

ENTREMETIDAS: Women, Humor, Cine and Gendered Mexican Identities

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Abstract: This paper demonstrates how the compelling humor of María Victoria Cervantes, the cantankerous criada bien criada, Ágelines Fernández Abad, the celebrated bruja del 71 and María Elena Velasco Fragoso, Mexico's favorite "India María" made explicit aesthetic selections to create nuanced and alternative Mexican female identities. Cervantes, Fernández Abad, and Velasco Fragoso strategically navigate the pleasurable, oppositional, and transformational in and through the unexpected nuances of performance and humor. Even as humor appears to be intransitive and inconsequential, Cervantes, Fernández Abad, and Velasco Fragoso comedically perform and showcase the unspoken and deliver an indictment on hegemonic and oppressive patriarchy. These comedic actors negotiate the boundaries of gender, cultural privilege, and power hierarchies within the context of early to mid-twentieth century Mexican humor.

Keywords: Chicana feminism, feminist epistemologies, film and television, gender, performance studies, cultural criticism

Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Mexican women were often socially, culturally, and politically conditioned to uphold the continued formation of the biologically superior Mexican male. Prior to the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920), Mexican women were limited and restricted to traditional notions of ama de casa (housewife) while men exercised political, economic, and social power. The Revolution, however, generated a prime opportunity for women to participate and contribute to the emerging discourse of nation. During this time period, women surfaced as writers, politicians and even soldiers. Women transformed the Revolution into a feminist exercise of female determination for women's rights. Women became entremetidas, nuisances upsetting male dominance. As early as 1915,

women in Yucatan sought legal recourse against men who had “dishonored” them. Women took men to court seeking restitution for the harm men caused them, namely pregnancy outside of marriage (Smith 2009, 2-3). Yet, despite all the effort and exertions from these emerging *entremetidas*—Mexican women who contributed to Mexico during the Revolution—early Mexican national discourses about Mexican identity centered a male viewpoint and a machista-fueled masculinity. The persistent and singular importance of the male to the national discourse about Mexican identity is underscored by the limited social and political power available to women after the Revolution.

For instance, in 1918, Mérida’s *El Correo*, an independent daily newspaper, printed stern warnings to Yucatecan women who desired to enter a more public sphere beyond the more conventional social order. Such public admonitions reflected the fact that women were “living their lives with greater independence in increasing numbers, traveling away from their parents’ homes and working in occupations outside” (Smith 2009, 22) their homes. But they also reaffirmed the “established gender relations that privileged male power over women at all times and to preserve men’s exclusive access to the world outside the home” (Smith 2009, 21-22). At the turn of the nineteenth century in Mexico, these limiting ideas of masculinity and femininity were largely disseminated by the emerging new media of film and television. In this sense, early twentieth century actors played a role in the formation of or opposition to these restrictive masculinities and femininities that reinscribed the emerging Mexican national identity. This project interrogates these formations, specifically within the performances of three Mexican actoras and comediantes—María Victoria Cervantes, Ángeles Fernández Abad and María Elena Velasco Frago—who dominated the screen between 1951 to 2014. In particular, I examine how the performances of these national public figures—primarily as characters that can be described as *entremetidas*, or

women who insert and express themselves without waiting for permission—manifested notions of womanhood that both challenged conventional notions of Mexican national identity and belonging and reinscribed them.

I contend that although the comedic performances of María Victoria Cervantes, Ángelines Fernández Abad and María Elena Velasco Fragoso were integral to the narrative and discursive formations that enabled the reification of Mexican masculinities as central to the nation, they also employed humor to negotiate the power, injustice, inequity and mobility of these dominant discourses and challenge the boundaries of gender and privilege within the context of early to mid-twentieth century Mexico. In part, this study exposes the control these women had over their careers, which was largely limited by the available roles for women that were often constrained portrayals of feminine identity rooted in the logics of the emerging Mexican national identity. Even today, Mexican cinematic and televisual constructions of women continue to be prescribed and understood in and through heteronormative ideologies and colonial vestiges of social decorum and fixed gender expectations. Nevertheless, María Victoria Cervantes (1933–) —the cantankerous *criada bien criada*; Ángelines Fernández Abad (1924-1994) —the celebrated *bruja del 71*; and María Elena Velasco Fragoso (1940–) —Mexico’s favorite “India María” —found ways to interpolate and affirm themselves, subvert expectations and interrogate heteronormativity through their innovative performances, ultimately showcasing compelling alternative Mexican female identities and narratives.

To provide some context for my analysis, I will review the literature on women and humor, Mexican humor, as well as the ways gender expectations have been normalized, contested, and studied in Mexican popular culture. I then treat the performances of Cervantes, Fernández Abad and Velasco

Fragoso separately, analyzing their performances for the way they challenged and reified gender norms and ideas of national identity.

Women and Subversion

Studies examining Mexican humor note that this cultural work often reduces Mexican cultural life to a male-centered perspective (Limón 1994; Ramos 1951). Central to this form of expression is the *pelado*. *Pelados* are poor individuals who moved from rural areas to urban metropolises at the height of industrialization and began to intermingle with the elite of Mexican society. Within Mexico's literary narrative, Ramos considered the *pelado* as a vile category of "social fauna...with whom relationship is dangerous" (53) and whose "real" position in the social order is to be "el desecho humano de la gran ciudad/the human waste of the big city" (54).

In contrast, actor and comedian Mario Moreno, or Cantinflas as he is known, elevated the *pelado* to a pop cultural phenomenon in film. With a career built on the portrayals of underdogs who contest modern forms of power and authority, Cantinflas introduced a new and aspirational masculinity for the Mexican male. Via humor and satire, Cantinflas (re)constituted the marginal, the private, the outsider with his *pelado* characters. With his catalog of over thirty movies, Cantinflas situated *pelados* at the heart of Mexican identity and belonging.

As a consequence of Cantinflas' long and successful career, scholarly attention to his *pelado* characters has eclipsed that of *pelada* characters. Unsurprisingly, women's expressions of humor are almost nonexistent within studies of Mexican humor. Chicana feminist scholars analyzing Chicana/Latina humor offer a way to recognize this female-centered portrayal as a political tool calling attention to sexism and patriarchy.

Drawing from Chicana feminist perspectives, Rita Urquijo-Ruíz (2013) explores the performances of Mexican actresses Amelia “La Guayaba” Wilhelmy and Beatriz “La Chata Nolesca” Escalona as female *pelados*, or *peladitas*. These two performers were Moreno’s female contemporaries who similarly employed comedy to critique political power. Urquijo-Ruíz’s theorization of these *peladitas* constructs and unearths feminist alternative narratives regarding Mexican humor. Her work follows the scholarship of Chicana scholars like Alicia Arrizón (1999) and Broyles-González (2003), who challenge the male centeredness in this area of research. In her examination of Chicana and queer performances, Arrizón (1999) positions humor as a mechanism that can reconstruct the ways in which women can understand the self, the female self, and/or the queer self. Broyles-González’s examination of one-woman shows by Chicanas from the 1990s and early 2000s notes that unlike the male-centered teatro collectives that emerged during the height of the Chicano civil rights movement, these female performances challenged the male dominance on stage, and instead were “radically countercultural and creative” (88).

Although predating them by two decades, the comedic performances of María Victoria Cervantes, Ángeles Fernández Abad and María Elena Velasco Fragoso were similarly transgressive. My purpose is to center how these understudied, suppressed, and differential knowledges of these early twentieth century humorous expressions by Cervantes, Fernández and Velasco assert an oppositional transformative Chicana praxis (Sandoval 1991) regarding the value of *mujer*-based knowledge and experiences. Enriqueta Vasquez (2005) invited *mujeres* to share their stories and humor and to write and perform their history. Essentially, she advocated for women to emerge as cultural, sociological, and political *entremetidas*. By drawing on their experiential knowledge, they can declare, share, and legitimate their experiences in creative and expressive ways.

Similar to Broyles-González's (2003) observation that Chicana one-woman performances "grew from the negative patriarchal legacy of the civil rights movement" (87-103), the performances of these Mexican comediantes can be read as socio-political stances of resistance against the backlash against women's newly gained independence after the Mexican Revolution. Cervantes, Fernández Abad and Velasco Fragozo each portray *entremetidas*—women who insert themselves and speak without waiting to be asked to speak—in order to introduce a space, a gap between their lived realities and the "standard Eurocentric, male-centered histories," thus engendering "new liberatory space for Raza women" (Broyles-González 2003, 87, 103). The following sections flesh out the roles and career choices they respectively forged.

María Victoria Cervantes

María Victoria Cervantes began her career at the age of six alongside Eduardo Jijón Serrano, better known as Paco Miller, in the "*carpas*" (tents/vaudeville). Miller was an Ecuadorian ventriloquist and entrepreneur with a traveling entertainment company. Cervantes was a singer, actor and comedienne who took the stage name of María Victoria (Las Noticias México, n.d.) and starred in nearly forty films. As a singer, Cervantes recorded over one hundred albums with a distinctive breathless voice that made audiences anticipate every note.

Throughout her artistic trajectory she was associated with several monikers: "la exótica vestida/the dressed exotic woman," "la belleza sin tiempo/the timeless beauty," "la perla del Occidente/the pearl from the West," and the most memorable is "la criada bien criada/the well-behaved maid." Despite all of Cervantes' singing and cinematic achievements, the role that ultimately placed her within Mexican popular culture was the role of Inocencia, "la criada bien criada." Cervantes initially portrayed the no-nonsense, back-talking, and bossy maid on stage—the ultimate *entremetida*. *La criada bien*

criada was such a theatrical success that it was launched as a television series in 1969 (Cortés and de Fuentes 1969-1980) and went on to have a fourteen-year television run. In 1972, the series was made into a film.

Until Cervantes' criada bien criada character, Mexican comediennes had not portrayed a lead actor on a sitcom and had not had one-liners or refrains. Inocencia embodied Gloria Anzaldúa's *hocicona*, which gave Cervantes power and the discursive distance from her exotic moniker. As Inocencia, Cervantes fearlessly declared, "Conmigo va andar muy derecho, no en balde en mi pueblo yo cuidaba puercos/With me, you're going to walk the straight and narrow; I didn't care for pigs in my ranch for nothing" (*La Criada Bien Criada* 1972). Cervantes was not the first actress to portray a Mexican woman from this particular socio-economic status with attitude, opinions, and ideas—entremetidas. Her character Inocencia was, however, the first to speak her mind as an autonomous single woman. And while she was still a caregiver, she spoke her mind to her employers (men and women alike) and to the men who wooed her. The stage and televisual criada bien criada, did not seek to please men, nor sought their company, their approval nor their financial support.

There were limitations, however. Cervantes and her character were constrained in terms of the type of labor a woman could procure in urban spaces, to the male behavior she would have to endure and even to the "type" of men with whom she could not engage socially. For instance, the 1972 film begins with Inocencia's arrival to Mexico City from her pueblo. Cervantes cinematically frames the arrival of thousands of women who left their pueblos seeking work in large urban cities throughout Mexico's period of industrialization. As soon as she arrives, Inocencia quickly meets two men, a deliveryman and a postman. These men flank her character throughout the film, as she becomes the love interest to both. Upon meeting the men, Inocencia announces she needs a

job. Her speedy declaration about her desire to work positions Inocencia as a reputable and decent woman. Despite their lustful interest, they help her find a respectable job by which she can support herself.

The postman secures an interview for Inocencia with an ama de casa. After the wife interviews and hires Inocencia, she calls her husband to introduce them. The husband comes into the frame at her beckoning. He is short, balding, and mousy, wears clothes that are far too big for his small frame and it is apparent that he is not the one in charge of the home. The mother then calls on her bebé/baby to come. When el bebé steps into the scene, Inocencia no longer wants the job. The bebé is a full-grown man who is dressed and treated like a child. When asked how old the child is, the mother says that he is seven going on eight and so begins Inocencia's new job.

Although the movie revolves around Inocencia's experience of coming to the big city, her experience is defined by her interactions with men and their care. The film portrays men as mousy, childish, and easily titillated. From the outset, Inocencia placates the whims and desires of the deliveryman and postman. El bebé is an ambivalent character who vacillates between adult and child-like behavior. The inconsistencies of the character's development make it difficult to connect with the fantasy of the man-child. Still, the needs and wants of this character are pacified by Inocencia. The mother of the man-child underscores this when she asks Inocencia to, "Entregarte cuerpo y alma al cuidado...cuídalo como que fuera tu propio hijo/Submit your body and soul to his care...watch him as if he is your own child" to which Inocencia responds, "Ni Dios lo mande/God forbid."

One of the most interesting revelations of the film are Inocencia's fantasies. Her status-driven daydreams reveal her aspirations and desires. She dreams of

being with a man in a suit, who drives a convertible and can afford a particular lifestyle. Inocencia's yearning for a specific type of man exposes fixed gendered expectations and echoes the idea that women fantasize about wealthy men as a means for social mobility. It also underscores fixed social identities/castes as even in her fantasies Inocencia dresses like a maid. The film gives Inocencia a voice and allows the audience to peek into her fantasies, yet the film fails to transcend a very limited gendered and classed socio-political space. Inocencia's dreams manifest that this desired life is inaccessible because even in her mind, a space that is hers alone, she is unable to rid herself of signifiers, like her maid's uniform which prohibit social mobility.

The television series proves a bit more liberating for *la criada bien criada*. The series is formulated around Inocencia working as a caregiver for a wealthy woman. This gendered caregiving is central to the character and story development. Inocencia's care unifies all who enter the mansion as her collective family. Throughout the series, she is not a love interest, does not care for children nor is she an object of desire. The series ran from 1969–1980 and for the life of the show, the characters remained stagnant. At the end of the series, the writers kill off the mansion owner who leaves the mansion to Inocencia. Although much can be said about the passing of wealth from one woman to another as powerful, the limitation of how women can come into wealth is problematic. How else can a woman inherit opportunity? Nonetheless, this inheritance offers a significant change for the character. Inocencia transforms the mansion into a small business venture. The show is reworked as *La casa de huéspedes* (1980-1983) with the same characters but now Inocencia is a single autonomous business owner who remains the lead character of prime-time television program in Latin America. *La criada bien criada* was Cervantes' most profitable invention and provided a transgressive *entremetida* representation of a contemporary woman.

María de los Ángeles Fernández Abad

María de los Ángeles Fernández Abad was a Spanish actress who moved to Mexico in the late 1940s soon after Francisco Franco in Spain came into power. Once in Mexico, Fernández began her career and took the stage name of Ángelinas Fernández. She entertained audiences for nearly four decades in theater, radio, film, and television. Fernández made the transition from radio to television and starred in over twenty novelas/soap operas. She was also cast in fifteen films where she shared the screen with actors like Mario Moreno *Cantinflas*, Arturo de Córdova and her friend Ángel Garasa. Fernández is most remembered for her 23-year portrayal of *Doña Clotilde, la bruja del 71*. After Ramón Valdés encouraged Fernández to join the new comedy series *El chavo del ocho* (1971), Fernández joined the cast and secured her place as a beloved icon of Mexican television and popular culture.

To understand the significance of *la bruja del 71*, we must understand the enormity of *El chavo del ocho*. In 1970, *Chespirito* began airing in Mexico and throughout Latin America. This sketch comedy show launched beloved characters like el Chapulín Colorado, el Doctor Chapatín, and el Chavo del Ocho (*Chespirito* n.d.). In 1971, *El chavo del ocho*, the sketch, became its own television series. Today, nearly five decades after first airing on Televisa, the syndicated sitcom averages ninety-one million daily viewers in all of the markets where it is distributed in the Americas. In the United States alone, it consistently ranks within the top five Spanish language shows broadcast on cable (Antunes 2012). To offer some perspective, the 2019 Super Bowl drew an average of ninety-eight million viewers (Sports Media Watch n.d.).

El chavo del ocho chronicles the mishaps of an orphan living alone in a *vecindad* in Mexico City. In Mexico and Latin America, *vecindad* generally refers to a poor neighborhood and not merely defined by the close proximity

of the dwelling spaces but by the kind of community that materializes among the neighbors who inhabit the space. The sitcom features children who are all played by adults: Quico, Chilindrina, Ñoño, Popis and, of course, el Chavo. Doña Cleotilde is the oldest woman of the vecindad. She takes pride in clarifying that she is a señorita, a virgin. By all accounts, this señorita was autonomous: lived alone, never married and did not have children. She paid her rent, her bills and provided for herself. This kind of woman and the life she led appeared so foreign and strange to the people of the vecindad they called her “la bruja del 71.” It is notable that in Mexico, witchcraft was/is a socio-cultural means by which to acquire power. Witchcraft was/is a form of resistance and complicates gendered and hegemonic hierarchies (Behar 1987; Schneider and Linderbaum 1987; Lewis 2003). The singularity of a self-sufficient woman who never married and who did not have children was such a spectacle that it could not be understood by the socio-political and cultural space of the vecindad. Such a woman was an enigmatic presence, probably possessed by unknown powers and surely dangerous. Within the confines of this socio-political and cultural space, such a woman could only be described as a paranormal manifestation, a “witch.”

La vecindad did not understand her unconventional ways. Still, Doña Cleotilde was filled with self-esteem, desires and was very open about her interest in men. She flirts with the younger, single father of the vecindad (Don Ramón as played by her friend Ramón Valdés). Her advances on the single father were direct and persistent, yet never reciprocated. This entremetida was not only a social anomaly because she lived her life without a male at her side and spoke her mind but also because she was the suitor. As an older single woman, Doña Cleotilde was the initiator and in control in selecting a potential partner and thus exists in a rare social plane within the context of Mexican society. She lived comfortably and did not rely on

male assistance or support of any kind. She was self-sufficient and appeared unabashed by her single social status or for living alone. Most notably, she was not defined by any association to any male character.

As noted earlier, *El chavo del ocho* began as a sketch, harkening back to the carpas/vaudeville where sketches were improvised material, born of improv sessions. Individual sketches were brief yet exploratory for character development. In the carpas, the success of the character hinged on the immediate connection of that character with the audience. This, of course, gave way to dedicated and nuanced inventions. Roberto Gómez Bolaños wrote, directed, and starred in *El chavo del ocho* and in the tradition of the carpas methodology of character development, the show gave significant autonomy to the actors to define and give distinction to the characters they portrayed. This autonomy to cultivate characters by the performers themselves would later become subject to litigation regarding who “owned” these specific portrayals as intellectual property (Regueria 2014; Nájjar 2015; Chaves Espinach and Rojas 2014).

María Antonieta de las Nieves (La Chilindrina) and Carlos Villagrán (Quico) sued Roberto Gómez Bolaños for the rights to own their characters as their intellectual property. In the midst of legal battles over La Chilindrina and Quico, de las Nieves and Villagrán launched traveling circus shows. They created a market for performances of and merchandise featuring the Chilindrina and Quico characters. In 2019, de las Nieves launched the farewell tour of El Circo de La Chilindrina (Espectáculos 2019). Even today, years after Gómez Bolaños’ death, the fights for the rights to these characters are still being fought. And even Édgar Vivar, who did not sue Gómez Bolaños over the rights to El Señor Barriga and Ñoño, launched his own circus show around the characters he helped develop. It is hard to imagine that la bruja del

71 would have been a fully developed character when Fernández was asked to portray Doña Cleotilde or not expected to contribute to the nuances of the character as all of the other *El chavo del ocho* characters. Fernández, like Vivar, never sued Gómez Bolaños for the rights to own la bruja del 71. It is notable that Fernández was forty-seven years old when she began to portray la bruja del 71 and had had great success as a cinematic and television actress, whereas de las Nieves was twenty-one, Villagrán and Vivar were twenty-seven and Doña Cleotilde remained a staple of *El chavo del ocho* for the life of the show. Ironically, it seems, Fernández was perhaps less self-sufficient than her entremetida character and, ultimately, her association to Roberto Gómez Bolaños's Chespirito defined her career.

María Elena Velasco Fragoso

María Elena Velasco Fragoso is better known as La India María. Velasco began her career as a showgirl in the late 1950s and early 1960s at El Teatro Tibolí and soon made her way to the famous El Teatro Blanquita. The transition from the small theater to the larger and more visible theater was instrumental in setting Velasco on the path to television and film stardom. At El Teatro Blanquita, she met and worked with Fernando Soto "Mantequilla," Pompín Iglesias, Óscar Ortiz de Pinedo and Julián Lipkies (Julián de Meriche), whom she later married. The experiences and connections she developed in the theater were formative and set her path beyond the scope of showgirl and dancer.

In 1962, Velasco's performance at El Teatro Blanquita captivated Spanish film director and screenwriter Miguel Morayta who offered Velasco a small part on his next film, *Los derechos de los hijos* (Morayta 1963). This small role gave Velasco visibility and directors like Juan Bostillo de Oro took notice. Velasco was cast as Petra the maid in the remake of Bostillo de Oro's 1944 *México de*

mis recuerdos (Bustillo de Oro 1963). In this film, she worked with leading Mexican actors like Fernando Soler, Joaquin Cordero, and Jorge Lavat. *México de mis recuerdos* gave Velasco a prime stage to introduce a character she had developed while at El Teatro Blanquita. The character offered a twist to the representation of the domestic worker. In this role, Velasco completely altered the fetishistic visual and rhetorical narrative of the French maid and introduced the domestic character as an Indigenous woman within the context of an urban metropolis and an upper middle-class lifestyle. Velasco stylized her character with braids and ribbons, multi-colored necklaces, and excessive use of lace in her colorful outfits and became la India María. Velasco, through la India María, represented the Indigenous woman who was often segregated, discriminated against, and underestimated and became a household name.

The first time Velasco officially starred as la India María was in *El bastardo* (Martínez 1968). By 1969, Velasco and her character were ratings powerhouses. That same year Raúl Velasco (no relation), a Mexican host/producer, began *Domingos espectaculares*/Spectacular Sundays which later became *Siempre en Domingo*/Always on Sunday (Velasco 1970-1998). Raúl Velasco asked María Elena Velasco to partner with him on his variety show. La India María was instrumental in cementing *Siempre en Domingo* as the must-see television event on Sunday evenings throughout Latin America. For nearly three decades, *Siempre en Domingo* became a Latin American Sunday evening staple and a platform for launching countless careers, much like *The Tonight Show with Johnny Carson* in the United States.

In 1973, María Elena Velasco returned to her career in film and to performing live but continued to make guest television appearances on *Siempre en Domingo* and other television variety shows. During one of her

guest appearances, host Gustavo Pimentel asked la India María, “Que harías sin en lugar de ser Presidenta Municipal fueras Presidente de la República?/ What would you do if instead of being municipal president [mayor] you were president of the republic?” Pimentel’s question referenced Velasco’s 1975 hit *La presidenta municipal* in which Velasco is elected mayor by happenstance.

Instead of remaining strictly comedic or softening the political critique, her response was direct and oppositional to the López Portillo presidency. Velasco replied, “Me daría la gran vida viajando por Acapulco con toda mi familia/I would enjoy the big life traveling through Acapulco with my family.” This exchange showcased the integration and unity of the character and the performer. The response revealed Velasco as the emerging *entremetida* which transcended the voice of the India María character. Velasco underscored the reality of corruption in the Mexican government, namely the wasteful spending and lifestyle of President José López Portillo who served as the fifty-first President of Mexico from 1976 to 1982. At the time, Mexico’s oil reserves strengthened López Portillo’s confidence both at home and abroad. But his greed turned the reserves into national financial calamity. During his presidency, Mexico’s debt skyrocketed to over sixty billion dollars. By the summer of 1982, the Mexican peso became virtually worthless. López Portillo was never charged with any crime even as his extreme wealth accumulation and waste during those years were evident. Velasco’s comments were accurate and pierced too deeply for Mexican politics.

Soon after these on-air comments, Televisa, the largest Spanish language multimedia production company, received a call from the office of the President ordering that Velasco and her la India María character be banned from television, and Televisa complied. Velasco became virtually invisible

in Mexican television for over a decade. In the late-1980s, Velasco began to emerge from her exile. In 1986, she made an appearance as la India María on *Siempre en Domingo*, not too long after the 1985 Mexico City earthquake that killed over 10,000 people and caused serious damage to the metropolitan area. It had been nearly thirteen years since she appeared on the show as a regular. When she walked on stage, the audience stood, shouted, applauded, and could not conceal their delight to see her on stage. Her performance was responsive to the welcome. It was as if she had never left. She performed for fifteen minutes to the delight of the audience and Raúl Velasco. Mexico was in recovery from the earthquake and la India María thanked the world for the support and assistance Mexico received. She also revisited popular refrains that emerged for la India María in *Siempre en Domingo* years back: “ven pa’ca güero/come here güero” and “no te hagas güero/stop pretending güero.” Güero is a colloquial Mexican word used to denote a person of fair complexion and/or with blond or red hair. Güero was la India María’s pet name for Raúl Velasco with whom she flirted incessantly during every performance. She also continued her entremetida tradition by celebrating Mexican-ness, woman-ness, indigeneity and adamantly declared,

Yo soy María, no soy ni María Félix ni María Victoria, simplemente María. Soy nacida en tierra seca. Sí señor, hecha en México y por mexicanos...que nunca se olviden que lo que en México se hace se hace bien y está bien hecho/I am María, I am not Maria Felix nor María Victoria, simply María. I was born in dry land. Yes sir, made in Mexico and by Mexicans...so that no one forgets that what is made in Mexico is made well and well-made.

Velasco asserts pride in her identity and the identity she portrays. Her declaration is clear, she is not afraid of the fusion with the identity of her

character. She is Mexican and thus “made in Mexico” along with everyone else who is “made in Mexico.” In her role as an *entremetida*, she challenges colonial castes and openly declares war on notions of socio-cultural supremacy. *La India María*’s last special appearance on Televisa was in 2006 (twenty years after her ban) on a special dedicated to her colleague and friend Raúl Velasco, who would die of heart and liver complications before the special even aired.

María Elena Velasco survived the ban from television because as contributing writer and director, she controlled much of the production process and content of her live performances and films. Velasco remained a favorite with audiences because she worked tirelessly to sustain her career outside the grip of Televisa and Mexican politics but also became very private and elusive with media outlets. Velasco’s productions evidenced aspects of social (in)justice in Mexican life like poverty, discrimination, and patriarchy, particularly on their intersection with women—specifically, Indigenous women. Velasco’s character mirrors the *pelado*’s transition and struggle in the metropolis in early twentieth century Mexico. Moreover, *la India María* is the first cinematic comedic female character whose performance is centered on the female experience and equally portrays men as those who can be advocates or obstacles for the advancement of women.

One of her most well-known films, *Tonta, tonta pero no tanto* (Cortes 1972) begins with *la India María* Nicolasa Cruz at the train station in her pueblo where her mother, father and donkey see her off to the big city to look for work. As soon as she steps off the train in Mexico City, *la India María*’s troubles begin. Two young women spot her as a “*tonta*” and approach her as if they know her, cover her eyes, and steal from her. They take her money and most importantly the address and directions of where she was heading. With

no money or sense of direction, she finds herself in the middle of the city, in the midst of midday traffic and confused at the daunting task of crossing the street. A police officer notices her anxiety and confusion and offers to help. He attempts to orient her and proceeds to give her instructions on how to seek help in the nearest police station, but she tells him that she cannot read and can only count to ten. The police officer does not mock her or make light of her illiteracy, but genuinely attempts to help her. She thanks him by offering him some oranges, which are all she has left. He tells la India María to keep her oranges because she could sell them at the open market. She heads out and spots a few women selling oranges on the street and she sits next to them only to be attacked by them. As they struggle, policemen come and begin to arrest the women selling oranges. La India María escapes as she asks, “¿Aquí es malo vender pa’ comer?/Is it a crime to sell to eat here?” Her question is an indictment of the criminalization of the honest work so many Mexican women took part in to support their families.

La India María encounters cultural turmoil and dissonance at every turn, but Velasco’s films present the honesty, generosity, and work ethic of the Indigenous people of Mexico, who are often seen and portrayed as eyesores of the urban landscape. Jorge Ortiz de Pinedo, a fellow comedian, submits that Velasco is an artist of denunciation whose films force the eye “para darnos cuenta de cómo tratábamos a esas Marías que andaban en las calles/. . .so that we would take notice of how we treated those Marias on the streets” (Azteca TV 2011). Velasco facilitates this denunciation throughout film and presents the potential of social institutions like the church. She constructs scenarios where the social good these institutions can do for the Mexican populace are demonstrated; like when she seeks shelter at the Catholic Church and the man closing the building takes money from the donation plate to give to her. The man prays that the saint from where he took the money will

understand that this was an appropriate use of the funds. Velasco juxtaposes the unconscionable decadence of the rich with the equally extreme poverty in Mexico City like when she takes the money the man at the church gave her and walks to a hotel seeking shelter. There, the bell boy does not greet la India María as a potential guest. He assumes that she is going to ask for money or sell her oranges. He warns her that if she does not have four hundred pesos, to walk away. She walks away muttering, “no me quiero quedar un año, sólo una noche/I don’t want to stay a year, just one night.”

Velasco is direct in her socio-cultural observations and criticism. Her films are particularly powerful because they concurrently portray women with agency without emasculating men. Velasco presents men who are helpful, kind, and generous. There is the police officer who helps her at the beginning of the film; the man at the church who gives her money; the bus driver who takes her to the television station to seek help; Paco Malgesto, the television host, who offers her help and friendship; Chenchó, the police investigator; and a childhood friend she finds in the city. Still, Velasco does not shy away from portraying men who indeed exploit and demean women like the bell hop and the man who offers her dinner and proceeds to grope her. In *Tonta, tonta pero no tanto*, la India María is a woman who may not know the rules and expectations of the city but is a quick study. María becomes a domestic worker to a rich woman. She does not provide care for any man or child and does not tolerate male advances. She navigates through the new social terrain and struggles with the impositions and burdens of colonialism, capitalism, patriarchy, modernization, and industrialization. As a borderlands figure, la India María does not accept the colonial/Western social norms and continually negotiates multiple cultural realities (Anzaldúa 1987). She grapples with language, social expectations, and behaviors.

Velasco ruptured the norm by portraying a strong Indigenous woman, unlike the many Mexican actoras/comediantes who atavistically portrayed oppressive colonial sensibilities that located women, namely Indigenous women, at the bottom of the socio-political hierarchy. Socio-cultural gatekeepers like Octavio Paz (1998) deemed women *el cuerpo que “duerme y sólo se enciende si alguien lo despierta/[the body that] sleeps and only lights up if someone awakens it”* (13). For Paz, women are passive, never “una pregunta, sino una respuesta, material fácil...que la imaginación y la sensualidad masculina esculpen/a question, only an answer, she is easy material [that] masculine imagination and sensuality sculpts” (13). As if he had not been clear about his position on women, Paz underscores that “[L]as mujeres son seres inferiores porque, al entregarse, se abren. Su inferioridad es constitucional y radica en su sexo, en su “rajada”, herida que jamás cicatriza/[w]omen are inferior because when they yield themselves, they open up. Their inferiority is constitutional and hinges on their gender, in their rupture [vagina], injury that will never heal” (10). Paz’s language reflects his insecurities and underscores his anxiety about women and reveals his personal defense of Mexican masculinity.

Velasco’s films disrupt these colonial vestiges. Her humor evokes empathy and kinship with and for *la India María*. Velasco is not waiting for someone to come “light her up.” She is conscientious about her status and makes choices about her condition. She interrogates her world and becomes a multidimensional person of intrigue, not easily deciphered. As an *entremetida*, *La India María* is not waiting for any man to sculpt her identity and she does not exist to continue the stability of an elite misogynistic notion of nation. *La India María* ruptures Paz’s elitist frame that Mexican identity is determined, restrictive and violent. As an Indigenous woman, *la India María* complicates Paz’s notion of *la Malinche*, women, indigeneity, betrayal, and surrender.

For Paz, Mexico's waning condition is engendered in female inferiority, impotence, and rupture. The fucker is the male, the one who opens. The fucked, the female, is passive. The relationship between the binary is violent, determined by the cynical power of the former and impotence of the latter. Velasco's character actively labors to heal and bridge years of oppression, misogyny, and distrust; not only for the Indigenous people of Mexico but particularly for Mexican women. La India María creates "*dis-comfort*" and opens an interstice for counter narratives and the potential for socio-cultural change (Gutiérrez 2010).

Considerations

These three twentieth century Mexican comediantes illustrate how women performers navigated the boundaries of gender, class and sexuality in Mexican cinema, television, and society. The women curated here demonstrate how even as the production and construction of the Mexican woman within televisual and cinematic texts were very rarely in the hands of women themselves, they found ways to create unique aesthetic personas that challenged naturalized notions of Mexican women using humor and often *entremetida* roles. When censored and silenced within the political national discourse, they found ways to survive and remain relevant and loved by their audiences. Female cinematic and televisual identity(ies) in Mexico continue to be heavily regulated representations but mediums like YouTube have, to some degree, democratized the female voice. More notably, humor remains an effective vehicle for *entremetidas* willing to question heteronormative sensitivities for contemporary twenty-first century comedienas like La India Yuridia¹ and Sofia Niño de Rivera² who engage Mexican femininities as ongoing dialogue of negotiations.

Notes

¹ Yuridia Ruiz Castro, better known by her stage name India Yuridia, hails from Monterrey, Mexico. As she began her career, she developed various characters until she eventually created India Yuridia. Castro emerged as a YouTube sensation, garnering more than two million followers and amassing more than 600 million views. Since her rise, she has toured all over Mexico and Latin America. In the Fall of 2022, she is set to tour the U.S., from Illinois to California.

Castro's stand-up is rooted on her feminist positionality, highlighting topics of gender equity, women's liberation, childbirth, housework, marriage, and much more. She underscores the absurdity of machismo and the complex sociological aspects of why so many women often tolerate it. Her performances hold a mirror to her audience and underscore the power women have. Her performances demand that her audiences (men and women alike) leave with a newfound respect for women/themselves.

² Sofia Niño de Rivera is a Mexican stand-up comedian and actress. She is known as a leader and pioneer of stand-up comedy (the genre) in Mexico and Latin America. Niño de Rivera has performed at large venues like Auditorio Nacional in Mexico City and at small iconic venues like the Gotham Comedy Club in New York. She was the first Spanish speaking Mexicana/Latina to have a comedy special on Netflix. Her special was such a success that Netflix offered Niño de Rivera a second special.

Like Yuridia, Niño de Rivera hones in to the nuances of Mexican identity. Her focus is on the middle-class spectrum of Mexico and highlights the gendered consequences of the pretension and sense of superiority by certain segments of the Mexican population. Her observations underscore the laughable aspects of the discrimination, misogyny and patriarchy at play in modern Mexican society.

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