On the "Campaign Trail" with The Mexican Elvis, Irony is the New Empathy: Constructing Alliances through the Distance Between

Paper for ASTR Seminar: "Unsettling Intentions: Activism and the Limits of Empathy"

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El Vez's piercing brown eyes stare out from his El Vez for Prez publicity poster with all the seriousness of the iconic Uncle Sam visage he adopts. Though the overall effect of seeing The Mexican Elvis, complete with his pencil-thin moustache, dressed up in the red, white, and blue of our national personification is humorous, the somber visual tone is not misplaced, as it not only hints toward the gravity of the upcoming election, but also the dangers of the discourse he enters into through his performance. El Vez wraps himself in the emotionally charged images of patriotism and speaks frankly about USAmerican politics – a risky business.[1] However, by establishing an ironic distance from the images and rhetoric he deploys, El Vez both protects himself from and warns us against the double edge of empathy, where "feeling with" becomes distorted in colonizing and propagandizing ways. His performance disallows the easy equivalencies of empathy in order to engender a deeper form of connection among his diverse audience base. Because it prevents his audience members from putting themselves in the *huaraches azules* of *el Rey,* irony in an El Vez concert allows for the revelation of alliances across multiple subject positions to create an ethical community enacted through thought, reflection, and rock and roll.

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[1] I have consciously chosen to use the term USAmerican in my critical engagement with the social, cultural, and political structures of the United States. In part, my use of this term stems from the personal and theoretical border encounters I have experienced as I engage with this material. The Americas span the southern tip of Chile to the Northern reaches of Canada, while the United States occupies a small portion of this continental mass. I wish to resist the inordinate power our nation wields over the hemisphere and the globe by disallowing our culture to claim as its own the term American. At times, however, I quite consciously use the term American, to address the mythologized, melodramatic understanding of America as it circulates in contemporary political discourse. This fictionalized understanding erroneously views America as the bastion of freedom, equality, and democracy at home and abroad.

The clever inversion that flips Uncle Sam's famous "I want you" into El Vez's "You want me" – an ostensibly silly joke completely in keeping with the rock star tradition in which El Vez situates himself – in fact voices a motivating impulse that marks encounters across lines of difference: desire. "You want me," asserts El Vez in the poster. Yet his accusatory finger seems to challenge the viewer, demanding, "What exactly is it of me that you want?" Of course, desire for difference is not necessarily harmful in its intent. Indeed, as Doris Sommer suggests, it provides the lifeblood of democratic negotiation within diverse societies; she notes, "Precisely because citizens cannot presume to feel, or to think, or to perform alike, their ear for otherness makes justice possible," (3). Wanting to hear and learn from difference can represent a benevolent, even hopeful wish for new experiences and new knowledges, for interesting and expanding dialogues, for the creation of productive and powerful coalitions. The emotional bridging to another that empathy facilitates, in its most progressive and transformative manifestations, serves as a potent conduit to connection and understanding. By placing his Chicano body in the figure of Uncle Sam, El Vez acknowledges this possibility; perhaps what we want from him is his vision of a society in which difference flourishes, where a Mexican Elvis *can* be our national leader, symbolizing the great social strides we have taken together.

And yet that finger scolds us again. By celebrating his appropriation of Uncle Sam as a subversive act of empowerment and holding it up as a marker of our collective progress (actual or potential), are we truly hearing difference, or are we engaging in a variation of what Laura Edmondson dubs "academic sugarcoating?" El Vez's use of this Ultra-American icon, a stern white nineteenth century patriarch, purposefully recalls an aspect of our national history that we desperately long to forget: the systematic erasure, oppression, and exocitization of difference

that we continue to struggle with today.[2] Maybe what we really want is for El Vez and his discomfiting reminder of our ignoble past and rocky present to recede from view, to assuage our guilt and then disappear. As Sommer asserts, "That is why political philosophy and ethics…caution against empathy, which plays treacherously in a subject-centered key that overwhelms unfamiliar voices only to repeat the solitary sounds of the self," (3). Empathy can quickly turn from a desire to understand difference into the need to possess it, to wash it away in a wave of (false) universalism, to force it say what we want it to mean, to derive pleasure from its strangeness and then discard it. Without really having heard across lines of difference, empathy can allow one the luxury of believing that an imagined they are just like me. Or at least they should be, unless I want them to be different.

Through its linkage with the political process, the Mexican Elvis Uncle Sam image also reveals how contemporary political discourse uses empathy as a power strategy. Organized ruling blocs attempt to rearticulate the social and cultural landscape in emotional and affective terms, evacuating from them the potential for real political engagement. As cultural theorist Lawrence Grossberg submits, "precisely by repoliticizing and re-ideologizing all of the social relations and cultural practices of everyday life, the new conservatism is effectively depoliticizing a large part of the population. It is creating a 'demilitarized zone' within everyday life through a series of 'strategies' directed at the national popular," (259). Thus when Sarah Palin sneers at the community activism of Barack Obama and applauds herself, on the basis of her hockeymomdom, for her "real" American political work, she erases a potent site of democratic political action (community organizing) and politicizes an emotionally constructed identity (hockey mom) that in fact offers no possibility for involvement. Being-like replaces

[2] Uncle Sam was popularly adopted as a symbol for the U.S. government during the war of 1812, though the famous "I Want You" poster El Vez parodies was painted in 1917 by James Montgomery Flagg.

doing. Tellingly, such rearticulations of the popular require a mode of empathic engagement that turns the public into the other. In a mirror to the previous example, what we want (or are told to want) in our political candidates is not actually that they be like us, but rather that we be like them. You want me because you want to believe you are me.

Amid this swirl of meanings, which reading does El Vez want us to take from these images? It's a trick question. In reality, there is no El Vez; there is Robert Lopez, the artist behind the moustache, which he applies with a Sharpie before every show.[3] Lopez creates his art not to persuade his audience, but to pose questions. He adamantly proclaims "it's not a crusade," (Personal email (1)). And he admits that he doesn't have the answers. Rather, for Lopez, the very act of questioning is the point:

> It's a symposium of ideas under the Elvis frame. To make them think is the most important thing…And there are no absolutes because it will change again… It's a constant strive, and that's what creative efforts are – to walk through it, to guide through it…It's a constant thing. In a way that is a good thing because it will always be to continue to struggle. There will never be the peaceful kingdom of Camelot or the God's Kingdom or a political socialism that makes everyone happy. It's always a struggle and people need to talk about it rather than blindly accept it and walk through it in a daze." (Personal Interview).

Thus the El Vez for Prez tour opens a forum, a space in which social realities can be dissected outside of the affective structures that mark official political discourse. More importantly, the tour enacts dialogue rather than absolutist debate. In my analysis of the El Vez for Prez poster, I have tried to model the way multiple meanings circulate in his performances. To return to the query, then, which reading is the correct reading? All of them, and countless more. Through El Vez, Lopez allows his audience to engage with the complexities and the contradictions of USAmerican society.

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[3] To clarify my terms, when I am talking about the performative event that is an El Vez concert, I refer to the character of El Vez by his stage name, leaving Lopez relegated to the frame and, as it were, out of the picture. When I reflect on the construction of this character through the artistry of Lopez, I will use his actual name.

Lopez carefully constructs El Vez to be the ultimate fake, offering enough clues to his inauthenticity for audience members to question the "facts" about himself he presents onstage. El Vez is a fully formed – and fully inauthentic – character who comes complete with an infectiously positive personality and impossibly absurd history. He was born in East LA on the Cinco de Mayo or the Fourth of July, depending on what time of the year you see him; his mother named him El Vez; and he was destined to grow up to become the best Mexican Elvis President in all the world. He lives a comic book destiny, an exaggeration of an Elvis image that was already larger-than-life to begin with. And now he is running for office on a platform of bringing Elvisness to the White House. The effect of such details is to situate El Vez as the impersonator who achieves authenticity, the fake that becomes real, the trickster who speaks the truth. Notes Lopez:

> i am heralding the un-authentic
> the impersonator
> the fake
> impersonate so real
> so real i am beyond fake (Personal email (2))

The inauthenticity of the character El Vez disrupts empathic engagement by preventing his audience members from emotionally investing in him. As he stands onstage in clown shoes; red, white, and blue pants with suspenders; Mickey Mouse gloves; and an oversized bowtie, he makes it impossible to "feel with" a character who is so obviously false. There is no emotional core to El Vez to connect to – El Vez is pure image, a mélange of pop culture references coupled with shiny pants. Lopez often proclaims, "I am El Vez, the Mexican Elvis, but it could easily be El Vez, the blank Elvis. You fill in the space," (Schenkman par. 7). The "blank El Vez" to which Lopez refers disallows emotional investment in the character, thereby enabling his audience and to think through the images and rhetoric he presents. Moreover, Lopez challenges his audience to remain active – "you fill in the space" – to participate in the unpacking of the messages he presents. El Vez initiates an exchange where each individual must actively work alongside his inauthentic figure to decode the multiplicity of meanings in the performative event of an El Vez show.

An El Vez performance relies on the deployment of recognizable icons and images, but roots them to what feminist theorist Donna J. Haraway describes as situated knowledges. Haraway asserts that webs of interconnection form when individuals are specifically and knowingly located in their subject positions. As Haraway states, "The knowing self is partial in all its guises, never finished, whole, simply there and original; it is always constructed and stitched together imperfectly, and *therefore* able to join with another to see without claiming to be another," (193). Again, this marks a move away from empathy; through grounding the self in specificity, one can engage in intellectual (not emotional), and therefore ethical, dialogue across lines of difference. Because the ideas El Vez puts forth must be decoded, he activates his

audience members to produce specific meanings that relate to their own situated identifications. Knowledge is produced by the shared labor of performer and audience members, which echoes Haraway's assertion that it is in the in-between spaces, the thoughtful interaction and exchange between individuals, that the important work of identification and connection gets done. An El Vez performance situates in-betweeness as the constructive space of progressive cultural production. The gaps Lopez opens between enunciations of cultural difference disrupt discourses of hegemony.

Lopez locates the character of El Vez in the specificity of Elvis, who, though instantly recognizable, lacks any sort of fixed position in the web of meaning. Elvis is everywhere, and because he is everywhere, he is effectively nowhere. Sideburns, jumpsuits, tacky showmanship – Elvis conjured in three brushstrokes; decades of USAmerican culture signified in an efficient, instantly recognizable package. Elvis the icon is the readymade culture engine Lopez takes apart to repackage in an entirely different mode:

> [Elvis] never was political, and he hated that. But even being a non-political is kind of a political statement. And so when you are dealing with people and audiences, it turns into a forum, and a forum to me is always a political element. At least, if not social, which again is political. (Personal Interview)

It is significant that Lopez uses the terrain of pop culture as the site of his social and political critique. To return to Grossberg's analysis, popular conservativism seeks to "restructure people's investments in the sites of the popular," (256). That is, it mobilizes people's affective investments in the symbology of pop culture to strip them of political agency. In contrast, Lopez picks up the most sacred of pop culture icons in order to inject thought back into the emotional pull of Elvis.

The unreality of the Elvis frame under which he operates establishes a distance between Lopez and the impersonator he inhabits. El Vez is theatre; Lopez performs the character as an

actor performs a role. Though he fills in El Vez with details from his own experiences, Lopez and El Vez are drastically different, particularly in how they each approach the world. While he admits that "there is the romance of optimism in Robert Lopez" that comes out in his performance of The Mexican Elvis, Lopez asserts that he is a pessimist (Personal Interview). In contrast, El Vez is earnest and positive in all that he does. Perhaps the greatest irony of an El Vez show is that El Vez himself is completely unironic. Lopez notes:

> I guess El Vez doesn't see it as art as opposed to this is my life and this is my cause and this is what I'm telling you. And then Robert Lopez would say the art of, Okay well is it that? Or am I making fun of that? Robert Lopez is more prone to juxtapositions that might occur in the performance as opposed to El Vez, who will live it. (Personal Interview)

Thus Lopez embeds the ironic distance of an El Vez performance in the conceptual foundation of the entire event. He constructs irony in the juxtaposition of El Vez's pure belief and Lopez's refusal of it.

The distance between Lopez as artist and El Vez as character provides a productive gap between the ideas and images he presents to us and how we choose to interpret them. Through El Vez, Lopez voices strong political statements, but irony and the El Vez sense of humor help to sidestep the polemics that shut down discourse. In the El Vez for Prez tour, he sings of immigration rights, enacts a burlesque "Stripping of Our Civil Liber-Tease," tears up posters of George W. Bush, and proclaims Bush to be a perverse clown, noting "Our tragedy has been your comedy." Yet these serious iterations are paired with observations about his platform shoes (looks like a pump, feels like a sneaker); his big, impressive inaugural balls (or, in a car-themed song, his fuzzy dice and hydraulics); and how, in his tiger-striped bell-bottomed jumpsuit, he is King of the Jungle (I feel grrreat!). Images and rhetoric are destabilized and juxtaposed. What he presents may be meant as a genuine critique or it may be nothing more than a stupid joke;

consequently, nothing should be taken at face value, nothing should be unquestioningly believed in. In the open forum of Lopez's construction, strong statements are freed from didacticism.

The ironic distance between Lopez and El Vez also impacts the manner in which community is enacted within the performance venue. Through his creation of *el Rey*, Lopez not only constructs a flamboyant and engaging character, but also the meeting ground in which the wildly inauthentic figure of El Vez comes together with his audience. In this utopic space, notions of cultural, social, and individual identities open up, enabling alliances to form across lines of difference within the audience itself. His playfully named Graciasland becomes a site of connection in which all are welcome. Though one fan might enjoy the amazing musicality of his shows and another his expression of Chicano pride, what matters is that they stand side by side to dance and sing along with *el Rey*. As Lopez notes, El Vez creates multiple access points to his performance, thereby expanding the reach of his message to an exceedingly diverse audience. He becomes a node around which webs of relation form:

> A great thing about El Vez is that it's a very inclusive, party idea, very the world is one…Act globally, think Elvisly! And it's really trying to connect the millions and millions of dots that is life, politics, [society]. (Personal Interview)

Because he avoids empathic conflation, each dot remains grounded in its own specificity. Audience members remain individuals steeped in their own situated knowledges while also becoming members of the El Vez community.

It is important to remember that an El Vez concert functions as the ultimate party atmosphere – it's a finely tuned rock show. It is through his ingenious reimaginings of Elvis songs and the landscape of popular music that Lopez as El Vez delivers his potent message. In the El Vez for Prez tour that mimics a Town Hall meeting, he answers questions of political policy (supposedly submitted by his constituents, the audience members) with music. For

example, what was in Elvis's oeuvre the love ballad "Suspicious Minds" becomes through El Vez a comment on the immigration policies of the United States in "Immigration Time." Then, with a quick costume change into a denim jumpsuit and hipster shades, he transforms himself into a cholo who switches "In the Ghetto" to respond to a question about gang violence with his song "En el Barrio." Far beyond an Elvis impersonator, he takes the familiar melodies of popular music and turns them into artistic and political expression. Not only does he rewrite the lyrics to existing songs, but also Lopez melds together songs from diverse musical traditions, combining bits and pieces of multiple songs to create one spectacular El Vez creation. An El Vez performance will "translate" over 200 songs in any given show, drawing from musical sources as disparate as Elvis, The Beastie Boys, The Clash, Naughty by Nature, David Bowie, Iggy Pop, Lou Reed, and such varied styles as rock, rockabilly, rap, punk, mariachi, and other popular Latin musical forms. As he performs his show closer "J.C. Sí Lowrider," merging Andrew Lloyd Weber's Broadway theme "Jesus Christ Superstar" with Elvis's "C.C. Rider" and the Guns 'N' Roses hit "Paradise City," El Vez constructs a world in which connection can flourish. It is through his musicality that his Graciasland comes fully into being; he constructs an alternate social space by pumping out music that is accessible to everyone. Though they cannot "feel with" El Vez in an empathic mode, audience members are invited to sing along with him without falling into the subject-centered key Sommer warns against. This is why, when leaving an El Vez show, you can feel proud to be a Chicano Lowrider, even if you're not, just as you can be proud to be an American heading to Paradise City, even if outside of the venue this pride might not be felt and Paradise City does not exist.

It is prudent to pause here to question whether my analysis, with all its talk of progressive connection and utopic community, is lapsing into the academic sugarcoating that Edmondson

warns against. Is El Vez for Prez truly a forum for dialogue, or am I just celebrating the fact that I see my beliefs voiced through an amazing, rocking show? Is there room for dissent in Graciasland? Lopez recounts a performance in Seattle's where audience members visibly contested his message. El Vez performed at an event called Seafair, which celebrates the maritime history of Seattle. With a base nearby, the majority of the audience are military families. As in his El Vez for Prez tour, El Vez opens his show by singing "God Bless Ameríca." Dressed in a bell-bottomed Uncle Sam suit, he sings the first verse of the song as originally written, asking the audience to join in. During this initial verse, a group of teenaged girls approached the stage and gave him the thumbs down him, shouting, "We don't like America. We don't like America. Boo!" El Vez's rewritten second verse, however, contradicts the patriotism of the first:

> This mess Ameríca
> We need help from above (or below)
> We're in trouble
> Tensions double
> For the weak and the meek and the poor
> From Afghanistan
> To Iraq-Iran
> Not to mention
> Troubles at home
> This mess Ameríca
> We reap what's sown
> God bless Ameríca
> My home sweet home

At this point, the teenaged girls assuaged by his more critical tone, a group of young military men came forward to voice their outrage. They booed and swore at El Vez, and when we entered the audience to shake hands with his constituents, they refused to engage with him, standing erect and holding their military IDs in his face. Lopez describes how, "at the end of the song, I lay down dead on the stage, and they were at eye level with me, flipping me off. And it

was exciting to me." Truly, Lopez welcomes these sorts of responses and takes it as evidence that he is accomplishing his artistic goals; "to jar them, in a good way or a bad way, is good for me…when someone says something, pro or against, it always is good to me because that means it struck a nerve enough about them to make a reaction," (Personal Interview).

The El Vez for Prez tour successfully voices progressive political sentiments precisely because it uses irony and humor – rather than empathy – as its mode of engagement. Ironic distance is the medium through which Lopez expresses complex interrogations of current social, cultural, and political issues in a performance that values entertainment over progressive politics but sacrifices neither. In the midst of an election cycle where the depoliticizing rhetoric of affective investment threatens to shut down honest discussion, a final irony is that the most open, straightforward, and nuanced social critique available to us comes from a Mexican Elvis impersonator. His El Vez for Prez reminds us that there is a real (however we personally define that real) to believe in, that the discussions he engenders are important and meaningful. Though we may not believe a word of the partisan debate circulating around the actual Presidential election, El Vez for Prez makes us believe in the possibility of genuine interpersonal and political engagement.

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