monsiváis’s work documents (1982), there was suddenly a flood of feminine images available for public contemplation and consumption.<sup>70</sup> Even within this context, though, in the magazines and on stage, Vélez stood out distinctly for the bold display of her thin, straight, “boyish” or “androgynous” body, which was often discursively associated with her *inquieta, nerviosa* personality and character.<sup>71</sup> The words “fragil” and “gracil” were also used to describe Vélez’s form, though she was never associated with weakness (and most certainly not passivity). In other words, paradoxically, she was twice at odds with tradition. Where the Mexican feminine was expected to be physically substantial, demonstrative of a generous and calming strength, and yet be submissive, Vélez’s body type was seen as brittle, nervous and, relatedly, aggressive. While she was diminutive in stature, she bore an image in public life that was as close to the attenuated “deco body” of popular illustrations that the era offered.

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<sup>70</sup> This is perhaps best exemplified by the profuse array, each week in *El UI* of photo galleries, of women that represented *belleza regional*, or regional beauty. Images in such galleries ranged from the “modern” to the “traditional,” though images of indigenous women remained scarce outside of an artisanal context. For *belleza criolla* (white) versus *belleza india* (indian) see López. See Joanne Hershfield’s *La Chica Moderna* for a broader discussion of images representing the modern *Mexicana*, especially quasi-folkloric figure of *la china polana*, which Hershfield frames as the female image, coming into particular importance in the ‘30s, as the binary figure cast opposite to the *pelona*. Novo (1946, 50) notes the false, padded hips of the *china poblana*’s skirt. See, also, Rubenstein (2006) and Serna (2010) on the *pelona*.

<sup>71</sup> “Androgynous,” in usage, did not imply a lack of sexual appeal but it was associated with U.S. modern constructions of femininity, especially Hollywood cinema, and thus implied a lack of Mexican feminine appeal. See Sluis (especially 478-79) on Bataclanismo and the “deco body.”

It would be difficult to overestimate the importance of visual discourses—photographs, drawings, theater, cinema—in the evolution and communication of cultural identity within a population with a very high rate of illiteracy. The exaggerated, mannerist, Art Deco-style illustrations that graced the covers and pages of the illustrated journals were iconic representations of a new femininity that had immeasurable social and cultural impact. Sluis's discussion of Ernesto García Cabral's ubiquitous handiwork, attenuated female figures rendered head to toe in bold flat colors and two-dimensional space, gives us a sense of a novel, iconic femininity circulating to herald a new global modern culture. As Sluis observes: "In many ways, these women, who appeared in many guises yet *always were the same woman*, were a stand-in for the modern metropolis." (133, emphasis added).<sup>72</sup> Vélez, I am arguing, is *that* woman, as much as any "real" woman of the times could be said to have been; she marked the meeting of iconic abstraction and embodied subjectivity to singularly represent Mexico's modern girl and, simultaneously, "stood in" for the modern metropolis. But iconic emblems are one thing, an actual individual is quite another; a celebrity "living caryatid"—a public, animated "icon" that danced, spoke (loudly), mocked, smoked, drove a car and collected a generous salary—was far more difficult to negotiate than were the sleek, silent images in magazines.

### **Lupe, la tiple sin la sonrisa encantadora (Lupe, the soprano without the enchanting smile)**

Carlos Monsiváis, in his 1982 monograph, *Celia Montalván (te brindas, voluptuosa e impudente, trans. you offer yourself, voluptuous and impudent)*, is concerned less with the

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<sup>72</sup> García Cabral was most notable for his covers illustration for *Revista de Revistas*; see Sluis (2006, 132-138; 2010, 476-479).

theater *per se* than with the *tiple*'s “impudence” in photographic representation.

Monsiváis approaches Montalván as an icon of visual culture. Indeed, there was clearly no *tiple* simulacrum that was so dramatically proliferative and so widely admired. Pablo Dueñas concurs that Montalván embodied the prototypical beauty of her time. Citing her “agreeable face and a voluptuous body,” Dueñas understates the case even as he outlines how Montalván’s simulacra became a culture industry in and of itself. Monsiváis’s collection of images makes this clear enough. For no Hollywood studio could have produced a more impressive portfolio; photographs of the “*tiple* with the enchanting smile” (con la sonrisa encantadora) were dramatically varied and variously sexy. We might assume such an industry to be prototypically pornographic, yet the photos argue for a more complicated conclusion. Ranging from the demure to the folkloric to the outrageous (to, indeed, the softly pornographic), Montalván photographs provide a veritable catalogue of feminine personae, dramatically performed through costuming and expressed affect. For Monsiváis, it is the intertextual force of the her representation—that is, her presence in public theater space juxtaposed, in secret conversation, with the simulacra circulating in the private spaces of home, work and fantasy—that is particularly provocative. This paradox of accessibility and un-possess-ability (the freedom to be sold so widely and yet remain autonomous) is a quintessentially modern phenomenon and one that, in and of itself, was as profound and as potentially destabilizing—culturally, socially, even politically—as anything that may have taken place in the space or the narrative of the stage. Thus Monsiváis asks us to contemplate the *tiple*’s role in producing the cultural meta-politics of nation and icon.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> I want to be careful not to equate the impact of Montalván in photos with Montalván (or her *tiple* colleagues) on stage; the two personages signified on separate registers: public and private entertainment.



Figure 9: Vélez's not always enchanting smile<sup>74</sup>

Vélez's popular notoriety functioned as a corollary to the popularity of the beloved Montalván. Monsiváis's discussion of Vélez is tellingly brief: Vélez was the only *tiple* of the period that embodied a challenge to the conventional feminine standard of beauty; she did so on the basis of her skinny body. Keeping in mind Sluis's framing of Vélez as emblematic of the “deco body” that signified the modern Mexican woman, we can review the troubled history survived by the iconic deco body’s real-life Mexican sister and precursor, the emergent *pelona*—or “bobbed-haired” woman—who served as a marker for a specifically foreign, modern, *unfeminine* image of the female.<sup>75</sup> The *pelona*, just like her nationally-specific counterparts within the global “modern girl” phenomenon, “was produced at the intersection of the global with the local” (Weinbaum et al, 2008, 6). To begin to understand the socio-political significations associated with the bataclanization of *revista* theater, we must understand the negotiation process by which the modern feminine located herself within the revolutionary project. The cultural

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(At this point I wonder if the fact that so few period photographs of Vélez became archived is representative of a vast contrast in the *private* circulation of the two figures, a separate subject of study).

<sup>74</sup> Vélez, with her overbite and large teeth, did not have a particularly demure smile, as caricatures love to emphasize. While it was not unusual for her to be referred to as *bonita* or *bella* (pretty or beautiful) I also found her referred to, on occasion in period Mexican discourse, as *not* attractive. [photo citation?]

<sup>75</sup> A certain amount of disagreement lingers as to how the term *pelona* should be translated. “Shorn woman” is Serna’s translation; Sluis and Rubenstien generally use “bobbed-haired” girl. Following Serna and others, I am steering clear of the “baldy” or “bald women” translation.

phenomenon of *revista*'s bataclanization had a parallel in the social phenomenon of Mexico's "real-world" modern girls, the *pelonas*, and their context within the politics of the revolution.<sup>76</sup>

### National identity and the "Good Years" of the Mexican Revolution

By 1920 the Mexican revolution had no longer a single enemy within the country... above all else there was enormous expectation of the great reconstruction work to be initiated by the Revolution. Not "everybody" but certainly large numbers everywhere felt that exalted sensation of man turned into a god, of man with creative genius and will, with the faith that from his own hands may come a new, great, brilliant, harmonious and kind world; faith, also, that nothing is impossible and that anything may be achieved by simply willing it.

Daniel Cosío Villegas, *Change in Latin America*, 1960, 29.<sup>77</sup>

I have referred to postrevolutionary Mexico as "tumultuous": thousands of people were displaced following the fighting, neither political nor economic instability had subsided, and the mass rural-to-urban migration—which dramatically upset the rigidly constructed class segregation during the war—continued unabated. In 1920, the year rhetorically marking the revolution's ten-year birthday,<sup>78</sup> the nation embarked on what Cosío Villegas refers to as the "good years" of the revolution: five years of great excitement, creativity and promise on seemingly all fronts. We might think of these as the "still optimistic" years. For by "good," Cosio does not mean to paint the period as safe, secure or harmonious. It was the early era of the Sonorans' political and military rise, though they

<sup>76</sup> Though Sluis sees the ba-ta-clán's glorification of "Deco bodies with short hair" as having "validated the struggles of the pelonas a year earlier," it is difficult to imagine how aggrieved female medical students might regard the public acceptability of the almost-naked, theatrical "deco body." I hope to avoid the conflation of signifiers (discursive and/or visual) associated with the flapper, the *pelona* and *bataclanismo*. With signification of national identity and femininity at stake, a great deal of attention was given, in national Mexican discourse of the day, to the parsing and explicating of the nuances of, and distinctions between, these various phenomena (see, for example, "La verdad sobre flapperismo," *El UI*, Dec 6, 1925, 20). The extent to which the un/popularity of the "bataclana" tiple is related to, or reflective of, the acceptance of changes in "real" women's quotidian lives or presentations remains a matter around which I can provide context but not resolution.

<sup>77</sup> This passage is quoted in part in Brusherwood (1989, 70). Cosío's importance and influence as a historian of Mexico was felt throughout the Americas, not least in the United States.

<sup>78</sup> While the revolution is commonly dated to 1910, that year is better understood as the revolution's beginning. That is, it marked the beginning of a series of armed struggles taking place between 1910 and 1917.

had not yet consolidated power. For example, the first months of 1924 saw the collapse of the “revolución delahuertista” named for Adolfo de la Huerta, who instigated a revolt in late 1923 against president Álvaro Obregón. The coup failed to remove the administration even though much of the Mexican army had supported de la Huerta.<sup>79</sup> Also in January of 1924, the progressive leader Felipe Carrillo Puerto was killed. Later that year, José Vasconcelos, the Secretary of Education from 1921-1924, resigned in opposition to Obregón’s regime. Obregón remained in the presidency until November of 1924 when his handpicked successor, Plutarco Elías Calles was elected. Cosío’s retrospective account is revelatory as a reflection (if somewhat sentimental) of the grand magnitude of the national stakes at play. The promise of the revolutionary project, as yet unfinished, rested on the legitimacy of the revolutionary vision, as still imagined. An authentically Mexican modernity held the potential to redeem the violent upheaval of the war. If the revolution had united the country leaving “not a single enemy,” it was less than clear what the nation had united around. Cosío Villegas’s mid-century account of the unique quality—in letter and in spirit—of Mexico’s revolution is worth revisiting. As outlined by Cosío,

the essential characteristics of the Mexican Revolution were these: to trust to the state, and not to the individual nor to private enterprise, the promotion of the general welfare of the country; to make this general welfare the principle, or only, goal of the action of the state so that its economic and technical resources as well as its moral influence would be used to better the lot of the farmers and laborers, the teachers and the bureaucracy, and so forth.

In attention to the general welfare of the populace, addressing ill-health, poverty and illiteracy took precedence in discourses of the revolutionary project; these priorities were

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<sup>79</sup> The U.S. came to Obregón’s military aid, and was probably responsible for keeping him in power (Spenser, 1999, 64-70).

entrusted to the care of the state.<sup>80</sup> But Mexico's precarious sense of authentic national identity and unity, an equally pressing if unspoken project of the revolution, was now forced to simultaneously negotiate the *global* project of modernity. Cosío Villegas continues:

The Mexican revolution had... a strong popular flavor, not only in... attempting to satisfy first the needs of the poor, but in believing that the people, the Indians, themselves, had virtues which must be recognized, respected and enhanced. The dominant idea during the good years of the revolution, let us say 1920-1925, was that the Mexican Indian had so many natural qualities that the problem of education lay in the teaching him (sic) modern work techniques but without contaminating him or modifying his general way of life: his traditional courtesy and reserve, his artistic sensibility and capacity, etc. And it was also a revolution that exalted the national at the expense, naturally, of the foreign (33-34).

The careful negotiation of the national within the global formed a discursive cultural tightrope that would be walked as the state attempted to maintain credibility and *viability* in addressing its ambitious social agenda. The phenomenon of the *pelonas*, and the cultural animosity they engendered, conspicuously located the issue of gender at a vexed intersection of these very matters. What is more, the controversy regarding the *pelonas* is illustrative of the way that, as Alejandro Ortiz Bullé Goyri points out, the polemics of the postrevolutionary society were directly reflected in the polemics of the theater (153-55).<sup>81</sup> Whether or not the phenomenon of the *pelonas* began as a social polemic or a cultural one, its resolution was determined (with great political savvy) in a way consistent with the social agenda of the state.

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<sup>80</sup> Cosío juxtaposes state responsibility against that autonomy of “the individual [or] private enterprise,” seemingly marking a distinction with U.S. values but leaving go any mention of the church. Arguably what marked the end of what might have been characterized as the revolution’s “good years” was the extreme anti-clericalism practiced under Obregón’s successor, Plutarco Elías Calles, which led to the Cristero Rebellion in 1926, kicking off three years of Cristero Wars. Cosío’s avoidance of the subject would seem to betray the sensitivity that Mexico’s official secularism continued to engender, well into the Cold War era. On anti-clericalism and the Cristero Wars, see Matthew Butler (2004).

<sup>81</sup> What makes this relationship even less mysterious, as Alejandro Ortiz Bullé Goyri (2005) and Pilcher (2001) both point out, José Vasconcelos championed theater from his post at the ministry of education, as part of an effort to keep the poor off of the streets.

### **Pelonas por libertad ... pelonas por la revolución**

It was just less than a year prior to Vélez's stage debut, in the summer of 1924, that contestations over Mexican femininity hit a fevered pitch over the length of women's hair. The *pelonas* were increasing in visibility. As gendered signs of change (change marked as foreign, modern and, as such, threatening) *pelonas* were particularly conspicuous. After coming under intense scrutiny in print media for months, controversy came to a head when violence broke out at the capital city's National University.<sup>82</sup> Several female medical students were attacked—forcibly “showered” and subjected to a head-shaving at the hands of their male student colleagues. In response to the violence, various male factions—including groups of *pelona*-sympathetic male students but also soldiers, state agents and working-class unions—officially came to the defense of the women. As demonstrations of support for the *pelonas* veered toward the paternalistic, the issue was increasingly articulated as one of Mexican women’s “honor,” and the responsibility for that honor was that of Mexican men. Thus rhetoric regarding revolutionary *masculinity*—the forward-looking hegemonic model for the new patriarchy—effectively eclipsed discourses concerned with transformative femininity. As Rubenstein explains in her thorough account, the restoration of the image of the honorable Mexican male trumped, in significance, the question of young women's hair (or young women's access to the social and cultural advantages of modernity, including a degree of agency over their own image). As “the question of honor” gradually became one of a specifically male paternalistic honor, the war on the *pelonas* was resolved with a

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<sup>82</sup> For earlier public controversy over the *pelonas*, see Serna's account of their condemnation at the First Catholic Women's Congress in 1922. Serna writes (in an unpublished manuscript, 2010): “The Damas saved particular ire for young women who, in imitation of their favorite stars, made liberal use of perfume and cosmetics that had previously been the accessories of prostitutes and actresses” (ch4, p9). A few months prior to the university violence, the journal *Revista de Revistas* had run a special issue covering “the reign of the *pelona*” (Serna, ch4, p7-8)

masculinist peace and the New Woman was all but silenced. Significantly, the female voice that remained audible within the din of masculine(ist) discourse came from within the institution of *revista* theater; it was that of the diva, Esperanza Iris, the very same voice that introduced the ba-ta-clán (Rubenstein, 69).

It was through a different type of theater, though, that the *pelonas* would reclaim agency in the process of their own identification: a series of very public performances of nationalism, sponsored by the Secretaría de Educación Pública (SEP),<sup>83</sup> inaugurating the grand and outsized National Stadium (the first set of the patriotic festivals took place before the stadium was completed, with ticket sales helping to fund the project).

Rubenstein writes:

Most of the women involved in the spectacles—choreographers, organizers, dancers, athletes and Red Cross nurses—conformed to the flapper mode. ... Although such was not Secretary Vasconcelos's intention, these festivals and similar occasions became opportunities for women employed by the state to display themselves en masse as both as both *pelonas* and representatives of the revolution. Thus, newspaper coverage of these events tended to show women in gym clothes or pseudo-Greek togas[!], all cut more or less on the model of the flapper dress. Such events also demonstrated, probably inadvertently, the vast number of young women who had found a place for themselves within the SEP (73).

As Ruberstein documents, these events were highly organized and massively popular. The extensive community participation in the staging and experience of the festivals was crucially important to their broader purpose: “the people who collaborated in producing them hoped to create a new kind of spectacle and a new form of civic ritual, displacing both the cinema and the church” (74-75). In the year following the student attacks, the terms on which the *pelona* persona was articulated shifted from global-and-modern to nationalist-and-postrevolutionary. The Mexican New Woman was now a symbol of an

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<sup>83</sup> The Secretaría de Educación Pública (SEP) was a highly empowered and influential office, particularly between 1920 and 1925, as it was operating under José Vasconcelos, one of the most important state figures of the postrevolution.

athletic, healthy Mexican revolutionary, who found state participation as teacher, nurse, student and administrator. As new public schools evolved under the agenda of the SEP, dance and “rhythmic gymnastics” remained essential to the physical education curriculum for girls. The *pelona* image (if not the personal subjectivities of each) becomes effectively folded into the revolutionary project by way of rhetoric and policies designed for the promotion of national health and public education. *Pelonas* were able to win their status within Vasconcelos’s revolutionary “cosmic race” on the basis of a new ideal constructed for young Mexican women – hygienic, athletic, Spanish-literate, disciplined for productivity and fit for nation building.<sup>84</sup> Though Vasconcelos resigned from his SEP position in 1925, his influence on Mexican society only grew. His classic essay published that year, “La raza cósmica” (The Cosmic Race), outlined the concept of *mestizaje* as a national emblem of race pride that subsequently served as nothing less than the foundational discourse of Mexican nationalism.

Short-haired women would continue as a point of contestation in Mexican society. A woman exercising personal physical agency, personal style, signaled an unwillingness to conform to traditional and normative modes of gender presentation. But the extent to which such “free thinking” meant doom to the national project was greatly lessened by the time Esperanza Iris brought the *desnuda* bataclanas to the stage. A bobbed-haired *chica moderna*, out in public, physically confident, active, even athletic, was now an “authentic” faction of revolutionary Mexico that, however disconcerting she would remain for many of her compatriots, was not going away.

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<sup>84</sup> For references on the discourses of short hair and hygiene, see Rubenstein (2006, 67, 78 n44, 72, 79 n55).

## Working Girls and Public Women: of Revistas and Cantinas

woman + money + public space = prostitution  
– Clara Coria (1986, 37).<sup>85</sup>

If the state/SEP sponsored spectacles operated to disassociate spectacularized young women from “both the cinema and the church,” as Rubenstein convincingly argues, we would do well to figure the theater, also, in the dynamics of that equation. Joanne Hershfield’s study, *Imagining La Chica Moderna* includes a chapter, titled “Picturing Working Women” (2008, 102-126) in which she references a 1929 newspaper article, “La vida dolorosa de la farándula: Las chicas que trabajan en las carpas” (translated by Hershfield as “The Painful Life of the Theater World: Girls Who Work in the Musical Theater”). In Hershfield’s brief analysis of the piece, the author’s only discussion of the theater, she offers the following explanation:

Although the article refers to the young woman in the photograph as an ‘actress and dancer’ it was assumed that those like her supplemented their meager wages acting in cabarets and bawdy theaters by working as prostitutes. In popular culture, *la fichera*, or the “dance-hall girl,” was featured as a popular protagonist in Mexican literature and film, where she was portrayed with compassion as a victim of society (123).

Hershfield invokes the theater in order to introduce her treatment of an important Mexican film genre of the 1930s and ‘40s, the *cabaretera* (or cabaret film). She thus stops short of explicating questions of *who* assumed that professional theater women were prostitutes, *when* and to what extent this assumption was a normative one, and, important for our purposes, how might a nuanced look at the various strata (social/economic/ethnic) of theater culture complicate this assumption.<sup>86</sup> Hershfield’s

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<sup>85</sup> Quoted in Castillo (1998, 13).

<sup>86</sup> The question of *la fichera* as “victim of society” is productively complicated by de la Mora (2006, 50-51), drawing upon the work of López (1993) and Monsiváis (1995).

translation of *carpas* as “musical theater” inadvertently erases *revista*.<sup>87</sup> Given the prevalence (and legality) of prostitution in Mexico City at the time, it would be stubbornly naive to insist that there was no relationship between sexual solicitation and the *carpas* or, for that matter, the *revistas*. Yet that relationship remains unquantified and, I suspect, unquantifiable. There is further room to equivocate regarding the “honor” of the *tiple* specifically; a clear argument for the distinction lies in the coveted images of Celia Montalván. Surely her value in simulacra would be greatly diminished had she been seen as a common whore. Likely there were those that did assume *tiples* to be whores, even in the strictest sense of the word, much as “high class” society in the U.S. looked askance at women associated with the theater and then with the movies. This attempt to elucidate the grey scale of such discourse is put forth in light of the consistent insinuations (in Mexican as well as U.S. discourse) that Lupe Vélez began as a prostitute. Scholarly invocations of historical discourse (often times overtly racist discourse that is initially introduced in order to be revealed as biased) occasionally fail to fully challenge or even interrogate the terms of the reference and thereby serve to perpetuate discourses associating Vélez with prostitution. Rather than attempt to recuperate an unsullied Vélez

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<sup>87</sup> As has been noted, the term “carpas” is generally accepted to indicate street/tent theaters that provided entertainment for the poor and lower-income working classes, a population whose economic status would have been decidedly lower than the audience we associate with *revista*. The fact that there was a very genuine artistic, intellectual and political appreciation *las carpas* (Novo; Orozco) should not obscure the fact that the *carpa* vs. *revista* distinction was indicative of a stratified public sphere. Neither *carpa* nor *revista* is specifically addressed in Katherine Bliss’s writing on sex work, wherein, I should add, the term “cantina” is always associated drinking rather than dancing or stage performance. While prostitution is associated with the cantinas and cabarets (this term would include some, though likely not all, *revista* venues), it is not clear that the sex workers were always also the performers (Bliss, 49-50, 64). To the extent that prostitution happened in the cabarets (and I don’t mean to suggest that is did not), the practice was problematic, first, on the basis of its “affront to the practice of organized [legally registered] prostitution” (Bliss, 173). When, in 1931, there was a prohibition against women working in cabarets, it was waitresses, and cashiers that were cast into unemployment, Bliss makes no mention of vedettes, or *tiples*. She includes “dancers” among those outraged by the law but focuses on the much larger numbers of unemployed women in the other categories (173-5). The relationship between theater culture(s) and sex work—in Mexico, specifically, but also in other locations deserves more careful research.

image, however, I want to productively complicate the signifying system of “whore” with the consideration of a more figurative deployment of the charge.

Debra Castillo draws out a semiotic logic between “...men who dedicate their efforts to government and public service functions (*hombres públicos*)” and the “impossible appellation” that historically denies the existence of such a role for women (Gabara, 145). The fact that the term “public women” (*mujeres públicas*), in Latin American Spanish, signifies sex work is indicative of the social—even psychic—allocation of public space in Mexico, and of the private (read domestic) space to which women were normatively relegated. We have seen that the phenomenon of the *pelonas*, and the controversy and violence they engendered, involved a contested image of women within the public sphere. The SEP’s *pelonas* of the revolution may have been, in a sense, a publicly displayed spectacle of national progress. But the extent to which they were seen as *mujeres públicas* (public women) is approximately equal to their perception as problematic. The *pelonas* were deemed acceptable once their occupation of public space was regimented nationally and folded into the revolutionary project. Sluis’s work on *bataclanismo* and *revista* theater offers a narrative by which mass-entertainment culture expanded the public space conceivably available for women. What Sluis’s work seems to repress, though, is the extent to which women’s entré to public life was still limited by the communicative “sign” defining “*mujeres públicas*” in both senses of the term: their female bodies. The perception that they would trade their bodies (their “honor”) for a role in public life came conveniently packaged with the taint of foreign influence and—Clara Coria would be quick to add (as noted in this section’s epigraph)—the stink of money. Thus the *tiples* of *revista*’s bataclanization are well positioned to come in for the harshest

forms of criticism: allegations of prostitution or (and) condemnation as disloyal “sell outs” or, as one might say in Mexican Spanish, *las malinchistas*.

The derogatory term *malinchista* refers to the trenchant legend of the whore/saint *La Malinche*. *Malinche*—also known as Doña Marina or by the *Nahuatl* name, Malintzín—was the translator, and companion and mistress of Hernán Cortés. Through the twentieth century, she became, variably, either the archetypal *mestizo* mother-figure of *la raza cósmica* or hated betrayer of the land and people of México. Reflecting on the fact that it was not until 1925, with Vasconcelos’s essay, “*La cósmica raza*,” that *mestizaje*, valuable as such, was formally articulated as a article of national identity, we begin to understand the palpably punitive caution that *malanchismo* represented at the time of Vélez’s career on the stage. Indeed, the great extent to which the negative/whore *Malinche* persona still discursively eclipses the positive/saint *Malinche*, allows us to take the measure of the never resolved tension perpetually undermining the national project of *mestizaje*. In the cultural context in which I seek to elucidate Vélez’s “meaning,” the epithet “malinchista” insinuates the feminine betrayal of Mexican values and traditions in favor of those of the purchasing exploiter, i.e. the United States. So if a skinny, foreign-educated *tiple* is not a literal whore she is nevertheless vulnerable to charges of figurative sell-out. As I explore, in the next section, the role of the illustrated magazines in the mediation of this realm of debate and contest, I will argue that—in a way that eerily anticipates the position that she later comes to inhabit as a Hollywood actress in the States—Vélez is deployed, in fact she deployed herself, on the front lines of a smoldering postrevolutionary battlefield. To insist on, indeed *fight* for, her right to the stage... to do

so publicly—sexual liaisons or no notwithstanding—Vélez must be seen as *una mujer pública* in the Mexican sense of the term at that time.

The rate at which gender normativity was being transformed—in presentation and representation, at least—is evidenced by the proliferation of the *pelona*, the flapper, the bataclana, and the rataplana (Mexican, U.S., French and Mexican images, respectively) appearing in the pages of 1925's illustrated journals. To the extent that *bataclanismo* evolved into a “normative discourse,” to invoke Sluis’s phrase “that reached far beyond the theater into the practice of everyday life” (470), and seeing how the *pelona* was contained within a skillfully constructed image of the postrevolutionary national project, as Rubenstein documents, these two forms of Mexican “modern girl” are still difficult to locate outside of the rhetorical and the abstract. Thus I return to the point that Lupe Vélez—as an individualized, embodied Mexican personage, emblematic, in varying degrees, of both of these abstract formulations—is uniquely positioned to test the gendered warp, so to speak, of Mexico’s national fabric.

### ***Lo(s) popular(es), “Mass Vanguardia”<sup>88</sup> and the Gender of Popular Culture***

It was no good. And I resigned myself. I checked the mirror, straightened my hat, and began:

“Respectable ladies: whatever you may say to the contrary, I don’t believe that women can and must compete in every domain with men, with the male, who is supremacy. I am not a feminist, because I feel that we women ought to be feminine, agreeable, and worthy of a home, if we wish to reign...”

But you’re yawning dear readers? I’ll spare you the rest. Just let me say this: I’m neither a feminist nor anti feminist. I’m not for the revolution, but neither do I defend the insipid domesticities of the hearth. So where do I stand, then? Midway between the bullfights and the opera.

Cube Bonifant, “Feminism in Full Sale,” *El Universal Ilustrado*, 1921  
(trans Lorna Scott Fox)<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> The term is Gabara’s (2007, 66-69).

<sup>89</sup> Cited in Mahieux (2010, 25).

It is tempting to frame the *pelona* ordeal as a feminist struggle. While I have characterized their battle as a social struggle in contrast to the bataclana/*tiple* development as a cultural phenomenon, neither is representative of a gendered politics in the sense comparable to the first or second international waves of feminism. Neither Anna Macías (1982) nor Shirleen Ann Soto (1990) mention *pelonas* in their respective chronicles of Mexican feminist movements.<sup>90</sup> Middle-class young women with modern ambitions had much to gain from the revolutionary project; the state's increased commitment to health and education was especially beneficial to young women. As an attractive face of post-revolutionary modernity and social reform, *la chica moderna* was not at official odds with the state agenda of her time. She had, in fact, an increased opportunity to enter the labor force and gain purchasing power in the mid-1920s, even without the benefits of suffrage. Thus, typically, she was not necessarily interested in spending her time and energy battling for greater access to political power. While Soto's and Macías's studies highlight the significance of print discourse to the feminist movement, they are referring specifically to *feminist* journals, not to the (far more popular) weeklies of the burgeoning bourgeoisie. Cube Bonifant, as she herself is quick to note, did not identify as a feminist. But she wrote as a woman and as a voice of her generation.<sup>91</sup> A writer attempting to precisely locate Mexico's postrevolutionary emergent, young, middle-class mass culture would be hard pressed to top Bonifant's self-positioning: "midway between the bullfights and the opera." This epigraphic selection is from the first instantiation of Bonifant's long-lived column, "*Sólo para mujeres*" for *El*

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<sup>90</sup> There is the establishment of a society of university women that happens in 1924 but no reference is made to the war on the *pelonas*. Politically active women's organizations were usually affiliated with the Catholic church and involved in the opposition to the state's official secularism. See Soto (1990) and Macías (1982).

<sup>91</sup> Until 1920, *El Universal Ilustrado* was directed by a woman, María Luisa Ross. See Gabara (2008, 140).

*Universal Ilustrado* (trans. “for women only,” though Bonifant was fond of writing of her awareness that men, too, read her column; Mahieux, 27). Bonifant was seventeen years old.

Bonifant, like Vélez, was emblematic of a bourgeois “culturalization” of public space, an eclipsing of the political—in print as well as visual discourse—that was greeted with anxieties associated with a dreaded “feminization” of culture. Viviane Mahieux’s work on Bonifant gives us an invaluable picture of the revolutionary era that highlights precisely these questions of gender, public space, and the vexed relationship between national and individual identification. Mahieux’s description of Bonifant’s modern world, very much that of Vélez’s herself, will prove useful as I proceed into Vélez’s stage world and is thus worth sustained consideration:

Perhaps the greatest yearning for change was felt among the young, middle-class women of the capital, who were beginning to see tiny cracks opening up in Mexican patriarchy. Such women were entering the labor market in unprecedented numbers, finding jobs as typists, secretaries, sales assistants, or teachers, discovering the joys of heightened mobility and purchasing power. [...] Inspired by the press and the big screen, the new female cultural consumer was broadening her horizons. The covers of popular magazines like the *Universal Ilustrado* or *Revista de Revistas* provided a showcase for the daring, sexy flapper fashions that were all the rage in the United States. *Women with bobbed hair and scarlet lips smiled out from behind the wheel of an enormous automobile....* The same magazines held regular competitions to identify the best female employee, the most promising film actress, the top national star. The press thus multiplied its women readers by offering them a novel way to participate in civic life. *It invited them to vote in various contests and competitions, something they were still denied in the political sphere.*

Nevertheless, the visibility of the modern Mexican woman remained more incipient than real... (Mahieux 2010, 20; emphasis added).

If the magazine cover discovered by Mahieux—the one in which a “[woman] with bobbed hair and scarlet lips smiled out from behind the wheel of an enormous automobile”—is the same *Universal Ilustrado* cover that I located fitting that description,

then that illustration (by Andrés C. Audiffred) graced the August 27, 1925 issue. That woman—perhaps too visible, beyond incipient, *too real*—was Lupe Vélez.<sup>92</sup>

The remainder of this section will be devoted to understanding the discourses of these magazines and will take us to the reader/“voter” contests to which Mahieux refers.

The explication of the qualifier “popular” in relation to popular magazines, like that of the popular theater, benefits from Ether Gabara’s dual-definition of the term. Gabara distinguishes between the ethnographic popular (*‘cultura popular’*)—the popular to which Cosío refers when he speaks of the Revolution’s privileging of the image of the indigenous—and the mass media (*‘cultura de masas’*) addressed by *El UI* and *Revista de Revistas* (123). And yet the nouveaux-bourgeois, mass-media-popular was necessarily conscious of the indigenous popular. Middle-class modernity could, in fact, self-define in conscious juxtaposition to (read *friendly* distinction from) the ethnographic popular.

*Rataplanismo*, as we have seen, playfully “performed” precisely that function. To further complicate matters, while Euro-American culture tends to place the popular in opposition to the avant garde (*vanguardia* or *vanguardismo*), we will see going forward that in Mexico, in the revolutionary period, vanguard modernists carefully constructed a collaborative identification with *los dos populares* in order that they might guide the nascent middle class toward a cultural articulation of “authentic” Mexicanness. Crucial to such a construction was the close collaboration between the modernist *letrados* (novelists, playwrights and intellectuals) and the mass-culture *cronistas* (chroniclers and journalists). The collaboration was so close, in fact, that the same people often fulfilled

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<sup>92</sup> El UI, August 27, 1925, “Número de Autómovil,” cover. There is also a May 25, 1924 cover of *Revista de Revistas* that fits this description. It is titled “La Chica Moderna” and it graces the cover, more recently, of Joanne Hershfield’s book, *Imagining Is Chica Moderna* (2008).

both positions, often under different names. The attempt to read the meaning of Lupe Vélez and her tiple cohort is to attempt to unravel the function of popular and modernist frameworks of *mexicanismo*, not the least important of which was the function of emergent shifts in gender expression.

Constructions of gender in relation to both the mass and the ethnographic popular(s) posed a negotiative challenge that was no less significant than that posed by race and indigeneity. That is to say, the negotiation was equally crucial to the consolidation of revolutionary Mexican society. And just as prescriptive constructs of femininity were being challenged, in and by way of newly accessible public discourses, so too were post-revolutionary images of masculinity. In contrast to representations of the feminine, however, there was a decidedly narrow range of acceptable visual presentations of masculinity available in visual discourse of the time. While photo galleries of women in *El UI* included the beautiful, the professional, the famous, the indigenous... photo galleries of men were usually limited to the showcase of civil servants, parliament members, judges, and the elite *letrado*; their aspects and presentations were a relatively uniform: stoic, *soberly* modern, official... conservatively consistent with sanctioned representations of masculine power.

If there existed a male counterpart to the flapper, he was the “fifi”—loosely translatable as “dandy”—identified by his penchant for balloon pants (*pantalón* “balloon,”) and associated with an invasive foreignness. Fifis showed up regularly in the discourse of the weeklies but, rather than being flattered with visual representation, they were invoked in a cryptic, often deprecatory manner that can be read as symptomatic of greater tensions playing out in the pages of the journals. Fifis—like tiples, theatrical

flaperistas and even the quotidian presence of *las pelonas*—were painted as overly susceptible to U.S. (and especially Hollywood) styles, values and consumption patterns. As a direct corollary to the *pelonas*, the fifis' self-identification through stylish presentation was thought to be as effeminate as the *pelonas'* short-haired athleticism was considered masculine (Serna 2010, 11). Once again we find ourselves at the complex intersection of gender and nation. There is, without a doubt, a homophobic component to the term and to the attitude with which it was deployed. Disdain for perceived male effeminacy, however, in association with the image of the dandy, carried an element of disdain for a *pre*-revolutionary European modernism linked with an old-world aristocratic “softness,” reflective of a bias having as much to do with class and industrialization as it did with homophobia. The fact that men who engaged in romantic or sexual dalliances with the *tiples* were often characterized as fifis would indicate a suspicion regarding properly masculine cultural identification that is queered variously, that is to say that queered (national/gender) identity was as suspect as homosexual orientation.

Pointed invocations of the effeminate fifí phenomenon, however, served a function in the magazines that was of a larger significance than any single instance might imply. I would argue the fifí as an accessible signifier, positioned at the hands modernist *cronistas*, to signal a contestation regarding Mexican masculinity that was more pervasive, and taken far more seriously, than were the anecdotal *pantalón* ‘balloon.’ Recent scholarship sheds light on a 1920s set of polemics pitting Mexico’s “virile” literature against its “effeminate” Other in a contest over the claim to Mexican modernism and modernity.<sup>93</sup> Although the polemic had nineteenth-century roots, the

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<sup>93</sup> For an example of the frivolous, see: “Lo que opinan las mujeres capitalinas sobre la moda del pantalón ‘Balloon’.” *Revista de Revistas*, Nov 15, 1925, 36. Vélez was not among the prominent *tiples* asked to

rhetoric mapped conveniently onto tensions between two postrevolutionary poetic vanguard entities, the *Estridentistas* (Stridentists) and the *Contemporáneos* (Contemporaries) group, both of which maintained high profiles in literature and the arts. A significant portion of the era's playwrights, including *revista* writers, held a secondary vocation (often under a pseudonym) as *cronista* affiliated with one or more of the journals and, simultaneously they generally maintained, to various degrees, a thinly veiled identification with one or the other of these vanguard entities. Historical treatment has privileged documentation of the modernists' antagonisms, framing the two groups as entirely separate and erasing the significance of their shared functions (Gabara 2007, 67). Gabara is among those seeking to counter persistent characterizations that would reductively paint the *Estridentistas* as macho, homophobic patriotic nationalists and the *Contemporáneos* as queer, politically superficial betrayers of the national(ist) project. Though Gabara might overcompensate, conflating the two groups in a way that erases their distinctions, most accounts insist on a nationalistic masculinism on the part of the *Estridentistas* and identify the European influence inherent to the *critical* nationalism (some would say anti-patriotism) practiced by the *Contemporáneos*.<sup>94</sup> Questions of how queer were the *Contemporáneos* and how homophobic were the *Estridentistas* will not be answered here.<sup>95</sup> More central to our purposes is the fact of the polemic itself, the stakes

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weigh in on the question. One week earlier, though, Vélez was asked to weigh in on the question, "Where do you think you'll be when you're fifty?" Vélez, described as "the little wire doll" [la muñequita del alambre], refused to project into the future. "¿Qué Piensa Used Hacer a Los Cincuenta Año?" *El UI*, Nov 8, 1925, 14-15.

<sup>94</sup> On the polemic(s) see also Balderston (57-64), Irwin (116-186), Oropesa (8-12), Rashkin (146-49), Schneider (121-148). On the nationalist question, Gabara writes: "The debate over the relative nationalism of the Contemporáneos and the Estridentistas has continued since their active years, with scholars going as far as to count the number of texts and artworks reproduced in their journals by Mexican artists compared to those by foreigners" (194, 303 n115; as an example of the counting, Gabara cites Sheridan, 1988).

<sup>95</sup> Manuel Maples Arce—poet, artist, writer and the most high-profile figure of the Stridentists—is known to have engaged in homophobic rhetoric, much of which proliferated well after the Stridentists "movement,"

at play regarding revolutionary national identity, in relationship to gender identity, in which the two groups were invested. What is clear is that the culture of *machismo* associated with the post-revolutionary period evolved contemporaneously with the first generation of homosexual males who were publicly defined and identified as such (Irwin, xxx; Rashkin, 147). It was *collectively*—to some extent *through* their animosities—that the two sets of modernists managed to define the terms and stakes of mainstream public discourse, articulating the intertwined issues of nationalism, national identity, political identity and gender construction within the public sphere.<sup>96</sup>

At a time when the topic of gendered literature and the relatedly contested sexuality of the nation’s *letrados* played out within *El UI*’s erudite literary pages, it is unsurprising that the “frivolous,” theatricalities of feminine gender construction playing out on *revista* stages held such an intense fascination for *cronistas* of both vanguard (*Estridentista* and *Contemporáneo*) persuasions. *Bataclanismo* provided a palatable mass discourse relative to the topic of male effeminacy or homosexuality, although—and, indeed, for that very reason—I would argue that the *tiples*’ significance for Mexican cultural identity was no less profound.<sup>97</sup> As Gabara makes clear, the meditating function

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as such, was in the past (see especially, Rashkin, 149-49). But we know that the signers of Stridentist manifestos did not necessarily share all of Arce’s ideas. Stridentist theater, particularly, eludes characterization on this front (and indeed on several fronts; indeterminacy was one of its most dearly held principles). See Rashkin (101-102) on El Teatro Mexicano del Murciélagos (Mexican Theater of the Bat), a Stridentist group. Luis Quintanilla wrote the program for a Theater presentation in 1924, wherein one of the acts was titled, “Fifis.” Quintanilla describes “the new urban dandies” as “already as characteristic of our national life as the most romantic of our village customs or the proud and savage rhythm of indigenous dancers” (quoted in Rashkin, 102).

<sup>96</sup> I did not find either group publicly taking a position on the anti-clericalism that would soon erupt in into the Cristero War of 1926-1929. Gabara (2007, 87) mentions that religion was a crucial mediated topic in the weeklies, though her work does not follow through with documentation specific to the topic.

<sup>97</sup> I am entirely convinced that further research is needed in order to locate, more precisely, the significance of *bataclanismo*—and *revista* theater in general, including the function of the *tiples*—within the cultural production of Mexican post-revolutionary mass cultural identity. My sense is that, unfortunately, the “stain” of the *vendida*—the sex worker “sell-out” so closely associated with the theater actress—has served to warn scholars away from serious consideration of Mexico’s popular theater.

of the weeklies in the evolution of middle-class mass culture was not inadvertent. Modernists writing for *El Universal Ilustrado*—columnists such as “Argos”—while consistently offering subtle evidence of their advanced erudition, ultimately address the reader from a level perspective, that is, one not separate from mass culture.<sup>98</sup> *Contemporáneos* and *Estridentistas* alike identified the emergent mass culture as the constituency of the modern moment in which to make most crucially investment in order to realize a salient cultural impact in post-revolutionary society.

The following is an excerpt from the editorial statement written by Carlos Noriega Hope (1896–1934), published in *El Universal Ilustrado* in 1920, when the young playwright and critic took the directorship of that publication.<sup>99</sup> He held that post until his untimely death at age thirty-eight.<sup>100</sup>

The idea of this journal is to be [a forum] ... of the frivolous and the modern, where transcendent things are hidden under an agreeable superficiality. Because it is doubtless that all periodicals have their physiognomy and their spirit, exactly like men... there are those that are frivolous and apparently vacuous, but that hold, at their base, original ideas and a human perception of life. Perhaps this weekly, within its frivolous spirit, contains the scent [perfume] of an idea.

— Carlos Noriega Hope, director’s statement, *El Universal Ilustrado: Semanario Artístico Popular*, March 4, 1920.<sup>101</sup>

When Salvador Oropesa employs the term “neo-baroque” to describe the cultural ambience of revolutionary Mexico, he is not speaking specifically of the era’s popular illustrated weeklies.

<sup>98</sup> For Gabara, the egalitarian character of its “promiscuous” relationship with the popular distinguishes Mexican modernism from its Euro-American counterpart and, rather shares an affiliation with the “hybrid” dynamic we more likely associate with (metropolitan) postmodern cultural production. Gabara argues this point by way of Thomas Crow’s *Modern Art in Common Culture* (1996) where Crow characterizes the avant garde modernist’s engagement with the popular as advancing through a series of raids and retreats. This appropriative dynamic, where the avant garde gains momentum by its “raids” on mass culture will come into play in my final chapter.

<sup>99</sup> Carlos Noriega Hope took the post after returning from a trip to Hollywood, which is chronicled in his publication *El mundo de las sombras* (1920). Noriega is affiliated with the theater but his sympathies consistently lie with the cinema, radio and with technology in general. See Rashkin, 96-97. On *El UI*, Noriega Hope, the *Estridentistas* in early radio, see Rubén Gallo (2005; esp. 123-4).

<sup>100</sup> There is evidence that Vélez played a role in an early film made by Noriega Hope, which never saw release. We know that the two maintain a friendship after she left for the U.S., even as certain writers in *El UI* turned somewhat hostile toward the actor and her work. Vélez made headlines in Mexico’s *Filmográfico* and *Hoy* when she returned to Mexico City to attend Noriega Hope’s funeral.

<sup>101</sup> Quoted in *Carlos Noriega Hope, 1896-1934* (1959, 34); quoted and translated in Gabara (139).

Oropesa's work, *The Contemporáneos Group* (2003) treats one important arena of vanguard modernist cultural production, that of the *Contemporáneos*, with a specific concentration on the work of Salvador Novo, Xavier Villaurrutia, and the wall of homophobia that they and their circle faced with the intensity of the era's gender polemics. In the above passage, however, where Noriega articulates the principles that inform his own criticism and cultural production as put in service of his vision for mass communication, the director (editor) makes a strong case for precisely the principle and practice that is at stake in Oropesa's concept of the neo-baroque mode of public discourse.<sup>102</sup> The neo-baroque sensibility is defined by the absence of limitations on its materials, influences and engagements, which is not to say that neo-baroque in practice, as I am suggesting we understand *El UI*'s broad cultural embrace, was forged without an agenda. The baroque "promiscuity" (Gabara) performed at Noriega's editorial hand, instantiates a deliberate and effective form of cultural mediation between the state, the (pseudonymed) elite, and the "two populars": mass and folk.<sup>103</sup>

Paging through *El UI*, one finds multiple galleries of photographs, a rich multiplicity of faces of post-revolutionary Mexico drawn from a broad range of Mexican society. I have mentioned the prominent picturing of civil servants, representatives of the middle and elite classes (it was far rarer to find representations of the mestizo laboring

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<sup>102</sup> There might be an analogy to be formed between Noriega and the MoMA director, Alfred H. Barr. Barr took his job in 1929 and also managed to institutionalize his interest in popular taste and mass production.

<sup>103</sup> Jesús Martín Barbero's influential theories of media and mediation (1987; English trans. 1993) have, as Gabara points out, effectively complicated the notion of *mestizaje* as "the reigning conceptualization of the mixture of the elite and the popular" (144). Discovering an "alternative to the dominant cultural nationalism of the postrevolutionary era," within the "strange and conflictive pages" of magazines like *El Universal Ilustrado*, Gabara builds on Martín's thinking on broadcast media and modernity to ultimately depart from some of his conclusions (126-7). Gabara (2008, 127-129) argues for reperiodizing Latin American modernity, pushing modernity's regional birth date from the initial era of *broadcast* media, as argued by Martín Barbero (1987), to that of mass produced *visual* discourse circulating just after the revolution. Doing so, she suggests that popular illustrated magazines, the very agents that, for many, represented that anxiety-producing "femininization" of Mexican culture, be reconsidered as a foundational discourse of Mexican modernism. Gabara uses the term "women's magazine," including *El UI* as loosely included in that category, partly in light of the role of its founding editor, María Luisa Ross. (140). There is, conceivably, much more to be gained from research into the contents, editorial politics and history of other publications, such as *Revistas de Revistas* for example. Research within women's magazines, more strictly speaking, would undoubtedly prove fruitful. For the initial general purpose of contextualizing theater and cinema culture, however, *El UI* is the clear priority.

class). Groups of prominent families might be included but, most consistently, readers were privileged to showcases of Mexican femininity—*las bellas de Oaxaca... la belleza de Tampico*; celebrations of the next generation—*los niños de Guadalajara*—are also well represented. Such slices of quotidian life figure before one reaches the equally eclectic cultural sections. Here one might find drawings by David Alfaro Siqueiros with, perhaps, poems by Juan Selvati, preceding Argos's “*On dit...gossip de la semana,*” (representing an eclectic mix on its own) and the theater reviews in “*farándulas de hoy*” (“the theater worlds of today”). Within the theater pages the rule of “catholic taste” (in the classical, non-religious sense) continues to hold; the *teatro serio* shares pages and columns with *revista*; the spectacles that are *bataclanismo* are regularly represented with a photo (though rarely awarded with any substantive textual discussion<sup>104</sup>). The *tiples* of the *revista* are, in 1925, extremely well represented in these pages. The reader will regularly encounter talk of the latest intrigue just before reaching the “substantial” political and social features that appear towards the end of each issue. The logic of the word “*revista*” as double-duty signifier for “journal” and “theater” becomes visually apparent before reading a word of text.

Such eclecticism is not by chaotic happenstance nor, however, is it precisely or consistently responsive to the dictates of either the marketplace or the state. In the unstable environment of the post-revolution social and political mechanisms had need to “hail”—or attempt to unify, if only by imagination—a heterogeneous demographic. Consumer society, unstable nationalist politics and vernacular visual expression and

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<sup>104</sup> I read about a specific role played by Vélez on only one occasion. She played Salome on 1925 [citation].

modernist aesthetics all met in the pages of *El UI*.<sup>105</sup> Gabara writes:

*El Universal Ilustrado*, under Noriega Hope's leadership, served as a fascinating and contradictory meeting ground for the discourses of nation articulated by the state, the increasingly powerful bourgeoisie, and the avant-garde artists and writers. It reported on educational programs of Vasconcelos, included fiction and poetry of both the major groups of vanguardias, and even reflected a conservative Catholic voice frequently associated with middle-class women of the time. *At the core of the mixture of frivolity and avant-garde originality are photographs, which over and over picture modernity in the figure of the modern woman* (140, emphasis added).

Visual culture was an especially important hailing mechanism within a population with a very high rate of Spanish illiteracy. Hailing a broad population that had little or no capital to spend, readily available pictures enabled access to the *promise* of the national project and a sense (if only a sense) of authentic inclusivity. Without attempting to minimize the importance of Gabara's attention to photography in the meditative function of the weeklies, I would suggest that she understates the significance of illustration, particularly in regards to the representation "types" of gendered Mexicanness that was such an integral part of the "picturing" of modern revolutionary culture. Relatedly, popular musical theater, owing to its performative ability to communicate on multiple registers, likewise played a crucial role in this world of radically polyvalent communication. Thus we come to understand the fascination with the *staging* of gender construction.

### **La tiple "Jazz" greets the electorate**

And the curtain rises  
It's Lupe Vélez  
She's the señorita of 1925  
With her ample forehead, enigmatic eyes, features extraordinarily similar to those of Gloria Swanson, she is a transparent and fresh beauty.  
Her figure is graceful—linear, harmonious and perfect... with curves that are attractive only in the style of the last twenty years.  
The señorita 1925, fragile and edgy, seems an adorable child – a child who shows anger and stomps her feet. A child who laughs charmingly – in her smile there is no pretending, no frozen expression on her face – and one who dances the disjointed jazz as easy as jumping rope or playing with dolls.

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<sup>105</sup> Noriega came under criticism from some quarters for an unwillingness to cross the party line of the state, as Gabara points out (140). I would actually suggest Gabara might play down this point. More research is needed, particularly in relation to the states' anti-clericalism.

It hasn't been three months since she dedicated herself to the theater, her triumphant debut caused a revolution on the stages, showcasing her vibrant personality, despite the thousand obstacles in her path.

Our youth who shun the slow "calandria" in order to avail themselves of the dizzying speed of the automobile or the airplane, enjoy and appreciate the "new theater" guided by the arrival of the Parisian company of Madame Rassimí.

Those great melodramas of yesteryear – the school of tragic comedy – the ridiculous comedy that reflects the pretentiousness of the elite and wealthy – are incompatible with the current generation. They are interested only in what is happening TODAY and scorn what comes with the future.

Jorge Loyo, "Lupe Vélez" *El UI*, July 18, 1925 (unpaginated; trans: Jorge Arteaga)<sup>106</sup>

*Estridentista*-affiliated *cronista* and playwright Jorge Loyo, like Argos, apparently detected in Lupe Vélez's persona/craft a certain transcendency "hidden under an agreeable superficiality," that spoke to (and of) this unique cultural moment in Mexico City. Writing in the July 18 issue of *El Universal Ilustrado*, just months after her initial sensation on *revista*'s stages, Loyo designated Vélez "la señorita 1925" and placed her illustrated portrait on the journal's internal cover, of sorts, that opened the theater pages. *El Universal Ilustrado*, like *Revista de Revistas*, employed a house illustrator – Andrés C. Audiffred – whose artistic sensibility evolved from a cartoon/comic practice not unlike García Cabral's.<sup>107</sup>

Loyo's gesture touched a nerve. As his designation quickly morphed from "señorita of the year" to "tiple of the year," discussions of Vélez's inflated salary—the highest of the *primeras tipes*—again brought attention to the fact that Vélez bought and drove a car, which became a major feature of her off-stage *chica moderna* persona. In

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<sup>106</sup> *El UI*, 16 July, 1925: 39; full text in Prida Santacilia, 181. Loyo enjoyed a relatively high profile in the theater and a notable rivalry with Salvador Novo. To the extent that he is remembered it is for his production, *Ulises* (1928), that mocked the Contemporáneos' *Teatro Ulises*. Loyo aims high in his lampoons, staging a comparable gesture in 1947 with his parody of Usigli's celebrated *El gesticulador*, which he titled *La gesticuladora* (Bullé Goyri, 188).

<sup>107</sup> Audiffred's work was based more on portraiture; he individualized faces in a way that García Cabral did not, and yet Audiffred, too, tended towards the iconic in his presentation style, using framing devices and heraldic stylistic flourishes.

fact, shortly after Loyo's designation comes an *El UI* issue dedicated to the automobile; the cover illustration is the afore-mentioned image of Lupe Vélez behind the wheel of what initiated readers could assume is her own car.<sup>108</sup> She is framed in a round border—an emblem of the future at hand—depicted in the era's requisite cloche hat and donning (as usual) an exaggeratedly toothy smile.

Comparative discussions of *tiple* salaries resulted in the publication of several *tiples'* pay scales, followed closely by the initiation of what became a high-profile, reader-driven popularity contest.<sup>109</sup> It started out with cumulative vote tallies printed in bold each week on the journal's cultural splash-page. Tens of thousands of readers eventually took part. Vélez dropped from second to third and then fourth position.<sup>110</sup> At some point it became clear that the contest was over the title “*la tiple* 1926.” Despite her drop in the polling, Vélez actively pursued Montalván's significant lead, effectively taking up the mantel as the new, iconoclastic soprano, despite her current hold—un-elected, remember—on the 1925 title. In a moment of critical mass, the competitors took their battle to the streets. Both Vélez and Montalván ventured to factories and armories to greet Mexico's working men and soldiers. In pictures published in *El UI*, each poses with her respective devoted legions of *mestizo* masculinity. In fact, the narrative began to parallel the more politicized discourses around the “war on the *pelonas*” of the previous year, in the sense that this contestation of femininity might be decided, ultimately, by

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<sup>108</sup> On the subject of Vélez and her car, *El UI* had a tendency to repeat effective photographs. One that turned up in multiple articles – whether about stars, cars, or modern women – pictures Vélez's automobile with its hood up, Vélez in a fur-trimmed coat, leaning over the engine while turning to smile at the camera (*El UI*, July , 1925: 61).

<sup>109</sup> Argos writes that Vélez makes \$50 (pesos) a day (*El IU*, 13 Aug. 1925: 10). The following week all the major *tiple* salaries are published: Lupe \$3,850 / Celia Padilla \$3,775 / Celia Montalván \$3,125 / Emma Duval \$3,335.

<sup>110</sup> First she trailed Montalván, then Montalvan and Padilla. Soon Delia Magaña (the *tiple comica* who had found terrific success by caustically imitating Vélez) pulled ahead to occupy the third place position.

way of male (working class / “normative”) discourse. In this instance, though, while nationalistic images of working class masculinity become important (and came with images offering a significant visual contrast to the light complexions of both women), they do not intervene to the point of eclipsing this *cultural* narrative in the way that they had come to control the properly *socio-political* narrative of the *pelonas*. The tiples were anything but lost in this story.

Predictably, on October 1, 1925, Celia Montalván was announced “*la tiple* 1926.” The result undoubtedly reflected Montalván’s wider popularity. But Vélez, as agent of challenge, emerged as the star—alternately protagonist and antagonist—of what may have been *El UI*’s first serialized documentary melodrama.<sup>111</sup> While Sluis characterizes her as “ba-ta-clan’s first real star,” Vélez may more accurately represent Mexican mass culture’s first native modern celebrity. What is more interesting than the fact of her celebrity, though, is its iconoclastic nature: Vélez’s personality translated discursively as an unlikely combination of aggressive, arrogant irreverence on the one hand, and warm, utterly personable sincerity on the other. She might be, in one discursive instance, loved for her childlike innocence, only to be, in the next, scorned for her impetuosity. The pages of *El IU* document Vélez, though, as a cheerfully strident challenge to normative (read “desirable”) femininity by way of the “boyish” body of a precocious, almost “virile,” girl (Pilcher, 20). There is a friendly nihilism enacted by her performance; it refuses to offer up any singular, unified “New Woman” ideal to replace the traditional image it flouts. It impersonates only to “destroy” a false idol of the past generation, in the

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<sup>111</sup> Vélez ended up in fifth place, behind Emma Duval. Final numbers were not printed. Each of the tiples received sizable features in *El IU*, written by the various cronistas and accompanied by photos. Actually, in a move that surely caused consternation in the *tiple* “community,” Lupe’s feature was equal in size to Padilla’s, the second spot holder, while Delia Magaña and María Teresa Renner got a shared article, titled, “dos tiples del futuro.”

sense of the iconoclast, and does so with ambivalence rather than forward-looking principle. Just as Loyo wrote in the piece that kicked off the tiple contest, Vélez was the icon of a youthful generation that held a cheerful and mocking disregard toward the future of the “national” project. And yet Vélez’s persona and the threat it posed were born of the revolution.

### **“¿Se debe acabar el Ba-ta-clán?” (Should the Ba-ta-clan be stopped?)**

In early March of 1926, just over a year after the debut of *Voilá Paris, bataclanismo* came under organized critique launched by the “Group of Seven,” a respected contingent of modernist playwrights, which included the *El UI* editor, Carlos Noriega Hope. The group, which had Stridentist leanings, managed to skirt the effeminacy polemic—at least publicly and for the most part—to effectively champion native authors of Mexican theater over the production of foreign work.<sup>112</sup> As a part of their 1926 manifesto, the authors circulated a call to put an end to the *revista* sub-genre of the ba-ta-clán. Their position—which was discussed prominently in an article in *Revista de Revistas* but did not surface in (Noriega Hope’s) *El UI*—was as concerned with ba-ta-clán’s non-Mexicanness as with the (sub)genre’s nudity and questionable morality. While reactions from important theater players fell on two sides of the question, there was professional agreement regarding the degeneration of the practice: the consensus was that legitimately Mexican *teatro frívolo* was suffering for the bataclanesque influence. Previously

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<sup>112</sup> The Group of Seven are Noriega Hope, José Joaquin Gamboa, Francisco Monterde, Ricardo Prada León, Victor Manuel Diez Barroso, and Carlos and Lázaro Lozano García. Usigli (129-130) notes their connection with the Estridentistas’ Teatro Sintético. The Seven, along with Teatro Sintético and Teatro Murciélagos, tend to be juxtaposed against Teatro Ulises, the Contemporáneo project of 1928 that favored translated productions of European work. See Schneider (123) for Noriega Hope’s involvement in the Estridentistas in the national/gendered literature polemic. For all their championing of Mexican theater, the Seven, like the Contempoáneos, held European theater in high esteem. The Group of Seven was also called “Los Pirandelllos,” for their devotion of Luis Pirandello, especially after the latter’s play, *Six Characters in search of an Author*. The Seven sought to influence and “elevate” Mexican theater with a model provided by certain outside artists and intellectuals.

sophisticated standards that had nurtured the broader *revista* genre were no longer upheld, it was argued; *revista*'s productive critical/topical edge had been dulled.<sup>113</sup> Those who opposed the wholesale banning of ba-ta-clán (among them Celia Padilla, Roberto Soto and Ermilo Abreu Gómez) held that the problem was not with the practice itself but with the deteriorating quality of imitations, which degenerated towards vacuous pornography. Celia Montalván, on the other side, spoke out righteously for an abandonment of the practice altogether. Lupe Vélez was neither asked to weigh in nor mentioned in the *Revista de Revistas* piece.<sup>114</sup>

Though Sluis discusses ba-ta-clán *revistas* as having “remained profitable business material well into the 1930s” (474), I would caution against equating the descriptive use of the ba-ta-clán term with the mode of production it had earlier signified.<sup>115</sup> Terms become notoriously fluid in this period of creative fervor; “ba-ta-clán” and “rataplán” were defined within a revolutionary theater culture specific to a time period that did not stand still for patiently sustained contemplation.

### ¿La tiple estridentista? (The strident soprano?)

[Rodolfo] Usigli tells us that Ermilo Abreu Gómez and Jacobo Dalevuelta [pseud. for Fernando Ramírez de Aguilar] spoke later of their participation in the *teatro sintético*. It must be true. Abreu Gómez and Carlos Villenave wrote a short scene, the manuscript found in the *Unión de Autores Nacionales*, entitled, *La nariz de los muertos*, a mere dramatic minute to show off the virtuosity of the actress, in this case Lupe Vélez who, bed-ridden and delirious, witnesses the suicide of her father who was unable to buy her the needed medicine. Without a message, the work is a violent and depressing glimpse at the misery about us.

John Nomland, *Contemporary Mexican Theater, 1900-1950*, unpublished dissertation 1967, 133 (emphasis added).

The *teatro sintético*, to which Nomland refers above, was the name taken by the theater

<sup>113</sup> This is precisely the point that Araceli Rico would articulate, years later (99).

<sup>114</sup> “¿Se debe acabar el Ba-ta-clán?” *Revista de Revistas*, 13 Sept. 1925: unpaginated.

<sup>115</sup> Sluis cites an article about María Rivera, “a one-time star of adult entertainment clubs in Plaza Garibaldi” writing her autobiography in 1938. Rivera was not a *tiple* in public discourse in the years I researched. See, too, Novo’s mention of later use of the term (1946, 29).

practice of the *Estridentistas* subsequent to the short lived *Teatro Mexicano del Murciélagos*. Regarding Nomland's brief and somewhat dismissive account of some of the scripts he located, Elissa J. Rashkin's *Estridentista* historiography, *The Stridentist Movement in Mexico* (2009), prepares us to read the archive with due cognizance of the tendency for polemics to reproduce themselves.<sup>116</sup> While the subjective memoirs of period historical players provide some of our most compelling and useful accounts of postrevolutionary theater, they also represent individual vested interests in what Ortiz Bullé Goyri calls the “factional wars” of the postrevolutionary vanguard (145). Which is to say, affiliates of the *Contemporáneos* group are not necessarily to be trusted when it comes to accounting for or accurately characterizing or the work of the *Estridentistas*, and *vice versa*: Salvador Novo largely ignores the *Estridentistas* in his memoirs and historical writings<sup>117</sup> and Rodolfo Usigli treats them with dismissive patronage (“fashion dictates,” 129). John Nomland’s consistent deference to Usigli may have resulted in the author’s attention deficit when it came to some of his own relatively obscure archival discoveries.<sup>118</sup> On the basis of Rahskin’s analysis of Stridentist innovations in epistemological theater, we can understand *La nariz de los muertos* (*The Nose of the*

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<sup>116</sup> Conversely, those who avoided the most contentious polemics actually tend to get lost to history, Ermilo Abreu Gómez (1894-1971) for example, tended to associate with both groups (he contributed to the journal, *Contemporaneos*, (see *Diccionario* and Usigli), and collaborates theatrically with the Group of Seven, who were staging *Estridentista* work). He was from Yucatan and was identified, to a large extent, as an indigenous “outsider” intellectual (he was interested in indigenous theater and in bringing indigenous themes to theater). For all this, he was able to stay largely above the fray of gendered and nationalist polemics. Sadly, now he is obscure but he contributed much to Mayan historiography as well as Mexican theater.

<sup>117</sup> Novo did not, however, ignore the Stridentists in his columns published at the time. In fact he was one of the few who consistently stepped up against the homophobia of their more outspoken polemicists. See Robert McKee Irwin (2003, 117-121).

<sup>118</sup> Nomland’s dissertation was never revised into a published book in English. It was, however, directly translated to Spanish and published—the same year it was submitted, in 1967—as *Teatro mexicano contemporáneo, 1900-1950*. This is indicative of the unfortunate lack of Mexican scholarship on the theater that continued until relatively recent times. It also indicates, though, a clear understanding of the significance of the topic which, unfortunately, was not sustained in U.S. scholarship.

*Dead*), even with its cryptic account as quoted in the above epigraph, as exemplary of the *estridentista*'s mode of theatrical practice: *La nariz* reads as an unromantic account of the lives and commonplace struggles of a Mexican family of the revolutionary period. Their situation is represented with a textual openness that refused to resort to prescriptive resolutions or didactic heroism. One of the principles of *teatro sintético* was its rejection of the aesthetics and propagandistics of Soviet-style social realism.<sup>119</sup> In fact, discussion took place in *El UI* regarding the fraught term “realism” (*realismo*), in comparison with the perhaps preferable *naturalidad* or *naturalismo*. In *El IU*, in a 1925 article, “Algunas opiniones acerca del Teatro Sintético” (“Some opinions about *teatro sintético*”), both Ricardo Parada León and the Lozano García brothers, Lázaro and Carlos, use the word *naturalidad* to describe a theory of acting infused with an expression of emotion that allows for the representation of a “prismatic” subjectivity. In keeping with this commitment to an ambiguous narrative stance, realism is likewise rejected, seen as a specifically bourgeois decadence. And yet, important for our purposes, “frivolity,” whimsy and humor are *not* scorned as decadent. Brevity, though, is prized over either narrative embellishment or digetic coherence. Considering, then, these guiding principles of *teatro sintético* (Schneider 1997, 121-148; Rashkin 104-106), it is unlikely that *La nariz del muerto* was motivated by thespian virtuosity, as Nomland speculates (not that I relish ruling out the value of Vélez’s “virtuosic” acting; especially as it is so rarely remarked upon). Rather, the scene would seem to insist on an almost perverse sense of absurdity, one likely to accompany a state of such profound hopelessness as that

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<sup>119</sup> Though several *Estridentista* adherents, it should be mentioned, did have some sympathy for socialism and socialist ideology; several of the Stridentists later joined the Communist Party. On Communist Party affiliations, see Rashkin (2009, 224-232).

in which the ill protagonist finds herself. The sense of absolute futility is real, even rational, and the acts of the desperate make as much or as little sense as do the negative fantasies (*possibly* fantasies) of the delirious.

With Vélez playing this scene—for, we must realize, however “virtuosic” an actress, she would be intertextually cemented to an audacious image that had, paradoxically, taken on a certain character of modern national authenticity (*mexicanísima*) even in its decadence—injects an added layer of self-reflexive incongruity that would read as at once ironic, chaotic and further sobering.<sup>120</sup> There is a certain poignantly baroque logic to Vélez’s affiliation with the sometimes Strident Abreu Gómez, who is himself a creature of borders and transculturation.

By the latter half of 1926, *cronistas* of the popular magazines regularly noted a “crisis” regarding the extent to which local theatrical talent—especially female talent—was being lured from the city’s stages. Montalván, among others, continued to insist on the degeneration of *revista* theater toward pornography; her contention that this phenomenon was evidenced by the exodus of stars was often quoted though difficult to support. The extent to which *revista* productions were regularly touring throughout the Republic, and especially the rate at which *tiples* were finding opportunities to tour internationally—

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<sup>120</sup> There is some reluctance on Rashkin’s part to link the 1926 work of Ermilo Abreu Gómez fully to either the Teatro Sintético or the Teatro Murciélagos. Rather, he is known for his work with indigenous theater (Rashkin, 106; Magaña Esquivel, 1964, 20). It seems to me that Abreu Gómez’s interest in indigenismo need not trump the vanguard nor the mass popular qualities of his work. He was one of the players weighing in on the question of “Should the Ba-ta-clán be stopped?” (His answer: no). Jorge Loyo, reflecting on Vélez’s plans to go to Hollywood, invokes Abreu Gómez as a fan of Vélez’s facility for imitation. Abreu Gómez—betraying an interest in U.S. popular culture not seen as characteristic of the Stridentists—delights in speculation on Vélez’s performing imitations of Raquel Meller, Esther Barrymore or Florence Mills for a U.S. audience. “No Mexican artist has succeeded in perfecting the facility for imitation as has Lupe Vélez.” Jorge Loyo, “La niña Lupe se va a Hollywood,” *El UI*, June 10, 1926. (Florence Mills, a young African American “jazz queen” of the Harlem Renaissance, who was enjoying a budding international career at this moment of 1926. Unfortunately, Mills died that year of appendicitis.

appearing, for example, in Madrid, Havana, Buenos Aires and New York—is hardly an unequivocal sign of declension. In his column “*On dit...*” published with the heading “Lupe Vélez triumphs in the north,” Argos’s tone is both astute and fair in summing up a local ambivalence toward Vélez and toward the particular practice with which she was associated:

Lupe Vélez, after exhausting completely the perfume of her grace—but not yet that of her likability—in the limited venue of the Lírico, departed at the head of the [Lírico] company in order to indulge a provincial public—one arriving too late to hear of the Charleston and that still ignores the existence of pantalón ‘balloon’—with her delicate [grácil] figure.

Reflecting on the fact that Vélez, in only a few months, “triumphed” in a manner that other performers—including those who benefited from class and social privilege—had not accomplished in years of work, Argos speculates on the future of the *tiplecita Jazz*: “Lupe is not a polyhedron nor an egoist; as she knows she will never successfully dominate all the genres of theater, she surrounds herself with talent that collectively shows promise for the future.” Argos predicts that, upon her return, Vélez and the Lírico company will be “again in the center of the constellation of stars.” Of course when Vélez would again find herself within a metropolitan star constellation, it would be at the center of the cinema universe, in the company of Douglas Fairbanks and Mary Pickford.<sup>121</sup> To those who identified her with the foreign influence—“the modern girl” of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century’s first era of globalization—Vélez’s move to Hollywood may have seemed inevitable. Yet the initiated Mexican would know that Vélez’s extremely successful Hollywood debut might have been less triumphant had it not been supported by her performances in the immensely popular stage revues that accompanied her film. The fact

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<sup>121</sup> I am referring to her Hollywood debut in *The Gaucho* (1927). Vélez’s casting and performance was, for the most part, greeted with pride in Mexico, though the film itself met mixed reviews in the weeklies.

that Vélez was reported to be performing at the top tier cinema palaces of major U.S. cities came as no surprise to the *cronistas* of Mexico City's weeklies.

### **Prologue... Memories of the future**

The close of this chapter is not this project's last word on Vélez's reception in Mexico. But it may be my last opportunity to afford due attention to the reportage of her *letrado* compatriots. By mid-century, when Salvador Novo penned the capital city's official remembrance I earlier invoked,<sup>122</sup> Mexican visual and literary discourse had consolidated around a set of gendered cultural images that, in stark contrast to the chaotic polemics of the 1920s, had stabilized along firmly nationalist lines. This newly imagined community was reinforced, in no small part, by the idyllic pictures and narratives provided by the golden age of Mexico's national cinema. Vélez had returned and left again, twice; she had become an international star, consistently held up against Dolores del Rio, at this point, rather than Celia Montalván. In *La Zandunga* (Azteca, Mex. 1938), Vélez portrays a *Tehuana* maiden, a favored version of middle-class culture's romantic fantasy of Mexico's own "domestic exotic" (Hershfield). The (pseudo-)indigenous persona she presented on screen bore virtually no resemblance to *la tiplecita jazz* who left Mexico City late in 1926.<sup>123</sup>

In the capital city, the postwar-1940s manifested a nostalgic longing for the nation's relinquished youth and independence. With the palpable, undeniable recognition of the influence of the United States, came a sense that the revolution was facing a crisis. Mexico responded to the climate with an official eulogy of sorts to the postrevolutionary

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<sup>122</sup> See Oropesa (12-27) on *Nueva Grandeza Mexicana*—its relationship to state identity and national culture and as a centerpiece of "neo-baroque" literary discourse.

<sup>123</sup> "Domestic exotic" is Hershfield's apt phrase. Also apt is the concept of the constructed "Indian aristocrat" (Pool, 53; López, 301-2).

city; the staging of a celebrated endorsement of Novo's *Nueva Grandeza Mexicana* (1946) represented the best of the capital—the “perfect” revisititation of the city’s halcyon years of collective cultural and intellect on display. As Oropesa points out, Novo’s celebrated “mixture of history book and tourist pamphlet,” is emblematic of the mid-century’s fraught complex of memory, sentiment, and spin. The celebrated volume manages to, at once, pay homage to the revolution, reassert the cultural credentials of the previously besmirched *Contemporáneos* and, not entirely incongruously, gesture in obeisance towards the colonial past of the same metropolis by evoking Bernardo de Balbuena’s 17<sup>th</sup>-century classic, *Grandeza Mexicana*. *Nueva Grandeza* is, paradoxically, a flamboyant textual instance of negotiative mediation. Such is the perfectly complicated *grandeur* by which *la niña* Lupe is assumed back into Mexico’s history.

Recovering from her hotly contested national debut—“Girl of the Year,” Mexico City, 1925—Lupe Vélez emerges as a split emblem; she is poised between the “the girl, Lupe” and the new, post-revolutionary woman. She was imaged in the popular press bent over the raised hood of her automobile even more often than she smiled from behind its wheel. She was both a charmingly benign flirt and, as I have argued, a scandalous “public woman.” I never found her represented in the popular press as half of a romantic heterosexual couple.

In the next chapter we will see Hollywood vacillate widely in its various attempts to do with Lupe Vélez what Hollywood does best: marry “the girl” off—on and off screen. In Hollywood, as in Mexico, Vélez’s public persona was eminently

serviceable in the dismantling of normative gender constructions and near “useless” in the construction of stable, widely presentable new ones.

## CHAPTER 3

### **Body and Soul Mate: Nation, Representation and American Marriage Crises**

Time was when Joan Crawford and Doug Fairbanks, Jr., were the most audibly devoted couple in Hollywood. They could be seen any noon at M.-G.-M. commissary languishing over the soup and crooning sticky phrases.

A daily witness of the procedure penned the following epitaph which Dorothy Herzog ran in her column:

Here lie the bodies of Doug and Joan  
They died as they lived--- making sweet moans.

Then alas came the day when the vivacious Lupe brought her Gar-r-ee to the commissary. They occupied the table next to Joan and Doug and completely out-mooned the former cooing champs. Half way through the meal, Lupe extracted a comb from Gary's coat and coiffed (sic) his disheveled locks, while the big boy from the great open spaces---the guy with the heart of ice--- submitted fatuously---and actually liked it.

---Cal York, "Gossip of All the Studios," *Photoplay*, August 1929, 87-88.

In 1929, not unlike today, purveyors of cinema discourse capitalized on the American obsession with the Hollywood Couple. The Couple dominated fan culture and the star system itself—encapsulating and commodifying the romance of stardom and of the cinematic experience. Stars in a celebrated romance could anticipate rapidly proliferating engagement rumors and their fans learned to expect a marriage announcement. Not that the value of marriage was culturally stable. Late in the 20s, the final years of the first decade of female enfranchisement, the social construction of heterosexual coupling was widely subject to reassessment. The institution of marriage was encountering something of an ontological crisis.

Within the fan-world of the era, the nuptials of Joan Crawford and Douglas Fairbanks performed a useful double duty, negotiating traditional and contemporary star-desire to produce a *new* exaltable Hollywood couple. The marriage gestured—

symbolically, nostalgically—to the beloved Pickford/Fairbanks union of the earlier generation.<sup>124</sup> And yet it represented something entirely different. Crawford was an independent American citizen, a “new woman”—one of the working class—who danced, smoked, voted. Crawford publicly discussed her reluctance to relinquish her single status; she had a life of her own to lose.<sup>125</sup> The Crawford/Fairbanks romance signified contested shifts in the structures of sexuality and romantic coupling that were central to an emergent post-Victorian mass culture phenomenon of youth culture.

The Crawford/Fairbanks union was officiated in June of 1929. Two months later, Cal York, writing the monthly gossip column in the fan magazine, *Photoplay*, pays tribute to the union as an erotically charged death of sorts. York then turns—in order to discursively refurbish the spectacle of youthful courtship—to the relationship flowering between Gary Cooper and Lupe Vélez. If Joan and Doug defied the taboo of testing *class* boundaries, Lupe and Gary challenged the stability of *ethnic* distinctions... if not racialized barriers.<sup>126</sup>

Vélez and Cooper met on the set of *Wolf Song* (1929, Paramount) in January of 1929. Rumors of engagement surfaced almost immediately and were not entirely laid to rest until the first months of 1932. The romance was meticulously documented in magazines and newspapers across the United States and beyond. Lupe Vélez was a “new woman” with a difference (fig. 7). As a flamboyant young Mexican, Vélez’s association with Gary Cooper, a young star whose image was crystallizing as an icon of “American”

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<sup>124</sup> See Elaine Tyler May, *Great Expectations* (1980, 75-76), on the enduring popular significance of the Fairbanks/Pickford marriage.

<sup>125</sup> Ruth Biery, “The Story of a Dancing Girl,” *Photoplay*, Nov 1928, 42-43, 133. See, also, Ruth Biery, “From Jazz to Gentility: Joan Crawford Is Going To Be Demure If It Kills Her,” *MPM*, May 1930, 66, 122. Here Biery writes, “[a]s late as 1928, I quoted [Crawford] in a story: ‘The wedding ring! That’s one thing I hope I’ll always be able to dodge. I know too much about it from studying other professional women who are married. Never! Not so long as I can support myself’” (66).

<sup>126</sup> *Photoplay* consistently drew cryptic attention to the class difference between Crawford and Fairbanks Junior. See, as examples, Eloise Bradley, “The Fairbanks - Not Like Dad.” *Photoplay* Feb 1929 p50, 90; Ruth Biery, “The Story of a Dancing Girl,” *Photoplay*, Nov 1928, 42-43, 133. In “Gossip of all the Studios” (*Photoplay*, Jan 1929, 24), Cal York points out that a few years before marrying Faribanks, Joan would not have been able to afford the House linens she now enjoys.

masculinity, became a limit-case for the testing of Hollywood inclusivity in an ostensibly globalized era. Though Vélez had been widely accepted and enjoyed as a silent screen partner to iconic male stars, off-screen romance presented an entirely different set of questions by which her star currency would be evaluated.



Figure 10: Lupe and Gary meeting off screen<sup>127</sup>

The first portion of this chapter examines Vélez's early Hollywood career from the hegemonic (English-speaking) U.S. perspective, drawing out the relationship between her films of the period and the discourse surrounding her relationship with Cooper. Vélez's persona was rarely disassociated from her Mexican origins. Yet I will posit that, within the early phase of Vélez's U.S. career, the set of significations named by this insistent marking of her Mexicanness was far more fluid than we might expect. An examination of period discourse suggests that, between 1928 and 1933, Vélez's persona went through considerable flux. As this chapter documents, the relationship with Cooper initially provided a stabilizing reinforcement of Vélez's star currency. The fact that the two did not marry, after over two years together, again destabilized her legitimacy as an

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<sup>127</sup> Vélez appears here to be performing... but for whom? She's in "civilian" clothes while Cooper is in his *Wolf Song* uniform.

American star. The ending of their relationship narrowed the terms on which Vélez's persona was deemed valuable within the industry that employed her.

Vélez's off-screen histories and discourses prove symptomatic of, and work in consort with, the surrounding social, cultural and economic factors impacting her career trajectory. The Vélez/Cooper romance fostered a discussion—an almost self-conscious examination, via popular culture—of the social stresses underlying the U.S. “marriage crisis.” It also foregrounded anxieties regarding immigration, assimilation and miscegenation. Discourse responding to the pair illuminate a network of related socio-cultural negotiations taking place regarding race, ethnicity, sexuality and procreation. The Vélez/Cooper relationship and the response it elicited, understood within its historical context, offers a fable of modern “mixed” marriage revelatory of the shifting landscape of (trans)American citizenship.

This chapter alternates between textual analysis of Vélez films and analysis of print discourses that respond to Vélez's personae, both on screen and off. The films under analysis were produced between 1927 and 1932 and fell into two categories—two periods temporally bridged by the Vélez/Cooper romance. These categories are, first, silent-era and transitional sound films that privilege an ethnic assimilation narrative and, second, early talking pictures wherein assimilation becomes variously problematic. What we find is that shifts in public attitude towards the Vélez/Cooper relationship track alongside ideological shifts in discourses around assimilation as articulated through the films in which she's cast. While I do not mean to deny the significance of the silents/sound/talkie transition as a factor in the measurement of foreign star currency, the case of Lupe Vélez profoundly complicates the extent to which we can understand shifts in foreign stardom, and especially Mexican stardom, as technologically determined.

The later films this chapter explores, those produced between 1930 and 1932, are analyzed in light of exigencies of the early years of the Production Code, particularly as

the Code impacted the representation of ethnicity, gender and notions of race. While the years between 1930 and 1934 are generally referred to as the “pre-code” era of talking pictures or, alternatively, as the “pre-code-enforcement” era, such nominations obscure the fact that the varied concerns attracting the attention of the Code Office came under scrutiny and restriction within varying time frames. Beyond putting the kibosh on a particularly sexy era of filmmaking, the larger and broader mandate of the Code was to solidify domestic and—importantly—international markets.

Hollywood cinema is and always has been a transnational phenomenon. As Ruth Vasey documents in her foundational study, *The World According to Hollywood* (1997), and as other scholars have since elaborated, exigencies of the Production Code were designed to guarantee that studio films would be welcome in any nation and region of the world that was generating substantial capital. Issues subject to restriction—primarily sex, violence, and national representation—were policed from the bottom-line up. Vélez’s career provides an illuminating case in this respect, which we will see play out through both this chapter and the next: her Hollywood career was shored up by her popularity in foreign markets, yet, ironically, she was consistently cast in films that were deemed offensive abroad.

Alongside Hollywood celebrity and industry histories, I consider period regional history—the civic and demographic exigencies at work in Los Angeles and the greater southwest. While studio-era Hollywood functioned as a purveyor of dreams (and nightmares), it also functioned as a mediator of certain material realities, including the geographic and demographic realities specific to its location within the city of Los Angeles. Early 20th-century Los Angeles—including the quasi-nostalgic construction of the city’s “Spanish” past as a replacement for its Mexican present—becomes a notable, if not entirely quantifiable, factor impacting Vélez’s career trajectory. The final portions of this chapter consider discourses generated within Mexican descent populations of city.

We have already seen examples of the fact that U.S. fan discourse was dramatically at odds with Mexico's own experience of Vélez as a popular public figure. As this chapter follows Vélez's reception in English-language news and fan magazines, it documents a trajectory again at odds with discourses in the Spanish-language communities under analysis. Rather than being in polar opposition, however, differing perspectives track along remarkably *parallel registers*, including those of marriage, kinship and cultural citizenship. Vélez's high-profile association with Gary Cooper proved hemispherically (if not universally) controversial.

Among Vélez's silent era and the pre-talking sound pictures, *Wolf Song*, Vélez's fourth credited feature, is a crucial text. *Wolf Song* is important not solely for its having occasioned the romance with Cooper; it is one of the few Hollywood films of the era (or any era) that purports to negotiate the historical relationship between Mexican, Spanish and Anglo demographics and identities in the U.S. Southwest. It is thus a key historical film informing the 1920's cinematic romance with "Spanish" exotica, a phenomenon that helps us understand the basis of—as well as the "troubles" (the racialized, gender and genre troubles) with—Vélez's stardom.

### **"TE AMO MEANS I LOVE YOU": Trades of Sex and Cultural Citizenship<sup>128</sup>**

Vélez was a known Hollywood quantity when production began on *Wolf Song*. Her star currency had been firmly established with *The Gaucho* (UA, 1927, directed by F. Richard Jones; written by Douglas Fairbanks), wherein she portrays an unnamed Argentinean "mountain girl" who, against (literally) divine odds, charms the charming Douglas Fairbanks. As an eagerly anticipated Fairbanks production, *The Gaucho* was released in metropolitan theaters as the centerpiece of an "evening's entertainment" (Koszarski, 1990). In Hollywood, its elaborate stage prologue simultaneously celebrated the opening

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<sup>128</sup> "Te Amo Means I Love You" is the title of the song that Vélez sings in *Wolf Song*. It became a popular seller as sheet music.

of Graumann's Chinese theater. As Vélez's charismatic Mountain Girl triumphed on screen (threateneing to "steal Doug's movie"<sup>129</sup> (figure 11), United Artists advantageously prevailed upon their star's theater experience for the live presentations. The strength of her presence and personality unquestionably helped carry the success of the events. Period discourse confirms that audience interest in Vélez's stage performance threatened, at times, to dominate the evening, even over the film itself. As I will address, later in the chapter, details of *The Gaucho*'s exhibition and reception in the context of the Mexican American community of Los Angeles, I limit this initial discussion of *The Gaucho* to its filmic content.



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**Figure 11: Will She Steal Doug's Picture?**

<sup>129</sup> Edwin Schallert, "The Preview" LAT, Oct 22, 1927, 11. See, also: Edwin Schallert, "WILL SHE STEAL 'THE GAUCHO'? : Carmen-esque Discovery From Old Mexico Proves a Studio." *Los Angeles Times* (1923-Current File); Jul 24, 1927, C11

The story of *The Gaucho* awkwardly combines the religious piety that characterizes Mary Pickford's silent films with the earthly physicality of a Fairbanks feature. Pickford in fact makes a brief appearance at the beginning of the film. As an apparition of the Virgin Mary, Pickford performs the miracle that saves the life of a girl (Greer Garson) who has fallen off a cliff, apparently transferring to the girl her own powers of physical healing. Pickford's earthly avatar, the young adult version of the saved "Girl of the Shrine" (no characters have actual names in this vintage allegory), played by Eve Southern, hold a place of distinction in the "Miracle City" that develops on the site of the original miracle. In this now prosperous city, the Shrine Girl practices her holy healing powers for the good of all. When "the Usurper" (Gustav von Seyffertitz) and his band of bandits capture Miracle City, Fairbanks's "Gaucho" figure—an evolving, eventually good bandit—captures it back. The Fairbanks and Vélez characters hit it off right away (in a rather compelling tango scene). But when the Gaucho's head is turned by the Girl of the Shrine, he's briefly torn between the two. The Mountain Girl gets jealous and turns him over to the Usurper. She later recants and helps him escape.



Figure 12: Fairbanks' Gaucho, enthralled by the "Mountain Girl"

While the Gaucho's attraction to the Shrine Girl is initially physical, the Eve Southern character ultimately becomes the catalyst for the spiritual transformation of the Fairbanks character. Fairbanks saves the Shrine Girl, along with the good priest he befriends, from the Usurper. Southern in turn heals the Gaucho of "the black death" (she also heals the sufferer from whom the gaucho acquired the disease... which appears to be leprosy more than the plague).<sup>130</sup> The Mountain Girl has remained steadfastly infatuated with the Gaucho throughout his transformation from bandit to savior. Said transformation notwithstanding, it is she, the Vélez character (is she indigenous, this "mountain girl" of the Andes? Fairbank's plays his Gaucho in brown-face, to which Vélez's pale skin is in sharp contrast), that Fairbanks realizes to be his destined partner. The film resolves its feminine binary—the elemental versus the divine—such that both roles are revered... but the elemental Vélez gets her man. The Gaucho initiates a pattern whereby Vélez

Vélez's next three films, like *The Gaucho*, all mediate themes of kinship and coupling in the context of class and ethnicity. Films two and three, *Stand and Deliver* (1928) and *Lady of the Pavements* (1929), are both set in Europe and will be addressed in detail shortly. *Wolf Song* is Vélez's first role as an ethnicized figure on U.S. soil. As such, it provides a revealing case-study of the U.S. assimilation narrative.

*Wolf Song* takes place in the Spanish colonial setting of Taos, New Mexico. Lola Salazar (Vélez) is the daughter of a prominent Taos patriarch (Don Fernando Salazar, played by the Russian-born actor, Michael Vavitch). Sam Lash (Cooper) is a former Kentucky farm-boy who has succumbed to the lure of the West to live the elemental life

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<sup>130</sup> Fairbanks maintains in publicity (press sheets) that the film was inspired by his visit to the Lourdes shrine in France. If there's an implicit allusion to the Virgin of Guadalupe, it is never stated in any discourse I have encountered. Likewise, if there is an allusion to the anti-clericism of Mexico at the time, that also goes entirely unspoken in the course of the film's production as well as its reception.

of the nomadic beaver trapper. Lash has strong, brutish appetites and little (save his looks) to recommend him within high society. The two fall deeply in love in the course of one night at the town *baile* (dance) before Lola's father arrives to find the couple sharing a kiss. Salazar promises to kill Sam Lash, "...as he would a thief." Sam convinces Lola, that very night, to leave with him and his partners. The four of them head to Fort Bent, an Anglo settlement in Colorado, where Lash's colleagues will be the impatient witnesses to Sam and Lola's wedding. When his colleagues head back out on the trail, Sam is torn between Lola and his homosocial element. Inevitably Lash succumbs again to the "wolf song" calling him back to the life he knows. Perpetually torn between (feminine) society and (masculine) wilderness, Lash returns to Lola. On his journey back to Taos, he is shot by a Native American. The film ends with Lash collapsed at Lola's feet; he has survived the Indian, only to be "defeated" by civilized society. Lash, assuming he ultimately survives the injury, has lost his Western heroism. He has been domesticated.

As an assimilation narrative, *Wolf Song* is ambivalent, though in a manner distinct from the ambivalence articulated in the novel by Harvey Fergusson (*Wolf Song*, 1927), on which the film is based. Production records indicate the studio's desire to frame the female element as a compromising pressure bearing down on the heroic male loner. So while the studio does not speak to the film's Spanish(Mexican)/Anglo "mixing" in the production records, a consistent tonal vilification of the female presence serves to, in effect, inscribe the film with an indecisive antipathy for Lola and the Spanish/Mexican society she represented. The film departs from the theme guiding the novel, which holds domesticity as an inevitable, if melancholic, (manifest) destiny wherein Spanish and Anglo society, together, negotiate Southwest "civilization." The film's more conservative

narrative tentatively resolves the Lash/Salazar transcultural liaison as one of tragedy and defeat. This move is complicated, however, by the fact that the two characters' social positions represent a reversal of dominant conventions of the U.S. western narrative: Lola Salazar is of wealthy, "civilized" society while Sam Lash, the white male hero, is the outsider who must negotiate the demands of love and marriage against those of origin, community and culture. The story naturalizes the unquestioned attractiveness of the white man to the privileged "Spanish" woman, thus romanticizing a *variation* on the more usual trope of the White Man's conquest of women of color.<sup>131</sup> Elided by the film, as well as the novel, is the historical fact that New Mexico's "Spanish" population of the era, whether *ricos* or *peones*, settled there by way of Mexico. In other words, the Salazars are Mexican. The distinction between "Mexican" and "Spanish" presented in *Wolf Song* (novel and film) are distinctions of class and mestizaje, not of nationality.

There is a period logic underlying the anomaly that is *Wolf Song*. The narrative, and the visual allure the story affords, is symptomatic of a phenomenon of 1920s' Hollywood that engendered an interest in the greater Southwest region. There was a palpable fascination with all things "Spanish"—including imagined versions of California's own colonial past—that manifested in architecture, civic planning and theater, as well as cinema.<sup>132</sup> "Spanish"—however mythical the history or manufactured the look—

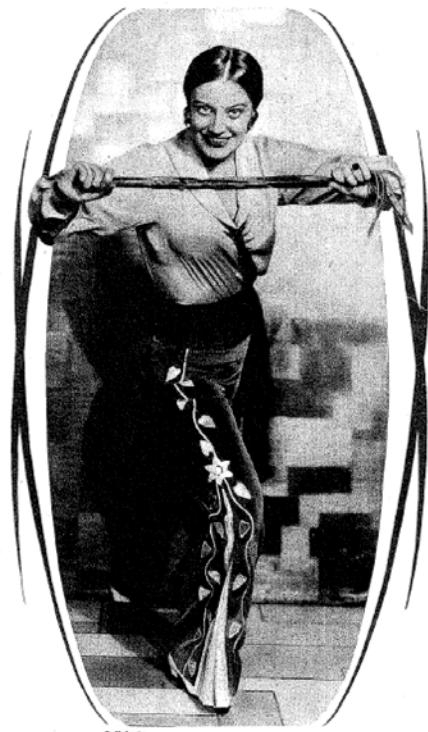
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<sup>131</sup> The film does imply a sense of Lash's "saving" Lola, as it assumes there are no "Mexican" suitors that fit Lola's aspirations for a suitable partner. For a historiographic trajectory of the blue-eyed savior fantasy, see Castañeda, 2000, 68.

<sup>132</sup> *Wolf Song* was filmed at the "Paramount Ranch" in the Sierras of California, against a backdrop of whitewashed adobes ("Paramount's Big Ranch, *NYT*, Sep 22, 1929, X6). [Paramount Pictures Press Sheets](#) shore up what seems to be a marketing decision to retroactively "set" the film in California. Paramount articles all read, "filmed on location in the Sierras"; neither Taos, nor New Mexico is mentioned. Herrick Archive. AMPAS Paramount Pictures Production Records file 238.f-1 (Core Collection Production Files) WOLF SONG -- pressbook, 1928-29 [loose] Victor Fleming; 1929 (Paramount Pictures, 1929). Consequently, perhaps, the AFI index (to date) identifies the Salazars of *Wolf Song* as a wealthy *Californio* family. See AFI's index (cont. next page):

distinguished the Southwest U.S. as regionally unique. Imaged as romantic, pastoral, musical and idyllic, on one end of the spectrum, or feudal, uncivilized, revolutionary, violent, on the other, Hollywood commodified and disseminated the Southwest's "Latin" cache nationwide. In *Wolf Song*, Vélez was, for the second (and last) time of her career, not Mexican but "Spanish."

Perusal of fan discourse reveals the ubiquity of images that mimic Vélez in her Spanish mantilla... or that fantasize the Anglo women as the Mexican "bad man" (figure 10 and 11).



R. H. Lourie  
Don Joan, the last name being Crawford. When she dons her skin, must she carry a spear? Or is it merely a part of the Mexican makeup? We think the latter, because, with eyes and a smile like Joan's, a girl carries already weapons aplenty.

**Figure 10: Joan Crawford in "Mexican make-up"**



P. P. A.  
Just an old Spanish custom—this going out to sea, armed to the teeth. And, there being nothing over her head except a sombrero, Clara Bow stands to get her man. Moreover, he's going to be taken for a ride on her surfboard—and there won't be any comeback.

**Figure 11: Clara Bow indulging an "old Spanish custum."**

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[http://afi.chadwyck.com/proxy.lib.umich.edu/film/full\\_rec?action=BYID&FILE=..session/1255657621\\_25086&ID=1774](http://afi.chadwyck.com/proxy.lib.umich.edu/film/full_rec?action=BYID&FILE=..session/1255657621_25086&ID=1774). For a discussion of "whitewashed" Spanish-Style architecture see Deverell, 2004; For an account of "The Mission Play" productions, 1913 through the late 1920s, see Deverell, 207-49; For Mary Pickford's and Douglas Fairbanks' advocacy of Spanish Style architecture, see Kropp, 159-160; for the making of "Olvera Street," see Kropp, 207-260. For more on this general representational trend, see Rosaura Sánchez (1995) and Douglas Monroy (1997).

Mexican imagery was not exactly eclipsed by Spanishness; more precisely, the two were blurred to the point of conflation and were equally subjected to Hollywood-style whims of fictitious fantasy. *Wolf Song*—its narrative, setting and (a)historical conceit—begs an examination of Vélez's screen persona, honed as it was, within the very *first* years of her stardom, to foreground issues of class and nationality. So from here I will backtrack to interrogate discourse appearing on the heels of *The Gaucho*'s high-profile success, the period prior to *Wolf Song*.

### **“Latin Blood Is Open Sesame in the Movies”**

Fan magazine discourse initially lagged behind urban newspapers in recognizing Vélez's success in *The Gaucho* and acknowledging her triumph in both the film and its theatrical accompaniment.<sup>133</sup> In early 1928, when Vélez begins to appear regularly in *MPM* and *Photoplay*, her success is seen as a conspicuous example of the “Spanish” vogue registering in Hollywood. One *MPM* piece titled, “Caramba! Tamale! Latin Blood is Now the Open-Sesame in the Movies,” places Vélez prominently among the handful of Latina/o actors working in Hollywood at the time, which included her compatriots, Ramon Novarro, Donald Reed, Gilbert Roland, and Dolores del Rio, along with Barry Norton (an Argentinean), Don Alvarado, (from Albuquerque, New Mexico) and the New York newcomer, Nena Quartaro. *MPM*, published in New York City, frequently reveals

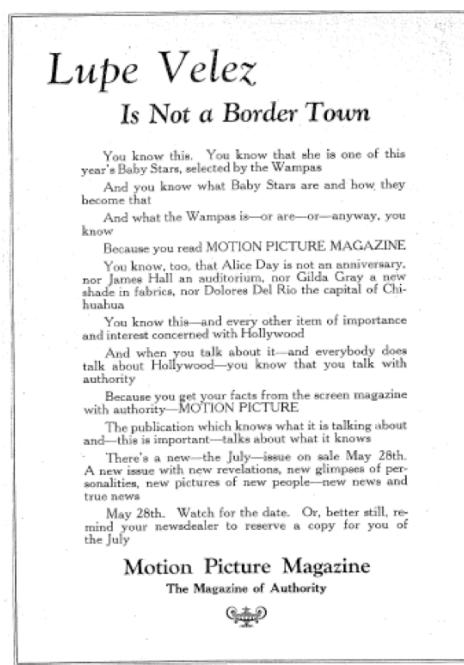


Figure 13: back cover ad, *Motion Picture Magazine*, June 1928.

<sup>133</sup> This is likely indicative of a split reflecting the different sensibilities of the urban coasts versus the neighborhoods in the American heartland.

an editorial tone of dismay at the Hollywood fascination with screen-style *Latinidad*, as is perceptible in a quotation appearing under a “Spanish”-fashioned portrait of Nina Quartaro in February of 1928: “Glorifying the Mexican girl has become Hollywood's mission in life. The señoritas have a way of becoming famous overnight...”.<sup>134</sup> But the magazine quickly warms to the trend, to the point of deploying facts regarding the latest Latin American stars to boast of the magazine's insider status and to test its readership's fan quotient. Vélez is the headliner in the ad that ran on the back cover of the June issue:

*Lupe Velez  
is Not a Border Town.*

You know this. You know that she is one of this year's Baby Stars, selected by Wampas.  
And you know what Baby Stars are and how they become that.  
And you know what Wampas is—or are—or—anyway, you know  
Because you read MOTION PICTURE MAGAZINE  
You know, too, that Alice Day is not an anniversary ... nor Dolores Del Rio the capital of  
Chihuahua.  
You know this and every other item of importance and interest concerned with  
Hollywood....<sup>135</sup>

This ad follows up on the juxtaposition of Vélez and del Rio, initiated the previous month in the “Caramba!” piece (*MPM*, April, 1928), which forges the comparison that will continue to plague both stars. The Vélez characterization mines the dynamics of her first screen role. Introducing her discourse on Lupe with a subhead reading, “Lupe—Hollywood's Riddle,” Evelyn Watson presents Vélez as an enigma not to be solved so much as to be contrasted with del Rio's status as “repressed... lady... of a fine old Castilian family...”:

Remember how she carried on in “The Gaucho,” getting Doug away from the fine spiritual influence of Eve Southern? Well she's just that kind of screen material. One minute she's a wild cat and the next a purring kitten, and you don't know what to expect of [...] She might have developed into one of the best comediennes if she hadn't decided to desert Mr. [Hal] Roach for a more flattering contract from United Artists. Out at that

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<sup>134</sup> The caption continues: ‘Nena Quartaro will accomplish this miracle as the star of 'The Red Mark'.” *The Red Mark* (1928) actually takes place in the French colony of New Caledonia in the South Pacific. *MPM*, Feb 1928, 19.

<sup>135</sup> Italics and indentation are in the original; I attempt here to affect the look of the ad as it appeared. *MPM*, June, 1928. WAMPAS is an acronym for Western Associated Motion Picture Advertisers. Each year a panel of judges award thirteen "WAMPAS baby stars" as the slate of female newcomers achieving prominence that year. See Dorothy Calhoun, “Baby Talk in Hollywood,” *MPM*, May 1928, 44.

studio they are all steamed up about Lupe. They think she is going to line up as a sort of Spanish Mary Pickford...

On the other hand there is Dolores del Rio, a country woman. Dolores is everything that Lupe isn't, but she's equally hot at the box-office. Dolores got into the movies a little ahead of Lupe and naturally she has a slight edge in popularity. She's scored in two Latin roles.... Wonder what Lupe would have done with those parts? Well, anyway, Dolores did herself proud even though she shone to better advantage in the more repressed role in "Resurrection." Maybe that's because Dolores is repressed herself. She is a lady, but she doesn't allow it to annoy anyone. Down in Mexico she was the daughter of a fine old Castilian family. In Hollywood she is the prime favorite of a certain genteel social group [...] What contrasts these Mexican ladies offer --- Dolores and Lupe.

Between the two of them, Vélez and del Rio offered everything that Hollywood could desire of the exotic Other—be she referred to as “Mexican,” “Spanish,” or “Castilian.” The wild and unpredictable Lupe and the repressed señora Dolores marked out the poles of pre- or sub-modern foreignness that served to flatter Hollywood’s image of the U.S.: The foreign was either traditional and withheld or untamed and uncivilized. The two thus functioned to insure the delimitations of each others’ personae.

Vélez was, indeed, young. The combined factors of her actual youth and the Hollywood proclivity towards infantilizing the foreign conspired to frame Vélez as perpetually naive and childlike, to the point of animalistic and primitive.<sup>136</sup> Early Vélez discourse indicates how far out on this limb the press was willing to stretch. In mid 1928, *MPM*'s first full feature on Vélez, the full title reading, “Whoopee! Lupe!!: In Love With Life and Her Success, Señorita Velez is a Skirt that ‘Ain’t Ascurr’ --- of Anything,”<sup>137</sup> employed extensive prose in quotations, inaugurating the press tradition of imitating (i.e. exaggerating) her accented English. The piece indulges an ethnic fairy-tale caricature: wild mountain-girl goes to Hollywood. Vélez is introduced as...

A wheedling, affectionate, arms-around-your-neck, pulling-your-hair child. A minx one instant. Begging to be petted the next [...] A child who still obeys her adored mother;

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<sup>136</sup> Del Rio was all of twenty-two at the time, but married and working under the watchful tutelage of producer Edwin Carewe.

<sup>137</sup> Gladys Hall, "Whoopee! Lupe!! *MPM*, July 1928, 59. The Gladys Hall papers contain three lengthy pieces on Vélez, including one partially lost biographical piece that is forty-five pages long. That piece was never published (it is completely fabricated, I might add). I would speculate that Hall identified Vélez as an important public figure with whom Hall might advance her own career. Herrick Archive, AMPAS. Gladys Hall Collection.

who is "chaperoned" by her secretary; who doesn't go out with the boys; who doesn't care for formal parties; ... who spends her evenings weaving Mexican rugs or taking her mother and grandmother to the movies... She is happy, she has everything she wants because she is "not ascurt of anything."

("ascurt" is press-mediated Lupe-speak for "scared").

"When I be a baby star at the Wampas Ball, all the others are so ascurt.... And I say, 'Why you be ascurt? What they do to you? They not keel you..?'" [...] What indeed can anyone do to seventeen olive-tinted Mexican summers? To Lupe, educated by the Indians and the nuns, lured from petty terrors long ago by a Spanish Pan in an aboriginal forest?

As the fairy tale winds up, Lupe's wild mountain courage is explained; she is not afraid of "the knife" because she, herself, brandishes one:

Lupe has two major passions in her life, her mother and her work. She has one passion a degree less only --- her adoration of Mary Pickford and her gratitude to Douglas Fairbanks. "If anyone say anything against Miss Pickford to me I use the knife," says fiery Lupe Velez. "She is an angel. She is so kind to me. She show me how to make up and teach me what to do, *like I am a child*. Oh, but she is sweet!" (emphasis added).

Oddly, when Hall allows Vélez a degree of maturity (and/or when she uses Vélez to insert a stereotyping generalization regarding Mexican men) it is in the arena of love and marriage. Lupe, who allegedly spends her nights weaving rugs, responds:

"Ooof, that! No man is worth any sacrifice from any woman," said the child, with the sword-thrust of her mature wisdom, ripened by suns, fostered by looking on pain. "No man is worth that. I have seen my mother suffer. I have seen plenty of women suffer with their sad eyes and their sad hearts. They give all up for some man and then, after a while, he don't want it any more and look at other girls..."

As Vélez's potential to generate romantic intrigue became increasingly obvious, the press quickly abandoned the folkloric, chaperoned image that discourses like Hall's had crafted. Throughout 1928, Vélez was regularly included in the many *MPM* survey-of-the-stars type features that privileged issues of coupling, marriage and family. While Vélez was characterized as boldly independent, her devotion to her mother was continually cited. Consistent familial association seemed to score generational favor while also signifying her foreign (pre-modern) national origin.<sup>138</sup> As significant as is the issue of family of origin within the fan press's profiles of the stars, the over-riding obsession is the *future* family, the star's impending marriage.

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<sup>138</sup> See, for example, Gladys Hall, "So Good to Their Mothers," *MPM*, Oct. 1928, 86.

There is an air of self-conscious tension discernible in Dorothy Spensley's piece, "Oo, La La! And Si Si!: Would the Foreign Damsels Marry Our Men?",<sup>139</sup> Spensley begins with coverage of the recent nuptials of Rod La Rocque and Vilma Banky before approaching the anxiety underpinning the piece:

Every foreign steamer brings another lovely, luscious, lithesome, foreign damsel, full of soft smiles and femininity. And here we are so darned athletic. Clipped and shorn within an inch of our ears, short-skirted and tennis soxed, we just can't radiate that dainty feminine charm. Not with tanned arms and sunburned noses.

Waxing vexed over *tanned* American arms, it is ironic that Spensley turns first to Vélez, the only Latina invoked in the piece, with the item's titular query:

"Oh," breathed Lupe, all pink tulle and silver embroidery in a period dress of the [eighteen-] seventies. "I like American man ver-ry mooch."  
"And would you marry an American man?"  
"Oh, ya-as!" answered Lupe, immediately; and then, reflectively, "Eef he would ask me."  
So now you know just the pangs us native girls are having.

Lupe? Pink tulle, soft smiles and femininity? The image is a far cry from the screeching, swearing, knife-wielding "wild cat" of discursive lore (and an equally far cry from the pants-wearing rebel that will grace fashion features just a few years later).

Assured that Vélez's rug-weaving evenings are behind her, the fan-magazine reader might soon encounter Ruth Biery's piece for *MPM* in January of 1929. Titled "The Love-Life Story of Lupe Velez," the piece frames Vélez as a skillful, capricious and yet still harmless (read sexually inexperienced) flirt. The piece contains an intriguing revelation, however that, for the savvy period reader, undermines Vélez's "naive" image:

"Married?" She shrugged. "I say I don't want to get married and maybe tomorrow I go out and get married. I don't know. I like to wait until I'm twenty-five or thirty. Then I like—what you say?—companionate marriage. Live together maybe one year and then live in separate houses. If I see too much of one mans —.

"No, I never lose a mans. It is because I never give them a chance to make me love that I never lose him." (emphasis added).

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<sup>139</sup> Dorothy Spensley, "Oo, La La! And Si Si!" *MPM*, Dec 1928, 33, 92. Perhaps the logic of this piece, including the costuming, follows from having conflated Vélez's still evolving off-screen persona with her recent screen role, wherein she is coupled with La Rocque in *Stand and Deliver*; A full-page photo of the two stars appeared earlier in the year (*MPM*, Feb. 1928, 43), though that film is set in the Greco-Turkish War (1919–1922).

## Companionate Marriage

MOTION pictures must keep up with the times. Years ago it was D.W. Griffith that made a picture called "The Battle of the Sexes." He will remake it, this time including Judge Peter Lindsey's idea of companionate marriage in the plot. Is is possible that Lupe Vélez will play the leading woman's part. [sic] Well, D. W. is modern, any way you take it.

"In and Out of Focus: Gossip of the Stars and Screens," *MPM*, April 1928

The term "companionate marriage" was arguably the era's most salient signifier of changing mores, youth culture, and generational tension. Although coined by sociologists, the term was introduced into the popular lexicon with Judge Ben B. Lindsey's controversial treatise, *Companionate Marriage*, published in 1927. The phrase soon became a keyword in use among those on the cutting edge of the era's reconsideration of normative coupling. Lindsey's "companionate marriage" was provocative for its bold de-coupling of sex from procreation.

It is somewhat halting to encounter a such a provocative signifier of modernity and sophistication—one on the lips of those conversant on the latest contests of values within 20th century American culture—suddenly articulated through the voice of Lupe Vélez, who has been constructed as the very personification of naiveté. If D.W. Griffith's remake *Battle of the Sexes* (1914, 1928—the latter finally starring the blond Phyllis Haver in the role of Marie, the temptress neighbor to a happily married family man) was initially scripted to reference the Lindsey marriage model, it is likely that Vélez was, indeed, familiar with the term and its cultural currency at the time.<sup>140</sup> Regardless of the veracity of its invocation in the context of the Biery interview, the use of the term here certainly points to its ubiquity within popular discourse of the day. As a concept, though a sometimes vague or fluid one, *companionate marriage* has everything to do with the modern terms through which pairing is approached in Hollywood culture and in fan

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<sup>140</sup> If Vélez did not herself actually bring the term to the conversation, perhaps the author uttered it over the course of the interview. Biery may even have inserted it into the piece disingenuously, after the fact of the interview. I suggest these various scenarios not because I doubt Vélez's knowledge of the term (actually, I don't) but because I am reluctant to take fan magazine discourse at face value. If the attribution is subject to question, the invocation is no less significant.

discourse. An association between *companionate marriage* and Lupe Vélez serves to include Vélez within the ever shifting image of the New Woman. If we are to believe that D.W. Griffith's casting of Vélez was considered to have been a "modern" choice, are we to understand that Vélez's "modern" screen function that made it so? Or perhaps the author is expressing anxiety about the "modern" practice of a perceived miscegenation. Or both. At any rate, Vélez infuses the modern marriage quandary with the specter of foreignness and, to an extent yet to be determined, of ethnicity and/or race.

As popularized through Judge Lindsey, the concept of companionate marriage can be understood as a cultural response to the shifting social status of American women. The 1920s, the first decade of the female political franchise in the U.S., ushered in certain fundamental cultural questions and begged certain social adjustments. With women now full citizen-subjects and no longer legal property, marriage operated on a newly conceived social and institutional structure, a structure of legal equality. Judge Lindsey placed the equality principle at the heart of his companionate marriage concept. Making the case for heterosexual civil unions based on the companionship of adult equals rather than for the purpose of child bearing, Lindsey's model boldly foregrounded sexuality. The *companionate marriage* concept relied on three specific changes in public policy for which Lindsey advocated: access to scientific birth control, provisions for the sexual education of youth, and divorce by mutual consent for childless couples. Because of the divorce component, people often characterized (he would say "misrepresented") Lindsey's concept as advocating trial marriage. This slippage seems to be at issue in the way Vélez has employed the term above (170-176). Apparently the "misunderstanding" of Lindsey's ideas was common (218-220). Lindsey had a penchant for provocation and self-promotion, which contributed to the currency his ideas carried in Hollywood.<sup>141</sup> As

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<sup>141</sup> The concept of companionate marriage had such currency that, in 1928, First National Pictures produced a film by that title. Ben Lindsey both wrote the story and co-wrote the screen adaptation. Betty Bronson plays the modern girl heroine with Hedda Hopper playing her mother. The film garnered mixed reviews but

a concept, even a vaguely defined one, *companionate marriage* became a kind of short hand reference for the way modern coupling was practiced within 1920s' Hollywood culture.<sup>142</sup>

Encountering Lindsey's concept through the voice of Lupe Vélez suggests a paradox supporting a point I want to reiterate: Vélez's persona(e) at this early stage in her career had yet to crystallize. Even as there was a consistent move to frame her as the Mexican Other, there is yet room to question the extent to which her Mexicanness foreclosed on her inclusion within the realm of another Other of the day, the New Woman. I would posit that, in 1929, Vélez was *not* outside of the potential sphere of inclusion by which U.S. culture had begun to circumscribe the *new* "American" female. Rather, I argue, she was deployed on the front lines of this contested arena. Ethnic representation served as a battle ground of sorts; ethnic female personae in the U.S. were deployed, discursively if not physically, as front-line, *expendable* forces pushing beyond the current boundaries of social acceptability. Doing so they simultaneously cleared a passage for, and served to shield, the unproblematically white female (she who had the most social ground to gain in the post-Victorian renegotiation of femininity) from exposure to social retaliation or backlash. I am suggesting that, on screen and in public discourse, Vélez served a canary-in-coal-mine function in the 1920s. If it was deemed

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apparently the hype was tremendous. *Photoplay* summed up *Companionate Marriage*, in its "Brief Reviews of Current Pictures" column, reporting: "[I]tots of propaganda. With such a live topic, this should have been a better picture" (Feb 1929, p8). Tiffany-Stahl simultaneously produced a counter "propaganda" film, *Marriage by Contract* (1928), which had its anti-heroine "drifting from one marriage contract to another" (AFI cat.) until waking up, relieved, from her "companionate" nightmare. Lindsey detractors apparently referred to companionate marriage as "contract marriage." Advertisements for the T-S film sported questions such as, "will contract marriage completely spoil womanhood?" (*Film Daily*, Oct 28, 1928, 3). Lindsey sued over the competing film ("Lindsey to Bring Suit Against T-S," *Film Daily*, Nov 8, 1928, 1). It is not clear if the litigation was resolved. *Marriage By Contract* seems to have received at least the hype that did the Lindsey film. When *Marriage by Contract* opened in New York, *Film Daily*'s front page reported: "Judges of the Supreme Court, city magistrates, prominent lawyers, club women, clergymen and welfare workers have signified intention of attending" (Nov 9, 1928). Other films produced in the period that trade in "companionate" themes and references include *Dry Martini* (Oct 1928, Fox Film Corp., starring Mary Astor) and *Man, Woman and Wife* (Jan 1929, Universal, dir. Ed Laemmle).

<sup>142</sup> Lindsey claimed his ideas were popularly "misunderstood," as when, for example, they were invoked in discussion of "trial marriage," "contract marriage," or "open marriage" (see Lindsey, 170-176).

safe for Lupe Vélez to express open enthusiasm for companionate marriage (which served, in effect, as a frank affirmation of her sexual agency), perhaps it might be safe (and/or profitable) for, for example, Anita Page or Ann Southern to assert her own sexual agency within the public sphere.

Judge Lindsey went to great lengths to suggest that *companionate marriage* was not solely the province or privilege of youth.<sup>143</sup> Inevitably, however, his ideas tended to be polarizing along generational lines. Hollywood culture reinforced the association of “modern” marriage with the younger generation while the industry—films and fan magazines alike—sought mitigation against a perception of generational divide. We might look to the trio of young, popular actresses in MGM’s *Our Dancing Daughters*, (Harry Beaumont, 1928)—Joan Crawford, Anita Paige and Dorothy Sebastian—for a germane example of how the terrain of youth coupling was being reframed to account for (and yet contain) an expression of female agency and sexuality. The very titling of this iconic trilogy—which includes *Our Modern Maidens* (Jack Conway, 1929) and *Our Blushing Brides* (Beaumont, 1930)—points up how re-imagined courting dynamics and refigured marital landscapes were framed on generational terms. For neither the appeal of Hollywood movies nor the phenomenon of star-struck fandom was limited to youth culture. Paging through *Photoplay* and *Motion Picture Magazine* in the late 20s and early 30s, it becomes apparent that the successful commodification of films and their stars required the striking of a discursive balance in order to mediate, rather than intensify, generational division.<sup>144</sup>

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<sup>143</sup> While Lindsey did not formally advocate for either trial marriage or for open marriage, the latter, described in various formulations, makes up the large part of the first two sections of the book. He did not argue for sex outside of marriage, but he also did not seem to consider adultery to be “outside” of marriage (Lindsey 1927, 18-69).

<sup>144</sup> Interestingly, another Mexican actor, Ramon Novarro, became variously emblem of and a champion for the Victorian values that companionate marriage challenged. The public persona of Novarro (cousin to Dolores del Rio) was successfully constructed as the handsome young face of old-world patriarchy. The

Generational conflict, however, was only one of a number of social negotiations taking place in the first decades of 20th-century U.S. mass culture. In Hollywood culture, generation conflict may have served as an ameliorative stand-in for larger contestations of national identity and questions of class and ethnicity. Seemingly secure families of Hollywood serve as proxy for the *supposedly* harmonious (homogeneous) family that is the U.S. American nation. The question remains, though: what did the contestational inclusion of the ethnic and the foreign (such as was seen in *The Gaucho* and *Wolf Song*) bring to filmic constructions of modern coupling? Vélez's screened romances helped broaden the terms of acceptable coupling—thereby narrowing the generational divide regarding marriage and sexuality—even as those terms would not be broad enough, *off screen*, to culturally include her. Vélez's perceived “outlandishness” was eventually agreed-upon, even celebrated, as a point of generational unification. Her exclusion was a site of U.S. cultural consolidation.

Scholars have shown images of the Other serve to define and unify, often by negative or cautionary contrast, an image of cultural homogeneity. As Edward Said theorized (*Orientalism*, 1979), and as scholars of nation and nationalism have since elaborated, institutions and forces of cultural hegemony deploy images of the Other to consolidate national identity across region, generation and (more complicatedly) class. Diane Negra's book, *Off-White Hollywood* (2001) analyzes the functions of European ethnic representation, looking at the “off-white” female star persona by way of the “complex and variable … ideological/cultural work she has performed” (3). Negra writes:

As female embodiments of national fantasies, ethnic female stars have embodied the promise of American pluralism and proved the desirability and reliability of the

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polarized personae of Velez and Novarro afforded Hollywood a safe cultural distance from which to stage ideological tension specifically around the sexuality of Hollywood's foreign stars (the Victorian Novarro persona also likely offered good cover for Novarro's homosexuality). See, for example, Faith Service[!], “What Women Want to Know: They Ask Ramon Novarro to Show Them the Way Back to Romance” *MPM*, Jan 1931, 102-3. See, also, Katherine Albert, “What's All This Chatter About Novarro?: Is he a saint who has suddenly turned worldly?” *Photoplay*, Nov 1932, 49, 114. Albert's answer to her own titular question is, “no.”

American Dream (sometimes in triumphant success narratives, sometimes in negative object lessons).

The national fantasies that Lupe Vélez embodies are found on both sides of the dialectic Negra identifies in her parenthetical caveat. In her brief characterization of the flat stereotype reductively thought to exhaust the signification of ethnic representation—that is, the stereotype her work seeks to transcend—Negra employs precisely the set of descriptive terms that could be used to summate the familiar, nefarious and specifically *racialized* Latina stereotype: “excessive, hypersexual, primitive, animalistic or exotic” (3).<sup>145</sup> In foregrounding this juxtaposition I mean to interrogate the distinction between markers of ethnicity and markers of race in Hollywood representation. Negra’s assessment suggests that the process of identifying the “cultural/ideological work” of the *Latina* star begs the analysis of the relationship between the excessive-hypersexual-(etc.) ethnic female and the *too*-excessive-hypersexual-(etc.) racialized female, and of how these representations function as star constructs. Analysis of the early Lupe Vélez personae, particularly in relation to matters of coupling, allows us to undertake just such an interrogation, one that, furthermore, helps us locate the historical terms of cultural citizenship and the limits of assimilability.

Richard Dyer theorizes the “ideological effect” of the (un-probational) “white” star persona as one that enforces ideology through the embodiment of dominant values, values that are accepted enough that they are virtually invisible as such. As Dyer theorizes, in times of cultural contestation, when certain values are in crisis, star personae are useful in mediating emergent cultural anxieties. “Raced” stardom has a corollary

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<sup>145</sup> Mary Beltrán writes of the “explosive nature associated with [the] Latina stereotype” of the “spitfire,” quoting Rita Moreno’s frustration with the trope, which Beltrán as well as Moreno identify as specifically associated with—even originated for (or by)—Vélez (Beltrán, 209, 62-66). As an aside, the 1934 film, *Spitfire*, starring a young Katherine Hepburn as Trigger Hicks, a Kentucky rube (slash) religious visionary who is suspected of practicing witchcraft, would seem to indicate that a broader range of characteristics were associated with the “spitfire” term in the years that it began to be applied to Vélez. See, also, Peña Ovalle on the “savage” or “barbarous” Latina stereotype supposedly embodied by Carmen Miranda (2011, 52).

function. Racialized representations serve to define the “neutral” white by imaging and embodying what white is not. Very broadly speaking, as star personages, non-white stars are deployed to define what dominant values are defined against (1979, 38). (The swarthy Mexican male as the “classic”, “iconic” and thus supposedly “abstracted” racialized bad man is the epitomizing example of the negative contrast to the heroic white image of westward manifest destiny<sup>146</sup>). In periods of contestation, ethnically framed figures have historically become particularly useful; they embody the fluid space loosely defining the outer limits of acceptability, testing the cultural waters where shifting values are being re-defined and re-contained.<sup>147</sup> What is at stake, then, is the question of Lupe Vélez as a “probationary-white”<sup>148</sup> ethnic figure versus Lupe Vélez as racialized Other.

### **Re-mapping Love --- American style**

The relationship between the marriage crisis, the “companionate” solution, and the cultural/ideological effect of ethnic stardom, suggests a cross-reading of Elaine Tyler May’s work on post-Victorian U.S. marriage (1980) with Julian B. Carter’s work (2007) theorizing whiteness, “normal” sexuality and constructed concepts of race. Both of these studies document the cultural necessity, in the 1920s, for a renewed iteration of sexual difference within the heterosexual union. The “new woman,” now more fully occupying the public sphere and enjoying the civic rights and responsibilities of citizenship, looked, acted and *desired* more like her male counterpart. Thus the assurance of sexual difference necessitated a clear, visceral, *erotically* charged demarcation; a cultural dynamic was needed to replace the work of sexual definition that used to be

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<sup>146</sup> See also De Usabel (1982), Marez (2004, 2005), and Noriega (1993).

<sup>147</sup> On this point in my introduction I referenced Dyer’s work on stars and how they negotiate values in contestation. I would also point to Dyer’s work on whiteness and associations with death. If Dyer’s contention about whiteness as embodying a kind of deadness on screen (as opposed to Black as imbuing life) is a bit over stated (and I believe his later writing indicates that it is), I would argue that Dyer is right to point to whiteness as limited (rarefied) and ethnicity (and later race, though less so in Vélez’s era) as expansive.

<sup>148</sup> Jacobson’s concept of “probationary whiteness” (1998) is invoked by both Carter and Negra. See also Nick Browne (1992) on how screened associations with Europeanness serve an assimilatory function for the non-European within the U.S.

accomplished juridically. Both May and Carter identify Hollywood as the locus of this emergent eroticism of marriage. A similar observation is made, in fact, in Judge Ben Lindsey's writing of the period: Americans looked to motion pictures, and to the "lives" (or constructed personae) of movie stars, to mediate the shifting logic of their private relations and identities.<sup>149</sup> Carter argues (consistent with Negra's logic) that the probationary white female figure in Hollywood film injects an ethnic and/or class difference—functioning in consort with an erotic embodiment of sexual difference—that brings a new level of excitement (more or less "morally" contained) to heterosexual union. Carter's argument affords an informed revisit of Dorothy Spensley's earlier referenced question, "Would the Foreign Damsels Marry Our Men?," which introduces precisely the stakes Carter theorizes: foreign feminine sexual difference as simultaneous stimulant and threat.

With this theoretical scaffolding in place to frame the Hollywood/marriage dialectic, we can interrogate Spensley's "foreign damsel" discourse while we examine the films I sidelined above, *Stand and Deliver* (Donald Crisp, DeMille Prod., 1928) and *Lady of the Pavements*, (D.W. Griffith, UA, 1929). These films dramatize/assuage the social tensions that erupt as male citizens of hegemonic society encounter the romantic/sexual allure of the female Other.<sup>150</sup> Yet they do so on terms that mobilize what I argue to be the early, assimilable, *ethnicized* (probationary white) Vélez, as distinct from her later personae, the less-assimilable *racialized* (Mexican) Vélez. Both of these films take place in Europe, a safe surrogate fatherland in which to stage analogies exploring the parameters of U.S. whiteness. I do not mean to suggest that Vélez, off screen, was ever

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<sup>149</sup> See May, 60-91; Carter 75-121, Lindsey 1-5; Both May and Carter look specifically to the films of Cecil B. DeMille, especially those produced between 1919 and 1929, to examine the cinematic representation of modern marriage (May 60-62; Carter 111-114).

<sup>150</sup> This marks a variation on the "hot-frigid dichotomy" identified by Ella Shohat (2006, 42). The "hot" racialized woman exists in stark polarity to the "frigid" white female. The "ethnic," then, straddles the barriers of acceptability, pointing the way for the release of the White woman from her "Victorian" frigidity.

understood as European. She was not. But as an “exotic” figure that “passed” as a desirable (silent) screen signifier of feminine ethnic difference in the Southern European context, she had a particularly valuable star function.

*Stand and Deliver* begins in the ruling-class home of Roger Norman (Rod La Rocque), a young British officer of World War I who, bored with the civilian life of the upper-crust in peacetime (“the horrors of peace,” an early intertitle reads), has decided to enlist in the Greek army. Norman, it is immediately established, is entirely uninterested in marriage (preferring war, “a fight he can win”). In fact he indulges a generalized antipathy for women. So when, as the good soldier in the European South, he is prevailed upon to liberate the Greek peasant, Jania (Vélez), from torture at the hands of Turkish bandits, his personal (sexual) ambivalence is on display. Yet when a grateful and obviously smitten Jania seeks out Norman at his military barracks, and then Norman’s Greek commanding officer accosts her, Norman is again called upon to protect Jania’s honor. Norman does so gallantly but inadvertently kills the officer in the process. As Jania and Norman share a need to escape the scene of the accident, our couple is stuck with each other, forced to feign married status.

Significant, for our purposes, is the gendered role reversal by which it is blatantly communicated that Jania is eager to see the provisional union become permanent despite the clear reluctance of her intended. When the two are locked up together in a room containing only one bed, it becomes redundantly apparent that Jania would be happy to see their feigned marriage consummated.<sup>151</sup> By the film’s end, Norman comes to share her sentiments. The picture concludes in London where Norman—attitude transformed—explains to a male friend the virtues of marriage and domesticity. The final scene shows

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<sup>151</sup> While reviews tended to split on whether this aspect of Vélez’s performance was charmingly comedic or constituted “over-acting,” female subtlety would be precisely the opposite of this film’s reason for being. By treating her blatant desire as an element of humor, the film avoids a turn toward unconvincing melodrama.

Roger Norman departing his friend's company to dine out with his wife, Jania, who has been on the town playing bridge with a circle of women friends. Ironically, Jania has quickly become the more urbane, more "modern" of the pair. Though Jania's English is intertitled with syntax meant to imitate an accent ("... thees London is terrible place! Full of lady bandits! I have lose twenty pounds playing bridge"), as it has been throughout the film, her assimilation into Norman's upper-crust social circle—which, incidentally looks more Hollywood than London—is complete. Jania is stunning in her evening dress (figure 14), looking precisely as Vélez herself might, photographed on the arm of, for instance, Tom Mix (with whom she was contemporaneously associated in the press).



Figure 14: *Stand and Deliver* (1928) The End

Once again, the openly expressed sexual desire displayed by southern-hemisphere feminine "folk" has been rewarded rather than punished; if Vélez's lusty Mountain Girl prevailed over the too saintly competitor with her overtly communicated physical attraction to Fairbanks as the good/bad white/brownfaced "Gaucho," Vélez's Jania performs a similar function: providing precisely the excitement of difference previously lacking within Norman's too "civilized" Northern society. In Vélez's third film, David Wark Griffith's *Lady of the Pavements*, Vélez's character's transformation is one notch

more dramatic: her unsubtle sexuality structures her upward mobility from cabaret singer (and implied sex worker) to aristocracy.

*Lady of the Pavements*, too, mines the theme of modern American marriage, structured metaphorically across a South-to-North European trajectory. The film is set in mid-nineteenth century Paris. Count Karl von Arnim (William Boyd) is a Prussian military attaché posted in Paris and engaged to French Countess Diane des Granges (Jetta Goudal). Upon discovering the countess's infidelity, Karl breaks off the engagement. Diana attempts to excuse her dalliance by explaining that the affair was with the emperor Napoleon himself. Karl is unimpressed. Ever the (Hollywood) romantic idealist, he would rather marry a "girl of the streets" than have the sexually opportunistic Diana's hand in an insincere marriage. Diane decides to arrange just that, conspiring to have Karl meet Nanon del Rayon (Vélez), a Spanish dancer from "one of the lowest dives in the Bohemian quarter of Paris."<sup>152</sup> At Diane's behest, Nanon agrees to masquerade as a higher-born, convent-educated performer working in a reputable venue. The ruse succeeds; Karl and Nanon are soon engaged and Diane insists on throwing them an engagement party. Having surreptitiously contracted the band from Nanon's old dive to provide the wedding music, Diana concocts a forum for the revelation of Nanon's true identity. Nanon, having too much integrity to deny association with her friends, flees in a mix of shame and anger and returns to her former haunt. Karl quickly seeks her out and they marry.

The erotics of sexual difference are, here again, mapped across provocative lines of class and ethnicity, which come with a naturalized regional difference regarding sexual mores. The status of French Aristocracy is successfully traded for the marginal Southern European "working girl," on the basis that naive transparency is morally valued over the

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<sup>152</sup> The long version of the synopsis found in the Griffith collection, the Smoking Dog Cafe, the establishment wherein Vélez was discovered, is described thusly. The quote continues, "... the habitat of tawdry women who ply their ancient trade among a clientele of drink-sodden men" (Griffith and Bowser. *The Papers of D.W. Griffith, 1897-1954*. [Sanford, N.C.]: Microfilming Corporation of America, 1982).

snobby social machinations of the privileged female sophisticate. While it is understood that neither woman is sexually innocent, Nanon's transgression—implied by the film's suggestive title and the cabaret's reputation, though never overtly confronted—is ultimately excused (even exoticized) as a practice of the resourceful art of survival, and thus not comparable to the willful transgression of Diane, who indulges the *privilege* of debauchery.<sup>153</sup>

Griffith's *Pavements* spent a lengthy period in production, as what might have been the celebrated director's last silent feature became, instead, his first sound film.<sup>154</sup> In the interim, the film engendered a keen and protracted interest well before its release. The fan press seized the opportunity to discursively play the film's two female stars against each other. Juxtaposition of Vélez against Jetta Goudal not only prefigured the antagonism between the characters in the *Pavements* story but capitalized, as well, on the extra-textual, off-screen personae of both actors. Thus, as it happened, *Lady of the Pavements*'s narrative of cultural assimilation became an analogue to its existence off screen. The parallels were clear enough: Velez's past life as a Mexican stage star, including the press's tendency to make reductive assumptions as to the "class" of theater from whence she came, becomes fused with Nanon's low-born status and whore-house/cabaret vocation. Even Nanon's convent education served to reference Vélez's own story. The film thus afforded Vélez the opportunity to prove herself a desirable "cultural citizen" within Hollywood's performance of U.S. nationhood. Relatedly, though, the dynamics of the film's production, exhibition and reception facilitated the inclusion of Vélez as a

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<sup>153</sup> The British censorship board found the implication of the film's title to be too direct and retitled the film, *Lady of the Night*. The change only seemed to attract attention to the film and invite derision toward the British censors (Griffith and Bowser, 1982). The film is supposedly based on the "real" life of "La Paiva," an infamous Russian, Jewish courtesan.

<sup>154</sup> When it became clear to the director that theaters and audiences were no longer interested in a silent feature, Griffith added sound for a few scenes of dialogue (the big identity reveal, mainly) and seven songs, all sung by Vélez. For more on the film's evolution in production, see Cherchi Usai (1999) and Griffith and Bowser (1982).

collegially professional citizen of movietown.<sup>155</sup> Pre-release press made much of the fact that Goudal, when asked to return for post-production sound recordings, demanded a high compensation for the extra work. An agreement was never reached. Vélez, on the other hand, happily cooperated, performing seven songs and some dialogue for the film's final release. Thus Vélez was seen as the more congenial (and less expensive) of the two immigrant stars. As Rosalind Schaffer put it in the *Los Angeles Times*, Goudal's stand meant that Vélez "had the whole sound field to herself."<sup>156</sup> As far as the majority of the critics were concerned, in fact, Vélez had the whole movie to herself; she was the hit of the production.<sup>157</sup> Goudal's reputation as a temperamental French snob—disdainful of American culture and bearing a suspicious lack of gratitude for her coveted standing in the movie colony—meant that she was especially vulnerable to the linking of the haughty, scheming, mean-spirited screen character with her "real" persona off screen. Velez—"anything but supercilious"<sup>158</sup>—was precisely Goudal's antithesis.

Vélez exuded salt-of-the-earth amiability: she was nothing if not pleased to be in Hollywood; she answered her own fan-mail and rode in the front seat with her chauffeur. She instructed Hollywood newcomers (including extras and non-actors) on how to apply make-up, just as Mary Pickford had supposedly once counseled her. In this period of her career, every report characterizing the "wild" Velez was matched with exaltations of her warmth, her sense of humor, her friendly (albeit "naïve") openness, and her extravagant

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<sup>155</sup> See "In and Out of Focus," *MPM*, April 1928, 37. Though actual conflicts between the two actors during filming appear to be relatively minor, the press capitalized on them before and after the films exhibition. See Elizabeth Goldbeck, "Relieving the Feud Famine," *MPM*, Dec. 1929, 50. See also "I Was Never Temperamental: So by Her Recent Actions Does Jetta Goudal Swear" (*MPM*, July 1929, 40, 98, 99).

<sup>156</sup> *Los Angeles Times*, Dec 16, 1928, H7.

<sup>157</sup> Reviews found in D.W. Griffith papers (Griffith and Bowser, 1982) contain scores of reviews documenting the phenomenon of Vélez's stardom at this point in her career.

<sup>158</sup> Ruth Biery, "How I Interview Them," *MPM*, May 1929, 106.

generosity.<sup>159</sup> Vélez's fiery emotionality, including her candid sensuality, operated in perfect contrast to the cool narcissism of Goudal's Hollywood vamp personae. And while the film staged "a 'good old woman to woman' brawl,"<sup>160</sup> taking place at the grand reveal of Nanon's gutter past, the screened cat-fight made significantly less of an impression than did the hissing of press discourse, much of which seems to have been hyped if not fabricated. *La Opinión* picked up on the reports of discord, publishing a caricatured illustration of the reported mayhem on the set (figure 15).



Figure 15: An imaginary battle<sup>161</sup>

Actual evidence points to more of a battle of retrospective discourse—egged on by press attention and fueled by Vélez's post-production imitations of Goudal in the stage shows—than actual confrontations or hostilities taking place during filming. As if to punctuate the distinction between her and Goudal, Vélez's stage charisma allowed her to forge a

<sup>159</sup> Goudal's protracted feuds with Vélez had greater discursive staying power, even, than her law suit filed against Griffith. Rosalind Shaffer, "Paging Miss Goudal," *Los Angeles Times*, Dec. 16, 1928, H7. See also *MPM*, May 1929.

<sup>160</sup> "The Lady of the Night" *To-Days Cinema*, Feb 26, 1929, unpaginated clipping (Griffith and Bowsler, 1982). This is a London paper. British censors changed the film's title from *Pavements to Night* and were relentlessly mocked for the gesture. The flap probably boosted the film at the British box-office.

<sup>161</sup> "Un Resultado... Imaginario," *La Opinión*, Dec 14, 1928, 4

personal relationship with fans across the country. The review that follows, written by Betty Colfax for the New York region's *Evening Graphic*, is a typical recording of the impression Vélez was making in February of 1929. If Vélez is ribbed for "displaying... most of her figure," she is, in the next breath, lauded above the "frigidaire beauties" that she imitates so handily on stage:

The dark-eyed slender young star goes through a show like a baby tornado, scattering her endearing terms around the audience, jumping from the [Raquel] Meller<sup>162</sup> violet song into some indistinguishable jazz tones, running all over the theater, scolding and cajoling men, flattering women and making them like it. She displays an indefatigable energy—and most of her figure—through a schedule of performances which would tax any player, but leaves Lupe vivacious and ambitious for more packed houses to conquer.

This newest flicker luminary to reach Broadway is about to take Mazda Lane by storm. Watch her do it. Within a week she'll be the latest Manhattan vogue. She has more personality than all the combined appeal of the frigidaire beauties who drop off the twentieth century and suavely wait for night club bows. She gives imitations of Gloria Swanson, Jetta Goudal and Dolores Del Rio, which won't make her popular with that trio, but judging from the week-end attendance, Miss Velez is a box office success.

*Pavements* itself receives only a brief mention at the close of this review:

Primarily Lupe is here in connection with the showing of her newest picture, 'Lady of the Pavements' [...] which needs the ticket-selling incentive of Miss Velez' personal appearances....

The film was generally reviewed as beautiful yet predictable, a technically fine melodrama that proved less compelling than the melodramatic discourses it occasioned off-screen. Steven Higgins, writing of the film later for *The Griffith Project*, observes that "Jetta Goudal and William Boyd sleepwalk through their parts. Only Lupe Velez gives any indication of having worked through her character with her director, searching for the connective tissues that would explain, however tenuously, Nanon's growth from a heedless cabaret performer to an elegant, intelligent woman deserving of love and respect. (Cherchi Usai et al, 1999 v.10, 219)."<sup>163</sup>

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<sup>162</sup> She was consistently compared with the Spanish vaudeville star Raquel Meller. In fact she apparently made a study of Meller's success, performing her "violet song" or "La Violeterra." In Mexican and U.S. discourse, Vélez was often compared to Gloria Swanson, whom she was known to imitate.

<sup>163</sup> Period reviews of the film and stage show suggest that Higgins is not exaggerating in his account of the film's accolades going rather disproportionately towards Vélez. Higgins continues: "In a way this was the ultimate embarrassment for D.W. Griffith, who now found himself in the position of being an unwitting foil for Lupe Velez and her ascent up the Hollywood ladder of fame. It must have been a terrible blow to

At the very time when fans might read of Vélez's triumphs on stage and encounter her face on the cover of fan magazines, they might also notice coverage of her liaison with actor, Gary Cooper, a relative newcomer. So while news of the pair surfaced in Hollywood, and *Pavements* reviews at times did register the romance, it was Vélez's stage shows, performed three times daily, that dominated the nationwide coverage.<sup>164</sup> Once the news of Vélez and Cooper became fully audible, however, it carried wide and far.

### **“LOUD-PEDAL LOVE”**

The *Los Angeles Times* reported Vélez on Cooper's arm on February 3, 1929, just before the spate of New York stage shows. *Photoplay* and *MPM* took up the topic in February and March, respectively. From all reports, it was the real thing from first blush; and writerly consensus *loudly* confirms that Lupe was *loudly* demonstrative.<sup>165</sup> Tales from the Paramount commissary report “... her voice could be heard at intervals above the clatter of dishes and the sounds of eating, triumphantly proclaiming, ‘he lofes me. Gary lofes me’” (Or is it “loofs me”? Or “luffs me”? Or “lovs me”?... regardless of how the accented inflection was penned, Lupe's voice was decidedly decibels above “appropriate”).<sup>166</sup>

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Griffith to find himself shunted to the side as Vélez took center stage and received more press attention than the film itself” (v.10, 220). In promotional discourse surrounding San Francisco Silent Film Festival of 2009, which opened and closed with Lupe Vélez films (*The Gaucho* and *Lady of the Pavements* respectively, the curator refers to Vélez as “the revelation of the festival.” The discourse almost indicates Vélez as being “discovered” by the contemporary spectator, rather than *re*-discovered.

<http://www.silentfilm.org/gazette20090904.php>

<sup>164</sup> This is particularly true of the reviews coming from the shows in the East, they were less concerned with the latest production news or gossip of romance and were thus particularly interested in the live performance. The Griffith papers (Griffith and Bowser) are especially useful in this regard as they include reviews from many smaller New York region periodicals and from Periodicals in Britain. Unfortunately the details on clipping sources are often cryptic.

<sup>165</sup> Apparently both stars maintained professionalism; there were no resulting set-delays or disruptive outbursts on studio time, “...There was never any upset schedules. He was never mooning around the Warner Brothers entrance when Lupe was making *Tiger Rose*, when he should have been acting strong and silent over on his own lot as *The Virginian*.” Dorothy Spensley, “Is Love a Liability?” *MPM*, Mar 1930, 28.

<sup>166</sup> Dorothy Manners, “Loud-Pedal Love.” *MPM*, July 1929, 30, 31, 112. See, also, Dorothy Herzog, “Como se oír a mejor love: lub o luff?” *La Opinión*, Oct 13, 1928, front. The headline appears over a photo of Vélez. The brief piece reports Vélez attempting to correct a German actress, Camilla Horn, on her

Not that fan press exhibited disapproval of the relationship. For the most part they did not. Though certain early pieces—Katherine Albert's February piece in *Photoplay* for one—stand out for their hostility. If the earlier referenced Gladys Hall's piece in *MPM* is an example of an extreme characterization of Vélez as childlike, naive, primitive and innocent, the discourse of Albert's piece is an extreme of another slant. Albert sexualizes Vélez, and explicitly racializes her origins, quite beyond the standards of discretion generally maintained at *Photoplay*. Within Albert's piece, which extends over five pages, acknowledgment of the Cooper romance reads like a late-breaking addendum which, given the timing, it likely was. After suggestively dropping the names of every male to ever escort Vélez, Albert declares, “And now—Gary Cooper!” followed by dismissive prose that reiterates the same thinly veiled accusations of harlotry that had already peppered the piece:

No stranger pair are to be found. Lupe of Mexico City. Gary of the Montana plains.... As a child she exchanged her kisses for bits of ribbon for her braids, later she bartered for orchids and bracelets. But Gary has no Orchids to give, yet Lupe says, “Oh, but I luff him. He is so sweet!”<sup>167</sup>

Items comparable to this generally occur in the second-tier fan magazines. For example, a particularly egregious piece published in *Picture Play* in April of 1929 includes a sub-headline that reads “Hollywood... now frowns on the unconventionality of the Mexican girl it once petted.” That piece’s handling of the Cooper romance is boldly infantilizing:

“...and Gary, when he played opposite Lupe in “Wolf Song” blushed under his make-up, but smiled at her in the manner of a bachelor uncle who is appearing in public with a particularly precocious and embarrassing niece of six.”<sup>168</sup>

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pronunciation of the word, counceling her against “luff,” but pronouncing the word, “lub.” Herzog is an English-language fan writer (see this chapter’s epigraphic quote).

<sup>167</sup> Katherine Albert, “The Hot Baby of Hollywood; Otherwise Lupe Velez,” *Photoplay*, Feb 1929, 36-7, 141-4.

<sup>168</sup> Helen Louis Walker, “The Flame of Hollywood: The Amazing Story of Lupe Velez,” *Picture Play*, April 1929, p24. Although I characterize this publication as “second tier,” the appearance of the publication is not decidedly different from *MPM*. In fact, a semi-regular *Picture Play* column, “Hollywood Highlights,” is penned by *LAT* writer Edwin Schallert and his wife, Elza Schallert. This would seem to indicate the magazine’s relative “legitimacy.”

I hesitate to over-emphasize such pieces, extreme as they are within the larger spectrum of my discourse, lest they overshadow the less denigrating press that makes up the majority. On the other hand, in light of the persistence of their discursive currency, it would be counterproductive to dismiss the significance of egregious items.<sup>169</sup> I have said that Vélez's image was in considerable flux still when she met Cooper. Being young, single and Mexican, Vélez's image was especially vulnerable to exploitation.<sup>170</sup> Here the Cooper romance becomes important: whether inadvertently or by design, Cooper protected her from the most predatory tendencies of the reporter instinct. Rather, it was not Cooper himself but the force field of his immaculate image that did the work. From March of 1929, through three years of persistent press attention, one rarely saw Vélez's name without Cooper's, nor visa-versa. The association worked to the advantage of both stars. Without "loud-pedal love," Cooper—who was previously notable for his relationship with the sky-high-profile Clara Bow—was rather a bore; columnists could

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<sup>169</sup> I should note that the egregious discourses tend to stand out, in the main, for differences of degree rather than kind, which is another reason they are important to note. Albert, however, is somewhat of an anomaly; she writes of Velez and Cooper frequently over the next two years and, interestingly, I have never again seen Albert take an attitude toward Vélez that approaches this extreme. Incidentally, Henry Jenkins's account of this Albert piece (2007, 125-27; 296 n), which cites an undated clipping, is three years off in its attribution (he estimates the date as "probably circa 1932"). Jenkins thus seriously mischaracterizes Vélez's image as framed in the press in general and *Photoplay* in particular. For, by the time of the Vélez/Cooper break-up in 1932, Albert's writing comes to reflect an apparently genuine affection for Velez's humor and candid honesty. In her article, "The Unknown Hollywood I Know," (*Photoplay*, June 1932, 60, 113), Albert longs for "old school" Hollywood, which she sees as epitomized by Lupe Vélez: "when picture gals were lusty gals of fire and emotion. Hollywood misses Lupe badly since she joined the Ziegfeld show. She is [...] the symbol of Hollywood to me—bold, noisy, volatile, utterly frank, but with a crude charm. Lupe is as mad as that mad town. Lupe is a product and a portrait of Hollywood." Albert thought it "fitting to end these screen memories of Lupe"; her shared insights into the "unknown" Hollywood end with the declaration that "...Hollywood—and Lupe—are swell!" (113).

<sup>170</sup> There is also a question of studio support at this stage. Vélez's contractual agreements were short and varied; she was often working on loan from one studio to another. In 1929, however, Vélez was the bigger star. Her salary for *Wolf Song* was four times that of Cooper's, though Cooper was honored with the film's top billing. (Herrick Archive. AMPAS Paramount Pictures Production Records file 238.f-1). Paramount had borrowed Vélez; they had not invested in her as they clearly had invested in Gary Cooper. Brundidge's promotional volume, *Twinkle, Twinkle, Movie Star!* (1930, written with the cooperation of Paramount and other studios), exists as evidence of Velez's vulnerability at the hands of producers with short-term commitments to her stardom. *Twinkle* features short and spicy chapters on thirty-one different stars. Velez is the only star whose photo is not accompanied by an "appears courtesy of..." notation. Her chapter is not entirely hostile but it is racializing and infantilizing; the tone is less measured than that taken with other stars. The interviews took place during, or shortly after, the *Wolf Song* production; Vélez is deployed to flatter Cooper and spice up his chapter. Her star currency had encountered a glass ceiling.

count on him for little more than an inscrutable silence couched under the protective cover of family.

Lupe and Gary fascinated as a study of opposites. Cooper was American, white, tall, laconic. Vélez was Mexican, “olive-skinned,” short, extroverted. Cooper was from a professional family (his father was a retired judge); Velez’s parents were of the military and the entertainment industry (her father was said to have been a general in the Mexican Army; her Mother was known to have been an opera singer). The significance of this final distinction can hardly be overstated. As I have suggested, in 1929 fan discourse, to speak of love is to speak of marriage, family and kinship... which functions to signal class standing. Fan discourse is rife with discussion of young stars’ parents. And there was nary a screen-star who was more associated with his attendant family than was Gary Cooper. It seems every parent-centered feature profiles the parent-centered Gary, generally accompanied by a photograph of the family, preferably with the car Cooper bought for his mother or, even better, in front of the home that the star and his parents (ostensibly) shared.<sup>171</sup>

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<sup>171</sup> The earliest instance in which I came across Vélez and Cooper in the same article came prior to *Wolf Song*, (*MPM*, Oct. 1928), in an article titled, “So Good to Their Mothers!” The rhetoric is hyperbolic: “Parted at times by circumstance but always inseparable are Gary Cooper and his mother...”. As for Vélez, the story reiterated that she would never leave her mother for a man. In “At the Foot of The Class: that’s where Gary Cooper is in the Hollywood school of sophistication,” by Elizabeth Goldbeck (*MPM*, June, 1930, 55,102), father (Judge) Cooper does *all* the talking (and none about Lupe). Four months later in Helen Louis Walker’s, “How to Bring Up a Parent,” (*MPM*, Oct, 1930, 64, 65, 114) the author sings the praises of Judge Cooper’s dedication to his son’s career, “telling writers just what Gary thinks about this or that. Which is good for Gary, because he hates talking” (65). Velez is in this piece also, under the heading “Lupe’s Problem,” which speculates/states: “It seems to me that Lupe was heard to remark that she was obliged to send her mother back to Mexico because she interfered with Lupe’s pursuit of her art” (114).



**Figure 16: Lupe, Gary and the Train**

### **“LUPE NO WED”<sup>172</sup>**

Refutations of a Vélez/Cooper engagement came immediately. In fact a fan might have read denials of the engagement before having heard the actual nuptial rumors. It was Vélez who was credited with the clarification. But her statement (“We just fine friends... but we no marry, Gosh no”) did not indicate a stalled romance.<sup>173</sup> Soon came a flurry of dramatic (and transparently exaggerated) train station narratives (fig. 12). Dorothy Manners writes an account wherein Vélez, departing for New York and leaving Cooper waving from the platform, sought one last kiss:

“ ... the cold, white pane of the vestibule separated them. With one sweeping stroke, Lupe grabbed the valise and would have smashed it to pieces if someone, probably an official, hadn’t restrained her... ”<sup>174</sup>

There were stories of a melancholy Gary awaiting Lupe’s return and then the inevitable loud-pedal reunion.<sup>175</sup> Meanwhile, Vélez’s star currency further solidified. She appeared

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<sup>172</sup> “In and Out of Focus,” *MPM*, June 1929, 101

<sup>173</sup> Under the heading “Lupe No Wed,” *MPM*’s column, “In and Out of Focus,” June 1929, 101, basically reprinted the *LAT* story, “Business Before Pleasure: Lupe’s in Love but Work Bars Marriage.” *LAT*, Feb. 18, 1929, A1.

<sup>174</sup> Dorothy Manners, “Loud Pedal Love,” *MPM*, July 1929, 31.

<sup>175</sup> “She’s Back on Coast So He’s Smiling Now” *Los Angeles Times*, Apr 19, 1929, A18.

on the cover of *Photoplay* in October and *MPM* in November. Any signs of flagging interest in the romance only proved its staying power, as exemplified by this piece by Katherine Albert, titled “Hollywood—A Manless Town”:

Certain blades and ladies are coupled together like freight cars, only more permanently. Certain names just go together. The Smith brothers, Joan and Doug, Wells and Fargo, Gary and Lupe, Trade and Mark, Sue and Nick, Bebe and Ben... You know what I mean. However this permanent mating doesn't help the love-lorn gals of the village.<sup>176</sup>

Albert, the writer who was quick to scandalize Vélez-the-seductress, six months earlier, is here anxious that Hollywood men are no longer susceptible to seduction, or capable of instigating it:

“Novarro can't be pried from his little theater, his music and his Europe. Walter Byron is so English that the girls don't know if he's asking them over for tea or asking them over.”

And Albert is as bothered by the lack of gossip fodder in “man-less” Hollywood as she is worried about the dearth of available escorts for the young starlets of the day. In an article entitled “The Men in Their Lives,” appearing in January of 1930, Gladys Hall, like Albert, is discursively reaching to explain what is essentially admitted to be a dull spell for love in the movie colony. Hall is anxious over the “one-man women,” a category in which she includes Vélez, though the nomination comes “by circumstance rather than by nature.” Velez is characterized as one of a handful of “one-man women who are not really one-man women at all....”. Hall continues:

Really. Women who are married to one man for many years and will probably continue to be so married until death do them part. Yet these types, their essential being, the flame you feel burning in them is the flame of Lorelei, the destroyers of thrones, the builders of empires. Such women as Lilyan Tashman, Estelle Taylor, young Lupe Velez [...] and Dolores del Rio --- these women were not born to be one-man women. They deserve, perhaps, extra-credit.

This item acknowledges Vélez's well-known status as “attached,” and yet avoids specificity; Cooper's name is oddly absent from the prose. By implying Vélez as fickle by nature, the article skillfully negotiates Vélez's persona/e from two contradictory angles; in other words, fan literature worked in consort with the ideological effect of the

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<sup>176</sup> Katherine Albert, “Hollywood—A Manless Town,” *Photoplay*, Sep 1929, 42.

films themselves. In this case, it worked together to eroticize sexual difference and simultaneously promote the value of ‘The Couple.’

#### SIDE BAR: The Hollywood Mexicana – Lupe or Dolores?

The inclusion of Dolores del Rio on the list of one-man women suggests an instability or a temporary shift in del Rio’s carefully managed public persona.<sup>177</sup> Five months after “The Men in Their Lives,” Hall is back on the theme: in a feature titled “Discoveries About Myself: As Told by Dolores Del Rio,” the actress is quoted as confiding:

I have been suppressed and repressed all of my life. Repressed in my work, repressed in my personal life.

I am not, by nature, melancholy, weepy, sorrowful, languishing or sweet. I am not patient. I am not conventional. I am not a *Ramona* nor am I an *Evangeline*. More, I am the girl of [the Wheeler and Woolsey comedy] ‘What Price Glory?’ These, for a bit, I could show my real self.

I am, by nature, tempestuous, fiery, stormy, eager.

I have never had a chance to express the sex that is in me. I am going to begin to now. I am going to be free (59).<sup>178</sup>

As if to underscore the point of del Rio’s suppressed “fiery” nature, later that summer *MPM* ran a full-page photo of Vélez, writing, in a caption beneath: “no longer is [Vélez] compared with Dolores Del Rio. On the contrary, Dolores, turned tempestuous, now is the one compared...” (Sep 1930, 19).<sup>179</sup> Ever since “Latin blood” had become the “open-sesame” in the movies, del Rio’s aristocratic image had destabilized.<sup>180</sup> A piece in the *Los*

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<sup>177</sup> The inclusion of del Rio as a “one-man women” is provocative: the author mentions that she left her husband—Jaime del Rio, since deceased—shortly after achieving success in Hollywood: “when a husband is picked up in girlhood and poverty and discarded in Hollywood and electrics, it is less for a new lover than a new career. As is the case with Dolores del Rio and Jaime.” *MPM* had reported Jaime del Rio’s death less than a year prior, in an article titled “Innocent Bystander,” which suggested that Jaime died not from a heart attack but from a broken heart (Dorothy Donnell, Mar 1929, 31, 97).

<sup>178</sup> Gladys Hall, “Discoveries About Myself: Dolores Del Rio Has Learned She Is Neither A *Ramona* Nor An *Evangeline*” (*MPM*, June 1930, 39, 90). The article goes on to discuss the death of Jaime del Rio as “one of the scars that has made me [del Rio] a woman.” “I find that I regret nothing. Nothing. Neither my failures nor my successes, neither my mistakes nor my triumphs” (90). According to this article, “America has taught [del Rio] democracy” and Hollywood has taught her to reject her “old belief in class distinctions” (90).

<sup>179</sup> The full quote reads, “not only is Lupe Velez in a comfortable place, but definitely looking up. No longer... the one compared. No wonder Lupe sings in ‘Gypsy Love Song?’” (*MPM*, Sep 1930 p19)

<sup>180</sup> Hershfield writes that del Rio’s agent/protectorate, Edwin Carewe, worked with Henry Wilson, “one of the best publicists in Hollywood,” to concretize the image of del Rio as “foreign and exotic” but also as

*Angeles Times* the previous year featured profiles of eight Latinas who were making a hit with directors. Filmmakers were asked to explain the “Latin” appeal and the “niche” the individual actresses had carved out for themselves. In this instance, del Rio and Vélez were characterized as suitable for the same roles. It was Raquel Torres, “an exact opposite of Lupe and Dolores,” who “for all her Latin spirit is a wistful, gentle type.”<sup>181</sup> D.W. Griffith, riding the crest of Vélez’s popularity in *Pavements*, explains:

For the same reason we like a naughty child we like the Vélez’s and the Del Rio’s (*sic*).

They flaunt the banner of naturalness in the face of sophistication and we like it because the gesture is new, because it has its element of fire and because it takes us out of the reserve centuries have put us under.

I might add that they are animalistic; they are natural. Our repressions and inhibitions are strange to them. They come from a country whose people have laughed through hundreds of years of poverty and distress. They’re truly carefree; they know how to laugh and to play because fundamentally they are a race without the disturbing quality of too great an imagination. Imagination breeds worry; worry is the greatest foe acting has in its positive self” (*ibid*).

Griffith here voices, clearly and unapologetically, the racialized bias by which he and, to an extent, Hollywood in general, approached Mexican female casting. (Interestingly, Raquel Torres’s “gentleness” went, for this article’s anonymous author, against expectations of the usual “Latin spirit” of which both del Rio and Vélez were apparently exemplary). The final portions of this chapter will look closely at the consistent comparisons between Vélez and del Rio, framing an analysis through perspectives articulated in Spanish-language discourse. Worth notice, at this point, is the blurring of the distinction between the images associated with the two; there is even an indication of a reversal of the perceived hierarchy—within the English-language press, that is—of these two most prominent Mexican stars. Furthermore, the indication is that Vélez’s star currency was robust enough to impact the strategy by which del Rio sought to frame her

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“‘glamorous’ and ‘aristocratic’ by emphasizing her highborn status, her convent education, and her European training in ballet and art” (10). Her class status was indeed well publicized (the piece I found is evidence of how trenchant was the assumption that a Mexican grew up poor—especially as fan writers persist in fabrications), but the question of how to present her personal image—i.e. her personal sensuality, sexuality and availability—seems to have been less nailed down.

<sup>181</sup> “Wave of Popularity Sweeping Mexican stars to the Top Marches On: Directors tell How Latin-American Beauties have carved Niche for Themselves in Filmdom’s Hall of Fame,” *LAT*, Jan 27, 1929, C11.

own image. Thus to the extent that Vélez was, or was perceived to be, complicit in the establishment of a stereotype that Griffith here so unabashedly celebrates, and if Vélez's star currency, as such, was seen to now dominate the field of Latina actors, we have perhaps identified the discursive field whereby her reputation as a betrayer to her own nation began to take hold.

"Low-Down on Recent News Reports... Lupe Velez is not married to Gary Cooper"<sup>182</sup>

*Motion Picture Magazine* ran a regular column each month, called "The Gossip Test" in which fans could test their knowledge of the latest movie colony facts and fictions. Questions of marriage were invariably in play. In January, 1930 (concurrent with the first Hall piece above about the "one-man women"), appeared the following:

Question: Who is supposed to be holding up the Gary Cooper-Lupe Velez nuptials? Or do their contracts contain clauses forbidding them to marry?

Answer: Of course this is just hearsay --- but I understand Mamma Cooper has her foot in the deal. It's not the contracts.<sup>183</sup>

The fan that failed the test was given the opportunity to amend her/his performance the following month. This time it comes with some editorial emphasis:

Question: What popular male star recently denied his engagement to a fiery señorita from Mexico?

Answer: Gary Cooper came right out in print and said he and Lupe weren't engaged. So there!

That would seem to settle it. But if not, there comes an article in April with a variant on the verdict, stated in the title: "Not For Love or Money: Would She Marry, insists Lupe Velez, lying in bed."<sup>184</sup> Though this is another denial of marriage, it is, as is evident in the subtitle, one of the more provocative Vélez pieces to date. It is also one with a refreshingly candid ring and, as such, it is worth a close look.

Belfrage begins having heard a rumor that Lupe Vélez "and her Garee have tearfully decided to part." He rushes to the Vélez/Cooper (co-purchased) residence to

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<sup>182</sup> *MPM*, Dec 1929.

<sup>183</sup> *MPM*, Jan 1930, 119.

<sup>184</sup> Cedric Belfrage, "Not For Love or Money..." *MPM*, April, 1930, 50, 97.

investigate: “Down the stairs from above jogged a tall lean man. He held out his hand. ‘Cooper is my name,’ he said.” Cooper explains that Lupe is in bed, recovering from illness. After showing Belfrage in, Cooper is physically stalled by the couple’s “protracted good-byes” before he finally excuses himself for a fitting.

Vélez decides to show the author some card tricks she has been practicing while down with the flu: “I been eenterview so much. I like better just doing treecks and talking like friends, so...” But the reporter persists:

“One writer, who interviewed you the other day, said you told her you had broken off your engagement to Mr. Cooper *because it would injure his career if you married him.*”

“... I have never been engage to Garee so how can I break the engagement? I no marry no-one, not now, not ever. Why? Because I am not crazee. I do not want to be marry. I like my freedom too much, bet your life. I lofe no mans. [...] Garee is varry good friend of me. We are friends long time and we go on being friends” (emphasis added).<sup>185</sup>

With his reference to career injury, Belfrage is likely citing Ruth Biery’s *MPM* piece the previous month: Biery’s is a rare critical piece with a caution to issue. The writer explains that stardom asks females to “accomplish a woman’s work before they are women,” arguing that the pressures of stardom take a personal toll on young stars.<sup>186</sup> Her approach to Velez is unusually sympathetic, and ends with a challenging address to the reader:

Lupe is Wounded

MARRIAGE. Youth has a right to try marriage. If Lupe Velez wished to marry Gary Cooper, it is her inherited youth privilege. The fact that she comes from one country and he from another is their business. But Gary’s admirers pen long letters storming against the union.<sup>187</sup> Just before Lupe left for Florida she begged me to never mention their names together.

“It has hurt us both,” she told me.

*It took Joan and Doug two years to train the world to the idea of their union. Then they risked fame,* to some extent, when they did it. (emphasis added)

With the rare direct acknowledgment of contested mores, Biery compares the foreclosed-upon ethnic-inflected couple to the class-inflected couple—once again, Crawford and

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<sup>185</sup> *MPM*, March, 1930 p32, 33, 90.

<sup>186</sup> “Glory Comes High: It’s Bought in Hollywood Only With the Renunciation of Youth.” *MPM*, March 1930 p32-3, 90, 95.

<sup>187</sup> In my research I did run across a small handful of letters published in *MPM* that demonstrate the sentiment to which Biery refers. It is impossible to correlate letters published to letters received (much less to broader public sentiment) or to account for a pattern that shifted over time.

Fairbanks—that screen fans had, apparently, begrudgingly, learned to accept and ultimately to celebrate.<sup>188</sup>

The blithe but friendly tone of Belfrage's article indicates a hint of agreement with Biery's position. Belfrage ends with a rare gesture of appreciation for Vélez's sense of humor:

At this point, Gary walked into the room. Lupe let out a minor whoop and held out her arms. There was a long silence.

“He is ugley, my Garee, no?”

“Er---oh, yes, indeed,” said I, absent-mindedly, not hearing very well.

There is an angry cry. Lupe sat up. “I keel you eef you say he is ugley. He is beautiful, my Gary! He ees beautiful!”

## Save the Children

Biery's frank challenge to the fan community for their bias and intolerance returns us to the question of Vélez as a limit-case for assimilation through marriage. The evolution of Vélez's character portrayals occurring over the course of her years with Cooper indicate a significant shift in the nature of the ideological function of her marriage narratives. What is more, textual analyses elucidate a set of cinematic discourses that operate along a parallel trajectory to that of Vélez's off-screen predicament. Four productions that I call the *save-the-children cycle*—three of which involve a procreative couple, a premise that is new to Vélez's roles—collectively suggest a narrative foreclosure against assimilation through marriage and implicitly link this refusal to the specter of miscegenation.

The first film of this group, *Resurrection* (1931, Carewe, Universal) is based on a novel by Leo Tolstoy. Vélez's anti-heroine, Katusha Maslova, reprises a role filled by Dolores del Rio in an earlier production (1927, Carewe, Inspiration). Katusha is an orphaned peasant girl who has worked since childhood under the charge of a seemingly

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<sup>188</sup> Second tier magazines that were less likely to measure their discourse (such as those earlier pieces discussed) may give an indication as to what Biery, and ostensibly Vélez, refer.

Omitted from this version of my study, due to limitations of space, is another round of marriage rumors and denials of 1931; the wedding ring anecdote, mentioned in my introduction, occurs in this period.

benevolent family of the aristocracy. Prince Dmitri Ivanovitch Nekhludof, has been her childhood companion and the two have fallen in love as they came of age. When Dmitri is called away for a stint in the army, the two promise to wait for each other. After a period away, during which time Dmitri has failed to uphold his promise of fidelity, ‘his army regiment has reason to briefly stop over at his aunt’s farm. Dmitri, changed by the dehumanizing stresses of war, seduces Katusha, who, though still in love, resists on moral principle the consummation of the relationship. The act occurs, nevertheless, and is enunciated in the film without dialogue. While a degree of sexual coercion might be ascertainable, Katusha’s acquiescence is made clear. Katusha arises the next morning to find Dmitri has left. When her employers find out she is pregnant, Katusha is exiled from her home. She manages to eek out a living for a time but, devastated at the still-birth of her baby, turns to the sex trade and quickly slides into a life of vice and ruin. Years go by; the film rejoins Katusha as she has been circumstantially implicated in a murder. Though she is innocent of the charge, she is “rightly” accused—in the film’s tragic moral sense—as she is suffering the guilt of her moral transgression and her child’s death.

When Dmitri is called to serve on Katusha’s jury, he realizes that the transgressions of his army days precipitated Katusha’s fall. Though he endeavors to argue her innocence, he fails to save her from exile to Siberia. But it is only his own life that is “resurrected”... by his having regained a moral compass. The film’s end stays with the decidedly pessimistic outlook it has forged: Dmitri wants to marry Katusha, but out of pity rather than desire. Realising this, Katusha opts to endure exile alone.

Carewe’s casting of Velez for such a dramatic role came as a surprise to many, or so it was reported.<sup>189</sup> Her performance surprised as well. Says *Motion Picture Magazine*: “[s]he is no longer the gamine, Lupe is a great actress.”<sup>190</sup> *Resurrection* stands as the only

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<sup>189</sup> It was thought that the director would have cast Dolores del Rio to reprise her role in the previous production but del Rio was quite ill at the time.

<sup>190</sup> Review, *MPM*, April 1931.

production of her career wherein Vélez is presented as physically unattractive. From the point in the story that the child is lost, Katusha, though not so very aged in years, no longer bears a physical appeal. In this aspect, the Vélez version looks—and plays, narratively—very much like the D.W. Griffith production (1909), which also profoundly condemns Katusha. Griffith’s short film takes little interest in Dmitri’s moral equivocations but deploys him as heroic, that is, as the redeemed bearer of the Bible that spiritually saves himself and saves Katusha, though she is sacrificed to a life of labor in Siberia.<sup>191</sup>

Comparison between these two films with Carewe’s 1927 version starring Dolores del Rio version indicates that the physical (and, by implication, moral) degeneration of del Rio’s Katusha is considerably less personally punishing.<sup>192</sup> It is this disciplinary function of the mise-en-scene of Vélez’s *Resurrection*—where Katusha/Vélez is singularly physically punished for her sexual transgression—that locates the film within the save-the-children logic; the stark turn toward condemnation of Katusha occurs with the demise of the child, which structures the physical devolution that, in turn, codes Katusha as unmarriagable. Foreclosing on the marriage to Dmitri forecloses on Katusha’s

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<sup>191</sup> There are five *Resurrection* films in all. Edward José directs one in 1918 (Famous Players-Lasky); there are the two Carewe productions and then, in 1934, *We Live Again* (see below). In the José film, Katusha finds “real” love within her class and she faces Siberia with a fellow prisoner. Interestingly, in that version, which reads as the most faithful to Tolstoy, the illicit sex, pregnancy, and miscarriage maintains class barriers but does not foreclose on redemption and happiness for the “fallen” woman. *We Live Again* is the most idealistic version, combining all the morality lessons with some lessons in (revolutionary?) democracy and a romantic reconciliation in the end. It’s a weirdly convoluted political treatment.

Tolstoy’s purposefully didactic novel preaches the hypocrisy of orthodox religion as well as the failure of the czarist state’s disregard for the peasant class. It privileged the moral/spiritual transformation of Dmitri over an interest in Katusha. The book is optimistic on the basis of individual humanism but holds little hope for social institutions. It was a huge hit in both Britain and the U.S., though its first treatment on film, Griffith’s, completely reverses Tolstoy’s intentions by placing the bible rather than the human conscience as the focalizing agent of redemption.

<sup>192</sup> I say this based on photos and reviews, without having access to the earlier film. A more complete textual comparison between these two productions is worthy of research. Hershfield has noted that Carewe was diligently protective over del Rio’s star image. It would be contrary to our understanding of that professional relationship to imagine Carewe portraying del Rio’s Katusha in the manner of Vélez’s Katusha (Hershfield, 2000, 10-12).

status as heroine.<sup>193</sup> (As for Vélez's performance, *MPM* is right, Vélez is as convincing in her dramatic role as she is unrecognizable (figure 17).



**Figure 17: Katusha/Vélez, transgression punished**

*Resurrection* was followed by another potentially prestigious remake: Cecil B. De Mille's *Squaw Man*, an apparent favorite of de Mille's and a save-the-children classic. Naturic (Vélez), a Native American, bears the child of her hopelessly selfless British lover, James Wyngate (Warner Baxter), who takes the name Jim Carston when he leaves England for the United States. Wingate/Carston has made the trans-Atlantic journey in order to protect his true, British love, Diana (Eleanor Boardman), from the scandal of her, Diana's, husband's (Paul Cavanagh's) financial folly by falsely assuming the blame of the husband's embezzlement. Though Naturic loves James/Jim and bravely saves his life—putting her own in peril as she is then wanted for murder—ultimately, Carston's opportunity to raise “his” child (born to him by Naturic) with the woman he loves, Diana,

<sup>193</sup> Three years later the film is made again with the very blond Anna Stern as Katusha (*We Live Again*, 1934, dir. R. Mamoulian; prod. S. Goldwyn). Stern's Katusha keeps her looks throughout and the couple marries in the end. According to the AFI catalogue entry, “Joseph I. Breen, the Director of the PCA, was so impressed with [the film] that, in a letter to Will H. Hays, he wrote: ‘Though dealing with a sex affair and its attendant consequences, the story has been handled with such fine emphasis on the moral values of repentance and retribution, as to emerge with a definite spiritual quality. We feel that this picture could, in fact, serve as a model for the proper treatment of the element of illicit sex in pictures’.” (AFI online <http://film.chadwyck.com.proxy.lib.umich.edu/fiaf/cgi/htxview?template=basic.htm&content=frameset.htm> accessed 3/31/2012).

is held up as the film's satisfying resolution. Naturic's only option is to be as selfless as the heroic James. She shoots herself. Carsten holds her as she dies.

Though Naturic, as reads the film text, is unquestionably un-assimilable to Western society, the child, "rescued" from growing up Native, is not. These two remakes, *Resurrection* and *Squaw Man*, suggest a renewed interest in conserving a matrimonial and familial status quo; they articulate a strident caution against matrimony or procreation as a mitigation of difference—be it a racialized, ethnic or class difference. Taking seriously May's and Carter's suggestion of de Mille's texts as iconic representations of period marital values, the remaking of *Squaw Man* in 1938 (previously produced in 1914 and 1918) indicates a regressive reiteration of procreation as the singularly supreme value of marriage and clearly weighs the value of the Child as greater than that of the mother.<sup>194</sup> Furthermore, the narrowing of assimilation potential articulated by this particular production of *Squaw Man* is engineered through the construction of race as a *specifically sexualized* unassimilable difference.

Historian M. Elise Marubbio, in her book, *Killing the Indian Maiden*, documents how de Mille's 1931 *Squaw Man* represented Naturic as a sexualized seductress in a way that distinguished the production from his earlier iterations (52-3).<sup>195</sup> The scene in which

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<sup>194</sup> Realizing that there was significant momentum behind remaking silents as sound films, I nevertheless assert that these particular remakes represent a reflection on the changing(-back) values of the era. It would be worthwhile to conduct an account of sound remakes in the early '30s next to their earlier versions. It would, likewise, be productive to compare titles remade versus popular or important films not revisited in the next decade.

<sup>195</sup> Marubbio argues that Vélez was cast specifically because of her persona as sexualized seductress, though Marubbio also points to Vélez's international popularity as a reason for her casting (97). Marrubio's writing on the chronology of Vélez's filmography is a bit jumbled; she writes that "[*Squaw Man*] tones down Vélez's persona as a vixen..." (97). I would submit that Vélez's first "vixen" role comes with *Kongo* (1932) and then not again until *Palooka* (1934). One *might* factor in Vélez's off-screen persona/representation in an effort to support Marubbio's "sexualized seductress" argument. But that factor would be, as my chapter is arguing, extremely hard to quantify. On screen, the *Squaw Man* seduction scene actually stands as the most willfully sexually transgressive role Vélez had, as of then, portrayed (with *Wolf Song* providing a very close second). In this sense we might consider Vélez's career trajectory itself as a narrative of transgression and punishment. That is, we might consider the "save the children" cycle as punishment for the late 1920s "transgressions" that had been, at the time, condoned. While *Squaw Man* is still very much "pre-code," I would propose an analogy to Richard Maltby's (1986) argument regarding

Vélez/Naturic leads Jim to spend the night with her, which includes images of Vélez's naked back, has no precedent. In earlier productions, the sex occurs "inevitably" and is at the subtly suggested instigation of Carsten. While we might write this off as the era's taking of "pre-code" liberties, I would suggest, rather, that we consider the function of a reverse corollary to the transgression-must-be-punished Hays-office principle which had been in effect prior to strict enforcement. Marubbio's cross-textual reading suggests that, in the 1931 *Squaw Man*, punishment was not simply meted out (toward the female) on the basis of sexual transgression but that—in this racialized instance—a punishing narrative allowed a willful *structuring in* of transgressive sexuality (we will see this play out in *Cuban Love Song* as well).<sup>196</sup> Naturic's death at the film's conclusion takes on an inscription of punishment that goes beyond the theme of "tragedy" in earlier versions.<sup>197</sup> Bearing this in mind, I turn to Vélez's next two films, the second pair of the four I am calling the save-the-children cycle. In both, Vélez is cast as a Latin American.

*Cuban Love Song* (1931, W.S. Van Dyke, MGM) and *Broken Wing* (1932, Lloyd Corrigan, Universal) both caused offense for their representations of Latin American nationhood, that is, for their imaging of Mexico and Cuba respectively. The former is essentially a *Squaw Man* scenario; *Cuban Love Song* takes place against a backdrop of

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Barbara Stanwyck "atoning" for the Wall Street crash. Vélez is made to atone for 1920s' sexual indulgences.

<sup>196</sup> In 1931, with the Code in place and manuscript submission mandatory but with the office having as yet no "teeth," the code itself may have provided an outline, a guide even, for justification of the most titillating scenarios. Such scenarios could be "tried out" on non-white, less protected star properties. See notes immediately preceding and following this one.

On a similar theme, I will posit that the caution against the female social-climbing "gold-digger" figure—she so close to the heart of the Production Code—might be thematically revisited as euphemistically cautionary against other, less representable, forms of social and economic mobility that caused greater anxiety in the 1930s, i.e. mixed-race coupling and miscegenation. Heidi Adrizzzone's (2008) work on the cultural anxiety around one high profile, mixed race, social-climbing figure in the "news" initially inspired me toward this line of inquiry, although that undertaking is outside of the purview of the present study.

<sup>197</sup> The film's trajectory leading to Naturich's death also suggests a corollary to the "transgression must be punished" rule of the code. We might consider that punishment was not necessarily meted out on the basis of transgression but, in some instances, punishment was *structured in* (see above two notes). This leads to another question worthy of Code research: Were there more opportunities for punishment *after* strict enforcement? Did such punishment disproportionately impact the roles (and careers) of women of color?

imperialism where sexually intrusive colonization is naturalized to narrate the value of saving brown children from brown places—and brown mothers. In *Cuban Love Song*, the Vélez character, Nenita López, dies off-screen in a flu epidemic and thus her illegitimate child—when taken to the U.S. by the returning soldier father to be raised by his Anglo wife—has not been wrenched out of her arms as in the *Squaw Man* story. Here there is, significantly, no acknowledgment whatever of the Cuban family who would have been caring for the child since the death of his mother. Broader elements of *Cuban Love Song*—its plot, its function as a musical and the specifics of the wrath it engendered in Cuba—are treated in the next chapter. In the current context I wish merely to situate *Cuban Love Song*'s exaltation of the Child, (and the replacement of its Cuban mother with the patient long-suffering wife (Karen Morley) of the U.S. Marine (American opera singer, Lawrence Tibbet)) with cognizance of the film's indulgent representation of sex outside of wedlock. Like Katusha in *Resurrection*, Nenita is at first reluctant and then acquiescent (actually she is forwardly enthusiastic) in consummating the relationship with the American Sailor. (We will see in the following chapter that, while the Hays Office scratched its head over the representation of extra-marital sex, they missed the significance of the film's careless representation of Cuban culture.)

*Broken Wing* is Vélez's first role portraying a Mexican and it is not an auspicious start. Strictly speaking, there are no children in the film. My reading of *Broken Wing* posits the Child figure as that played by Vélez and as having been saved—from uncivilized Mexico—prior to the plot's beginning. Seen in this light, the film follows a nativistic/paternalistic logic similar to *Cuban Love Song*.

Lolita (Vélez; the character's last name is not given) has grown up with her white American foster father, Luther Farley (George Barbier), a wealthy and politically connected colonial patriarch, whom the motherless Lolita adores. Lolita is romantically pursued by the violent and irrational Captain Inocencio Dos (Leo Carrillo). Not

surprisingly, by Hollywood logic, Lolita much prefers the handsome pilot, Phillip Marvin (Melvin Douglas), who falls from the sky after Lolita prays for her “king of hearts” to be delivered from heaven (i.e. anywhere but from the soil of Mexico), as promised by her fortune-telling nanny, María (Soledad Jiménez). Lolita ultimately lands her pilot, whom she gets to keep even after he recovers from the amnesia contracted when he crashed (his plane) and fell in love. Lolita will accompany Marvin to the U.S., where the two will marry. Thus the lovable Mexican child, Vélez/Lolita, is saved from Mexico and the Mexican bad man just as she has been saved from having been raised by Mexican parents. Like *Cuban Love Song*, *Broken Wing* was deemed offensive and was banned in Mexico.<sup>198</sup> Later in this chapter I will look closely at the discursive fallout, as occurred in Mexico and in Los Angeles’s Mexican-descent population, resulting from the film and its banning. Relatedly, though, and in order that Mexican circumstances of reception are contextualized, I will examine the era’s social and political climate which, I would submit, structures the logic of the save-the-children films.

As the “roaring twenties” submitted to the Great Depression of the 1930s, we are given to understand a swing towards cultural conservatism as responsive to a palpable fear, on a variety of fronts, for the future of the U.S. nation. Such a fear might be measured by way of two related indexes of anxiety. The first is evidenced by the failure of the concept of “companionate marriage” to find rhetorical acceptance as a response to the so-called marriage crisis. What we see is the reinforced centrality of the *procreative* value of coupling. Again, I submit, this anxiety is mitigated through the exaltation of the quintessential personified hope for the future: The Child (the reverence for Shirley

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<sup>198</sup> To the consternation of the Mexican Consul, however, *Broken Wing* was exported internationally, including to other Latin American countries (De Usabel, 1982, 79-80).

Noteworthy, for our purposes here, is that it seems Paramount had originally floated the possibility of Gary Cooper in the role of the pilot. In fact *Broken Wing*, Velez’s first picture with that studio since *Wolf Song* (she was again loaned to Paramount for the production), might very well have been conceived as a vehicle to capitalize on the currency of the Velez/Cooper romance. Interestingly, as such, the narrative’s resolution would actually have implied a favorable ruling on the concept of a Vélez/Cooper union.

Temple provides a salient cinematic manifestation of this phenomenon). The second is the heightened nativistic anxiety regarding the Foreign and the Foreigner. These two indexes conspire for a rearticulation of miscegenation anxiety, evidenced with the remake of *Squaw Man*, an imperialist narrative that, though sexed up, maintains its Victorian values. Likewise, they conspired to alter the terms of Vélez's inclusion in Hollywood production and in U.S. society. The terms of her Hollywood casting turned on the basis of her Mexicanness.

Mexican-descent Angelenos encountering *Broken Wing* by way of *La Opinión* would encounter the film's publicity coming next to stories of the massive repatriation of Mexican-Americans getting underway in the early 1930s. As George Sánchez's (1993) work makes clear, prior to the Great Depression, Mexican immigration was understood—by the Los Angeles immigrant community as well as by both the U.S. and Mexican governments (including the California State Government and the Mexican Consul of Los Angeles)—as a temporary, provisional pattern that would be resolved with gradual voluntary repatriation once the post-revolutionary situation in Mexico had stabilized.<sup>199</sup> Instead, of course, the economic hardship coming with the Depression—and the degeneration of Anglo U.S. attitudes towards U.S. Mexicans developing therewith—led to a period of intense repatriation/deportation pressure.<sup>200</sup> The save-the-children films I identify were produced during the initial years of this process. The framework through

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<sup>199</sup> The Mexican population in Los Angeles approximately doubled between 1910 and 1929. The revolution was a primary factor, but so was the recruitment of Mexican laborers for California's burgeoning agriculture industry. Most residents ended up in the city, as there were fewer jobs than immigrants. See Sánchez, 63-86 and 209-226.

<sup>200</sup> The syntactical question of “repatriation” versus “deportation” is complicated. Because the Mexican State supported Mexican repatriation, the terminology becomes equivocated on both sides of the border. I want to defer to Sanchez for clarification: “When [during the great Depression] the Mexican Chamber of Commerce complained that the deportation raids launched by the Immigration Service were disruptive of the local community, they were criticizing the chaotic nature of the raids which made residents afraid to shop and work, not repatriation itself. The Comité de Beneficencia Mexicana, a committee of the Los Angeles Honorary Commission, changed its focus in 1931 from supporting indigent Mexicans in the city with food, clothes and medical care to paying for railroad passage back to Mexico for those who could not afford it. The repatriation efforts of the middle-class leadership, therefore, were not simply a reaction to initiatives formulated by racially inspired Anglo officials, but were the culmination of efforts begun in the early 1920s to keep Mexicans in the United States loyal to their mother country” (123).

which this remaining immigrant population—the one-half to two-thirds of the Los Angeles Mexican population who chose to (and were able to) stay—would conceive of their national status was, as Sánchez documents, substantially and permanently altered (12). From the perspective of the dominant culture, the degree of acceptance of, or tolerance for, Mexican assimilation had everything to do with the extent to which the Mexican population would be constructed as racialized Other. In other words, these filmic narratives of family, nation and citizenship occur against the very real historical backdrop of a turning point in (trans)national identity and cultural negotiation.

The save-the-children cycle articulates a profound nervousness, on the part of dominant U.S. society, of a racially heterogeneous future. That nervousness was variously stoked and assuaged, on screen, over images of the “redeemed” Child. Throughout the period of deportation / repatriation, Mexican American *citizen* children were being born in the United States. The question remained as to how “foreign” and/or how “American” these children would, could or should be. This cycle of films implies a nativist answer: the “foreign” child’s happy future rested on her/his “rescue” *for* Americanness *from* her/his (Mexican) heritage.

By 1932, Vélez is no longer an “off-white” figure whose assimilation was negotiable on the basis of ethnicity. Within the post-crash climate she becomes a specifically racialized Other whose exclusion enters an extended process of finalization. As we assess the discursive mediation of the Cooper/Vélez relationship, we should bear in mind that hostile sentiments there represented (often conveniently attributed to the specter of “Momma Cooper”) were not hardening in a vacuum.<sup>201</sup>

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<sup>201</sup> I have sidelined the supposed agency of the Cooper’s disapproving mother as a primary factor in the couple’s unmarried fate, seeking instead to widen the social context informing racial/ethnic anxieties within hegemonic culture.

## No White Wedding

There was little gossip alleging unhappiness or conflict developing between Cooper and Vélez. The official story was that Vélez, having finally received Cooper's proposal, refused to marry him... though the press liked to speculate that Cooper was being a gentleman in his account of the breakup.<sup>202</sup> Either way, Vélez was vulnerable to moral criticism; she appeared fickle under one scenario or manipulative under the other.

Whatever the reasons, the word was that Cooper's mother had escorted him out of town, that she sought to insure there would be no reversals of the decision.<sup>203</sup> While the press was initially reluctant to let the relationship go, once the breakup was repeatedly confirmed, unsubtle indications of relief began to creep into print.<sup>204</sup>

The Vélez/Cooper relationship was not soon forgotten, though it was soon quite literally "reframed." A 1933 *Hollywood on Parade* short (Louis Lewyn) reprises the romance with a clip of the first sizzling love scene from *Wolf Song*. The 1929 footage has been edited into a newly produced novelty vignette that serves to recontextualize Vélez's ethnicity. At the sequence's opening, Vélez appears in a life-sized still that is framed to represent the cover of a piece of sheet music. Serenaded by two Jalisco-style Mariachis, she soon "comes alive" in the photo as the camera moves in to lose the sheet-music frame. Portraying a version of "herself," and wearing no Spanish mantilla, she stands

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<sup>202</sup> "Gossip of the Studios," *MPM*, Jan 1932 p40-41: "'I asked Lupe to marry me,' he says, 'and she wouldn't.' That is all---Gary keeps the discreet silence of a gentleman." See also "Gossip of the Studios," *MPM*, Nov 1931 p 97-98. Two years later, in an interview in *La Opinión*, Cooper says exactly the same thing: "¿Dejarla... yo?... Lupe me dejó a mí. "Una Interview con Cooper, el Astro Dichoso." *La Opinión*, Nov 18, 1934, sec 2, p6.

<sup>203</sup> Cal York, "Announcing," *Photoplay*, Jan 1932 p36. Also "Gossip Test," *MPM* Jan 1932 p101.

<sup>204</sup> A *Photoplay* item appearing in October, 1932 is exemplary of a certain tone manifesting in the press following the confirmed end of the affair: Titled "I'm Through Being Bossed," where the influence of women in Cooper's life and career is left open to a certain amount of interpretation. The reader might glean that Cooper is now asserting himself freely out from under the overbearing presence of either his mother or of Vélez, depending on the reader's own preconceived notions. The clearly articulated subject of the piece, the surety of Cooper's newly established masculine footing, fails to mask the strategic ambiguity of its female object. Marion Leslie, "I'm Through Being Bossed," *Photoplay*, Oct 1932 p34-35, 98-99. A curious item of gossip appearing several months later, occasioned by Cooper's marriage to Veronica "Rocky" Balfe, remarking that both the bride's and the groom's parents accompanied the newlyweds on their honeymoon. Cal York, "Announcing," *Photoplay*, Mar 1933 p48.

silent and coy in a sideshow-type booth/set that has been painted with a hand-written script reading, “dedicated to Lupe Velez.” The musicians sing, with verses alternating from Spanish to English, a song addressing “Lupe” by name. Spanish Lola Salazar with her class privilege is gone. Velez has been affectionately but unmistakably re-Mexicanized, even *carnivalized*, by this folkloric setup. Maintaining the Mariachi music extra-diegetically, the film cuts to the *Wolf Song* footage. Lola is back. The former couple is revisited in a slow, close dance sequence. She looks up at Cooper, their eyes lock, her lips slightly parted. Coming slowly ever closer, their mouths are just shy of meeting when their faces become obscured by Cooper’s hat. When they shift so we see them again her expression has subtly changed. Mantilla or no, Spanish or Mexican, married or not, now as then, their chemistry is arresting.

### **En la colonia: Lupe’s crash of 1929**

There is a certain ironic redundancy to the Mexicanizing effect produced by the *Hollywood Parade* sequence. As should be clear at this point, Lupe Vélez’s public persona has rarely if ever been disassociated with her Mexicanness, not in Hollywood discourse and certainly not in the Mexican descent colony of Los Angeles. The “Spanish beauty” mishap described in the introduction to this dissertation speaks to the fact that, even had Vélez wished to distance herself from Mexico, an attempt to do so would be folly. The response in *La Opinión* to the *Los Angeles Times*’ 1927 “Spanish Beauty” mistake took place in the context of what was otherwise a relatively welcoming reception for Vélez and enthusiasm for the Music Box Revue appearance, her first prominent role in the local industry. This mix of celebration and caution is the earliest example of what comes to typify discursive dynamics taking place in the Los Angeles contact zone. The high-profile castigation of Vélez happened to take place on the virtual eve of her

breakthrough to stardom. For, as legend has it, it was the Music Box that led to Vélez's friendship with Fanny Brice and from there led to her casting in *The Gaucho*.<sup>205</sup>

We saw in the previous chapter how characterization in the Hollywood fan press mediated its way into Mexico's illustrated weeklies. Shortly after Adolfo Piembert's intervention, reviews of Vélez's presentation in *The Gaucho* proliferated in the Mexican press and in Mexican-descent Los Angeles. Vélez was almost invariably heralded as a great success, which is not to say that the film overall was universally appreciated.<sup>206</sup> *La Opinión*, like discourse in Mexico, was quick to take the film to task for the fact that it

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<sup>205</sup> A competing legendary history indicates that Dolores del Rio had initially been on Fairbanks's mind for a role in the film. Apparently Fairbanks, who had just been privy to a private screening of Carewe's first *Resurrection* (1927, *Inspiration*), had been in conversation with the director about the possibility of Del Rio playing the "leading role" opposite the star/writer. Carewe informed Fairbanks that del Rio was unavailable, tied up as she was with no less than three roles scheduled for filming (*The Trail of '98*, *Ramona*, *No Other Woman*). According to news at the time, Carewe had another actress to suggest for the role Fairbank's was looking to fill. Fairbanks agreed to give Carewe's relatively untried actress a screen test. The test went well and... Eve Southern was cast ("Leading Ladies of Screen Gamble on Being in Picture," *NYT*, May 29, 1927, X4). What has gotten confused in later discourse is the fact that there were two "leading ladies" to be cast in *The Gaucho* script. Dolores del Rio was not in consideration for the "wild mountain girl" played by Vélez; she was sought for the saintly "girl of the shrine" role, the woman with whom the Vélez character ultimately competes (victoriously) for Fairbanks's heart. The later confusion is likely caused by the fact that, once the film was released, it was rarely referred to as a production with two female leads; Vélez's role, and her performance in it, eclipsed the impact of the saintly Southern.

The two figures were deliberately cast as opposites; the "girl of the shrine" was quite literally not of this world, whereas the "wild mountain girl" very decidedly was. Frances Gilmore, in her article "Nordic Poise and Latin Passion: A study of Temperaments," (*Motion Picture Classic*, Sept 1927, 55, 90). characterizes Southern as "the good influence" and Vélez as "the bad influence." Southern is quoted: "I play the spiritual love. Very peaceful and sweet.... And I lose the hero in the end to the bodily love!" (emphasis added). This was the roaring '20s after all. It was a stroke of luck for del Rio that she was unavailable for the part.

One of the most delightful scenes in *The Gaucho* has Vélez eating, drinking, talking and arguing with Fairbanks all at the same time. She partakes in each activity with equal and simultaneous passion.

<sup>206</sup> For an excellent example of the ambivalence with which the film was greeted in Mexico, particularly by the most elite, well established critics, see two reviews anthologized in Ángel Miquel (1992): José Juan Tablado's (52-58; first published in *El UI*, Oct 9, 1927) and Juan Bustillo Oro's (214-18; first published in *El UI*, Feb 2, 1989). Juan Tablado references Vélez saying that she and the film's director, F. Richard Jones, had plans to marry. Vélez came under criticism, here, on that basis. I found no other reference to such plans in *El UI*. Bustillo Oro makes no mention of backstage romance and enjoys the film rather more than did Juan Tablado.

*La Opinión* briefly picked up the story: "Lupe Vélez se casa?" (Sep 9, 1927, 4). No details are given, except that "the news is circulating in Hollywood." The article goes on to elaborate details of Vélez's youth ("she's not yet seventeen years old"), her stage triumph in Mexico within "the genre 'rata-plán mexicano' inspired by the 'bataclán,'" and Vélez's unique presentation of The Charleston. The article makes no move to play down Vélez's stardom; it celebrates her having "managed to eclipse other favorites of the public."

I found no further mention of the marriage plans in *La Opinión*. And I found no talk of a Vélez/Jones romance with within U.S. discourse, only later insinuations that sparks flying between Fairbanks and Vélez had gotten under Pickford's skin. There may have been a move to quell one rumor with another.

was neither a representation of Argentina nor of the true South American gaucho figure. An anonymous Argentinean critic, for example, responding in *La Opinión*, was unmoved by Fairbanks's claim of "artistic license" and found no consolation in Fairbanks's admittance that the film was more fantasy than reality. Indeed, *La Opinión*'s guest critic assailed the Fairbanks character as "half personality of the [U.S.] far west, half bandit of the [Spanish] Sierra Morena, a type both truculent and arbitrary that, what is more, dances on a stage as though in a cafe concert." The writer asks rhetorically: "why, then, call such a film 'The Gaucho'?"<sup>207</sup>

In this, Vélez's first film (unlike cases posed by her later projects), Vélez was not held individually accountable for her vehicle's indulgence in fantastic exoticism or its implications of state weakness and national lawlessness. Most critics gave Vélez's Hollywood debut a roundly considered "thumbs up" for the humor and vitality she brought to the production. But the big news in the community was the stage show that accompanied the film. Vélez's seasoned, candid and charismatic stage presence made her a significant asset in promotion. Her star force in Hollywood thus unfolded in direct descent from her work in Mexican musical theater. The fact that her stage triumph was as complete as her screen success was a point of pride in Mexico and in the Los Angeles community.<sup>208</sup> On the other hand, pride in Vélez did not go so far as to warrant the accompaniment of her introduction with a rendition of the Mexican national anthem, as happened with the Graumann Chinese Theater's first *Noche Mexicana*. The fact that Graumann's indulged in great fanfare in presenting Vélez's film and stage show to the

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<sup>207</sup> The Argentinean critic answered his own question, speculating that the move was propaganda specifically designed to capture the South American market. "Concepto que 'el Gaucho' mereció en la Argentina," *La Opinión*, Jan 25, 1928, 4. This issue is strong enough to be taken up again by Eugenio de Zárraga, "Una Explicación necesaria en el caso de cintas 'denigrantes,'" *La Opinión*, May 30, 1934, 4. Apparently Fairbanks had been pressed to concede the point: "my 'Gaucho' isn't Argentinean, nor is he of any country in South America; he is an ideal character of a pampa that only exists in my imagination."

<sup>208</sup> Initial coverage in *La Opinión* was conspicuous but muted; typical was an article that merely announced the screening, including the prologue that in which "various Spaniards, Mexicans and South American take part [...] Lupe Vélez's role in the film is one of the most important." "Elogios a la película 'El Gaucho,'" *La Opinión*, Dec 25, 1927.

Mexican community shows they understood the box-office potential of both Mexican star and Mexican audience. But Graumann's lacked awareness of how that appeal might translate within elite versus popular circles and they certainly misjudged the (in)appropriateness of performing the Mexican National Anthem to introduce an individual entertainer ("a person who is not the legitimate representative of a nation," opined *La Opinión*) appearing solely for the purpose of entertainment.<sup>209</sup> Graumann's invited the luminaries of *la colonia*—including educators, intellectuals, the Mexican vice-consul and Ignacio Lozano, founder and owner of *La Opinión*—to attend the event. So a night that might have somewhat endeared the theater to the colony instead became an entirely avoidable public relations debacle that cast a shadow over Vélez's first "official" presentation to the personally invited elite.<sup>210</sup>

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<sup>209</sup> "Gran función e gala el Teatro Chino: será en honor de la colonia mexicana," *La Opinión*, Jan 8, 1928, 4; also quoted by Laura Isabel Serna (diss. 2007, 346-7). To my reading, it is hard to measure the extent to which the inappropriate playing of the anthem was tied to Vélez personally, or tied to the basis of class, or if the same reaction would have resulted from any actress receiving the "honor." As Serna notes, the vice-consul opined, *before the event*, that Graumann's plans to honor the community by playing its national anthem would be seen as inappropriate in such a setting. Serna's writing ties the offense taken directly to "the entrance of actress Lupe Vélez, identified by *La Opinión* as an 'ex-chorus girl from the Lírico' (a cabaret in Mexico City)," in order to explain that "Vélez's association among the Mexican elite with the racy world of Mexico City's cabaret and theater scene made her a problematic candidate for the position of cultural ambassador and an unlikely official representative of the Mexican Government" (346-347). While Vélez is certainly "an unlikely official representative of the Mexican Government," she would not necessarily be seen as an illegitimate cultural ambassador. Serna continues, in a footnote, to explain the association between Mexico's theater scene and prostitution. As discussed in my chapter two, however, the *Lírico* was not considered a "cabaret," and an *ex-tiple* (the term used in the piece to which Serna refers) should not be translated as "chorus girl" but as "soprano." Celia Montalvan, Lupe Rivas Cacho and Delia Magaña—*tiples* or *ex-tiples* all—are each highly celebrated in *La Opinión* on occasion of their appearances on Los Angeles stages. These stars are not confused with chorus girls or prostitutes. See my note 205.

This Vélez project has, on multiple occasions, convinced me of the need for scholarship that rejects the recirculation of rhetorical whore bashing. Such representations, which perpetuate a regressive, classist, "morality" discourse, must be analyzed rather than accepted at face value.

<sup>210</sup> A further offense was created—one "even more keenly felt," as Serna notes—at a later point in the show: an announcement that "a Mexican would play the harmonica," introduced "a poor, comical negro doing pirouettes and making comical gestures" ("Dos inconscientes ofensas" *La Opinión*, quoted in Serna). The paper used the opportunity to make the point that the practice of slavery in Mexico ended with the nation's formation. This second offense may have further exacerbated any negative reaction to Vélez's participation in the event, to the extent that there was one.

Faux pas notwithstanding, the pages of *La Opinión* reflect Vélez's rising popularity in the colony.<sup>211</sup> In mid-April she participates in her first important community event, a benefit for Mexican victims of a recent flood in California's rural Santa Paula Valley. Her hand-written letter to the committee organizing the humanitarian relief (and to "the honorable Colonia Mexicana, my friends...") is reproduced in the paper,<sup>212</sup> reflective of a new role for Vélez, a genuine, if junior, cultural ambassador. In June she participates in the community's important *Fiesta de la Raza*, organized by the Grupo Hispánico in Los Angeles. In October she was invited back to *Fiesta de la Raza* as a guest of honor, receiving that honor at the hand of Virginia Fábregas, who was arguably the most significant dramatic actress of Mexico's "legitimate" theater.<sup>213</sup> Still another community event, sponsored by *La Opinión*, highlighted Vélez's participation, along with that of Ramon Novarro and Raquel Torres. In this instance she asks, by way of the paper, for the community's patience with her performance, as she had been busy with her travel schedule and thus unable to rehearse with the orchestra ("I won't tell you what the songs are, but you will know them").<sup>214</sup> Vélez has been welcomed into the community and, for that, she enthusiastically expresses her joy, humility and gratitude.

As I have outlined above, *The Gaucho* was released in top-tier metropolitan theaters with exhibitions including live stage performance of which Vélez was an invaluable participant. After the opening in Hollywood, she toured with the film,

<sup>211</sup> The paper still makes fun of Vélez, in playful ways; they show a picture of her funny smile as they report her announcement as a WAMPAS baby star, "An Advertisement for toothpaste? no!... Just the smiling effigy of Lupe Vélez, the ex-tiple 'Jazz' of the Lírico of Mexico and now 'Wampa Baby Star' (*sic*) under contract with United Artists of Hollywood." "La Estrella del Día," *La Opinión*, Jan 31, 1928, 4.

<sup>212</sup> "Un autógrafo del la Estrella Lupe Vélez." *La Opinión*, April 14, 1928, 4.

<sup>213</sup> "Encantada!—fue la respuesta de Lupe Vélez: cuando Virginia Fábregas la invitó a la fiesta de la Raza," *La Opinión*, Oct 7, 1928, 8. See ad on the same page: Vélez is listed as the headliner, with her name printed in capitals and a larger font than Fábregas or José Crespo. For post event coverage, see, "Recibira una medalla," *La Opinión*, Oct 10, 1928, 4. Under an atypical photo (for Vélez in *La Opinión*), unsmiling and sophisticated, reads an atypical caption: "La encantadora Lupe Vélez."

Vélez enjoyed a visit from her old friend Teresa Renner this same week; "El debut de la Tiple-jazz" (also referred to as *la tiple cómica*) was well received: "Teatrales," *La Opinión*, Oct 11, 1928, 4,6. *El Universal Ilustrado* wrote that Renner stayed with Vélez during her visit to Los Angeles.

<sup>214</sup> "Mañana se efectuara en el Ambassador Auditorium, el 'Baile de las Estrellas'," *La Opinión*, Oct 26, 1928, 4. The event received front-page coverage the next day: "¡Estrellas!" *La Opinión*, Oct 27, 1928, 1.

performing song and dance numbers billed as “of her own creation,” at topflight theaters in New York, Chicago and Pittsburgh.<sup>215</sup> When the metropolitan tour was complete, the film began appearing at neighborhood theaters across the country at “popular prices.” This included a run in downtown Los Angeles in which, with an unusual move, Vélez appeared in person nightly reprising her stage show. On June 5 1928, the *Los Angeles Times* reported of the success of that two-week run with the following brief story announcing the show’s last night.

Because the demand for pictures of Lupe Velez, Douglas Fairbanks’s leading lady in “The Gaucho,” at the United Artists’ Theater, who is also appearing in an original song-and-dance act of the stage of the playhouse in connection with the showing of the picture, has been so great, the charming little Mexican artist will distribute 1000 more to ladies on the audience today, the management announces.<sup>216</sup>

The live appearance of a star before an audience paying “popular prices” for a movie indicates an anomalous circumstance. While the story does not elaborate on the ethnic make-up of the crowd, the expectation that photos would be distributed to the “ladies of the audience” indicates the historical existence of a fan base that has gone largely neglected in accounts both of the period and within recent scholarship; it seems more than likely that Vélez’s “ladies” were substantially *mexicanas*. The show was highly advertised in *La Opinión* for the entire two weeks of its run.<sup>217</sup> Lost in this fanfare was the opening of *Stand and Deliver*, released late in February 1928, which did not tour with a stage show. Vélez thus enjoyed somewhat of a reprieve from stage touring, until *Lady of the Pavements*, which, as has been discussed, equaled *The Gaucho* in its collection of stage (if not screen) accolades. *Pavements* caused particular excitement in Mexican-

<sup>215</sup> At one of the standard price events in Los Angeles she gave away one-thousand signed pictures of herself, largely, reported the *Los Angeles Times*, to thrilled female fans, (“Mexican Star’s Act Ends Today,” *LAT* June 19, 1928, A11). The accolades she received in Los Angeles are too many to include here, but they extended from the Hollywood set (“Hollywood Night Honors Actress,” *LAT*, May 28, 1928, A11), to the Mexican-American community (“Fiesta Day at Philharmonic Brings Drama,” *LAT*, Oct, 16, 1928, A11).

<sup>216</sup> “Mexican Star’s Act Ends Today,” *LAT*, June 5, 1928, A11.

<sup>217</sup> By July, *La Opinión* reported that Vélez was ill (not for the first time on the tour); her doctors ordered that she be allowed to rest. *La Opinión*, July 13, 1928, 8 (photo caption). While the tours can be seen as honoring her popularity, She also appears to have been highly taken advantage of. They were running her ragged.

descent Los Angeles as Vélez was not only *heard* in the film but she was heard *singing*—in Spanish—as advertisements declared in large, bold print.<sup>218</sup> Owing to *Pavements* extended time in production, the community was treated to two Vélez movies in rapid succession, *Pavements* and *Wolf Song*, featuring song lyrics in Spanish. Vélez’s popularity was thus poised to reach a real height in the community. And perhaps it may have, had not two virtually simultaneous scandals eclipsed her light.

Trouble came in late in January 1929. Raúl Reyes Spíndola, delegate to Mexico’s Secretary of Education, was invited to a screening of *Wolf Song*. Reyes Spíndola found a certain scene in the film, specifically its three intertitles, to be denigrating of Mexicans. Taking up the matter with Will Hays’s Production Code office, he reportedly succeeded in getting the entire scene removed. Gabriel Navarro’s coy article about the situation praises Hays’s response for “saving a certain Mexican cinema star” from “artistic death.”<sup>219</sup> The article takes Vélez to task throughout, for her participation in the film, without mentioning the currently popular actress by name. The offensive scene is left undescribed save a characterization of one intertitle, which reportedly “compared a Mexican woman to a Native American ‘squaw’.” As the article reads, the offense is not taken as a derogatory reference to Native American women but to the “comparison” between Indians and Mexicans (Navarro puts “squaw” in quotation marks, which I interpret not as scare quotes but as indication of a term in English). The comparison in question comes with a line of dialogue reading, “she can dance like a Ute that’s counted coup.”<sup>220</sup> The line means to identify the unnamed Mexican woman as a good dancer. The

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<sup>218</sup> “Oiga a Lupe Vélez... canta y habla en Español,” advertisement for United Artisits Theater, *La Opinión*, Jan 22, 1929, 4.

<sup>219</sup> Gabriel Navarro, “UNA PELICULA DENIGRANTE PARA MEXICO, A PUNTO DE SER LANZADA A LA DISTRIBUCION.” *La Opinión*, Jan 20, 1929, p4.

<sup>220</sup> Details of the changes can be readily identifiable owing to the existence of several working scripts. Herrick Archive, AMPAS. Paramount Pictures scripts: WOLF SONG, Victor Fleming; 1929 (Paramount Pictures, 1929). The lines of dialogue are taken straight from Fergusson’s novel (10). Counting coup is a

broader conversation taking place in the scene continues on to characterize the same woman as a great cook (of chile con carne) and to imply she is also good in bed. Assumably, the larger offense is that committed with the third intertitle, which carries the implication that the woman in question is sexually available. Curiously, Navarro and Reyes Spíndola indicate no specific interest in matters of identity and relationship regarding supposed Spaniards, Mexicans, Native Americans, “*peones*,”<sup>221</sup> *ricos*, uncouth whites and the representation of *mestizaje*. And while their interest in this scene indicates a concern for the represented propriety of the one Mexican woman who is never shown, no mention is made of the film’s consistent sexualization of women of the subjugated classes.<sup>222</sup>

Much like the imagined Argentina of *The Gaucho*, the Mexican/Spanish life-world of nineteenth-century Northern New Mexico, is answerable more to imagined frontier fantasy than to history. While Fergusson is understood to have engaged in significant research for his novel, there is little in the story that necessitates historical accuracy. Such a conceit that would have a young *rica* fall instantly in love with a scruffy white trapper (who, in the book had learned to “speak Mex”) may seem unsurprising in that it maintains a version of (Southern/Spanish) whiteness for both characters. There are several baseline problematics to the film, beginning with the hacienda fantasy and the

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Plains Indian tradition, which has to do with the honor of a warrior and thus implies a masculine celebration of courage and victory. Counting coup would not imply a comparison to the Pueblo Indians of the region of Taos. Thus the line would read more as an expression (belittling the culture of Native Americans) than as an actual comparison. These trappers are characterized in the novel to be well-traveled; the line flatters their (or Fergusson’s) “knowledge” of the practices of a range of Indian tribes.

<sup>221</sup> I am using the term *peones*, here, as it was the term used in Fergusson’s novel. Context (vaguely) indicates that, in the novel, *peones* refers to a specific circumstance endured by a subset of *los pobres*, that of indentured servitude or slavery. Fergusson does use the term *slavery* as well; he does so, however, to indicate an enslaved *Native American* population. Historically, these two subjugated peoples are not distinct but existed as New Mexico *mestizaje*. Both film and novel predictably deny the class and race based oppression within the Spanish speaking population of 19<sup>th</sup>-century Northern New Mexico. As slavery continued in the Northern Territories well past the date it was ended in Mexico “proper,” it follows that anti-indigenous and mestizo bias also continued beyond, even, the level operating closer to the capital. For the most relevant scholarship I have found, to date, on 19<sup>th</sup>-century New Mexico, race and “whiteness,” see Gómez, 2005.

<sup>222</sup> If as I have said, the film leaves open the possibility that the compromised women were to be read as Native American, it seems that Navarro and Reyes Spindola are willing to read the film on those terms.

romance of class disparity, naturalized by skin color. These matters are not engaged by the *La Opinión* piece and apparently did not merit challenge in the evaluation of Reyes Spindola.<sup>223</sup>

There is an element of irony in the fact that Navarro is quick to applaud the Hays Office for having invited Mexicans to the screening and for making suggested changes, given the superficial quality of the questions raised and changes made. In this context, *La Opinión*'s refusal to extend any benefit of the doubt towards Vélez, a nineteen year-old actress with no agency over script details, seems simplistically vindictive.

Perhaps the quick condemnation of Vélez is explainable by a separate news item that appears on the very same page of *La Opinión*'s cinema section as appears this *Wolf Song* article. Vélez had granted an “interview” to the *Los Angeles Evening Herald* that bought her a rash of trouble.

**¡EXTRA! LUPE IN LOVE FOR THE FIRST TIME!**

**Declarations of the potosina star in an interview**

“Spanish girls can’t have ‘pep’ like me and be good.”<sup>224</sup> To be decent it’s necessary to be quiet and repressed.”

“For the first time in my life I’m in love, and this is crazy [ridiculo]. Never have I loved anyone until I met Gary Cooper.”

“In Mexico, a woman that is married is a slave. I’ve always loved my liberty.”

“This little devil of fire comes from a town near Mexico city that has 5,000 people and 300 churches!”<sup>225</sup>

“If I stayed in Mexico, I’d be a ‘bad woman’ ....”

These and other lines were said in an interview published last night in the “Evening Herald” by the Mexican artist of the screen, Lupe Vélez, in the presence of Gary Cooper, to whom she confessed her love. However, when the writer asked what she thinks about marriage, she responded:

—“I am free, and I want my freedom. In Mexico a girl is a slave after she marries....”

[...]

<sup>223</sup> I earlier placed *Wolf Song* (film and novel) within the catalogue of “transcultural” products and productions that, as previous scholars have argued, sought to de-Mexicanize the southwest in favor of a Spanish-ized (racially pure) “whitewash” of the region’s ethnically and economically complex history. For a terrific overview of historiography of Spanish and Mexican representations in scholarly and popular history, see Antonia I. Castañeda (2000). On the Spanishizing of Southern California pseudo-history in the early 20th Century, See William Deverell, *Whitewashed Adobe* and Phoebe S. Kropp (2006).

<sup>224</sup> The *L.A. Herald* review interview and article was in English. It’s extremely unlikely that Vélez would have said that, “Spanish girls can’t have ‘pep’ like me and be good” (my emphasis); she was talking about her home country. *La Opinión* translated the line as “muchachas españolas,” though undoubtedly the mistake originates with the *Tribune*. Again, Vélez doesn’t get the benefit of the doubt.

<sup>225</sup> This line implying excessive Catholicism is included, in the *La Opinión* piece, in a way that seems to attribute the anti-Catholic sentiment to Vélez, though it seems clear that the characterization of Vélez’s origins has composed by the *Los Angeles Herald* writer.

The writer concluded the article with praise for Lupe's talent for imitation, assuring that the one she does of Dolores del Rio is very funny, as is that she performs of Jetta Goudal.

This brief item appearing in *La Opinión*, which I quote here almost in its entirety, is followed three days later by a more extensive article further discussing the same interview. That second feature is accompanied by a caricature of Vélez looking cheerfully self-satisfied. There was no further discussion of the source of that interview, the *Los Angeles Evening Herald*, a William Randolph Hearst paper.<sup>226</sup>

**I'm Free; Free!—Shouts Lupe Velez**

The *inquieta ex-type* Jazz of Mexico declares that she loves the United States, because here she is free. She likes Americans and considers it "terrible" to be married in Mexico—as she sees our customs.



Figure 18: Vélez is “free” at last<sup>227</sup>

Here *La Opinión* purports to reprint the interview in translation. The account elaborates further on the anti-Mexican sentiment Vélez apparently expressed: Vélez liked going out by herself and did not like to be accompanied or watched, (girls going out alone in Mexico are thought to be bad). She found Mexico hypocritical (a woman can't smoke in public and yet it was her grandmother that taught her how to smoke). Seemingly Vélez's

<sup>226</sup> Hearst newspapers developed a reputation for slandering Mexicans and fueling anti-Mexican sentiment from the 1920s through the 1940s. See for example, scholarship on the Sleepy Lagoon incident of the subsequent "Zoot-Suit Riots": Obregón Pagán (2003) and Barajas (2006).

<sup>227</sup> This drawing by Salvador Boguez had been also printed in *La Opinion* six months earlier (June 24, 1928, 4), running, then, under quite different circumstances: with a caption referring to Vélez's participation in the grand "festival hispanico" (referred to in the English-language press as the "Spanish festival" as discussed in my introduction), at the Philharmonic Auditorium. In that context the image, under the headline "La Niña Lupe," reads as a figure generally delighted and "full of pep" rather than self-satisfied.

gravest perceived sin lay in her impudent insinuation that the benefits of her new-found freedom as a young woman in the U.S. were found liberating for the older generation of Mexican women as well. Vélez claims solidarity with her mother when she states, “here I can go out with young people and my mother doesn’t worry. *She* knows no one will talk” (emphasis added). Vélez then reportedly detailed the disingenuous machinations by which a young woman would have to arrange to go out with friends or with a boy, saying such proscriptions cause girls to have to lie. The implication is that the disingenuous representation is served to the mother, necessary for pride of family within a judgmental community, rather than for self: “lies all the time, lies and lies.” Again Vélez invoked the older generation in her condemnation of Mexican patriarchy. It was these comments that reportedly raised the greatest ire in Mexico:

To be married in Mexico is terrible. The husband can do what he wants and the wife is afraid to say anything. He can go out all night but his wife has to stay at home with the kids and not say a word. If she goes out until seven at night, he asks her with disgust, “where have you been?” and fights with her. And everyone thinks he’s in the right.

The article, as translated in *La Opinión*, ends in such a way as to frame Vélez as irresponsible and a bit unstable. She offers to dance for the reporter, accompanying herself with her own sung words, “Halleluja, I’m free, I’m free”; she reportedly knocks over a vase of water in doing so. Though the (Anglo) reporter warns her to protect her white coat from the spilled water, Vélez is unconcerned, saying that she can always get it cleaned the next day. No mention is made of Vélez’s penchant for imitation, the note on which the article was earlier said to have ended. And Gary Cooper is nowhere referenced in this version.

A week later, *La Opinión* reports of the stir the interview caused in Mexico. *Excelsior* and *Ilustrado* are reportedly up in arms. The next day, a letter that Vélez had submitted to the Raúl Reyes Spíndola was printed in full in *La Opinión*, as it was in Mexico’s *Ilustrado*. Vélez maintained that the attributions were exaggerated and the

quotes inaccurate; her meaning was misunderstood. She was merely speaking to the differences in the two counties and not opining for or against the ways of either nation.

As I recently told a large audience of Mexicans in the United Artists theater, I always feel myself to be a daughter of Mexico and, at the bottom of my heart, the people of Mexico are my most beloved as I am one of your compatriots by birth.

The American people have been kind to me and to the Mexicans that have come to this country. Your respect for our country and our people and particularly for those that visit America is something of which I am proud. I'm sure that my country and people share my feelings about this respect. There exists a cordial understanding between America and Mexico—a feeling of friendship, loyalty and cooperation.<sup>228</sup>

Following the text of Vélez's letter, *La Opinión* closed the item with a rehearsal of the profound indignation the interview had incited. Singling out injury, caused because “[Vélez] said that Mexican women are ‘liars par excellence’,” the paper thereby deploys another *quote* that had not appeared in either of the two prior accounts of the interview.<sup>229</sup> As these events are unfolding, *Lady of the Pavements* debuted at the United Artist theater on Broadway and 9th.<sup>230</sup> The *Los Angeles Times* covered the *Pavements* stage shows in detail but missed (or ignored) the controversy spurred by the interview in the *Evening Herald*.

Inconsistencies surfacing in *La Opinión*'s multiple accounts of the interview suggest a fanning of the flames ignited by the interview, when dousing may have been an option. *La Opinión* used the opportunity to again position Vélez as an exemplary caution against U.S. assimilation. This, even as—or perhaps because—Vélez seemed to be

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<sup>228</sup> “Lupe Velez (sic) dice que ama a México y a los Mexicanos,” *La Opinión*, Jan 31, 1929, front page. In this instance Reyes Spindola is referred to as “special commissioner to the government on behalf of the cinema.”

<sup>229</sup> (“mentirosa por excelencia”). “Lupe Vélez dice que ama a México y a los Mexicanos,” *La Opinión*, Jan 31, 1929, front page. Finally, the piece reported a boycott against Vélez's films in Mexico. If there was a boycott—or boycotts—which is likely, it (or they) was/were unofficial and were probably variously and locally specific. Regarding *Wolf Song* specifically, the boycott point became either mute or buried. While the film was not exported to Mexico, Paramount records make no reference to any reaction against the film subsequent to the Reyes Spindola requests. I would speculate that Paramount decided against export.

<sup>230</sup> The first screening was on January 22nd and Gabriel Navarro's review appeared just three days later. Navarro describes the film as beautifully photographed but “a disaster as a talkie,” with the worst synchronization he has witnessed to date. (The D.W. Griffith papers also document some synchronization problems in the initial run which he vowed to fix. Apparently they did indeed get fixed.) Navarro further opines that, “as in earlier pictures, Vélez is still a type and is not in any manner an actress,” though he concedes her personality on the screen in magnetic. (“La Pantalla,” *La Opinión*, Jan 25, 1929, 4).

gaining popularity among the paper's potential readers. To contextualize *La Opinón*'s editorial practices we must look again to the community demographics. This time, it is useful to reach back prior to the stock market crash and thus prior to repatriation pressures. The later years of the 1920s offered their own backdrop of contestations in the greater Los Angeles community regarding national identity. The community was founded on a built-in tension between pride of origin and culture, on the one hand, and the potential for U.S. assimilation, on the other. Sánchez documents a social and political climate against which *La Opinión*'s position follows a social logic. The paper was responding to a pressure that was being exerted by the Anglo population of Los Angeles: assimilate to U.S. Anglo culture. *La Opinión* used Vélez to paint an especially cautionary picture of U.S. assimilation, one that a young Mexican girl should read.

Modern Los Angeles had always been dominated by immigrants, which is to say, the region was dominated by newcomers transplanted from the midwestern United States. Southern California developed as a conservative population that was suspicious of urban life as experienced in the east and midwest. To a very large extent, newcomers shared a collective intention to found and maintain a staunchly protestant white culture. Though Sánchez gives us a picture of a Los Angeles that was growing in diversity as it grew in population, “[i]t was the middle-class mid-westerner who dominated the public culture and politics of the city during the early twentieth century.” U.S. migrants were rejecting the traditional rural life of their roots while maintaining their “anti-urban ethos.” They were rejecting midwestern cities, crowded, as they were becoming, with poor and working-class immigrants. This population, as Sanchez writes, “reshaped the political and social mindset of southern California, giving it a midwestern flavor” (91). By 1930, 14% of Los Angeles residents were considered “nonwhite,” a category that included Mexican, Japanese, Chinese and African Americans. Moreover, of foreign-born (non-

U.S. born) Angelenos, Mexicans were the largest group, accounting for 19% of that population.<sup>231</sup>

Attitudes regarding foreign nationals, in relation to the “ideal” California picture that the white majority sought to create, split between nativists advocating curtailment of immigration, and “reformers” seeking means of assimilation and “Americanization.” While nativist attitudes had currency politically, the economic value of the Mexican labor force—in the period subsequent to the forcing out of the Asian labor force (in the early 1920s) and prior to the Great Depression—was such that the assimilationists prevailed. Thus by the late 1920’s a now “professionalized” Americanization force set its sights on Mexican women, believing the patriarchal nature of the Mexican family structure to be a key barrier to Mexican assimilation into U.S. culture, including the learning of English and the instilling of the “protestant work ethic” (Sánchez, 98-107). Americanization efforts, then, did indeed seek to undermine Mexican male authority. A young charismatic Mexican woman, standing in apparent solidarity with her mother to declare, in effect, “we’re free,” painted a portrait that too closely approximated the threat seemingly posed by the forces of concrete, even official—as Sánchez says, *professional*—forces of assimilation.

We know there existed a profound antipathy toward assimilation or acculturation (the term more often used) within the highest quarters of the colony, including the editorial operation of *La Opinión*. In this period, as Serna documents and as becomes consistently evident to the historian/reader, the paper was largely aligned with the Mexican consul and the interests of the Mexican government. In its efforts to consolidate the exile population, *La Opinión*’s editorial agenda may have been more conservative—more reactionary against the perceived invasion of radically modern American values—

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<sup>231</sup> In addition to the “non-white” and foreign-born indexes, populations found suspect by the conservative mindset settling into the Los Angeles basin, would include non-protestants—Jews and Italians along with Mexicans. Relevant issues of representation involving both those ethnic categories will be addressed in Chapter 4.

than the Mexican American public, and more conservative than (regions of) Mexico itself. The environment Vélez had known in Mexico City, including factions of the popular press that spoke to the City (the illustrated journals), appeared more tolerant of transnationally-informed modern culture than was *La Opinión*.

In its conservatism, *La Opinión*'s rejection of Vélez—or its registering of opposition to her apparent mode of “assimilation”—could be seen, in the wider picture, as both somewhat self-defeating and somewhat contradictory. First, it served to consolidate the elite Mexican position in a way that, ironically, was not inconsistent with the elite white protestant world that governed the social and political structure of the greater metropolis. So, when the deportation campaign developed in earnest, the overt resistance of the Mexican American elite to any measure of assimilation served the nativist agenda.<sup>232</sup> Ultimately, though, the contradiction element is of greater import; for what might seem more surprising than *La Opinión*'s willingness to vilify Vélez is its doing so while embracing Hollywood entertainment culture to the great extent that it did.

Colin Gunckel speaks to the paper's apparent contradictions as symptomatic of the ambivalent engagement with the industry. *La Opinión* attempts to strike a balance between, on the one hand, celebrating Hollywood cinema and its Mexican players and, at the same time, maintaining a moral and cultural distance. As Gunckel documents, there was “an attempt to capitalize upon [Hollywood’s] popularity with readers and to simultaneously espouse a stance of cultural protection” (2009, 72). In the case of Vélez, once the “I’m Free” gaffe blows over and a decent interval has passed, *La Opinión* appears to achieve that balance with an unstated editorial policy: coverage of Vélez subtly shifts such that she is treated as a Hollywood star rather than as a *Mexican* Hollywood star. As the paper, in the 1930s, increasingly exploits reader interest in

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<sup>232</sup> On another front, we know, from over a decade of scholarship on cinema and protestant whiteness, that antipathy towards Hollywood cinema's immigrant Jewish influence meant that the industry became a negative symbol of the “immigrant element” in the eyes of conservative Protestant population. See Brackman (2000).

Hollywood films and stardom, Vélez is not exiled from coverage but neither is she, any longer, “nuestra Lupe.” She becomes, in effect, Lupi Velez. And the fact that she begins making Spanish-language Hollywood talkies did not change that dynamic.

Hollywood’s foray into Spanish-language production introduced yet another topic of negotiation to *La Opinión*’s cinema pages. Early in the process, as scholars have documented, the productions were highly criticized, owing especially to problematics of accent variation and regional and cultural (in)consistency (Gunckel, 2008). The paper stopped short, for good reason, of criticizing the Mexican and Latin American players for taking part in the films. Spanish-language studio productions came to make up a significant portion of the eclectic mix of entertainment available in the locally owned theaters.<sup>233</sup> Vélez was never criticized for making the films, which played in local venues for consistently respectable runs, but her films, whether in English or Spanish, received little attention outside of advertisements and brief listings. Likewise, her local personal appearances were infrequent. It was not until about two years after the “I’m Free” mishap that salient signs in *La Opinón* indicated Vélez as, again, a popular figure in the community. February of 1932 brought Vélez an appearance as a guest of honor before a screening of her third and final Spanish-language film, *Hombres de mi vida* (Columbia, 1932). The event gained notice in the paper with a flattering write-up indicating the film was enthusiastically received.<sup>234</sup> As a class-conscious (Irish) immigrant tale with a willful, plucky heroine—who was also Catholic, moral and chaste (despite the innuendo

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<sup>233</sup> See Gunckel for extensive documentation of the community’s “decidedly hybrid exhibition practice” (2009, 154).

<sup>234</sup> Vélez was joined at this event with Juan Torena (a Filipino actor who made many Spanish-language Hollywood films), Cuban actor René Cardona, and Paul Ellis from Argentina, who played a supporting role in *Hombres en mi vida*. Ellis (born Benjamin Italo Jose Ingenito O’Higgins) played mostly small roles in Hollywood films, usually uncredited. He later went to Spain and, as Manuel Granada, made movies until 1970. Vélez seemed to be making few appearances at the important functions in the colony. For example, in Dec 1930, she appeared at a screening of *Oriente y Occidente* (*East is West*) but was not at the Fiestas de la Raza just a week earlier. (*La Opinión*, Dec 18, 1930, 6; advertisement).

of the film's title)—it was an image-positive role for Vélez.<sup>235</sup> Just as things were looking up in the paper, however, the release of *Broken Wing* (Paramount, 1931) placed Vélez again at the center of controversy. *Broken Wing* played right into the image of Vélez as national traitor.

## Broken Promise

Put two trick performers such as Lupe Velez and Leo Carrillo in one picture, let them loose with their facial mannerisms and their shoulder shruggings and you have... “The Broken Wing.”

[...] Innocencio, plus mustache, plus sombrero, plus swagger, plus guns, and a merry smile, is very much in love with the Madcap Lolita, a fiery Mexican lass. This is none other than Lupe. Romantic, impulsive, she takes as matter of course, the tribute payed by Innocencio until this very handsome American aviator drops into the picture. *Then things take a turn in favor of the United States.*

Innocencio storms, he threatens. Finally he takes action. He will shoot this so-handsome but luck-less Americano despite Lupe’s cries and shoutings. And is about to until the army turns up. [... *Broken Wing*] is good fun and had last evening’s audience at the Paramount in a mildly hilarious mood most of the screening.

*New York Times*, (my emphasis).

This was the scandal that “stuck.” It was a high-profile production that played exceedingly well in the English-language press. The fact that it made Mexican government forces appear petty, violent, ineffectual and corrupt in contrast to the glorification of the imperial U.S.’s patronizing “civility,” went undiscussed in English. It is a well-produced, nicely paced, entertaining, offensive film. Carrillo’s Mexican villain (“an ingratiating Mexican bad man”) conveniently allows the U.S. imperialist figure (Vélez’s foster father) justification as virtuous patron and protectorate. From the hegemonic U.S. perspective, Vélez and Leo Carrillo provide an entertaining antagonistic

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<sup>235</sup> *Hombres en mi vida* was the Spanish-language production of *Men in Her Life* (Columbia 1931) in which Vélez starred opposite Gilbert Roland. The original English-language film starred Lois Moran and Charles Bickford. Thus it was the only one of these Spanish-language adaptations wherein Vélez had not been cast in the original version. Which is to say it was a “regular” role, not one designed for a language/accent-challenged player cast in a marginalized/foreigner position (in *East is West*, for example, Vélez’s dialogue was written in “pigeon” English and thus would have translated to “pigeon” Spanish... not a great national image). *Hombres* was especiall well received in Teatro California (“Los Teatro Locales,” *La Opinión*, Mar 29, 1932, 4) and it exhibited again in the community in 1934, at which point *La Opinión* responded with even more open enthusiasm, naming it one of the best of Hollywood’s Spanish-language features, thus signaling that it had not given up, in principle on either Vélez or on Spanish-language studio practice.

chemistry. As the *New York Times*'s-Mordant Hall (who had not always had a kind word for Vélez's professional chops) reports, "the brunt of the story is borne by Leo Carrillo and Miss Velez and, with their spirited encounters and their bright and colorful dialogue, they succeed in making the utmost of their roles."<sup>236</sup> It was suggested that the film "offer[ed] the fiery Lupe her best role" to date.<sup>237</sup> Such is the blindness of U.S. mainstream discourse to Hollywood's semi-regular international offenses.

In an interview for Mexico's fan magazine, *Filmográfico*, which took place close to a year after Mexico's banning of *Broken Wing*, Ramon Novarro is asked if he can "explain the cases of Lolita del Rio en *La paloma* [*The Dove*] and Lupe Vélez in *Alas rotas* [*Broken Wing*]." *The Dove* (RKO, 1932, Herbert Brenon—released in the U.S. as *Girl of the Rio* and hereafter referred to as such) came out two months prior to *Broken Wing* and was likewise banned in Mexico:

[Novarro] thinks a little.  
Their labor in these films has been involuntary. I am a friend of theirs—especially of Lupe, who has been witness to my many caprices [veleidades]—and both have discussed this point with me. They, like me, are devoted Mexicans and never would be given to denigrate Mexico; but cinelandia is cinelandia and here we can't do just what we want; there are stipulations in our contracts. I give thanks to God that I have not found myself in the painful position of Lolita or of Lupe. How I would lament not only an offense to my country but an offense to any other country of my race.<sup>238</sup>

Consistent with Novarro's statement, Mexican discourse quantified no distinction between the two roles, that of Vélez and of del Rio, in the measure of their offensiveness. The issue is essentially the same: the Mexican heroines fall in love with sympathetic white heroes, rejecting Mexican suitors (the suitor roles are played by the same actor in

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<sup>236</sup> Mordant Hall, "Leo Carrillo Appears as an Ingratiating Mexican Bad Man in a film of an Old Play." *NYT*, Mar 26, 1932, 17.

<sup>237</sup> "Double Bill Booked For Paramount," *LAT*, Mar 19, 1932, A7.

<sup>238</sup> "Ramon Novarro se separá de la Metro" *Filmográfico*, Feb 1933 (unpaginated). The article is a continuation of a two-part interview with Novarro. The first page of this part (Febraruay) is lost from the archive; likely author/interviewer was identified in the publication. Vélez ("nuestra artista maxima") is back in *Filmográfico* in April: Sarita Díaz, "¡Lupe Vélez, con todo su sal le dan y más Pimienta! (Lupe Vélez, with all her salt and more pepper)," *Filmográfico*, April, 1933 (unpaginated). Vélez tells Díaz that she's very glad everyone likes her new film *Hot Pepper* (Fox Films, 1933), as no one has been writing about her in the U.S. magazines since she and Cooper split up. "No one in Hollywood knows me well."

both films, Leo Carrillo, the “first family” Californian<sup>239</sup>). In both films the Mexican woman’s rejection of the Mexican man is naturalized, as the Carrillo characters are irrational, sinister, childish and vain. In both films the heroine saves her beloved American from Carrillo’s firing squad. One difference is that *Broken Wing* is a comedy. If one is willing to grant latitude on this basis, Carrillo’s character comes off as an exaggerated version of a stereotype, arguably a self-conscious—though I would not go so far as to say self-critical—performance. Again, if one is willing to accept, for example, Mordant Hall’s account of Carrillo’s “ingratiating... good-natured, bad guy” (Hall misses the significance of the character being a governor), one would see a contrast between *Broken Wing*’s Inocencio and *Girl of the Rio*’s Señor Tostado, “one of the most unsavory and sadistic greasers yet to meet the screen” (Cortés, 238).<sup>240</sup> Another discernible difference lies in the “save the children” operation. Being infantilized and thus painted as innocent, Vélez’s character escapes the overtly exoticized and/or criminalized sexualization that Curtis Marez points to as the structuring principle of *Girl of the Rio* and other films of the cantina girl ilk (Marez 2004, 167-8).<sup>241</sup> Lolita/Vélez marries the U.S. suitor with her feminine honor intact.

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<sup>239</sup> For a sense of Carrillo’s complete identification with his Spanish heritage, see Carrillo’s *The California I Love*, Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1961. And see Marez (2005, 495-7).

<sup>240</sup> Leo Carrillo was never taken to task for his portrayals in *Broken Wing* or *Girl of the Rio*—or, for that matter, *Lasca of the Rio Grande* (Paramount, 1931) *Viva Villa* (MGM, 1934) and others—despite the fact that it was his character that most palpably articulated the negative stereotyped characterizations of the Mexican nation. Carrillo’s buffoonish bandits and revolutionaries specifically undermine the credibility of Mexico’s government and civic structure, i.e. the Mexican state’s institutional fitness for modernity. Perhaps it is not coincidental that 1932 saw, shortly after the flap occurred around *Broken Wing*, the dedication of the Teatro Leo Carrillo, which was celebrated with considerable fanfare in the community. However, the theater’s location on Olvera street, along and its high prices, would indicate that it existed more in service to tourist trade than to the Mexican-descent community (as pointed out by Gunckel in a conversation of May 12, 2011). The theater’s exhibitions were infrequently advertised in *La Opinión*; when they were, though, the theater was hosting special events of the community.

<sup>241</sup> The fact of prostitution being legal in Mexico, so close in proximity to Hollywood, can be assumed to have played a part in the dynamic that Marez identifies. The fact that prostitution is criminal in California and negotiated in Mexico would conveniently play into the American romance of (light-skinned) Mexican woman’s honor saved by white U.S. men.

If del Rio turned down the role based on its portrayal of a cabaret dancer, as has been suggested (by Carlos Cortés, 1991), the final character presented no such profile.

The banning of *The Dove* brought word that *Broken Wing* was next. Gabriel Navarro took up the matter in *La Opinión* with a full-page piece carrying the headline, “¡We’ve Lost Dolores del Rio!” Novarro begins by rehearsing the successes of del Rio and the good feelings engendered between the star and her Los Angeles admirers. When he moves to the recent declension (under a sub-heading “the beginning of the end”), the question of marriage and kinship is emphasized over the offending production. Navarro, however, resists blaming the “loss” of Dolores on the actress’s divorce from Jaime del Rio, which he maintains was accepted, with reluctance, by a public that respected her privacy: “they did not scrutinize the corners of her private life, becoming attracted to merely dramatic emotion, as has occurred in the case of Lupe Vélez.” For Navarro, it was not del Rio’s divorce that marked the beginning of the end, it was Lupe Vélez. And it was not Vélez’s films that posed the problem, it was the success of her persona, the fact of her stardom. Navarro continues:

Lupe Vélez appeared in the world of the silver screen: foolish [alocada] restless [bullisiosa] and “care-free.” Little by little, the figure of the *potosina* [woman from San Luis Potosí] began to project a shadow over the austere image of modesty. This was the beginning of the end.

It was a “hostile” atmosphere that caused del Rio to “seek refuge exclusively in the heart of the American public.” For Navarro, it was this forced-push—forced by competition with Vélez, we are given to understand—toward Americanization that led to del Rio’s marriage to Cedric Gibbons and thus to the loss of her public’s sympathies.<sup>242</sup>

For Dolores, her co-nationals have respect and affection, for Mrs. Gibbons, they can only maintain the cold courtesy inspired by a madam of a non-*hispano* name. This might be unjust, but it is in accord with the social conventions of our people, erroneous perhaps, but true nonetheless.

*Girl of the Rio* is seen as “the last straw [*el colmo*],” bringing del Rio’s professional life to the point that “we’ve lost her.” As evidence of the loss, Navarro quotes del Rio

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<sup>242</sup> Gabriel Navarro, ¡Hemos Perdido a Dolores del Rio! “La Opinión,” May 22, 1932, 5 (ill. sup.) Though he condemns the nuptials, Navarro identifies a point of pride in del Rio’s choice, describing Gibbons as “one of the leading artistic practitioners in the world of Hollywood cinema.”

reporting that she “[has] known happiness for the first time in [her] life since marrying a gentleman who doesn’t belong to our race.” Comparing her to a political refugee who can never return home, Navarro insists that, “if she does not feel [like a refugee], it is only that the spirit of the race in her heart has already died. It is all a question of values....”

*Broken Wing* is nowhere mentioned in the piece; neither is Gary Cooper.<sup>243</sup> But the point is made that Vélez’s behaviors had been unbecoming (to her race) from the time of her arrival; she was a toxic influence in/on the Los Angeles community and on her Hollywood compatriots. This is the strongest direct indictment against Vélez yet presented in *La Opinión*. Yet if we juxtapose such accusations next to discourse noted earlier in *Motion Picture Magazine*—i.e. del Rio’s statement: “I have never had a chance to express the sex that is in me. I am going to begin to now. I am going to be free”<sup>244</sup>—the indictment finds a foothold. Such a perspective accounts for *La Opinión*’s chilly reception towards Vélez from the start.<sup>245</sup> And it explains the paper having virtually ignored Vélez’s relationship with Cooper.

Navarro’s condemnation notwithstanding, del Rio’s coverage in *La Opinión* did not wane for long, if at all. She continued to be highly celebrated in the community even just shortly after *Girl of the Rio*. Before the year was out, another Mexican starlet would be prematurely written off. “We’ve Lost Lupita, Too!” rang out a November headline.<sup>246</sup> One might wrongly assume, as I initially did, that Lupita Tovar was dismissed for her

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<sup>243</sup> By the time *La Opinión* takes an interest in the Cooper romance it is years later. In an interview Cooper is asked why he didn’t want to marry Vélez. He said that he did. “I asked her to marry me. She turned me down.” “Una Interview con Cooper, el Astro Dichoso.” *La Opinión*, Nov 18, 1934, sec 2, p6.

<sup>244</sup> We should remember this is Gladys Hall, who I have characterized as someone who makes things up (not to single her out). We have no more reason to believe del Rio said this than we have to accept Vélez weaving rugs after leaving the set of *The Gaucho*. The point is the “hostile” atmosphere that Navarro sees del Rio as having forcibly accepted.

<sup>245</sup> Perhaps the rumors circulated that Vélez was to marry Richard Jones, director of *The Gaucho*, were more toxic than they appeared in print at the time. See my footnote 206 above.

<sup>246</sup> “Tambien La Perdimos..!” (photo caption appearing over a photo of Lupita Tovar). *La Opinión*, Nov 13, 1932, 3 (ill. sup). Reading below the photo: “Primero fué Dolores del Río, a ahora es Lupita Tovar una artista que perdimos, en cierto modo. Al transformarse en Frau Paul Kohner, Lupita ha dejado naturalmente de ser mexicana, por más que nosotros, que la conocemos estamos de que sus sentimientos están siempre con los suyos...”.

participation in the offending *Border Law* (1931, Louis King, Columbia). Not so. It was her marriage to Czech-born producer Paul Kohner that precipitated the "loss."<sup>247</sup>

*La Opinión's* hand-wringing over del Rio and Tovar suggests (unpublished) conversations may well have taken place in the Mexican American community of Los Angeles at various junctures of Vélez's early years in Hollywood. However, with Vélez having been written off to a large extent by *La Opinión*, there was no apparent need to belabor in print the pros and cons, the highs and lows, of her public persona—devoting space to her love life, even negative commentary, would legitimize her apparently acculturated celebrity.<sup>248</sup> If Vélez relished a measure of "freedom" available in the U.S. as compared to Mexico, it was based on her ostensible ability to be "just *Lupi*," a dubious concept in itself and one that had never been reconciled with the Mexican communities expectations of "nuestra niña Lupe." With those expectations already disappointed, the *Broken Wing* scandal received far less attention in the LA colony than that of *Girl of the Rio*.<sup>249</sup>

Navarro waxed vexed to see del Rio and Tovar making choices not unlike that of Vélez, to live their own lives rather than what the paper would have liked to see as their Mexican lives. Based on what were considered to be the terms of Mexican identity—

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<sup>247</sup> In a way the Mexican descent colony did lose Tovar; she makes no more Hollywood films. Tovar goes back to Mexico to then return to Los Angeles on screen (and in a live appearance) as the star of the famed Mexican production, *Santa* (1932). (Tovar's daughter with Kohner, Susan Kohner, was cast as Sarah Jane, the black teen-ager that passes as white in the 1959 version of *Imitation of Life*. The couple also had a son, Pancho, who became a director. The Tovar/Kohner marriage lasted until Kohner's death in 1988.)

It is worth mentioning that there was in fact a penalty meted out to Mexican male actors in this era for racial "adultery." It was comparable in kind but certainly not in degree: John Gilbert's marriage to Virginia Bruce was "grave" news (G. Navarro, "Hollywood." *La Opinión*, Aug 3, 1932, 4). Barry Norton (Alfredo Carlos Birabén of Argentina), was celebrated in the paper for articulating his preference for Latinas (Maria Luz Patiro, "Barry Norton prefiere a la mujer latina" (*La Opinión*, May 13, 1932, 6). No male figures, including Ramon Novarro, faced the force of scrutiny that was weighed upon del Rio, Tovar and (especially) Vélez.

<sup>248</sup> For an excellent study of acculturation and the young Mexican American woman (1920-1950), see Vicki Ruiz (1993).

<sup>249</sup> In Mexico, where "Lupi" had more currency, the discursive fallout regarding the two films was approximately equal. Del Rio, however, was not officially censured from Mexican movie theaters, as was Vélez (the April *Filmográfico* interview made no mention of the ban or censorship). It was largely a symbolic gesture to temporarily ban all of Vélez's movies from Mexican screens. I can only speculate as to was to speculate as to why del Rio didn't receive this final harsh reprimando.

again, as seen from the perspective of the paper and the community elite—their decision to renounce “racial” loyalty by marriage meant they chose American cultural citizenship over Mexican. The fact that the paper very soon came around to again embrace del Rio and Tovar showed that, from the standpoint of popularity, those terms of citizenship were not as rigid as the paper might have estimated or hoped. Once again, we see the paper balancing a mandate of cultural protectionism while satisfying the desires of their readers. The terms of that negotiation privileged del Rio and Tovar, embraced as Mexican stars, over Vélez, a figure of Hollywood.

Lupe Vélez’s high-profile relation to Gary Cooper impacted her image in the imaginations of every public she encountered. With her championing of companionate marriage, Vélez participated in the era’s reconceptualization of the New Woman in U.S. hegemonic culture, challenging normative delimitations on “American femininity” and female sexuality. In doing so she simultaneously helped broaden the terms on which the “new” *Mexican* American woman might reshape her identity and redefine her value within her families and her communities. Which is to say that Vélez posed a profound threat to the project of cultural protection.

Over the course of the next chapter we will see Vélez “included out” of the modern Couple culture she helped to image on screen. Though the process of her exclusion serves not at all to shore up her value in the discourse of *La Opinión*, it shores up the tenacity of her star-determination and sharpens her performative humor. With her first Mexican film, the force of Vélez’s popularity in Mexico—which evolves “on the ground” in Los Angeles as well—will eventually pressure *La Opinión* to reevaluate the punishing distance at which she was held. For most of the 1930s, though, Vélez poses too

grave a threat to be safely mourned as “lost”; she is exiled to Anglo Hollywood,<sup>250</sup> remotely contained as “just Lupi.”

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<sup>250</sup> She is exiled to “Anglo,” white Hollywood in the mid-1930s, except for her time spent making films in London. Largely absent from this version of my study is discussion Vélez’s three British Films, *The Morals of Marcus* (1935), *Gypsy Melody* (1936), and *Mad About Money* (1938). Vélez’s work in England remains a rich topic for further research.

## CHAPTER 4

### Savage Discourse... and the (Musical) Staging of American Civilization

“Whom do you have in mind for the leading woman?” I asked.

“Lupe Velez,” they said.

“Lupe Velez!” I swallowed three times. “you mean the Mexican wildcat who hit a director over the head with a bottle!”

“None other. She will play the peanut vendor, and she’ll be so hot that she’ll melt the proscenium arch and it’ll come blopping down upon the orchestra!”

In his 1933 self-published autobiographical reflection, *The Glory Road*, opera singer Lawrence Tibbett crafts a narrative explaining the doubts he apparently harbored, initially, upon agreeing to star opposite Lupe Vélez in MGM’s *Cuban Love Song* (1931), the film that would finish out the contract that materialized Tibbett’s stage-to-screen crossover strategy.

“Listen,” I said, “there has been a terrible mistake. My name is Lawrence Tibbett. I’m a singer. You’ve evidently mixed me up with Sam Houston, who licked the Mexican army!”

I went around asking everybody, “What’s the best way for me to get along with Lupe Velez?”

I might have asked, “what’s the best way to jump over the moon?” It couldn’t be done.

They warned me, “She’s likely to bust out any minute, kick over the camera, and pick up a light and swat you over the head.”

Tibbet has mastered the bait-and-switch narrative mode common among fan discourses, where the star-as-problem scenario is overturned by a credible mediator revealing the “unknown human side” of the problem/star in question.<sup>251</sup> Tibbet is likely motivated by

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<sup>251</sup> Alma Whitaker (*LAT*), publishing right before *Cuban Love Song* was released, offers an exemplary case: in “‘Mexican Wildcat’ Most Affectionate Playmate,” Vélez is profiled as talkative, energetic, a terrifically popular player that greets “anything with trousers” with warmth and affection. Whitaker closes: “A Hollywood wit says Lupe is the girl who makes the old men young and the young men old. Her technique

the need to negotiate his own unique position. As an opera singer—a keeper of high culture—Tibbett’s task is to sustain his credibility as high-cultured artist while justifying or legitimizing his foray into lower-cultured Hollywood cinema. Thus he affects a role as creative ethnographer of sorts, positioning himself as a *genuine American* artist who—having been invited to grace the world of (genuine American) mass entertainment—has the rare, behind-the-scenes perspective to offer his higher-brow fans. Tibbett speaks from an elevated position he crafts for himself: he is able to function as cultural bridge-builder, owing (ostensibly) to his fully considered, intellectually self-reflective perspective... his insight into the complex exigencies, personal and professional, of (self)image and representation. Tibbet “reveals” the elite-culture aspirations harbored by those of low Hollywood so as to flatter his own image.<sup>252</sup> And who better to personify that peculiar Hollywood animal—that ego-inflated, insecure entertainer who wishes nothing so much as to be known as a “real” artist—than Lupe Vélez, the young, foreign exotic of the Hollywood jungle.

When we first met at rehearsal she seemed to appraise me with a challenging eye.  
“How do you do?” I said, knowing very well how she did.  
She said she did alright, which was contrary to what I had heard.  
Then an inspiration came from heaven! I offered, “I understand that you have a lovely voice.” I knew nothing about her voice.

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is fond recognition and vivacious flattery. She makes them all feel important and happy. ‘I love them all, so why shouldn’t they love me?’ [Lupe] demands” (Oct 4, 1931, B9). (The author also quotes Vélez reporting that she has been having “sinking spells,” but the idea is so in contrast to the star’s energetic presentation that the piece references this health issue only to make light of her fatigue: “If Lupe is like that on sinking spells, one can only imagine her capacity without them.”) Actually, though, Vélez suffered a “nervous breakdown” in this period.

<sup>252</sup> Tibbet had his own investment in American cultural citizenship to negotiate, as is communicated clearly, if inadvertently, between the lines of his book. He faced his own challenges in narratively civilizing his heritage (Tibbett comes from a family of California gold-chasers; his father, Sheriff of Kern County, was shot by “a local outlaw”; his uncle owned the town saloon.) With his book, he is attempting to bridge his two audiences—his two musical worlds—as he negotiates his rural California “redneck” roots. Upon completion of his three-film contract with MGM, clearly forged to bring opera to the screen, his contract was not renewed. With *The Glory Road*, he is advancing his own promotion, astutely framing himself as the liaison between elite and popular entertainment. He makes a point, in *The Glory Road*, of staking out his tastes as well as his accomplishments, citing “Don Azpiazu’s stirring reproduction on *The Peanut Vendor*,” along with Duke Ellington’s *The Indigo Blues*, as his “most highly prized phonograph recordings” (53).

“Who told you that?” she demanded. Something in her tone indicated that, shooting blindly, I had struck a vital spot. I was to learn, thank God, that she did have a good voice.

“Everybody,” I answered.

“It’s not like my mother’s,” Lupe said quietly. “her voice was divine. She was an opera singer in Mexico.”—She looked up at me. “Would you sing something for Lupe some time? Something in Spanish perhaps?”

“Of course, I said with what little breath was left in my body. “How about now? There’s a piano over there.”

I felt like Clyde Beatty, the animal trainer, must have felt when he first made a tiger lie down and roll over. Now I believed Congreve—“Music hath charms to sooth the savage beast, to soften rocks, or bend a knotted oak.”

Once Tibbet has established his higher ground on the set (in his narrative at least), he is at liberty to so “generously” reveal the Real Lupe Vélez... the “great emotional actress,” suffering for her inability to control, rather than be controlled by, press discourse.

I have never worked so peacefully with a leading woman. [...] Lupe Velez is a great emotional actress. Her only trouble is that she believes what the press agents write about her, and acts off-stage as well as on in a desperate and doubtless tiring effort to live up to her reputation as a firebrand.

According to Tibbett’s self-aggrandizing narrative, Vélez suffers for lack of the capacity for mature self-reflection (an assessment not so different from Paramount’s claim that *Wolf Song* represented the Real Lupe), precisely the trait that Tibbett exercises in this act of telling his own story.

With his carefully constructed gesture as cultural mediator, Tibbett uses Lupe Vélez to save himself for popular consumption by deigning to name and explain the low and thereby elevating it by way of his own magnanimous association. I open this chapter with Tibbett’s narrative as it exemplifies a pattern whereby Vélez is framed, defined, and positioned to enhance the image of others... and to negotiate the acceptability of Others. As in the previous chapter, Vélez-in-relation serves to redefine the parameters of American assimilability. In

this chapter, music consistently becomes both agent and metaphor for the structuring of inclusion and exclusion.

### **The Melting Pot Musical**

Jane Feuer (1978) writes of the plot convention characterizing the standard Hollywood musical as posing “an opposition between elite and popular art,” manifesting most often as a generation-based contest that the author terms “the ‘opera vs. swing’ narrative” (1978, 491). *The Jazz Singer* (Warner Bros., 1927), positioning the traditional religious music of the father against the jazz favored by the son, provides Feuer’s foundational example. Variations of Feuer’s elite vs. pop schematic help us follow the logic of standard Vélez narratives, both on screen and off, including those reaching back to her often repeated heritage story: as the *tiple* “jazz,” daughter of an opera singer. Alternative manifestations of this model replace the trope of generational conflict with the binary of metropole vs. periphery, conveniently staged as culture (or “cultured”) vs. nature (or “natural”). D. W. Griffith’s *Lady of the Pavements* (UA, 1929) offers a class- and ethnic-inflected variation on this theme and, in doing so, plays on the off-screen class and ethnic inscription attached to Vélez’s “real” persona: the cabaret performer/working girl. Two years later, in *Cuban Love Song* (MGM, 1931), Vélez, cast as a “peanut vendor” and presenting the popular Cuban song, *El Manisero*, (or “The Peanut Vendor,” as it was called upon its popularization in the U.S.), is paired with the American opera-singer-turned-movie-star, Lawrence Tibbett. The film, though is not of the back-stage musical sub-genre that so well illustrates Feuer’s model, nonetheless plays out according to formula, thus affording Tibbett the opportunity to advantageously position himself within a back-stage narrative of his own making.

Two subjects, both loosely intertwined with Tibbett's autobiographical narrative, ground this chapter: the music of *Cuban Love Song* and the pairing of Lupe Vélez with one of *Cuban Love Song*'s then minor players: Jimmy Durante. The role of Durante's character in the film—O.O. Jones, the lovable, ethnic (vaguely Irish) rube / folk musician—introduces a triangulating function that suggests a purposeful re-working of Feurer's binary system is in order. Even the concept of musical *triangulation* may not prove expansive enough to exhaust the series of counterpoints packed into the Opera v. Jazz formula. Certainly we understand, for example, that a traditional-versus-modern tension falls far short of exhausting the counterpoint systems at work in *The Jazz Singer*. Feuer's binary of Opera versus Jazz suggests negotiations of center versus periphery, foreign versus domestic, ethnic versus "white," hegemonic versus subordinate.

As in Griffith's *Pavements*, the "opera versus swing" opposition in *Cuban Love Song* is eventually produced in two parallel universes, on screen and off (Tibbett's stories of the film's back-stage dynamics may have been inspired by the stories evolving out of the supposed tension between Vélez and Jetta Goudal). The crucial narrative distinction between the two films lies in their opposing narrative resolutions to the question of assimilation. As we saw in the previous chapter, Griffith's film affords Vélez's character (and song) acceptance into hegemonic Anglo society via marriage. By contrast, *Cuban Love Song* ends with the Vélez character, Nenita, being fondly remembered but safely dead. The film fails to square its sexy narrative and visual appeal with its (impaired/repaired) moral compass; the Nenita/Terry copulation is not framed as villainous in the film and the "punishment" meted out in the end bears no cause/effect

relationship to the sexual transgression. Thus the inevitability of Nenita's death is textual rather than narrative, leaving the "moral" conflict in limbo.<sup>253</sup>

While *Cuban Love Song*'s moral conflict is erased rather than addressed, its musical opposition is quite neatly resolved. Feuer describes a version of the binary musical that succinctly describes *Love Song*'s narrative strategy: resolution occurs when popular music becomes acceptable through a stylistic "assimilation" into the world of the classical/traditional (492). It is the film's two equally prominent and oft-repeated songs, "Cuban Love Song" and "El Manisero," that together facilitate Nenita's son's "rescue." Though I have revealed the film's end in the previous chapter, certain details deserve elaboration.

The third act of *Cuban Love Song*, finds Terry Burke (Tibbett) in a New York nightclub with a large group of his illustrious friends. The group is celebrating the anniversary of Burke's wedding to his loyal and patient wife, Crystal (Karen Morley). When the band plays "*El Manisero*," Terry is prompted to leave the celebration to indulge in a bender of drink and reminiscence that takes him back to Cuba. In Havana, he locates Nenita (Vélez) only to learn of her death. Burke is grieving at Nenita's graveside

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<sup>253</sup> Typical of a pre-code mode of sexualizing representation that often fails to square its narrative and visual appeal with its (unstable) moral compass, Vélez's death is the film's convenient if weak defense against potential criticism for its representation of extra-marital sex. The ending is a Production Code mandate but its meaning is ambiguous. The files make mention of an alternate ending with no record left of what the ending was substituted for. Herrick Archive, AMPAS. PCA files, *Cuban Love Song* file. Jason S. Joy to Irving Thalberg, Aug 25, 1931.

*Cuban Love Song*'s PCA file is illuminating on the matter of the Studios' attitudes toward the issue of national offense. See (De Usabel, 1982, 79-80), who has covered the case thoroughly. Suffice to say that Jason Joy was severely taken to task, for his *financial* irresponsibility: Herron writes, "You will always have to consider that the American Marines in Latin America are unpopular with the masses; they are the symbol of the so-called American despotism. You know the Marines well enough to know that wherever they go they do run riot. These points just have to be considered if our people expect to keep their Latin-American markets. *It is not a question at all, as you know as well as I do, of the sensibility of these things, but it is a question of dollars and cents.* It will take a long time to live down the conflagration that this picture has caused [...] and God knows our receipts from that part of the world are shot to Hell as it is." Herrick Archive, AMPAS. PCA files, *Cuban Love Song* file. Ted Herron to Jason S. Joy, Dec 22, 1931 (my emphasis.)

when he hears “The Cuban Love Song” sung in English by a Cuban boy. As that boy, Terry Junior, tells Terry Burke, he is singing a song his mother used to sing to him. Apparently Nenita taught her son the song-of-the-father, the father whom she “always knew would come back for” his—their—son. With Tibbet’s song effectively replacing *El Manisero*, the song that Nenita’s mother had sung to Nenita in her own childhood, the two songs switch nations, providing a transcultural bridge of sorts on which is based the only sustained logic for the film’s otherwise incoherent ending.<sup>254</sup>

Ironically, the most “authentic” Cuban element in the film is the band playing in the New York nightclub: Ernesto Lecuona and The Palau Brothers’ Cuban Orchestra, are a “real” Cuban jazz band with an Afro-Cuban singer (uncredited) as *el manisero*, who passes peanuts from a basket as he sings. The band performs a *genuine*, though highly contested, product of Cuban/US transculturation. “The Peanut Vendor” gained prominence in 1930 and ’31, first in New York and later throughout the States and around the world, by way of recordings and sheet music that included (highly compromised) English-language lyrics.<sup>255</sup> Ned Sublette regards the song as “exhibit A of

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<sup>254</sup> While cultural theft (or, for that matter, child theft) was not voiced as the reasoning behind Cuba’s banning of the film, the symbolic forced emigration/Americanization of Cuban music that the film enacts has been a documented and persistent annoyance. See note 3.

The Moving Pictures Exhibitors’ Union of Havana instituted a boycott of all M-G-M films until *Cuban Love Song* “has been withdrawn from the market.” This after “prominent Cubans who have recently returned from New York, where they saw the film.” Cuban critics found that the film, “depicts the island as an uncivilized country where the natives are half-clothed and bare-footed, and magistrates impose absurd penalties on foreigners.” A studio representative “recalled no scenes in which [the film] in an unfavorable light and expressed doubt that [M-G-M] would heed the threat to the extent of withdrawing the film from all showing in the United States” (*NYT*, Dec 19, 1931, 16).

<sup>255</sup> Sublette’s seminal study, *Cuba and Its Music*, devotes an entire chapter to “The Peanut Vendor.” Regarding the Latin music boom and the question of lyrics, Sublette writes that the U.S. had little patience with the Spanish language: “A key factor in the popularity of the music was new lyrics in English. [...] The English lyrics by Marion Sunshine and L. Wolfe Gilbert began, ‘If you haven’t got bananas don’t be blue / Peanuts in a little bag are calling you.’ Sometimes the translations were bad; other times they were awful. They rarely got worse than the ‘Peanut Vendor’ couplet: ‘If you’re looking for a moral to this song / Fifty million little monkeys can’t be wrong’” (398).

a tradition of two parallel Cuban musics: one for domestic consumption, the other for export” (399).<sup>256</sup> Sublette writes:

Cuba didn’t see itself as a nation of peanut vendors, but that was now its image in the world, projected internationally through music. A Faustian bargain had been made. Cuban music was henceforth a part of the American music scene, but at the price of being presented as a novelty, with cutesy ethnic stereotyping. That combined with the language barrier, obscured the fact of how important an influence Cuban music had already become on American musicians.

In this, the American media were to some degree taking their cue from the Cubans. With blackface still common in Cuban musical theater and a vogue for faux-bozal lyrics, many white composers in Cuba were exoticizing the black experience or presenting it as a kind of novelty, though less crudely than in the American minstrel tradition (398-99).

Significantly, Terry Junior, played by Phillip Cooper (who, three years later, would be cast as the boyhood Pancho Villa in *Viva Villa* (1934, MGM) and “Little Jose” in *Under the Pampas Moon* (1935, Fox)) appears genetically more likely to be the son of the band’s Afro-Cuban “manisero” than that of Tibbett and/or Vélez. The melodramatic significance of the child’s “rescue” (which punctuates the devotion and virtue of Terry’s wife Crystal) is made visually apparent but existentially complicated by the fact that the Cuban boy’s global-south origin is represented so conspicuously (if inexplicably) on his complexion. The film’s earlier erasure of race—enacted in the casting of a light-completed Vélez in the role of a rural village-dwelling peanut vendor and a French actor, Mathilde Comont, as her Tia Rosita—is willfully reversed with the image of the happy mixed family in the film’s closing shot. Young Cooper’s dark features, in contrast to the Anglo-Saxon features of Karen Morley, emphasize a racial difference that the film re-fabrics. Assimilation, however limited its parameters and obfuscated its articulation,

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<sup>256</sup> According to Sublette (399) Lecuona “served as musical advisor for the film and was horrified.” Sublette doesn’t mention that the band did end up performing in the film. They did *not* perform English-language lyrics. Sublette’s timeline indicates that MGM had its finger firmly on the pulse of popular musical trends—though not Cuban sensibilities(!)—when it prepared its second Tibbett feature. Don Azpiazu’s band’s smash hit New York debut performance on 181st Street quickly prompted the venue change; the move was to RKO’s Palace Theater on 47th and Broadway. El Manisero—with the Afro-Cuban Antonio Manchín singing the vendor’s call, “that most basic of folkloric genres”—was, as Sublette tells it, “the big moment” of the Azpiazu set (395). The recording was made in 1931. MGM nonetheless scooped RKO in bringing the music to the screen.

is belatedly revealed as being at the thematic center of the *Cuban Love Song* narrative. The smooth transculturation of song supplies the cultural stand-in for the too-obviously vexed acculturation of human bodies and spirits. Despite her own light complexion, Vélez's ethnicity codes her signification. Vélez/Nenita is deployed to facilitate the assimilation of the child, Terry Junior (which is made significant precisely because of his dark complexion), even as her own transculturation function—her (sexual) role in the cultural blending staged for the poignant resolution of the film—is unacceptable and thus erased.

The logic of the Jane Feuer's Opera versus Jazz binary becomes crossed, in Vélez films, with a center/periphery opposition that ultimately functions to stage Vélez's apparent unassimilability. *Cuban Love Song* initiates a *centrifugal* pattern, in the Ortizian sense, whereby Vélez is deployed as a consumable, tradable product of the periphery, her potential as subject denied. Just as she birthed Terry Junior, Vélez consistently facilitates a mode of transculturation by which, to "succeed," denies her inclusion. The 1930s find Vélez as *perpetual* probationary subject. Vélez's screen avatars dwell in a representational realm where transcultural citizenship is a perpetual possibility that—variously but consistently—remains ever elusive. As we progress through the first half of the 1930s, we find her characters are consistently constructed as not quite suitable as transcultural subjects.

The films and discourses treated in this chapter, most of which are produced in the United States between 1933 and 1939, wield Vélez as bearing the brand of ethnicity while erasing her agency as ethnic subject. Even her Mexican feature, *La Zandunga*

(Azteca, 1938), is locatable on a transcultural menu of sorts that reveals similar dynamics of trade in ethnic and racializing signifiers. Much like Vélez's earlier texts staged the terms of marriage and citizenship, Vélez's 1930s films, with their trade in song and dance, stage a specific manner of cultural assimilation. This time, however, as marriage becomes impossible for Vélez's characters, the logic of her inclusion becomes contingent on her value as performer. She is valuable as a producer of products (song and story) that have market value for American citizen subjects, but her own subjectivity (as approximated through the subjective experience of her screen characters, which continue to carry significations of Vélez-specific identification) is represented as value-lacking. Vélez's stage presence, her performative virtuosity, becomes the basis by which her own "Faustian bargain" (to re-invoke Sublette) is negotiated.

Crucial to the dynamic of Vélez's mid-thirties star function is her stage and screen relationship—her probationary pairing, I will call it—with another “white” ethnic figure: her frequent comedic partner, the “Eye-talian” Jimmy Durante. Durante began as a jazz pianist but his star currency becomes his anarchic antics whereby self-deprecating humor negotiates a basis for the embrace of his indeterminately articulated ethnic identity. Durante and Vélez made two Broadway productions and four Hollywood movies together. We will start by returning to their initial contact, the set of *Cuban Love Song* and the musical/ethnic triangle formed by way of Vélez, Durante and Tibbett. Tibbet's retrospective professional musings offer a narrative perfectly pitched to re-enact the center vs. periphery contest, discursively, in the fan world off screen.

The very title of Tibbet's self-published memoir, *The Glory Road* (1933)—taken from the title of one of the opera singer's favorite popular songs of the day, “a Negro

spiritual” written by Clement Wood with music by Jacques Wolfe—works to position the singer/author as a bridge figure between the elite and the popular, including the racialized “Negro” popular. But Tibbett’s notion of the popular, very much like that of *Cuban Love Song* itself, suffers under the strain of its illogic. Like *Love Song*, Tibbett’s narrative neatly if inadvertently exemplifies the erasures enacted by the transculturation fantasy it indulges. Tibbett holds up “The Glory Road” (originally published as “De Glory Road,” and generally referred to as such)<sup>257</sup> in order to insist that Americans “need not apologize” for their autochthonous music (he avoids the subject of hegemonic America’s treatment of those that produced so much of her autochthonous music).<sup>258</sup> It is precisely for these slippages that Tibbett’s narrative is useful for our purposes. Tibbett stages a layered performance of transculturation for the purposes of negotiating (his own position within) a distinctly American modern culture. In doing so, he manages to reveal the unstable fabrication of the American “melting pot” mythology even as he demonstrates the use value of that mythology. This act of holding up “Negro” inflected music enacts,

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<sup>257</sup> Clement Wood's three “Negro” poems were published and put to music by Jacques Wolfe. The publication is dedicated as “for Paul Robeson,” though I find no documentation, or any further indication, of Robeson having performed or recorded the songs or poems.

<sup>258</sup> For the egalitarian-minded Tibbett, “‘The Glory Road’ is ‘as fine a musical composition as Leoncavallo’s prelude to Pagliacci’ (55). Describing composer Jacques Wolfe as “a music teacher in the public schools of Brooklyn, N.Y., who is no more a Southerner than was General Grant,” he reveals the role of appropriation and vexed origination at work in the “popular” music he holds up. His binary becomes triangulated rather than bridged with a *stand-in* version of the Other, a figure (Jacques Wolfe) with whom he identifies and who supposedly links the center and the periphery but actually serves to mediate/replace the unassimilable presence of the actual “Negro.” Wolfe was born in Romania, emigrated to the States as a boy, entered Juilliard at the age of 16; he was stationed in the south during World War I and took a great interest in African American Music. He wrote “Sad Song in De Air” with Langston Hughes. Clement Wood, who wrote the poems Wolfe put to music, had less actual contact with African Americans than did Wolfe. Clement Wood's autobiography is, like that of his friend Lawrence Tibbett, titled *The Glory Road*; it was published just three years after Tibbett's and dedicated to Tibbett. The book is more a quixotic collection of poetry and memoir than an autobiography, offering little about his life and creative development. His recollections have him rubbing elbows with socialists, though the book is un-political. The book’s second chapter, titled “When My Mammy Spoke,” includes all Clement’s “Negro” poetry (24-36). In his epilogue, Clement initiates some explanation of his varied forms of verse (“For it is lilting concentrated Negro speech: no one speaks in artificial conventionalized lines,” 270-271), but he never articulates any basis by which he theorizes or conceptualizes poetic appropriation.

in its very process, the erasure of the Black American experience. Claiming the “Negro spiritual” is a way of claiming authentic Americanism by identifying with the transcultural product most unique to American soil.<sup>259</sup>

With the inclusion of Durante as Terry Burke’s Marine buddy, O.O. Jones,<sup>260</sup> the binary structure of *Cuban Love Song*, as well as that within Tibbett’s narrative of the film’s production, becomes triangulated. If the contrast between the opera singer vs. the ethnic (“roughneck”) jazz talent—Tibbett vs. Durante—was as irresistible as the opera singer vs. the “Mexican wildcat”—Tibbett vs. Vélez—ultimately, the pairing of Durante and Vélez—roughneck meets wildcat—proved even more durable.

As we have seen, Tibbett maintained that Vélez’s “trouble” is that she “believes what the press agents write about her.” Quite tellingly, *The Glory Road* paints Durante’s behind-the-scenes antics as, like Vélez’s, consistent with the comedian’s well-honed stage/public image. Tibbett relays a story of Durante playing to his celebrity would-be-parvenu persona (“a genial, willing and likable roughneck, new to the movies and ready to break a leg for the camera if it would get him a laugh”). He stages Durante in-character as the anti-sophisticate; the eager Durante is enamored of nothing more than the prospect of acting the “Latin lover” role on the Hollywood screen. Tibbett writes:

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<sup>259</sup> Michael Rogin, in *Blackface, White Noise* (1996), argues blackface as a whitening process of identity performance utilized primarily by Jewish performers. One might understand the white “Negro Spiritual” as a kind of elite blackface, a blackface that proves convenient for those put off by the physicality/“amorality” of jazz music and/or uncomfortable with the vulgarity of minstrelsy.

<sup>260</sup> The long sought explication of the “O’s in Jones’s name provided a minor sub-plot in the film. The interest in Jones’s name (Oswald Obedia) and Jones shame around that name, speaks directly to a pan-ethnic naming quandry that stands in for any discussion of Jones’s ethnicity or any motivation behind either his bafoonery or his friends’ constant “friendly” teasing. Jones and Romance, played by Ernest Torrence, are both working class. Torrence, born in Scotland, is an accomplished singer in his own right, is large, 6’4” tall and thus appealing as an opposite to Durante. *Cuban Love Song* thus plays out the cinematic U.S. Army trope, more fully developed in WW2 films wherein lifelong male bonding occurs despite class, ethnic or corporeal differences.

Louis Mayer, the big boss, told Jimmy that the next day he was to play a Bulgarian general in a love scene with Lupe Velez. Jimmy was highly pleased. “Romeo stuff, hey?” he said, spitting into his hands. “Watch Durante!”

Tibbett thereby launches into an absurdly extended anecdote in which Durante, “a *natural* comedian” (my emphasis), fails to realize the love scene set-up is a practical joke. When the whole elaborate, outlandishly-costumed (and highly improbable<sup>261</sup>) gag was finally up, Durante supposedly “grinned sheepishly, then turned toward a mirror, threw back his shoulders, and slapped his chest. ‘Well,’ he said “gag or no gag, I never saw Durante look sweller!”” (69).

Tibbett succeeds in making the apt point that Vélez and Durante are, in effect, complicit in the performance of ethnic drag that reads as un-contained and uncontrollable; their acts spill beyond the parameters of venue and thus appear “real” rather than performed. The dynamic operates on a circular logic, though, with “logic” (i.e. lucid strategy) being the operative distinction between cognizant performance and inadvertent act. The personae of both figures are predicated on a *naïve* foreignness (entirely the opposite of the foreignness of, for example, Greta Garbo, who will consistently surface as “counterpoint” in the discursive dynamics this chapter analyzes) that frames their participation in Hollywood as an educational and thus civilizing, Americanizing process. To play the archetypal ethnic parvenu, the probationary-white immigrant battling to affect the trappings of modern citizenship, is to *perform* a persona that lacks access to its

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<sup>261</sup> “Van Dyke told Jimmy to go to the wardrobe department to get his costume.

Jimmy came back staggering under a load. He wore a golden helmut, much too large for him, with eagles on it and a yellow plume four feet long. He had a mighty sword that dragged on the ground. His coat was bright red with yellow epaulettes and his chest sank under a score of metals. Across his breast were six white ribbons and around his waist a red, white and blue sash. His trousers were pink and almost hidden in patent leather hip boots, to which were attached flopping spurs that interfered with Jimmy’s feet, so that he had to take zig zag steps, like an Indian dodging bullets. Swinging from a cord around his neck was a tuba.

The make-up man had painted Jimmy’s long nose a bright blue and had put black circles under his eyes and a goatee on his chin” (Tibbett and Farkas, 69).

own autonomous subjectivity as performer: the clown as opposed to the comedian. In Tibbett's characterization, both Vélez and Durante lack self-awareness. Vélez "believes" herself to be embodied by a definition others prescribe. Durante "believes" that he is being called upon to play the "*Latin lover*"—thus he believes he is playing a type rather than being given credit for playing out a satirical farce (if the scenario happened at all)—even as he has supposedly been outfitted and accessorized quite far beyond believability (69). Thus Vélez and Durante play the clowns of Tibbett's back-stage comedy.

To put this scenario in clearer perspective, we should bear in mind that Durante—in addition to being acknowledged in New York as a composer and master of boogie-woogie piano while Tibbett's voice was yet cracking in the Bakersfield Methodist boys choir—owned a cafe he named "Parody" (Bakish, 39-40). In other words, Durante knew precisely what he was doing with his self-constructed parvenu/rube image.<sup>262</sup> But his ability to strategize (or even to accommodate with cognizance) participation in Hollywood on Hollywood's unrelenting terms meant the obfuscation of his own personal and professional agency. It meant, in effect, the self-deprecating denial of the skills of strategy (or cognizance of accommodation) itself. As discussed in the previous chapter, from her debut in *The Gaucho*, Vélez was consistently said to have been ("merely") "playing herself" the implication being that every role she performed was "simply" "natural." Durante, likewise, was given roles that played to his persona constructed on

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<sup>262</sup> Durante was not only a figure of comedy and music on Broadway since he was "discovered" from the nightclubs by Florenze Ziegfeld in 1929, but he was, since March 1931, author—book and music—of the his own show, *Night Clubs*. Durante ("I've been in the up-all-night racket for twenty five years") was not just "a natural comedian," as Tibbett offers, he was a one-man think-tank theorizing the post-vaudeville institutionalization of American-style self-deprecating comedy. "Broadway, That World Called Pleasure," *NYT*, Mar 8, 1931, 65. See also David Bakish and Stanley Greene. Regarding Durante's cafe "Parody," see Scott, "Schnozzle, Hollywood's Latest Sensation," *LAT*, Oct 4, 1931, B9. Regarding Durante's brilliance at parodic satire *in print*, as co-produced by *Photoplay* author Donald Ogden Stewart, see Stewart's "The Love Life of Jimmy Durante," *Photoplay*, June 1932, 58-60, 118.

stage and thus off-screen, perpetuating the illusion that what we saw was the Real Durante.<sup>263</sup>

Tibbet ascribes Vélez's supposedly transformed, amicable personality on the *Cuban Love Song* set to her having been variously flattered and humbled as a singer, the assumption being that her professionalism was an unnatural imposition on her personality, a personality that is only hers in as much as she, again, "believes" herself to be as the press has defined her (firebrand) or as Tibbett, in generous contrast, assures her (good singer). To his readership, then, he denies her any trace of autonomous, self-reflective subjectivity. He ends the segment with sheer infantilization. Tibbett writes:

*Our* only difficulty [with Vélez] was in getting her to sing a song in the picture. Believe it or not, Lupe was too shy! Away from the microphone she sang beautifully. She knew good music, *and could imitate an opera singer* and sing cadenzas and top notes and hit a clear, free top C as well as many a coloratura. But when the sound apparatus was turning over, time and again, before she finally recorded the song perfectly, she broke down and ran off the set, crying, "Lupe is not engaged to be a singer! She cannot do it!" (68-9, emphasis added).

Again indulged is the myth of Hollywood professionalism as civilizing. Vélez, as the "natural" talent that cannot perform in world of modern technology (the idea that Vélez was afraid of microphones is patently absurd), reportedly regards her performance, her voice, as a humiliating failure, affording Tibbett the opportunity to publicly congratulate himself for recognizing her merits.

It is no wonder that Vélez would return to the stage at this point in her career. Vélez's earlier stage persona, steeped, like Durante's in *parody*, afforded her the opportunities for performative reflexivity that she had no opportunity to indulge on screen.

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<sup>263</sup> Apparatus theory notwithstanding, star construction may potentially play as significant a role as film form as a factor influencing the extent to which spectatorship is denaturalizable. In fact, within popular film, star textuality and construction might be understood as—to varying degrees (and degrees would vary widely)—a formal filmic component, just as actor physicality can play a mise-en-scene function.

## “Queen of the Hot-Cha”: Vélez on Broadway

Having met Durante on *Cuban Love Song* may have facilitated Vélez’s entré to the Broadway stage. Durante had established his presence on New York’s vaudeville stages since 1920 and performed on Broadway, starting with the Ziegfeld Follies, since 1929. It is likely more than coincidental that reports of Vélez having been optioned by Florenz Ziegfeld circulated almost immediately after the film wrapped. Her name was mentioned in connection with Ziegfeld’s upcoming production, *Hot-Cha!*, when Bert Lahr was signed, yet the production went up in Pittsburgh with Riva Reyes playing the role of Conchita.<sup>264</sup> It was not until production was in progress in Pittsburgh, February of 1932, that Vélez was announced as joining the company, replacing Reyes, for the New York debut. Nelson B. Bell, writing for *The Washington Post*, characterizes Vélez’s role in *Hot-Cha!* as “the villainess of the piece, who makes Jack tread the bypaths of amorous adventure.”<sup>265</sup> Jack (Buddy Rogers) is married to Dorothy (June Knight) and, not surprisingly, his “bypaths of amorous adventure” (from which he predictably recovers) occur narratively in Mexico.

The scene of [Vélez’s] entrance is full of lively rapid dancing, much of it hers, and she is favored with about the only song in the whole play which does not remind one of most other songs in most other musical comedies. She puts all she has into her performance: enthusiasm, agility, voice, a white-toothed smile, hips, shoulders and arms. After this her opportunities are less, except for her part in the plot which gives her a chance to wear several beautiful costumes setting off her trim figure to full advantage.

According to Bell, the show was dominated by Lahr, who “presented as ridiculous a figure as possible of unrestrained horseplay.” Highlights included (in addition to Vélez’s

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<sup>264</sup> *NYT*, Nov 12, 1931, 30

<sup>265</sup> As the Vélez casting was initially announced, it was said that the part had been written for her; nothing was said about another actor getting booted from the Conchita role. Reva Reyes later sued and won 7 weeks pay. Rehearsals began the first of March; Vélez debuted a week later in the role of Conchita. *Broken Wing* was, at that time, still in production, presumably wrapping scenes for which Vélez was not needed. It’s possible that the part was originally written for her in mind (see note that follows) and that the *Broken Wing* contract posed an initial conflict.

splashy entrance) Lahr's performance, "among a chorus of girls," of a song and dance parody of Vélez. In classic vaudevillian form—i.e. by drawing on the audience's intertextual familiarity with the performers' personae—the tables were turned on Vélez as mimic; the imitator became the imitated.<sup>266</sup>

Reviews of *Hot-Cha!* were generally tepid. Mostly the show served to occasion debate as to whether or not the Follies model was stale and outmoded.<sup>267</sup> But Vélez rose above the discussion. In fact, reprising the reception of the *Pavements'* stage shows, the Ziegfeld stint gained Vélez some enthusiastic fans outside of the Hollywood circle.<sup>268</sup> She received a flattering write-up, for example, by Elizabeth Dickson in *Collier's*.<sup>269</sup> The piece's provocative title, "The Girl with One Talent," is explicated in the article's opening paragraph:

It isn't beauty, it isn't brains, it isn't ordinary charm. This thing called lure is a current that goes out from the possessor and brings back to her almost anything she wants.

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<sup>266</sup> Nelson Bell, in *Washington Post*, Mar 10, 1932, 4. Lupe Vélez is impersonated by women, too, who are popular for their facility to imitate. See, for example, "Short Shots from Eastern Studios," *Film Daily*, June 25, 1932, 6; Sheila Burnett is appreciated for her Vélez imitation.

<sup>267</sup> See, for example, J. Brooks Atkinson, "Thinking it over," *NYT*, Mar 20, 1932, X1. For Atkinson, "the veteran brand of musical comedy still has something worth retaining... Mr. Ziegfeld's voluptuous style of showmanship yields a depth and a richness of color that give the theater some of the far off lure of an Oriental bazaar." Bert Lahr's brand of "carnival horseplay" dominated and was widely enjoyed by even those who found the follies genre stale. According to Gerald Bordman (1978) "It was really a loosely strung-together piece designed to provide a vehicle for Bert Lahr, ignoring to some extent the fact that Ziegfeld originally conceived the evening as a showcase for Lahr's glamorous co-star, Lupe Velez" (476).

In Mexico, interestingly, *Filmographico* (Aug 1932, unpaginated) characterized Vélez's initial work on Broadway as "the biggest success of her artistic life." The interest in Mexico in the Ziegfeld Follies was considerable, likely for its affinity with *revista* theater.. The news of her participation in *Hot-Cha!*, though, is several months late in coming.

<sup>268</sup> Hollywood press did not pay sustained attention to Vélez's debut with the follies/ Cal York did make a punning note of the fact that "Lupe Velez... is knocking the customers right in the aisles with her hot-cha performance in Ziegfeld's 'Hot-cha' in New York" ("Cal York's Monthly Broadcast from Hollywood," *Photoplay*, May 1932, 96). The production also merited a full-page publicity photo in the previous issue. Here Vélez, in a dress that looks more like Hollywood-Persian than Mexican, is shown with Buddy Rogers and June Knight, pictured against the background set depicting "Mexico" in white-washed adobe and red tile roofs, in other words akin to the manufactured Hollywood image (*Photoplay*, Apr 1932, 27).

<sup>269</sup> Elizabeth Dickson, "The Girl With One Talent." *Collier's* June 25, 1932, 9.

“Lure,” in Dickson’s estimation, has nothing to do with Hollywood stardom or Vélez’s reputation on the screen, in fact Dickson makes no mention whatsoever of Hollywood or of Vélez’s films:

What the crowd gets isn’t anything of Lupe that can be photographed or put in words. It’s something she is and gives. Something that appeals to the elevator boy, the bank president, the débutante and the suburban housewife. if you ever saw a girl who was being herself, enjoying it and inviting the gang to the party—that’s Lupe. She never acted in her life. And that’s her secret.

Time and again, Dickson identifies Vélez’s “lure”—aka “it”—as authenticity:

To the interviewer accustomed to pose, calculation, a soft mouth and a hard eye, books of press clippings all layed out and a National Registry of photographs, all of the subject under discussion, she’s a gift.

As the article reads on, more specific talents and endearing characteristics are liberally enumerated, “... a voice with a husky, exciting quality—imitations that are animated caricatures....”. Above all, Dickson dwells at length on the friendship Vélez extends toward the girls in the chorus and the generosity she shows her fans. She wraps up the piece with a detailed story of Vélez having bought a bracelet delivered to the star on behalf of an admirer who was in desperate need of some cash. Vélez has too many bracelets so she gives one to a chorus girl in order to make room on her wrist for the charity purchase. Dickson closes:

If you were a man and had the price, you’d undoubtedly buy her the bracelet. Being another woman, you catch yourself in one of the rarest of feminine emotions. You want her to have it. And when Godmother luck has given anybody *that* kind of charm, *so common in animals and children*, so almost non-existent in adults, there’s nothing more to be said (emphasis added).

Vélez was young, but not a child. Even as the piece pursues an anecdote attesting to Vélez’s decidedly adult protocols, sensitivities, and decisions, it cannot resist the notion that the young star’s “lure” owes to her having escaped the development of calculating motives that one (however “unfortunately”) gains in the process of maturation and “civilization.” The consistent explanation for Vélez’s apparently unfailing honesty is

rooted in her “primitive” origins. (Within the high/low negotiation that Feuer outlines, resolving in the glorification of the popular, we ought to consider the cultural currency of “naïve transparency” as one element within the mosaic of conflicting values by which modern American culture constructs its glorified “melting-pot” brand of nationhood: the pride taken in the youthful, “natural,” not-too-civilized American nature.)

Dickson’s piece ignores Bert Lahr entirely and had little to say about the show (only that “[i]t’s a pity that the audience who go to *Hot-cha* haven’t seats equipped with television sets, for Lupe isn’t on till the so-called plot sets the bunch down in her own hot-tamale locale.... The stage seemed empty when she wasn’t on”). Antoinette Donnelly, writing for the *Chicago Daily Tribune*, likewise ignores Lahr and devotes her piece to Vélez. Singling out Vélez on her “visit to the girls at the Follies,” Donnelly (who is the Tribune’s beauty editor) makes no pretense of being a theater critic.<sup>270</sup> Significant is the fact that, like Dickson, Donnelly eschews the kind of discourse of Hollywood caricature and hyperbole to which Tibbett referred when he (so “sympathetically”) suggested Vélez came to embody her own press-constructed persona. Both journalists, for example, remained refreshingly unaware of the cat-fight trope that tended to dog stories of multiple female star figures.<sup>271</sup> Whether writing about Vélez’s “Garbo idolatry” (May 7, 1932) or about the “diverse personalities” of several “movie queens” under one roof (April 5,

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<sup>270</sup> Antoinette Donnelly, “Visit to Girls of the Follies Is One Great Big Beauty Feast.” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, May 7, 1932. 17

One has to wonder if it was Lahr’s sense of having been upstaged that prompted him to speak so maliciously of Vélez, as reported by Lahr’s son, John Lahr, in the latter’s biography of the former. Lahr perpetuated the mythology of Vélez wearing no undergarments, though he offers no explanation as to what might have afforded his insight. He also claimed that “Lupe never washed” (Lahr, 1969, 130). As to why his son would choose to publish such slander, I can only speculate. What is as bad, though, is the recirculating of such discourse (Jenkins) within an imprecise historical context.

<sup>271</sup> We might speculate that Vélez spoke of Garbo because the world’s adulation for Garbo was so apparent. Garbo came up in the Dickson interview as well as the Donnelly. Dickson quotes Vélez: “No, I never try to change myself. I couldn’t be Garbo. But it would be so dull if we were all Garbos! People like her because she is quiet and so beautiful. People like me because I have pep. They like you, and you, for other things. We must just be ourselves.”

1932),<sup>272</sup> Donnelly's writing emphasized female harmony. Vélez, "dynamically alive... [a] triumph in personality expression," was not singled out by Donnelly on the basis of her youth, her nationality, her accent, her foreignness. Donnelly highlighted Vélez for "brains" and "wit-matching." We are clearly a long way from Hollywood.

Though *Hot-Cha!* suffered the weight of its extravagant cost against the stress of the deepening Depression, it continued on Broadway longer than it might have. With players taking pay cuts and spectators offered a reduced price scale, the show bought itself an extra three weeks beyond its initial closing date, making for a respectable fifteen weeks total.<sup>273</sup>

### Screening the Staged Vélez

Along with the Spanish-language picture, *Hombres de mi vida*, Vélez completed three English-language Hollywood films in 1932: *Kongo* was released in October, *The Half-Naked Truth* in December and *Hot Pepper* in January of 1933. Hollywood spin-merchants were particularly impressed with Vélez's placement in *Kongo* (MGM) opposite Walter Huston.

*Kongo*, like *Squaw Man* and *Resurrection*, is one of Vélez's more "prestigious" films, those with rarefied pretensions, which, since 1930, happen to be the very films that most unequivocally stage Vélez's unassimilable status.<sup>274</sup> This one is a heart-of-darkness-

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<sup>272</sup> Antoinette Donnelly, "Three Movie Queens Show How Diverse Personalities Can Be." *Chicago Daily Tribune*. Apr 5, 1932, 18. The April article was written after Donnelly "attended an affair at which Mary Pickford, Pola Negri, Lupe Vélez and Helen Chandler were guests of honor."

<sup>273</sup> The New York Times reported the show's end late in May, then two days later reported reported it would continue indefinitely. Ziegfeld's 'Hot-Cha' is to end its Run." *New York Times*, May 25, 1932, 23

<sup>274</sup> See Ruth Biery, "The Strangest Friendship in Hollywood," (*Photoplay*, Nov 1932, 16-17, 105) on the Vélez / Walter Huston relationship on the *Kongo* set. After making clear that the friendship is not romantic, Biery writes of the admiration that Huston had for Vélez's "natural" abilities and energy, which, Huston supposedly said, "she got, seemingly, from nowhere" (105). The two are framed as opposites: Huston is "cultured, dignified and a good Hollywood citizen" (46); Vélez is "tempestuous, temperamental,

type story. Accompanying Huston acting a version of the Kurtz archetype named Flint (who manipulates the natives with his own fraudulent side-show-style “voodoo.”), Vélez plays Flint’s Portuguese mistress/whore, Tula. *Kongo* offers a cautionary musing on (mis)transculturation and de-civilization where, as Francis G. Couvares aptly summarizes, “The primitive environment degrades the white male characters, leading each to violate the other’s patriarchal rights over women” (2011, 10). Vélez’s Tula (often mistaken for “a half caste” in period reviews) serves as sexualized placeholder between Western modernity and the “savagery” of deepest Africa.<sup>275</sup> *Kongo* is utterly and morbidly serious (though the astute illustration the film receives in *La Opinión* suggests it may not have been taken that way). Vélez’s next film, *The Half-Naked Truth*, released by RKO just over two months after *Kongo* reached the theaters, is another film where Vélez’s character is of ambiguous ethnicity. *Half Naked*, though, serves almost as *Kongo*’s refreshingly comedic antidote.

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unconventional” (47). The theme of the article (playing out the related theme of the film) highlights Vélez’s impetuosity (“I live as I please. I’m like the people back in the Stone Age...”) and Huston’s civilizing influence (“[Walter] might have told [Vélez] of the impossibility of living naturally in a civilized age [...] instead of pointing out her faults he told her stories about people he knew who suffered for those same faults”). Huston’s character in this discourse prefigures the character (civilizing agent) that Lawrence Tibbet takes up in the narrative with which I open chapter 4.

<sup>275</sup> While accounts of the film often referred to the character as “half-caste,” the mistake says more about the film’s obsessive spectacularization of the racialized “primitive”—where Portuguese serves as a place holder for the “half-civilized”—than it does about any mistaken reading of individual journalists or critics. As Couvares writes, Tula “serves as a sort of halfway admission of the lure of the female Other for the imperial man” (*ibid*). Narratively, Tula’s main function is as a degrading influence on the drug-addicted, white British doctor—called, appropriately enough, Dr. Kingsland (Conrad Nagel)—who happens to be the only hope for the redemption of the degraded white female (Virginia Bruce) whose honor is at the center of the story.

*Kongo* falls loosely within the save-the-children cycle, though Vélez is neither the child saved nor the mother sacrificed. The blond star, Virginia Bruce, is the virginal daughter mistakenly drawn into the jungle, saved in the nick of time from a father (Flint) gone wrong.



**Figure 19:** illustration of *Kongo*, appearing in *La Opinión*.<sup>276</sup>

In *The Half-Naked Truth*, Vélez plays an essentially nameless and rootless character that performs (diegetically) “the Bella Sultana” on the carnival circuit and the “Turkish Princess” named Exotica on Broadway. In this film’s hands, the character’s ethnic ambiguity serves to point up “ethnic masquerade” (Sturtevant, 2005) rather than enacting ethnic erasure or conflation. *Half Naked*’s story is a carnival-to-Broadway narrative based very loosely on the life of Harry Reichenbach, a publicist in the 1910s and ‘20s who was known for staging elaborate publicity stunts.<sup>277</sup> Jimmy Bates (the Reichenbach character, played by Lee Tracy) is the publicity-genius behind Exotica’s success who hijacks the Broadway enterprise of Merle Farrell (Frank Morgan, playing a stand-in for Florenz Ziegfeld) when the latter has lost his read on the pulse of the public. The implied equation of Broadway to an overblown, over-hyped, carnival operation forms a savvy send up of “the great white way.” Moreover, with its farcical critique of publicity, celebrity, fandom,

<sup>276</sup> Illustration by Eaton, *La Opinión*, March 9, 1933, 4. The advertisement running on the same page showed Vélez's name in a larger typeface than Walter Huston's. No review appeared.

<sup>277</sup> The film went into production under the working title, “Phantom Fame.” The story is based very loosely on the memoir by the reknowned publicity artist, Harry Reichenbach (1882-1931), titled *Phantom Fame: Anatomy of a Ballyhoo* (as told to David Freedman. NY: Simon and Schuster, 1931).

and fashion, *The Half-Naked Truth* forms a tongue-in-cheek burlesque of “foreign” exoticism. As Victoria Sturtevant points out (2004), the film deploys Vélez to launch a satire on the very tropes by which Vélez herself is typically represented. A key scene in *Half-Naked* almost directly reflects aspects of the critical discourse around *Hot-Cha!*: Jimmy Bates anticipates Merle Farrell’s failure to read the modern sensibilities of his public, predicting the failure of the dour, overblown, orientalizing dirge—“March of the Orient”—that Farrell has designed for Exotica. The evening is saved when Bates and Teresita (the Vélez character’s “real name,” though it is only used once) conspire to improvise their way into “the carpenter song,” Vélez’s sexy little number from their carnival set. In fact, the contrast between Princess Exotica (the veiled Turkish Princess doing the fake harem dance) and Teresita (the livewire with the short skirt, showcasing the quirky sexy dance style that is all Lupe Vélez) approximates the contrast marking *Pavements*’ Nanon rehearsing social pretensions on screen versus Vélez imitating Jetta Goudal on stage.

*Half Naked* is Vélez’s first proper screen “comedy”; her best comedic work thereafter will mine the self-reflexive vein the film exploits. But *Half Naked* does not so much mark Vélez’s turn towards self-reflexive comedy, as Sturtevant suggests, as it self-consciously shadows the turn already instigated by her stage work.

Every Hollywood Vélez film subsequent to *Kongo* engages in reflexive casting that directly or obliquely references Vélez’s star status.<sup>278</sup> Each cast her in roles that

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<sup>278</sup> *Laughing Boy* (1934, MGM) is conceivably the outlier of the era, harkening back to roles of the late twenties that engaged in exotic portrayal of foreignness, though in this case on U.S. soil. I will maintain that the film does indeed play on her off-screen status, in that it places her in a position to corrupt her compatriot actor, Ramon Novarro. Vélez plays a Navaho, Slim Girl, opposite her friend, Novarro, as the title character. Novarro is the noble hero. Slim Girl, an orphan raised by whites is unable to live harmoniously in either the Navaho or the white world (so much for saving the brown child for civilization); she functions as seductress in one world and whore in the other. Slim Girl is a tragic figure, repentant on

reflect on her off-screen personae as performer: singer, dancer, or stage-star. While only *Hollywood Party* casts Vélez as a Hollywood film star (about which more below), every one of them—including *Half Naked*, arguably—reflects *anxiously* on her star status and thus, even if indirectly, casts a shadow on the question of her cultural citizenship.

On the one hand, Vélez’s post-stage shift in representation showcases her performative abilities and helps to keep her career afloat in an era that was proving difficult for foreign players. And it clearly underscores the fact that Hollywood maintained a fascination for Vélez as a public figure. For while it often seems, judging from fan discourse, that only brief and intermittent attention was paid to Vélez’s Broadway triumphs, the shift in her roles tells us that her performative charisma had indeed registered in Hollywood, even if the screen roles that were designed to exploit her stage triumphs rarely afforded her the opportunity to fully exercise the power of “lure” she emanated on stage. On the other hand, though, narratives that wielded a productive self-reflexivity were rare. More often, her casting as the perpetual entertainer framed Vélez as a kind of novelty attraction within each text. In fact, after *Half Naked*, Vélez’s characters were rarely the *subjects* of her films (not even, arguably, in the *Mexican Spitfire* films, despite the fact that the series ostensibly names her as its subject). While certain parodic sequences within later films match the mode of high satire operating in *Half Naked* (most notably *High Flyers* (1938, RKO), as we will see), the self-reflexive comedy screened in *Half Naked* represents the high-water mark for critically astute

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her deathbed after catching an arrow meant for her white lover. More might be said about *Laughing Boy* as exemplary of mixed moral messages that are typical of the transitional years of the Production Code. (The Hays office documentation is extensive; once again the Code office appears to have spent a lot of effort trying to get it “right” and still manages to offend virtually all comers). However, because *Laughing Boy* stands as an anomaly within Vélez’s career trajectory, being not a “modern” setting and involving no diegetically performative element, I have relegated it to the margins of this study.

reflection within a Vélez text. Perhaps it is telling that even *Half-Naked* itself, remarking on the vicissitudes of novelty attraction and the fickle swings of audience affection, ends with Vélez leaving Broadway to return to the carnival (folkloric, antiquated, futureless) from whence she came. The hasty launch into the extra-diegetic “wedding march”—which accompanies the Vélez character’s reunion with Jimmy Bates and plays over “the end”—signals that end as “happily” resolved (with a “mixed” marriage no less). But to take the reflexive insight of the film seriously would be to understand, in advance, the diminishing returns available on Vélez’s own professional path.

Vélez’s final film of 1932, *Hot Pepper* (Fox, J.G. Blystone; released in January of 1933), one of the popular “Flagg and Quirt” (Edmund Lowe and Victor McLaglen) series of programmers, fails to mine the comedic vein initiated in *Half-Naked*. Though Vélez plays a sympathetic character with a (typically) fiery personality that offers her comedic agency, *Hot Pepper* lacks *Half Naked*’s rather cynical sophistication and indulges in a liberal measure of unreflexive “hot” Latina stereotype. Like *Half-Naked*, as one of her pre-code-enforcement pictures, *Hot Pepper* affords Vélez to the opportunity to dance to her full sensual ability without the threat of the censor’s knife.<sup>279</sup> The appeal of Vélez’s dance style, in the few films of the early 1930s that indulge it, lies in its combining of sexy sensuality with a seemingly un-self-conscious whimsy. Vélez’s rejection of self-seriousness lends a delightfully comfortable physicality to her performances. She was not a virtuosic dancer, but her uniqueness—comprised of a witty physicality, the feature that

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<sup>279</sup> Herrick Archive, AMPAS. PCA files, *Hot Pepper* file. James Wingate to Winfield Sheehan, Nov 16, 1932. “In Lupe’s song and dance we notice that apparently in spite of the intentions of the director a few of the forward wiggles and cooch movements slipped in. It is always advisable to keep this type of movement entirely out of dance routines, as it is fundamentally against the code and is pretty generally censorable.”

made her a star in Mexico—never failed to delight and entertain. Perhaps owing to the reception she received with her stage shows, “live” diegetic audience response became a feature of Vélez films, which rarely neglected to give a visual account of the diegetic audience’s gaze.<sup>280</sup> Both *Hot Pepper* and *Half Naked* exploit Vélez’s Broadway stage charm, seemingly to either predict or suggest her return to the New York stage.

### **Strike Me Pink!: The (Ethnic) Colorization of Class Conflict**

It is hard to tell if Bosley Crowther is being facetious or innocently punning when he reports that the producers of the failing *Forward March* stage production became determined to revive the show with a cast that would give it some “class” (the quotes are Crowther’s).<sup>281</sup> *Strike Me Pink!* was initially titled *Forward March* and was a left-leaning, *class* comedy that failed to charm its Pittsburg audience in 1932. Once retrofitted with Durante, Vélez and Hope Williams—the “stars” procured to save the production (the scare quotes, again, are Crowther’s)—*Pink*’s political punch was largely abandoned in favor of physical comedy. By all accounts, 1933 was not a great year for the profit margin of ventures on either stage or screen. Disposable income was tight and the stay-at-

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<sup>280</sup> Her titular character, Pepper, hails from some unnamed region of South America and upon arrival in this country (in a burlap sack) she quickly becomes a stage star. In a feeble attempt to avoid putting export revenue in jeopardy, the has put into play its ill-advised strategy of leaving ambiguous the national origin of foreign characters. It should be noted here, also, that export motivated code standards that sought to minimize nationalist offense were enforced earlier than were the more domestically motivated prescriptions against sexual offense. (“Brazil” was changed to “South America” while no change was made to Lupe’s dance.) Wingate writes: “at the present it is indicated that the Brazil consul speaks broken English and that the others characters use spanish as their native tongue. To avoid, in so far as possible, any offense to this nation we suggest that the consul be allowed to speak very good english with as little accent as possible. Further, since Portuguese is the native tongue of Brazil, Spanish ought not be used. This is a very sore point with the Brazilians and one which ought to be considered rather carefully” (*ibid.*).

<sup>281</sup> Crowther, “From Blue to ‘Pink’,” *NYT* Apr 9, 1933, X2. Vélez and Durante were signed with *Strike Me Pink!* in November, 1932, but were not able to begin rehearsals until late January, 1933. Crowther’s piece tells the story of Lew Brown and Ray Henderson’s transformation of the *Strike Me Pink!* Production: “So the former gentleman was deputed to thrash about for some ‘class.’ His initial move was to climb aboard a transcontinental airplane, with his camera strapped to his side, and wind westward to Hollywood. Here he established headquarters and started out on the trail of ‘stars.’ Lupe Vélez, he recalled had made a memorable appearance in the late Mr. Ziegfeld’s ‘Hot Cha!’ and one James Durante, despite his extreme mortification, had aquitted himself with honor in a show called ‘the New Yorkers,’ in which Miss Hope Williams also appeared.”

home ease of popular radio plays struck a blow to the financial viability of both mediums. Nevertheless, *Pink* did admirable business. Theater scholar Gerald Bordman would later characterize *Pink*'s reception as "the closest thing this dismal period came to having a hit," noting that, "[b]y the time is (*sic*) reached New York Lupe Velez and Jimmy Durante were a bigger lure than the show itself" (Bordman, 482). *The Los Angeles Times*, also, cites the production as an event worthy of optimism for a beleaguered entertainment industry, pointing out hometown favorites who could be found in the New York audience:

Theater business has taken a big jump for the better this past seven days. A week ago, managers mournfully told you that they would all be closed within the week. Of course, business isn't anything like it was on the "old Broadway," but it was better today. There are several sell-outs among the twenty-five or so current attractions and another ten or so that are getting along fair to middling.

"Strike Me Pink," the Durante-Lupe Velez show, is selling standing room. Wednesday night found Norma Talmadge and Georgie Jessel among those who had to occupy chairs pushed hastily into the aisles.<sup>282</sup>

Class politics was definitely *not* acknowledged as among the show's selling points. Bordman describes the narrative's original leftist leanings being reduced, in the Vélez/Durante version, to just one musical number, "'Home To Harlem' ... [which] attempt[ed] to elicit sympathy for a black criminal's longing for New York." Bordman's description brings to mind the stylistic sensibility of (a white-appropriated version of) the "Negro" spiritual: "Home to Harlem" was "...sung against Henry Dreyfuss' moving cyclorama that depicted episodes in the black man's progress—a cottonfield cabin, a prison chain gang, a Harlem nightclub" (Bordman, 482).<sup>283</sup> Strident labor politics that, in

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<sup>282</sup> Mollie Merrick, "Pictures, Radio at Death Grips." *Los Angeles Times*, Nov 27, 1932, B13. Merrick reports on the musical as a Hollywood strategy to combat radio. Apparently Lew Brown and Ray Henderson, *Strike Me Pink!*'s producers, were contracted to produce six musical pictures for Fox. The decision was that of Winfield Sheehan.

<sup>283</sup> Bordman also writes that one of the production's tunes, "It's Great to be Alive," originated with *Hot-Cha!*, a point further indicating that the show, though not a huge success on by all accounts, saw a success

the original *Forward March*, might have addressed a broader racial and ethnic economic underclass, were, in *Pink*, reduced (to representation of a “criminal” class), segregated and historicized. Reviews of the show in newspapers of the day, including Crowther’s lengthy account of the Vélez and Durante “star” procurements, made no reference to the Harlem number, nor to any relevance to race, politics, or class (only “class”).

What was consistently remarked upon, though, was the combustible combination of the two stars and the violence they both capably, and very liberally, inflicted upon the English language: “Lupe and Jimmy! ‘Are they a couple of boids?’ A Mexican tamale and an Eyetalian lover. Hot cha cha—cha cha—cha cha....”<sup>284</sup>

So even as class struggle was racialized and then marginalized as a topic of the revue, the consistent references to mangled English reveal ethnicity as the implicit center of *Pink*’s humor. The show staged a nightly ethnic battle. As Andrea Most’s scholarship attests, the seasoned Broadway audience of the Depression era was familiar with the staging of the ethnic battleground: Broadway staged nothing less than, as Most argues, the very process of “making Americans” (2004). The era privileged productions that addressed, whether overtly or indirectly, the (especially Jewish) immigrant experience, ethnic and economic assimilation, and cultural citizenship.<sup>285</sup> In *Pink*, the subtext of

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for Vélez that gathered some momentum. The tune, writes Bordman, “enjoyed a contemporary vogue” (483).

<sup>284</sup> “A Tornado? No! Jimmy and Lupe.” Sara Hamilton, *Photoplay*, Dec 1933, 30-31.

<sup>285</sup> In her book, *Making Americans: Jews and the Broadway Musical*, Most writes: “The musicals of the 1920s and ‘30s, many of them written and performed by Jews from immigrant backgrounds, suggest a strong opposition to rigid racial categorizations, advocating instead a more fluid conception of identity. Emerging from immigrant families and desperate to become Americans, Jewish performers understood the crucial importance of being able to adopt whatever personae they chose” (41). From the *Strike Me Pink* group, Lew Brown and Henry Dreyfuss were both first generation Jewish immigrants. My provisional interpretation of this show, though it was produced four years prior to Rodgers’ and Hart’s *Babes in Arms*, has been influenced by Most’s chapter on the latter. And, like *Babes*, *Pink* was adapted for a screen version (starring Eddie Cantor) that diverges entirely from the themes of the Broadway production (For Cantor’s “de-semitism,” see Jenkins (1990); also see Most on Cantor. *Strike Me Pink* remains a fruitful topic for further research.

ethnic belonging is introduced right along with Durante. Accounts of the show describe Durante's entrance: coming down the aisle rather than from behind the stage, a quarrel is staged where he is pitted against an usher who is refusing him entrance (Bakish, 44). The "classic" ethnic paradox is launched for comedic irony: the entertainer who is welcome to take his position on stage is, at face value, judged as *unwelcome* in the world inhabited by the paying audience. While the scene might bring to mind the more intransigent racial Cotton Club scenario, it also pertains to the intersection of ethnic entertainment and anti-Semitism. Either scenario would have been familiar to the real Durante. The stage Durante, perpetually marked by his "mangled" English, represents an ambiguously ethnic (probationarily white) working-class immigrant.

In his book, *The Great Clowns of Broadway* (1984), Stanley Green offers some rare accounts of Vélez/Durante stage work, including useful examples of the narratives that framed the hilarity and the power struggles on which they were based. Green writes:

In [one] skit, Miss Velez played a *temperamental* actress dissatisfied with the chair she had been given to sit on, and Durante was the show's property man ("Oh, da temperament of these people! Me what goes out wid de elite! De intellegentsia!"). The scene called for Lupe and Jimmy to bump hips and one night Jimmy put a monkey wrench in his pocket. Lupe screamed with pain, reached into Jimmy's pocket, grabbed the wrench, proceeded to chase Jimmy up and down the aisles. When she finally caught him, the two wrestled briefly on the stage until Jimmy ended the brawl by tossing Miss Velez into the orchestra pit (page emphasis added).

We will never know if the two choreographed some or all of their seemingly improvised comedy. If some events were truly Durante's unilateral, open-ended instigation of mischief, he knew he could trust Vélez for a spontaneous and good-natured comedic response. But it is the "class" inflection of the roles in Green's account that here provides the particularly enlightening glimpse of the vaudevillian Vélez that never translate intact to her screen roles. While Vélez is already known to be "tempestuous"—embodying the *physical* manifestation of the uncontrollable "temperamental actress"—in *Strike*, Vélez

also performs the haughty version of “temperamental.” In this segment of *Pink*, she is the high strung, neurotic, perhaps mercurial modern subject, “de intelligentsia”—*before* she comically explodes the illusion in a performance of uncontained, physically articulated emotionality. This is her opportunity to play the persona of that which she was *not* mistaken for—where she would enact a persona quite like her Judda Goudal, Gloria Swanson or Greta Garbo imitations—*before* erupting dramatically into a performance of the caricature that she is *known* to inhabit, the “firebrand” or “spitfire.” The contrast formed by the two characterizations of the “temperamental” public figure—the affected/modern versus the natural/peripheral—denaturalizes both “high” and “low” personae, making them both more compelling. Durante, in this scene at any rate, complicates the high/low binary by being on the receiving end of both of Vélez’s affected temperaments. The hip-pocket/monkey wrench sketch reveals Vélez and Durante, equally, as lower-rung immigrants in a battle for agency and acceptability.<sup>286</sup> On the stage, within the prevailing aesthetic of vaudevillian “anarchistic comedy” (Jenkins 1990, 22-23) not only is the high/low opposition complicated beyond the binary structure that Jane Feuer describes, it is also more likely to be left in tension. The narrative resolution that negotiated the class and taste polemics of the Hollywood screen musical did not hold sway on New York stages. *Conflict*, not resolution, was the privileged topic of urban theatrical entertainment (Green, 1984). While Durante and Vélez engaged in nightly battles on Broadway, there appears to have been no “winner” or “loser” established. That will not be the case once the Vélez/Durante pairing come to the screen.

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<sup>286</sup> Bakish writes that “Durante and Velez (sic) were a bigger hit than the show,” making the link between the duos popularity and the Hollywood pictures they soon made together. He very briefly mentions another *Pink* highlight, where “[Durante] and Lupe play ‘children of nature,’ frolicking in Central Park” (44).

In December of 1933, more than six months after *Strike Me Pink* has closed, *Photoplay* ran an elaborate feature on the Vélez/Durante Broadway “tornado”<sup>287</sup> (figure 20). The two-page spread clearly speaks more to the anticipation (read promotion) of the upcoming MGM production, *Hollywood Party*, than to the actual New York reception of *Strike Me Pink!*. Yet the *Photoplay* writer, Sara Hamilton, deftly executes the stage-to-screen transformation by discursively staging a variation on the popular hip-pocket routine. In Hamilton’s version, Durante has planted a tack in his pocket as he and Vélez are rehearsing a dance scene for *Hollywood Party*; Hamilton’s story reads as a *Real* behind the scenes moment rather than an account of staged (however improvised) comedy. In actuality, however, there is no dance sequence between Durante and Vélez in *Hollywood Party*, and there is, furthermore, no point in the plot at which a dance scene with the two would have made sense. Nevertheless, Hamilton’s Durante narrates:

Loop keeps trampin’ on me dogs... so I fixes her, I put a tack in my pocket wit de point stickin’ out, see, and over hot-chas Loop, hits de point and, for three weeks, dey hides me in Clark Gable’s dressin’ room, see, an’ slips things through the window to me at night.

De fourt week, she forgets all about it, so it’s safe to come out. “Allo beeg boy,” she cries when she sees me, givien’ my schnozzle a twit. ‘Where you been, darlin’? Lupe miss her Jeemy.’

Dats what I like about her. She don’ harbor no grudges. In a couple of years it’s all over wit’ Loop. Wotta gal.

The article offers its readership an illusion of privilege to an elaborate back-stage farce. And it continues. As Hamilton’s story goes, Vélez finds out (only after catching a glimpse of Durante in his scant costume) that her co-star is playing a “Tarzan” figure in the film. She loudly admonishes him as having none of the attributes of the real Tarzan—that being, of course, Johnny Weissmuller, whom Vélez recently married—and, once again, the two are chasing around the set threatening an impending physical battle.

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<sup>287</sup> Sara Hamilton, “A Tornado? No! Lupe and Jimmy.” *Photoplay*, Dec 1933, 30-31.

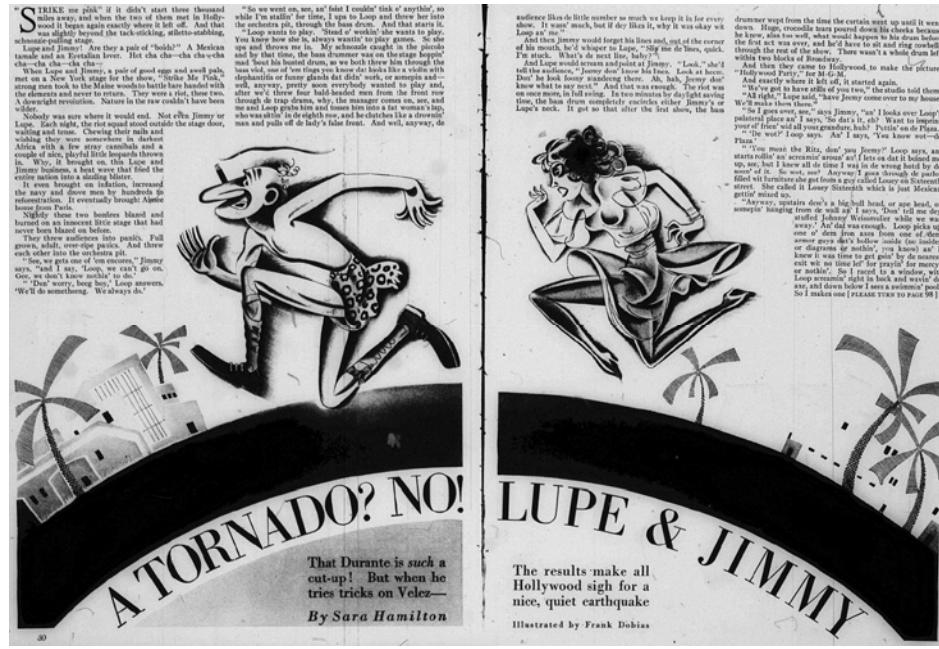


Figure 20: Chasing Jimmy Durante from stage to screen

Completing the trope of the backstage binary (which I have argued is prone to triangulation), the article introduces the “elite” presence of Greta Garbo, aghast at the antics taking place in her professional presence: “‘Vot game is dis?’... ‘Gott, such craziness.’” (Tellingly, the spoken English of the elite foreign star is just as likely to be exaggerated for comedic effect as is the English of the low-born immigrant; Hollywood is most comfortable outsourcing both the high and the low to the foreign element, thereby maintaining the image of the relatively classless United States.)

If *Hollywood Party* had not taken so long in production, such discourse might have meant a boon to the film’s reception. As it happened, the film was not shown for another seven months, by which time two other Vélez/Durante films had already screened. Thus the pair’s stage-to-screen leap, envisioned so seamlessly by Hamilton, suffered under the double jeopardy of industrial inertia and premature enthusiasm. Garbo,

incidentally, contributed only a copy-written cameo/clip to *Hollywood Party*;<sup>288</sup> she surely was *not* loitering in the studio for the film's rehearsals.

### **“Include [her] out!”: Hollywood, 1934**

In the context of their stage relationship, Durante paid a significant compliment to Vélez's skill as a comic when he refers to her as “his best female foil.”<sup>289</sup> However, the way in which the “foil” dynamic plays out on screen, Vélez becomes Durante's compliment by way of uncomplimentary representation. The films of 1934, unlike the Vélez/Durante stage representations, establish a pattern wherein Vélez is paired with Durante romantically. But the pairing becomes a set-up for double failure; Vélez is unable to execute the transition from entertainer to romantic or even social partner within the world of her films' narrative subjects. In all three of the post-*Pink* Durante screen pairings, Vélez—though billed second to Durante and, as such, as the female lead—plays the narrative function of romantic antagonist; her characters are desirable sexually but remain—to various extents, humorous or otherwise—signifiers of social problem... of the undesirable citizen. The quote of my subheading, “Include her out,” invokes the famous oxymoron (“Include me out”) attributed to Samuel Goldwyn. Mark Winokur notes the phrase as one that “might summarize the immigrant paradox” (1996, 180). I co-opted Winokur's phrasing (“immigrant paradox”) above, in characterizing Durante's denied entrance in *Pink*. On screen, though, Durante is consistently (if humorously) included in. It is Lupe Vélez who is “included out.” I take the phrase quite literally. She is

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<sup>288</sup> We see just the final shot of the then very recent *Queen Christina* (MGM, 1933) before the Schnarzan trailer begins. The juxtaposition is perfectly ironic in its opposition (see Larson's reading of this scene (11)). As reported by *Film Daily* (June 22, 1933, p7 and June 26, 1933, p8), *Hollywood Party* was originally imagined to showcase a number of screen luminaries, including, in addition to Garbo, Joan Crawford, Jean Harlow, Marie Dressler, Lee Tracy, Jack Pearl, Nils Asther and Jean Hersholt.

<sup>289</sup> Muriel Babcock, “How Mortifyin’! Lupe Gets in Durante’s Hair—or What’s Left of It.” *Los Angeles Times*, Jul 9, 1933, A1.

included, in that her function (to facilitate the relative acceptability of Durante) is necessary. It is also temporary. She is included, but only in order to be framed as expendable and, finally, expended.

As Nina Madero, “Spanish” nightclub dancer and boxing groupie in *Palooka* (1934, United Artists), Vélez’s character epitomizes opportunistic vixenism. When Nina’s initial amoral influence causes her boxing champ boyfriend (Fred Toones as “Smokey”) to lose his title, she immediately throws over the spent loser to seduce the naive, young, pugilist farmboy (Stuart Erwin as Joe Palooka) who just defeated the former champ. Predictably, Nina’s/Vélez’s victory is as temporary as is her new boxer boyfriend’s.

The most interesting thing about Vélez’s role in *Palooka* is its repurposing of her well-documented off-screen enthusiasm for the fights. Within discourses emanating from both Mexico and the U.S., in coverage both of the period and posthumously, Vélez’s passion for boxing represented the aspect of her “real” life that was most consistently documented and most well remembered. In *Palooka*, though, Vélez’s boxing enthusiasm is reduced to the vehicle by which we understand Nina’s opportunism.

Boxing was/is an immigrant, underclass, racialized sport. To the extent that *Palooka* did not erase ethnic figuration of the boxing world entirely, the film casually vilifies its ethnic figures to champion the morally superior (physically inferior) “loser” from the American Heartland. Class, too, then, is suppressed in favor of a binary that conveniently structures the “clean living” farm family disrupted by the corrupt, ethnic, city-slicker/vamp couple represented by Durante and Vélez.<sup>290</sup> Nina does not elicit

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<sup>290</sup> The “Italian Palooka” trope of American fight movies (Bondanella, 2005), is splintered incoherently in *Palooka*. Durante’s Irish-ish Knobby Walsh represents the corrupt world of boxing; Joe Palooka is the

enough sympathy from the film to even figure in the scenes that stage its happy romantic resolution, which comes with Joe's marriage to his farmland sweetheart (Mary Carlisle as Anne). Vélez reappears for the film's closing punchline, which might be read as referencing ethnic/Catholic fertility: Nina and Knobby are married when they show up in the Palooka cornbelt—married, with a very large-nosed baby boy (imaged in the form of a sight-gag accomplished by way of Durante's photo-sampled face).

In narrative structure, *Strictly Dynamite* (RKO, 1934) is a *Palooka* remake. This time Vélez's character, Vera Mendez, is Durante's (Moxie Slaight's) girlfriend from the film's start. The two are also partners in their capacity as radio personalities. Again, however, Vélez plays the vamp antagonist, fickle and opportunistic in love (and Moxie is, "just the tool of a beautiful dame"). Appearing to have no loyalty to Moxie in business or love, Vera is concerned only with her own commercial success and will manipulate, indiscriminately, either Moxie or his intellectual young writer (Norman Foster as Nick Montgomery) toward her own ends. She turns to the latter, behind Moxie's back, in an attempt to procure better radio material, i.e. to steal her partner's thunder and thus advance her own career. The implication throughout is that Vera is talentless ("every time she sings the radio audience reaches to adjust their reception... but Moxie's hooked").<sup>291</sup> Not only does her nefarious influence threaten the marriage of the tender, naïve, Anglo

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Anglo-Saxon innocent who escapes that world with his moral integrity intact. This "splintering," I should note, initially takes place with the comic strip, "Joe Palooka" (drawn by Ham Fisher, distributed by McNaught Syndicate, 1928-1984) on which the film was based. For a discussion of Racism in the *Palooka* comic strip, see Lenthall, 1998.

<sup>291</sup> Durante and Vélez became a popular duo together on radio; their stardom within this medium deserves further research. For example, the two won the particular affection of writer Nelson Bell in the *Washington Post*, on the basis of stage appearances but also radio. See, for one example, Bell, "What Have You Been Wondering About Lupe Velez." *Washington Post*, May 22, 1924, 24. Bell writes that Vélez puts such energy into her performances that they put a "serious drain on the nervous system"—Vélez's nervous system. "Lupe has been told by her physicians that she can not work more than four weeks of personal appearances at a time without serious consequences." Very little work has been done on the factor of "personal appearances" within Hollywood stardom. For Vélez these appearances (on top of her Broadway work) were key to her popularity around the country. They were also extremely physically taxing.

couple (Foster and Marion Nixon), her selfishness and her hedonistic indulgence in drink also undermines Nick's talent and professionalism, thereby threatening his material livelihood. The film's climax occurs when Vera and Nick both mysteriously disappear from New York for three weeks, thus appearing to have run off together.

Vélez's task is the most demanding of the *Dynamite* cast. The "logic" of the plot depends on her ability to convincingly perform the diverse, illogical and unlikely motives of her heartless, opportunistic character while remaining charming enough to seduce. Thus Vélez's own talents (despite the fact that the film's dialogue maligns them) are favorably if minimally showcased. She performs her song, "Oh Me, Oh My," with an understated and playful spontaneity modulated appropriately to the cocktail party setting that provides its narrative context. The film answers the flirtatiousness of her performance by allowing her diegetic spectators the power of the gaze. Vélez's charisma in the party setting, combined with the responses of the other guests, allows the spectator's involvement in a conflict that involves charm, seduction and jealousy. Yet, as the Latina caution in yet another cautionary romance narrative, her unacceptability is clearly articulated as the inevitable means by which the film will be resolved and her character will be marginalized.<sup>292</sup>

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<sup>292</sup> Vélez's Vera sports a fantastic and physically flattering wardrobe; highly mannered, modernistic designs apparently insure her status as decadent villain. I would posit Vera's outlandish wardrobe an anti-thesis to the hegemonic Anglo heroine's "puffed sleeves before tea-time" (see Charlotte Cornelia Herzog and Jane Marie Gaines, in Gledhill, Routledge, 1991). A gratuitous photo in *La Opinión*'s Sunday Magazine pictures a head-shot of Vélez in a typically interesting costume from the film: a closely fitting dress topped off with a striped, flouncy, faux-fur, high collar. Though the photo's caption makes no mention of the film and it misinterprets the costume (as "Lupe in one of her famous furs" ... without seeing the whole dress, one might mistake the neckline for the collar of a fur coat, though not a real one), the caption writer has, nevertheless, caught the spirit of the film, sarcastically riffing simultaneously on the costume and on Vélez's performative persona. Accusing Vélez of "imitating a zebra," The caption indicates that Vélez's outlandish costumes are not to be taken seriously: "Estos son famosas pieles de Lupe Vélez, imitando a una zebra. "La estrella mexicana las ha puesto de moda en Hollywood." (photo caption) *La Opinión*, July 8, 1934, Sunday mag. unpaginated.

*Strictly Dynamite* gestures towards an astute—and astutely humorous—rendering of the sensitive, conflicted artist/poet faced with the financial imperatives facing a newly-married proletarian writer in New York City. Montgomery, at the urging of his more practical wife, prostitutes his ostensibly fine literary talent to write for the popular parvenu hack comic (Durante). The film's initially sophisticated premise makes its starkly negative positioning of Vera Mendez all the more nefarious. Vera functions as the locus of conflict; she is strategically positioned to absorb and thus erase, every taste/class tensions haunting the favored (Anglo) relationship (for while Durante and Vélez have top billing, their romantic relationship is not of central concern to the narrative).



Figure 21: Vélez costumed as the modern vixen

The film resolves when it is revealed that Nick and Vera had not in fact been together during their simultaneous, three-week absence. The two did not run away together at all. Nick was “taking exercise” at a “health spa” (a subtle reference to an alcohol addiction besetting the young “poet”). Vera’s absence is explained with the last minute introduction of her (very large) sister. Apparently, unbeknownst to anyone, Vera

had spent the time with her family, assisting with the birth of her sister's twins. Vera's ethnicity has been inexplicit throughout the film, though her name and accent are both unmistakably Latino. To facilitate a happy resolution, the ending "recuperates" Vera with the supplementary *corollary* of the sexually promiscuous Latina stereotype; like *Palooka*, *Strictly Dynamite* ends on the trope of ethnic fertility. Vera Mendez (and finally her large, fertile family) represents the excessive Other and, as such, the caution against which hegemonic American values, including white majoritarianism, are to be maintained. The position Vélez occupied in the late 1920s—signifier of an ethnic diversity that helped sell U.S. Anglo-Saxons on the appeal of off-white assimilation—is fully relegated to the past. Vélez's final film with Durante, *Hollywood Party* (MGM, 1934), is a "Hollywood-on-Hollywood" text (Larson, 2009). As such, it is particularly informative in its staging of the "include her out" paradox.

**The Hollywood (Dream) Party: "...let's throw all transgression to the wind and enjoy ourselves with absolute infirmity!"<sup>293</sup>**

Crashing the metonymic "Hollywood Party," Vélez's role in the film by that name could not be more directly reflective of her off-screen circumstance. Most personally specific, in this respect, is Vélez's casting as screen-mate of Schnarzan, the title character of the *Schnarzan the Conquerer* (Durante's un-athletic anti-Johnny Weismuller *Tarzan* send-up) in the satirical film trailer within the film.

The Party is the structuring event of the film. When Durante is advised that "Schnarzan is slipping," he hatches a plan to lure the "famous explorer" Baron

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<sup>293</sup> This line is spoken by Durante/Schnarzan as he welcomes his guests to his party. (As Larson points out, the film goes so far as to joke that the Durante character is English-illiterate. Looking at a newspaper his agent hands to him, which sports an article about his "rival," Liondora, Durante responds, "Right on the front page.... What does it say?")

Munchhausen to his Hollywood mansion so he can buy the Baron's lions (just arrived from Africa) and thus improve the authenticity of his film series.

Diegetically "off-screen," Vélez is Durante's girlfriend (the two both play "themselves" in the film). But the couple is in the process of breaking up, professionally and personally. Durante has "kicked her off his latest [Schnarzan] picture," as part of his attempt to revamp his image, and he refuses her an invitation to his party. The meta-joke being that Vélez (who plays "too rough," gets "too involved") is too primitive, too unsocialized, to be the social partner of even the vulgar and naively ambitious outsider (Durante/Schnarzan) who is, himself, the cheesy personification of the rube/primitive. Vélez is not addressed by name until she crashes said party (Durante calls her "Jungle Woman" on screen and his "white dove dove" on the phone); when the bartender informs her of his orders that she's not to be served, she is addressed as "Miss Veléz."

Always dressed just a little too scantily—both "on-screen," in the trailer within the film, and diegetically "off-screen"—Vélez is a comedic spectacle of excess.<sup>294</sup> As Larson points out, the casting creates an intriguing contrast between the "real" Jane, the "relatively demure" (and accent-less... though also scantily clad) Maureen Sullivan. Larson, however, refers to the Vélez choice as "stunt casting." Given that the momentum behind the film was in no small part owing to the success of *Strike Me Pink*, it is far more likely that the Schnarzan character was developed in response to Vélez's pairing with Durante, rather than the other way around. The point is, though, that, like *The Half-Naked Truth, Hollywood Party* is astutely (and often hilariously) self-aware in its extra-textual

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<sup>294</sup> On the screen within the film, Vélez is wears a skimpy faux-grass number that quite obviously requires a body stocking foundation to work at all as clothing. This transitional code-era film thus treats the loosely conceived exigencies of Hays regulation as a sight gag opportunity, thus underscoring the risqué dress, worn when she crashes Durante's party (no body stocking), a second comic thumbed-nose to the code.

references.<sup>295</sup> Where Vélez is concerned, however, I would argue that the latter film, unlike the former, does not operate as self-reflexively *critical* of the mode of ethnic representation in which it participates (and which it *selectively* burlesques).

Durante/Schnarzan is the classic ethnic parvenu. His comedy is rooted in loud proud ignorance, making him an absurdly ironic gate-keeper against Vélez. Durante defensively straddles the ethnicized parameters of assimilation and citizenship; his defensive strategy requires his distance from Vélez. On the one hand, Schnarzan and his entire hatched plot reads as so ridiculous that his self-positioning as arbiter of Hollywood propriety is enjoyed as pure farce. Even so, to side with Vélez in the (literal) battle staged by the film, one must read against the grain and carve out a position as a resistant spectator. The fact that the “grain” of the film is so unstable, the cracks and fissures so delightfully obtrusive, may render the film *inadvertently* self-critical. But the degree to which the film reads as cognizant of the irony it stages is—in the final analysis of the Vélez character specifically—suspiciously indeterminate.<sup>296</sup>



**Figure 22: Vélez and Durante - a power struggle misrepresented**

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<sup>295</sup> See Larson (2009) for a thorough account of these as well as an understanding of their period accessibility.

<sup>296</sup> As one tangible measure of the film’s indeterminacy, I would submit that the power struggle staged between Vélez and Durante in the film is mistakenly represented by this studio shot (figure 22), which implies Durante as cowed by Vélez and led by the “Schnoz.” Vélez might have the agency to crash the party, but Durante has the power to exclude her socially.

The film's overall indeterminacy—which is evidenced, or manifest, most obviously by the film's technical incongruencies which go somewhat beyond the fact of the film's “vaudeville aesthetic” (Jenkins, 1992)—is a primary reason that it is often read as a quintessentially “muddled text” (*ibid.*, 114).<sup>297</sup> Allen Larson, though, building from Mark Winokur's work on Hollywood studio comedy as being specifically expressive of an immigrant-dominated industry, sees a (white) ethnic method to *Hollywood Party's* muddle. Winokur's work shares with Most's an interest in the relationship between the representation of “white ethnicity” *generally* and the *specificity* of Jewish representation. Winokur seeks to explain “the absence of the immigrant and the ethnic as fully fleshed characters and lead players in the American film industry,” which is certainly ironic on its face given that “the film medium is and has been to a great extent dominated by immigrants and children of immigrants.”

In an official culture that trusts only immigrants who can repress the visible characteristics of ethnicity, economically and socially successful immigrants will tend to be uninterested in portraying a way of being that they must repudiate, at least in their public lives. Denial of ethnicity becomes a piece of the fabric of success, of how one achieves status and recognition in American culture (4-5, partially quoted in Larson, 14).<sup>298</sup>

Larson's reading of *Hollywood Party* offers an invaluable contribution towards the elucidation of Winokur's “immigrant paradox” (180, 60) within the “American” identity making process. Durante, in so many of his films, is representative of a mode of studio representation described by Winokur wherein ethnic cultural practices are erased or replaced with vaguely stereotyped (apolitical) populist “sensibilities” (Larson 14).

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<sup>297</sup> Quoted in Larson (2009, 12). Regarding *Hollywood Party's* normative role/reputation in cinema scholarship, Larson writes: “the film's unfortunate legacy has generally been to epitomize early sound-studio moviemaking gone wrong” (12).

<sup>298</sup> Even earlier, in her foundational essay, “Ethnicities-in-Relation,” Ella Shohat makes a related observation: “The study of American cinema is necessarily as well the study of the projected ‘American Dream’ of these [studio mogul] immigrants, their manner of perceiving the image that hegemonic America would desire for itself” (1991, 218).

*Hollywood Party* is somewhat the happy exception. Ethnicity is all over *Hollywood Party*; so is the vexed practice of passing as “some version of Anglo-American” (Winokur, 10). Rather than enacting ethnic erasure, *Hollywood Party* writes the erasure marks right into the text. Larson thus sees in the film, “traces” of the “complexities, anxieties and contradictions” that come with “the act of ethnic repression and denial” (14). So, for example, rather than the usual complete obscuring of Durante’s/Schnarzan’s Italian heritage, the film stages one brilliant exception—a momentary sight-gag—that points up the general rule of erasure. The moment comes as Durante is contemplating the threat posed by a rival star, a competing Schnarzan-esque series player. As he mutters the competition’s name, “Liondora...,” he moves toward a ceramic bust of “himself,” Durante/Schnarzan, in Roman head-gear. He methodically positions himself in profile, in perfect juxtaposition to the Roman bust in the same profile, to finish his thought: “... my hated rival.”

Further references to ethnicity include Liondora disguising himself as a Marquis from “Souther-part Europe,” Baron von Munchausen being a pseudo-German fraud, the array of Jewish-ish movie moguls, and a group of rabbinically-coded scientists. A chorus of Black dancers<sup>299</sup> dressed in ostrich-feathered-pseudo-native dance costumes have bones through their noses and, as per usual, Vélez issues a rapid-fire stream of emphatic Spanish at the refusal of her invitation to Durante’s party (her key epithet, “cara de pelícano,” is later reprised in English: “pelican face”). The film’s insistent interest in

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<sup>299</sup> While there is some element of genuine levity in this dance performance given its hyperbolic over-the-top play of racial exoticism and fantasy, it is undercut by the fact that the dancers, like Vélez, are not invited to the party. They are not participants in the narrative, either, other than (quite typically) as musical entertainment. Had there been opportunity for the dancers to speak, thus revealing their non-“Africanness” and underscoring the gag as such (pace the Marx Brothers’ *Animal Crackers* [1930]), The performance would signify entirely differently (i.e. better).

ethnicity is self-spoofed in that it comes with a simultaneous (comedic) preoccupation with corporeal difference. We see plenty of Durante's Schnoz shtick, the "bodily sign of difference corroborating the misfit, outsider-standing-on-the-inside status upon which all of Durante's material played" (Larson, 20). Larson points to the work of Sander Gilman to speak to the full significance of the nose as "the genetic-truth-teller that ostensibly revealed the distinction between Irish and English, Jewish and Aryan, black and white" (*ibid.*). Speaking to the Durante "schnozzola" image, Larson continues:

The intrusive schnoz was the perpetual joke—the idea of the body out of control, unable to adhere to social scriptures (a fart joke)—the body that speaks truths and reveals lies. The addition of prosthetic body hair in *Hollywood Party*'s mock trailer sequence only adds another level of detail (although by no means an insignificant one) to the insistence upon invoking disruptive and seemingly irrepressible modalities of embodied difference (expressed aurally and visually)—*in order to nominate their ultimate nonsensicality*—as the essence of the Durante image. (Larson, 20, emphasis added).

On the one hand we can take seriously the Schnarzan spoof on the erotically idealized image of Weissmuller and the paradoxical mobilization of that erotica by way of the liminal, semi-primitive Tarzan (figure 23). On the other hand, though, Larson's deference to the significance of the film's indeterminacy, here identifying a kind of corporeal indeterminacy supposedly articulated by the fact that Durante's nose was never treated as indicative of his Italianness, "invited further contemplation of the very nature of the bodily marker—and corporealized difference—itself," might be over-stated.



Figure 23: Tarzan / Weissmuller's public image<sup>300</sup>

The Durante image is too readily consumable as Jewish to be understood as a pointed intervention that undermines the accepted stability of ethnic differential markers (though taking Larson's point, I would again gesture to the film's Roman bust sight-gag as polyvalent in its significance). Rather, we might see Durante as participant—in reverse—in what Jenkins identifies as the “de-semitization” of Broadway players as they hit the screen. Durante's semitization facilitates an ethnic, class-inflected, melting pot Americanism that *Hollywood Party* places along side its other parvenus: Mr and Mrs Clemp the lily-white, oil-soaked-Okies (Charles Butterworth and Polly Moran).

*Hollywood Party* (and, by implication, Hollywood itself... supposedly) “democratizes” insider vs. outsider status by blurring *almost* all class and ethnic borders to negotiate a comical take on the American “melting-pot” dream. Laurel and Hardy as naive townsfolk swindled by the fraudulent Baron Munchhausen facilitate the quasi-counter-hegemonic free-for-all, as do the Three Stooges: Larry Moe and Curly, doing a

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<sup>300</sup> *Photoplay*, June 1933, 29. Artsy, high-contrast treatment notwithstanding, this image, verging on the pornographic, is by far the most sexually charged image I have seen in fan magazines of the era. The caption speculates on Tarzan's future prospects: “... first 'twas Bobbe Arnst who held claim, then Lupe Velez, and now who shall it be?”

vaudeville-esque walk-on bit where our rabbinicalesque “men of science” identify the trio as specimens of “Neanderthal, androgynous and anthropedic” skull types (with different degrees of hollow-headedness articulated with a musical sound gag). The film’s only undisguised, stable ethnic reference is the figure/character of “Miss Vélez”: her casting, her name and her Spanish-language outbursts make clear that the party’s ambitious and determined refusenik is unequivocally Mexican.<sup>301</sup> And she is the only one “included out.” Afforded the privilege of hindsight, we know that the crashing of the “Hollywood Party” appeared, for several years, as though it might be Vélez’s final Hollywood act. Vélez would only participate in one Hollywood film (playing the part of an especially talented maid in *High Flyers* (RKO, 1937), about which more below) until the Good Neighbor Policy ushered in the “Mexican Spitfire” film series. Such a perspective should beg consideration of *Hollywood Party*’s not-so-comical relationship to its referent. Vélez really was being shown the door.

*Hollywood Party*’s “jarring it-turns-out-it-was-just-a-bad-dream ending” (Larson, 12) makes a gesture toward Vélez’s redemption that is exceedingly clever and yet unsatisfying for the “pro-Vélez” spectator. Durante wakes up from said dream to the voice of *his wife* (Jeanne Olsen, Durante’s actual wife) who prods Jimmy to hurry up, lest

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<sup>301</sup> The film’s most generous gesture toward Vélez comes late in the film, in an extended silent comedy routine she performs with Laurel and Hardy (who are also Hollywood “outsiders”), which was frequently pointed to as a highlight—if not *the* highlight—of the film, eg: “Laurel and Hardy Steal MGM’s ‘Hollywood Party,’” *Hollywood Reporter*, Mar 29, 1934, 3. “one of the funniest sequences seen in pictures in many a day is to be found in the Lupe and Laurle and Hardy. “It had last night’s preview audience rolling in the aisles and actually sobbing with laughter. That sequence is worth the price of admission and is the highlight in the otherwise dull musical. The picture otherwise doesn’t rate the time and money that MGM has expended.”

The perfectly modulated comic timing of the skit—wherein Vélez transforms from quietly haughty, to charming and back again—showcases her in stark contrast to the uncontained physical spectacle she otherwise performs. Her brief but spot-on imitation of the gate-keeping butler’s snooty accent (“eau, is that sew...”) is another example of this contrast. One other gratifying Vélez moment occurs when she throws the sexually aggressive Charles Butterworth character—with apparent ease—over her shoulder, over the patio wall, and into a hedge. It’s clear no stunt double was used.

they be late for “Lupe’s party.” He has an open copy of Edward Rice Burroughs’ *Tarzan* novel face down on his chest. Recasting Vélez as party-giver (she was indeed known for throwing fabulous parties) rather than refusenik names her as Hollywood insider. On the other hand, what was Durante doing dreaming about Vélez? The entirely unforeseen all-a-(bad)-dream ending is at its most “jarring” when we reflect upon the implication that a married man was dreaming of a vexed *personal* relationship with another woman. The film’s ending asks the spectator to retrospectively attribute the logic of the dream *entirely* to its extra-textual reference. That is, we are to understand that, as Durante went to sleep reading Burroughs’ *Tarzan*, he did not dream of being Tarzan but of being Weissmuller, and thus of being married to Lupe Vélez. Apparently the film couldn’t resist playing on the fact that Vélez marriage to the real Tarzan had already shown signs of trouble. Yet the timing of the film’s production and release is such that it may well have been participating in the momentum of the press’s framing of the couple as violent spectacle rather than just cleverly exploiting it.<sup>302</sup> One thing is clear: when Durante wakes up from his nightmare, the Lupe Vélez character lingers as the text’s most palpable signifier of the “real.” Thus, even beyond the previous Durante pictures, *Hollywood Party* glibly and directly, if cleverly, dismisses Vélez as potential romantic

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<sup>302</sup> According to an article attributed to Vélez’s own hand, the press indulges, also, in the spectacularization of sex and indiscretion. For a remarkably frank “confession” regarding her marriage and its surrounding discourses, see “Johnny y Yo: Confesiones de Lupe Vélez,” *Cinema Reporter*, Feb 1935, 7. Vélez writes: the fantasies of the public are without limit. About me it has been said that I have married in secret more than seven times and that my lovers include nearly the entire masculine colony of Hollywood.” Vélez assures her readers that she has only twice been in love, with Gary Cooper and Johnny Weissmuller. She explains with great care that she and Johnny have differences that sometimes result in fights. “I love Johnny, and if someday we have to separate, I will feel it with all my heart. I realize that he is brutish, violent at times. But he has never slapped me, as has been said in various magazines.” Vélez contends that she tends to push Weissmuller too far, that she enjoys seeing his emotions because he’s so large and strong. “When the fury passes he takes me in his arms and I have this sensation of being protected against anything and everything. In these moments I think I could never divorce my Johnny, in spite of the gossips that say our divorce is inevitable.” Reading this piece between the lines, so to speak, and next to other discourses, I would agree with Rosa Linda Fregoso (2003, 122) that Vélez was likely a sufferer of spousal abuse.

partner. Such a consistent pattern of treatment would surely have the effect of reducing her viability as a casting choice in romantic dramas or even comedies, and thus would have a substantial adverse impact on her career.

### **En la colonia Mexicana: ¿la incluye afuera?**

Vélez's disappearance from Hollywood was preceded by a near disappearance from the pages of Los Angeles's Spanish-language newspaper, *La Opinión*.<sup>303</sup> Given the historical and social context of the community we imagine to be *La Opinión*'s readership, and the role the paper took in relationship to that community, the ambivalence towards Vélez and her films is not necessarily surprising.

Between 1933 and 1939, the years that Vélez was working largely outside of Hollywood, Los Angeles's Mexican descent community underwent a set of profound and highly stressful transitions. Repatriation pressures continued, even as the hope promised by national return, as a partial solution to unemployment and economic deprivation, had faded. Sánchez documents Depression-related demographic shifts that we can understand as impacting the entertainment culture of the community: not only was disposable income exceedingly hard to come by, but the downtown Mexican population was dwindling. Mexicans willing and able to stay in Los Angeles were largely those with families. As

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<sup>303</sup> Her film *Hot Pepper*, the only film made subsequent to *Broken Wing* that got any attention in the community, received a mildly favorable write-up and had an apparently successful local exhibition, yet was singled out by Gabriel Navarro as a film that denigrated the Mexican race (*la raza*). The Durante films were conspicuously absent from *La Opinión*'s pages. The paper's "Rarezas de Hollywood" daily cartoon featured a drawing of Vélez and a Durante-related anecdote wherein he planted some hot pepper powder on her person and she had to leave the radio studio for the sneezing fit she suffered as a result. Durante seemed quite popular in *La Opinion*; he was featured unusually often in "Rarezas" column. However the Vélez/Durante comedic partnership was discussed only in very brief instances. *Palooka and Hollywood Party* were overlooked. *Strictly Dynamite* was mentioned with a two-shot photo with Durante on the cine/sociedad pages and, for one day, an ad ran with text in "Durante-style," purposefully-mangled English. Likely the ad was deemed untranslatable. Such logic points up the probable inaccessibility of Durante's humor to an ESL audience or a non-English-speaking audience. The film played with a drama, *Of Human Bondage*, which may not have helped it to attract the audience that might have appreciated its proletarian humor.

single repatriots (mostly men) left the downtown plaza area, they were replaced with a stressed and jobless Mexican descent population coming to the city from outlying agricultural regions of the southwestern United States. But this population (also constituted largely of families) consolidated in East Los Angeles, some distance from theaters that historically served the Mexican descent community. Remaining downtown families came under demographic and social pressures under which they, too, increasingly migrated to the eastern region of city. So even as 1933 saw an influx of Spanish-language venues downtown, those theaters were unable to maintain a consistent commitment to Spanish-language exhibition. The result was a transcultural mix in the downtown venues, a rich and varied exhibition culture that served its constituency with mainstream Hollywood features and Hollywood-produced Spanish language films along with Mexican and Latin American films.

The other major demographic phenomenon accompanying this transition period, also documented by Sánchez, is a decisive shift in the politics of long established Mexican American institutions in the city. With a loss of one-third of L.A.’s Mexican residents, the community transitioned to “a new period of leadership that would witness the emergence of American born Chicano leaders more affiliated with their working class communities and organized labor backgrounds.” Sánchez refers to a major political shift that was not necessarily directly discussed in the pages of the community’s newspaper. For example, as Sánchez writes, “after 1935, the Mexican consulate would never again play as crucial a role in organizing local leadership around goals formulated in Mexico city” (123-124). Accepting, for the moment, Sánchez’s broad outline of political shifts taking place within institutions heretofore dominated by the elite and linked with the

Mexican government, we can provisionally approach discourses responding to Vélez and her films of this period as a uniquely positioned lens through which to image resultant shifting cultural consumption patterns as responsive to, and/or reflective of, political transitions. This portion of the chapter seeks to trace the vexed “contact zone” of sorts between Lupe Vélez and *La Opinión* in order to understand her position in relation to the nations and nationalisms in and by which her personae were negotiated. Such negotiations are revelatory of a set of tensions that are not unlike those traced above. That is to say, Vélez’s Mexican persona(e) was likewise negotiated by way of a double-binary of cultural identity formations constructed through and around her films. Her image was mediated through tensions between the elite versus the popular within the Mexican American community while negotiating complicating factors of images of tradition versus modernity. Thus a Vélez micro-history follows Colin Gunckel’s work in complicating Sánchez’s binary structure. Rather than a polemical model where a newly imagined, distinctly *Mexican American* identity is established as a conservative, elite-run nationalist culture gives way to a progressive labor-class allegiance with ambivalent national identification, we find subtler, more attenuated conflicts of national and cultural identification. In this process the role of the *transnational* is continually central—both in import and impact—to identity formation on both sides of the border.

Vélez’s three films with Durante were all but entirely ignored in *La Opinión*. Events that might have celebrated Vélez and her accomplishments—successful theater gigs in New York and London that collected consistently positive reviews—likewise eluded

coverage.<sup>304</sup> In fact her two Broadway shows, the three British films, and London's "American style revue," *Transatlantic Rhythm*, all went unheralded in *La Opinión*'s pages.<sup>305</sup> In mid-1935 Vélez did get some high-profile coverage in *La Opinión*, though not the kind designed to rehabilitate her image. The lengthy article in the Sunday Magazine of May 12, titled "*Rasgos de Lupe: Su Meteórico Ascensión al Estrellato Cinematográfico* (A Portrait of Lupe: Her Meteoric Rise to Cinema Stardom)," consists of a condensed and yet elaborately slanted history of Vélez's career on the Mexican stage. The piece, written by Don Alvarado, a *hispano* from New Mexico and a Hollywood actor,<sup>306</sup> ascribes Vélez's "meteoric rise" to her fearless determination and supreme self-confidence. Alvarado consistently minimizes her talents, contending, "little was expected of an artist of her class, not a good voice but only suggestive acts and attitudes, which the novel actress knew how to produce." According to Alvarado, Vélez

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<sup>304</sup> *Laughing Boy*, (which played in local theaters with the title *La raza de bronce*) was tolerated as "less than ideal," but sustained an interest likely owing to its two Mexican stars. While New York followed Vélez's booking and reception on London stages rather closely, *La Opinión* missed news of Vélez participation. *La Opinión*, on Dec 29, 1935, 4, featured a photo of several blonds on their way to London for Felix Ferry's Follies but Vélez was not included in the photo (she would have already been in Europe filming *The Morals of Marcus*) and she was not mentioned, though *Transatlantic Rhythm* ads appearing elsewhere indicate she was the/a headliner.

<sup>305</sup> The one exception to the rule came early: back when *Strike Me Pink* was still to be titled *Forward March*, Gabriel Navarro reported that Lew Brown offered Vélez the part after Clara Bow had refused it: "La 'niña' Lupe has declared, on various occasions, at the top of her lungs like she declared everything, that she 'no es plato de segunda mesa' ('isn't a plate on the second table')." Navarro suggests she might seek counsel from another Spanish-language proverb, "la falta de pan, buenas son tortas (when you don't have bread, sandwiches are fine)," but that such refection is not consistent with Vélez's character. He then tells of her accepting Brown's offer "without blinking, trying to appear amiable and obliging." Navarro compares her high salary (\$2500/wk) to that she earned in the Teatro Lírico in México—though the Broadway compensation is actually much higher. Navarro's headline for this part of the column, "Una maravillosa transformación de 'La Niña Lupe,'" is thus understood as being quite sarcastic. Finally, he adds, provocatively, that the Lírico salary to which he alludes is "not including the generous gifts that generals and other admirers gave her...." (elipses in the original). I found no suggestion that Bow had been considered for *Forward March* or *Strike Me Pink*. Lew Brown was also involved in *Hot-Cha*, leading me to believe that his casting of Vélez was neither hasty nor a second thought.

<sup>306</sup> Don Alvarado, "*Rasgos de Lupe: Su Meteórico Ascensión al Estrellato Cinematográfico*." *La Opinión*, May 12, 1935 (Sunday mag., unpaginated). Alvarado, born Joe Page, had a successful early career in the silent cinema but was relegated to lesser roles with the transition to sound (Clara Rodriguez, 2004, 17-19).

was celebrated by her public—especially its men—though disparaged by theater professionals:

In fact, for [Vélez] discipline didn't exist. It was a word with no significance and that didn't figure in her dictionary. For the producer, the director, the orchestra leader, etc., little Lupe was a problem of enormous magnitude. The lively response she offered at every performance drove away the veterans of the theater [Las vivas respuestas que daba a cualquiera observación, hicieron salir muchas canas a los veteranos del teatro]. The orchestra director, for the first time in his life, didn't know if the singer would follow the orchestra or the other way around. When a number began, Lupe would neither follow nor dignify with even a look the man who handled the baton.

This insubordination and her juvenile antics earned her enemies, especially within the female element; but she felt amply compensated with the popularity she enjoyed among the men. She gained fame by being ready for any mischief, having no fear of anything and she could be readily found exercising her ingenuousness in the most compromising of situations.

Alvarado is confident that Vélez had no female fans in Mexico—which is inaccurate—though he concedes her popularity with “la clase pobre,” which he attributes to “the sincere pleasure with which the artist took part in the fiestas and customs of the pueblo”:

Frequently Lupe could be found, very early in the morning, with a group of friends, with whom perhaps she had returned from some dance, eating happily in some mercado. Sitting next to a *peón*, savoring with delight her coffee with milk, her beans, her “tacos” and her sweet roll.

‘Buenos días, Lupe!’ ‘¿Que tal, Lupe?’ With these and other exclamations she was recognized from everywhere, and Lupe had a smile and a friendly response for each one of her admirers [simpatizadores].

In this, the only flattering portion of the piece, Alvarado attributes her popularity to the same characteristics that were used to explain her popularity with her Anglo fans in Hollywood: her down-to-earth friendliness, humble origins, and the class-transgressive appeal of her self-assured cheek. But while this characterization is well founded, the anecdotes that support his version are not. Their inaccuracies, in fact, follow a pattern strikingly similar to inaccuracies common in the mainstream English-language press.

Framing Vélez's Hollywood ambitions, Alvarado tells a story in which Vélez and her friends discuss the Greta Garbo phenomenon after having seen the star at the picture show. Vélez reportedly claimed (egotistically and ridiculously, it is implied) that she

could “do what Garbo does” as well as Garbo herself... better if she wanted to. Garbo did, indeed, achieve great attention within Mexico’s emergent mass culture—but *after* Vélez had left for Hollywood.<sup>307</sup> Likewise incredibly, Alvarado dwells on Vélez’s poverty, though he makes no mention of her father, her siblings, her Texas education or her day job. He only mentions Vélez’s painfully devoted mother. Alvarado’s Vélez irresponsibly spends her stage earnings (he greatly *underestimates* her salary) in order to affect an inflated image as star-about-town. This imagined Vélez then “goes crazy” when her first show concludes and she slips quickly back into poverty. Alvarado’s *pobrecita* Lupe spent her days at home—dancing to American songs she played on a second-hand phonograph—dreamily recounting her nights in the Teatro Principal, until she finally got another contract, at the Teatro Lírico, earning 60 pesos/week.

By 1935, numerous accounts of Vélez’s history, variously more accurate than Alvarado’s, had been told in both the English- and Spanish-language press. This piece, to a well-read fan, would be readily identified as a fallacy that, furthermore, is rooted in class—even racializing—bias. Alvarado ends his tale at the point when Vélez has secured her contract with Fairbanks for *The Gaucho*:

We all know what has come to pass since then, and we know another thing besides: that she can’t be now as “crazy” as before. There’s a lot that happens behind those smiling eyes *and that dark complexion* (15, emphasis added [*ese cutis moreno...*]).

Alvarado’s piece suggests almost a “Hollywood Party” scenario; Vélez is being given high-profile, Sunday magazine coverage in order to be pointedly shown the door.<sup>308</sup>

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<sup>307</sup> The timing of such a scenario, however, would require Garbo’s first Hollywood film (1926) to have to have been immediately released in Mexico, and her stardom immediately recognized and celebrated by Vélez’s (*clase pobre*) friends.

<sup>308</sup> If the bias detectable in Alvarado’s account is representative of one factor explaining the dearth of Vélez coverage between 1935 and 1937, it was one among others: her physical absence, a temporarily diminished space in the paper’s pages devoted to cinema and theater and—as Mexican film production and distribution

When *La Opinión* eventually renewed its interest in Vélez, some two years after the Alvarado piece, its pages reflected an enthusiasm for her stage career that was, though belated and somewhat anomalous, revelatory of a re-visioned impression of her stardom.

On April 11, 1937 (just prior to the casting *High Flyers*), a piece ran in the cinema pages of *La Opinión*'s Sunday's section that reported, under a full-page banner headline, Vélez's plans to give up cinema and devote herself to the theater. Apparently Vélez intended to bring Spanish dramas, in translation, to the U.S. stage.<sup>309</sup> A dedicated (even disciplined) artist, Vélez had reportedly spent two days in the basement of the Lozano Bookstore—which happened to be owned by Ignacio Lozano, the editor of *La Opinión*—looking for “new works.”<sup>310</sup> Vélez is quoted:

My longing is to debut one of these works, in English, because I'm sure that the Spanish theater is very vigorous and represents the new modality that I want to communicate in my portrayals.

Based on the one text Vélez had reportedly singled out, Jacinto Benavente's *La malquerida* (1913, opening date in Spain), it seems the emphasis was indeed on modern Spanish plays. The matter of the relative value of Mexican versus European (especially Spanish) cultural production was controversial and contested (Vélez would likely be aware of such controversy, owing to her career on Mexican stages). *La Opinión*, in this piece, does not interrogate the implied hierarchy of great Spanish texts over dramas originating in Mexico or Latin American.<sup>311</sup>

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increased in 1936—greater coverage of those individual productions and of debates concerning the merits and vicissitudes of Mexican national cinema.

<sup>309</sup> “LUPE VELEZ ABANDONARA EL CINE PARA DEDICARSE AL TABLADO.” *La Opinión*, April 11, 1937, sec 2, p6

<sup>310</sup> The Lozano bookstore, as George Sánchez writes, was a cornerstone enterprise serving the Spanish literate community of Los Angeles. Sanchez makes the apt observation that “Lozano, not surprisingly, heavily advertised in his own paper” (175).

<sup>303</sup> Once again, there is an irony in the fact that Vélez was so vilified for supposedly referring to herself as “Spanish” (see the introduction to the dissertation) when the cultural elite seemed to trade on Spanish association with relative impunity.

The fact that *La Malquerida* had been brought to the U.S. stage in New York, in translation, seventeen years prior, would not necessarily preclude its revival. The earlier rendition was received with “wild enthusiasm” (Starkie 1954, 220) in the States, and it featured a strong female protagonist who might offer an ideal vehicle for a Vélez transition from comedy to drama.<sup>312</sup> National origins notwithstanding, well-read fans (one with cognizance of both Johnny Weissmuller and *La malquerida*—Cube Bonifant, “halfway between the bullfights and the opera,” comes to mind) might indeed relish the thought of Lupe Weissmuller, in the role of the protagonist, Raimunda, wife of the Don Juan-esque Esteban, confronting her “craven-spirited” husband with what a later critic identifies as “one of the finest pieces of declamations in the modern Spanish theater”:

Dry those eyes, blood should have flown from them. Drink a little water. Poison it should have been. Don’t drink so quickly for you’re all of a sweat. Look how you are all torn by brambles; knives they should have been (quoted, *ibid*).

Whatever the relative viability of Vélez’s potential project, *La Opinión*’s broadly displayed headline—followed by the prominent placement of “Librería Lozano” in the subtitle—would indicate an (opportunistic) editorial awareness of Vélez popularity, not to mention her potential influence on the consumption patterns of the paper’s readership. At the very least it made for an intriguing announcement to the community that the star is back in town.<sup>313</sup>

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<sup>312</sup> Its popularity was met with chagrin by certain Spanish critics, who characterized the work as Benavente’s supreme act of selling out to the tastes of the very people he had so sharply satirized in his first plays. Federico de Onis, writing in 1923, writes of the author in reaction to the popularity of his *La malquerida*, “There is a symbolic, moralizing tone about his later work which does not accord with his earlier art. He enjoys a greater popularity than ever among the very people he had so sharply satirized in his first plays. But the intellectual minority has shown apathy toward this last phase of Benavente’s dramatic art. Artificial and false, they label it. Benavente himself once said: ‘only God and my artistic conscience know that when we moralize we have to lie’”(363). See also, Starkie (2000) on Benavente criticism.

<sup>313</sup> Likely owing to her frequent absence from Los Angeles, it had been years since Vélez was reported as participating in the live events and benefits that frequently took place in the theaters of *la colonia mexicana*. Just five days after the bookstore piece, however, Vélez was announced to be joining Dolores del Rio, Rosita Moreno and Leo Carrillo at the debut of *Suprema ley*, a Mexican film adapted from the

## The Tehuana of *La Zandunga*: images of voluptuous modesty

The full force of Vélez popularity in the Mexican-descent community of Los Angeles became clear later that year, with the announcement of her lead casting in an up-coming Mexican production.<sup>314</sup> *La Zandunga* (1938) was huge news—*huge* news—and the coverage was thorough, if not always rigorously accurate. Reports of the contract signing made the October 3 issue of *La Opinión*, garnering a full page headline accompanied by a prominent photo of the signing event and a subheading that noted Vélez's salary: 50,000 pesos. Gabriel Navarro was pictured in the photo with Vélez, as was Rubin A. Calderón, president of Azteca Films, and Mexican consulate Renato Cantú Lara. *La Zandunga* would be a folkloric romance and was reportedly written with Vélez in mind. With Mexico's most celebrated director, Fernando de Fuentes, secured for the project, the significance of the news gained further credibility. *La Zandunga* was sure to be a success.

By 1936, all major Mexican productions exhibited in the LA community,<sup>315</sup> and thus the space in the daily's pages reserved for Mexico's films and stars rivaled that devoted to Hollywood. *La Opinión* continuously apprised its readers as to trends in Mexico's burgeoning cinema industry. Just as the nascent industry's successes were enthusiastically celebrated, tensions and debates that national productions engendered, individually and collectively, were vigorously engaged. Gunckel's work details the newspaper's various and evolving perspectives regarding the crucial issues at stake:

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novel of the same name by Federico Gamboa (author of the celebrated *Santa*) at the Teatro California. The event was organized in coordination with the LA Police Department to promote the prevention of juvenile delinquency. Profits would fund summer events and vacations for 3000 youths, "la mayoría mexicanos" (advertisement, *La Opinión*, 16 April, 1937, 4 (ads ran for ten days)).

<sup>314</sup> Early coverage of Vélez's plans to make a film in Mexico was more thoroughly covered in the Mexican press than in *La Opinión*. Speculation ensued that Vélez might return to perform in the Teatro Lírico while en Mexico. She did not. "Que Lupe Vélez Volverá a 'Lírico.'" *La Opinión*, Oct 17, 1937, sec 2, p3.

<sup>315</sup> Gunckel (unpublished manuscript, 2011) documents the significance of Calderón's Azteca enterprises and Frank Fouche, the relationship between Azteca and *La Opinion*, and the virtual monopoly Azteca held on the theater enterprises serving the Mexican descent communities.

Mexican identity in representation, national specificity and Hollywood differentiation, relative technical merit, and the targeting of domestic versus international audiences. As Gunckel writes, “[i]n the context of Mexican/Mexican-American Los Angeles, the theorization of Mexican cinema by journalists in the 1930s... functions as an allegory of acculturation, while revealing the anxiety about the impact of mass culture on both Mexican identity and national relations” (2009, 130).

Revelatory of a parallel to modes of transcultural commodity production discussed earlier in this chapter—that is, paralleling the operation by which music and musicals were used to negotiate individual and cultural identities in a heterogeneous U.S.—the Mexican film industry relied heavily on folklore and musicals to effect a balance between exoticization and authentic regional expression as it attempted to both interpolate and “reflect” its own heterogeneous population. As Gunckel documents, the Ranchera genre—epitomized and exemplified by the overwhelming success of *Allá en el Rancho Grande* (1936)—quickly became the privileged mechanism of national image production manufactured in support of the post-revolutionary project of Mexican unity and identity. Ranchera films “emphasize the Mexican underclass as both the source of authentic culture, and the population that a steadfastly national culture would protect against further acculturation” (Gunckel 2009, 145). The timing of the Ranchera phenomenon—and the broader category of the *custombrista*—coincided precisely with the recalculation of national identity that was occurring, as Sanchez’s thesis posits, in post-repatriation, Mexican American Los Angeles.<sup>316</sup>

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<sup>316</sup> While the conservative narrative structure taken up by the popular Ranchera genre might seem to entirely contradict Sánchez’s thesis, Gunckel makes an argument for the musical nationalism represented by the genre as carving out a sort of third option for understanding the negotiative celebration of *Mexicanidad* that the genre facilitated (Gunckel 2009, 166-7).

By late 1937, after waves of monotonous *Allá en el Rancho Grande* look-alike films, *La Opinión* writers increasingly questioned the relative merits of the *costumbrista*. They observed, somewhat cynically, the industry's search for regionalized variations on the Ranchera mode—a stylistic formula privileging the music, dances and landscape of the Jalisco region—that could be mined for a popularity (and profitability) that might reinvigorate the genre. There was full cognizance of the fact that, as the region that *La Zandunga* presumed to represent—the isthmus of Tehuantepec—had become a haven for tourists and artists (often one and the same constituency), the romanticized representation of that place and its people was experiencing an apparent vogue within Mexican film. Beneath the November headline reading, “two artists interpret the same type,” Vélez is compared with Adelita Herrera, the Tehuana-portraying star cast in *Zandunga*'s “rival” production, the upcoming romance, *Tehuantepec*. Herrera—“less the artist and more the personal beauty”—will be portraying the same Mexican “type,” wearing the same clothes, dancing to the same music, singing the same “melancholic melodies” of the region, as will Lupe Vélez. And yet, the article is at pains to make clear, Vélez, at \$13,000 for an estimated 15 days filming, will reap twice the compensation of the young Herrera, though the latter is expected to work considerably longer (26 days).<sup>317</sup> If the genre was continually successful on the basis of its formula, the piece logically wondered, why so dramatically differentiate one production solely on the basis of its expensive Hollywood star? Questions would persist as to the logic and function of Vélez's role in Mexican cinema.

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<sup>317</sup> I have no record of the film, *Tehuantepec*, having been released. A later article reported a scandal in which thousands of dollars set aside for the production had “disappeared.”

In a *La Opinión* piece running a week later, a related and yet more nefarious report claims that members of the cast of *La Zandunga* (Arturo de Córdoba, the Venezuelan actor, Margarita Mora “and others”) had refused to work with Vélez, “whose arrival in Mexico had been a scandal” (figure 3).<sup>318</sup> In reality, however, Vélez had yet to arrive in the capital city when the piece appeared in print. The reported scandal concerned, again, the Hollywood star’s high salary. Margarita Mora reportedly opined openly that Vélez is not, within Mexico, considered more notable than the other figures of the film and thus, to Mora’s mind, Vélez was not worth the higher salary.<sup>319</sup>



Figure 24: Artists of the Mexican cinema refuse to work with Lupe Vélez<sup>320</sup>

This argument would soon prove irrelevant. The following weeks brought stories of the lavish celebrations and devoted attention with which Vélez’s arrival was enjoyed by her

<sup>318</sup> *La Opinión*, Nov 21 sec2, p1.

<sup>319</sup> “CORDOBA ESTA FURIOSO,” reads the subheading further down the page. Corboba’s compensation is not disclosed; he is supposedly angry that his role in the film is not more significant and resentful that the film is dominated by “la niña Lupe.”

Two days later (Nov 23, 1937, 4), Vélez is featured in a “rarezas” cartoon: “LUPE VELEZ... posee una de las colecciones mejores de dagas y cuchillos en Hollywood, los que mantiene siempre muy limpios y afilados (... has one of the best collections of daggers and knives in Hollywood, which are always kept very clean and sharp.)” The dialogue balloon above the Vélez caricature reads, “¿busca camorra? (looking for trouble?).”

<sup>320</sup> The picture of Vélez chosen for the faux “scandal,” in which Vélez’s jewelry is prominent and her expression is haughty, is the same that ran when she asked for a divorce (the first time). See photo accompanying “Lupe Vélez Pide Su Divorcio: se esfuó su Romance,” *La Opinión*, July 12, 1934, front.

legions of Mexican fans. One of *La Opinión*'s main cinema critics, Esteban V. Escalante, wrote at great length of Vélez's homecoming railway tour, which brought the star on a circuitous route from Guadalajara to México D. F., making stops at town after town wherein each she was welcomed by admirers "from all social classes."<sup>321</sup> Speaking in elaborate detail of the pleasure she took in being in her homeland, Vélez admitted to Escalante a weakness for the food of Mexico (the writer reminded her that her role did not require she be thin). They were both right, as it turns out. Vélez's love of country showed on her physique in *La Zandunga*. If, as Hextor L. Zarauz López contends, the Tehuana was an icon of "voluptuousness and modesty" (Zarauz López 2004), Vélez quite adequately embodied at least one of these traits.

In mid-December, approximately a month after reporting the "scandal" over Vélez unjust salary, *La Opinión* printed a rare, high-profile retraction: the full-page headline reads, "nobody refused to film in Mexico with Vélez," followed by a subheading affirming that "there is nothing against her, it is said." The retraction named the article's author, "el señor X. Carlos Ponce," (whose name was not published on the original piece) as the individual responsible for the error (Dec 19, 1937). The retraction made no reference to Margarita Mora, who did not ultimately appear in the film. Interestingly, the actor who was finally cast in the first supporting female role, María Luisa Zea, who was not featured in the original piece, wrote a letter to *La Opinión*—as did Córdoba—stating her sincere indignation at having read the earlier piece and assuring

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<sup>321</sup> "Lupe Vélez en México" *La Opinión*, Dec 7, 1937, 4. See, also, Hugo del Mar, "El cinema en México" *La Opinión*, Nov 28, 1937, 4, reporting that railway stations were not large enough to hold all the fans that showed up bearing flowers and show-bills (presumably to have autographed). Escalante spent some time on the train with Vélez in order to conduct the interview; he asked her about a variety of issues, including her husband (he will be joining her in Mexico soon), why she hasn't been in any Hollywood films lately (she's been appearing in important cities all over the world and making lucrative films in England), and *La Zandunga* (she loves it).

readers that she is grateful for the opportunity to work with Vélez (those generous make-up tips figured again, along with useful acting advice), which has been a wholly positive experience (“she has been enchanting”). The Zea and Córdoba letters were printed in their entirety; the discrepancy regarding the casting of the supporting female role was not addressed.<sup>322</sup>



Figure 25: images of the Tehuana Lupe.<sup>323</sup>

Writing for *La Opinión* on March 18, 1938, Hortensia Elizondo covered *La Zandunga*'s opening night from Mexico City, where she enjoyed the film with “thousands of enthusiasts overflowing the packed coliseum on the Avenida Juárez.” Although the debut happened to fall on the day the nation's premier magistrate announced the complete nationalization of Mexico's oil resources—the “liberation from the imperialist yoke of petroleum”—news of that nationalist triumph was, as Elizondo was somewhat chagrined to point out, eclipsed by the triumph of the *estrella mexicana*.<sup>324</sup>

<sup>322</sup> In the interim, a short piece reported other personnel secured for the picture. Neither Mora's nor Zea's name was mentioned; the names floated were Lolita Camarillo and Esperanza Baur. “Gratas nuevas artísticas del cine nacional,” *La Opinión*, December 5, 1937, sec2, p1. Fernando De Fuentes's compensation was not discussed, until February of the following year when it was noted that it was surely a “goodly sum” (Pedilla Mellado, *La Opinión*, Feb 1938).

<sup>323</sup> In the photo on the left (figure 25) Vélez appears with María Luisa Zea (published in Zamorano Villareal, 2005, 24).

<sup>324</sup> “Los Estrenos Cinefónicos: ‘La Zandunga’,” *La Opinión*, Mar 29, 1938, 4.

Vélez was present at the opening, accompanied by her husband, Johnny Weissmuller. She wore the distinctive dress of the Tehuana to greet the adoring crowd. Once the film began it had the crowd's undivided attention. That is, until Vélez and de Córdoba kissed, at which point someone from the audience let out a convincing Tarzan yell and everyone (including Weissmuller, it was reported) laughed and cheered. When Weismuller responded with a studied Tarzan yell of his own... the film's romantic spell must have been completely broken. But the night, for that, was no less successful.<sup>325</sup>

Elizondo's review of the film was typical of initial reviews within both the Mexico and the Los Angeles press. *La Zandunga* was beautiful: top-notch production values, gorgeous direction, terrific acting, snappy dialogue (thanks owing to the able assistance of Salvador Novo), music, dancing, landscape, costumes... and a pleasing if predictable story. The film was universally praised on such terms and proved its merit at the box office. Whereas Elizondo had elaborated on the opening as an event, Padilla Mellado re-reviewed the film, ten days later, to reiterate the film's strengths and concur regarding the full and enthusiastic crowds it attracted. If the "traditional" modesty of the Vélez character (Lupe) stood at odds with Vélez's feisty public image, the contrast served to underscore the skill and modulation with which she interpreted the role. Lupe (if the film was written for her, as was widely understood, the character was certainly named for her) was an utterly charming character. Vélez's acting was universally praised, as was that of the rest of the cast.

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<sup>325</sup> One should give Weissmuller credit here for a sense of humor. It's likely that it was known that Vélez and de Córboba had an affair during the production. For an account of the Tarzan yell in the English-language press (under a rather cockolding title), see "WEISSMULLER GIVEN BIRD AT LUPE VELEZ PREMIERE," *LAT*, Apr 10, 1938. C3.

The success of the film notwithstanding, it rightfully and predictably came under criticism on the basis of its formula. Luz Alba (aka Cube Bonifant), for example, writes that the film must hold place number 50 or so in an extended *costumbrista* “series”: “the dress of the *campesinos* has changed a little, and the music, but not the content of the representation.”<sup>326</sup> Furthermore, as *La Zandunga*’s Tehuana presumed to be a representation of indigeneity, the film’s veracity came under criticism on that basis.<sup>327</sup> Mexican cinema favored light-complected actors. Because the *charro* and *china poblana* figures of the Ranchera genre were nominally mestizo their cinematic embodiment (however romanticized, idealized or otherwise disconnected from reality) was more feasible than this representation of the indigenous Tehuantepec.

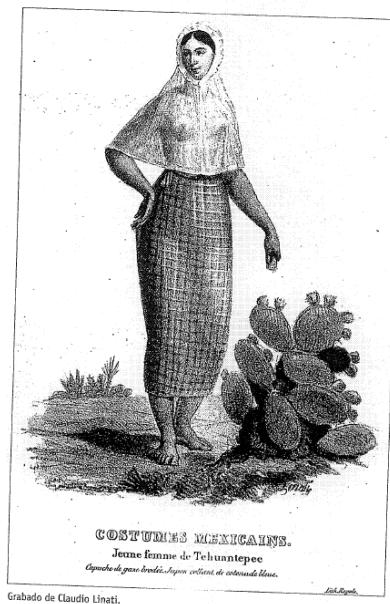


Figure 26: The Tehuana figure<sup>328</sup>

The specifics of the film’s plot—typical as it was in its representation of a love triangle among a proud, happy, “traditional” community of workers and its comedic condemning

<sup>326</sup> *Ilustrado*, March 31, 1938; quoted in Gabriel Ramírez, 172.

<sup>327</sup> X (Xavier) Villaurretia, “La Zandunga – critica cinematografica” (rev.). *Hoy*, April 2, 1938, 55.

<sup>328</sup> An early exoticized idealization of the Tehuana, as represented in a print by artist/tourist Claudio Linati, 1828, published in Zarauz (2004, 26).

of the nefarious wealthy landowner—received little scrutiny in period reviews. As pointed out by Zarauz, however, much more recently (2004, 28-29), the film is determined to celebrate the concept of the region's agricultural bounty and to translate that celebration in commodifiable terms. In the narrative's love quadrangle, Vélez's Lupe falls in love with a sailor from Veracruz, Juancho (Arturo de Córdova), who works for the "American Fruit Company." Juancho's gain is the loss of her local suitor, Ramón (Rafael Falcón), also a gallant and thus sympathetic character. The allusion to the actual U.S. corporation, United Fruit (which contemporaneously carried on exploitative practices in the isthmus's neighboring region in Guatemala), seems clear enough. Particularly in light of the film's picturesque *mercado* scene, the scenario serves to romanticize the international marketplace, effectively linking commerce with traditional rural life while condemning the vaguely feudalistic, exploitative labor model as represented by Lupe's wealthy but undesirable suitor, Don Atasio (Rafael Icardo). Lupe's romantic preference for Juancho over Ramón is certainly fraught, politically, and comes with a particular irony, given the timing of the film's release, coincidental with the nation's "liberty from the imperialist yoke of petroleum."

Considering the problematics of its cultural and economic politics, it is understandable, in retrospect, how this formally quite adequate production—made by Mexico's then and future most celebrated filmmakers—has since fallen into relative obscurity. In other words, Vélez's role in *La Zandunga* is describable as another vexed performance of transculturation, and one that underscores Fernando Ortiz's original significance of that term. The film uses the transnational currencies of the costumbrista genre and the fashion/fantasy of exoticized indigeneity, along with, of course, the

currency of Lupe Vélez, to sell the concept of transnational commodity while obfuscating the highly asymmetrical distribution of capital that transnational trade evidenced and corroborated.

Politics notwithstanding, *La Zandunga* was a terrific success in both Mexico and Mexican America. *La Opinión* covered, in advance of the opening, elaborate preparations for the film's Los Angeles debut. *La Zandunga* opened simultaneously to packed houses in the community's three main theaters—California, Eléctrico and Roosevelt<sup>329</sup>—where it screened for over two weeks, several times a day between noon and midnight. After its initial run, exhibition reduced to one theater where the film screened for another two weeks.<sup>330</sup>

Occupied as she was with a pre-Broadway tour of her stage comedy with Clifton Webb, *You Never Know*—which had been playing to sold out houses in Massachusetts, Connecticut and Washington D.C.—Vélez did not attend the Los Angeles premiere.<sup>331</sup> No hard feelings were audible in the local press, yet neither was there an explanation of her absence.

### **Performing the Politics of Representation: Lupe on Not Lupe**

Lupe Velez is versatile and her powers as a comedienne are a surprise. She gives imitations of Marlene Dietrich, of Katherine Hepburn, even of Laurel and Hardy, and has one scene as Shirley Temple. This is the nearest that the revue ever gets to satire. Lupe Velez at least prevents it from being heavy-footed when she is on the stage.

~M.C., *The Manchester Guardian*.<sup>332</sup>

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<sup>329</sup> All three theaters were owned by Francisco ("Frank") Fouce. On Fouce's role important role within the exhibition culture of the Mexican American community of Los Angeles, see Gunckel (2009, 160-172).

<sup>330</sup> *La Zandunga* screened in a double feature with, ironically, a documentary about Mexico's newly nationalized oil industry. As exhibition of *La Zandunga* phased out, *Alla en Rancho Grande* was reprised as its replacement (thereby sustaining/exploiting the community's enthusiasm/nostalgia for the homeland).

<sup>331</sup> Simultaneous to preparations for the *La Zandunga* premiere in Los Angeles, the *L.A. Times* reported of Vélez having "stopped the [Cole Porter] show" in Boston. "Lupe Velez Wins Ovation in Cole Porter Musical." *LAT*, April 8, 1938.

<sup>332</sup> M.C., "New Revue at Opera House: First Performance of "Transatlantic Rhythm." *The Manchester Guardian*, Sep 14, 1936, 11.

Lupe Vélez is one more whose public appraisal largely beclouds her real nature and aspirations. Hailed as the most “temperamental” of the prevalent stars of the stage and screen, Señorita Velez actually is a young woman whose ardor for footlights and kliegs quite explains and encompasses the measure of her success. She is much more apt to be found busily rehearsing in the theater than she is to be discovered mussing the hair of luncheon guests or flipping the neckties out of dignified masculine waistcoats!

~Nelson B. Bell, *The Washington Post*.<sup>333</sup>

In *You Never Know*, Lupe Vélez and Clifton Webb play a maid and butler, respectively, who perform their employers’ positions and personalities when the heads of household go out for the evening. The fun of the show is in the class-transgressing disidentification (or, perhaps a performance of the impossibility of disidentification)<sup>334</sup> although, narratively, all class tension is happily “resolved” in the end. The show was a grand success on the pre-Broadway tour and then died when it arrived in New York. Vélez’s role as the cheerfully disaffected maid *reprises* her role in the sole Hollywood film of the mid 1930s: her portrayal as Juanita, maid to the wealthy Arlington family in the Wheeler and Woolsey vehicle *High Flyers* (1937, RKO). In fact, this relatively obscure film draws on various elements of Vélez’s mid-century stage work. Teaming her up with a quirky, vaguely ethnic/class-coded older male star (Robert Wheeler) and in showcasing her Hollywood star imitations (already familiar to her fans, in legend if not in actuality), *High Flyers* completed a feedback loop: *screen* references *stage* having referenced *screen*.

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<sup>333</sup> Nelson Bell, “Cole Porter Musical Scores On First Night in New Haven.” *The Washington Post*, Mar 4, 1938, X10

<sup>334</sup> Again I am both inching towards and backing away from the invocation of José Esteban Muñoz’s theory of disidentification(s). If disidentification is a “performance of a hybrid self” (1999, 4-5), this class-specific transgression marks a performance of a specifically class-based hybridity that is presented as an impossibility, a humorous fantasy, and was, indeed, perpetually out of Vélez’s reach (Vélez’s wealth never altered her “class”). On the other hand, her pairing with Clifton Webb in this instance points up the entirely different social identities of these two—here “equal”—servant-fantasizing-as-master performers. The show’s premise carries a *potential* for political critique through identity play and disidentification. Without actually seeing the show, it is difficult to speculate on its realization of that potential.

*High Flyers* stars Robert Wheeler and Burt Woolsey, a team with roots, like those of Vélez, in popular theater. Wheeler and Woolsey films are vaudevillian in their aesthetic, which is to say that their highly improbable narratives serve “merely” (often quite ingeniously) to string together a series of performative moments of song, dance, mimicry and comedic showmanship. *High Flyers* is a serviceable, entertaining film with a close to nonsensical plot. Jerry and Pierre (Wheeler and Woolsey) are bumbling carnival / confidence men who stumble into doing business with some actual criminals. Being mistaken for detectives, they end up as guests in the Arlington home which, unbeknownst to them, is in the process of being robbed... until they are then mistaken for the actual jewel thieves who had disengenuously hired the team as their stooge carriers.

Vélez’s narrative role in the film (or *roles*—her narrative role and her musical role are almost entirely disconnected) shares almost nothing in common with her earlier screen roles. Initially she appears to have been miscast, to the point where her star persona is almost distracting. Her presence as maid becomes a self-reflexive valence that destabilizes her character’s positioning from the film’s very start. The musical numbers thus actually provide the logic for her self-reflexive role in the film, her contribution being one of sly, industry-directed antagonism, an extra-diegetic antagonism that (significantly) falls *just short* of any class antagonism that might spill over into her character’s diegetic function as maid.

Vélez's star function in the film crystalizes at a point when the plot is in full swing: the Arlingtons' household has gathered in the parlor, having just been warned that the Wheeler and Woolsey characters are mentally unstable, dangerous, thieves. The audience knows the pair as benign, depression-era working stiffs caught up in a little money-earning scheme that narratively degenerates into hapless mischief. But the Arlingtons and their loyal servants are wondering how they are going to "get" these criminals. Juanita has an idea: she recalls a movie she once saw—a movie "exactly like this"—she says, as she launches into her song, the title and refrain of which boast, "I Always Get My Man." The meaning of this phrase is fluid; within the lyrics of the song, it shifts from the narrative's mandate of capturing the criminal to the extra-narrative commentary on how a woman lures a lover, even referring to how a woman lands a role in a Hollywood film. Vélez's number not only spoofs the familiar individual personae of three of her actor peers, it launches a broader commentary on Hollywood representation.

The song is presented in the first person; Vélez demonstrates how she would "get" her man, if she were one of those movie stars who seem to always do just that so successfully on screen: these movie stars being Dolores del Rio, Simone Simon and Shirley Temple. Thus Velez's impersonations burlesqued versions of normative female desirability that her own image in this era did not signify. She is pointedly identifying—and identifying with—the distance that exists between her own image and the image of the hegemonic feminine ideal. She performs that separation by performing the personae of women who, through various means, manage to get what they want from "the man" in Hollywood.<sup>335</sup>

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<sup>335</sup> Vélez's billing was third or lower only in the ensemble picture, *Hollywood Party* (though I maintain the position that she was crucial to the film's whole concept) and in the "Flagg and Quirt" film, *Hot Pepper*.



**Figure 27: Lupe Vélez as Dolores del Rio.**

In the “Get My Man” number, Vélez is *comically* performing the sentiment—a kind of cocky star-envy—that Don Alvarado’s story humorlessly imagined for her in 1935. Her impersonations burlesque privileged versions of—or models for—feminine virtue that her own image “fails,” at this point in her career, to signify: Dolores del Rio, Vélez’s discursive nemesis, is the regal and vaguely “Latin” aristocrat against whom, as we have seen, Vélez is constantly compared (figure 6).<sup>336</sup> Simone Simon is known in this era to deliver “the perfect pout”; she signals the charmed innocence of supposedly inadvertent sexual allure. Vélez hilariously spoofs Simon as sporting the ever-desirable French foreign accent even as her speech is incomprehensible. Finally, there is the hugely popular Shirley Temple who aggressively infiltrated the generally adult oriented realm of fan magazine discourse—and not solely in the U.S.; Mexico and Latino Los Angeles

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The latter provides the nearest precedent to this film, in that the characters Harry Quirt (Edmund Lowe) and Jim Flagg (Victor McLaglen) play repeat characters in their pictures, which thus operate in a series of sorts. Consistently at the center of the Flagg/Quirt plots is a love triangle. In the first of the Flagg and Quirt films, *What Price Glory?* (1926), Dolores del Rio is cast as the heroine of the triangle. Incidentally, both *Hot Pepper* and *High Flyers* are the last in their respective series.

<sup>336</sup> *La Opinión* never breathes a word about *High Flyers*. In fact the only discussion regarding appropriation I saw in that paper in this time period is the afore-mentioned zebra reference.

were equally under the spell of the infant Temple.<sup>337</sup> The Temple impersonation is especially interesting in this context of the signifiers of feminine desirability that Vélez's performance is spoofing. Vélez, as the previous chapter documents, had been consistently—often simultaneously—infantilized and sexualized in Hollywood. In this musical number Vélez humorously distances herself from Temple's infantile, white-as-virgin-snow image and, simultaneously, undermines Temple's association with innocence and purity. At nine years old, Temple, like del Rio and Simon, is known to always get her (grown) man. Vélez demonstrates that she's keen to the irony of Temple's oh-so-innocent allure (given the studio shot (figure 28) of Vélez's imitation, so, apparently, was RKO). Vélez ends her performance with a show of cheerful but cocky—even “butch” and I will return to this point—defiance: playing “herself” now (she is certainly not a maid) she insists not only that she can do what these other players can do, but she demonstrates that she has the power to perform any of their *constructed versions* of femininity, and that she has the savvy to identify and deploy the most effective version, whatever the situation at hand.

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<sup>337</sup> See, for one particularly provocative example, a large close-up published prominently on *La Opinión*'s cinema page: Temple is greeting her much older brother Jack, with a surprisingly emphatic, even erotic, kiss on the lips (*La Opinión*, Aug 17, 1937, 4).



**Figure 28: Vélez, Temple and the “pedophilic gaze”<sup>338</sup>**

Vélez’s finale concludes when a buzzer sounds and the film cuts to show an alarm—an abrupt signal to Juanita (and the viewer) that she is still, after all, the maid—reading “guest room.” The following scene takes her to the Woolsey character’s quarters where, after a bit of comedy and a little flirtation, the two team up for a terrific song and dance performance of a tune titled, “I’m a Gaucho.” This number at once references the Fairbanks film that brought Vélez to fame and renown ten years prior, predicts *La Zandunga*, and spoofs Hollywood’s own *costumbrista* practice. Woolsey’s part—in charro-garb, as a songster Gaucho “who really knows how to Gauch”—harkens back to his 1933 film, *So This is Africa* (RKO), a jungle movie send-up that prefigured Durante’s Schnarzan riff. Vélez and Woolsey perform, side by side, an acknowledgement of Hollywood’s imperialial project by pointing up the (not benign) silliness of Hollywood-style imperial/empirical “knowledge.”<sup>339</sup> Vélez again carries insider status, extra-

<sup>338</sup> For more on Temple and the “pedophilic gaze” (Studlar’s term, 2001), see Ara Osterweil, 2009.

<sup>339</sup> In this instance I am inclined to invoke Muñoz’s term and call this a disidentification practice. Vélez is “rewriting of the dominant script” (Muñoz, 23), remixing the roles of “discoverer” and “discovered” to point up the falsehoods of neo-colonial mythology.

diegetically; Vélez and Woolsey *share* the insight that empowers them to point up the willfully constructed fantasy that is typical of Hollywood “ethnic” *and feminine* representation. The flirtation is over; she is neither the coy nor the modest maiden of the costumbrista genre. Rather, simultaneous to the effect of spoofing her ethnic-coded image, she is, in effect, performing a masculinized or queered role (a role that, in the mode of other Wheeler and Woolsey vehicles, might have been filled by Burt Wheeler). Production code files show the Hays office was consistently anxious that Vélez’s dance numbers not be “lewd or suggestive.” This resulting performance is, funnily enough, at the other end of the “spectrum”: a de-feminized dance style that takes on a queer valence as it, in effect, serves to mock conventional heterosexualized eroticism. Juxtaposed so closely with the prior spoof on “getting her man,” the effect is magnified. Vélez’s intonation is not exactly what *Variety* called “panze humor,” but it would be right at home in the “genderfuck” world of Wheeler/Woolsey, as theorized by David Boxwell (2003).<sup>340</sup>



Figure 29: "I'm a Gaucho."

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<sup>340</sup> For an excellent discussion of how Wheeler and Woolsey’s *pre-code* films “challenged conservative sex and gender norms” see Boxwell (2003): “Wheeler and Woolsey Queered: The Downright Peculiar Pleasures of Pre-code Wheeler and Woolsey.”

The agency of imitation and appropriation—that is, the ability to envision, name and perform that which one is not—is a mode of reflexivity that is culturally informed and, in this case, ethnically and nationally inflected. Vélez simultaneously plays on, and disidentifies with her image of the “discovered” Other. In showcasing her insider savvy, she destabilizes the hegemonic spectator position; she up-ends the position from which the spectator might have presumed to idealize and/or romanticize the supposed “naivete” of her foreignness.

Impersonation forms a commentary on systems of representational and identity construction that has the *potential* to critically reveal differentials of power. This is not to say that cleverly constructed commentary is the same as progressive or instructive critique. Reflexive intertextual reference might serve solely to validate the wider viewing practices of the spectator, shrewdly rewarding the “literate” (i.e. avid) consumer with added entertainment value. The *High Flyers* text (like *Hollywood Party*) is especially useful as a tool to interrogate the difference. Its multiple intertextual appropriations offer the opportunity for polyvalent reading. Contextual as well as textual analysis of the full range of appropriations in this text (and appropriation always inherently serves as extra-textual signpost), allows a sobering consideration of the limits regarding who gets to appropriate whom, and on what terms.

We have seen Vélez—as a hybrid, transcultural figure—gain agency through a form of performative disidentification. Toward the end of the film Bert Wheeler impersonates Charlie Chaplin in a charming tap performance. At the end of his Chaplin imitation, Wheeler (by way of photographic effect) leaps on top of an upright piano, where he begins to smear around his face the black make-up that had formed his Chaplin-

esque drawn mustache. He then reaches into Marjorie Lord's open purse to dip into some form of make-up that she (against all odds) conveniently keeps on hand. It becomes clear that Wheeler is making himself into blackface. At this point, there is a cut taking us to the next room where Lord—overcome by the hilarity of the performance that, diegetically, has been staged for her alone—begins to recount the event to her false friend (the film's real jewel thief), Dave Hanlon (Jack Carson). Soon Woolsey arrives through the door in full blackface make-up. Wheeler's blackfaced dancer performs an ungainly rooster-like step that suggests generic minstrelsy.<sup>341</sup> From here, the scene descends further into racist caricature: coming face to face with the actual thief, Wheeler—narratively back in character at this point, as the suspected petty criminal, but in blackface—performs the moment of realizing his imminent capture, in minstrelsy fashion, with a supposedly humorous furtive exit. The motivation for minstrelsy performance becomes clear: the blackface was designed to exploit, for racializing humor, a narrative moment involving fear, guilt and impending capture.

Such nefarious racializing representation does not read as altogether out of place within the film overall. For all the film's textual interest in the vicissitudes of signifying

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<sup>341</sup> Wheeler's minstrelsy act in this film has been, in both period and recent discourses, referred to as an impression of (even an "homage to") Bill Robinson, the popular African American dancer/actor, better known as Bojangles. There is a logic to the Bojangles reading. In following Vélez's impersonations and Wheeler's Chaplin, the textual suggestion is that this is an individual appropriation. And given Robinson's prominence at the time and the fact that Wheeler and Woolsey had screen history with Robinson, dating back to a 1930 film, *Dixiana* (RKO), Robinson would conceivably come to mind (in fact only Robinson could possibly come to mind). The context also points to Robinson's two 1935 films (20th C. Fox) with Shirley Temple—Temple, of course, referenced earlier in the film. The Temple/Robinson pairing was extremely popular with the hegemonic Anglo audience, helping to make Robinson one of the most immediately recognizable figures of the time (the two made a total of four films together, all of which can be described as "plantation fantasies," a description that fits *Dixiana* as well). To the slim extent that the Robinson association would have been made, however, the act is not interpretable as an homage. A comparison of Wheeler's brief blackface scene with Fred Astair's genuine blackface homage to Robinson, in *Swing Time* (RKO, 1936) the previous year, underscores the obvious difference. Whereas Astair's "Bojangles of Harlem" meets the skill level of Robinson himself, Wheeler's blackfaced character dances nothing like Robinson.

systems, its appropriative cleverness, in the final evaluation, stops far short of self-reflexive industrial critique. Vélez's performance is generated by way of a socially marginalized character; diegetically—that is, outside of the musical numbers—Juanita is a mildly supplicating domestic servant.<sup>342</sup> Furthermore, while the figures Vélez burlesques in her “Always Get My Man” song carry more cultural currency than she, they are drawn from two sub-categories of Hollywood U.S. femininity—the foreigner and the child—both of which reflect back on her own position and persona. We know from historical press discourses that Vélez performed impersonations of figures of Northern European, Anglo-Saxon Hollywood as well: Marlene Dietrich, Katherine Hepburn, Gloria Swanson, Greta Garbo, but these impersonations were not immortalized on screen for another seven years. While we might rightfully feel a debt of gratitude towards *High Flyers* for its celluloid preservation of Vélez’s wonderful impersonations, the film, in the final analysis, reveals very definite constraints as to whom Vélez, as a minoritized figure, is able to burlesque and from what level within the screened social hierarchy she can launch her appropriation.

*High Flyers* is a particularly creative and historically productive “include her out” text. It serves to reassert the questions obliquely posed by *The Half-Naked Truth* and *Hollywood Party* regarding the location of specifically Mexican representation within the

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<sup>342</sup> Vélez’s Juanita also serves a kind of mediating function between the Arlington family maid and her less “Americanized” aunt, the family’s butcher-knife-wielding cook (Soledad Jiménez, who plays Vélez’s aunt in *Broken Wing* five years prior).

The Production Code office was cognizant of potential upset on the basis of her nationality. There exists a scene in which Vélez refers to Wheeler’s compulsive peanut eating habit—he throws them in the air and catches them in his mouth—as catching flies. She demonstrates the oral action, makes a face, and says, “I caught one.” The Hays office asked that this scene be deleted. It wasn’t. The “pig latin” reference was omitted. Herrick Archive, AMPAS. PCA files, *High Flyers* file. Letter from Breen to Briskin, Aug 12, 1937: “We earnestly advise you to seek consult your foreign department regarding the character of Juanita. Please omit the reference to Juanita’s language as pig latin. Since this is sure to offend Spanish speaking nations. The business of Juanita swallowing a fly is definitely vulgar and must be omitted. We warn you again that some political censor boards are likely to delete the business of Juanita pulling a stiletto from her garter. There must be no profanity or vulgarity in “her steady stream of Spanish invectives”.

eclectic and ambiguous menu of “ethnicness” variously served up on the Hollywood screen. Just as importantly, it does us the invaluable historical service of preserving Vélez’s impersonations on celluloid. In the next chapter we see the fraught attempt at Vélez’s cultural re-assimilation—attempted thanks to the Hollywood’s participation in President Roosevelt’s Good Neighbor Policy—by way of the series of B-movie programmers named for Vélez, the *Mexican Spitfire* series. Ironically, the practical demands of the series forestall Vélez’s participation in the nascent star system forming within Mexico’s national cinema, though, as we will see, she remains a figure within the heterogeneous scope of Mexican cultural identification.

## CHAPTER 5

### The Mexican Spitfire: Of Fighting Words and Serial Combat

It was considered good box-office when stars like Lupe Velez went into tantrums. Feuds now never make headlines.

[...]

Just because hair-pulling and face clawing between pairs of festive female stars doesn't reach the headlines today, is not a sign that Lupe Velez and Jetta Goudal were the last of the gladiators. In their day, battles reported, *and even judiciously built up in the reporting*, were good box-office. More recently, no more than near rumors of feuding between such girls as, let us say, Ginger Rogers and Katherine Hepburn, reached the prints.

~John Stanford, "Do the Stars have to Behave?" *Motion Picture Magazine*, 1939.<sup>343</sup>

In July of 1939, *Motion Picture Magazine* ran a quasi-contemplative look back at the mis-behaviors that were regularly indulged in by "temperamental" stars of the 1920s and the pre-code 30s. The author, John Stanford, makes the cryptic suggestion that, in earlier days, the reporting of stars' "battles" were "judiciously built up." Stanford neglects to clarify who was doing the building up (or the reconstruction<sup>344</sup>), and on what basis, or in whose interest, such adjudication was enacted. That ambiguity in the margins of the piece leads one to wonder whose behavior had changed in the interim: whether the stars, the reporters or the magazine publishers have wised up or, perhaps, the studios' protective vigilance had increased its effectiveness. Stanford suggests that, by late in the '30's, Hollywood stars themselves had "grown up" and calmed down. The piece appears with a near full-page head-on-pillow, high-angle portrait of Bette Davis, captioned with a claim

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<sup>343</sup> John Stanford, "Do the Stars have to Behave?" *Motion Picture Magazine*, July 1939, 26-27.

<sup>344</sup> The reader may recall from the previous chapter some of the Lawrence Tibbet's judicious constructions. The story about Vélez hitting her (unnamed) director over the head with a bottle gets retold in here in Stanford's piece as well. This time it is specified as a champagne bottle and it was Pola Negri, another "temperamental" foreign actor that did the hitting (63).

that “...one can be a great actress and live a perfectly normal life” (26). A smaller picture adjacent to the headline shows the antithesis of the currently fashionable decorum, the antithesis of Bette Davis: Lupe Vélez holding her Chihuahua. With her mouth wide open, teeth visible, eyes in a squint, Vélez looks to have been caught in a yell (though it might as easily have been an off-guard yawn).

Opening the piece with Vélez’s supposed tantrums, and then proceeding into the grand cat-fight that ostensibly took place between Vélez and actress Jetta Goudal on the *Lady of the Pavements* (1929) set, Stanford frames Vélez as not only the instigator of actress-on-actress antagonism but as *the emblem of Hollywood’s culture of “bad behavior”* ... behavior now but an embarrassing memory:<sup>345</sup>

Recently, a tacit ban was imposed on spectacular extravaganzas, dissipations held up to the public gaze and crazy parties of the sort stars once liked to give. Parties that made common folk think all film people must be child-like, half-cracked zannies. The rest of America may have been almost as silly, during prohibition days, but that certain Depression made most of us forget how we acted under the Volstead Dynasty.<sup>346</sup>

The author rehabilitates Hollywood to mirror “the rest of America”: middle America in the twenties was “almost as silly” as Hollywood. Now that the country has settled down to the serious business of the Depression, the movie town has wised up as well. Stanford, keen to associate Hollywood behavior with the “common folk,” consistently characterizes extremes of the past by way of Otherized and/or foreign references. After attributing a vague empty-bottle-over-director’s-head perpetration to Pola Negri, for example, Stanford praises Marlene Dietrich for having become an American citizen. He

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<sup>345</sup> Stanford, interestingly, credits the Screen Actors’ Guild for the shift to adult behavior. Clark writes that this supposed function of the SAG became common lore, a discourse that helped mask the guild’s actual purpose, which was about a dicey combination of labor protection and protection of studios but was somehow a policing mechanism wherein actors would peer pressure each other into good behavior. It was the MPPDA that had far more to do with actor public relations and the studio’s learning to protect their live commodities. (Clark, 62). See, also, Prindle (9) on actor “childishness.”

<sup>346</sup> For *MPM* readers familiar with Vélez related discourses in prior years, terms like “crazy parties,” and “child-like, half cracked zannies” would likely sound familiar, perhaps subtly keeping Vélez’s persona as one subject of this passage, even though her name was not specifically invoked.

then links her newfound Americanness with “the taming of her wild-roaming eyebrows” and the abandonment of her previously displayed penchant for “men’s togs” (“[o]h she’s a smart girl, that Marlene!”). Gone from Hollywood, according to Stanford, along with Dietrich’s “trick eyebrows,” are the “grotesque Chinese fingernails” of an actress unnamed. Exhibitionism and “show-offs” are the supreme culprits of the bad old days:

We no longer see those eye-popping automobiles of Jackie Oakie, Gary Cooper, Mary Pickford, and many other celebrities. Maybe the fact that Stepin Fetchit finally surpassed them all, when he bought a great limousine of robin’s egg blue, had something to do with the sudden shift toward more modest vehicles (27).<sup>347</sup>

Implied throughout the piece is the notion that supposedly un-adult behavior—such as that of the African American star, Stepin Fetchit, having purchased the wrong color car—served to caution the ostensibly staid, rational (white American) stars to retire or restrain their outlandish excesses.<sup>348</sup>

Vélez and Stepin Fetchit play parallel roles in Stanford’s piece. Vélez, who had been largely away from Hollywood for five years, is re-mobilized in absentia with the author’s backward gaze into history; Stanford deploys Vélez as the emblematic gem of yesteryear’s debauchery. This history (the reader might remember from Chapter 3) is

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<sup>347</sup> The point is reiterated in a caption under a small black and white photo which, though hard to make out, is assumedly a picture of Cooper (62). Post-Vélez, Cooper’s image was heavily invested in conservative, American patriotism. This twice-highlighted reference implies that he earlier (i.e. years 1929-1932) indulged in less circumspect behavior.

<sup>348</sup> Sanford makes no mention of shifting demographics represented by Hollywood personnel, i.e. the number of “foreign” or black actors working in the late twenties (greater) versus the late 30s (lesser). Stepin Fetchit (Lincoln Theodore Monroe Andrew Perry) made just one film in 1938, one in ’39, and no more until 1945. His filmography might be compared with his seven films in 1934 and six in ’35. Lena Horne had her first credited role in 1943. Hattie McDaniel had two roles in 1939 as compared to twelve and thirteen in ’36 and ’37. I place these statistics next to the fact that blackface was still in common practice (*High Flyers* (1937) and *Babes in Arms* (1939) are two relevant examples). The discourse of this piece suggests that Hollywood’s “cleaning up” of its reputation meant a whitening of its screened workforce. Of the “well behaved” stars in Stanford’s piece, the only who is *not* un-probationary white is Don Ameche (born Dominic Amici, in Kenosha, Wisconsin). In the Good Neighbor era, Ameche was routinely cast in “Latin-lover” roles, such as that of Ricardo Quintana in *Down Argentine Way* (20thC Fox, 1940).

fictional; the referenced feud was scripted and filmed; it erupted between Nanon del Rayon and Countess Diane des Granges, not between Lupe and Jetta.<sup>349</sup>

The 1939 Stanford piece is but one instance within a pattern of selective refurbishing of history.<sup>350</sup> Two years later, in June of 1941, John Chapman, “Looking at Hollywood” columnist for the *Chicago Tribune*, rehearses the Stanford narrative of the “temperament” exhibited by Hollywood’s past stars. Pola Negri is a standout and, once again, Marlene Dietrich had just barely managed to save her career by renouncing temperamental ways—becoming suddenly humble, undemanding and “quite the regular person.”<sup>351</sup> There is, again, an unacknowledged pattern of foreign stars as exemplary of Hollywood’s historical problem of temperament and decadence. Again Vélez is deployed by way of the Vélez/Goudal battle. This time, however, Vélez is not charged, precisely, with having instigated a brawl. It is Goudal that takes the larger burden of guilt within Chapman’s fighting fictions. Vélez is cast as the naive child:

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<sup>349</sup> As was discussed in Chapter 2, The film’s director, D.W. Griffith looked back to discuss the film in his radio show six years after the production. There was no mention then, even, of overt discord, though the press did make much of Goudal’s resentment of Vélez’s more central role and greater screen time. Reports of animosity helped maintain interest in the film through its long delayed production process.

<sup>350</sup> For a fan-press article revelatory of a variation of this theme, see Kay Proctor, “Hollywood Birthrate Going Up.” *Photoplay*, June 1940, 16-17, 78. Proctor bemoans that Hollywood has been used as “a handy scapegoat for all the real or imaginary ills of the world. From short bathing suits to long fingernails...” Proctor concedes with, “in a sense, I suppose, there was some justice to it,” but asserts that now Hollywood should get credit for its positive influence: “... in the face of international chaos, toppling governments, industrial strife and threatened security... the youth of Hollywood... want children and are having them.” In a rare allusion to the war and to international politics (rare in the fan press of 1939-40) that also supports my argument in the previous chapter about the centrality of children in the U.S. imagination of the period, Proctor asserts that, “[childbearing] is... the most significant answer that Hollywood could make to the charges of the Dies committee and the accusation of radical and subversive attitude toward the American form of government. In having children they are proving their faith in the future of this nation and democracy” (17).

<sup>351</sup> John Chapman, “Looking at Hollywood,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Jun 18, 1941. Chapman refers to the period immediately following the 1937 film, *Knight Without Armour*. Though she only went a year without making a picture, this was the period that she had supposedly been labeled “box office Poison” according to Chapman, she was “out for a long time”). On the other hand though, Stanford’s article makes the case that her popularity was back (on virtually these same terms) two years earlier.

It might be noted that this is precisely the period in which Hollywood cultural in general, and the studios specifically, are becoming openly cognizant of the impossibility of retaining their coveted “neutrality” regarding the war in Europe. At this point I can only speculate as how the antipathy toward “foreigners” mapped onto feelings about being “dragged into war.” See, also, the note immediately preceding this one.

Heartily disliked among the temperamental stars was Jetta Goudal.... D. W. was getting fed up. He called in Johnny Miles, his press agent, to get Jetta in hand. Miles decided the thing to do was somehow belittle her, and he had just the right idea. In the show was a wild Mexican girl, Lupe Velez, who hated Goudal with considerable fierceness. "I'm going to keel her!" Lupe would screech. So Miles used Lupe to deflate Goudal—and incidentally did a lot toward making her a new temperamental star.

Goudal had an intimate scene to do: a love scene. Like many stars, she insisted on privacy for such stuff. Blackboards were put around the set to keep people from looking. Miles primed Lupe Velez to put her saucy little face through the blackboards during Goudal's big moment and stick out her tongue.

Jetta saw the Velez tongue and went for Lupe like the British navy after the Bismarck. There was a lovely animal-like hair pulling fight and it hit the papers with Lupe as the heroine. That was about the end of Jetta Goudal.

Chapman must have missed the fact that the “wild Mexican girl” was the star of *Pavements*, the film having been conceived as a Lupe Vélez vehicle.

Such revisionist off-screen discourses ran parallel to the trajectory of screened representations instantiating Vélez’s late-30s comeback, with mutually reinforcing films and print publicities conspiring in the maintenance of her embattled persona. By the time the Chapman piece was published, Vélez had been screened in two “cat fights,” one appearing in each of the first two films of the *Mexican Spitfire* series, the eight B-rated programmers that largely defined Vélez’s Hollywood screen persona between 1939 and 1944. Three months after the initial Chapman article, (in a piece coinciding with the release of *Playmates* (RKO, 1941), wherein Vélez’s character, a bullfighter named Carmen del Toro, engages in a jealous-lover battle scene with co-star John Barrymore)

Chapman takes the opportunity to repeat the Goudal tale:

Lupe hadn't got more than an inch or two along the road to success when she had her first fight, and it was the fight that made her. It was a frame-up. D.W. Griffith, filming “Drums of Love” (*sic*, wrong Griffith film), was having trouble, as usual --- with his star, Jetta Goudal.

“What Goudal needs,” he argued, “is something to belittle her.... I'll take her down a peg, and I know just the gal to do it --- a little Mexican we've got working in the picture, named Lupe Velez.” [...]

Jetta reacted perfectly according to plan. She leaped from her love couch and went for Velez, and the two girls had a scrap that made the bout in the “Carmen” tobacco works look like a tea party on a hot day. And the hellish part of the whole thing was that,

hidden among the various blackboards, were several carefully chosen Hollywood correspondents. The fight made dandy news --- and it made Lupe a new colorful figure.

It would seem Vélez's entire fourteen-year career is but a blurry memory providing convenient fodder for "judicious" rebuilding. Chapman's second version of the battle sent this researcher (author) on a fruitless search for the accounts of those "several carefully chosen correspondents." But Chapman's "frame up" of 1929 never actually happened. It does seem, however, that Vélez was serially "framed up" by such revisionist discourses of rediscovery.<sup>352</sup>

This chapter takes us to the period for which Vélez is most known: the years of the *Mexican Spitfire* films. Vélez's persona in the series, I will argue, was founded in large part on the discursive build-up of off-screen antagonistic relationships. The Goudal chronicles represent one such sparring partnership. Vélez's discord with her husband, Johnny "Tarzan" Weissmuller—from whom she was divorced as of 1939, the year of the rampant recirculation of the Goudal fictions—served to set the pattern in motion.<sup>353</sup> With a continuing examination of the cultural reconstruction of U.S. marriage—including variations on "companionate marriage," discussed in chapter 3, now having shifted in the context of the Depression era 1930s—this chapter brings the public interest in Vélez and Weissmuller into sharper focus and, by extension, offers new insight into the cultural logic on which the *Spitfire* films precariously rest.

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<sup>352</sup> Chapman played this scenario out one more time in March of 1942, in a piece about foreign stars having a difficult time in Hollywood in the '30s. For the second time, he reiterates that "some" did not believe that Goudal was from the Netherlands. Chapman was intent on conveying that Goudal, who was Jewish, was actually "just" a stenographer from Brooklyn. "They Came, We Saw, Few Conquered!" *Chicago Tribune*, March 8, 1942, D3.

<sup>353</sup> The standard discourse dates the Vélez's marriage to Weissmuller as spanning 1933 to 1938; the divorce did not become final until 1939. Johnny had already announced his plans to remarry. The date was set for July, immediately after the divorce came through.

The earliest press accounts of the Weissmuller marriage had portrayed the union as having a “taming” effect on the “untamable” Lupe. The domestication narrative quickly shifted, however, and was obsolete by the year of *Hollywood Party*’s release in 1934.<sup>354</sup> News of the couple’s numerous conflicts brought the return of the “untamable Lupe” discourse. Rumors of violence represented Vélez as the aggressor. The press seized on the image of tiny Vélez beating on the ample and familiar torso of her Adonis mate. Though each threat of divorce came from Vélez, and each one cited physical as well as mental cruelty on the part of Weissmuller, each reconciliation only undermined Vélez’s credibility. The press was quick to dismiss the veracity of Vélez’s claims, attributing her changed heart to fickle remorse for her quick temper.

Vélez’s literal (physical) *battle* to stay married to her husband discursively stages her as a perpetually probationary wife (within a non-companionate marriage) precisely the position that is re-screened with her role as Carmelita Fuentes-Lindsay, the “Mexican Spitfire.” The *Mexican Spitfire* series of films invest in the very combination of physical and cultural battlegrounds that are underscored in the press accounts of Vélez’s actual

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<sup>354</sup> Witness a *Photoplay* feature (June 1934) dating from the early months of the Vélez/Weissmuller marriage and likely timed to coincide with the release of *Hollywood Party* (the same month). The article bears the pessimistic title, “Lupe and Johnny Were Lovers,” and plays both sides of the tamed/untamable image. Here stories of darned socks and home-cooked meals served up a new domestic image, an eager-to-please, softer-spoken Vélez: “...Lupe has become a “yes woman” a model housewife as ever wifed a house. You wouldn’t, you just couldn’t believe it. As ideal housewife she had happily achieved her most coveted role.” As the story continues, though, the term “yes woman” is revealed as Vélez’s own *performance*. “I just go ‘yes woman’ on Johnny. I say, ‘Yes, darling,’ ‘yes, darling’ yes, darling’ to everything Johnny say [...]. And so I let Johnny win the fight, because when I say ‘yes’ he does what I want to do anyhow.”

The article describes a number of petty and highly implausible fight scenarios, claiming for instance, that they fight over whom to root for when they attend the boxing matches together (the punchline being that their fights are more compelling than the action in the ring). The article ends with a suggestion that the tamed/untamable dichotomy—the instability of the article’s rhetoric—is a function of Vélez’s own instability and unpredictability (a tactic that prefigures the dynamics of her unstable representation in *The Mexican Spitfire* films): “[s]o Lupe is ready to and willing to submerge her personality, the very personality that made her what she is in pictures, to hold the man she loves. (At least that is what she says at the moment, but remember it’s a woman’s right to change her mind.)” *Photoplay*, June, 1934, 58, 98-100.

marriage. Carmelita is characterized as perpetually unable to negotiate the terms of modern partnership despite her apparently desperate desire to do so. She is unable to control herself verbally and physically. Her aggression, however, in the *Spitfire* films, plays out in conflict with her husband's ex-fiancé rather than with the husband himself, hence reinstating a cat-fight trope that plays off the Goudal legend. These mutually reinforcing discourses off screen (both of which are independently unstable), followed by reiterations on screen, serve to falsely naturalize Vélez as somehow unfit for the benefits of cultural citizenship, so closely linked, as they were, with the elusive privilege of marriage.

### **“In This Corner... Lupe Velez”**

**She Loves Him—She Loves Him Not.** Lupe Velez (Loo-pay Ve-lezz<sup>355</sup>), 27, has been a movie actress for 11 years, and Johnny's wife nearly four years. Their married life is marked by frequent quarrels and separations, but they always kiss and make up. Twice Lupe started divorce actions. “We fight all the time,” she said once, “but I don't blame Johnny. It's 50-50.”

She is kind to the poor and gives much to charity . . . She and Johnny sleep in twin beds.

*Look Magazine*, July 1937

It was two years prior to Stanford's *MPM* piece on the “new temperance” of star behavior that “Hollywood’s battling couple” moved from fan magazine readership to a more generalized public by way of the popular *Look Magazine*. Clearly the *Look* feature—which consists of six pages of captioned photos—is not constructed around an interest in stars’ latest films. Neither Vélez nor Weissmuller stood at the top of their professional game at the time. In fact *Look* made no reference to *High Flyers*, Vélez’s only Hollywood film between 1934 and 1939, which was in production the month the piece was published. Weissmuller, similarly, had not released a film in eight months and would

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<sup>355</sup> This is the rare corrective reference to Vélez’s name that counsels the Spanish pronunciation of the “e” in Lupe.

not see another *Tarzan* release until 1939, one year after he and Vélez had divorced.<sup>356</sup> So while the Hollywood star-couple, as such, retained the currency in popular discourse that it held ten years prior, it is interest in this particular couple's "battling," over their celebrity, that brought this feature to press.



**Figure 30: Hollywood's Battling Couple**

*Look*'s photo essay, the full title of which reads, "The Story of Tarzan and His Mate: Hollywood's Battling Couple," covered three double-page spreads. The first page introduced both stars with large individual photos. Against the photos was printed, in boldface, white type, "In This Corner... JOHNNY WEISSMULLER" and "In This Corner... LUPE VELEZ." (The Vélez photo seems to have been chosen as one that shows almost as much of her bare torso as the Weissmuller photo shows of his. On the facing page are two *Tarzan* stills imaging Weissmuller and his co-star, Maureen O'Sullivan.

<sup>356</sup> *Tarzan Escapes* (MGM, 1936) was the most recent at the time of the Look's article. *Tarzan Finds a Son!* (MGM) was released in June of 1939. Meanwhile, the jungle franchise appeared to be branching out without him, Glenn Morris made *Tarzans' Revenge*, released in 1938. *Tarzan and the Green Goddess*, released the same year, starred Herman Brix in the title role.

There is one small picture of Vélez holding a monkey. Although the caption under the monkey photo references Vélez's film, *Kongo* (1932), the photo is not a still from *Kongo* and does not feature Vélez's hair or costuming as she appears in the film. In fact, the photo does not appear to be Vélez at all. Veracity of the photo notwithstanding, jungle primitivism and the couple's shared association with animals are the subjects of these images and their captions.



**Figure 31: Lupe Get's Mad...**

Turning the page, Weissmuller temporarily disappears. This two-page spread includes nine photos of Vélez taken from various points in her career. The captions introduce her in much the manner that John Chapman would later employ—that is, with quasi-historical reference that assumes Vélez's Hollywood career is unfamiliar to the readership. Again, the piece's theme of animalistic aggression is pursued in earnest. “Why Lupe Bit a Horse... Anything Can Happen When She Loses Her Temper,” reads a

bold-face heading on the left. “Lupe Gets Mad... Director Spanks Her,”<sup>357</sup> reads the headline on the facing page. “She’s Temperamental...” begins a caption under a still from *Where East is East*, wherein the Vélez character, Toyo Haynes, is biting her father, Tiger Haynes (Lon Chaney), on the arm. A *Look* reader familiar with the film might know the still was from an entirely playful scene. And yet, the caption continues, “[t]his might be taken from real life, but it’s just a scene between Lupe and Lon Chaney in 1929. Lupe is sometimes called ‘The Mexican Pepper Pot’” (26). Along with an old saw claiming that Vélez, once bitten by a horse, responded by biting said horse back (the horse and his teeth are pictured; Lupe and hers are not), this page reiterates a popular notion that Vélez was born during a hurricane and it claims she regularly carries two guns (guns being mentioned, as it happens, in the captions of three separate photos).<sup>358</sup>

**Harmony—For the Present.** Lupe and Johnny enjoy a game of backgammon between a couple of their numerous arguments. Their home is virtually a fortress, every window is barred and every door barricaded and double-locked. Between Lupe and Johnny’s beds lies a big gun. Once Lupe wounded an intruder. (28)




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<sup>357</sup> The story in one caption, apropos in no way to the photo under which it reads, claims that it was W.S. van Dyke, director of *Cuban Love Song* (1931), who spanked Vélez (“She didn’t bite him or anything”). Given Lawrence Tibbet’s exhaustive (i.e. embellished) coverage of the behind-the-scene antics on the set, we can assume that Tibbet might have mentioned this anecdote... if, indeed, there was any truth to it.

<sup>358</sup> Oddly, considering we are in the realm of star representation, the piece goes out of its way to insist that one especially flattering “Hollywood ‘glamour’ shot” is “not true to the real Lupe...”. The caption makes a comparison between the “glamour” shot and one taken when she was quite and young, featuring her looking starry-eyed and innocent, with little make-up (see fig. 25, right). The photo is less professional looking; the lighting is such that her skin might be seen to appear darker than it does in the “glamour” shot.

The final two-page spread features two photos of Vélez and Weissmuller together: in one the couple, as the aforementioned quote suggests, they are playing backgammon; in the other they sit ringside at a boxing match. There is also one photo each dedicated to previous relationships: Vélez with Cooper and Weissmuller with Bobbe Arnst. The other two pictures on this spread feature Vélez alone. In one she is posed on a polar-bearskin rug, her head resting on the bear's head, her face posed just above a fierce, open mouth. The other is a film still with Vélez looking typically glamorous and clutching a white telephone receiver. The caption under that photo reads, "...despite all their quarreling (*which some believe is largely for publicity*), Lupe thinks Johnny is Hollywood's only he-man" (29, emphasis added).



Figure 32: Hollywood's "He-Man" and his mate

The "he-man" claim on this page is foregrounded in a large heading (in juxtaposition to Weissmuller working out, again with the naked torso). Weissmuller—an

Olympic swimmer holding world records that denote an almost inhuman physical capability—cultivated an image in the fan press that was based more on body than mind. These two probational Americans—apparently fascinated by each other's highly contrasting Other bodies and their imagined “elemental” natures —served to mask the *hegemonic public*'s fascination on both counts. Of particularly telling significance within that caption, though, I would suggest, is the parenthetical regarding publicity. Here again is the implication that the Vélez/Weissmuller fights are played up for cynical purposes (with the visual of Vélez on the telephone providing the not-so-subtle implication that the Weissmullers are the disingenuous opportunistic parties). Yet as both Vélez's and Weissmuller's careers clearly suffered in the years of their marriage (they were far more likely to be found on page than on the screen) it seems unlikely that the stars (or, for that matter, anyone with the stars' strictly professional interests at heart) sought to publicize their troubles. The *Look* feature is gratuitous, feigning an interest in the Weissmullers that thinly veils its fascination with the topic of “ethnic,” animalistic battle. Moreover, *Look* foregrounds Vélez's supposed aggression over any such characterization attached to Weissmuller. The piece is emblematic of Vélez's press treatment of the period, providing a concise preview of Vélez's persona in the *Spitfire* series: she is a fighter, not a lover (or, perhaps, a fighter *as a lover*). However we might interpret the degree of veracity to the Johnny/Lupe fights, the instability and then failure of the “primitive” Vélez/Weissmüller marriage served to dramatize, and thus absorb, American fears and tensions around the challenges of modern coupling.

**(“When love congeals... it soon reveals) ... The Faint Aroma of Performing Seals”**

Richard Rogers and Lorenz Hart, “I Wish I Were In Love Again,” *Babes in Arms*, 1937

Lupe Vélez and Johnny Weissmuller were unique personages within mid-century Hollywood culture. The discourses of embattlement I have highlighted capture and exploit, quite effectively, Mrs. and Mr. Weissmuller’s “singularity.”<sup>359</sup> I will argue, however, that analysis of representations of coupling in popular culture locates the Vélez/Weissmuller dynamics as one instance within a larger pattern of representation in public discourse. What follows in my discussion of troubled marriage in the era—on screen, on stage, and in print—is informed by the concept of “popular modernism,” theorized by Ulf Lindberg (2003) in an essay discussing interwar Tin Pan Alley music. Lindberg locates a canonical vestige of U.S. culture’s adjustment to modern—i.e. companionate—marriage, with an analysis of song lyrics that articulate a trauma of companionate coupling performed through “companionship duets” (290-293).

Lindberg’s study elucidates an “anti-romantic tendency” in Tin Pan Alley music that gives literal voice to a modernist emphasis on individual subjectivity, a voice at odds with the romantic ideal of marital bliss and harmony (287-292). Companionship duets worked, as such, because they structured an anxious partnership between *equals*; the duets formed a competitive matching of individual wills and wits. Lindberg contextualizes Tin Pan Alley modernism in relationship to the romantic screen comedies of the late 30s and 40s, entertainment discourses “which allow the female enough

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<sup>359</sup> Regarding the reality of Vélez’s “pugilistic” construction, she was well known to attend the boxing matches on Friday nights at the Hollywood Legion Hall. This, on its face, was in no way outrageous behavior. The Legion Hall was a regular haunt on the Hollywood social circuit; a great number of actors and several actresses were regularly spotted at the fights. The stars’ attendance (and that of star searching locals) made the Hollywood’s arena, according to Bill Henry of the *Los Angeles Times*, “America’s most successful fight club” (Jan 24 1937, A11). Vélez was a highly visible—and, apparently, audible—regular in the ringside seats. Certainly her enthusiasm for the fights helped crystallize her persona as a fighter. Less understood, though, (and I’ll revisit this point below) was the way in which Vélez’s fandom was an expression of her loyalty to her national origins.

intelligence and autonomy to make her at least equal to the male” (287). Lindberg is here referencing canonical, “A” comedic romances, films that center upper-class, white Anglo couples.<sup>360</sup> There is a gap, actually, existing between ethnic-inflected Tin Pan Alley modernism under Lindberg’s analysis and the Hollywood films to which he draws comparison. The *Mexican Spitfire* films, structured as they are around an ethnically inflected male/female power struggle, help to illuminate that gap.

The metropolitan context that gave rise to Tin Pan Alley jazz—1930s New York City—was undergoing, at that time, a profound cultural negotiation of class (obviously), “race” (African American) and “ethnicity” (European). Lindberg theorizes this metropolitan mixing as constitutive of the popular modern music the era produced. This aspect of Lindberg’s analysis is limited, however, by the fact that he analyzes songs and lyrics apart from their Broadway theatrical narrative context. My pursuit of Lindberg’s argument finds that the representation of race and ethnicity, and the question of transcultural assimilation, plays a *more* significant role in the articulation of angst—and violence—within “popular modernism,” than Lindberg’s study suggests.

The show-tunes that Lindberg singles out as some of Tin Pan Alley’s quintessentially anti-romantic “modern” ballads—those written for Rodgers’ and Hart’s surprise hit of 1937, *Babes in Arms*—were voiced through ethnic- and racially-coded representations. “I Wish I Were in Love Again,” is an ironically nostalgic recollection of a troubled, love/hate romance complete with “flying plates,” “blackened eyes,” and

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<sup>360</sup> Throughout this chapter I will use “Anglo” in reference to marriage and relationship discourses, over “white,” as I seek to underscore that dynamics defining *probational* whiteness were still very much in play. The fact that the “Mexican Spitfire” films featured specifically British characters (even if they gently chided them), is I would posit, illustrative of, or a comment on, the elevated status of specifically Anglo-whiteness.

“punch-drunk” obsession.<sup>361</sup> The duet occurs between Dolores and Gus, characters described by theater scholar Andrea Most as, respectively, “the sheriff’s nymphomaniac daughter” and “a streetwise kid always ready for a fight” (2004, 66-67). Gus is un-subtly coded as an Italian immigrant son; Dolores (though her name is—significantly perhaps—of Spanish derivation) is a white, middle-class daughter, slumming in rebellion against her sheriff father. “I Wish” is the second embattled duet between Dolores and Gus to occur in *Babes in Arms*. The first duet, “You’re So Fair,” takes place with the couple’s break-up. “You’re So Fair” employs a verbal double-entendre working to contrast Dolores’s fair skin and her *un-fair* play, punning to insist that whiteness and fidelity are normatively located in the same female person. Dolores’s unfair sexual behavior is a betrayal to her “fair” appearance. She has been, the song insinuates, passing as “fair.” Gus sings of wanting to pay Dolores’s “*fare... to the tropic of New Guinea*” as he “want[s] to yell ‘c’est finis’ to this affair.” Gus wants not only to send Dolores far away, he seeks to send her to a culturally distant, un-white, “primitive,” tropical society where he imagines her un-“fair” (un-white, un-chaste) behavior will find its rightful home.<sup>362</sup> By the time “I Wish” is performed in *Babes in Arms*, the knife-wielding Gus is understood as looking for the next sparring partner... one who plays “fair” and is thus representative of

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<sup>361</sup> Mexico’s monthly, *Cinema Reporter*, picked up Hollywood’s interest in the flying plates discourse: “Johnny is strong, but Lupe throws plates with very good aim.” Edi Cástor, “Desde Hollywood,” *Cinema Reporter*, Apr 1938, 7. Castor is impressed by the apparent fact that Vélez does not want a divorce, despite the fact that the two “fight constantly.” Castor finds Vélez’s loyalty a laudable national trait.

<sup>362</sup> It is worth mentioning that Dolores is not the “tramp” referred to in another of *Babes* canonical popular modernist tunes, “The Lady is a Tramp.” That distinction belongs to the play’s heroine, Billie, who is also the hero’s, Val’s, girlfriend. As Most reads this tune, it functions as “a celebratory anthem, not a moral harangue. [Billie’s] independence and free thinking, not her lack of virtue, earn her the title of ‘tramp.’ The song forces the audience to question not only Billie’s social standing, but the very nature of moralizing labels attached to independent women” (95). Thus the play goes out of its way to exalt the class-challenged, independent, American “hobo”-tramp, but goes out of its way, too, to inscribe a moral/national otherness to a woman who signifies a specifically sexual independence.

the American nation into which the *Babes in Arms* scenario is instructing his assimilation.<sup>363</sup>

Songs exemplary of Lindberg's "popular modernism" were largely narrativized through the ethnic, racialized, or transgressive feminine Other, and yet they played to—and became extremely popular within—the broader, Anglo-hegemonic populace. Bearing Dolores and Gus in mind, we might approach Lupe and Johnny, "Hollywood's Battling Couple," as a similar kind of theatrical ritual that both staged and denied the reality of "popular" and/or "modern" marital angst—*staged*, that is, for entertainment (with a "faint aroma"), yet *denied* as representative of any serious contestation within *hegemonic white* American experience.

Nuptial narratives of the late 1930s represent the continuation of the shifting cultural constructions of marriage of the late 20s and earlier 30s, as discussed in chapters 3 and 4. Chapter 3 documented Hollywood's strategic deployment of ethnic difference within its stories of companionate assimilation. Vélez, in the late 1920s and 1930, was deployed strategically within screened negotiations that sought to exalt "assimilation" through marriage. Later, however, we saw Vélez's probational cultural citizenship—in life and in film—sacrificed to uphold a system of culturally produced homogeneity that reflected the nativistic protectionism characterizing the early Depression years. Within her real-life relationship to Gary Cooper, the (racialized) differences the two faced proved insurmountable, or proved to be so under the judgment of the fan/public. In Chapter 4 we saw Vélez being "included out" of Hollywood (and "civilized" romance)

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<sup>363</sup> As Andrea Most (2004) argues, the liberal political negotiations of ethnicity, race and class at play in *Babes In Arms* seek to actively, if subtly, engage and represent the Jewish immigrant urban experience in the context of Depression era hardships—including the "problem" of the ethnic implications constitutive in the New Deal, "welfare state" social programs—even as none of the characters are explicitly (albeit subtly coded as) Jewish.

by way of roles characterized by opportunistic promiscuity and/or physical aggression. By stepping briefly back from Vélez's representation, and looking at the canonical romantic comedies referred to in Lindberg's theory of "popular modernism," we can parse the circulation of two separate but overlapping interests expressed in cultural production of the era. For as we consider the "trouble" with "mixed"-coupling, we must distinguish, separately, the generalized (white/Anglo) problematics introduced by the mature, modern, enfranchised woman within the context of the companionate couple. An exploration of celebrated "remarriage comedies" (Cavell, 1981) helps isolate—or, rather, helps identify the period's social *mandate* to isolate—these two operations. Cultural production of the era, I will argue, reveals an interest in the redemption of companionate marriage as a broad concept but then delimits that redemption to the *white* wedding and—delimiting the framework still further—to the white, *upper-class* wedding.<sup>364</sup>

### **Fear of Commitment: Marrying *The Girl From Mexico***

The American fascination with embattled coupling—as characterized by way of Lindberg—is directly related to the dynamics of coupling faced by the 1920s New Woman and her man. If the 1930s marriage was based on a newfound equality of sorts—including a level of expressed female sexual desire that had previously been silenced and/or pathologized—we can understand that, as two supposedly equal individuals mature together, such unions will rest on an uneasy foundation. While modern marriages meant an eroticization of difference, they also, ultimately, meant a re-negotiation of gender-ascribed power dynamics. For, as Lindberg's reference to romantic comedies

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<sup>364</sup> For a critique of Cavell and a revisititation of the remarriage/screwball genre(s), see Shumway (1991). Shumway's brief discussion of class is insightful: "One reason that screwball comedies almost always involve the rich is that their world is a metaphor for the reward that romance promises of love" (10). As I will show, such a reward is never imaged within the Lindsay/Fuentes union.

implies, even where male/female power differentials do not map along lines of class, race or ethnicity, the late 1930s saw a new expectation of marital equality being negotiated against Depression-era social and economic trauma. Such an image carries a powerful cultural current.

The contextual framework that I seek to describe has been theorized by Stanley Cavell in his 1981 monograph, *Pursuits of Happiness*. Cavell analyzes the era by way of Hollywood's "comedies of remarriage." Cavell's "remarriage genre" consists of comedies negotiating the pitfalls and everyday failures of romantic love. Their narrative mandate is to overcome marriage's initial battles<sup>365</sup> and break-ups with an ever happier, permanent, *equality-based* remarriage. Remarriage comedies uphold the promise of companionate coupling (though Cavell doesn't invoke that term) as a permanent force for good (happiness) in the lives of mature adults. Cavell's films begin with an existent marriage: "[t]he drive of its plot is not to get the central pair together, but to get them back together, together again. Hence the fact of marriage in it is subjected to the fact or threat of divorce" (1-2). Because a central tenant of the remarriage comedy is the strong character of the (New) woman—her function as equal partner to the man (the same principle identified by Lindberg with his analysis of companionship duets)—the films stress the role of the heroine over the hero as the individual who "holds the key" to the plot's happy resolution (Cavell, 1). Resumption of the marriage is the woman's choice. While Cavell finds the most compelling examples of his genre in films produced between 1934 and 1949, the majority of the films he analyzes are made between 1937 and 1941. These are the very years that were produced the first five films of the "Mexican Spitfire"

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<sup>365</sup> While the battling couples within the films of Cavell's genre rarely manifest their troubles physically, one notable exception to this rule occurs in the first scene of *The Philadelphia Story* (Cukor, MGM, 1940) when Cary Grant punches Katherine Hepburn.

series.<sup>366</sup> The first “Spitfire” film, *The Girl From Mexico* (Goodwins, RKO, 1939) establishes the marriage between Carmelita Fuentes (Vélez), a singer from rural Mexico, and Dennis Lindsay (Donald Woods), a New York City ad man. The following four films carry the explicit threat of divorce.

The Spitfire remarriage model certainly varies from Cavell’s genre; three fundamental differences, though obvious, are worth underscoring. First, and second, the heroine of the *Spitfire* films is a Mexican who marries a working-class Anglo man. Remarriage comedies center on urban, upper-class, Anglo-Saxon couples. The third difference is that the *Mexican Spitfire* films occur in series; owing to their serial nature, the resolution of marriage is never final. These inter-related factors, i.e. the formula of a working-class “mixed”-marriage serial, conspire, in the *Spitfire* films, to articulate a dynamic whereby the institution of marriage receives blithe treatment. While Cavell’s films articulate a feigned blitheness—in the form of urbane sophistication effected by the smart jadedness of the characters—as texts, the remarriage comedies take marriage very seriously; the films’ resolutions consistently come with the *overturning* of cynicism, the acceptance of human folly, and an upholding of the value of humility and forgiveness (Cavell, 19-22). Human folly in the *Spitfire* films is superficial, utilized to advance a farcical plot (I will return, repeatedly, to address the significance of the Spitfires’ farce factor) rather than to further a theme of companionship. Humility and forgiveness rarely play a role in the plots’ resolutions. In turn, each remarriage resolution, having been

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<sup>366</sup> Films that Cavell does not analyze, but that fit his genre, are also produced in this period. Notable examples include *Mr. and Mrs. Smith* (Hitchcock, RKO, 1941) and *The Women* (Cukor, MGM, 1939). In fact the box-office hit of the era, *Gone With the Wind* (Fleming, MGM, 1939) portrays dynamics that are similar to the battles staged by remarriage-type partnerships and the questions of equality and female agency. Curiously, *Gone With the Wind* opts not to hold up the institution of marriage for the independent woman facing economic challenges but reserves marriage for the meeker, wealthier, more conservative Melanie (Olivia DeHavilland). For further details of the generic features of remarriage comedies, see Cavell, 28-30.

rendered superficial, allows for the continuation of a series based on the perpetual instability of the Lindsay relationship. In this sense, Vélez's casting was "perfect": not only was she pre-associated with the serial mode of production by way of her public association with Weissmuller-Tarzan, but her off-screen life with Weissmuller, having been discursively treated more or less like a popular domestic serial, attested to the commercial viability of an embattled, irresolvable, "interracial" marriage premise. Vélez, the "low-born" U.S. Mexican immigrant deployed to crash the *Hollywood Party*, was now deployed to crash the modern marriage comedy.

Admittedly, approaching the Spitfire films in the light of Anglo-centric remarriage genre may elucidate more contrast than comparison. In constructing this juxtaposition, I mean to refute the assumption that, by the fact of being B-movies and of Vélez being Mexican, the films cannot be evaluated in light of the cultural logic that underlies the era's discourses of marriage.<sup>367</sup> Juxtaposing the Spitfires to the Cavell genre helps systematically analyze the incoherence of the series, its conspicuous contradictions and continuously self-revising significations. In short, bringing the Spitfire films into the broader logic of the era sheds light on how Vélez was, again, "included out," of Hollywood cinema.

Cavell locates his remarriage analysis in the context of U.S. history in the late 1930s, arguing the genre is reflective of "the inner agenda of a culture" (17). For Cavell, the films image a cultural history of the impact of first-wave feminism that is

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<sup>367</sup> The first few movies were not always exhibited as the second film of a double feature, their "B"-status varied with location. Once the films solidified into a series, however, they were consistently second billing. The first film does not appear to have been conceived as a series opener. Its box-office profitability—the combination of popularity and low budget—gave rise to the subsequent films.

unaccounted for within the broad strokes the feminism's social history. The cultural function of the remarriage genre was to bring the "liberated" female citizen/subject to the public, within and through a refurbished, re-imagined institution of marriage. The era—necessarily constructing an "American dream marriage"—produced "a shared fantasy, apart from which the [remarriage comedies] under investigation could not have reached their *public* position" (Cavell, 17, emphasis in the original). The films privilege representations of the female: her desires, her doubt, her sexuality, her choice and—crucially—her *equality* in relationship to her partner. For Cavell, the collective "subject" of the remarriage genre—the meta-subject, or industrial subject—is the creation of a "new woman" *for the screen*. The films offer *instruction* on the creation and representation of the new woman, equal to the man, both as marital partner and as cinematic subject (140). Looking at the Spitfire films on Cavell's terms offers a means by which to measure not only Carmelita's marital agency but, relatedly, the extent to which Carmelita/Vélez is the cinematic subject (or not) of the films that were named—and ostensibly created for—her character/persona.

Cavell's theorization of the remarriage genre cites the woman's equal status within her marriage as cinematically compelling for the fact that she has a worthy partner: an intelligent, witty husband deserving of his intelligent, witty wife; the remarriagable male carries the burden of proving his worthiness in relation to a mature, capable, independent-minded woman. Dennis Lindsay is not a character designed to rise to such a standard. He is, in fact, consistently ineffectual, both as Carmelita's marital partner and as Vélez's cinematic partner. The role of Dennis is filled by three different actors over the lifetime of the series (Donald Woods, Charles (Buddy) Rodgers, Walter Reed), with the impact of

each replacement proving negligible. It is Dennis's Uncle Matt (Leon Errol) who serves as Carmelita's equal partner. Matt is Carmelita's ally and her comedic compeer.

Crucially, Matt is also a father figure. In Cavell's genre, the woman's father functions as "senex" at the daughter's side, facilitating her union with the man she truly loves, the original and future husband. The father supports the modern woman/daughter in her discovery of, or her access to, the "key" to her marital success (56-7). The "key" to the *Spitfire* films' narrative resolutions, similarly, involves the co-operative effort of Carmelita and Uncle Matt. The fact that Dennis never supplants Uncle Matthew—never surmounts either the personal chemistry or narrative agency of the bond between Carmelita and his own uncle—speaks to Dennis's impotence as a character and, moreover, operates to infantilize both Carmelita and Dennis. The ultimate expression of Dennis and Carmelita's failure as an adult couple lies in the fact that they never leave Matthew and Della's apartment to live on their own.

This factor, as well, is constitutive of the working-class confines of the series. In abdicating agency to the older couple over the younger, the thematics of the *Spitfire* films become antithetical to those of the upper-class, white remarriage genre. As a "modern" companionate marriage prototype, they are a failure. Following Cavell, one might even say they *instruct* the representation of "mixed" marital failure.

If the series began with a commitment to Vélez as cinematic subject, that commitment is undermined by its refusal to commit to the Lindsay marriage. Scholars before me have debated the films' "progressive" versus "regressive" presentation of Vélez. Implicit in these analyses is the supposition that Vélez's representation in the series is foundational to the cinematic representation of Mexican women and U.S.

Latinas. My analysis extends beyond the question of Vélez's individual character and representation, taking the position that the Spitfire films are, by and large and as a series, regressive films. But their regression is *not* due to—but actually takes place in spite of—Vélez/Carmelita's role, persona and representation. Privileging relationships in my analysis—Carmelita's relationships to both her husband and to her uncle-in-law—allows an examination of the film's failure to commit to the (re)marriage premise on which it was ostensibly founded and, on that basis, its failure to commit to its central character.

I begin my textual attention with the first Spitfire film, *The Girl From Mexico*, wherein Carmelita and Dennis meet and marry. As the film that sets up the remarriage pattern, and as the only Spitfire film that attempts to represent Mexicans within Mexican society—placing Mexico and the U.S. in commercial—transcultural relationship, *The Girl From Mexico* warrants particular attention.

*The Girl From Mexico* opens in the office of an advertising agency: L.B. Renner and Company. L.B. (Donald MacBride) is on the phone with an impatient client and has just received a telegram from his man in Mexico who has failed in his search for a singer/dancer (“with a name”) to employ in the advertisement of a product/program (which goes un-specified). Dennis Lindsay is sent on the next plane to Mexico City to replace the fired ad man. While preparing for his trip, Lindsay receives a call from his fiancé, Elizabeth, phoning from a bar. Elizabeth has been drinking, all afternoon it seems, with two well-heeled female friends. Not only does Elizabeth misrepresent her location (she's supposed to be with her decorators), she mocks Dennis's ignorance and gullibility (“before you train them, you have to catch them,” she says to her friends, with femme-

fatale deviousness). Elizabeth is obviously a bad marriage choice, the fact of which immediately colors Dennis as haplessly and hopelessly thick.<sup>368</sup>

With Dennis bound for Mexico, a montage indicates his diligent star-search: brief images of folkloric singers from a variety of locations imply a succession of unsuccessful auditions. The film re-opens with Dennis's search having been delayed in the small, fictional town of San Próximo (translatable as "Saint Next"). The scenario is enacted with a version of the familiar south-of-the-border-inefficiency trope—i.e. the narrative wherein any sort of mishap, in this case a malfunctioning rental car, means the impossibility of conducting important business until "*mañana*."

As Carmelita enters the San Próximo scene, her Mexicanness is represented as folkloric. She is costumed to appear much like the singer-hopefuls in the previous montage, entering the scene with a wrapped bundle on her head which turns out to be laundry that she will wash in the fountain on the patio of the restaurant/ranch/service-station where Dennis is about to order his lunch. Carmelita takes an obvious liking to Dennis but quickly adjusts her expression when he returns her gaze.

Dennis and Carmelita's meeting is implausibly orchestrated to set up a "spit-fiery" outburst. Carmelita is aggressively thrashing the laundry in the fountain when she loses her grip, setting to flight a wet bundle that finds Lindsay's shoulder. Dennis good-naturedly tosses the bundle back... with a bit too much force. It knocks Carmelita backward to fully submerge her in the fountain. She comes up screaming. Dennis

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<sup>368</sup> The film is already showing signs of its conflictedness in its representation of Elizabeth as villain/drunk. Linda Hayes, a very attractive blond, is photographed with a flattering, soft-focus, close-up. Her attractiveness was not lost on one *Variety* reviewer, who, made note in her short review of Hayes as "a looker, incidentally." The review's next paragraph (its closing sentence) reads with cryptic self-contradiction: "Camera is discriminately favorable nearly always to Miss Vélez, a difficult screen type. No close-ups." If the camera is favorable to Vélez, it is in the quantity of images it grants her, not the quality. Hayes is treated with more close-ups than Vélez. "Girl From Mexico" (rev.) *Variety*, May 1939.

apologizes but then laughs, having “never seen someone get so angry so fast.” He adds that she “looks like a little wet fire cracker.” Carmelita is angered further by his mockery and pushes Dennis into the fountain. She yells at him in rapid Spanish that approximates her English outburst. The humor of the set-up is based on the juxtaposition of two stereotypes. The quasi-feudal, picturesque fantasy set up by the outdoor, public laundry trope demands a beautiful, demure woman, which is precisely what Carmelita pretends to be when Dennis is looking. The camera reveals her interest in Dennis—which is immediate and for no apparent reason (save, perhaps for his Americanness or his apparently important business?)—indicating the falsehood of her demure, folkloric pretense but also giving a lie to the vehemence of her angry outburst. Thus neither her demure pose nor her seemingly candid outbursts are trustworthy. Her character is stable only in its volatility and inconsistency.

That night, at the same enterprise in which she earlier scrubbed laundry, Vélez is the singer providing the evening’s entertainment. During her rendition of “Negra Consentida,” she performs flirtatiously for the men in the crowd, beginning with Dennis, who appears surprised by her pleasing voice. Carmelita concludes the song and exits. Dennis follows to offer her the ad job. The camera remains in the dining area to show a potted plant fly out the archway through which the two have exited. It lands with a crash and we cut to our heroine’s second tantrum.

Carmelita is vehement in turning down Dennis’s job proposal (she is angry that he left during her performance; the viewer knows that he left only in order to call New York and report that he had found his singer). After she drives Dennis from the room, though, she pouts and tells the restaurant’s proprietor that she didn’t really want him to go away

(“I don’t know what’s a matter with everybody, everybody picks on me”). Owing to the comedic skill with which Vélez performs the irony of her character’s several contradictory displays of emotion, this strained reveal (assuring the viewer of the romance plot) *arguably* comes off as charmingly conflicted—even as a internally self-reflexive acknowledgment of the absurdity of her own character—rather than merely infantilizing or absurd in its irrationality. I mention this moment as it establishes a pattern that continues throughout the series: the *Spitfire* films contain a great number of illogically contrived instances that put an impossible strain on Vélez’s skills of ironic and/or comedic delivery. Many such moments do not come off as effectively as does this one.

With Dennis and Carmelita’s professional negotiations at an impasse, the restaurant proprietor explains Carmelita’s behavior, enlightening Dennis regarding a crucial cultural divide: “in Mexico, we are not so new-fashioned maybe. In Mexico the young people [by which he must mean young women]… they must do what the papa and the mama say, until they are married.” Yet Dennis does not directly seek “the papa and the mama” for permission to take Carmelita out of the country. It is through a state mediated arrangement that Vélez is convinced to work in New York. With a cut to a regional district court, the film asks Dennis to convince the court, plus seven older members of Carmelita’s extended family, that a New York advertising job is in her best interests. With the judge presiding, and with her parents unidentified, Carmelita’s family forms a consensus in favor of her departure. Familial agency is, in effect, collapsed under the patriarchal authority of the state. Significantly, the decision is based on economic rather than personal or professional desire: despite her family’s approval, Carmelita remains

stubbornly reluctant to leave Mexico. She informs the judge that she will agree to go, but only to help provide for her “very poor” family. She states that she is leaving for her family, not for Dennis. The arrangement involves a promise from Dennis (a promise to the judge, not to the family) to take responsibility for Carmelita’s well-being. Dennis puts up a \$10,000 bond for her (playing to the trope that everything and everyone in Mexico can be bought, though, in this case, not cheaply) and agrees to buy her a wardrobe of suitable New York clothing upon arrival. In addition, Dennis is to be in regular contact with the Mexican consulate, whose apparent responsibility it is to insure “her moral welfare will be looked after.” This scene appears designed to honor, or at least humor, the Mexican state’s effort to maintain a role as cultural protectorate through its consulates. Owing to the absurd exaggeration of the scenario, however, it only reinforces the benign-patriarchy image of fantasy feudalism that the film has already established.

Through the remainder of the film, shifting to New York, Dennis’s accountability to the Mexican consulate becomes the narrative ploy through which the character justifies, to himself and to his fiancé, the extent to which he maintains a close watch over Carmelita’s “welfare.” Dennis (and the viewer) can plausibly deny that his concern is personally or sexually motivated. In other words, his motivation to satisfy the consulate “hides” the fact that he is attracted to Carmelita. So when Carmelita plots to make Dennis jealous—by setting up a situation that appears to indicate she has begun a sexual relationship with Señor Tony Romano (played by Polish actor Edward Raquello), one of Lindsay’s ad clients—Dennis responds out of “responsibility” rather than jealousy. Carmelita, for her part, shows no compunction in risking her own reputation in the

consulate's eyes.<sup>369</sup> In a sense, Carmelita is represented as in perpetual rebellion against patriarchal authority. Her outrageous antics, though—her misguided disregard for both social propriety and self-respect—are only a function of her “love-struck” scheming for the affections of Dennis. Bear in mind that, in 1939, Lupe Vélez is 30 years old and divorced. Carmelita Fuentes is being “protected” by the very forces that Lupe Vélez rebelled against (either directly, indirectly, or in effect) ever since she has been a public figure. The series works to re-stage—and disingenuously “clean up”—Vélez’s history as Mexican emigrant / U.S. immigrant while, at the same time, falsely exploiting her “outrageous” off-screen reputation.

Carmelita’s outrageousness crescendos as the plot approaches conclusion. The night before Dennis and Elizabeth are to be married, Carmelita calls Dennis from Romano’s bed (her presence there is “innocent,” a happenstance of her advertising campaign, artificially contrived by the plot to enable Carmelita’s absurdly inappropriate jealousy ploy). Meanwhile, Dennis has been *told* by his Uncle Matt that he is in love with Carmelita. Uncle Matt then convinces Elizabeth of Dennis’s duplicity, which, in combination with Dennis’s “concern” (on behalf of the consulate) for Carmelita, makes Elizabeth jealous, causing her to break off the marriage.

When Dennis rushes to rescue Carmelita from Romano, he makes his first empowered move in the film. He throws a punch at Romano, who ducks and plants a fist in Dennis’s eye. Carmelita knocks Romano cold with a vase to the head and rushes to Dennis on the floor: “Oh my darling, is there something I can do for you?” Dennis picks

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<sup>369</sup> The unimpeachable personal and professional behavior of Señor Romano—who is, most assuredly, a gentleman through all—indicates that “Good Neighbor” efforts were made to avoid national offense (more will be said about the film’s Good Neighbor Policy context below). Romano is neither rude to Carmelita nor is he tempted to take advantage of her as she stages her promiscuity to provoke Dennis’s jealous reaction.

up Carmelita by the waist and hauls her out of the room, saying, “[t]here’s only one thing to do with you and I’m going to do it.” The next shot is scored with “The Wedding March” and shows Dennis and Carmelita leaving a cathedral (behind six blond bridesmaids, presumably Elizabeth’s) as husband and wife.

At the moment of Dennis’s hasty decision to marry, the narrative conveniently erases the ostensible transnational agency of the Mexican consulate. The idea that Dennis has been carefully accountable to the Mexican state, right up until he decides to take responsibility for Vélez himself, upholds the American male’s assured right to marry whom he pleases, foreign-born or domestic, regardless of citizenship status, without any negotiation of state, social or juridical concern.<sup>370</sup> As Dennis so directly defies the stated preference of his anxious, nativistic Aunt Della, and as neither he nor Carmelita ever mention Carmelita’s family in Mexico, the film affirms Dennis’s freedom of marital choice as trumping obsolete class and ethnic kinship constraints on free-range romance.<sup>371</sup> It is significant that the film avoids engagement with the social or even personal realities of such a choice. The realm of “madcap” comedy governing the final third of the film conveniently offers a generically sanctioned release from seriousness, masking (somewhat) the film’s refusal to screen the awkward encounters that would precede an unconventional marriage. Carmelita and Dennis are not the modern “star-crossed,” lovers bravely challenging outmoded institutions. For, not only does the film

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<sup>370</sup> The scenario upholds a socio-cultural value that was not entirely un-contestable. Though the male right of nuptial choice had never been subject to legal question, women had only very recently been granted the right to choose a foreign partner. It was only in 1934, fourteen years after women had secured the right to vote, that women were legislated the right to marry a non-U.S. citizen without having their citizenship revoked. Nancy F. Cott cites the generalized acceptance of the ideals of companionate marriage as the factor motivating the 1934 change securing the woman’s right, as U.S. citizen, to her partner of choice (1998, 1470-1471).

<sup>371</sup> I am tempted to suggest Aunt Della as an analogue for Gary Cooper’s mother. Elizabeth Risdon even bears a striking resemblance to Mrs. Cooper.

refuse a final discussion between Dennis and the previously ever-present Mexican consulate, it lifts from Dennis all the weight of his character's decisions: it skips over his break-up with Elizabeth and refuses a confrontation with Aunt Della. Most tellingly, though, it avoids any screening of his feelings for Carmelita. It even evades imaging the wedding vows that join husband and wife. Dennis's decision to marry Carmelita, being so uncharacteristic and incoherently motivated, is not even readable as his moment of boldly reclaiming personal agency from his overbearing aunt and deceitful fiancé.

Instead, the conclusion implies the effectiveness of Carmelita's machinations over such a passive man. Even this implication, though, is negated by the fact that it actually was Uncle Matt's agency, more than Carmelita's, that "held the key," (to again invoke Cavell's terminology) leading to the marriage and thus to the plot's resolution. The final scene is played as high comedy. Elizabeth, standing with Della outside the church, sees Carmelita emerge with a bouquet of Calla Lilies, the "exotic" (quintessentially Mexican) flower that Elizabeth had, rather ironically, chosen for her own bouquet. "And my Calla lilies..." Elizabeth screams, as she throws a bag of rice that hits Carmelita in the head. Carmelita races down the church steps to beat Elizabeth repeatedly with said lilies. Thus ensues cat-fight-number-one of the series. The film's closing shot is not of a happy husband and wife but of two fighting women.

Final third of the film notwithstanding, the slapstick factor in *The Girl From Mexico* is notably less the "madcap comedy" than are the later films of the series. *The Mexican Spitfire* (Goodwins, RKO, 1939), the second film, differs on several counts from the first. It is the tropes established in the second film that cement the series into a repeatable formula, and it is on this serial formula that scholars previously examining the

series have focused their analyses. When Charles Ramírez Berg, for example, describes the *Spitfire* films as “farces, comedies in which a group of characters find themselves in an isolated location [...], wherein the plots revolve around many mishaps caused by mistaken identity, characters disguised as other characters [...] and so forth” (2002, 93), he fairly characterizes films two through eight. For it is around Uncle Matt, in combination with Lord Epping, introduced in the second film, that the mistaken-identity ploy is established.

*The Mexican Spitfire* invents Uncle Matt’s ability to perform an uncanny imitation of Lord Epping, a rather magical transformation made possible by the fact that the two characters are played by the same actor, Leon Errol. I have earlier indicated that the Matt character, to a large extent, “holds the key” to the Lindsay remarriage mandate. Uncle Matt’s ability to perform Lord Epping allows him access, also, to the secret behind every film’s *second* narrative mandate, a goal competing with the remarriage mandate: the signing of the advertising contract (hereafter referred to as “The Contract”) that, in each film of the series, becomes crucial to Dennis’s successful business. Going forward, as I argue that this second narrative mandate in the series comes to dominate over the first (the remarriage resolution), I will analyze the Lord Epping / Uncle Matt magic not as an anarchic comedic element but as the central logic structuring and motivating every film in the series. But I want to return, first, to Ramírez Berg’s argument regarding the realm of anarchic comedy.

Ramírez Berg broadly characterizes the *Spitfire* series as “a farcical world [in which] *all* of the characters are silly and do silly things [...] Carmelita’s antics are not

unusual or demeaning, only more animated...” (93, emphasis in the original).<sup>372</sup> This description is offered in support of his argument that “it is not the strategy of the films to make Carmelita look stupid” (93). Even this low bar, though, is cleared inconsistently and by varying degrees. It is true that, just as Carmelita is characterized as childlike, unsocialized and irrational, Uncle Matt is equally impetuous and irresponsible. Every role, in fact, is played to an extreme: Epping is a lush; Elizabeth is catty, cruel and dishonest; Aunt Della—with her obsession with “breeding” and the superficial markers of high-born status—is a caricature of a quasi-racist, eurocentric, classist bias. In the series’s earliest iterations, hyperbolic characterization sometimes works to make the films, just as Berg argues, “subtly progressive” (94). Yet representation of Carmelita/Vélez varies greatly between, and even within, each film. This being so, my analysis of the series as a whole purposefully avoids a referendum on the character of Carmelita (thus refusing a verdict regarding Vélez’s individual participation in the series) in order to focus on the films’ gradually shifting character relationships, sign systems and narrative motivations. Furthermore, I seek to place the series’ trajectory in the context of historical politics, which requires an examination of the exigencies of Hollywood’s participation in President Roosevelt’s “Good Neighbor Policy” (GNP). GNP context allows a return to the topic bracketed earlier: the apparent cultural (and socio-political) agenda motivating the representation of a transcultural marital relationship.

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<sup>372</sup> Submitting his interpretation of the series as “arguably a too optimistic and hopeful one,” Ramírez Berg is here reversing an earlier analysis. His 2002 position critiques his 1990 reading that “used Vélez’s Carmelita as an example of the female clown stereotype” (94). With this change-up, Ramírez Berg likewise challenges the analyses offered by Ana M. López (1993) and reiterated by Alicia I. Rodríguez-Estrada (1997).

## “Good Neighbors” Make Good Business

*The Girl From Mexico* was produced in March of 1939 and released in early June. As was reported in the *Washington Post*, we can understand *The Girl From Mexico* as RKO’s first production in response to President Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s having prevailed upon Hollywood to support and make visible his GNP agenda.<sup>373</sup> Roosevelt’s Good Neighbor Policy (GNP) was a complex and often internally contradictory political and economic policy that sought to improve relations with Latin America. Roosevelt commandeered Nelson A. Rockefeller, who had a controlling interest in RKO since 1932 (and who had been intimately involved with the GNP agenda since its inception), to head up the Hollywood arm of GNP effort, which had a vague governmental/corporate agenda from the beginning.<sup>374</sup> As scholars agree, there was no clear mandate as to what a “good

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<sup>373</sup> Melrose Gowler, “Good Neighbor Policy Adopted by Hollywood,” *The Washington Post*, May 1, 1939, p.14. Gowler writes: “One Studio, RKO-Radio, apparently heard Mr. Roosevelt’s suggestions louder than the rest, for it is setting something of a record with four films with Latin American backgrounds in productions simultaneously. [...] The first of RKO-Radio’s quartet of contributions to the good neighbor policy will be ‘The Girl From Mexico,’ starring Lupe Velez [...]. It is a gay comedy of a cute little Mexican girl who is brought to New York, upsets the metropolis, and happily returns to Mexico” (as it happened, of course, Carmelita did not return to Mexico). The other three films reported to complete the “quartet” were *Panama Lady* (1939), *Five Come Back* (1939), and *The Dove*, with Leo Carrillo and Steffi Dune. The latter was released as *The Girl and the Gambler* (1939). If RKO did indeed consider a *Dove* as a good neighbor vehicle, the choice is further evidence that, from the beginning, filming in Latin America (thus sharing the economic benefits of local production) was prioritized over utilizing Latin American stars or devising scenarios that engendered “hemispheric solidarity.” Growler cites Hollywood’s “awakening” to “a realization of the enormous popularity of American film stars in the lands to the South.”

<sup>374</sup> The GNP officially went into effect in 1933, after being announced in President Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s inaugural address. The rhetorical gesture of harmony towards the nations to the south marked the first public articulation of a sincere, if self-interested, effort to patch-up intercontinental relations after, under the administrations of Theodore Roosevelt, William Howard Taft and Woodrow Wilson, U.S. military interventions took place in Cuba, Haiti, Nicaragua, the Dominican Republic, Mexico and Honduras (Bender 23-5). While the overarching U.S. agenda in Latin America (designed to insure U.S. national security and to expand Latin American markets for domestic goods) did not change in 1933, fear of fascist expansionism necessitated a construction of improved inter-American alliances. In order to implement the new strategy, the Roosevelt Administration unofficially joined forces with the Rockefeller Foundation, along with other corporate entities, resulting in quasi-state supported initiatives, varying from the philanthropic to the overtly corporate, to advance programs in public health and economic development in Latin America, especially as related to transportation and infrastructure. The policy became much more public in 1939, the year that Hollywood was tapped to join the effort. In August 1940, The Office of the Coordinator on Inter-American Affairs (OCIAA) was set up, with Nelson A. Rockefeller as the Coordinator, to facilitate Hollywood’s continued involvement of in GNP pursuits. John “Jock” Hay

neighborly” film would enunciate. The policy, as produced through Hollywood, was inevitably confused and conflicted, for there were, in effect, two GNP mandates under which Hollywood operated. First, there was a political mandate, which serviced Roosevelt’s efforts to counter fascist propaganda circulating in Latin America and which was supplemented with government funding.<sup>375</sup> Second, there was the economic/industrial mandate to capture the Latin American Market (and to do so before Spain—with its civil war having just ended in Franco’s victory—could renew its film industry). In a sense there were four mandates, as both the political and the economic played out in two regional spheres, the United States and Latin America, both of which tended to be reduced, in commercial treatment, to falsely homogenous spaces. From the political perspective, the mandate sought to foster sympathetic interest on the part of the U.S. citizenry towards their Latin American “neighbors”—the domestic mandate—while simultaneously facilitating a greater trust, on the part of Latin Americans, in U.S.-style capitalistic democracy thereby forestalling the influence of European fascism—the inter-American affairs mandate. On the economic side, Hollywood wanted to increase its export market in Latin America without compromising its domestic box-office receipts. In short, the exigencies of Neighborliness were often at cross-purposes. From the standpoint of Hollywood production, they proved irresolvable.<sup>376</sup>

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Whitney was named to the head of the Motion Picture Division (MPD) of the OCIAA within two months of the agency’s creation. For more about GNP policies, see Bender (2002), Woll (1974), Fein (1999).

<sup>375</sup> As reported in *Variety*, legislation proposed by the White House that would provide \$1,000,000 of government funds to “prevent European totalitarians from luring the South Americans to their way of thinking *and from snatching our valuable trade*” (my emphasis). “President Roosevelt’s Frank Plan To Woo S.A. Good-Will Via Screen,” *Variety*, April 13, 1939, p.1. *Variety* discourse registers consistent, overt, and savvy cynicism toward the OCIAA mandate. Expressed cynicism, though, did not lessen industry enthusiasm for the agenda to increase exports.

<sup>376</sup> This irresolvability is most clearly evidenced by the number of GNP-shaped productions that tended to announce themselves as such, seeking, self-consciously, to explain their own convoluted logic. Both of the

*The Girl from Mexico* reflects the GNP's conflictedness. Inadvertently, perhaps, the film begins with an unusually candid perspective on Good Neighbor era corporate politics: seeking a Mexican performer to brand an advertising campaign, the film articulates the concept that good neighbors make good business. The plot invokes (twice, in two ad campaigns) foreign feminine exoticism as capitalist currency. Advertising brings Carmelita and Dennis together, thus personal/marital transculturation is made sense of through forces of international capital.

Furthermore, the idea that the advertising agency would seek a Mexican singer “with a name... a celebrated singer” for an ad campaign, represents a self-conscious reference to the current popularity of Mexican music. In reality, however, it is unlikely that any of the handful of prominent Mexican musicians—all of whom were male—carried a “name” that would have proven effective as an advertising tool within the hegemonic marketplace.<sup>377</sup> Logically, the L.B. Renner fictive ad-agency readjusts its strategy. Dennis Lindsey makes the case, with optimistic conviction, that a talented and charismatic Mexican performer, heretofore unknown, *will soon* be celebrated in the general U.S. public, acquiring the cultural currency necessary to promote products. The casting of Vélez, as the Mexican singer whom Dennis “discovers,” is not only strategic, it is mandatory. Her anomalous career makes the film’s premise—its textual performance of commercial transculturation—plausible.

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two *Spitfire* films that involve GNP related performances, where Vélez is brought diegetically to the stage, identify themselves as “good neighbors.”

<sup>377</sup> The most prominent were Tito Guízar, Jorge Negrete, Lorenzo Barcelata and Ernesto Cortazar. There were still very few Latina musical stars that had individualized identities (*The Girl From Mexico* pre-dates Carmen Miranda’s U.S. film debut, which took place in 1940 with *Down Argentine Way* (1940, 20th Century Fox)).

Having mentioned the self-conscious (mis)representation of the emigration process, I mean to underscore the fact that *The Girl* went to some lengths to insure that it did not repeat Paramount's offense with *The Broken Wing*. The Mexican state in *The Girl* is nothing if not strong, responsible and efficient, both on its home ground and in its transnational reach. Nevertheless, the film's seeming deference to Mexico's "sensitivities" comes off as patronizing and superficial given the ham-handed fashion by which it is incorporated into, and then conveniently dropped from, the narrative. Carmelita's familial and emotional ties to Mexico are blithely discarded ("I think my welfare is going to be much happier here") in order to punctuate her U.S. metropolitan desire and her desire for Dennis.<sup>378</sup> The film holds up the U.S. as the beacon of opportunity and modernity; its efforts towards courting the Latino/Mexican market are unceremoniously dumped in favor of the effort to satisfy the U. S. audience's national/self-representation. Such narrative contradiction and inconsistency is masked, or asks to be absorbed by, Carmelita's unstable characterization. Vélez's character is overburdened to the breaking point with such impossible negotiations. Carmelita thus comes off looking "dizzy" like "an alluring ding-bat," just as Ramirez Berg describes in his 1990 analysis of Vélez as an example of the stereotypical Latina "Female Clown" (1990, 295). It is Vélez's effectiveness in working the fine line between clown and comedienne that is the film's periodic saving grace. And it is on that basis that Ramírez Berg later shifts—between his 1990 reading and his ("perhaps too optimistic," he writes) 2002

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<sup>378</sup> Early *Spiifire* films include a handful of Mexican characters. We have seen, for example, the representation of Romano, who does not speak Spanish with Carmelita, likely owing to the fact that the actor is Polish. Also in *The Girl*, however, is a scene with Carmelita in a comically heated argument, in Spanish, with the character named as Mexican Pete. In *Out West*, Carmelita argues (again) comically and heatedly, with a Mexican man at the airport. The series later stops supplying Carmelita with Mexican conversational (sparring) partners.

revisitation—to champion Vélez’s role in the series. Recognizing Ramirez Berg’s conflictedness, it is worth noting the most pleasurable moment of the foundational film, *The Girl From Mexico*, which, jarringly, occurs right after one of the least pleasurable moments of the film. I will address the two scenes as they occur in the text.

Immediately following the juridical scene in San Próximo, Mexico, Carmelita and Dennis are shown having arrived in New York. Standing in the hallway outside the Lindsay apartment (where Aunt Della and Uncle Matt live), Carmelita sees a fire alarm and breaks the glass. Dennis angrily asks for an explanation. Carmelita explains that she is cold and, reading the words “fire” and “emergency,” thinks an emergency fire will light when she breaks the glass. Beyond establishing that Carmelita’s rural Mexican background means she has neither a tolerance for cold nor a familiarity with modern mechanisms like fire alarms or heaters, the scene seems to want to underscore, comically, the grand social chasm between New York and San Próximo. Thus Vélez plays the scene with wide-eyed wonder. Narratively, the hallway moment functions to have Carmelita wrap herself up with Dennis in his coat so that, when Della and Elizabeth come to the door, Dennis and Carmelita are caught in a compromising position. The fire-alarm “joke” is unnecessary, made worse by the coat moment being obtrusively inappropriate (and overplayed), especially given prior scenes underscoring traditional Mexican decorum (not to mention Dennis’s promise of appropriate New York clothing). At any rate, the door opens, Della looks appropriately scandalized and Elizabeth greets Carmelita with cold suspicion (“charmed, I’m sure”... to which Carmelita responds with purposefully challenged English: “I’m charming, too”). As everyone heads into the apartment, Carmelita, for no conceivable reason and despite Dennis having warned her against doing

so, pulls the fire alarm. Soon sirens are heard, Dennis is vexed and Carmelita ashamedly admits she pulled the alarm, “just a little bit... like this” (demonstrating the pulling action with her finger). The whole thing is contrived to affect the naiveté of a curious, mischievous child meeting a big wide modern world.

Scenes like this are irredeemable, ethically and comedically. The film’s bearings are regained, however, in the very next scene, set the following morning. Carmelita seems to be alone and begins to take a look around the apartment. She sees a framed photo of Elizabeth and begins talking to the picture: “Aaa-ah, so nice to see-ee you,” she says. Mimicking the exchange from the previous evening, she answers herself with Elizabeth’s affected, “charmed, I’m sure,” and continues addressing the photograph:

And when are you going to be married, *señorita frEio burro...* pretty soon you think, eh?  
Well that’s what YOU think. But I have a little surprise for you... miss SNIFFY NOSE.  
You are just blind as a BAT... If you had two eyes in your head, instead of two tiiiiiny lit-  
tle STONES... you could see he loves ME. Not YOU...

The scene’s narrative purpose is to reveal Carmelita’s scheming intentions to the viewer. It is not the script as much as the performance that turns her description and imitation of Elizabeth into such effective comedy. That and the fact that Carmelita has an audience of which she is unaware: Uncle Matt (whom she did not meet the previous night) has walked in, checked the number on the door to make sure he is in the right apartment, and is standing right behind Carmelita when she throws herself off-balance with the exuberance of her performance. Carmelita, initially anxious about what Matt overheard, quickly discovers she has an ally. The partnership is inaugurated with a vaudeville-esque song and dance rendition of “She’ll be Comin’ ‘Round the Mountain,” performed in character and without diegetic rupture, in which Carmelita’s sung refrain, “when she comes,” imitates Errol’s nasal voice and facial expression; her concentrated attention on

Matt is performed on her face with a comical combination of study, mimicry and bemusement. The two rise from the player piano and the music continues. They dance around the house, arm-in-arm, executing boisterous kicks until they bump up against the authoritarian Della. They then dance themselves in reverse, self-reflexively turning to show the audience the “Ooops” looks on their faces, and dance into their separate rooms.

The scene is significant for its singularity as well as for its function within the long-range dynamics of the series. The sequence establishes the Carmelita/Matt (Vélez/Errol) bond of mutual appreciation and friendship in a moment standing completely outside of the plot’s scenario concerning “The Contract.” The song and dance performance, in fact, operates as delightful, anarchic textual excess; it has no narrative motivation or consequence. It is the rare scene that serves spectatorial enjoyment of Carmelita/Vélez free from the manipulations, schemes and antagonisms with which the narrative burdens the character. While the eight-film partnership initiated with this scene forms the basis of the series’ comedic merit, few, if any, of the later Carmelita/Matt collaborative moments offer such excessive delight. And none are as lengthy or as generously staged. Again, the fact that the only companionship and shared humor expressed in this film does not develop between husband and wife, but between wife and uncle, prefigures the series’s dynamic of avoidance, its refusal to commit to its married couple.

The series’ avoidance of the Lindsay marriage points up the issue of “race”-mixing, in the GNP context, as referenced by Ana M. López in her analysis of the series (1993). Clearly this perpetually probational, unquaintly chaste marriage reflects miscegenation

anxiety.<sup>379</sup> López contends that, “the questions posed by the series could no longer be tolerated because there were no ‘good neighborly’ answers. The ethnic problematic of the series—intermarriage, miscegenation, and integration—could not be explicitly addressed within the new, friendly climate” (413). As has been noted, however, the timing of the Lindsay union, screening in 1939, presents the Lindsay’s “mixed” marriage at precisely the opening of GNP. I would argue that the Spitfire films initially take a cautiously progressive position on the very questions that López rightly insists they pose. For the fact that the series failed to pursue the expansive potential of the Lindsay marriage, however, I am not sure the GNP, as originally and vaguely conceived, can be faulted. Rather, I would suggest that the opening film represents the “progressive” intentions of the GNP, while the trajectory of the series evidences the policy’s stilted manifestation. In other words, the series’s economic motivation quickly trumps the pursuit of any social/cultural substance that might have threatened its box-office potential. If *The Girl from Mexico* meant to re-launch Vélez’s career as an inter-American advertisement for the GNP (just as Dennis Lindsay originally looked for a Mexican singer to promote a product that the film opts not to name), Good Neighbor rhetoric turned out to be a performance of neighborliness—more advertisement than product—and, not incidentally, one sold only in the hegemonic Anglo marketplace.<sup>380</sup> It is possible that reception of *The*

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<sup>379</sup> To Ramírez Berg, the Lindsay marriage itself is a testament to the progressive, subversive potential of comedy; the realm of farce and absurdity can manifest resistance to the hegemonic race-mixing taboo in a way that drama, or even more naturalistic comedy, cannot.

<sup>380</sup> The film was very well received in the U.S. press. A review in the published in *Los Angeles Times*, after the film previewed as Hillstreet Theater, is exemplary: “Last night a new comedienne was added to the roster. She is Lupe Velez... in ‘The Girl From Mexico.’ Doubtless some of the credit goes to her director, Leslie Goodwins, and without doubt her stage work has helped her; but the fact remains that she has bloomed forth as a brilliant comedienne, spontaneous and vibrant. And not only is Lupe a first class comedienne, but she has glamour, allure, and varied talents. She can show dancers how to dance and torch singers how to sing...” See, “Lupe Hit as Comedienne,” *Los Angeles Times* (May 11, 1939), 9. *Hollywood Reporter* (May 11, 1939) likewise reviewed Vélez and Errolas a hit comedy team: “[t]here were times,

*Girl From Mexico* in the *la colonia* of Los Angeles contributed to the decision not to export the film to Mexico.

In October of 1939, with *La Opinión*'s announcement of the production of the second Carmelita film, *The Mexican Spitfire*, comes belated and cryptic confirmation of the paper's critical stance towards the earlier film. (This announcement of the second film did not indicate its relationship to the earlier picture; had *The Mexican Spitfire* been understood to be a sequel to *The Girl From Mexico*, its production might have been met with even greater suspicion than is evident in this brief announcement.) Within the notice, *The Girl From Mexico* is quickly sized-up as "one of those vacillations [vaciladas] of Hollywood that they consider 'Spanish'."<sup>381</sup> Clearly, for this critic, the considerable amount of Spanish dialogue in the film (spoken by Mexican players, including several minor stars and extras) did not in itself offer reason enough to overlook the film's patronizing portrayal of Mexican state, juridical and familial institutions. *Vacilada*, as a noun derived from the verb, *vacilar*, creatively punctuates the verdict. As a *vacilada*, the film is described as hesitant or indecisive. More significantly, though, it characterizes the film as a joke or a tease. It is a concise summation of the film's problematics, one implying multiple levels of insult.

*The Girl From Mexico* provides a material example of the chasm existing between two national perspectives regarding what "neighborly" representation might look like; it is a rare and thus useful example of the myopia vexing the earliest years of

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between the two of them that the audience's laughter drowned out the ensuing dialogue for a full half minute." Edwin Schallert, writing a month later, is somewhat less strident in his praise: "'The Girl From Mexico' at least proved that Lupe Vélez could renew her screen activities as a peppery comedienne. It wasn't exactly a big league picture, but the reviews were favorable, and so RKO has decided that a kind of sequel will be in order." Edwin Schallert, "Drama," *Los Angeles Times* (June 27, 1939), 8.

<sup>381</sup> "Lupe Vélez en una Nueva Cinta," *La Opinión*, Oct 8, 1939, 6. "La última producción en que trabajó la Vélez fue "The Girl from Mexico," una de esas vaciladas de Hollywood sobre lo que ellos consideran "spanish'."

Hollywood's GNP. From the fact of the successful Latino capitalist character, Tony Romano, being cast to a Polish actor, to the same Romano's perfume being named "Romance Español," to (most clumsily) Mexican Pete's restaurant, "Mexican Pete's," being referred to as "Spanish," Hollywood demonstrates the tenacity of its ignorance regarding the identity and heritage of its most immediate neighbors. Though the film named itself to privilege Mexico, employed Mexicans, and made an effort to locate itself in relation to actual Mexican locations (including "authentic" regional costumes),<sup>382</sup> it was, for *La Opinión*, understandably, just one more frustrating version of Hollywood-style "Spanishness." What is worse, though, is that such clumsy errors were never righted later in the series, even as each subsequent film was exported to Mexico during the most supposedly vigilant years of the GNP. In the final two *Spitfire* films, both of which narratively put up morale-shoring "Good Neighbor" stage shows (self-consciously referred to as such), both refer to their stage shows as including "Spanish" dance and music. Despite its title, the series is hard pressed to employ the word "Mexican" as a neutral—much less, positive—modifying adjective within the dialogue of its Anglo characters. The series knows its U.S. audience.

### **The Spitfire: Clipping the Claws of the "Mexican Wildcat"**

The second *Spitfire* film, the first remarriage narrative, has received considerable scholarly attention. *The Mexican Spitfire* employs consistently clever dialogue, a relatively lucid narrative, and seems a genuine attempt to re-address the GNP mandate. Carmelita's Mexicanness is again foregrounded and Della and Elizabeth (who both refer

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<sup>382</sup> In a scene showing the filming of one of the "Romance Español" ads, Vélez is wearing a Tehuantepec costume she wore in *La Zandunga*. As discussed below, Vélez mentions the costume in an interview with de la Torre for *La Opinión*.

to Carmelita as a “Mexican wildcat” in the film’s opening scene—Elizabeth, with a devilish, “we’ll clip her claws...”) are the narrative’s antagonists, their undisguised racializing bias being punishingly mocked. Noting certain improvements, though, is not to say the film is unequivocally “progressive.”

*The Mexican Spitfire* opens with Carmelita and Dennis Lindsay returning from their honeymoon in Mexico. Della and Matthew meet them at the airport. Della has invited Elizabeth to join them and the two conspire in a deceptive plan to have Carmelita, to her undoing, spend the afternoon with Elizabeth while Dennis goes straight to the office to attend to Lord Epping’s advertising account. This sets up a scene that is exemplary of the film’s instability. On the one hand, Carmelita appears to be taken in by Elizabeth’s feigned gesture of friendship, naively stepping straight into the folly that establishes the film’s plot. On the other hand, there is an ambiguous gesture, occurring as the two are toasting with champagne at lunch, implying that Carmelita recognizes Elizabeth’s duplicity and is *not* taken in. This obtrusive, and yet false “reveal” is specifically available to the Spanish-speaking spectator: following her “salud”—all smiles and glass raised—Carmelita says, with voice lowered, “*cara de perro antipatico mucho,*” calling Elizabeth a very disagreeable dog face. Elizabeth asks what that means in English and Carmelita responds—with a charming smile—that, “you don’t say that in English.” While it is a gratifying few moments for the Vélez-sympathetic viewer, the entire scenario surrounding this exchange has Carmelita completely taken in by Elizabeth’s devious machinations. Thus rather than the toast signaling that Carmelita is smarter than Elizabeth thinks, it has Carmelita coming off as both gullible *and* *disingenuous*. Furthermore, the line “you don’t say that in English,” while funny, and perfectly

delivered, allows the English-only spectator (as Henry Jenkins' reading point out) to believe that Carmelita is quick to profanity.<sup>383</sup> The broader situation infantilizes Carmelita, representing her as less savvy than both antagonist and viewer. Consistently the Spitfire films, while offering moments of real pleasure for the sympathetic viewer, ultimately place that viewer in a no-win situation, leaving her/him reaching futilely outside of the films' troubled logic in search of a stable spectator position.

The next scene has Elizabeth bringing a tipsy Carmelita to Dennis's office (interrupting his all important client meeting) and tricks her into posing as Dennis's secretary. Doing so, Carmelita inadvertently places The Contract (with Lord Epping) in jeopardy (here we have the foundational scenario that will be repeated, in theme and variation, in six more films). Worse for Carmelita is that, by having posed as Dennis's secretary, she is deemed unpresentable, later, as Dennis's wife. Thus when Lord Epping comes to the Lindsay home for dinner, Elizabeth substitutes as wife and Carmelita poses as secretary. When the Uncle-Matt-posing-as-Lord-Epping magic gets our comic duo in further trouble, Carmelita confides in Matt that she is resigned to divorce Dennis because she is no good for him, she is "just a big gallstone around his neck." It is this conflict—Carmelita as wife versus Carmelita as business hindrance (consistently implying that

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<sup>383</sup> Jenkins's reading, referring to Elizabeth as "a friend," and to Vélez's one line in Spanish as a "long tirade," somewhat mischaracterizes the exchange. But it is telling that, in reading Vélez's Spanish as profanity, Jenkins (2007, 142-143) indicates that the English-only viewer is likely to—perhaps encouraged to—hear the line as such. Actually Carmelita's Spanish-language jokes were clean. The PCA stipulated (repeatedly with every film) that care be taken to guard against offense or profanity in Spanish dialogue. Herrick Archive, AMPAS. PCA Files, *Mexican Spitfire* file. Joseph I. Breen to J. R. Mc Donough. "Care will be needed with this 'stream of Spanish' to avoid the inclusion of anything offensive" (written all caps). *Mexican Spitfire at Sea* file. Addison Durland to Joseph I. Breen, Sep 17, 1941. "[the film contains] nothing that would give offense to our Latin American neighbors. We assume that the customary care will be exercised so that the words are correct and free of anything that might offend Latin American audiences."

partnership with “the Mexican” is an economic liability)—that forms the basis of each break-up in the series.

*The Mexican Spitfire* sees the passive Dennis nearly reverse the results of his passivity in the previous film: when Carmelita files for divorce, Dennis readily, again, succumbs to Elizabeth’s devious charms. When Carmelita’s divorce (obtained in Mexico) is found to be invalid, she returns to New York on the eve of Dennis and Elizabeth’s wedding. The series’ second cat-fight is staged when Carmelita (dressed in an infantilizing pinafore), has been charged with explaining to Elizabeth (looking very lovely in her wedding gown) that she and Dennis are still married. Again, as she cheerfully agrees to save Dennis from the awkwardness of his own personal accountability, Carmelita’s level of gullibility is unclear. She can be read as either being stupid or *performing stupidity*; the ambiguity as to her level of awareness need never be resolved, as the film’s ending degenerates into an all-out food-fight free-for-all (figure 33). Carmelita and Lord Epping receive the inevitable cakes-in-the-face, while Elizabeth’s glamorous appearance is relatively uncompromised.<sup>384</sup> In a sense, then, the film does serve to “clip [Carmelita’s] claws.” She has been repeatedly humiliated and her marriage is precisely as unstable as it was at the end of the previous film. To measure this remarriage comedy in light of those of the canonical Anglo-Saxon variety is to reflect on the fact that the latter invariably end with a

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<sup>384</sup> Three years after the “Hollywood’s Battling Couple” feature, *Look* ran a photo essay covering a party Vélez threw to celebrate the end of the *Mexican Spitfire* filming. One of the largest photos was a still from this food-fight scene. Vélez is sitting on the floor in her short pinafore, legs not together, knees exposed, cake on her face, sticking out her tongue. It is not a photo that a vigilant studio would generally want to have featured in a high-profile magazine, not a photo of one of its valued stars, at any rate. See “The Best Party Beverly Hills Had Seen in Months (even better than the one Lupe gave a year ago to celebrate her divorce),” *Look*, Jan 2 1940, 34-5. In *Cinema Reporter*’s coverage of the filming of the scene, note is made of the several costume changes and face washings undergone by Linda Hayes, in order that she maintain her appearance. The article mentions no such concern for Vélez’s appearance. “¡Si Lupe Vélez fuese al frente, no podrían los soldados pelear!” *Cinema Reporter*, 12 January 1940, p.3.

closing shot of the happy, reconciled couple. *The Mexican Spitfire* ends with Epping's caked face.



Figure 33: The Mexican Spitfire's Food Fight<sup>385</sup>

### Lord Epping Provides an Out: The Re-Contract Genre

As the series goes forward, the advertising agency, and the imperative to secure The Contract, increasingly dominates as the central concern of series. L.B. Renner is gone and the company now reads as Lindsay's own (though his apparent economic status remains



I lifted this photo of the food fight from *Look Magazine*'s coverage of a Vélez party ("Lupe Vélez Gives a Party and Does a Barefoot Dance," *Look*, Jan 2, 1940, 34-36). The coverage of Vélez in this GNP-era article is actually quite favorable (*Look* makes clear that the cake shot "is from the movie she just completed"). But the lifted-skirts theme created by this two-page spread is unmistakable, and is especially provocative as combined with the twice-mentioned barefoot reference... making, too, the association of film to life. (The third photo is a half-page show from the photo-essay's third page.)

the same).<sup>386</sup> With subsequent films, each one of the primary characters—Matt, Della, Lord Epping—get subsumed into the force created by the momentum of the ad agency: Uncle Matthew is naturalized as an agency colleague, Della consistently takes the role of entertaining clients, Lord Epping becomes an agency partner. Carmelita, who has not participated in the business since the first film, is swept to the margins.

Abril Trigo, in her publication, *What Do You Mean by Cultural Globalization?* (2004), theorizes a variation on Fernando Ortiz's economic model of transculturation that describes a set of *simultaneous* centrifugal and centripetal forces of transnational capital whereby those who are not embraced by (or subsumed into) its center are doomed to suffer marginalization. The Lindsay marriage is valued purely on its function as a help or a hindrance to business. The series, originally named for Carmelita/Vélez, works narratively in favor of the interest of the business enterprise that comes to dominate the motivations of every other character while it sweeps Carmelita aside, staging her unacceptability.

Ramírez Berg has argued that, ideologically, “the films are sly critiques of patriarchal capitalism’s dehumanizing focus on business, money and profits at the expense of human relationships” (94). This perspective informs one available reading of the films, which are, perhaps strategically, ideologically incoherent enough to invite conflicted reception. I will suggest, though, that Ramírez Berg’s reading is against the grain of the series’ prevailing structure. The primary example cited in support of his

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<sup>386</sup> Advertising, as a capitalist enterprise and tool, came into major significance in the 1920s. It became a cinema/TV trope in the 50s, 60s, and beyond, with admen positioned as the quintessential company man, the “creative” producer whose creative energy is compromised and usurped by the interests of capital, the pattern being that pressures and rewards of the system are both high and that they, in turn, exact a high personal price. Edging toward the portrayal of the adman dynamic, the series had a potential to be somewhat ahead of its time. Unfortunately, it fails to purposefully exploit the adman tension it introduces.

position, which invokes the fourth film in the series, deserves examination. Ramírez Berg writes:

*Mexican Spitfire's Baby* (1942), for example, opens with an argument between Carmelita and Dennis at a nightclub. She is angry because they are supposed to be celebrating their first wedding anniversary, but Dennis keeps dancing with another woman. He explains that he is trying to get an important business contract with the woman's father, which would amount to \$50,000 per year. Typically, his Aunt Della supports his behavior. Finally Carmelita explodes:

Ha! This is a fine wedding anniversary. *Me sacas a pasear... no bailas connigo, nomas bailando con esa mujer [con] cara de palo. Y despues de eso no mas habla de* “business, business, business, business.” [You invite me out... you don't dance with me, just with that wooden-faced woman. And after that you only talk about “business, business, business, business.”] Why don't you dance with me? Why do you have to dance with somebody else?

The scene is one that rewards the Spanish-speaking audience with a pleasurable moment of righteous dialogue that goes un-translated in the text. However, in viewing the scene—wherein Vélez's anger actually explodes *before* Dennis's explanation—I find its enunciation much less ideologically progressive, and thus less gratifying, than does Ramírez Berg.

The film opens on a shot of a large anniversary cake, which is picked up by a waiter and delivered to the table as the house band announces the Lindsay anniversary. As the waiter approaches the table, we get our first image of Carmelita, who looks bored and disgusted, only flashing a fake smile as the waiter sets down the cake. She “explodes” (with the lines reading above) just as the waiter leaves. The spectator has been given no information at all at this point with which s/he might evaluate Carmelita's situation. Moreover, as Carmelita yells at her husband, the camera isolates her by showing Matt and then Della, both looking embarrassed, and then scans the room to show Carmelita's outburst having drawn the attention of the entire establishment. Only then does Dennis offer his justification: “I told you, I had to dance with Marjorie *White...*” (emphasis mine). It is Uncle Matt, Carmelita's only consistent ally, who interjects the “\$50,000 a

year” sum, thus weighing in, along with Della, to support Dennis’s explanation about the importance of The Contract. Because we have been given no indication as to how much time Dennis danced with Ms. White (who is not shown), we have no basis to evaluate, trust, or sympathize with Carmelita’s position. Dennis promises not to mention business again. When he reverts, Carmelita pushes his face in the cake and announces she is getting a divorce. The scene is over, divorce in play, not four minutes into the movie.

The film cuts to the breakfast table the following morning where the inflammatory argument continues. Quite funnily (if it did not serve to “include [Carmelita] out”), when Dennis tells Carmelita, “marriage is a sacred contract,” Carmelita explodes anew: “there you go again, contract, contract, contract.” Carmelita’s failure to understand Dennis’s use of the phrase “marriage contract” becomes the point at which Dennis leaves the breakfast table in exasperation. Carmelita’s inability to see the “marriage *contract*”—a legal agreement that places marriage in the realm of commodity finance—makes their communication impossible. Meanwhile, Uncle Matt has joined the two at the breakfast table. Carmelita turns to Matt, saying, inexplicably (and thus undermining the significance of the “Contract” issue): “did you see what he did? *He hit me.*” Carmelita is now made out to be a hysterical liar in addition to being jealous, short tempered, too loud... too aggressive. While a sympathetic viewer might wish to read Carmelita as admirably prepared to “fight” for her marriage—for a companionate role in her husband’s life that is not subjugated beneath his work—the film constructs her as simply ready for a fight.<sup>387</sup> What the film avoids with all this conflict, of course, is the possibility of representing any affection at all between an Anglo husband and a Mexican wife.

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<sup>387</sup> Incidentally, this whole argument scenario is advanced in order that Uncle Matt can hatch the idea of bringing the two together... with a baby. Rather than suggesting the two might conceive a baby, however,

Ramírez Berg is right to point out that the conflict at the root of the series—the marriage contract versus The Contract—offers the opportunity to locate a position of resistance to the dehumanizing effect of relentless pursuit of capital. Yet, with each film, the resistant spectator position, the pro-marriage position, is less available. Each film reiterates the impossibility of transnational partnership (making them, in essence, anti-good neighbor films). It is with this film, *The Mexican Spitfire's Baby*, that Uncle Matt, previously readable as retired from an unspecified profession, has joined Dennis at the ad agency. I would argue that this change marks the point at which the balance maintaining the series' central conflict becomes untenable. The series' ideological position is no longer ambiguous; it crystallizes against Carmelita to uphold the supremacy of “business, business, business.” It asks Carmelita to “assimilate” by wholly accepting the business that her marriage is structured to uphold and yet it refuses her a viable position within that structure.

The problem becomes especially glaring in the sixth *Spitfire* film (the second of three produced in 1942), *Mexican Spitfire Sees a Ghost*. Vélez's Carmelita does not appear on screen until after a prolonged, narratively excessive set of gags involving Lord Epping, now an agency partner, preparing for a hunting trip just as the Fitzbaddens (Minna Gombell and Donald MacBride), a brother and sister “with more dollars than sense” are coming to visit him. When the scene finally shifts to the Lindsay household, Dennis, Matt and Della are pondering how, without Epping, they might convince the Fitzbaddens to provide the agency with “a little working capital.” When Dennis asks of Carmelita’s whereabouts, Della, with typical disdain, reports Carmelita and Uncle Matt

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the plot device comes in the form of a war orphan (Matt, through Lord Epping, secures an orphan from “the last war,” however, a French “girl,” approximately 28 years old, thereby setting up a misunderstanding that inevitably leads to jealousy and suspicion).

had been on the roof “helping the painters.” Carmelita then enters, over eight minutes into the film, swinging through the window on a boatswain to land on the floor. Dennis begins to scold Carmelita, “don’t you think you’re a little too...?” when Della interrupts: “‘unladylike’ is the word.” (Della’s larger point, of course, is that class mixing, helping the help, is unladylike. Her disdain is directed at both Matt and Carmelita.) Dennis agrees: “As we become older we must become a little more... *dignified*.” Carmelita exits saying she’s going to be young all her life, precisely so that she does not end up like Della, and makes an appeal to Uncle Matt for support: “isn’t that right Uncle Matt?” “You bet your life,” Matt mumbles, nervously, under Della’s eye.

Here, then, is another example of a moment of pleasure for the viewer wishing to “side” with Vélez against Della. The stakes are high as this instance marks the rare moment that the films’ ever-implicit class conflict is *specifically* invoked. But the position is entirely unrewarded within the film. The viewer is “included out,” just as Vélez is. For, with Carmelita having left the room, Della, ostensibly concerned about the impression the family (business) might leave on the wealthy Fitzbaddens, suggests leaving Carmelita and Matt behind—the two being too vulgar and undignified to meet the class requirements of the circumstances—so that she and Dennis can appropriately woo their prospective investors (at Epping’s vacation cottage, though Epping supposedly will not be joining them there). As the scene continues, Della exits and Dennis (ignoring Della’s suggestion to exclude Matt as well) confides to Matt that he thinks Della is right about leaving Carmelita behind: “but what am I going to tell Carmelita?” Matt, protecting Dennis, then *volunteers* to sit out the gathering to take Carmelita to a boxing match.

“She’ll understand,” he says, marking a key moment in which Matt sides against Carmelita’s acceptability.

Della is no longer mocked for her uptight, closed-minded, classist bias. The film sides with Della—setting up a situation that justifies Della’s perspective as reasonable—to establish a plot in which Carmelita poses as the maid (underclass) in Lord Epping’s cottage. This whole exclusion scenario structures Carmelita as Matt’s partner once he decides the two should masquerade as butler and maid (after Della, reversing her position that excluded her husband, calls him up to the cottage after all). The narrative, then, holds the promise of a little class sabotage (whereby it might prove its mettle as a true screwball comedy<sup>388</sup>), a promise on which it never even begins to deliver. Moreover, there is scarcely a moment in the film that acknowledges the Lindsays’ marriage. Carmelita is, in effect, the maid. Finally, *Sees a Ghost* is the turning point upon which the series is no longer based on the concept of remarriage. Carmelita never threatens to leave Dennis; she has lost even that leverage. Her sympathetic viewers, then, can no longer hold out the melancholy hope that Carmelita/Vélez finally will summon up the determination to leave the marriage/family/series that has been treating her so poorly.

The antics for which the series has become known—Errol’s Uncle Matt posing as Errol’s Lord Epping, thus making for two Lord Eppings that contradict each others’ actions—have been gradually adjusted since *The Mexican Spitfire* in one crucial if subtle way: Della is still made to look silly, but not for her nativistic attitudes or her snobbery. In these later films, Della is mocked by way of only one repeated joke; she thinks she has

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<sup>388</sup> Winokur’s discussion of the screwball comedy genre, in relation to marriage (the “Thin Man” films), informs this discussion. Winokur writes: “... because screwball comedies attempt different strategies to force disparate classes and societies into each others’ company, they tend to be thematically about a heterogeneous culture trying to become homogeneous but physically and visually about a homogeneous culture trying to appear heterogeneous” (1996, 232; emphasis added).

caught her husband posing as Lord Epping but mistakes the real Epping for her disguised husband. The mistaken-identity humor creates personal awkwardness and tedious confusion but is emptied of its classist implications.

Consistent with the supremacy of capital in the Spitfire films, the two sets of Others in the series represent two economic poles: the lower-born immigrant, Carmelita, and the high-born class, represented conveniently as British and by way of the ridiculous Lord Epping. Lord Epping personifies The Contract, the unholy grail of which each film is in pursuit. While the films riff on Epping as a kind of old-world “barbarian,” they uphold his monied agency. So while corporate capital is made ridiculous in the series, it is benignly ridiculous—drunk, irrational, senile, immature, subject to manipulation and the whims of happenstance. It is silly but it is not cruel (unlike the films themselves) and, most significantly, its supremacy to the logic of the film is never challenged. The antics of Carmelita and Uncle Matt amount to amusing work-arounds of certain minor power dynamics while, ultimately, the dynamics of class difference are left wholly intact.<sup>389</sup> Rather than subverting the normative values governing advertising, our comic duo stays busy covering up or reversing the damage of their own blunders, which are approximately as irrational or immature than those of Epping. What is more, by (illogically) bringing Epping into the ad agency as some kind of partner, the series goes out of its way to increase his degree of inclusion in the dynamics of the plot while (even

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<sup>389</sup> The truest moment of comedy happens when the film veers into surrealism with Vélez and Errol making cat sounds in an attempt to lure a dog (who has made off with Matt’s Epping hairpiece) from under the couch. After Carmelita does an imitation of “a Mexican wildcat,” (a self-reflexive nod to a phrase that has been in circulation now for at least eleven years), the two spend an extended period of time on all fours meowing and pretending to be cats. The scene is played for hyperbolic silliness and the delight the two take in its performance is infectious.

more illogically) his capital does nothing to liberate the Lindseys from their tedious working class predicament. That is, the Lindseys are still not in a position to, for example, take a vacation that does not revolve around the signing of The Contract. Thus the series avoids the opportunity to engage in the kind of marital tensions that form the basis of, for example, the Cavell remarriage films. Instead, as I have argued, it moves towards sidelining the Lindsey marriage altogether.

With Lord Epping increasingly governing plot dynamics, the central conceit is one where an “American” actor (Australian, originally) simultaneously plays a down-to-earth Yankee and a supercilious Brit. Performative nationalist masquerade trumps transculturation as the series’ sustaining momentum. This shift in thematic center is materially documented by the fact that—as RKO Production Code records and trade advertisements both reveal—ever since *The Mexican Spitfire Out West* (the third film), the series was in production with “Lord Epping… (Out West, etc)” as working titles.<sup>390</sup> It is likely that the “Mexican Spitfire” titles remained intact as a GNP gesture. In the Ortizian sense, if we were to see Carmelita/Vélez as the “home”—the origination and embodied identity at the center of the series—nothing represents the centrifugal force of the series’s economics as obviously and tangibly as does this proposed name change.

### “Don’t you want to be a ‘Good Neighbor?’”

~ Uncle Matt Lindsay, speaking to his wife, Della (*Mexican Spitfire’s Elephant*, 1942)

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<sup>390</sup> *Mexican Spitfire’s Baby* (which couldn’t really be called “Lord Epping’s Baby,” was in progress with the title, “Lord Epping Sees a Ghost.” Herrick Archive, AMPAS. PCA Files, *The Mexican Spitfire’s Baby* file. May 20 1941. Even earlier, in an RKO productions advertisement (*Cinema Reporter*, August, 1940. Under the headline, “The Show Must Go On”), RKO includes photos of twenty-three of its important stars, including Vélez and Errol, and features several films currently in production, including “*Lord Epping Out West*.” After the final film, plans were advanced to continue production as a *Lord Epping* series. *Variety* (July 15, 1943) reports that the duo will not resume but that “Errol as Lord Epping will continue, according to an announcement by RKO.” Likely Vélez suicide likely rendered those plans untenable.

Just as the first *Spitfire* films have been discussed in light of the GNP's establishment, the latter films should be viewed in light of the policy's Hollywood consolidation. As mentioned previously, GNP practices negotiated two complex and conflicting mandates: the effort to attune U.S. sensibilities towards Latin American culture and the necessity to avoid inter-American offense and thus maximize market potential. Responding to the second mandate, two years into Hollywood's official participation in the GNP, the Hays Office announced the appointment of Addison Durland, a Latin American specialist, to Joseph Breen's Production Code team to, as *Film Daily* bluntly framed it, "eye scripts for Latin American boners."<sup>391</sup> The Durland appointment was greeted with optimism in the Mexican American community, as reflected in *La Opinión*, although, not unpredictably, Durland did not bring to an end the errors, anachronisms, or humiliations historically typical of Hollywood's representation of Latin America and Latin Americans.<sup>392</sup> As Brian O'Neil writes in his study of Durland's tenure, Durland was a "pragmatist" who understood the limits of his position (2001, 376).<sup>393</sup> Yet O'Neil, remains at rather a loss to explain Durland's response to films that featured high profile Latin American stars, wherewith, writes O'Neil, Durland's scrutiny of Latin American representation tended to wane:

[p]erhaps he strategized, *not without reason*, that the use of Latin players would provide a buffer against criticism. If Latin American officials took offense at the representation in these pictures, [Durland's] reasoning may have gone, they would direct their resentment towards the stars rather than the studios (376, emphasis added).

Not without reason, indeed. We know that Vélez, for one, consistently received the brunt of the criticism for offenses perpetrated in her films, effectively shielding the culpability

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<sup>391</sup> "Durland Will Eye Scripts for Latin-American Boners." *Film Daily*, Mar 27, 1941 (quoted in O'Neil, 2001, 359).

<sup>392</sup> Angel Villatoro, "Notas del cine mexicano," *La Opinión*, June 2, 1941, 4.

<sup>393</sup> Durland's pragmatism meant that he privileged the mitigation of offense to foreign markets, as measured by the standards of the elite over any concern with U.S. Latinos (376).

of RKO and/or the larger industry, guilty as they were of either complacency or disingenuousness. O’Neil continues:

Whatever his motivations, Durland consistently made little or no censorial interventions in films with major Latin performers such as Lupe Vélez, Carmen Miranda, and Cesar Romero. He often quickly determined that they would “present no problem from the Latin American point of view” (376).

O’Neil pointedly cites the Spitfire films as exemplary of Durland’s having fallen asleep at the wheel, writing: “[g]iven that Mexican officials had regularly derided Lupe Vélez’s screen portrayals, Durland’s lack of critical intercession concerning her films is bewildering” (376). Well, yes... and no. Having considered the films’ instabilities, ambiguities and frequent moments of pleasure (Vélez’s imitations of Matt’s imitations of Epping, for example), we can concede that what O’Neil writes of as the “customary ‘Hollywood Latin’ (the dumb emotional comic),” signifies differently in a high-comedy context than it might in a drama with a Latino character inserted for “comic relief” (375, parenthetical in the original). Representational lapses, as well as triumphs, are complicated—sometimes pleasurable sometimes disturbingly—by the topsy-turvy world of comedy.

This argument is not to deny O’Neil’s justification in interrogating Durland’s priorities. The Spitfire series—as just about every critic, then and now, agrees—degenerated significantly in the later years, the very years of Durland’s watch.<sup>394</sup> What I am arguing is that it is not “[Vélez’s] trademark characteristics: lots of eye-rolling, body movement, double entendres, frantic bursts of Spanish dialogue, and fractured English marked by malapropisms—the types of behavior Durland routinely tried to screen out

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<sup>394</sup> As David Zinman writes, the degeneration of series programmers was fairly typical. Part of their appeal, to the studios, was in their inexpensive production. The audience enjoyed the familiarity of the characters and tropes they knew to expect. Thus, it was typical for the studios to let a winning formula repeat, playing itself out for as long as (or slightly longer than) it remained viable (Zinman, 1973, 10).

from Hollywood's Latin characterizations" (O'Neil, 377), that account for the series' egregious offenses. The problems are not with Vélez's "characteristics" but with the films' plots, scripts and ideological motivations. The films are designed to put Vélez/Carmelita in her place, so to speak, and Vélez was increasingly unable to transcend that place. Durland's mandate—to relieve the scripts of specifically offensive one-liners and negotiate national references—gave him, and the Code office in general, little influence over these broader operations of representation. The limit of Durland's reach is reflective of the contradictions Hollywood institutionalized with its enactment of the GNP. In sum, the *Spitfire* series was probably—initially—a sincere, if consistently misguided, GNP effort, such as existed under the terms of the policy. The will to uphold any level of integrity within the series, however, was as malnourished as the series' budget and as short-lived as the average *Spitfire* film's turn around time.

Durland's assessment of GNP-era cinematic practices and problematics were bound to an assessment consistent with that of the elite classes that controlled Latin American censor boards. That is to say, Durland's evaluation was bound to, as O'Neil writes, "the image that Latin American elites like to convey of the region: light skinned, modern, and civilized" (361). As we know from the history of Vélez's reception in the elite Mexican American community (also reflected in the histories of Lupita Tovar and Dolores del Rio), the elite classes were firmly ambivalent towards any representation of a Mexican immigrant woman marrying an Anglo man. Hollywood's U.S. centrism may have been responsible for RKO's having missed the fact that the Lindsey marriage in *The Girl From Mexico* would never, to the judgment of the culturally protective elite, make for a "Good Neighborly" representation. As a Good Neighbor series, then, the Spitfires were doomed

from the start. At the same time, though, and for the same reason (the discrepancy between elite reception and popular reception) the Durland desk likely missed the fact that popular Mexican reception of the Spitfire series—to the extent that it is measurable by way of periodicals such as *Cinema Reporter* or *Filmographico*, the popular Mexican fan magazines of the day—tracked very closely to the reception recorded in the United States. In Mexico, the first three Spitfire films—the three following the unscreened *The Girl From Mexico*, which were often funny (despite their numerous faults) and which gave Vélez some room to roam comedically—were quite well received. Not surprisingly, though, esteem for the films steeply declined as scripts degenerated, plots were repeated, and Vélez was increasingly marginalized.

By early 1943, when earnest discussion of a second Mexican production featuring Vélez began appearing in the news, Mexican print discourse had long since ceased devoting column space to the Spitfires, save for the rote production notice. In April of 1943, *Hoy* reported that various unspecified productions posed the possibility of Vélez's return to Mexican production. The writer, Crispin, in his column, “Hollywood Comentarios Semanales [Weekly Commentary]” speculates that *norteamericano* producers might, after seeing Vélez on the screen of her own country, realize how they had wasted the talent they had on their hands. Crispin hoped Hollywood would regret using Vélez as the “absurd, exaggerated type...”:

... the Mexican rocket [cohete mexicano], with rude remarks and ridiculous scenarios... Lupe Vélez has always been, to our judgment, a great dramatic artist; it was on this basis that her talents should have been exploited.”<sup>395</sup>

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<sup>395</sup> Crispin, “Hollywood Comentarios Semanales.” *Hoy*, April 24, 1943.

As RKO squandered their star's potential (and if Mexico's upcoming production fell short of confirming Vélez as a great dramatic artist) at least Vélez's studio agreed to loan their star to Columbia for the production of two refreshing GNP wartime comedies.

### **Lupe Vélez and the The Performance of Transculturation**

Like the *Spitfire* films, the Columbia features, *Honolulu Lu* (1941) and *Redhead From Manhattan* (1943), self-consciously reference Vélez's off-screen persona and thus appear tailor made for their star. Unlike the *Spitfires*, though, Vélez's Columbia characters are roundly sympathetic and are placed squarely the center of their narratives. Vélez's abilities as actress, comedienne and performer are in full display. Both the Columbia films involve the dual-role ploy somewhat akin to that of the *Spitfire* series. In these, however, it is Vélez who is double-featured. *Honolulu Lu* casts Vélez (Consuelo Maria Cordoba / Lu) as a faux-elite, (ex)con-artist reformed into a popular cabaret singer who makes a hit with the (Pearl Harbor) sailors but must negotiate two celebrated identities. The film's release date, December 11, 1941, probably ranks with the worst inadvertent timings in all of Hollywood history. As the U.S. responded to the attack on Pearl Harbor, the film was quietly exhibited on schedule but, understandably, without advertisement. A rare good role for Vélez—one wherein a handful of Vélez's famed off-screen imitations show up as Lu's stage performances—slipped into near oblivion.<sup>396</sup>

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<sup>396</sup>Vélez imitations include Dietrich, Gloria Swanson, and Katherine Hepburn, along with a pretty “funny” Hitler, who makes German language sounding nonsensical exclamations punctuated with “Mussolini.” I don’t mean to overstate the film’s merits by ignoring its problems. For example, the film goes out of its way to flatter the U.S. soldier figures while avoiding romantic closure. The film has Lu (Vélez) fall quite openly for Skelly. In one of the few scenes where Lu and Skelly are alone, Lu eagerly declares her love for Skelly but he is cheerfully unresponsive. The scene’s scenario reads as quite unusual next to the typical white patriotic romances that take place as war era films get underway. The film clearly prioritizes sailor camaraderie above any romancing, thus avoiding “mixed” romance. The film’s ending has everyone crazy about Lu, who has been crowned “Honolulu Queen,” but no romantic partner.

Columbia Pictures was pleased with Vélez's work on *Lu*, crippled box-office notwithstanding, and made plans for a second Vélez vehicle, *Redhead from Manhattan* (1943).<sup>397</sup> *Redhead* is particularly interesting in its double feature of Vélez: she plays a Carmelita Fuentes-type immigrant role, as Rita Manners, as well as a “refined” role, as Rita’s stage performer cousin, Maria, who uses the stage name, Elaine. The latter character affords Vélez a persona rarely available to her on the U.S. screen. Elaine’s aristocratic accent, sophisticated demeanor and circumspect soft spokenness (one might say, her Dolores del Rio-ness) provides a mechanism that, in effect if not intent, points up and destabilizes the constructedness of the two distinct representations. For a Vélez-devoted fan, the humor of the film (and its considerable surrealism) is grounded in this polarity. José María Santos’s favorable review of *Redhead from Manhattan* (*Torbellino Femenino*) in San Antonio’s *La Prensa* made the same observation: “The triple persona offers Lupe the opportunity to show us, unequivocally, her talents and to demonstrate that, when necessary, she knows how to be, on stage and on screen, temperate [*sobria*], distinguished, serene and always artistic.”<sup>398</sup>

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PCAfiles of both Columbia films specify a need for regional vagueness, specifically so that no Latin American country will find reason to take offense. I disagree slightly with O’Neil’s account of the film as an example of Durland’s dismissal of the California Latino audience. Leo Carrillo’s character, a con man visiting Hawaii, *disingenuously* identifies himself as being from California and having generations of Spanish roots in the region (an obvious play on Carrillo’s real persona). To my reading both characters are presented as “nationless,” though a Spaniard identity is implied. The film’s efforts as a “Good Neighbor” gesture, which are clear, rely on the understanding of Lupe Vélez’s *actual* nationality and identity. I agree, though, with O’Neil’s reading of the PCA file, which states: “Call [Consuelo Cordoba and Don Estaban Córdoba] natives of California, of Spanish extraction—so they show no offense to Latin Americans.” Herrick Archive, AMPAS. PCA files, *Honolulu Lu* file. Durland to Cohn, Sep 18, 1941.

O’Neil’s larger point, though—that Durland’s office fretted over export markets but was unconcerned with reception within the U.S. Latino population—is right. Furthermore, the studios were certainly not worried about the response from the native Hawaiian demographic. Nina Campana, a Mexican-descent Los Angelina, plays Aloha, Vélez’s native Hawaiian self-styled manager. The relationship between the two female characters is respectful and friendly in the film, but Aloha’s characterization of is nonetheless denigrating and entirely inauthentic.

<sup>397</sup> Edwin Schallert, “Drama,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 10, 1942, 8.

<sup>398</sup> María Santos “La Semana en Hollywood,” *La Prensa*, Jul 25, 1943, 8. Regarding the “*triple* persona” referred to in the review, like in *Honolulu Lu*, there are some cringe moments in this film. In order to sneak

*Redhead*'s story revolves around Rita filling in for Elaine's absence from the stage, the absence necessitated by Elaine's pregnancy, which she has to keep secret from the show's producers (Elaine is married... to an officer of military intelligence, but/and the producer insists on no married women in his productions). The identity cover works to hide Rita from the police; Rita managed to get in to a mishap that had her labeled as a "fifth communist" (one of my favorite of her purposeful malapropisms).

Rita's first performance of Elaine's material comes with a number titled, "I Can't Make Up My Mind." The song works along the lines of *High Flyers'* "I Always Get My Man," in that Vélez sings of persona and identity, performance and decision. She begins by musing on what kind of woman to be, what form of femininity to affect (which self-reflexively comments on the contrast between Rita and Elaine) and proceeds to consider what kind of Latina to dance (which comments self-reflexively on the GNP). The performance is peppered with, as María Santas wrote, Vélez's "deliciosas imitaciones." I offer some of the lyrics along with a sense of the impersonations that come with the song:

should I be cold as ice...  
or as hot as a pair of dice?  
I'm the undecided kind...  
I can't make up my mind.

As far as my language goes...  
should I be speak with a "dis" or "dos"?  
or should I be *so refined*...  
I can't make up my mind.  
...  
should I be on the square...  
or kind to some millionaire?

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Rita out of Elaine's dressing room, Vélez dons blackface make-up and performs a "southern accent" complete with "yowsa"s and exaggerated "y'all"s. When she meets an African American messenger at the door (uncredited), his rather stereotypical character is fooled by the disguise and takes a liking to Rita. This moment is somewhat redeemed when, closing the door, he says, almost to the camera, "I don't think she's from Harlem!" It is a nice moment in that the humor is based on the messenger as having *not* been entirely fooled by the disguise. Rita is not impersonating a specific black maid but is performing a black stereotype. Elaine does have an African American dresser in the film, Polly (Lillian Tarbo). In fact the two have a warm and respectfull relationship and the dresser, though she plays a minor role, is not reduced to a stereotype. All this to say that the film's handling of race is mixed.

I'm just a helpless fuff who can't make up her mind.

...

Carmen Miranda she...  
might be just the right type for me...

[imitating Miranda]

"ah I like you vety vety much..."

you make me 'chc chc chc' all over... yes you do... ha...de chc chc."

Perhaps I do just like that Latin American dame.

She of the Konga fame

that madame la.... what's her name? Oh.

[konga dance]

Would people skip romance  
to see Carmen Amaya dance?

[flamenco dance]

"vamana niña"

should I do my ballet...  
the Carmen Miranda way  
the Konga dance perhaps  
or should I do my taps  
I'm just a helpless fuff  
Who can't make up her mind.

By the end of the song, Vélez is proceeding, rapid fire, through versions of dancing *latinidad* that bring her to the point where she performs (what I choose to take as) a self-referencial exhaustion.<sup>399</sup>

In Columbia's two films, Vélez plays (in effect) four down-to-earth, generous performers who are effective and well received in contrasting entertainment settings. As both films set Vélez in contrasting performance venues (*Redhead*'s Rita triumphs in a U.S. "cantina" before meeting her cousin on Broadway), they both make a point of her stage shows pleasing both high-brow and low-brow audiences. The films become

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<sup>399</sup> Carmen Amaya was a Spanish Flamenco dancer of Romani origins. The Flamenco dancing in the film is quite convincing; judging from the camerawork, however, it appears a double was used for the footwork close-up.

particularly gratifying to the Vélez fan in that they draw on a very real aspect of Vélez's off-screen history: her border-crossing performative charisma.<sup>400</sup>

The Columbia films unequivocally settle the question as to whether or not Vélez was deployed as a good neighbor figure. The final *Redhead* stage show has Vélez, in skirted military togs, leading what has to be one of the most united-front, white-house-in-the-backdrop, morale boosting, why-we-fight, "Good neighbor" musical extravaganzas of patriotism ever produced. This is no Busby Berkeley number; *Redhead* is a low-budget, black and white programmer. Nevertheless, in spirit if not in material production, this is a no-holds-barred, chorus line finale of a wartime ending... to Vélez's last U.S. picture.

The film does not initially reveal which Vélez it is, Rita or Elaine, performing the final number. In anticipation of the evening, Rita tells the director (and by implication the audience) to *guess*. There's a way, then, that the viewer is encouraged to see the performer as Vélez "herself" and, at the same time, she is Rita and Maria/Elaine embodied as one. Half way through the number the film cuts to side stage and we see Elaine, on the arm of her husband, celebrating Rita's triumph. The fact remains, though: it is by way of her virtuosic *merging* of two performative personae that Vélez become a transcultural soldier in the war effort... and in the *fight*—perhaps her own fight—for "hemispheric solidarity."

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<sup>400</sup> There is more work to be done on GNP-related film scenarios outside of the canonical musical comedies. I have found no sustained scholarly account of, for example, Columbia Pictures' work in the GNP context.



**Figure 34: A final "Good Neighborly" salute**

Let's fall in line and do our part  
for every freedom loving heart  
is on the march... to victory

let give our all and not despair  
let's help our comrades over their  
across the sea... to victory

We've got a job to do  
in the factory, on the farm  
we've got a job to do... let's do it!  
we need Tom and Jim and Bob to do  
all the labor - hi ya Neighbor  
we can do it... there's nothing to it

Let's fall in line - all of the nations answer to freedom's call  
and we'll win the fight for what we know is right  
so march on... to victory.

### **En Mexico de afuera: “Lupe is ever Lupe”**

Unlike *La Prensa*, Los Angeles's *La Opinión* missed *Redhead in Manhattan*. The paper, in fact, had ignored most every film Vélez made subsequent to *La Zandunga* (a list that includes seven *Spitfire* films, *Honolulu Lu*, *Redhead*, *Playmates*, *Ladies Day* (RKO, 1943) and *Six Lessons from Madame La Zonga* (Universal, 1941)). Vélez's films were not screening in theaters serving the community and, what is more, the Los Angeles

theaters in which they did screen were not advertising their Vélez vehicles in *La Opinión*.<sup>401</sup> The reasons behind this development are likely multiple. During the war years, *La Opinión* carried less coverage of entertainment in general and of Hollywood cinema in particular. Mexican cinema was becoming more prolific, increasing in production quality, and thus accounting for a larger percentage of local screenings. Along with the shift privileging Mexican films and stars came a privileging of male over female actors celebrated in the films and in the paper. Figures such as Tito Guízar, Jorge Negrete, and, especially, Mario Moreno (Cantinflas), filled the print space that Vélez, Dolores del Rio, and Lupita Tovar had previously inhabited.<sup>402</sup> Nevertheless, the dearth of Vélez coverage, and even advertisements, is conspicuous. In the years between the success of *La Zandunga* (1938) and the announcement of *Naná* (1944), Vélez's second and last Mexican production, *La Opinión* published just one substantive feature on Vélez, an interview of sorts, which took place during the production of *The Girl From Mexico*.

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<sup>401</sup> I should add that Vélez performed with GNP tours in Baja California. I saw no coverage of the tours in *La Opinón*. *La Prensa* covered one show (April 5, 1942, 10) with a large photo and a caption reading: "... Lupe Vélez... recibió verdadera ovación el domingo pasado de parte de los soldados y marineros mexicanos de la guarnición de Ensenada, Baja California, cuando se presentó ante ellos durante el agasajo que les dedicó el grupo de estrellas de primera magnitud que con ese objeto fue al risueño puerto."

Vélez and Arturo de Córdoba were highlighted in the announcement of plans for a GNP celebration in Tijuana. "Se celebrará el 'Día de Defensa' en la Baja California," *La Prensa*, May 19, 1942, front page.

Finally, the "Mexican Spitfire" apparently climbed aboard her British fighting "namesake." Well, an autographed photo did. The fuselage of the British single-seat fighter aircraft, the "Spitfire," used by the Royal Air Force, was reportedly graced with an autographed photo that Lupe Vélez sent to honor the pilot on behalf of her fans in England. "Hollywood por Dentro" *La Prensa*, June 7, 1942, 11.

<sup>402</sup> Though del Rio had by no means disappeared from the paper, Vélez's case in these years was opposite that of Del Rio's; del Rio remained in the pages even as she disappeared from the screen. Vélez made programmer after programmer but had disappeared from the pages of *La Opinión*. Del Rio made no releases in 1939, 1941 and 1942. *Journey into Fear* (1943) was her last U.S. film before she relocated in Mexico. It came out the year following del Rio's physical move. For more about del Rio's reasoning in the switch, see Hershfield, 52-57. Hershfield does not mention *La Zandunga* as a factor in del Rio's decision, though I think it quite likely that *La Zandunga*'s (and Vélez's) success contributed del Rio's conviction that the transition could be received positively.

The contents of that item might well cause one to wonder if an offense was perceived, a negative impression that led to the imposition of a quiet blacklist of sorts.<sup>403</sup>

The article of June 1939 was ostensibly about Vélez's love life, though a broader, more ambiguous topic is offered in the title. "Lupe Vélez confesses before a writer," the headline reads, followed by a subheading indicating that Vélez's "confession" is of her disinclination to remarry.<sup>404</sup> As she readily admits, within the article, to having a current boyfriend, Vélez's foreclosure on marriage might be read as scandalous in light of traditional values in general and those of Mexican Catholicism in particular. What may have been more damaging, though, is an off-topic exchange that opens the article. As the piece reads, when the reporter/writer, Elena de la Torre, arrives on the RKO set to meet Vélez, she finds the actress in a conversation with a number of Mexican cinelandia personnel, most of which are involved with *The Girl From Mexico*. Vélez breaks off to meet with de la Torre, opening the conversation with reference to one among the group of colleagues:

Lupe spoke very excitedly.

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<sup>403</sup> Such a policy, if it occurred, would do well in explaining the fact that Lozano's sister paper out of San Antonio, Texas, *La Prensa*, devoted more space to Vélez in subsequent years than did *La Opinión*. *La Prensa* ran a column on the sports pages, "Esquina Neutral (Neutral Corner)," that frequently mentioned Vélez's attendance at the boxing matches on Friday nights at the Hollywood Legion. In fact, the distinction I am citing, whereby *La Prensa* cinema pages offered more coverage of Vélez than did those of *La Opinión*, may not hold true for the papers' respective sports pages. At the time of this writing, *La Opinión* is not word searchable, whereas *La Prensa* is. Thus I have been able to locate numerous references to Vélez in *La Prensa*'s sports pages whereas my *La Opinión* research was, for the most part, limited to *Cine* pages and to headlines on the front pages.

An article in *La Prensa* in June of 1941 (current with the production of *Playmates* and with John Chapman's article previously cited, tells of Vélez's loud championing of a Mexican boxer whom she believed to be wrongly denied victory in the ring. As the article reads, it is "well known" that the American Boxing league harbors a bias against Mexicans and "Negroes." When an unnamed "azteca" was discriminated against by the referee and denied a win, Vélez, it was reported, jumped into the ring and began to hit the referee with an umbrella. Al Jolson took the *inquieta* Lupe's side. The incident set off a fight that reportedly engulfed the entire establishment. Vélez appeared before a judge the next day and paid \$1000 fine. It is difficult to say exactly when the incident occurred; this article is recalling "an occasion" of the past. ("Muchos Han Sido Pugilistas y Despues Actores de Cine," *La Prensa*, June 29, 1941, p12).

<sup>404</sup> "Lupe Vélez se confiesa ante una escritora: ¿'Casarme otra vez?pregunta—ese ni pensarlo siquiera'," *La Opinión*, June 25, 1939, sec2p4.

—I can't explain why that woman comes close to me, says hello to me, talks very finely to me, if she knows I don't like her [...]. I've said this to her face, in a number of ways, and she just laughs and takes it as a joke...<sup>405</sup>

De la Torre claims initial confusion as to whom Vélez could be referring, until it becomes clear the offender is Dolores del Rio. De la Torre thus opens with this “strange case” whereby two Mexican actresses, both triumphant in Hollywood, who share the same physical aspects “de raza” (of race), are inexplicably not the best of friends. Instead the two “detest each other and live like a cat and a dog.” To continue the explanation, de la Torre defers to Vélez:

Lupe explains to us:

—To Dolores, I am ordinary in my words and ways; on the other hand, to me she is too ‘superfine’ [finustica]. It is clear! She and I will not resolve this. But let's leave this alone. It makes me sick...

Despite the unyielding nature of this explication, Vélez has apparently endeared herself to the reporter with her candid demeanor. The article quickly moves to counter what de la Torre charges to be the *Hollywood* press’s characterization of Vélez: a “savage tiger” [fiera tigresa] persona. The writer explains that Hollywood publicity paints every figure in a certain manner and that such strident initial characterization stubbornly persists, regardless of the truth. In Vélez’s case, the characterization is that of a “genuine beast, a species with a reptilian shell and a frightening sting.” De la Torre counters this characterization, however, with her own experience:

When I speak with her she has no shell, I’m certain. She is gentle, gracious, friendly, and she has, in her words and her manners, charms like those of a schoolgirl, both mischievous and kind.

The article, like so much of Vélez representation, eludes stability. On the one hand, by leading with Vélez’s condemnation of del Rio—easy as it is to read Vélez’s words as

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<sup>405</sup> “Lupe Hablaba excitadísima. —¡no me puedo explicar el por qué esa señora se acerca a mí y me saluda y me Habla muy fina, si sabe que no la saporto y que a me es muy antipática! Se lo he dicho en su cara en todos los tonos y ella se ríe y lo toma a broma...”

proof of her beastliness—the piece functions to condemn Vélez. Dolores del Rio appears the more civil and generous; del Rio's persistent advances towards Vélez are repeatedly rebuffed. On the other hand, for the sympathetic reader, del Rio comes off as false and phony. Vélez sees her compatriot—who is consistently held up by an elite faction of Mexican-America that has never afforded Vélez the benefit of the doubt—as looking down on her, treating her as common. Vélez has no use for del Rio's *finustica* (superfine, or falsely fine) pretensions. Vélez unsubtly alludes to a class distinction; she is offended by what she sees as patronizing condescension. Vélez thus refuses participation in a false friendship. de la Torre writes as though sympathetic with Vélez, though her editors—perhaps much of her readership as well—were likely less amenable to Vélez's candid condemnation of the revered del Rio.

The article is generous in length and moves on to cover considerable ground: Vélez's absence from Hollywood, her work in New York and London, and her busy schedule (which, Vélez says, has left her only two weeks vacation in seven years). When de la Torre asks Vélez about her most satisfying work, she answers without hesitation that *La Zandunga*, and working in her own country, has been her most pleasurable and gratifying experience: "I am Mexican to my roots. And these years away from my country have made me love it and miss it more each day."<sup>406</sup> Seemingly as evidence,

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<sup>406</sup> The article notes that Vélez rented the costume to RKO for the filming of *The Girl from Mexico*, for \$200 per day. The costume is only used in one very brief scene (a single shot, actually, part of a montage that shows Carmelita modeling for the perfume commercial in Romano's home). So, while the article might be read to imply Vélez turned a profit on the rental, she surely did not.

Absent from de la Torre's piece is any discussion of *The Girl From Mexico*. Though the interview took place during *The Girl's* production, it was published three weeks after the film's release date of June 2. There had been an announcement of the film, which included a picture of Vélez with the large-print caption "Vuelve" ("she returns") on the Sunday cinema page (section 2 page 6) of February 12, 1939. This, and a small photo/fashion piece that featured Vélez and two other stars wearing the hat styles of the day, were printed right after *La Zandunga* played (again) at Teatro Roosevelt (ad Feb 17, 1939, 4) and at Teatro Arrow (June 16, 1939, 4).

Vélez is then said to have shown the writer a Tehuantepec skirt and blouse, presumably one of the costumes from *La Zandunga*, which she bought for \$5000. With that, Mr. Kelly, Vélez's Chihuahua and "companion" ("my one and only love") is invoked as further evidence of Vélez's strident Mexican identification. With the reference to love, discussion then turns to talk of Vélez's current human male companion (who goes unnamed). Vélez admits she enjoys going on dates and being out about town.

—And marriage?

—Shut up, by God, that's crazy. Marriage never. Once is enough... too much!

—Poor Tarzan!

—Poor me, you should say!...

The article ends with a final provocative scenario. Vélez gets word from her assistant—word coming a bit late—that a call had come in, a dinner invitation, from her un-named frequent companion. Vélez tries to return her friend's call. But there is no answer. Apparently out of frustration, Vélez's treatment of her assistant, blaming the assistant for not telling her earlier about the call, is harsh. Vélez is quoted in a "spitfire-worthy" outburst: "What a beast you are, woman, what a beast, what a beast, Surely now I'll go without dinner!" Immediately upon quoting the supposed outburst, de la Torre then insists that the harsh treatment is an act. Vélez's true kinder, joking nature is "betrayed by her eyes, voice, her laugh, her picaresque gestures." The assistant, de la Torre says, doubtless sees the same Vélez the reporter sees, one putting on a performance. De la Torre "translates" the real message that Vélez's eyes and voice articulate:

—what matter, woman, what matter! Don't worry! I'll see him tomorrow!

And I say good-bye to Lupe thinking of the veil of bad temperament that has covered Lupe since her arrival en Hollywood. A Tiger? No... actually she's a domestic cat, with long fingernails.

With this, the *second* reference to Vélez's treatment in the (U.S.?) press, the piece concludes.

The article offers a riddle, answerable with a number of solutions, none of which are entirely satisfying. Either de la Torre is straining to give Vélez a positive spin despite the evidence that Vélez really is rather a beast, or the writer understands (or advantageously positions herself to “understand”) the “real” Vélez, just as do the others that know and love her (i.e. her assistant). de la Torre would seem to represent Vélez’s warmth, her picaresque sense of humor and her lack of elitist pretension. Perhaps de la Torre—inadvertently or not—wrote a poorly conceived article: the writer presents Vélez at her worst by way of a gossipy account when she might have avoided such an anecdotal, personal, provocative characterization. The decision to conclude the article with an account of such an awkward moment of frustration—one where the meaning of the incident turns entirely on (the author’s) personal perception—seems ill-advised.<sup>407</sup> For it is hard to imagine a set of implications more damaging than the suggestions that Vélez would 1) insult del Rio to her face, 2) turn around and insult del Rio to the reporter, and, 3) verbally castigate her Mexican assistant. (On all three counts, I have seen the like in no other press account, neither in Spanish nor English).

Vélez didn’t appear in a substantive article in *La Opinión* for almost five years. If any conclusion could be drawn from this last article, it is that Vélez appears to have been unwisely “honest”—too comfortable being herself (or, too willing to perform a version of “herself” that participated in the social construction of her public “honesty”) in the presence of the press. For whatever reason, Vélez neglected to practice vigilance against the worst impulses of the reporter instinct.

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<sup>407</sup> If I were to offer my own interpretation of the scenario, I would say that Vélez was self-consciously, and a little self-deprecatingly, playing on and with her own disappointment at having missed out on her dinner date. She is expressing her disappointment, even anger, but simultaneously making fun of herself for that disappointment. If that is what de la Torre was attempting to convey, the point did not come across very clearly.

Unguardedness had become Vélez's press persona. It was typical of Vélez, especially in the Mexican press, to be (or appear) remarkably candid. That characteristic was deployed as largely positive, in Mexico, in a way that stood in contrast to her framing in Los Angeles.<sup>408</sup> Vélez seemed to speak to the Mexican press as if to a trusted friend. Sometimes, again, she shared too much; such cases would give the reader a sense of intimacy or, at times, a sense of Vélez's lack of professional judgement. For example, she was known to be too demonstrative of her agency as an avid consumer (exhibit the \$5000 Tehuantepec dress mentioned in the de la Torre piece), leaving herself vulnerable to charges of avarice... and of narcissism. In a 1937 interview for *Cinema Reporter*, for example, which took place upon her return from England, Vélez explained her absence from Hollywood in a manner that the writer was quick to characterize as "pompous." The British, according to Vélez, being "deeper, more thoughtful, more artistic"—in a word, "better"—appreciated her more (and paid her better) than did the *norteamericanos*. Despite this *CR* reporter's critique regarding Vélez's inflated ego, she (the reporter) was eager to agree with—and, in fact, support—Vélez's case against Hollywood. (Both parties stopped short, it is coyly implied, of fully explicating that critique: the writer subtly indicates that there is more to say—or that there was more that was actually said—about *los americanos*).<sup>409</sup> Not that she affirmed every aspect of Vélez's life or behavior. The writer was openly shocked, for example, by the excessive drinking that occurred over the course of their time spent together. And she was unable to imagine the bill they

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<sup>408</sup> See, for examples: Juan Tomas, "Pin... Pan... Pun... Habla Lupe Vélez." *Cinema Reporter*, May 29, 1943, 8. Tomas was "thrown a little" [desconcertado un poco] at having been presented to Vélez in her dressing room before she had applied her make-up, but Vélez presented as "an explosion of frankness [franqueza] y de cordialidad." Thomas notes that Vélez doned lipstick for the accompanying photo but she didn't resume her make-up until the interview was complete.

<sup>409</sup> While there was no byline on this article, Vélez referred to the writer as "chica" in the interview.

must have accrued (“it’s like the theory of relativity”). This writer, like Vélez herself, did not shy from topics controversial, petty or crass. The result is that the interview comes off as particularly “authentic.” And it ends on a warm note:

Upon exchanging good-byes, Lupe said to me:  
—you can’t imagine my desires to go to Mexico. It doesn’t matter the price, what matters is the public.  
—when?  
—very soon you will see me.  
We will see if this comes to pass.

On balance, as presented in the Mexican press, Vélez’s frankness trumps her vanity and appears to elevate her esteem. The exchange just described is one segment within a larger article (titled “How Lives the Mexican Artist in Hollywood”) which features, along with Vélez, Lupita Tovar, Movita Casteñeda, and Dolores del Rio.<sup>410</sup> The Vélez segment is the most personal account by a wide margin, reading as though the writer had met a friend as much as conducted an interview. Once the other stars had been profiled, the piece returns to Vélez for the closing scenario. Apparently Vélez hosted a small party with the writer in attendance. Other guests at the event include Barry Norton, an Argentinian actor, and his friend, Mexican actor George Lewis.<sup>411</sup> The situation offers yet another candid moment: details were not given in the article, but apparently Norton uttered disparaging remarks regarding Mexican “customs” and “idiosyncrasies.” The insult incited Vélez to, in coldly formal Spanish, request that Norton have the kindness to leave. She extends the invitation (to leave) to Lewis as well. The two exit, “with lowered heads...”

Lupe returned to her jovial self, but in her eyes was still apparent her furious anger against someone that, in her own home, had the nerve to speak ill of Mexico.  
Lupe is ever Lupe.

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<sup>410</sup> The first and last line of the Dolores profile both read: “Dolores del Rio is sad.” The segment is mostly about how beautifully, tragically sad she looks (the first line of Morita’s profile, which follows del Rio’s, reads: “Morita is not sad”).

<sup>411</sup> Lewis had changed his name in the silent era and, as that era ended, was confined mostly to uncredited roles.

In Mexico, in contrast to the other two arenas of her reception, Vélez was given a measure of liberty, a benefit of the doubt, a space of individual acceptance. “Lupe is ever Lupe”; she remains “*nuestra* Lupe”... “our Lupe”... simultaneously “*mexicanisima*” and “just Lupe.”<sup>412</sup> Owing to her time on the British screen and on stages in London and South America, Vélez is advertised as “the glorious, the only Mexican star of world-wide fame,”<sup>413</sup> yet she remains “*la niña*, Lupe.” If the discourse comes off as deferential, deference is not unconditional by any means. Mexican discourse records a guardedly paternalistic perspective towards Vélez (a paternalism unquestionably grounded in a culture of patriarchal authority, but paternalism that was more generous, I would argue, than the patriarchal authority governing Vélez’s Hollywood representation).<sup>414</sup> Vélez is covered, in Mexican discourse, with a mixture of pride, encouragement, introspection... combined with an element of doubt: an avuncular tolerance that at times registers quiet embarrassment. But nationalist pride in Vélez is evident in no small measure, as is very genuine affection.

*Cinema Reporter* consistently followed Vélez’s U.S. releases, as well as possibilities of her further Mexican productions. After the cancellation of Vélez’s starring role in *La Panchita*,<sup>415</sup> for example, the *Cinema Reporter* reader would have known there

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<sup>412</sup> “Corte y Reporte por Dumbo,” *Cinema Reporter*, May 12, 1943. The caption, under large photo that occasions the announcement of *Naná*, reads: “La señorita simpatía, la estrella mimada, la mexicanísima, Lupe Vélez, la ‘Niña Lupe’ ¡POR FIN!... Guapa, gentil y entusiasta—la mujer dinamita—vina a México con tres propósitos: visitar a la Virgen de Guadalupe, ver a su Papá, el general Villalobos, que está enfermo y firmar el contrato para filmar *Naná*. ¡por fin! La contratación de Lupe Vélez para *Naná*—película que abrirá nuevos derroteros al cine Mexicano.

<sup>413</sup> I’m quoting a double-page advertisement for *La Zandunga* in *Cinema Reporter*, Jan 1938, 2.

<sup>414</sup> *Cinema Reporter* covers Vélez’s romances with diligence and without apparent judgment. For gossip of romance with Clay Moore, see “Otra Film de Lupe Vélez,” *Cinema Reporter*, Sep 29, 1939. For gossip of supposed marriage to Big Boy Williams, see “Hoy se casa Lupe Vélez,” *Cinema Reporter*, Nov 1, 1940, 1.

<sup>415</sup> “Lupe Vélez en la Panchita,” *Cinema Reporter*, Jul 22, 1938. The production was said to be starring Arturo de Córdoba and Domingo Soler. A Mexican production by this name was finally made in 1949, starring Marga López as Panchita.

was talk of Vélez starring in a new version of the famed Mexican production, *Santa*,<sup>416</sup> and would also have known of plans for a stage production of *Hit and Run* (a Los Angeles stage revue) to add Vélez for its tour in San Francisco, though neither of those productions came to pass.

Periodically, cinema stories circulating in Mexico—stories concerning Hollywood as well as Mexican cinema—would reach *La Opinión*'s readership directly. Hortensia Elizondo's film reviews, along with her other news and commentary from Mexico, were a regular *La Opinión* feature. Robert Cantú Robert, the editor of Mexico's *Cinema Reporter*, was eventually featured as well, albeit less frequently. During much of the later 1930s, when Vélez coverage was sparse, her name was more likely to come up by way of discourses originating in Mexico than by those out of Los Angeles. Sometimes there was considerable lag time, though, between regions. For example, Cantú Robert's news that Vélez and two of her two sisters were planning to form a familial production company was printed in *La Opinión* on the first of October, 1939.<sup>417</sup> The very next week, news came from RKO that Vélez was contracted for *The Mexican Spitfire*. The *Spitfire* production necessitated the postponement (apparently, the eventual cancellation) of the previous plans. It is not surprising that the piece announcing *The Mexican Spitfire* (the same aforementioned short item that weighed in critically on *The Girl From Mexico*) carried an undertone of criticism.<sup>418</sup> The timing of the reporting, with Vélez seeming to

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<sup>416</sup> The Santa plans were announced three times: "Reporteando," *Cinema Reporter*, August 19, 1938, 4; "Lupe Vélez vendrá a filma *Santa*," *Cinema Reporter*, Mar 1, 1940, 1; "Santa Comenzará," *Cinema Reporter*, July 19, 1940. *Santa* was not made again, though, until 1943 with Esther Fernandez.

<sup>417</sup> Roberto Cantú Robert, "Cine Nacional," *La Opinón*, Oct 1, 1939, 6. The sisters were involved (billed in ads as "Hermanas Vélez" and as "hermanitas de Lupe Vélez") in a local benefit for Charito Ortega. Advertisement, *La Opinión*, June 11, 1939, 3. Lupe Vélez is not listed on the roster of participants.

<sup>418</sup> "Lupe Vélez en una Nueva Cinta," *La Opinión*, Oct 8, 1939, 6. "Después de confirmarse la noticia relativa a que Lupe Vélez formaría un cuadro artístico con sus hermanas Reina y Josefina, para recorrer los

have abandoned her familial project within a week of its announcement, left the star appearing blithely fickle in her allegiances.

If there was disappointment, in Mexico, that the Vélez sisters would not establish their own (U.S.) production company, *Cinema Reporter* did not dwell on the problem. The magazine followed up in the coming months with two lengthy favorable pieces written in anticipation of *The Mexican Spitfire*'s arrival in Mexico.<sup>419</sup> One of these, titled (with an apparent nod to the GNP if not an anticipation of the U.S. joining the war effort) "If Lupe Vélez is out front, there's no need for soldiers at battle," featured coverage from the set during the filming of the grand food fight at the end of the film. According to the visiting *Cinema Reporter* reporter, the hilarity overtook the entire production set: "everyone laughed until they cried."<sup>420</sup> The scene—in fact the film as a whole—apparently had a similar effect on audiences in the U.S.; the review in *Hollywood Reporter*, for example, reported that several times in the course of exhibition, dialogue was inaudible owing to the volume of laughter in the theater.

In highlighting the contrast between Mexican and Mexican American coverage, I should not imply that generous, personal features on Vélez appeared often in the Mexican press. Vélez was rarely in Mexico so such coverage depended on the

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Estados Unidos, ha venido una modificación. Ahora se sabe que antes de emprender esa jira, Lupe hará una película que llevará el título de 'Hot Tamale,' con Donald Woods."

<sup>419</sup> "Lupe Vélez muy aclamada por su interpretación para RKO — La Exhibición de 'Mexican Spitfire' causó un Gran revuelo." *Cinema Reporter*, Dec 22, 1939, p.1.

<sup>420</sup> "¡Si Lupe Vélez fuese al frente, no podrían los soldados pelear!" *Cinema Reporter*, 12 January 1940, p.3. The visiting reporter, who went un-named in the Mexican periodical, was particularly interested in the film's considerable Spanish-language dialogue, highlighting, early in the piece, Vélez's zinger aimed at Della, just before the cakes began to fly: "Vieja sinvergüenza, cara de perro [shameless old dog-faced lady]." *La Opinión* ran two brief favorable announcements of the film's screening, though it singled out Errol over Vélez as the highlight. "En el Teatro 'Wiltern,'" *La Opinión*, Feb 24, 1940, 4. Also see, A. A. Loyo, "Sobre los teatros de habla español," *La Opinión*, Feb 25, 1940, sec2 p4. The Wiltern is not generally considered to be one of the theaters of *la colonia*. Loyo's announcement uncharacteristically includes *The Mexican Spitfire* as "one of the [recent] attractions that we can consider 'ours'" [atractivos que podemos considerar entre los 'nuestros']. *Mexican Spitfire Out West* screened at the Wiltern as well; see "Nuestra Lupe," *La Opinión*, Nov 15, 1940, 4.

magazines' abilities to send reporters to Hollywood and was, therefore, intermittent. And, as I mentioned, *Cinema Reporter*'s enthusiasm for the *Spitfires* died down after *Mexican Spitfire Out West* served to quite thoroughly disappoint.<sup>421</sup> The extent to which fans may have been willing to sit through lousy productions in anticipation of moments of pleasure, or that they may have found some satisfaction in resistant reading such as those offered by Ramírez Berg, is difficult to discern. What remains clear, though, is that, in Mexico, Vélez remained a highly popular figure.

In October of 1942, a writer publishing under the name, "Denigri," was in Beverly Hills to attend a lavish party at Vélez home. The resultant piece, titled, "Lupe Vélez, The Chosen One [*la consentida*] by North American... and by me also,"<sup>422</sup> is candid in its honesty, much as its subject has the reputation for being. Denegri's words seem carefully chosen. As *la consentida*, Vélez is said to be favored, pampered, indulged, perhaps even spoiled. To the extent that she could be seen as either favored or (over-) indulged, Denegri includes himself among the subjects doing the favoring. Denegri's piece is contemplative, even self-reflective, both in its presentation of Vélez and its consideration of the position of Mexico and Mexicans in the transnational/global culture of Hollywood. I'll close this often conflicted chapter with close consideration of Denigri's seemingly conflicted reflections on those very subjects.

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<sup>421</sup> I regret having no real indication of popular reception of these films in Mexico. Because Vélez was still a figure of such great interest and popularity, I am imagining that they did well enough through a few more films. Even after a very poor production (*Mexican Spitfire Out West*), the series gains a bit of steam back with some truly gratifying comedy in *Mexican Spitfire at Sea*. Even *Mexican Spitfire's Baby* (my reading of the film's opening and premise notwithstanding), afforded some measure of pleasurable entertainment. Vélez is good. She consistently proves fun to watch, even in circumstances that are far less than ideal.

<sup>422</sup> Lupe Vélez, *la consentida de norteamericana... la mía también*," *Cinema Reporter* 5:221 (October 1942) 10. Published in October, this piece would appear after *Mexican Spitfire Sees A Ghost*, the point at which I have identified the series as being pretty much irredeemable.

As Denigri's piece opens, Vélez, "the great friend of Mexico who receives those calling at her door with the proverbial Mexican hospitality," welcomes Mexicans from Los Angeles as well as visitors flying in from Juarez. These are guests with whom the writer, as well as the hostess, is acquainted. Denegri is frank in his description of the opulent setting of Vélez's home in the heart of Beverly Hills. And he is frank in his appreciation of his friend, Lupe:

Lupe is an admirable woman. By the force of her will and her uncommon tenacity, she has been able to arrive, and maintain, a privileged place before a world wide public. She has suffered a lot, also, in order to reach her position of predestined glory. Of [her suffering] very few know.<sup>423</sup>

It was not unusual for the English-language press, also, to write of Vélez's lavish Hollywood parties, but this writer does not indulge a list of several Hollywood stars in attendance. Rather, Denegri writes of the familiar, enchanting atmosphere provided by the evening of Mexican music and dance. Almost as an aside, Denegri writes of a moment well into the evening when, "the gentle hostess indulges us with some imitations of the famous figures of Hollywood and we could not help but laugh, they were perfect."

After the spontaneous performance by the hostess, most of Denigri's compatriots had to leave to meet their plane back to Juárez, "nuestra solar patria [our homeland]." The party then slides into the hostess's conspicuous display of her jewelry collection (a quarter of a million dollars worth of jewelry, Vélez apparently reports, the likes of which our author had never seen before: "... amethysts, rubies, aqua marines, turquoise, of the most fine cut and brilliance... such brilliance, my God!"). With the jewelry display comes a flurry of photos the U.S. press is taking of the hostess and other Hollywood stars. Denegri turns introspective with the morning light: his exit, which he

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<sup>423</sup> Lupe es una mujer admirable. De un fuerza de voluntad y tesón poco común; debido a ella ha podido llegar y permanecer en el sitio privilegiado que ocupa ante los públicos universales.... Mucho sufrió también para poder llegar al lugar de los predestinados, eso muy pocos saben.

takes suddenly and alone, is described with a sense of simultaneous urgency and reluctance.

With the taking of photos passed the rest of the evening. The light of daybreak tried to surprise me, rob me of the night's blessings. Taking advantage of the last shadows of the night, I fled, losing myself between the palatial gardens and the alleyways of that earthly paradise. To those far away the echo of my voice could be heard:

*hasta mañana, Lupe... encantado.*<sup>424</sup>

The subtle ambivalence of this piece—Denegri's self-conscious account of the ostentatious indulgence in wealth and glamour that swept over the evening as his friends and compatriots had largely departed—is left unresolved. The essay resists condemnation, neither faulting, nor fawning over, Vélez and her Hollywood guests (the individual identities of which he does not bother to mention). Instead, the author self-reflects on the affect of his own “bedazzlement.”<sup>425</sup>

If Vélez was openly “favored” by *Cinema Reporter*, the feeling was mutual. Accompanying Denegri's essay is an array of photos including a prominently figured portrait of Vélez that is signed and dedicated: “[f]or *Cinema Reporter*: to my best friends of the continent, Sincerely, Lupe Vélez.” There is no reason to imagine Vélez's words—which underplay the border to privilege a *continent*—were not carefully chosen. Vélez's phrasing serves a reminder of the misnomer that is the commonly used term, *norte*

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<sup>424</sup> En la toma de fotos se ha pasado el resto de la veleada... La luz de alba trata de sorprenderme y posiblemente robarme el secreto que esa noche he podido [ha podido?] atesorar. Ante esa amenaza, aprovechando las últimas sombras de la noche, huyo... me pierdo entre los palaciegos jardines y callejas de aquel paraíso terrenal. A los lejos se eschucha el eco de mi voz: "Hasta mañana, Lupe... encantado."

<sup>425</sup> I am tempted to interpret “Denegri's” *nom de plume* to be constructed from the archaic verb, *denegrir*. Such a pseudonym might provide a subtle indication of the author's own potential “denigration” for having undertaken the vexed role of Hollywood messenger... or transcultural interloper. The preterit of *denegrir*, in the first person, is *denegrí* (*denegrir* has since become obsolete in favor of *denegrecer* or the more common *denigrar*). I am tempted, also, to tentatively attribute the article to Roberto Cantú Robert who, as the editor of *Cinema Reporter*, would find himself in a perpetually “tranculturating” position. Useful follow-up research would involve revisiting *Cinema Reporter*, looking specifically for other pieces authored by “Denegri.” I don't recall the name, and I have record of no other pieces on Vélez by this author, but I cannot, at the point of this writing, resolve my working hypothesis that the name may have been taken specifically for this single article.

*americano*. Vélez fan discourse primarily transpired in three cultural/national communities that share the same continent. By choosing to deny a border separating her from her friends and fans at *Cinema Reporter*, Vélez performs a kind of transculturation wish, a trans-American Dream.

She also practices her by now well-honed talent for indeterminate expression. I have argued that the embattled Carmelita Fuentes/Lindsay of the Mexican Spitfire films was denied subjectivity and refused any level of maturity, thus her (re)marriage was never intended as a legitimate union. The Columbia films, though, have advantageously mobilized Vélez's status as a grown woman and a mature actress. With decades of performance behind her, Vélez was finally able to produce the richly indeterminate persona(e) that her youthful, "exotic child," Hollywood image could never signify. It is Vélez's representational indeterminacy, I will argue in the next chapter, which forms the basis of her posthumous appropriation. While her indeterminacy, first, becomes the liability that plagues her cultural memory, we will see queer re-appropriation—in the "final" instance—transvalue a liability into an enduring cultural asset.

## CHAPTER 6

### Lupe's Queer Ghosts

Lupe

you were left drowned in a toilet the last scene in your throat  
facing a little audience of white tiles

lightless

can you go back to your past?

posters and smiles sadistic extravaganzas and tarzans swinging  
among purple veins of your sheets scattered through the streets

dying for a secret

cosmetic thick with the scent of weeping in yellow vases and cigarettes  
burning out in your arms the american sun

shoving the sperm in your brown back and the cashier asking  
for dollars so that everyone can forget your deathless shoulders  
in nocturnal taxis of enamel a monopoly of movies and mirrors  
that can never murder your black eyes

Juan Felipe Herrera, "Suicide in Hollywood" (Herrera 2008, 59; excerpt)

On December 14, 1944, Lupe Vélez ingested the contents of a bottle of Seconal and ended her own life. Suicide notes indicated she was expecting a child. The authenticity of the notes, despite their atypical handwriting, was never challenged. Though an inquest was requested, based in part on questions surrounding the suicide notes, one was never carried out.<sup>426</sup> As read the December 15 cover story in the *Los Angeles Times*, "[Vélez] was found dead in her bed in her home at 732 North Rodeo Drive, Beverly Hills, lying as if asleep under an eiderdown quilt and clothed in blue satin pajamas. [...] Police physicians, who pronounced her a suicide, also confirmed her last [written] words that she was an expectant mother."<sup>427</sup> Vélez was five months pregnant.

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<sup>426</sup> "Lupe Velez Death Brings on Inquiries," *LAT*, Dec 16, 1944, 1. Five hours passed between the time Vélez's body was found and the time the notes were delivered to the office of the investigator.

<sup>427</sup> "LUPE VELEZ SUICIDE OVER LOVE TRAGEDY," *LAT*, Dec 15, 1944, 1.

There is a poignant if not morbid irony accompanying the fact that each of Vélez's final three films invokes a theme of motherhood. In each film Vélez's characters' maternal potential is treated with, in one sense or another, an element of caution or doubt. The supposed humor in *The Mexican Spitfire's Blessed Event* (Goodwins, RKO, 1943) hinges on confusions and miscommunications that cause the Lindseys to *mistakenly* believe that Carmelita (rather than her pet "wildcat") has given birth. Carmelita's behavior is too physically strenuous, apparently irresponsible, in short, too *wild*, for her perceived fragile status as new mother. (The film ends with the announcement that Carmelita is, after all, pregnant... and the studio announces the end of the *Spitfire* series.) It is not until Vélez's title role in her final film, *Naná* (Azteca, Mexico, Dir. Celestino Gorostiza, 1944), an adaptation of Emile Zola's naturalist novel, *Nana* (1880), that Vélez depicts, for any significant time on screen, a living mother.<sup>428</sup> Whether by intention or coincidence, the imagery depicting Naná's demise at the end of the film (which varies significantly from the celebrated naturalism by which the death of Zola's Nana—killed by the small pox she contracted while nursing her son's illness—is depicted) *bears an uncanny resemblance* to the Mexican figure of La Llorona, or the Weeping Woman, on whom I will elaborate shortly. Gorostiza's Naná is not dead at the end of the film. Instead, Naná is imaged wandering the streets some decades after her child has died.<sup>429</sup> *Naná*'s end vaguely articulates Naná's fall as a kind of long-term psychic and/or

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<sup>428</sup> Elaine is portrayed, very briefly at the end of the film, in the role of mother. *Redhead from Manhattan* (Landers, Columbia, 1943) offers a narrative that is refreshingly un-antagonistic towards Vélez in the image of mother. Even so, Elaine da Silva (Vélez) has to keep her pregnancy a secret, along with the existence of her (Anglo) husband, an FBI agent (Lewis Wilson), in order to keep her job as a stage performer. It is Elaine's pregnancy that brings her cousin, Rita da Silva (also played by Vélez), to perform on stage in her stead.

<sup>429</sup> The film thus de-links Naná's physical decline from her son's disease and death; Naná does not earn credit for having nursed her son in his illness, knowing the risk to her own life. Vélez's appearance brings to mind her role as Katusha in Edward Carewe's 1933 Hollywood production of *Resurrection*, discussed in Chapter 2.

occupational inevitability that reads like a purgatorial penance. No one seems to see her... not the adults, anyway, who are talking about her distant memory as she drifts by in a kind of suffering stupor. Only a handful of neighborhood children register her presence; the film closes with Naná (or perhaps Naná's ghost) taunted and mocked on the street by that group of five menacing children.

### Preface to a Prologue: La Llorona

That La Llorona is dead matters but little to the narrators [of her stories], for she continues to be a powerful response, especially the everyday matters of gender, sexuality, and love.

The public history of Mexican diva and Hollywood film star Lupe Vélez, the original "Mexican Spitfire," bears an uncanny resemblance to the myth of La Llorona. On 15 December, 1944 — just three days after the start of the Guadalupe holy days — Vélez's corpse was discovered in her Beverly Hills apartment. She had committed suicide, thus taking the life of her unborn child as well. The apparent motive for her act was that, like Medea of Greek myth, she had been painfully rejected by her lover, a Frenchman of another class and culture. Like La Malinche—the indigenous woman who was Hernán Cortéz's lover and translator, who was used and rejected by a European male—Vélez was tossed aside.

Luis D. León (2004, 8)

The would-be father of Vélez's child was Harald Ramond, also known as Harald Maresch, born in Vienna, Austria (his French ethnicity is questionable; his status, as father of Vélez's unborn child, is not).

In the Mexican and Mexican American context it is La Llorona—the Weeping Woman who mourns and/or haunts lost and/or errant children—who absorbs and mediates the particular brand of shame and anguish associated with *la mujer pública* (the quintessential *vendida*, or sell-out) as mother. In his book, *La Llorona's Children: Religion, Life and Death in the U.S. Mexican Borderlands* (2004), Luis D. León theorizes La Llorona as a transcultural figure of the Mexican borderlands. For León, La Llorona's children are those enduring familial, cultural and regional displacement. They are the children lost to colonialism. La Llorona's anguish acts as an quasi-embodied placeholder

for the intangible, unquantifiable loss that the concept of “transculturation”—if theorized with excessive optimism, as the term has been charged with carrying—masks; her cries register the pain of erasure that has been perhaps too easily denied within the paradigm of “the cosmic race.” La Llorona’s stories rehearse a perpetual search for her (Mexico’s) lost children.

In the introduction to his book, León outlines “a genealogy of La Llorona” that traces the weeping woman legend from her origins as the “malevolent” Aztec goddess, Cihuacoatl, or Snake Woman, who “brought misery to men.” With the Spanish conquest, Cihuacoatl was “transformed in the cultural imagination into La Llorona,” who served variously as the source or the prescient messenger of malevolence (7). The Weeping Woman is said to have cried for the destruction of the Aztec Mexican civilization and for its children, first as warning and then in mourning (León, 6-7). As the legend survives, however,

[t]he standard premise of the myth condemns the weeping woman for killing her children to spite her lover. Some have said *La Llorona* is actually a synecdoche for *La Malinche*, who purges the soul of the New World, as well as her own soul, of colonial excess by destroying the patrimony of Cortez: the first mixed race children of mestizos (León, 14, referencing Anaya, 88-89).

La Llorona is said to have drowned her children and, as León notes, “La Llorona is often sighted near bodies of water” (7). If, as León somewhat casually posits in my previous epigraphic quotation, La Llorona’s status as historical “matters but little to [her] narrators” (8), her significance lies in the fact that her suffering has no end; that her children are perpetually reborn explains her relevance as a “powerful response to quotidian problems... of gender, sexuality, and love.” León uses his point regarding the not-dead status of Llorona as a transition to the still relatively recent public history of Lupe Vélez, which ostensibly supports the author’s point regarding the continued

relevance of Llorona. And yet, while Vélez is, on a number of occasions, associated with the La Llorona archetype, the Vélez that has been perpetually reborn to popular culture, the hegemonic Vélez afterimage, has had little to do with Vélez the progenitor. Vélez's after-image has given birth to texts, not life. I do not mean to privilege Vélez-the-progenitor as a preferred or more productive afterimage; I do mean to underscore the vast space between one culturally valuable understanding of her death and the more familiar version that has come to shape her dominant cultural legacy.<sup>430</sup> William Anthony Nericcio is right to point out that, "Vélez's staged exit comes to define the dynamics of her career and delimit the discourse of her cinematic legacy" (157). Even Patricia Crespín—the writer and dramatist whose play, "Living Purgatory," most vividly mines the La Llorona/Lupe persona and legacy—resorts to Vélez's "staged death" to explicate the "Real" star's demise. It is irresistible, I suppose: La Llorona's earthly avatar drowning in the smallest—and the nearest, the most commonplace—of bodies of water. Patricia Crespín writes:

Lupe took her suicide to the utmost extreme, placing roses and gardenias on her bed and lighting candles. She dressed in a silver lame (*sic*) evening gown, took an overdose of Seconol and lay on her bed in a glamorous pose to await her death. The Seconol made her nauseous and instead of drifting into a peaceful slumber, she drowned in the toilet while vomiting.

I will not use the space of this dissertation to compose my own competing rendition of Lupe Vélez's death, nor to detail or challenge the specifics or the veracity of the standard story, which has been so sufficiently rehearsed in so many venues.<sup>431</sup> Victoria Sturtevant

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<sup>430</sup> For a creative meditation on Lupe Vélez, La Llorona, Frida Kahlo and La Malinche, see Patricia Crespín's unpublished dissertation, *Writing the Warrior: A Latina Writes Latinas*, UNM, 2003. In April and May of 2009, Crespin brought her play, *Living Purgatory*, which features the four figures, to the stage in Albuquerque, New Mexico. See Steinberg, David, "Playwright-director partnerships stoke coals of 'Words Afire,'" *Albuquerque Journal*, April 20, 2009.

<sup>431</sup> Mexican filmmaker Martín Caballero's earnest, post-camp revistitation, *Forever Lupe* (2007), avoids the suicide details and openly asserts his intent to "clean up" Vélez's image and dispel the "lies" that dogged her memory. As truths remain hard to come by, Caballero's 30-minute film covers some territory regarding her best known relationships (Cooper, Weissmuller, de Córdoba) while very subtly intimating a

writes that Charles Ramirez Berg writes that “more people have probably heard of Lupe Vélez through a joke about her death made in the pilot episode of the sitcom *Frasier* in 1993 than have ever seen one of her films” (Sturtevant 2005 19; referencing Ramirez Berg 2002, 92). I am distilling, here, the *Frazier* reflection down to the essential logic behind the sequences’s attempt at ironic/dark humor: Vélez wanted nothing more than to be remembered; she is remembered... but not in the image she had imagined.

*Roz:* [...] She takes an overdose of pills, lays on the bed and imagines how beautiful she’s going to look on the front page of tomorrow’s newspaper. Unfortunately, the pills don’t sit well with the enchilada combo plate she sadly chose for her last meal. She stumbles toward the bathroom, trips and falls head-first in the toilet, And that’s how they found her.

*Frasier:* Is there a reason you’re telling me this?

*Roz:* Yeah. Even though things may not happen as we planned, they work out anyway. [...] All [Lupe Vélez] wanted was to be remembered.... Will you ever forget that story?<sup>432</sup>

Probably the most widely consumed reference to Vélez’s death in recent popular culture occurs in an episode of *The Simpsons* (Feb 16, 1997) featuring (as a guest, playing himself) the queer-kitch-camp filmmaker, Jon Waters. This version did not bother to recount the sordid suicide at all. Waters, giving several of the *Simpsons*’ cast of characters a tour of Springfield’s “kitch shopping district,” makes an quick, off-hand reference, pointing out a hardware store where Lupe Vélez bought her toilet.<sup>433</sup> The scene trades on the Vélez narrative as a casually dropped “inside joke”—one with, apparently, enough currency to subtly flatter the media-savvy consumer that is the *Simpsons*’ ideal spectator. The *Frazier* and *Simpsons* references require no knowledge, on the part of their audience, of Vélez’s life or career; they only demand familiarity with the story made so

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reference to a later circulated rumor: that Arturo de Cordoba and Harald Ramond were lovers, with Vélez caught in the middle of a destructive triangle.

<sup>432</sup> David Angell, Peter Casey, David Lee, “The Good Son,” *Frasier*, first aired on Fox, September 16, 1993.

<sup>433</sup> For a full account of the *Frasier* episode that referenced Vélez’s death, see Ramírez Berg (2002, 92, 284 n15). For a description of the reference on *The Simpsons* (first aired on Fox Feb 16, 1997), see Lupe Vélez’s Wikipedia page, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lupe\\_V%C3%A9lez](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lupe_V%C3%A9lez) or snpp.com: <http://www.snpp.com/episodes/4F11.html>

famous in Kenneth Anger's *Hollywood Babylon*. Two years after the *Simpsons*/Waters mass consumed camp reference to Vélez's death, video artist Rita González mobilized her own (queer) Vélez story. González sought an audience with an alternative historical perspective and a more local point of entry.

## The Fever of Appropriation

Andy discovered some tawdry little book on the great deaths of Hollywood.<sup>434</sup> He loved the chapter on Lupe. Lupe Vélez the Mexican Spitfire. She tried to go out like some gorgeous bird of paradise, a real slow fade to black. After putting on her designer gown, lighting candles and getting the set just right, she pumped seventy-two Seconal and ended up with her head in the toilet. Andy thought it was wonderful. He loved fashion mistakes.

*The Assumption of Lupe Vélez* (Rita Gonzalez, 1999), narration.

With the titling of her experimental documentary video, *The Assumption of Lupe Vélez* (1999), filmmaker Rita González updates and appropriates the multiple meanings of “assumption” at play in José Rodríguez-Soltero’s film of 1967, originally titled, *Life, Death, and the Assumption of Lupe Vélez*. The “assumption” at play in Rodríguez-Soltero’s title would seem to most directly refer to that film’s end, where the Lupe character—played/Performed in drag by (Andy Warhol’s) Puerto Rican “Superstar,” Mario Montez—is *assumed*, lovingly taken up (upon her suicide by oven), to a elusive, starkly effervescent, exalted space.<sup>435</sup> If we take Rodríguez-Soltero’s title as literal in its religious or spiritual sense, it refers to the taking up of a *living* person, “body and soul,” delivered “upward,” heaven bound. On a more tangible plane, “assumption” simultaneously refers to Montez having taken up the character/persona of Lupe Vélez, a

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<sup>434</sup> Rita González’s wording led me to wonder if Warhol had been inspired by yet another tawdry book, *Hollywood R.I.P.* (I.G. Edmonds, 1963). But the *R.I.P.* narrative has Vélez dying in her bed. Warhol probably accessed the unauthorized version of *Hollywood Babylon* (1965). Though *Hollywood Babylon* is not solely “about the great deaths of Hollywood,” one might imagine it being characterized as such. For more on Warhol inspired by Anger’s story, see Warhol and Hackett (1983, 127) and Dick (1989, 158-59).

<sup>435</sup> On Warhol’s superstars, see Suárez (1996, 225-231).

performance that the term “acting” does not quite describe. Finally, intertextually, “assumption” refers to the filmmaker’s, Rodríguez-Soltero’s, loose taking up of his friend’s, Andy Warhol’s, subject matter by staging a remake of sorts of Warhol’s film, *Lupe* (1966), produced the previous year.

Like the texts it references, González’s video is not precisely “about” Vélez the individual, nor is it about the Mexican or Hollywood persona that bears that name. González’s subject matter is the queer community that assumes Vélez—takes her up—via stage and screen. *The Assumption of Lupe Vélez* is an intertextual map mobilizing Vélez as an instrument of discourse. As a documentary taking up a series of inter-referential appropriations, the video enacts an exploratory analysis of Vélez’s signification at the hands of underground cultural producers. In that sense, Gonzalez’s project parallels my own task at hand: to map the set of mid-century fictions that re-animated Vélez’s ghost within U.S. popular memory. Like González’s video, my final chapter is not so much about Lupe Vélez as it is about late 20<sup>th</sup>-century visual and discursive appropriations that assume her, and thus about the impact that those assumptions have had on her legacy and cultural memory.

The large part of this chapter analyzes and contextualizes three texts. The first text is Kenneth Anger’s infamous story of Vélez suicide, which is actually a series of stories appearing in various versions of his *Hollywood Babylon* books (1959, 1964, 1972, 1984). The others are film texts: Warhol’s and Rodriguez-Soltero’s *Lupe* films, both of which are obliquely occasioned by Anger’s narrative. These are three texts produced by queer male cultural producers who came of age in an era steeped in the homo-repressive culture of the postwar consensus. Robert Corber’s work (1993, 1997) documents how Cold War

discourses of national security colonized discourses of American modernism, naturalizing a cultural link between communism and homosexuality and thus—effectively if indirectly—between capitalism and heterosexuality. More recently, Matthew Tinkcom’s work on 20<sup>th</sup>-century cinema, camp production, and systems of capital, theorizes “camp” as a philosophy of cultural production that critiques (straight) modern economies of profit. I approach my three queer, male, mid-century filmmakers as producing (with varying degrees of rigor and “success”) critiques of the operations—or “economies”—of Hollywood stardom. My intent is to explore how, and why, the image of Lupe Vélez (or that of her death) was so useful for their various purposes. Finally, I will return briefly to the work of Rita González and her West Coast colleagues to explore some late-late twentieth-century appropriations of the Vélez afterlife.

Deploying intertextual strategies mobilized by Pop artists of the 1950s (most notably by Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns<sup>436</sup>) innovation of Pop Art, Anger, Warhol, and Rodríguez-Soltero each appropriate Hollywood iconography to investigate the meaning and value of stardom and star production in relation to the meaning and value of art and art production. Their processes—including intertextual “poaching” practices that

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<sup>436</sup> Richard Meyer’s (2002, 95-125) work on Warhol’s early career documents the relationship between Andy Warhol’s homosexuality, his work, and the changing economies of postwar/coldwar mass culture. Meyer links Warhol’s early, commercial illustration work to the artist’s obsession with Hollywood stardom, glamour and commodity. Meyer historically contextualizes Warhol’s development as an artist, arguing that the homophobia of the era’s art world impacted, even *nurtured*, the development of Warhol’s aesthetic. Warhol discovered, in his capacity as a commercial illustrator, the joy of playing with, shaping, stimulating and manipulating *economies*. While he was a commercial artist, Warhol was keenly aware of Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg, two queer artists that challenged the supremacy of abstraction by trading in mass-culture iconography and thus ushering in Pop Art. But Warhol was, the story goes, shut out of the New York art world for being “too swish” (Meyer, 314n.52). With Warhol’s own tremendous commercial success (and emboldened also by the success of his cohort of (swish) gay male designer friends), it became clear that *queer sensibility was viable, economically*, even if it was not acceptable socially or, in the New York art world of the 1950s, artistically. The eventual triumph of the camp marketplace, in its flamboyant celebration of the absurd, doubly signifies with a celebration of the absurd machinations involved in charting discursive and economic avenues that “pass.”

characterize Pop Art—served to critique the terms by which hegemonic, academically sanctioned art culture exalted a particular (“macho,” heteronormative) American modernism. My analysis of this work is attentive to scholars and critics of the last decade who have looked beyond form and formalism to the conditions of production of the texts under study. As both Juan A. Suárez and Douglas Crimp have pointed out, Pop Art, in its day and for a considerable period thereafter, had been theorized through a restrictively modernist framework, a critical paradigm that exalted the value of aesthetic and conceptual autonomy to the point of denying the broad significance(s) of Pop Art’s appropriative function. In other words, Pop Art was evaluated on the (politicized) terms of precisely the aesthetic it meant to subvert.<sup>437</sup>

To a very large degree, it has been the reclamation of Warhol as a queer artist that has opened up a critical juncture readdressing relationships between Pop Art and cultural identity, particularly gendered and sexual identities (Doyle, Flatley, Muñoz, et al., 1996). More recently, with the revisititation of Mario Montez’s collaboration in the queer underground practice of Warhol and Rodríguez-Soltero, issues of identity regarding cultural constructions of ethnicity and race, in relation to sexuality and gender, have broadened and enriched the discussion. Relatively recent scholarship [Suárez (2008), Hiram Pérez (2005), Arnaldo Cruz-Malave (2007), Taro Nettleton (2009), Rita Gonzalez and Frances Negrón-Munteñer (2009), and Lawrence La Fountain Stokes (2011)] bring, to queer underground historiography, an Other component of identification that has been as elided by the term “queer” as it has been by analyses of both “Pop Art” and the “avant-

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<sup>437</sup> Crimp, in his essay “Getting the Warhol We Deserve,” (*Social Text*, 1999) is specifically speaking back to Hal Foster’s *The Return of the Real* (1996).

garde.”<sup>438</sup> The overdue acknowledgment of the Puerto Rican / Latin@ presence within the New York queer underground greatly facilitates consideration of, for example, the fact that Lupe Vélez’s star text signified (and signifies) in a manner quite distinct from the set of meanings associated with the star references at the center of the Hollywood-referencing Warhol films with which *Lupe* is casually bundled: Hedy Lamarr, Jean Harlow, Lana Turner.<sup>439</sup> But I should take a step back. To understand Warhol’s *Lupe* (indeed, perhaps, to approach any of Warhol’s Hollywood star(dom) films), one must begin at *Hollywood Babylon*. An informed look at the *Babylon* books necessitates a grounding in the cultural practice of their author, which dates back to Los Angeles of the 1940s, near to the time and place of Vélez’s passing.

### Locating Kenneth Anger

Anger tells stories with mostly terminal overtones. Lupe Vélez, Hollywood’s “Mexican Spitfire,” had a series of torrid affairs and wanted to leave a beautiful corpse behind for the photographers. An unpredictable reaction to the Seconal overdose thwarted her. She dies with her head in the toilet drowned in her own vomit. *Anger is not ridiculing her toilet end; he identified with her desire to keep dignity in death and to leave a beautiful corpse.*

Bill Landis (1995, 95; emphasis added).

Kenneth Anger’s personal history points up two profound historical conflicts that shaped the trajectory of the filmmaker’s work from the earliest years: xenophobic violence and anti-Communist and homophobic hysteria. Anger’s first film, *Fireworks* (1947) draws from the filmmaker’s recollection of the so-called “Zoot Suit Riots” of 1943. In much later explanations of the film, Anger discusses the strong impression left on him—at an impressionable thirteen years of age—by images of the riots. The Zoot Suit Riots, as now

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<sup>438</sup> My chapter is informed by the debate occasioned by the “Gay Shame” conference at the University of Michigan in 2003. In addition to the writings cited in text, see, also, the conference’s resulting anthology, *Gay Shame* (Halperin and Traub, eds., 2009).

<sup>439</sup> The “Hollywood series,” as it has been called, consists of *Harlot* (1965), and *Lupe, More Milk, Evette*, and *Hedy* (all 1966).

understood (it is unclear how Anger understood them), involved racially motivated violence—especially in the form of forcibly stripping or “pantsing” (de-Zooting)—perpetrated by U.S. Marines on U.S. Chicanos (or Pachucos)<sup>440</sup> during World War Two (Obregon Pagán, 2003). Anger’s perpetual dreams/nightmares about the Marines’ physical/sexual violence form the catalyst for *Fireworks*, which was completed three years after the riots, when Anger was just seventeen years old. The film carries a dreamlike surrealism in which violence and erotics share space and sign in. Neither “zoot suits” nor Pachucos (nor any Mexican Americans) are imaged or even alluded to in the film. It is initially tempting to speculate on a link between the two cultural traumas of the period that Anger himself points to as formative to his work—i.e. the relentless prejudicial bullying taking place at the hands of the HUAC, and the violent and equally prejudicial scapegoating that underlay the conflict that resulted in the riots—particularly as they both stand as environmental circumstances related to Anger’s coming to terms with his homosexuality. Anger, however, does not himself articulate this link. In fact, regarding the Riots, it is more likely that Anger carried the hegemonic Anglo opinion of the day, which would have the Mexican-American youth as perpetrators of the violence and as morally deserving of the assault. Had *Fireworks*’ referential material been interrogated within critical engagement in the film’s own era, we might have a greater understanding of how the film is shaped by the specifically Mexican American significance of its history. But the fact of the Riots, as content, has been too easy for

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<sup>440</sup> Chicanos and African Americans were targeted for their wearing of “zoot suits” (*drapes* was the West Coast Pachucos’ preferred term) during the World War II era. The large suits were seen as an indulgence in scarce resources during an era of austerity. Such an indulgence was seen as unpatriotic and dangerous and further reinforced the false assumption/generalization that Mexican Americans and African Americans seen stateside were sitting out the war. For a full consideration of “zoot suit meaning,” see Gerardo (2012).

Anglo Anger critics and scholars to miss. Sailors, within a text created by an openly gay filmmaker, have been understood simply as a signifier of homoerotic fetish.<sup>441</sup>

*Fireworks* brought Anger some attention in the (marginalized) community of experimental independent filmmakers in Los Angeles, but it was especially well received in France. Anger's antipathy toward the narrow creative constraints of the Hollywood studio system—exacerbated in the climate where, caving to the pressure of the House Un-American Activities committee (HUAC), the studios instituted the “Communist” blacklists—is said to have led to his decision to take up Henri Langois's job offer as assistant at the *Cinémaque Française* (Landis). Incidentally, one of Anger's first jobs with Langois' was to edit the extensive footage generated by Sergei Eisenstein's unfinished project, *¡Que Viva México!* (Landis). Recent work on Anger, which plays up his status as cultural outsider, places a certain emphasis (including an “exotic” visual emphasis) on Anger's engagement with the Southwest border.<sup>442</sup>

I offer this early, anecdotal Anger history to augment our understanding of the filmmaker's formative sensibility toward humanity, sexuality, pathos and violence as intertwined with his formative concepts of Mexicanness and “race.” As recently as 2002, Anger's compulsion to offend veered into the realm of the ugly epithet when, in Mikita Brottman's idiosyncratic anthology, *Car Crash Culture*, Anger's essay coughs up the

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<sup>441</sup> Suárez links *Hollywood Babylon* with *Fireworks* in that “objects of desire [stars and sailors] are also icons of death and destruction” (147).

In the Hays interview (2007, 32) Anger remembers having seen the actual riots (“The Mexicans were dressed in silk and satin zoot suits. The American sailors were antagonistic toward them because they were slackers.”). In the documentary (*Anger Me*, dir. Elio Gemini, Frameline, 2006) he mentions only having seen pictures. As told in the documentary, the sailors that Anger used as actors in the film were Anger's friends (Anger maintained they were “the sweetest guys in the world,” which seems a pointed and provocative aside, considering it comes with a reference to the Riots).

<sup>442</sup> Interestingly (ironically), the photograph of Kenneth Anger accompanying the interview in Hays (2007, 26) pictures an aged Anger set before a projection of Eisenstien's footage from Mexico, what appears to be an image of a Day of the Dead celebration. Perhaps Anger's obsession with death inspired the choice to image Anger with a figure wearing a sombrero and a skeleton mask. The image comes from the documentary film, *Anger Me* (*ibid.*)

term “beautiful beaner” to describe the fourteen-year-old Filipino youth, García Stevenson, who was driving the car wherein F. W. Murnau’s lost his life in an infamous accident of 1931 (the “underground” story being that Stevenson was Murnau’s lover, the crash the result of an in-transit sex act).

Landis’s conviction that Anger held a sympathetic identification with Vélez—that he identified with her desire to keep dignity in death—is, for practical purposes, irrelevant (though, in the course of this chapter, I believe it will become clear that Landis’s claim is disingenuous). Whatever might be, or might have been, regarding Anger’s personal level of “ridicule,” and whether or not any ridicule reflected racial and/or ethnic bias... the material legacy of Anger’s fascination with the beautiful corpse does not turn on authored intention. As we proceed into the *Hollywood Babylon* stories, I take seriously their implicit interrogations, their questions—and verdicts—as to who gets to leave a beautiful corpse (i.e. who gets to be a star). Anger’s ruminations on the nature and limits of stardom highlight topics that resurface with Warhol’s and Rodriguez-Soltero’s respective filmic appropriations of the Lupe story.

As I have said, the posthumous attention accorded Vélez’s suicide was catalyzed by *Hollywood Babylon*’s publication in the 1960s (Warhol and Hackett, 1980, 160-161). The *Babylons* are a serialized, relatively lucrative commercial project taken on by Anger to help finance his much less lucrative filmmaking practice. As a young *Cinemateque* assistant in France, Anger entertained his French colleagues with stories of Hollywood debauchery, stories that, it is thought, originated as rumor and came to Anger over the years by way of his industry-associated grandmother. The first edition was published by

Jean Jaques Pauvert in France in 1959 and released within a series of cinema-themed coffee-table books (Landis, 94). An English-language version, which would not become available until 1965, was likewise strategized to mitigate a financial squeeze.<sup>443</sup> Though Anger is credited as the author, the 1965 copyright is held by the Associated Professional Services Inc., of Phoenix Arizona. Apparently Anger—naively, desperately, or both—relinquished two-thirds of the English translation to Marvin Miller, a sleazy publishing-world character, on speculation.<sup>444</sup> The Miller book is small, almost pocketbook size; most of the visuals from the French volume are missing. Landis's description of the Miller knock-off is apt: “Sold in a plain brown wrapper, the whole affair is extremely tabloid, a pinnacle of sleaze, the photos contained in the book are crude reproductions [...] Estimates are that it sold two million copies during the sixties” (122-3). One of those copies must have been obtained by Andy Warhol.

## Lupe in Babylon

The Miller version, while essentially representative of the narrative that has become familiar to Vélez followers, that is, to fans and scholars alike, is but a shadow of the “grander” story we associate with Vélez’s suicide legend. I print it here in its entirety for purposes of historical record:

When Lupe no longer saw a way out of her troubles—after so many quarrels and stories—she decided to kill herself, and determined to turn it into one of the most beautiful moments of her life; to turn tragedy into *apotheosis*.

She ordered hundreds of flower arrangements, and when her house had been turned into a green house of the very loveliest ones, she called in her make-up man and her hairdresser to turn her out more magnificently than ever before for this last time. Then, in

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<sup>443</sup> This version was timed to compensate financially for the lapse of Anger’s Ford Foundation grant (Landis, citation).

<sup>444</sup> Landis writes that Anger insists that Miller took the manuscript and ran, writing the final third of the book himself (). Looking at the ’65 version next to the French, I would submit that the end reads more as an artless translation (Vélez is “the Mexican Bombshell” rather than “Spitfire”) than a hack rewrite. This version, appearing well into the last third of the Miller book and thus not claimed by Anger himself, according to Landis, is a pretty direct (if clunky) translation from Anger’s French text.

the huge Spanish-style house, she put on a lame (*sic*) dress and lots of jewelry. After a solitary banquet, during which she had herself served with the spiced dishes of her native country, she dismissed the servants and went upstairs to her room. Alone among the flowers she swallowed a *tubeful of Seconal* and lay down on her bed.

Half an hour later, the meticulous staging suddenly took an unforeseen turn which would have been worthy of Bunuel (*sic*). All the effects planned by the fiery Mexican had been ordered; the flowers paid her a final homage, the glistening chandeliers shone on the lame of her dress. Lupe died in *beauty*.

The harmony was complete, with the sole exception of the seconal and the spicy food, when the solemn lights around her body were abruptly besplattered. Lupe obeyed an instinct even stronger than death and ran, teetering on her high heels, toward the bathroom. But she slipped on the marble tiles as she ran up to the toilet bowl — which turned out to be her last mirror! — and head first, she fell in and broke her neck. Thus she was found, stuck and half-submerged in this bowl, strange and macabre. And thus was extinguished one of Hollywood's glories! (234-235, emphases in the original).

Here we have no account of Vélez's pregnancy, her "quarrels and stories" are un-explicated, there are no candles... no "fake Spanish Hacienda." For the reader familiar with the canonized version, this initial melodrama is almost disappointing; it fails to exploit the full potential of its narrative strategy. With each version of the story, however, revised in each subsequent *Babylon*, the story is significantly... strengthened.

*Babylon's* legitimately authorized English-language version was not released until 1975. The authorized version is larger (American coffee-table sized) and formally cleaner. More importantly, it has been "rationalized." That is to say, it has been transformed from one continuous barrage of debauchery into distinct chapters structured by arching narratives. Lupe Vélez's chapter, inexplicably titled, "Chop Suicide," is elaborate and sensational, a classic of Hollywood tabloid-lit.<sup>445</sup> By 1975, Anger's "research" had dug up every old saw charging torrid affairs and lifted skirts.<sup>446</sup> Anger had even learned enough Spanish that he could conger up Lupe's "Días Dos Muertes" (*sic*) last supper. The setting for the narrative has been more meticulously prepared: now we

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<sup>445</sup> Possibly the chapter is titled after one of Vélez's dogs, which were called Chips and Chops. Or possibly the title is a reference to the fact of her playing Asian characters in two of her films. Neither the dogs nor these films are mentioned in the chapter.

<sup>446</sup> Anger characterizes Vélez's "affair" with Cooper as "several months" rather than three years. "Lupe just couldn't understand why he would get mad when she would flash her charms at Hollywood parties by flinging her dress over her head – she was always innocent of lingerie" (231).

have “candles everywhere—everything’s aglow”; Vélez’s bed is “beneath a giant crucifix.” The toilet has become “an Egyptian Chartreuse Onyx Hush-Flush Model Deluxe” planted atop the *orchid*-tiled bathroom. “Juanita,” the famous “chambermaid,” now enters the set and Louella Parsons, resident expert, is invoked for credibility: Parsons is said to have sat on the story for 31 years (which does not explain how Anger might have acquired it in 1958, only 14 years after Vélez’s death).<sup>447</sup>

### ***Babylon* as text and discourse**

Scholarly attention to the *Babylon* books has, by in large, been limited to brief, sympathetic characterizations that place the book in relationship to Anger’s films. Within both mediums, as Mikita Brottman observes, “...mainstream Hollywood functions both as [Anger’s] matrix and his adversary.” In *Babylon*, for Brottman,

[i]mages of Hollywood stars are taken out of their usual structures of representation and put into new, perverse contexts intended to disturb customary modes of perception. These books, like Anger’s films, serve to highlight the very ambivalent dynamic between cinema audience, and the stars they worship and destroy” (2002, 5).

Matthew Tinkcom, who frames the *Babylon* books as “queer camp,” offers the most sustained analysis to date. Tinkcom’s reading, though, reiterates Brottman’s articulation of the books’ “irresolvable duality”(5), that is, Tinkcom’s reading underscores Anger’s love/hate relationship with Hollywood and stardom. Tinkcom’s project, as I have noted,

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<sup>447</sup> Vélez had no employee named Juanita. News stories at the time, and accounts after, have confirmed that Vélez’s personal assistant, Beulah Kinder, found Vélez’s body.

It is relevant to note that the mid-seventies marks the end of a period of significant gains established by the Chicano movement. It was also a time when the U.S. was in decline economically. The conditions were set for a backlash. Indeed, Elisabeth Martínez sees 1980 as the beginning of two decades of a racializing regressive tide for Mexican Americans. She links the backlash to Ronald Reagan’s presidential (1995, 1022-3). We might, then, consider the significance of Reagan as the Governor of California from 1967-1975. See also Deena González’s essay, ““Lupe’s Song”: On the origins of Mexican-Woman-Hating in the United States” (2001), which documents “Lupe’s Song” surfacing in California fraternities in 1976. (I am not arguing for any link between Lupe Vélez specifically and this song’s hideous, Mexican-woman-hating lyrics.). Incidentally, Anger should have claimed Hedda Hopper was the one sitting on the story; unlike Hopper, who wrote an obituary for Vélez, Louella Parsons rarely wrote about Vélez; Vélez death is discussed in neither Hopper’s nor Parsons’s books.

theorizes queer camp as a *production* strategy (as opposed to camp as a reading strategy, a function of reception) whereby camp operates as a critique of capital. For Tinkcom, camp's reanimation of the cast-off commodity serves to reassess its value and currency on non-normative terms. In other words, camp points up—and thus, for Tinkcom, critiques—the instability of capital. Camp subverts hegemonic, modernist aesthetic economies by giving value to the formerly valueless. Such re-valuation, or “transvaluation,” (Suárez 1996, 119), redistributes subjective agency under capital, lending value to the recycled—and the recycler—and empowering a “trash,” or trashed, i.e. outdated, aesthetic; the resuscitated failure—the beloved fashion mistake—challenges the myth of commodity stability on which the supposed stability of capitalism is based. Thus while Tinkcom does not use the term, he is defining queer camp as an *epistemological* project.<sup>448</sup>

Tinkcom argues that the *Babylon* texts function simultaneously as instantiations and critiques of Hollywood fandom; they are camp enactments of fandom, “fan writings,” queer fan productions and, as such, *critical* fan productions that revalue the Hollywood commodity, recirculating it on a redefined set of terms. Crucially, for Tinkcom, the books call out Hollywood for its own production of a “star scandal system” (Tinkcom, 145-7). By foregrounding Hollywood’s complicity in the production and circulation of scandal (as Tinkcom’s interpretation of Anger’s argument goes), the books do not create an alternative fan position, exactly... rather, they point up and expose a scandal-interested

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<sup>448</sup> Epistemological texts are “formally reflexive texts” (Rodowick, 1994, 34) that function to produce knowledge about the social/political/aesthetic function of their own production. Rodowick’s definition points to what the editors of *October* referred to as films with a “critical discursive function.” Rodowick writes; “Here *discursive* means a reflexive concentration on the forms and materials specific to cinematic expression; *critical* defines the ‘epistemological’ project of modernist cinema as the full exploration of its means of representation and its ‘deconstruction’ of normative, representational codes” (12). With his essay, “Counter-Cinema: *Vent d’est*” (1972), Peter Wollen staked out the distinction between a realist, or “transparent” illusionistic mode of production, and an epistemological mode of production.

fan position that Hollywood itself has created. Hollywood produces its own hypocritical and false system of representations that both uphold normative sexual and gender identities even as they profitably cannibalize the non-normative. Tinkcom posits that the circumstances of the (first) book's production, being “remote from Hollywood” (i.e. in France and then in “pulp non-fiction” form), “suggests that camp responses to Hollywood iconography could for a long period only inhabit the margins of film culture” (145).<sup>449</sup> The suggestion is, then, that Anger, by looking back to scandals concomitant with the very foundations of the star system, was retrospectively identifying and inhabiting a queer camp fan position that was at the heart of Hollywood iconography from the star industry’s inception. Anger made tangible a historically invisible fan position. Tinkcom writes: “Anger thus offers a reading of Hollywood through its own allegedly prohibited history” (147).

Even Tinkcom gestures toward a recognition of the fact that one may find it difficult to distinguish Hollywood’s (cynical, disingenuous) “star scandal system” from *Babylon*’s own scandal “system” (Tinkcom, 149). Anger looks back into history, remobilizing earlier real or rumored scandals—often specifically implicating the Other (including the queer Other but also the foreign Other) in sensationalistic dramas. In that sense, the Babylon stories operated very much like the fan writings I highlighted in the previous chapter (i.e. John Chapman’s and John Stanford’s writings in fan magazines of the late 1930s, and *Look Magazine*’s Vélez profiles in the early 1940s). We have already seen—with *Babylon*’s representation of F.W. Murnau’s death, which served to *out* the director as queer just as it implicated him in a relationship with an under-age “beautiful

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<sup>449</sup> The fact that that *Confidential Magazine* came out in 1952 somewhat troubles Tinkcom’s point about the circulation of counter-Hollywood-glamour stories being remote from the Hollywood industry. For more on *Confidential Magazine*, see Henry Scott (2010).

beaner”—that Anger’s logic of scandal and spectacle changed not in the least over decades of publishing on Hollywood.<sup>450</sup> *Babylon* discourse is derived from Hollywood capital. While it may often disrupt—or point up the instability of—hegemonic star and/or narrative value, it does not critique the economies of Hollywood currency. Rather it performs a discursive function that, while *generally* valid (I will specifically address the invalid case of the Lupe Vélez story below), fails to rise to the level of *critique*: the *Babylon* books very viscerally illustrate the way in which Hollywood economies can so efficiently absorb and profit from the mechanisms of the industry’s own auto-critique, which is approximately equal to its methods of deriving profit from—preemptively auto-commodifying—its own system of scandal.

Each *Babylon* reiteration (as each is a response to Anger’s own financial crises) reproduces the systems of its production. In the 1984 version, *Hollywood Babylon II*, the Vélez story is reprised in a shorter, slightly less graphic account positioned within a larger chapter. That chapter’s title, “The Language of Self Murder,” is deceptively contemplative, implying greater thematic cohesion than it delivers (203- 269, Vélez is 260-4). The chapter begins by framing Hollywood suicide as a narcissistic impulse succumbed to by individuals who cannot bear to live life without their youth and beauty as guarantor of public esteem and success. Anger catalogues popular suicide methods in a gendered taxonomy: guns are favored by men, for example; pills are favored by women. Read entry by entry, the tone is unstable. The narrative voice reveals affection for some, appreciates the accomplishments of others, cares nothing for several. The narrator is an

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<sup>450</sup> A critical response to Anger on García Stevenson might well come armed with Hiram Pérez’s response (2005) to Douglas Crimp (2002) on Mario Montez.

illogical fan, one driven by an inconsistent, if alternative, assessment of justice and/or beauty.

To locate the author's camp sensibility, as framed by Tinkcom, in the articulation of the Lupe Vélez story would mean positioning Vélez as "resuscitated failure." Her potential as such is implied but then denied. Vélez, the story goes, had attempted to take one final moment of control over the system of her own representation. Staging a suicide that leaves the world with the beautiful corpse, the perfect iconic image—one worthy of the pantheon of "heavenly bodies"—Vélez would have seized agency over the last instance of her representation. With her failure to perform the perfect suicide, Hollywood normative value triumphs. In Anger's hands, Vélez's hyperbolic, grotesque failure to seize agency over her image offers a narrative that, as Victoria Sturtevant writes, "participates in the logic of comedy—a melodrama gone awry, presumption deflated, elegance defiled (2005, 19). Vélez has accomplished the ugliest death instead of the most beautiful.

The only way the story could be understood as an iconoclastic negation of convention—an affirmative overturning of the normative terms of stardom—would be if the public *had* been left with a beautiful corpse. That is, if, in the period of 1958-1975, Vélez had indeed been remembered as a superbly glamorous and successful star by Hollywood (i.e. Anglo-normative) standards. Had Vélez been remembered as an iconic star, her ugly demise would perform a camp transvaluation and thus function as critical "corrective." The ironic joke would be on the industry's exposed systems of conventional star production and fan position; the story would be a socially engaged negation. As it is, though, there is no socially shared public misconception that is revealed as hollow.

Anger's story serves only as a *personal* negation. All that is exposed is Vélez's own individual supposed misfire. What is more, we are to understand the realization of that supposed misfire to have been Vélez's final conscious thought. The fact that we are privy to her (supposed) last private ironic failure makes her personal tragedy a very public, final humiliation. The celebration of her suicide does not rename and reframe Vélez's star commodity value, it reanimates the processes of public devaluation that characterized her Hollywood career.

Tinkcom makes the point that, within the books' constellations of sins, crimes, transgressions and grotesqueries, *Hollywood Babylon*, to a very large extent, "centers its concerns on the status of female sexuality and sexual pleasure" (150). If there is any temptation, following Tinkcom's reading of *Babylon* logic, to locate Vélez's story within the thematic framework of Anger's narratives on Mary Astor, Mae West and Francis Farmer—that is, as sardonic celebration of certain female stars' unapologetically errant sexuality and counter normative gender expression (Tinkcom, 152)—such a characterization would be gravely misguided. Any (trans)value the reader might find in Vélez's supposedly errant sexuality is relentlessly undermined by the text's derogatory language. Phrases such as "gyrating cunt-flashing Hollywood party girl" (Anger, 1981, 232) result in a narrative tone that set the story quite outside of the rubric by which Anger tells the stories of the "failed" (scare quotes are Tinkcom's) female stars that Tinkcom's study brings to our attention:

To hear them described by Anger, the lives of Astor, West and Farmer are triumphs over the hypocrisy of Hollywood politics, where the studios actively recruited non-conforming talent, all the while remaining unwilling to support, legally or otherwise, these figures when they erupted outside the boundaries of propriety. Yet these women have hardly remained staples of Hollywood star canons from the classical period and in fact enjoy a status mostly within a "trash" aesthetic of Hollywood cinema, to which Anger has been pivotal (152).

Tinkcom is acknowledging Anger's agency in the creation of an alternative Hollywood trash aesthetic—"a celebration of degeneracy and the perverse"—populated by conventionally "failed" stars. To the extent that we can understand female "triumphs over the hypocrisy of Hollywood politics" (152) to be a privileged theme of the Babylon books, we also must contend with the fact that Anger's story of Vélez's failed suicide/accident, told with a relish in transparently far-fetched detail, goes to great lengths to *include her out* of this catalogue of triumph.<sup>451</sup>

## Perfectly Dead



Figure 35: Jim Osborne, "Hollywood Tragedy"

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<sup>451</sup> I would break with Tinkcom and argue that nostalgia, rather than camp sensibility, structures each *Hollywood Babylon*. Only a nostalgic posture guides the narration fluidly from instances of "straight" fandom, to moments of critical reflection, to the revelation of an ironic camp perspective. Depending on one's own chosen position as reader, the *Babylon* narratives allow for a shift from one star's story to another. In other words, *Hollywood Babylon* offers something for almost everyone, or certainly for a wide spectrum of tastes and fan positions. The text trolls for wide consumer appeal on approximately the same basis as do any number of commercial products. This irresolvable *multiplicity* (as opposed to its "duality," for which Tinkcom and Brottman argue) ultimately betrays the text's *raison d'être* as a commercial product pledged to the accumulation of capital. *Hollywood Babylon*'s ambivalence, its ability to "pass"—as, at once, exposé, criticism, cynical commentary and fan discourse—is part of its commercial effectiveness. The narrative voice, reading as first person editorial with autobiographical enhancement, establishes the author as, simultaneously, authority and fan. Thus the reader forgives its incoherence: nostalgic fans are not expected to be rational and, *unlike artists*, they escape the expectation of theoretical (or "moral") consistency.

The visceral retelling of Anger's Vélez story by way of Jim Osborne's underground comics (fig. 28),<sup>452</sup>—to say nothing of the mass culture circulation of the story broadcast on *Frasier* and *The Simpsons*—speaks of the extent to which the Vélez fiction has come to epitomize or encapsulate the “value” and circulatory currency of Anger's *Babylon* logic. Likewise, Landis, as we saw in an earlier epigraphic quote, uses the Vélez story to typify the *Babylon* sensibility: the “stories with mostly terminal overtones” on which the books rest. As we have also seen, it took a few versions for *Babylon*'s author to get that sensibility so... *right*. The story's grotesque toilet climax is meaningful in relation to the suicide's staged aesthetic. The *set*, decorated with pre-funeral flowers that suggest sainthood, a literal visual iconization, is crucial to the irony on which the story's meaning hinges.<sup>453</sup>

While the preparation of the perfectly beautiful corpse resonates with the underlying theme of celebrity narcissism (which was foregrounded in the “Language of Self-Murder” chapter from 1984's *Babylon II*), and need not rest on Catholic iconography, the concept of the corpse as icon is certainly enhanced by the religious imagery—candles, flowers, crucifix—that evolved with each version of Anger's perfected narrative. The fact of Vélez's Catholicism—coupled with her name, Guadalupe, and inextricably tied, in the U.S. Protestant mind, to her ethnicity—makes the tale all the more poignant, more ironic, more perverse... and hence more *perfect* on those very terms. Vélez's staged spectacle sends up the spectacle of Catholic imagery. Such a seemingly self-aggrandizing gesture—creating her own image in the image of the *Virgin*

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<sup>452</sup> <http://phantomspitter.blogspot.com/2009/03/four-comic-stories-by-jim-osborne.html>

<sup>453</sup> The phrase “fake Spanish Hacienda,” may have even originated with the Warhol circle () but that shows up in Anger's seventies version, helps cinch the irony though, in fact, one might describe any number of Beverly Hills mansions with this phrase (as we know from the discussion of civic planning and architecture in chapter 3). Anger himself, in 2002, remembers Tom Mix's home with the same description.

of Guadalupe (and here the profane reference to “cunt-flashing” becomes all the more ironic, “humorous,” and offensive) makes Vélez—and, by association, Mexican Catholicism—read as pre-modern, naive and/or hypocritical.<sup>454</sup> As represented, Vélez registers an un-enlightened penchant for idol worship bound up with a kind of narcissistic ignorance. The *Frasier* story does us the dubious service of synopsizing the *Babylon* take-away: Vélez would not be remembered in life and thus naively imagined, as self-staged icon, she would be remembered in death. As Anger’s final, 1984 story would have it, she is killed by the high-heeled shoes (slipping on vomit covered marble) that she vainly insists on wearing to meet her maker.<sup>455</sup> It is arguably the specific degradation of Catholicism—represented to imply that Vélez herself degrades (rather than negotiates) her own religious up-bringing and beliefs—that implicates this story as both a personally leveled offense and as an ethnically- and a culturally-based offense.

The *Babylon* Vélez story begs the consideration of two related issues implicitly at stake in the narrative’s continued circulation: The question of individual access to stardom and the naturalizing of the relationship between Latina beauty, sexuality and death. In as much as photographic representation becomes a version of entombment, in the Bazinian sense, and as, likewise, ideally represented personages, stars, are “immortal” beauties, these two concepts are intimately related. Dead Hollywood actors do, by classic industrial design, leave behind beautiful corpses in the form of their filmic/photographic representation. While this is especially true for iconic figures that die young, youthful

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<sup>454</sup> In fact, the full context of Anger’s places the profane image next to a delusional image (it is implied) of religiosity and purity: “Lupe, the gyrating cunt-flashing Hollywood party girl, was in her heart of hearts the snow-white virgin of her first communion in San Luis Potosi...” (232). Again, the story implies a pre-modern inability for reflective identity construction. The implication places Vélez in complete contrast to the imaging of Farmer, Astor, and West.

<sup>455</sup> This narrative element of slipping on the tile, seemingly explaining the otherwise unlikely(!) possibility of drowning *in* the toilet, occurs in the first and last versions, but is absent from the middle versions.

immortalization is not limited to the early perished. Kenneth Anger's story does not so much muse on the idea of the beautiful corpse as it performs the operation of publicly and permanently defiling one. To the extent to which Vélez is memorialized with an image in which she is represented with her head on, in, or near the toilet—which, thanks to Anger, is quite a significant extent—the actress has been robbed of her Beautiful Corpse and thus “included out” of the pantheon of Hollywood icons. This function of exclusion is in no sense a counter hegemonic move on Anger’s part; it is, in the final analysis, a racist one.

### **In Search of the Warhol that Lupe Vélez Deserves<sup>456</sup>**

In the Summer of 2002, in Los Angeles, the Museum of Contemporary Art and American Cinematheque collaborated to present a film series, screened at the Historic Egyptian Theater in Hollywood, titled “Andy Warhol does Hollywood.” As wrote *Los Angeles Times* staff writer, Kevin Thomas (the same *Times* writer who had written on the beat of the underground film scene over three decades prior), several Warhol selections were to be screened in tandem with their corresponding historical reference material, that is, with vintage Hollywood movies “starring the actresses being emulated, parodied or celebrated (or all three) in the corresponding Warhol film.” Thomas announced the planned *Lupe* (1966) screening:

In the prophetic, split-screen "Lupe" (1965), [...] the ill-fated Edie Sedgwick is simultaneously seen lolling about an elegant apartment in the Dakota, applying makeup and chatting with Warhol stalwart Billy Name, and in the other scene, beautifully gowned but alone and drinking away her dinner in a formal dining room. Both episodes culminate in conjoining images in which Sedgwick is seen as dead in a bathroom in emulation of the real-life fate of movie star Lupe Velez. The waif-like Sedgwick couldn't have been more different from the "Mexican Spitfire," yet she too was to die at an early age. It will be followed by the 1939 Velez movie "The Girl From Mexico."

—Kevin Thomas, *Los Angeles Times*, August 1, 2002<sup>457</sup>

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<sup>456</sup> This section’s title is a play on the title of the Douglas Crimp essay (1999), “Getting the Warhol We Deserve.”

Thomas's announcement offers, along with historical documentation of a certain exhibition history, a rather complete narrative synopsis. While *Lupe* is said to be Warhol's first "narrative film" (Isles) the fact of its conclusion—in the form of *Lupe*'s/Edie's death—stands as its only formal narrative element. *Lupe*'s entirely indeterminant meaning is such that its screening with *The Girl From Mexico*—which, let there be no doubt, would never have registered any value at the Museum of Contemporary Art on its own terms, that is, without Warhol's indirect transvaluation—makes perfect sense in its making of no textual sense at all. It is sublimely impossible to picture what might have transpired at the Egyptian on Friday, August 28, 2002. The inscrutable *Lupe* offers analytical satisfaction only to those prone to the heady savoring of informed dissatisfaction. Teaming *Lupe* with *The Girl From Mexico*, another intriguingly unsatisfying film, could only compound the impenetrability of the representational misfires that interested Warhol. I imagine the evening might have been experienced as... theoretically "underdetermined" and, as such, an appropriately Warholian event. My analysis will ultimately argue Warhol's underdetermination as cultural-economic theory in practice.

Warhol's *Lupe* provides an inverse corollary to my reading of Anger's *Babylon* books. While Anger's texts answer to a commercial logic and, as such, exist in contrast to his modernist artist-driven film texts, Warhol's *Lupe* is only readable through an auteurist rubric. This is not to say that *Lupe* necessarily represents a coherent, theoretically stable authorial position within Warhol's body of work. Rather, I would argue that the

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<sup>457</sup> "Warhol Series Presents 'Lupe,' 'Lonesome Cowboys'." Thanks to Kevin Thomas for pointing me to this reference.

mechanisms of the capitalist mass market form the logic on which Warhol's authorship is defined and the only logic that holds his oeuvre in place. Warhol was the first, and perhaps is still the only, artist to garner Artistic (auteurist) success through an insistent embrace of the concept of art *in* (and thus of) market society. When, in 1962, he erased the paint dripping from his soup can representations, he left every romantic notion of the artist's vision aside and made work that spoke—loudly and unapologetically—the language of commodity. Immediately following that *formal* adjustment, Warhol began making paintings of money. To Warhol it seems to have been obvious, likely even *sincere*, to make art about economics.

From his analysis of Warhol's filmic practice, I take up Matthew Tinkcom's interest in "how camp's attendance to the centrality of the commodity and of labor in contemporary life is another form of queerness to emerge in modernity" (75). I appreciate Tinkcom's frank declaration of Warhol's queer *modernism*. Warhol subverted modernist aesthetics so as to *produce* a postmodern aesthetic, but his practice (including his negotiation of critical reception) was firmly rooted in modernism. His ambivalence toward modernist aesthetic principles leads the historian to re-periodize postmodern aesthetics rather than engage with Warhol on his own terms or, rather, the terms dealt by his own late-modernist era. Warhol's epistemological practice, his reflexive critique, rested on the denial of the artist's responsibility to formulate critique... or, more succinctly, on his refusal to formulate a theoretical principle on terms that feigned autonomy from the market. Thus Warhol performs an (auto-)critique of modernism; one that is precisely, stubbornly, *not* a critique of capital... though it might be understood as a critique of "straight" capital.

Daniel Herwitz argues that, “Warhol’s game of indeterminacy aims to defeat theory, to defeat interpretation, and above all to defeat the possibility of having convictions in art” (232-33). For Herwitz, Warhol’s work is “far from the terrain of the avant-garde” as it “fails to deliver the interpretive goods” (233). *Lupe*’s textual underdetermination rests in the fact that the film’s subject, topic, and form operate entirely (perhaps strategically) independent of one another.

Depending on which of these elements—subject, topic, form—extant critical analyses have foregrounded, *Lupe* has been classified in any one of three ways. First, based on its title and closing shot, critics classify the film as part of a “trilogy”—along with *More Milk*, *Evette* and *Hedy*, all from the winter of 1965-1966—of parodic Hollywood-related narratives (Isles, 90).<sup>458</sup> Yet *Lupe* is entirely unscripted, unlike the others, and its connection to its Hollywood reference is far looser. From a second perspective, as *Lupe* is one of Warhol’s dual-screen films, it has been read as a study of duality. And yet, beyond form, there’s no real basis to understand the two-screen texts as operating in a coherent “series.” The stark contrast taking place between the two screens in *Lupe* shares little in common with, for example, the complex doubling and layered, reflexive interplay structured by *Outer and Inner Space* (1966), save that both films are Sedgwick vehicles. To the extent that *Lupe* is about duality, it is a Sedgwick duality in which Lupe Vélez no longer figures.<sup>459</sup> Finally, privileging *Lupe*’s macabre subject

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<sup>458</sup> Isles is citing Callie Angell’s classification [The Film’s of Andy Warhol: Part II, exh. cat. (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1994) 25]. The film *Harlot* (1965) might be placed in this category as well, though it was made bit earlier and non-narrative. *Lupe* is often referred to as Warhol’s first “narrative” film.

<sup>459</sup> Arguably the film concerns issues of double duality or triangularity; the make-up scene is positioned next to a mirror so if, in exhibition, the two reels are projected simultaneously, the viewer will see three Sedgwicks. Yet, as if to underscore his ambivalence towards stable meaning making, Warhol gives instructions that the film might either be viewed on one screen with one reel following the other, or on two

matter, Isles suggests reading the film next to the *Death and Disasters* series. This actually follows a certain kind of logic, if, that is, we read the film as privileging of the banal, denying the singularity, the fame, of both Vélez and Sedgwick. For the disaster series makes icons of ghosts, immortalizing the deaths of those anonymous in life. *Lupe*—as a filmic text referencing historical Hollywood but starring “this last year’s model” (Edie Sedgwick in decline)—is both about stardom and is a document of stardom... or a document of Warhol’s Factory version of stardom, which is also about the eccentrically banal. In this sense, Warhol’s *Lupe* speaks back to Anger’s narrative by denying the spectacularization of star suicide.

*Lupe* makes the clearest ontological sense when placed next to other Sedgwick vehicles, all of which are eminently indexical (that is to say, Sedgwick on screen is understood as Sedgwick the person); they are very much *of* (if not *about*) Edie Sedgwick. The fact that Warhol planned to show the Sedgwick films together, and that he never did present (or even refer to, as far as I have seen) the “Hollywood series” as such, would seem to support this classification.<sup>460</sup> This brings us to the fact of *Lupe*’s singularity in one revealing sense; the film’s failure—or, I will say, refusal—to “deliver the interpretive goods” is conveniently remediated by the off-screen life of the film’s star/subject. Sedgwick’s death by overdose (probably accidental) ultimately delivered the interpretation upon which most retrospective discussion of *Lupe* relies: the idea that the film is *about* Sedgwick’s imminent self-destruction transposes the film into an historical

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screens with simultaneous projection. The artist thus implies that between these two entirely different spectatorial experiences, he harbors no preference.

<sup>460</sup> The plan was set aside when Sedgwick did not want to work with Warhol anymore, suspecting (like Mario Montez, as we will see) that he was making fun of her (Stein, 1982).

document.<sup>461</sup> Yet if one accepts Herwitz's argument that "Warhol's art is radically ambivalent about the very idea that it should mean anything at all" (247), one would reject the idea of any prophetic intention in the film's making. It makes more sense to accept *Lupe*'s indeterminacy, which registers most profoundly at the disconnection between the screened "action"—two indexical sign systems, both narrative only in the most vérité/documentary sense—and the screens' final simultaneous image: an iconic image (semiotically speaking) indicating the referent of the film's title, Lupe Vélez, who, otherwise, has no clear connection with the text.

Had the film staged Vélez's suicide, making the film specifically about Vélez (or the Vélez of the *Babylon* legend), the narrative would have folded the irony of its camp misfire—being then compounded by the irony of Sedgwick (Anglo-Saxon Aristocrat that she was) as Vélez's screen surrogate—directly into the text, charging the fact of that irony with "meaning," (and perhaps some implied critique) and reiterating the Anger texts. But it does not do this and would not. Warhol's love of "fashion mistakes"<sup>462</sup> (if not the people who make them), which I have no doubt he harbored, leaves no trace on the film itself. Instead, in a move I read as consistent with Herwitz's argument regarding Warhol's portraiture, the filmic image *drains* meaning, drains Vélez (and Sedgwick, though in a different way) of both expression and characterization. Herwitz writes:

Warhol replaces the projects of knowing people—feeling for them or against them, taking the poetry from them, or representing them in a social nexus, projects defining traditional portraiture—with that of fascination with the construction of the image of people through advertising, film, and the American dream (238-9).

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<sup>461</sup> James argues for the significance of Warhol's films as documentary "valuable precisely for his depiction of an otherwise unrepresented social milieu." (66-67). James argues against the proposal that Warhol's filmic practice is one of voyeurism.

<sup>462</sup> Rita Gonzalez, *The Assumption of Lupe Vélez* (1999), narration.

In other words, Warhol replaces an individual's (Vélez's/Sedgwick's) uniqueness with the representation—deadpan celebration—of her value as commodity, which is a transvaluation process of the most basic sort. Warhol's *Lupe* is *deadpan* camp. Its deadpan-ness is excessive; it is in diametrical contrast to flamboyance and yet equally indulgent. It is flamboyantly banal. The camera movement—its disinterested pans and zooms, implying its own boredom—makes for the strong presence we understand to be the film's author.<sup>463</sup> The life that is drained out of the screened figures is thus transferred to authorship. Warhol works hard (obsessively) to make filmmaking look simple, even authorless. And he does this so effectively that the glibness of his tone permeates the text with his own seemingly ambivalent attitude. It is with pristine complacency that Warhol mobilizes Vélez's name as an empty signifier, allowing it to be accompanied by whatever vague signification that the name carried in 1966: namely, Anger's story. The text relies on what is familiar about Vélez and/or Sedgwick so that viewership and circumstance construct whatever meaning might be ascribed to its enigmatic yet monotonous text.

Warhol's is a passive voice, even a (faux) bewildered one, but it screams through the text nevertheless. The untheorized, uninterrogated what-is-familiar is what, I believe, fascinates Warhol. And the viewer has to *believe* something fascinates the author because authorship is all the film gives us; we are fascinated with Sedgwick, for example, in large part because we are convinced that Warhol is. Hollywood stars were unknown as individuals and yet totally familiar. They are familiar enough—especially with TV's broadcast of old movies—to be utterly banal, to seem already drained of expression and

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<sup>463</sup> I am indebted to David E. James on this point. James writes: "Warholic camera work: zooms in and out or pans up a blank wall unsolicited by any pro-filmic event and thus not just drawing attention to the camera-operator but giving him a certain personality, namely one of bored and distracted figit." (1989).

characterization.<sup>464</sup> So while the text reads with bland transparency, its intertextuality speaks (with ambivalence) of the transvaluation of Hollywood stardom (via commercial TV) that is a function consistent with camp logic but one that also references the reality of the “camp” times. *Lupe* speaks to the chaotic remix of text and context in the age of late capitalist “post-auratic” (Cruz-Malavé 2010, 3) consumption.<sup>465</sup>

Perhaps the utility of Vélez’s image for this purpose is the fact of its already signifying with a kind of indeterminacy. “Classically” camp icons—Mae West, Maria Montez, Jayne Mansfield, Joan Crawford, Carmen Miranda—do not chaotically signify in the way that Vélez does (and, as I have argued, always has); their operations of transvaluation are not especially ambiguous.<sup>466</sup>

David E. James identifies the dynamic of “being seen,” culturally, as the “critical issue” of Warhol’s film practice: “[t]he construction of [Warhol’s] personal filmic discourse is inseparable from the process of securing prominence in the discourse of others” (58).<sup>467</sup> James thus links what he sees as Warhol’s twin obsessions: discourse and posturing. Warhol’s obsession with discourse becomes an extension of his obsession with the familiar, his intense interest in what commonly circulates in society as “known.”

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<sup>464</sup> In New York, as documented in the television listings in the *New York Times*, The “Mexican Spitfire” films were the only Vélez films broadcast on television during the 50s and 60s.

<sup>465</sup> Thanks to Arnaldo Cruz-Malavé, for generously sharing with me the text of his inspiring talk at UM, April, 2010.

<sup>466</sup> Regarding the “Hispanophilia” exercised by underground cultural producers, Suárez speaks of Vélez, grouped with Carmen Miranda and María Montez as signifying a queerness on the basis of an unconventional femininity linked with their ethnicity: “In these three divas, ethnicity was the excess that put them beyond the pale of conventional romance and may have primed them for queer appropriation” (2008, 11-13). Suárez makes the apt point that Good Neighbor era Hollywood musicals formed a foundation for a version of camp sensibility, but, I will reiterate, Vélez does not carry the consistent, monolithic image of María Montez or Carmen Miranda. Unlike these stars, Vélez’s image/persona didn’t “stabilize” until it was defined by her death... or by Anger’s definition of her death.

<sup>467</sup> David E. James (1989) makes this argument in the context of his reading of the specificity of Warhol’s work within broader oeuvre of the underground, to which he theorizes *irony* as the “central structuring device.” Cruz-Malavé points out the limitations produced by the reduction of underground production of that which can be approached ironically, a point that will become important in discussion of Rodriguez-Soltero below.

Warhol's art is *about* the production of socially shared knowledge. The what-is-known (and by whom), regarding Lupe Vélez, becomes crucial on exactly the terms that James identifies as central to Warhol's work: The shifting significance of Vélez's life and career reflected the dramatic and varying processes by which her persona(e) secured prominence—i.e. value—in the discourses of others. In Warhol's hands, Vélez's suicide story, proliferated by Anger, is fascinating for its enactment of radically changing *economies* of cultural discourse. Following James, I would place Warhol's interest in discursive currencies, and their shifting economies, as *Lupe*'s “central structuring device.”

The value of Anger's Vélez narrative, for Warhol's purposes, has nothing to do with Vélez's history. It resides in the power of “outsider” (trash gossip) knowledge production—in this case, “knowledge” steeped in camp ironic morbidity—to so decisively intercede on the economy of cultural discourse... to, on a dime, shift and re-value decades of agreed upon “what-is-known.” Anger's stories suggest that you don't have to produce art to produce what used to be (rather romantically) considered the province of art, to do what art does: to suggest a new way of seeing and understanding the world.<sup>468</sup> The fact that, in this instance, the significance of revaluation is frivolous and superficial, is not beside the point, it actually is the point. Warhol's art is considered anti-art, hostile to art, “ruining” art (for real artists) in that he proves that markets do what artists thought they should do themselves, as artists, not as producers of commodity. In positioning Sedgwick as Vélez's surrogate, *Lupe* succeeds in completely de-stabilizing

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<sup>468</sup> Dave Hickey says that Warhol changed the world: “You couldn't walk into a grocery store and see it the same way after Warhol. He changed the world” (Rosenfeld, *Andy Warhol: A Documentary Film*. 2006, dvd).

Anger's narrative. The film succeeds in rendering the suicide as banal and ordinary, just as Sedgwick's activities—her relatively relaxed morning indulging in a leisurely make-over and a haircut, on one screen, or a long lonely distracted dinner involving no appetite and extra alcohol on the other screen—are banal and ordinary (hence the link to the Saturday Disasters). The power of the final image, owing to its uniting the two screens, retrospectively re-signifies the daybed scene as only a depressingly superficial, aimless *play* at contentedness. Warhol has “seized the means of reproduction,” taken control of the discourses of fame, only to expose fame as punishingly banal on all but its own superficial terms.<sup>469</sup>

I will use the space remaining on Warhol's *Lupe* to mobilize the text as an occasion for historical contemplation. The fact that we can retrospectively locate a logic to the Vélez/Sedgwick duality—one not found in the text and (I would hold) manifested inadvertently—speaks of certain regional/temporal analogies existent between postrevolutionary Mexico and 1960s U.S. culture.

### **Girl of the Year - D.F. 1925 / NYC 1965**

Some become Girls of the Year because their fame suddenly shed light on their style of life, and their style of life could be easily exhibited, such as Jackie Kennedy and Barbara Streisand.

But Jane Holzer is a purer manifestation. Her style of life created her fame—rock and roll, underground movies, decaying lofts, models, photographers, Living Pop Art, [...]. Once it was power that created high style, but now high style comes from low places, from people who have no power, who slink away from it in fact, who are marginal, who carve out worlds for themselves in the nether depths, in the tainted “undergrounds.” Teen-agers, bohos, camp culturati, photographers—they have won by default, because, after all, they do create styles. And now the other society goes to them for styles, like the decadenti of another age going down to the wharves of Rio to find those raw vital devils, damn their potent hides, those proles, doing the tango. Yes! Oh my God those raw-vital proles!

Tom Wolfe, “The Girl of the Year.” 1964<sup>470</sup>

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<sup>469</sup> Rosenfeld, *Andy Warhol: a Documentary Film*. 2006. Dvd. I'm quoting Brian Keane.

<sup>470</sup> Wolfe's “Girl of the Year” essay first appeared in the *Herald Tribune's Sunday Magazine, New York*. It is reprinted as chapter eleven in Wolfe's self edited collection of essays (1965).

What is gained by comparing an anecdotal reference (several times repeated) of Edie Sedgwick as 1965 “girl of the year” to Lupe Vélez as “señorita 1925” by Jorge Loyo four decades earlier? Where can this coincidence point beyond two fetching skinny brunettes who leave two beautiful corpses, two sets of dyed blond hair. Perhaps if Tom Wolfe’s nomination of Warhol superstar (“Baby”) Jane Holzer in 1964 had been held back a year and ascribed to Sedgwick, Warhol’s anointed Superstar of ’65, my comparison would be sharper, though, in reality, no more tangibly significant. As it is, Bob Heidie’s conversational reference to Sedgwick as “the girl of the year” (GOTY) was undoubtedly an extrapolation of Sedgwick as Holzer’s heir apparent in the eyes of those who followed such things. (And, make no mistake, people following such things were many: not merely the art world or an insider chic set. Holzer had the British invasion at her doorstep; Sedgwick’s style was emulated by readers of *Vogue* and *Life Magazine*; Wolfe’s readers, following his chronicles in the *New York Herald Tribune*, were legions.) Sedgwick had the society credentials and the American-aristocracy-runs-amuck ironic appeal for the anti-establishment social climbers. She was gorgeously emblematic of a young rich nation whose primary care in the world involved messing with—ironically, ambiguously, ambivalently, relentlessly—the old cares of the old world (class, culture, taste). The GOTY nominations—Vélez’s of ’25, Holzer’s of ’64, Sedgwick’s of ’65, Nico’s of 1967—were innovations of popular journalism’s rejecting institutional legitimacy and turning to the street for credibility. The cultural currency of a GOTY distinction is in direct contrast to a Miss America, a Miss Mexico, or an *India Bonita*. The latter contests guaranteed continuity of the social status quo with the pretty female upholding an

idealized national image. Our GOTYs mark spontaneous recognitions of brash newness, *disruptive* change, opposition—openly *mocking* opposition—to the conventionally granted honor of Miss... fill-in-the-Nation. “Girl of the Year” was a badge awarded to certain “girls” who came to signify, if not instantiate, a cultural upset—it was a badge of iconoclasm, recognizing implosions of class stratification where sacred images were being quickly re-valued, recycled and replaced. Paradoxically, GOTYs also stood for a newly forged queering of culture: a coming together of the lettered and the popular, the richer and the poor-ish (or images/signifiers thereof), the gay and the straight, over the vicissitudes of style, identity, gender, celebrity and cultural globalism.

Andy’s girls—Holzer, Sedgwick, Nico—and the 1960s New York scene of which they were emblematic, bear a remarkable cultural resemblance to the *tiple*-centric theater scene of post-revolutionary Mexico City. The carnivalesque, underground-surfacing, New York party scene of the mid sixties, as reported by Wolfe or as later recalled by Factory regulars, brings to mind Jose Orozco’s recollection of *Revista*, the dramatically diverse audiences it assembled, from “the filthiest scum mixed with intellectuals and artists” (45). If Warhol’s Factory did not host army bureaucrats or secretaries of state, as did the *revista* that Orozco remembers, it attracted the odd politician along with a steady stream of Hollywood actors, British rockers, New England socialites, Broadway writers and players... the effete rubbed shoulders with the rawest of “vital proles” (Wolfe). In such worlds rhetorical labels like “liberal” and “conservative” are inadequate to encompass the chaotic dynamics, alliances and contestations in play.<sup>471</sup> Political labels

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<sup>471</sup> Warhol’s world elevates fame far above any political positioning. Warhol’s Magazine, *Interview*, was vexing to the political minded for the fact that the Left and Right were equally culturally “valuable,” that is, cultural currency (in a world where it is imagined that all would be equally likely to enjoy their fifteen minutes of fame) is valued as an end in itself.

are both inadequate and irrelevant, hence the vulnerability to charges of apolitical indulgence, decadence, and, not least, the dreaded (queer) “feminization” of culture. In both U.S. and Mexico’s post-revolution it is a queering of gender normativities that underscores the inadequacy of binary taxonomies. The “cultural revolution” of the 1960s reflected the exhausted utility of “high” art’s politicized aesthetic, its inability to sustain a vibrant culture of creative production (despite the considerable material and discursive resources dedicated to Clement Greenberg’s formalism<sup>472</sup>) that could prove as compelling as mass-produced America and her massively proliferating visual culture.<sup>473</sup>

Evidencing a shift not unlike that of postrevolutionary Mexico (Gabara, Oropesa), when turn-of-the-century modernism was seen as culturally and politically spent, the avant garde did not find inspiration in romanticism (an understatement, considering Warhol) but, rather, turned to a version of the baroque.<sup>474</sup> Such coincidences of trans-American history do not arrive with a ready argument for their connection. The link between Sedgwick and Vélez is not self-evident at face value. If it was Sedgwick’s enigmatic charm, uncanny timeliness, uni-sexiness, that led to her casting as Lupe, the choice should not be taken as recognition of a time and place in which these same qualities were recognized in Lupe Vélez. On the contrary, Sedgwick’s casting was

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<sup>472</sup> It was not until 1974 that Eva Cockcroft’s article in *Artforum* (“Abstract Expressionism, Weapon of the Cold War”) revealed to the wider public the U.S. State Department’s role in the international promotion of the crown jewel of American high modernism, abstract expressionism. Likely, however, Cockcroft’s publication marked the *culmination* of knowledge shared in New York cultural circles, rather than a grand revelation (Guilbaut). American high modernism had become subject to question not solely on the basis of its polemical, elitist dismissal of the popular, but on its apparent inability to sustain its tired binary of avant-garde versus kitsch, then more than half-century old, on other than deliberately constructed, politically motivated terms. With its reliance on cloaked institutional backing revealed, high Modernism’s dogma of artistic autonomy was rendered retrospectively hollow.

<sup>473</sup> Suarez, in his observations regarding journalistic literary models () does not mention the significant role of the visual in the work of Wolfe, Thompson, and Susan Sontag; I would suggest, again, an analogy with the popular weeklies of postrevolutionary Mexico.

<sup>474</sup> To the extent that the “counter-culture’s” romanticism absorbed the neo-baroque—again, a function of economy and commodity—I have to re-submit the question of cultural leveling and commodification.

understood as highlighting her contrast from her referent (Waughn, 2002). The idea that Lupe Vélez's performative persona, life experience or (trans)cultural knowledge somehow mysteriously touched Andy Warhol's queer antenna... and that Warhol thereby conceived of a association between Vélez and Sedgwick... is an appealing notion but not an argument I can sustain. On the other hand, Warhol's *Lupe* did occasion a compelling, creative response. The fact that José Rodríguez Soltero's *Lupe*, came to be known by the same name as Warhol's (rather than the original, title discussed at the opening of the chapter) may provide testament to the second film's value as a (corrective) *remake* of the first.

### **Conclusion: The (Life, Death) and Assumption of Lupe Vélez**

I don't like to use the word "drag" because it has other meanings... it means something bad. I'll wear costumes for films of plays—but not at home—because I'm creating something for art.

Mario Montez, 1968.

Lo Chocante is our point of origin.

Lupe Vélez is our corn goddess.

Mario Montez is our patron santo.

We declare Walter Mercado our spiritual advisor.

We rescue camp from the sole property and fetish of white queer sensibility.

We work outside the binary of resistance and assimilation.

— excerpts from "A.L.A.R.M.A.'s Manifesto Destiny," 1998.<sup>475</sup>

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<sup>475</sup> A.L.A.R.M.A. (Artists in Los Angeles Reconceptualizing Media Arts) is Rita González, Ramón García, C. Ondine Chavoya.

1. We appropriate the phantom spectacles of the city to practice and produce counter spectacles.
2. We create drive-by identities like the passing glance of desire and recognition.
3. We make our absence palpable.
4. We mark and work within the multiple sites of subjection to restructure relations of desire, pleasure and power.
5. History is not nostalgia, it is an act of presence and an active present.
6. We live in a moment of danger.
7. We create situations for critical and creative thought and action.
8. We don't assume that identity and community are predetermined factors, but constantly negotiated through the multiple intersections and contradictions of desire, violence, and representation.
9. The artistic trappings of the last century have putrefied, as have those of postmodernism.
10. We cannibalize existing icons and media images.
11. We stage movement and possibility as opposed to the prescribed stasis of iconic mythical representation.
12. Lo Chocante is our point of origin.
13. Lupe Vélez is our corn goddess.
14. Mario Montez is our patron santo.
15. We declare Walter Mercado our spiritual advisor.

Much has been made of Warhol's 1964 car trip to California: his fascination with the West and his love of plastic. Though the trip to Los Angeles did not mark the beginning of Warhol's filmmaking practice, it seems to have been the initiation of his interest in Hollywood as a "factory," providing a (not antithetical) model for his own future work.<sup>476</sup> The shiny pop aesthetic was everywhere evident, increasingly so the further west Warhol traveled (Nettleton, ). The western U.S. had more space, less apparent industrial production, more apparent consumption and—less often noted, prior to recent critical interventions—fewer bodies of color. Warhol, acting in his capacity as U.S.'s collective magic mirror, reflects the nation's aesthetic values happily back to itself... seemingly without judgment and thus, in effect, performing a kind of absolution: "Vacant, vacuous Hollywood was everything I ever wanted to mold my life into. Plastic. White on white" (quoted in Nettleton, 2009, 76). Just as Warhol's filmic work is about economies of discourse and "seizing the means of reproduction," it is impossible (or should be) to separate his queer discursive intervention from the ethnic/racialized politics of

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- 16. Maria Felix lives!
  - 17. Set to the theme song of La Tocada: Veronica Castro's bad feathered hair and over-permed split ends will replace the unibrow icon.
  - 18. Selena's bad fashions are an inspiration to us all.
  - 19. We want to bring real tackiness back in popular culture.
  - 20. We rescue camp from the sole property and fetish of white queer sensibility.
  - 21. We will rescue fashion victims, recognizing that only the well-dressed will survive.
  - 22. We are neither stereotypes nor archetypes, nor prototypes nor caca-types.
  - 23. We do not mediate, we deviate.
  - 24. We are not American Me nor American You.
  - 25. All our actions shall have theme music.
  - 26. Repulsion will be convulsive or will not be.
  - 27. The border as brokered metaphor is tired.
  - 28. We can afford to be sarcastic, sardonic, ironic and satirical, but refuse resignation and nihilism.
  - 29. We work outside the binary of resistance and assimilation.
  - 30. We reclaim this land as Aztlán, Sodom and Gomorrah, and the Land of the Lost.
  - 31. We refuse the normative landscape of the city, its blissful nihilism and resignation in order to reconfigure its cognitive foundation and effects.
  - 32. We come from Modesto, Santa Ana and Whittier.
  - 33. We perform the unimaginable: we walk in L.A.

<sup>476</sup> Tinkcom points out the switch on the Hollywood "studio" and the Warhol "factory" (2002, 87).

representation. Jonathan Flatley observes the extent to which Warhol's pop aesthetic creatively ushered the artist and his cohort of "outsider" Factory workers into the public sphere. Flatley argues that The Factory and its discourses produced "queer versions of what Nancy Fraser has called subaltern counterpublics" (Flatley 104, Fraser 15, quoted in Nettleton 15). But Taro Nettleton questions the extent to which Warhol's "utopias of self-abstraction"—which, Flatley argues, enabled factory queers and their spectatorial counterparts to "feel as if [they] had transcended [their] own particularity"—was available to "counterpublics" of color. Regarding the screening of Mario Montez, Nettleton finds that, in fact, they were not:

If 'white-on-white' was all Warhol ever wanted, it might very well be that those who were not white were marginalized even within Warhol's counterpublic space. [...]. In the film *Hedy*, wherein Montez acts the role of Hedy Lamarr, the film undermines Montez's potential to inhabit that role by drawing attention to Montez's male particularity rather than his performance. Montez remembers: 'I think he was trying to bring out the worst in me.... I was holding a cigarette in a holder and he zoomed in on my arms so that he could see my huge veins'" (Nettleton, 76, citing McColgen's interview with Montez, 1968, 19).

Montez's suspicion that Warhol was "trying to bring out the worst in [him]" is all but confirmed by Warhol's memory of the same event: "When he saw that I'd zoomed in and gotten a close-up of his arm with all the thick, dark masculine hairs and veins showing, he got very upset and hurt and accused me in a proud Latin way, 'I can see you were trying to bring out the worst in me'" (Warhol/Hackett, 1980, 91).<sup>477</sup> Warhol's remark, incidentally, serves to underscore the significance of the controversy that occasioned a reconsideration of Montez work: the casually, condescendingly naturalized coupling of the concepts "Latin-ness" and "pride." Greg Barrios's period review of *Hedy* documents a spectator response that complicates the reception of Montez as misfit/outcast/exotic in Warhol's pantheon of superstars. For Barrios, Montez proves—with his "almost

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<sup>477</sup> These two accounts are both quoted in Nettleton, 77. See, also, accounts of the Warhol/Montez relationship in Cruz-Malave (2007) and Perez (2005).

unbelievable performance” in Hedy—that he is “the only authentic ‘superstar’ to emerge from the new [underground] movement” (31). Implied in Barrios’s review is that Montez’s performance manages to “transcend” *despite* Warhol, rather than due to Warhol’s own belief in Montez’s star qualities.<sup>478</sup> Perhaps relatedly, the collaboration would soon come to an end. After *Hedy*, Montez appeared for six minutes in *Chelsea Girls*, his last film with Warhol.<sup>479</sup>

*Lupe* is the last of Warhol’s ’65-’66 Hollywood diva satires, and the only one in which Montez is not in the diva role.<sup>480</sup> Of the diva films, *Lupe*, taken on its face, is the most dead-pan and probably the least humiliating of both character and performer.<sup>481</sup> If we choose to see *Lupe* as the final in a trilogy, Montez’s absence is made all the more conspicuous. Rodriguez-Soltero’s remake not only reinserts Montez in the drag role of Hollywood diva, it unburdens the star of the satirical irony that Montez’s casting takes on under Warhol’s direction. Furthermore, Rodríguez-Soltero’s film goes a considerable distance in reinserting Vélez herself.

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<sup>478</sup> Unfortunately, I am unable to account for Barrios’ career as a critic (is he perhaps the same critic who wrote occasionally for *Film Quarterly* in the same era with the spelling “Gregg” Barrios?) Barrios seems to have been one of the very few critics of the era that was able to write outside of modernist formalism’s imperative, that is, along the lines of the approach advocated by Suárez. Apparently his criticism, too, had largely fallen through the cracks of the avant garde’s cultural memory.

<sup>479</sup> Montez didn’t like how he was treated by the two other men in the scene. According to his later account, he was singing, he sang two short songs, and the two were talking over him. He left and Warhol told him to get back in the scene and he refused. (Barrios, 1968, 19).

<sup>480</sup> According to Angell, Both *Hedy* and *Lupe*—along with *More Milk, Evette*—were made in the Winter of 1965-66; AFI lists *Hedy* as opening in New York on 3 March, 1966; *Lupe* is listed as opening 7 May, 1966. *More Milk* opened 8 February; *Chelsea Girls* opened 15 September 1966.

<sup>481</sup> Even so, Sedgwick’s work with Warhol was coming to a close after *Lupe*. She is said to have not been sure if he was making fun of her or not (Stein, 1994).

Thomas Waugh sees Sedgwick as perhaps the only female in Warhol’s movies that is representative as a “vaginal woman” rather than a queen. The fact that Warhol didn’t use Mario Montez points to the fact that Montez’s casting would not operate in ironic contrast to Vélez’s persona that it functioned in relation to the personae of Lamarr, Turner, or Harlow.



Anthology Film Archives

**Figure 36: Mario Montez as Lupe**

Rodríguez-Soltero's *Lupe* exists in intertextual triangulation with Anger's and Warhol's texts, yet it asserts its autonomy by adopting neither Anger's hyperbolic grotesquerie nor Warhol's ambivalent abstraction. Here Vélez has a history of sorts, a history epic-like in scope rather than limited to a tale of her demise. At the same time, the film avoids reference to any story that might be mistaken as literally historical, including Anger's. While reinserting Vélez (which occurs most directly with an "interview" where she is asked to name her favorite actors... her transhistorical answer names Cooper, Wiessmuller and Charles Ludlam) the film does not suppress actor/performer to character. In this *Lupe*, character signification is symbolic rather than iconic (as in conventional Hollywood narrative) or indexical (as in Warhol's films).<sup>482</sup> This mode of signification brings the film into the realm of the kind of individual subjective expression that modernists championed in avant-garde production. On the other hand, the film's blithe tone and Hollywood subject matter keep it firmly in the realm of Pop. Rodríguez-Soltero's innovation of character and genre hybridization is one of the film's profound

<sup>482</sup> As discussed in earlier chapters, the normative function of actors on the Hollywood screen is polyvalent, meaning they always negotiate a combination of indexical, iconic and symbolic representation with iconic representation being heavily privileged.

strengths, though it is also surely a reason for its having initially slipped through the cracks of criticism and public discourse.<sup>483</sup> I have said that the film counters the realism convention of suppressing actor to character; recent attention to the film—important accounts by Suárez and Cruz-Malavé—have consistently privileged actor over character, emphasizing the complex indexical significance of Montez's casting *over* the symbolic function of Montez as Vélez.

Owing to the self-consciousness of a gender-bent role portrayal, there is an inherent simultaneity to Mario's presence as performer and actor; we do not see him as embodying Vélez as much as performing Lupe. Such cross-signification arguably allows a retrospective interpretation, also, of Vélez as *performer* of Lupe: Vélez as drag queen performing the Latin feminine, the very operation that is at the heart of my argument in the first and third chapters of this dissertation regarding the role of performativity in Vélez's practice. So while Montez's indexical significance, like Warhol's choice of Edie Sedgwick, functions self-reflexively, Rodríguez-Soltero's *Lupe* brings Vélez's history and Mario's present into contact rather than staging their distance. Warhol's film, only vaguely anchored by setting, stages an abstraction; Sedgwick alone, represented indexically, locates the film in present time New York, a world alien to Lupe Vélez. Rodríguez-Soltero's film, in contrast, creates a space for Vélez on the Lower East Side, gives her a surrogate body and a home that opens to street and community; Vélez is afforded a brief incarnation in the '60s present. *Lupe* is a neighborhood film with a collective sensibility (portions of *Lupe* were filmed in Montez's apartment, with

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<sup>483</sup> In this version of the chapter I have largely jettisoned the critical split by which queer underground production was evaluated and discussed in its own time. See Suárez (1996) for an account of those who critiqued the work on aesthetic grounds versus those who championed it on “free-speech” grounds. Waugh's work (1996) on queer underground audience suggests the genre's appeal was based on its function as queer eroticism, especially when not created by an established artistic personality like Warhol.

Montez's white cat standing in for Vélez's own beloved pets). Most significantly, perhaps, for its contrast to Warhol's film, Rodriguez-Soltero represents Vélez's act of suicide, thereby restoring agency to her choice. By staging the suicide as a gas asphyxiation rather than drug overdose, the scene bears no reference whatsoever to Anger's narrative and the film's final image could hardly be more different from the Warhol ending. In Rodriguez-Soltero's ending, Montez, gorgeously filmed in a bright red coat, arms extended, gaze upward, is, as Cruz-Malavé writes, "assuming here a much-deserved divine status by ascending to heaven in body and soul... joyously rushing... toward the promised, glowing transcendence of the film's image...."

... he is not a passive recipient of divine intervention of grace.... Montez may be said both to embrace and demand his entrance into the luminously transcendent sphere of cinematic stardom, his assumption of ascension to stardom being marked here both by a willfully rebellious artiness and an apparently unpremeditated unself-conscious, hyperbolic form of belief" (2).

Cruz-Malavé's reading privileges indexicality, as I have noted and, importantly, recuperates Montez's fantastic(al) performance in the film. Cruz-Malavé positions Montez not simply as actor but as Actor (in the Austinian sense). This emphasis on Montez—the fact that Vélez slips out of the analysis—reveals the still limited extent to which Vélez's historical presence signifies in the film. We might be reminded, for example, that Vélez's New York spirit lives on Broadway, dressed in jewels and fur. The red coat is borrowed for her brief *Loisaida* visit.

We might want that Vélez, too, would gain "entrance into the luminously transcendent sphere of cinematic stardom," as is, conceivably, the film's wish. And it is no less sincere a wish for the inexact or ahistorical nature of its reference material.<sup>484</sup> In

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<sup>484</sup> The suggestion that Vélez started out as a street-walker, while falling entirely outside of circumference of illuminating biography, is represented with humorous affection in Rodriguez Solteros's and Montez's hands and thus functions as a reference to Vélez's *discursive* history even while perhaps serving, I have to

fact, the ahistoricity is purposeful. Ultimately, part of the film's affect lies in the fact that Vélez's assumption remains—ultimately, poignantly, realistically—unrealized. Readings by both Cruz-Malave and Suárez reach for the Vélez in the film and come back with someone or something else. The extra-textual association that Mario Montez's off-screen story introduces—the association of Vélez with the Dominican-born B-movie actress, Maria Montez, namesake of Mario's screen persona—has scant biographical relevance to Vélez, her films, or her life. “Perfect filmic appositeness” (Jack Smith, 1962) notwithstanding, Maria’s magically “atrocious” acting along with the “plastic cornball” sets combining to create the “druglike hallucinatory beauty” of her technicolor films, do little to illuminate Vélez’s late career B-movie productions (filmed in black and white) and tell us nothing about their reception within queer, underground, and/or Puerto Rican communities. Vélez’s “Spitfire” films bear no resemblance to Maria Montez’s *Arabian Nights / Cobra Woman* image. Montez’s femininity—tall, broad, ample, and regularly paired with the strapping John Hall—is “unconventional,” as Suarez notes (2008, 11), in a manner that satisfies the U. S. version of an exotic Latina *ideal*. Her “atrocious” acting, together with her films’ campy pre-modern settings, is delightfully subversive in that the combination self-reflexively denaturalizes that particular Latina/feminine trope. What is all the more delightful is the way Maria Montez can be seen to relish this process of sly transvaluation while the question of intent (on the part of author or performer) becomes irrelevant. The “fiesty” Vélez, by contrast, accounts for an *un-idealized* Latina stereotype that in fact functions as Maria Montez’s opposing corollary: Vélez is the anti-Amazon; her diminutive stature serves to naturalize Carmelita’s/Vélez’s perpetually re-staged

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submit, to confuse actual history. Having only seen the film on one occasion, I am indebted to Suárez’s textual analysis (2008, 22-25).

battle for her legitimate position within the very B-caste texts in which she is supposedly centered. Vélez has as much in common with Montez as does Rosie Perez.

While Rodriguez-Soltero's appropriation does not afford access to Vélez's actual history, it performs the more salient function of probing the fact of her historical absence. Ramón Garcia's identification of the political stakes in Vélez representation is instructive. For Garcia, "specific icons and myths are recuperated in order to reinscribe them with a politics previous representations denied them" (2002, 70). Garcia, one of the A.L.A.R.M. scholars, here explicates precisely the operation of a productive intellectual recuperation. He is writing not about Rodriguez-Soltero's film, though, but about the 1999 video by fellow A.L.A.R.M.ist, Rita Gonzalez. Garcia continues:

In [*The Assumption of Lupe Vélez*], the hyperbolic performance of gender is reconnected to Lupe Vélez's 'Mexicanness'—a connection that her star persona in Hollywood naturalized and depoliticized. By acknowledging and reflecting upon Lupe Vélez's ethnic markings and her gendered performativity, the myth of Lupe Vélez, the Mexican spitfire, is decoded and politicized (70).

Gonzalez's video is negotiating multiple recuperations. I would suggest that its most productive recuperation is of Rodriguez-Soltero's *Lupe*, which Gonzales does indeed inscribe with the politics that its original context (i.e. its critical reception, or lack thereof) was denied.

With *Lupe*, Rodriguez-Soltero is working in a manner comparable to the art of the Los Angeles-based Asco collective of the late 1960s and early '70s. Asco ("nausea" in Spanish) is a four person collective consisting of Harry Gamboa Jr., Gronk, Willie Herrón, and Patssi Valdez, that launched a project, called *No-Movies*, whereby faux film "stills" "document" Chicano movies in Los Angeles that have not actually been made. In an analogous manner, Rodriguez-Soltero's film performs a faux documentary—an imaginary recuperation of a might-have-been-Vélez. The film's full title, "The Life,

Death and Assumption of Lupe Vélez,” promises a quasi-mystical epic history that happens to be an untellable story.

C. Ondine Chavoya describes the process by which Asco’s “no movies” project performed a double critique, spoofing the normative structure of stardom and celebrity representation while also belying the utopian nationalism trope generally adopted by the Chicano community: “While Warhol’s strategy may have been not to direct his films, Gamboa’s was to not make movies; while Warhol may have attempted to create a Hollywood outside Hollywood, Asco created the affect of Hollywood from the periphery of Hollywood” (1998, 10-11). In a similar maneuver, Gonzalez’s *Assumption* brings to light the significance that Vélez’s absence, mediated by Montez’s performative presence, has for a queer population in Los Angeles. It is Montez’s “hyperbolic performance of gender” (as phrased by García), taking place in Rodriguez-Soltero’s *Lupe*, that the initiated spectator might carry over as a reflection on Vélez’s own craft, and thus become “associated with her Mexicanness” (or, rather, enacted by Montez, associated with *latinidad*). González’s *Assumption* brings home—from New York to Los Angeles and to the Mexican-American / Chicano community of Echo Park—the serial documentation of Vélez’s cultural memory. While delighting in the fact of queer male figures in drag finding and speaking community by way of Vélez’s ghost, we should not make the mistake of assuming a direct relationship between Lupe’s queer ghost and the *recuperation* (optimistically claimed by Garcia) of the “actual” Vélez.

There is a moment in González’s video that seems to most directly locate Vélez’s historical subjectivity. Blurry imagery of a feminine countenance fill the screen as Mexican artist Ximena Cuevas narrates what we want to understand as Vélez’s own

words... commenting on, self-reflexively, on her own historical words: “I arrived on the scene as they say, with one dollar ... when I opened my mouth these are my first words in English: ‘chocolate,’ ‘malted milk,’ ‘strawberry ice cream’ and ‘hell’.”<sup>485</sup> It sounds so right that we are not inclined, in the viewing moment, to be reminded that Vélez learned English at a Texas convent school, practiced her nascent language skills in her job in the Mexico City department store where she was employed, and was known to sprinkle English into her stage shows. Gonzalez’s dedication to the rediscovery of Lupe Vélez as subject results in a project that, I would submit, reads as reluctant to squarely face the fact of its still missing center.

*The Assumption* presents Vélez’s image in its canonical 1927 *Gaucho* incarnation (as “feisty,” lusty pan-Latina girl-child, the silent role that launched her Hollywood career) and narrates, in Spanish, Vélez’s somewhat questionable suicide notes (which were hand written in English and which are also reproduced in the later editions of *Hollywood Babylon*). In other words, the video mediates a small set of conundrums that bookend the missing, two-decade-long series of mediated conundrums that are what we have of Vélez history. In this sense, *Assumption* might be seen to embrace, even celebrate, Vélez’s opacity. For it is Vélez’s opacity that is so productively mobilized—fetishized even—by the queer Echo Park community that has taken her up to (re)produce her collective memory. It is the absence at the center of the Vélez narrative—viscerally exploited by her compellingly false biographies and thus deceptively appearing to be filled—that renders Vélez so ripe for the transvaluation and re-signification performed by Anger, Warhol, Rodríguez Soltero and González. The combination of her opaque

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<sup>485</sup> Though Rita González’s credits do not list Heda Hopper as a writer, I defer to Fregoso’s analysis of the video, which documents Cuevas’s reading an obituary that Heda Hopper wrote for Vélez.

subjectivity and the excessive sexuality associated with her persona renders her particularly useful in the production of gender critique. Here I submit another “coincidence” of history: the fact that Lupe Vélez—before Anger or anyone else redeployed her death and her memory, in fact before she ever arrived in Hollywood—had taken on the performance of gender as her province and her currency. The enigmas of Lupe Vélez’s celebrity—her role as celebrity antagonist in the Mexico City popular theater, her reciprocal love/hate relationship with Anglo Hollywood, her ambivalent embodiment of transgressive femininity and “exotic” consumability, her hyperbolic performance of a volatile Latina stereotype—are all obliquely signified in Rodriguez-Soltero’s *Lupe*. Yet it is the impossibility of the stable representation of enigma that is foregrounded in that film. Rodriguez-Soltero’s *Lupe* denaturalizes Vélez’s representation, and thus acknowledges the uncanny phenomenon that is “cultural memory.” Rodriguez-Soltero’s *Lupe* cheerfully but poignantly reminds us that the figure in the center of the *Lupe* text has not been accounted for and, so, is unrecuperable. Though unrecuperated, Lupe Vélez is nonetheless *assumable*, in the spiritual if not the cultural sense.

With that thought again in mind I am struck by the image of Lupe Vélez appointed as A.L.A.R.M.’s Chicana corn goddess. The Vélez referenced in A.L.A.R.M.’s manifesto comes packaged in a complex set of ironies. For we know that Vélez—whether “*la tiple jazz*” or “the Mexican Spitfire”—has always been located so far from Chicomecoatl and so close to the United States. As *la tiple* 1925, Vélez might be understood as emblematising a kind of modern opposition to the romancing of indigenous identity. I’m thinking again of *la tiple* “jazz” standing in productive contrast to Mexico’s 1925 *india bonita*. But, as the spirit of the A.L.A.R.M.’s manifesto (“Lo

Chocanate is our point of origin") might serve to remind, a cultural ritual like the *india bonita* contest represents a performance of indigeneity as much as a celebration of *indianidad*. In fact, they—the tiple jazz, the *india bonita*, the Mexican Spitfire—are all transcultural, hybrid figures. Writer and performance artist Aida Salazar uses the term “indigenous chic” to characterize the Mexican representation of the “Indian” as portrayed by Mexican films (most famously in films starring Dolores del Rio). For Salazar, “indigenous chic” carries an authenticity in that it is “completely comfortable with its own hybridity.” (García, 65-66). There is a fecund humor enacted with A.L.A.R.M.’s corn sign’s double mis-fire: the image of Vélez striking some sort of iconic ironic corn-goddess pose (however and wherever the corn(y) goddess might manifest—perhaps advertized on the side of an express bus or on a billboard next to Walter Mercado’s, visible from an L.A. freeway) lends A.L.A.R.M.’s invocation a personal specificity while indicating the conspicuous absence of any stable iconic figuration that the historical Lupe Vélez might neatly embody. A.L.A.R.M. lends the corn-goddess trope a transcultural function that, as Salazar maintains, “corn-goddess mythology” itself generally denies.<sup>486</sup> Salazar, recorded in a conversation with Ramón García, sums up her analysis of “indigenous chic” with a statement that speaks to A.L.A.R.M.’s transvaluation strategy: “I get bored with corn, unless it’s on a stick” (García, 66). I relish the image of Vélez as our lady of transculturation, goddess of corn on a stick. She inhabits, simultaneously, Mexico City and Los Angeles and New York. Her voice is still loud... loud enough to drown out the call of La Llorona.

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<sup>486</sup> Ramon Garcia writes: “[a]ccording to Salazar, ‘corn goddess’ mythology is a limited perspective because it lacks the conscious hybridity she strives for in her writing and in her performance” (65).

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