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Dolores del Río and Lupe Vélez: Working in Hollywood, 1924-1944

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Abstract

This article focuses on Dolores del Río and Lupe Vélez, contextualing their film careers in relation to their reception by their audiences. It focuses on how, despite their generally opposite media representations and personas, they had much in common because they functioned within very similar political-economic contexts. Contributing to their commonalities was the film industry's role in casting and representing them in a manner that reflected the hyper-sexuality attributed to Latinas, but in a "palatable" –for the times– way. Despite different career paths, both were personally involved in transnational circuits, confronted issues of work autonomy, accommodation, resistance and control, and were pressured to play to Hollywood stereotypes and to "represent" their communities. The author's analysis is based on an examination of primary materials dating from 1924 to 1934, and relevant period and contemporary readings and web sources. The article underlines the relevance of their lives to contemporary Latina/o actors.

Key words: media, early Hollywood, Dolores del Río, Lupe Vélez, Latina film stars, representation

Resumen

El artículo se enfoca en Dolores del Río y Lupe Vélez. Sus carreras se contextualizan en relación con la recepción que tuvieron de sus audiencias. El texto se centra en cómo, a pesar de las representaciones opuestas que sobre ellas presentaron los medios y se formaban las personas, ambas tenían mucho en común, puesto que funcionaron en contextos económicos y políticos muy similares. La industria del cine contribuyó a estos aspectos en común al ponerlas en papeles que reflejaban la hipersexualidad atribuida a las latinas, aunque de manera agradable, congruente con la época. A pesar de sus diferentes trayectorias, ambas se involucraron en circuitos transnacionales, confrontaron asuntos de autonomía laboral, cláusulas contractuales, resistencia y control, y a las dos las presionaron para que representaran los estereotipos de Hollywood acerca de sus "comunidades". El análisis del autor se basa en el examen de materiales de primera mano que datan de entre 1924 y 1934, así como en lecturas relevantes de esa época y fuentes de la web. El artículo subraya la importancia de las vidas de estas actrices para los actores latinos contemporáneos.

Palabras clave: medios de comunicación, etapa temprana de Hollywood, Dolores del Río, Lupe Vélez, estrellas de cine latinas, representación

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Not many film viewers today know of the existence of major Latina stars in early Hollywood (1914-1935). As I have noted in an earlier work (Rodríguez, 2008), this period was marked on one end by "The Roaring Twenties" and, on the other end, by the Depression. Hollywood was influenced by this era of the Harlem Renaissance, the Jazz age, the Flapper, the "Charleston," and, other dance crazes. Consumption marketing expanded tremendously and women and men enjoyed an era of greater liberality. The Suffragette movement secured the vote for women in 1920 and World War I brought a greater number of women into the paid work force. The more restrictive Hays Code of 1934 had yet to be implemented. While the 1929 depression would curtail much of the economic and media expansion evident during this era, this had yet to occur when Dolores del Río and Lupe Vélez entered Hollywood.

This article begins with an overview of their careers in Hollywood. It then compares their similarities and differences, as well as the common issues they faced as working actors at the time. It concludes by discussing the continuing relevance of these issues to contemporary Latina/o actors. In the interest of greater clarity and focus, I abstain from applying a single theoretical framework to this work. Rather, the intent here is to reassess existing information about these two film stars, to place them within a particular historical context, and to articulate an original argument about their labor and its connection to representation.

Dolores del Río (1905-1983)[1]

The origins and rise of Dolores del Río (1905-1983) have been detailed by many (Rodríguez, 2008; Ríos-Bustamante, 1992; Carr, 1979; Lemming, 1985; Bodeen, 1976: 283). Referred to as "the first Latina superstar," by the early 1930s, she was one of Hollywood's ten top moneymakers. She had a long career, beginning in 1925 and continuing to star in films in the U.S. and in Mexico as well as in Argentina and Europe until 1978. Born Dolores de Martínez Asúnsolo y López Negrete in Durango, Mexico, she was the only child of a banker (Carr, 1979: 3). She was "discovered" in Mexico by Edwin Carewe, a well-known Hollywood director, who had been invited to her home and saw her perform and dance for her family and friends. He invited her and her husband to come to Hollywood to be in his films.[2] While in Hollywood, Dolores del Río played a variety of leading roles, from European aristocrat to "native" girl to European peasant.

[1] Parts of the biographical material on Del Río and Vélez can also be found in Rodríguez (2008).
[2] Interestingly, Rosie Pérez and Lupe Vélez were also discovered while dancing; and, Jennifer López, Salma Hayek, Rita Hayworth, Carmen Miranda, and Rita Moreno had had dancing careers that facilitated their move into acting.

Viewed from today's perspective, what is striking about her representation in the media are the adjectives used to describe her. They were *not* words like "Latin bombshell," "hot tamale," "sultry," "spitfire," or "hot cha cha!" Rather, they were words like "sophisticated," "aristocratic," "refined elegance," "glamorous," "sedate," and "ladylike." Also surprising is the extent to which the references to her clothes often matched these adjectives and how she, nonetheless, retained her "Latin-ness," i.e., her Mexican origins in the coverage. Within a few years after her arrival, she was a major hit and her appeal was astonishingly broad. She quickly came to command a substantial salary and to exercise control over her choice of films, scripts, and camera angles. Despite the fact that she did not speak English when she first began and had to have the director's instructions delivered through interpreters (Gómez-Sicre, 1967), she made the transition to sound films gracefully. Her accent was deemed slight, attractive, and international, i.e., not specific to a particular country. By the early 1930s, a time when Hollywood set the fashion pace in a way that has not been equaled anywhere since, she had also created a wardrobe that established her "as one of Hollywood's Best Dressed Women." It was said that "Del Río always dressed like a star," and women all over the world were copying her style of make-up and dress. She also attended parties where fan writers and the press found her "as dazzling in appearance as she was gracious in manner" (Carr, 1979).

This persona that she and others had created is all the more striking when we reflect again on the context of the period when it occurred. The Mexican-American communities of the time were highly segregated and had high poverty levels; this was also true of the African-American communities. The Eugenics movement was in full force, not just in the U.S., but worldwide, and would come to influence the development of Nazi Germany. Restrictive U.S. covenants and segregated schools functioned to keep Mexican-Americans separated from other Americans. From 1910 to 1930, over one million *Mejicanos* migrated northward. They settled into existing barrios and forged new ones "in the Southwest and in the Midwest and small towns and cities" (Ruiz, 1993: 109). Indeed, the Mexican immigration to the United States was so substantial that a formal category called "Mexican" was added to the racial categories in the census.[3] African-Americans had also begun their migratory trek from the South to the industrial cities of the Northeast and Midwest and developed substantial communities, like the ones in Harlem and Chicago. However, once the depression began, from 1931 to 1934, the U.S. government deported or repatriated 500 000 Mexican people, or one-third of the Mexican population in the United States,

[3] This was deleted in 1940. See Rodríguez (2000) for a history of how Latinos have been counted in the census.

back to Mexico (Rodríquez-Estrada, 1997: note 12; Noriega, 1997). As Ruiz (1993: 120) notes, Mexicans were the only immigrants targeted for removal.

Consequently, given this picture of Mexican segregation, some might find it surprising to find any major Mexican stars at the box office during this period and to find them depicted in the way Dolores del Río was. However, by the late 1930s, and after the major repatriation, fewer film proposals came her way and the roles she was offered were, according to O'Neil (2000: 8), often stereotyped, "exotic supporting roles that she summarily turned down." In 1943, she returned to Mexico, where she became a top star in Mexican movies, did international films, received numerous awards, and became known as the "First Lady of Mexican Theater" (Reyes and Rubie, 1994: 389-393).

Lupe Vélez (1908-1944)

Like Dolores del Río, Lupe Vélez also began her career in the silent film era and was similarly "discovered" in Mexico. However, they came from very different backgrounds, had different Hollywood experiences, and evolved quite contrasting public personas. Lupe Vélez was born María Guadalupe Vélez de Villalobos in San Luis Potosí, Mexico. Her father was an officer in the military; her mother had been an opera singer. At the age of 13, she was sent to study at a convent school –like Del Río– but in San Antonio, Texas. Her father died two years later and so Lupe Vélez returned home to help support her mother and younger siblings (O'Neil, 2000). She became a featured dancer in a local musical revue, and this is where, in 1925, she was seen by aging matinee idol Richard Bennet, who invited her to come to Hollywood. She was subsequently signed to a contract by producer Hal Roach in 1926. She appeared as an extra in comedy shorts before getting her first starring role as a "mountain girl" at the age of 17 opposite Douglas Fairbanks, Sr. in *The Gaucho* (1928). The film turned out to be a big success. With regard to her language ability, it is hard to say what command she had over the English language. One author has concluded that both onstage and off, her accent and broken English were purposely accentuated by her and by the press as a "viable gimmick" (Parish, 1974: 595).

Like Dolores, Lupe played a broader set of roles when she first arrived in Hollywood. For example, in her first starring role, she, she played a Greek peasant girl (*Stand and Deliver,* 1928*)*, an upper class señorita in 1840s Taos, New Mexico (*A Wolf Song,* 1929*)*, and a chanteuse in a café (*The Lady of the Pavement,* 1929). (Lupe Vélez was actually the first to sing a number of now classic Irving Berlin songs.) However, as the industry switched to sound production, Lupe Vélez became increasingly con-

fined to characters that may have been of different ethnicities or ethnically mixed but that were, in general, tempestuous supporting roles (O'Neil, 2000: 10). Also, her public image came increasingly to parallel the fiery, tempestuousness of these characters. As I detail in Rodríguez (2008), many of her photos and the magazine captions accompanying her photos emphasized the seductive "Just a Mexican wild kitten" persona. See, for example, Figures 2, 3, and 4, *Photoplay* (1928) 33:3:21*; Photoplay* (1929) 36:2: (July): 20; and, *Photoplay* (1928) 38:5:62 20. In magazine and news coverage of her, Vélez was represented as beautiful and likable but quick to erupt emotionally. As Rodríquez-Estrada (1997) notes, in her later films, she also demonstrated an aggressive, unrefined style of personality that permitted yelling and physical contact, behavior not generally displayed by the Anglo women characters in her films –unless, of course, Lupe Vélez's antics drove the women there.

Adding to her public image as the Mexican miss who was also "the hot tamale" were the sparks surrounding her numerous romantic liaisons with well-known Hollywood stars (e.g., Gary Cooper, Ronald Coleman, Gilbert Roland, John Gilbert, Arturo de Córdova, and Ricardo Cortez).[4] Her tumultuous marriage and subsequent divorces to Johnny Weissmuller, the star of the Tarzan series of the time, were also often highly profiled in the media. Interestingly, at least one writer indicates that Lupe Vélez felt the press gave the public the wrong image and that she was far less impetuous and temperamental than people had been led to believe (Parish, 1974: 615). However, few writers then –or subsequently– accepted this view. Regardless of who was more responsible for the public image, in 1934 RKO did not renew her contract because of all of the attention that her public fighting with Weissmuller drew. After they divorced, she went abroad to make films, including one in Mexico, where over 10 000 ecstatic fans greeted her in 1938, after an 11-year absence (Rodríquez-Estrada, 1997: 484).

Unfortunately, despite the commercial success of the "Mexican Spitfire" series of films that she made after her divorce from Weissmuller, her life ended tragically. In 1944, Lupe Vélez returned to Mexico (as had Dolores del Río before her) to make the film *Nana* (1944*)*. Returning to New York, she announced her engagement to Harald Ramond, a relatively unknown, 27 year-old French actor. Soon after it was announced that the engagement was off, on December 13, 1944, after the Hollywood premiere of the Mexican film, *Nana* (1944), she committed suicide, taking an overdose of sleeping pills. She was five months pregnant and 36 years old (O'Neil, 2000; Rodríquez-Estrada 1997: 487).

[4] While most Latino stars of this era have had few English-language books done about them, there is actually a book about Lupe Velez and her lovers (Connor, 1993). It is not a flattering portrait and paints her very much as "the Mexican hurricane" who destroyed men. (See, for example, pages 1-10.)

Similar Bodies

Despite the contrasting media personas developed by each of these two Mexican stars, physically they were not very different, especially when they first began. They both had long, dark brown hair and eyes, were olive-skinned, of similar age, height, and weight, and were equally attractive Mexican women. Their color and physical type were clearly relevant to the success of both stars in Hollywood. Both were fairly light-skin with European facial features. Both were selected to be Wampas babies. (Wampas stood for the Western Association of Motion Picture Advertisers. Each year Wampas picked 13 women to be Wampas babies, who were prominently featured in magazines. Being chosen "a Wampas Baby" was acknowledgement that they would soon become –or already were– a genuine Hollywood starlet who could expect a bright future in the studio system.) Dark-skinned women or women who differed significantly from the norms of the day were not chosen.[5] Del Río was selected in 1926 and Veléz in 1928. In the case of these Mexican actresses, they may have had the acceptable "Latin Look" of the day, which to some degree morphed with the acceptable Southern European look of the time. (The large influx of Southern and Eastern Europe immigrants from 1880 to 1920 and the fact that they and their children were now part of film audiences and were Hollywood directors may have also contributed to a wider appreciation of such physical types.) In either case, they were in a space where other women of color who deviated more from the prevailing European norms could not be.

Although I have not found specific comments by Vélez on the role of color and race in film, Del Río was aware of the racialized casting that characterized Hollywood films, noting that light skinned actors could play any nationality, while those with dark skins played only servants and some villains (Hadley-Garcia, 1993). Clearly, there were also light-skinned actors who played villains or servants, but they did so in blackface, brown-face, yellow-face (for Asian stereotypes), or red-face (for Native American Indian stereotypes).

[5] According to Wollstein (2002), only one non-Caucasian, Toshia Mori, was ever chosen to be a Wampas baby. This came about in 1932 because Lillian Miles (of *Reefer Madness* fame), who had originally been selected as a Wampas baby, failed to show up –she was apparently getting married– and faced disqualification. Mori was selected in her place. Although it is difficult to tell from a 1932 photo of the 1932 Wampas babies, it may have been that Mori, like the more European-looking Del Río and Vélez, did not deviate substantially from the European standards of beauty dominant then in Hollywood, and generally in mainstream America. Alternatively, Mori, as well as Vélez and Del Río, may have been seen to fit quite well into prevailing expectations of what an attractive "Latin" or "Oriental" should look like at the time.

Star Personas: "Good" Spanish and "Bad" Mexican

Despite their physical similarity, the press generally described them then –and many film scholars have subsequently seen them– as having dual and opposing star personas. According to Rodríquez-Estrada (1997: 485), Lupe Vélez was the "bad Mexican wildcat" and Dolores the "good Spanish lady." According to historian Antonia Castañeda, this duality –or what she terms the stereotypical dichotomy between "good" Spanish and "bad" Mexican images– has its roots in U.S. history. Castañeda argues that Anglo perceptions of Spanish and Mexican women in nineteenth-century California were based upon sex, race, and class: "Both stereotypes revolved around sexual definitions of women's virtue and morality…. The elite *Californianas* were deemed European and superior while the mass of Mexican women were viewed as Indian and inferior" (Castañeda cited in Rodríquez-Estrada, 1997: 485). In essence, while most Mexicans were perceived as racially inferior, *Californiana* women who possessed land and intermarried with Anglo men were depicted positively. To them were attributed aristocratic and virtuous qualities and they epitomized "good" women; but this was "at the price of denying their racial identity, and [being treated] as racially superior to Californiano males and the rest of their people" (Castañeda cited in Rodríquez-Estrada, 1997: 485).

These dichotomous images were not limited to the screen or U.S. history; they were also to be found –and to a certain extent, are still to be found– in the popular culture. Ruiz (1993: 114), for example, notes that some Mexicans adhered to this dichotomy and admitted in oral histories from this period that they tried to pass as "Spanish" instead of Mexican, hoping to melt into the U.S. social landscape. Moreover, she found that some Anglo-Americans "also employed the term *Spanish* to distinguish individuals of superior background or achievement" (Ruiz, 1993: 126, note 29).[6] A similar duality was also reflected in *both* the English- and Spanish-language press in the U.S. and in the Mexican press.[7] "From the moment Vélez was introduced to Hollywood audiences, her sexuality was attributed to her ethnicity. Her image and her behavior transgressed 'traditional' boundaries of accepted Anglo

[6] This dichotomy between "good" and "bad" is also found in the film literature on male Latinos, i.e., the "good" greaser and the "bad" greaser, and in other groups; for example, there is the "good" black and the "bad" black, the "good Indian" and the "bad," the "good" Asian and the "bad," and even the "good" girls and the "bad" girls. Often the "good" ones are closer approximations in color, type, and class to the central white characters – and, sometimes, partially white in ancestry. In other instances, they were quite distinct, as in the case of "the Mammy" figure, the Tonto types, or the "otherness" of the characters was further accentuated by their clothing and in their relations with others. In the case of these two Mexican stars, who were physically quite similar, other variables, e.g., class and geopolitical identification may also have contributed to their distinct personas.

[7] See O'Neil (2000) and Rodríquez-Estrada (1997) on press coverage.

standards" (Rodríquez-Estrada, 1997: 485). Even in her movie, *Mexican Spitfire*, Elizabeth, the Anglo female character, refers to her as the "little Mexican wildcat." Dolores del Río was never referred to in such terms. While Del Río displayed the ladylike qualities of elegance, decorum, and reserve in her roles and in her press image, Vélez transcended "traditional" boundaries by flaunting her sexuality. Her ethnicity and her embellished Spanish accent added to an aggressive style of personality that permitted yelling and physical contact, behavior not displayed by Anglo women (Rodríquez-Estrada, 1997). As noted above, as the industry switched to sound production in 1929, Lupe Vélez's personification as a hot-tempered, thickly-accented, Latin temptress quickly solidified.

Fashioning the Images: Who Was Responsible?

To what degree were these two stars responsible for the images they projected? Not all authors agree on the degree to which they created or had control over their images. However, there is general agreement that they were *not* passive agents, *and* that the Hollywood machinery and connections were important to their success. For example, both Hershfield (2000) and Martínez Gandia (1930: 42-43) maintain that the behind-the-scenes publicity apparatus was quite important in Dolores del Río's success. Del Río's manager, Edwin Carewe, was a celebrated film director. He and Hollywood publicist Henry Wilson provided a continuous supply of stories and photos in which Dolores del Río was presented as glamorous, aristocratic, of highborn status, with a convent education and European training in ballet and art.[8] Both Del Río and her manager Carewe carefully protected her star persona. One example of the attempt to control her image is a letter by Dolores del Río in English in which she expresses her concern over shots of her in *The Loves of Carmen* (1927) where "my limbs are exposed in a manner that is most embarrassing to me" (cited in Hershfield, 2000: 10). At this point in her career (her second year in Hollywood), these concerns appear not to have been heeded. For, having seen this film before reading her letter, I do remember being impressed with the fact that there was one scene that was repeated two or three times. In this scene, Dolores del Río's "limbs" and *underwear* were explicitly shown. However, by 1933, she had negotiated much greater control over her work.

[8] She was also described as a feminine woman who preferred long hair and a stylish, classic wardrobe (in contrast to the bobbed hair, slim sheaths, and short skirts of the flapper). This, Hershfield (2000: 9-10) argues, set her apart and above the "average" American beauty and contrasted her with the flapper of the day. Del Río represented a "traditional woman," but also a foreign and upper-class woman with impeccable morals.

Interestingly, Lupe Vélez was also not cast as a flapper, but neither was she cast as the traditional and aristocratic señorita. Rather, as discussed above, she was the independent, free-spirited hot tamale. To what extent was she an active agent in creating this image? Rodríquez-Estrada (1997: 486) argues that both Vélez and Del Río were active agents. She argues that Hollywood did attempt to act as a "cultural ethnographer" –as it still does today– manipulating and distorting the images of Mexican characters as well as the images of Latino and Latina actors. However, she finds that both Del Río and Vélez demonstrated that they negotiated for space within this structured culture and therefore helped create their own separate personas and destinies. Both women sought to control and further their own careers; however, Del Río appears to be the one with greater mobility and control. This was influenced, in large part, by her class position and certain choices (described below) that she made for herself during her tenure in Hollywood (Rodríquez-Estrada, 1997: 481). Once Del Río was settled in Hollywood with the help of director, Edwin Carewe, her beauty helped establish her as one of the most talented women there. As a result, she managed to steer clear of the Mexican spitfire stereotype that was to be Vélez's trademark. According to Rodríquez-Estrada (1997), Vélez did not have that guidance or support, and she could only rely on her own instincts.

The Role of Transnationalism in Their Lives

Despite the fact that both stars were generally presented in contrasting terms, their careers had similar transnational trajectories and came about largely as a result of transnational events. It is unlikely that Dolores del Río would have been "discovered" in Mexico had a Hollywood director not been looking for a "female Valentino." Lupe Vélez was similarly "discovered" in 1925 in Mexico by matinee idol Richard Bennet. While they were stars in Hollywood, both Lupe Vélez and Dolores del Río maintained ties with their families in Mexico, and examples of this were covered by the media. Their Mexican origins were also explicitly noted in the coverage of them, although they were often referred to in the English-language press as "Latin" or, in the case, of Dolores del Río as "Spanish." Coverage of both stars was also extensive in Mexico, Spain, and in other Latin American countries, as well as in the Spanish-language press in the U.S. Although Dolores del Río never did Cine Hispano (i.e., Spanish-language films produced by Hollywood studios), Lupe Vélez did three movies. Both made films in countries other than the U.S., although this was after their careers had peaked in Hollywood. Dolores del Río also traveled abroad to make films. Consequently, although transnationalism is often viewed as a modern phe-

nomenon, both these stars were strongly involved in transnational circuits as part of their work worlds.

Work Autonomy, Accommodation, Resistance, and Control

Also common to both stars were the personal issues and societal constrictions that influenced their work roles. The one year in which Dolores del Río did not have a picture was 1931, and a series of personal events preceded or accompanied this withdrawal from film. This included her divorce from her first husband (Jaime del Río) and his subsequent death –some press reports held her accountable for this. There was also her break-up with her discoverer and manager, Carewe, and in addition to suggestions that she had been responsible for the breakup of *his* marriage. The press also alleged that she had had a "nervous breakdown" (O'Neil, 2000). Lupe Vélez also faced personal problems and societal limits, often covered in the press.

In addition, both stars' careers began to flounder about the same time, in the late 1930s. Although Lupe Vélez's trajectory and image were quite different from those of Dolores del Río, the parallels are clear with regard to timing and their struggles over work autonomy, accommodation, resistance, and control. Although Hollywood studios dictated the image and roles they felt suited an actor or actress, Del Río broke repeatedly with the studios, indicating her desire to find roles she felt suited her image. Once these characters and films proved useless to her, she moved back to Mexico and to more appropriate roles. Vélez apparently planned a similar move in 1944, but she may have been overwhelmed when she discovered that her fiancé, Harald Ramon, planned to annul their marriage after their child was born.

Although Dolores del Río exercised greater power than Lupe Vélez did, over time, she, too, was less able to call the shots. In her heyday, Dolores del Río commanded a substantial salary, chose her films, exercised control over scripts, and made known her views on camera shots. However, by the late 1930s, the roles offered her were, according to O'Neil (2000: 8), stereotypes. He maintains that, concomitant with her marital problems –she divorced her husband, Cedric Gibbons, in 1940– Del Río's career began to sputter. She eventually left Hollywood in the early 1940s because she wanted more control, saying, "I wish to choose my own stories, my own director, and camera man. I can accomplish this better in Mexico" (Rodríquez-Estrada, 1997: 481). Had she stayed in Hollywood, O'Neil says she would have become "an aging semi-exotic star" and *not* "the First Lady of Mexican cinema" (2000: 8).

While Dolores del Río resolved her decline in Hollywood by returning to Mexico in 1943 for good, Lupe Vélez took a different path. She revived her career in 1939 with her Mexican Spitfire movies, making the last one in 1943. While Dolores returned to Mexico and often played the noble indigenous woman, Lupe accentuated and refined the role of the Mexican spitfire in the U.S. In so doing, she may have turned what may have been her "social otherness" at the time into strength.[9] The character she played in this series, Carmelita Woods, signaled a departure from her previous screen image. According to O'Neil (2000: 15), the raw sensuality of her earlier pictures was toned down in the series. Carmelita was a heroine committed to the institution of marriage. In this regard, the character countered the Hollywood stereotype of the Latin woman who loses the Anglo man to an Anglo woman. However, according to Rodriguez-Estrada (1997: 484), other stereotypes abounded, including Carmelita's lack of breeding, her social unacceptability, her refusal to put her show business career aside, her lack of desire to have children, and her failure to promote her husband Dennis's career. In each film, Dennis's aunt questions Carmelita's background and implores Dennis to divorce her and marry his ex-fiancée, Elizabeth (Linda Hayes), who was "real Plymouth Rock stock."

The plot in the Mexican Spitfire series often revolved around the rejection of Carmelita by her mother-in-law and the preference of the mother-in-law for the WASPy Elizabeth. According to O'Neil (2000), the basis for this plot was Lupe Vélez's real-life rejection by Gary Cooper's mother, when she had been involved romantically with him. These movies were comedies, bordering on slapstick, and it is difficult to say whether the films were seen as poking fun at the prejudices surrounding such marriages, or if it was understood that comedy was used to convey or reflect disapproval of such marriages. Whatever the case, the comedies showed Lupe Vélez's comedic skills to good advantage. Moreover, they were films in which a Latina headlined for eight movies straight –a true rarity. They were also unusual in their early treatment of mixed marriages.

But the relevant question, given our focus on the extent to which these stars were able to resist studio expectations to play stereotypes, is: Did Lupe Vélez contribute to, collude with, or transgress the expectations others had of her when she

[9] It should be noted that Lupe Vélez's Mexican spitfire character was quite different from the more modern conception of subsequent Latina spitfires. As I have noted elsewhere, Lupe Vélez's "Carmelita" character was spunky, funny, smart, often outwitting others and getting the guy in the end (Rodríguez, 1997: 80ff). This is in sharp contrast to subsequent spitfires, who were often marginal characters, never got the guy, but were easy, super-sexed, or violent and vulgar Latinas who fumed and fornicated without humor, without substance, and without much intelligence. These spitfires were also generally adjunct players, with few lines or much relationship to the plot. In contrast, the Lupe Vélez character, Carmelita, was the protagonist and Lupe Vélez was the star.

did her series? Within the limited range of stock stereotypes of a Mexican spitfire, were there ways that Lupe Vélez resisted them in her films? Within these films, she often outsmarted others and ended up winning. Within this positive context, did her playing dumb, her heavily accented English, malapropisms, and dramatic facial and hand movements reinforce the stereotype of the time, make fun of it, or get the audience to admire it?[10] Was Vélez's response to the boundaries placed on Latinas at the time similar to the subsequent routes taken by other actresses at other times? For example, was her Mexican spitfire character equivalent to Jennifer Lopez's successful homegirl from the South, South Bronx today? In other words, was she the "Jenny from the block" of the 1940s?

I suspect it was a bit of each, i.e., Lupe Vélez most likely contributed to, colluded with, and also purposely transgressed the expectations others had of her when she did her series. It is not surprising when actors contribute or collude in this way, given the difficulties of successfully navigating the race and ethnic boundaries that all groups then –and now– confront. Many both then and now "play to the crowd" and "play to the stereotypes." They do this to succeed, or, simply to find work as actors. To some degree, Vélez's Carmelita character was also squarely in the tradition of ethnic humor, which utilizes and exaggerates cultural stereotypes to poke fun. In this regard, she contributed to and colluded with the cultural expectations others had of the hot-blooded, south-of-the-border Latina.

However, given the Hollywood persona that the press chronicled at the time (as a feisty, in-your-face hot tamale, defiant of traditional conventions and seemingly independent of male and industry controls), she may also have been exercising a more transgressive role in her character as Carmelita. In other words, she may have consciously converted her (perceived) social otherness into a strength. This more transgressive mode of operation or presentation in the work sphere is not altogether uncommon, both within the media world and outside of it. For example, Latina scholar Denise Segura argues that some Chicana scholars within the academy have also consciously converted their social otherness into a strength (2003).

This tendency to act in a more transgressive manner may also have deeper roots in marginalized or subaltern groups, and it may, therefore, be more recognizable to members of these groups when seen on film. In these transgressive acts, individuals purposely take what is perceived as a negative and use it to their advantage, i.e., "to get over." Alternatively, they may dissipate its negativity by making fun of the negativity, or by appropriating its meaning, transforming it from a negative to

[10] Denise Segura suggests that many Chicana intellectual workers have also taken a similar route and turned their own social otherness within academia into strength.

a positive. We see examples of this "messin'," "goofing," or "foolin' with" in many groups, e.g., playing "the dozens," or jiving in the African-American community, or La Passategla of Southern Italy. An early description of this is found in Lauria's (1964) ethnographic work with Puerto Rican males, in which he found a unique balance between "*respeto*" (respect) and "*relajo*" (making fun of). His respondents made fun of themselves and others, often using exaggerated speech, mannerisms, and physical play; but it was always understood to be within an acceptable framework of kidding, with the person being kidded having the ability to "*dejar el relajo*" (turn off the joking).

Appropriation is yet another form of transgressive action among those who are "othered," and it is possible that Vélez was trying to take over the stereotype and thus appropriate it. We saw very good examples of appropriation during the late 1960s and the 1970s when the Black Power movement began to use the term "black" to substitute for the term "Negro." (The term "black" was actually a reintroduction; it had been used in earlier census forms and among individuals. However, it was discarded because of its negative associations in the early twentieth century and the term "Negro" was introduced to replace it. By mid-century, it had become the term of preference for African-Americans and others [see Rodríguez, 2000, Chapters 2 and 5]). Similarly, during this period of major social change, there were additional name shifts. The term "Newyorican" was introduced to challenge the term "Neo-Rican," which implied a less than full-fledged Puerto Rican-ness. Poets, artists, and activists articulated and used the Newyorican term and conveyed along with it a strong, more politicized, defiant, and demanding identity and definition for the second generation group. The term "Chicano" was similarly introduced and supplanted what was seen by many as the more negative term "Pachuco" or the more accomodationist term, "Mexican-American" (Noriega, 1997). Today's term "Queer studies" is another similar example of appropriation.

Their Shift to Modernity And Away From Ethnicity

Despite their contrasting star personas, both actresses made similar shifts away from ethnicity and to a more "modern" image at about the same time. Although Dolores del Río had earlier played exotic roles,[11] in 1933 she struck an agreement with the

[11] For example, in *The Loves of Carmen* (1927); she also played a "half-breed" Native American Indian in *Ramona* (1928) and in *Bird of Paradise* (1932), a South Sea island princess.

RKO studio that gave her the power to okay her own scripts (O'Neil, 2000). According to O'Neil (2000), she now refused to wear exotic clothes and wanted roles "steeped with modernity and sophistication." These roles were to reflect her star image that was being advanced in the press at the time and that was made visually obvious by her wardrobe. This image of modernity, in vogue then and paralleling the interest in Art Deco and modernist, abstract design, was accentuated when she married Cedric Gibbons in 1930. According to the media, Gibbons, a very well-known and connected art director in Hollywood, designed and built a house to "reflect their personalities –he the master and she his decoration" (Rodríquez-Estrada, 1997: 480). Photographs of the modern, sophisticated Del Río set against the background of this house were commonly found in *Photoplay* and other news outlets of the time (Rodríguez, 2008).

Both Dolores del Río and Lupe Vélez liked the image of modernity. It was associated with progress and with being better off or of a higher class. It was seen, particularly by those outside of the U.S., as very "American" and, perhaps, as less ethnic. However, the press that Lupe Vélez received concerning her shift to a more modern image differed considerably from that of Dolores del Río. In 1929, one reporter described the "dignified manner of her home," how Lupe "curbs her tongue with people she doesn't know" and the gowns in her wardrobe that "any Park Avenue lady would be delighted to own," but then adds, "In them, of course, Lupe Vélez does not look like a Park Avenue lady, merely because she is too striking a type" (Rodríquez-Estrada, 1997: 482). Clearly, the reporter did not think that her "type" could ever be accepted into the upper class that lived on Park Avenue.

Also detracting from Vélez's image as a "lady" and a modern sophisticate were the sparks surrounding her numerous romantic liaisons with well-known Hollywood stars, as well as her turbulent marriage to Johnny Weissmuller.[12] Yet, according to Ruiz (1993: 484) and Rodriquez-Estrada (1997: endnote 41), she was also projected in the press as the spitfire that had to be conquered, all the while overlooking Johnny Weissmuller's physical violence toward Lupe Vélez.

Interestingly, although Del Río in her transformation to being a modern woman personally continued to assert her Mexican nationality and identity, she became less ethnically Mexican in the press. She was seen to have made the shift "from the Mexican shawl to the glamorous fur" fairly easily. In contrast, Vélez, in her shift to a more modern image became more highly identified as a *Mexican* spitfire and was

[12] In 1934, RKO did not renew her contract because of all of the attention her public fighting with Weissmuller occasioned. She also took her film-production company to court in 1934 to collect a check due her. Her personal life was constantly in the news and her independent, freedom-loving, "devil-may-care" attitude toward life was underscored. All of this coverage contributed to her spitfire image.

constantly embroiled in contests over control. For her, the shift to modernity did *not* represent a decline in ethnicity. So, although both made the shift to "modernity," each was received differently by the press.

Were Their Community Ties Burdens Or Sources of Sustenance?

Also common to both stars' careers was their concern about their Latino communities' reaction to them –communities both in the United States and in Mexico. There is evidence that both stars viewed their community ties (and connections to Mexico, Mexicans, Spain, or Latinos in general) as sources of sustenance, identity, and pride. Lupe Vélez was hugely popular in Mexico and was often shown with members of her Mexican family, including a child of her sister's that the studio said she had adopted. She also had plans, according to some, to return to Mexico. Dolores del Río strongly identified with her Mexican heritage despite her growing fame and her transition to "modernity." She also felt strongly about being able to play Mexican roles and bemoaned the fact that she was not cast in them.[13] She never relinquished her Mexican citizenship and said in 1929 (at the height of her popularity) that she wanted "to play a Mexican woman and show what life in Mexico really is. No one has shown the artistic side –nor the social" (quoted in Carr, 1979: 32). A year later in 1930, she expressed similar sentiments in relation to appearing on stage, saying at the time, "I'd love to appear in fine, emotional dramas…and am eager to play in stories concerning my native people, the Mexican race. It is my dearest wish to make fans realize their real beauty, their wonder, their greatness as a people. The vast majority seem to regard Mexicans as a race of bandits, or laborers, dirty, unkempt, and uneducated. My ambition is to show the best that's in my nation" (Ibid.: 42).

But there are indications that their relationship to Latino communities also constituted a burden; or, that these communities were seen as yet another distinct public that they had to please. O'Neil (2000: 17) maintains that both Dolores del Río and Lupe Vélez faced the double burden of negotiating the industry's limited opportunities for Latina actresses while at the same time not offending fans and critics south of the border. They were viewed as "unofficial ambassadors" and were particularly under the microscope when they played Latin characters. For example, Martínez Gandia (1930: 67-75), writing from Spain at the time, took Dolores del Río to task

[13] The words "Spanish Actress" had been added when she was first introduced to Hollywood. She had had to insist for quite a while to get the adjective changed to "Mexican" (Gómez-Sicre, 1967: 10).

for her participation in the film *The Loves of Carmen* (1927). Despite a generally glowing book about Dolores del Río, he said that this film ridiculed Spain and committed errors that were so horrendous they were laughed at in Spain. Furthermore, he added that though Dolores del Río had not created the movie, they could not forgive her because she had lived in Seville for seven months and should have corrected these errors. Her *Girl of the Rio* (1931) also provoked immediate resentment and threats of violence toward the theater owner when it was exhibited in Mexico City. The Mexican government banned the film and made a formal protest about this film because of its "blatant stereotypes." It was "exhibited only in a censored version" (Hershfield, 2000: 41). Similar accusations arose after Del Río appeared *In Caliente* (1935).

Moreover, criticism appeared in *La Opinion*, a Los Angeles Spanish-language paper established in 1926, with Mexican viewers expressing discontent over the parts played by Dolores del Río (Rodríquez-Estrada 1997: 480ff). The star responded publicly and defensively to the Mexican protests, saying she would never do anything to hurt the image of her "querido México" (O'Neil, 2000: 18). *La Opinion* also published an article in 1931 that noted that Dolores del Río refused to accept a role in a "defaming script." Interestingly, Lupe Vélez subsequently accepted this same role (Rodríquez-Estrada, 1997: 485-486).

Lupe Vélez was less concerned about Mexican reaction to her roles. But she was also pressured by United Artists (under threat of a Mexican boycott of her films) to write a letter saying she had been misquoted in the U.S. press. She had been quoted extolling U.S. views and practices regarding women over Mexico's views. She concluded her letter of apology by saying that she would "always feel like a daughter of Mexico" and that "deep down, the esteem of the Mexican public is the dearest to me." Despite the criticisms in the Mexican press, their Mexican fans never abandoned them. This was clear to them when they traveled in Mexico and were met by huge crowds of adoring fans. In line with this, from what has been written about both their lives, it appears that both wanted to maintain the esteem of their Mexican audiences and that the enthusiastic reception by fans was very meaningful to both of them and influenced their decisions to return and act in Mexico.

Both were also criticized in the Spanish-language press for their marriages to non-Mexican men. When Dolores del Río married Gibbons, she was accused of becoming too Americanized (much like Brazilian critics would later accuse Carmen Miranda of the same thing). For some, underlying such criticisms was the specter of "malinchismo" (Malinche was Hernán Cortés's interpreter, guide, and lover during the Spanish conquest of Mexico). They were also criticized for their value changes (i.e., their "modernist" styles and freer-thinking views; and, for "staying to work in

Hollywood at a time when the Mexican film industry was struggling to establish itself as a viable enterprise" (O'Neil, 1998: 20). Interestingly, English language fans apparently knew nothing of the conflict between Del Río and Mexican viewers. Instead, *Photoplay*, the most important fan magazine of the day, focused on Del Río's sense of fashion (Rodríquez-Estrada, 1997: 480) and Lupe's antics, romances, and activities.

Relatively un-researched is the extent to which cultural gender norms in the Mexican-American and Mexican communities in the U.S. and in Mexico presented societal constraints on them. We do not really know the extent to which internalization of the gender role ascribed then to women in Catholic Mexican culture (i.e., that of the Virgin Mary ideal, and the traitorous Malinche figure) affected them. O'Neil (2000) suggests that Vélez's suicide was related to her internalized Roman Catholic heritage, which most likely made it difficult for her to consider an abortion in that time. According to O'Neil, the prospect of living with the social stigma of being an unwed mother was unthinkable. Despite her independent, freedom-loving, "devil-may-care" attitude, her death revealed internal personal limitations not often brought to light in her public life. But we do not know why she did not consider other options, such as going away, having the child, and giving it up for adoption. Perhaps she had just tired of it all. Recognizing that her fiancé did not want her and her child, perhaps she just did not want to continue fighting. We do not know the extent to which the pressures of U.S. racism and the constructions of ethnic stereotypes, plus the demands of her own socialization and community expectations also influenced her decision.

Did They Both Function as Role Models?

Finally, as famous, high profile artistes, to what extent did they move the contours of the gender roles that their cultures had demarcated? Ruiz's (1993) analysis of oral history interviews with women who lived at the time indicates that young Chicanas in the U.S. identified with them, wanted to be like them, and that these stars were important to them. The handful of Latina actresses appearing in Hollywood films such as Dolores del Río and Lupe Vélez whetted Latinas' aspirations. The fact that movies were a popular form of entertainment (monetarily accessible), plus the proximity of many Latinas to Hollywood, contributed to "star-struck" adolescents' adulation of these stars (Ruiz, 1993: 113). In this regard, they (and their work) were attributed certain meanings in terms of the gender roles they represented. In many ways, they countered the more common lives of Mexican women at the time. They were successful monetarily, in their careers, and in mainstream Hollywood; they divorced (and were not shamed or looked down upon by their public); they did not have

children; and they seemed to lead independent lives. In this regard, these two figures and their work were significant in shifting work and gender norms for women.

Summary

Despite the contrasting images of these two stars during their time in Hollywood –and which they continue to have in much of the literature written on them– they shared many similarities. Both had been raised in Mexico and were actually quite similar in physical appearance. Even though both spoke accented English, each transitioned into the talkies film era, while many other Latin stars –particularly the men– did not. Also, toward the end of their Hollywood careers, each chose to return to Mexico to make films. Each had a different end to their Hollywood careers; but each ended at a different point in Hollywood. And, each departed from the central Hollywood scene substantially disillusioned and frustrated. Also, both women functioned within very similar political-economic contexts. They were part of the early growth of Hollywood on the national and international scale and also part of the interest then in international and transnational actors and films. As the times and fashions changed, they also both shifted their images from their initial clearly, ethnic "Spanish" señorita style, with perhaps a dash of Mexican pepper, to a more "modern," de-ethnicized style. In addition, both changed and were changed as a result of their work. Indeed, their careers depended on their ability to change so as to be in sync with public demands or studio expectations in a number of geographic and cultural settings.

They also contended with situations and structures that were in many ways quite similar and very much related to their position as Latinas working in Hollywood film. For example, they both contended with the question of how much control they could –or could not– exert over their images, with the accommodations they had to make to be successful, and with the resistances they felt to conform to Hollywood expectations and stereotypes,[14] as well as to pressures from various Latino communities to "represent" their heritage in positive ways. But their lives as detailed above suggest that they did not totally leave behind their ethnic or racial consciousness. In this regard, they were much like the Mexican-American women during this period studied by Vicki Ruiz (1993). They conformed to the idea of "cultural coalescence," i.e., taking from U.S. culture but also retaining much of their own. Interest-

[14] To some degree all actors contend with the issue of how much control they have over their images. But for these Latinas, control also involves the degree to which they were projected as "other" or "not us."

ingly, neither ever played a U.S.-born Latina –but then U.S.-born Latina/o characters did not enter Hollywood film until much later.

Much like Latina, African-American, Asian-American, and Native-American Indian stars of today, these earlier stars seem to have shouldered multiple burdens despite their success in Hollywood. They often had to meet the sometimes contradictory expectations that others had of them as women, as Latinas, and as stars. They also had to meet conflicting expectations in their communities of origin (Mexico); in Latino communities in the United States, Latin America, and Spain; and, in mainstream, English-speaking communities. In essence, despite the differences that were underscored between these two film stars then, and the contrasts that are still made today by more contemporary authors, they had more in common than is generally acknowledged. They and the work they did were also significant in pushing the boundaries of gender role definitions during their time.

Their stories are still relevant today. Despite the successes that each star experienced, they struggled with issues that still resonate for Latinas in film. Many of these issues are also felt in the work lives of the other Latina women in the public eye, but not in film. These issues include the extent to which they can be autonomous individuals, have control over their life, and work and accommodate to the demands of their studios, their public, and the press. The question of whether community ties are burdens or sources of sustenance still surfaces and resonates with contemporary actors of color, as does the extent to which contemporary actors feel responsible for –or are held responsible for– positively "representing," helping, or identifying with their communities. Finally, these two stars also confronted personal problems and problems with the film industry, as do many film stars today.

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