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Profiling El Vez, The Mexican Elvis

A Dramaturgical Methodology to *Make the Dream Real*

Abstract

This article discusses the critical practice the author uses in her writing about El Vez, The Mexican Elvis. After offering a brief introduction to El Vez, to the artist Robert Lopez who created him, and to the relationship between them and the icon of Elvis, the author presents the aims of *Make the Dream Real*, the monograph she is drafting about El Vez/Lopez, to consider how it draws on biographical writing and yet departs from it. The author argues for a dramaturgical methodology and its inherent critical proximity as a means of writing an analytical, contextualized, engaging analysis of an artist and entertainer. The dramaturgical methodology, built

on dramaturgical thinking, values flexibility, using a variety of research practices combined with vibrant autoethnographic writing to offer vivid analysis that conveys the intellectual, emotional, and somatic experience of attending a live El Vez performance. The article discusses the value of deep dramaturgical thinking and critical proximity that opens up primary sources and archives through an extended dialogue with the artist built on mutual trust and respect.

Keywords

dramaturgical sensibility, dramaturgical methodology, critical proximity, El Vez, Mexican Elvis, Robert Lopez

Abstrakt

Profile El Veza, meksykańskiego Elvisa: Dramaturgiczna metodologia monografii *Make the Dream Real*

Artykuł dotyczy krytycznych strategii stosowanych przez autorkę w monografii El Veza, meksykańskiego Elvisa. Po krótkiej prezentacji El Veza, Roberta Lopeza, czyli artysty, który go stworzył, oraz relacji między nimi a ikoną Elvisa autorka określa cele *Make the Dream Real*, monografii El Veza/Lopeza, by pokazać, w jakiej mierze wykorzystuje w niej strategię biograficzną, a w jakiej od niej odchodzi. Autorka opowiada się za dramaturgiczną metodologią i wpisaną w nią zasadą krytycznej bliskości jako narzędziem umożliwiającym stworzenie analitycznej, kontekstowej i angażującej analizy twórczości i wizerunku artysty rozrywkowego. Dramaturgiczna metodologia, ufundowana na dramaturgicznym myśleniu, pozytywnie waloryzuje elastyczność i wykorzystuje różne praktyki badawcze i pisarskie, w tym autoetnograficzne, aby zaproponować sugestywną analizę odzwierciedlającą intelektualne, emocjonalne i somatyczne doświadczenie uczestniczenia w występie El Veza na żywo. Artykuł ukazuje wartość pogłębionego dramaturgicznego myślenia i krytycznej bliskości, dzięki którym źródła i archiwa poszerzone zostają o dialog z artystą oparty na wzajemnym zaufaniu i szacunku.

Słowa kluczowe

dramaturgiczna wrażliwość, dramaturgiczna metodologia, krytyczna bliskość, El Vez, meksykański Elvis, Robert Lopez

I am El Vez, The Mexican Elvis.
If you don't know who I am, then I feel sorry for you.¹

An El Vez show opens using a time-tested formula designed to excite an audience. An off-stage announcer hypes the crowd by introducing the key players: the band, The Memphis Mariachis, who immediately launch into the big sound of the opening song; the back-up singers, The Lovely Elvettes, who strut onstage in glittery, sexy costumes; and finally, “the man, the myth, the moustache”—El Vez himself—who enters with pure rock star bravado, wearing a tight-fitting bell-bottomed jumpsuit or some impossibly snug gold lamé pants. Upon taking center stage, he belts out the lyrics to a song that has been carefully curated to convey the theme of the show as it works the crowd into a celebratory state, dancing and singing along. Following the opener, El Vez will bring it down a bit. Over a Memphis Mariachis vamp, his accent thick, El Vez introduces himself and his performance to the audience. Here he usually offers the epigraph quip, as he scans the crowd for “El Vez virgins” whom he can lure into touching his shoes, providing the segue into “Huaraches Azules,” his version of “Blue Suede Shoes” (you never ever touch the shoes of El Vez). It is a funny moment that welcomes new fans in, while also chiding them for not yet knowing El Vez.

But what is it *to know* an entirely performed character such as El Vez, who constantly signals his inauthenticity while singing truth from the stage? Is it to have experienced an El Vez show, or is it to catch a glimpse of Robert Lopez, the artist behind the image? Which is more authentic: the creation, or the artist who created it? These questions are on my mind, as a scholar currently drafting *Make the Dream Real*, a monograph that interrogates the rock performances of El Vez and the artistry of Lopez. This article will first discuss how I came to write about the art Lopez creates, which straddles Elvis impersonator, performance artist, and trickster. I consider El Vez as personage, musical persona, and character built on biographical elements from Lopez’s life, which are put in conversation with the iconicity of Elvis Presley and an embodiment of Chicanidad to offer a new understanding of the nation.² I then elucidate my research practice, what I call a dramaturgical methodology, which combines my training in theatre historiography and performance studies with my theatrical praxis as a dramaturg,

¹ Lopez-as-El-Vez utters some variation of this line in most shows. Performance descriptions are based on field notes from the many El Vez shows I have seen over the past two decades.

² Lopez self-identifies as Chicano, but uses the terms Latino/a/x often in his music and stage banter.

to analyze how El Vez performances create meaning. I also wrestle with the methodological challenges of a dramaturgical methodology and its inherent critical proximity. I conclude with a quick discussion of structure, and what I hope *Make the Dream Real* will prompt in my readers.

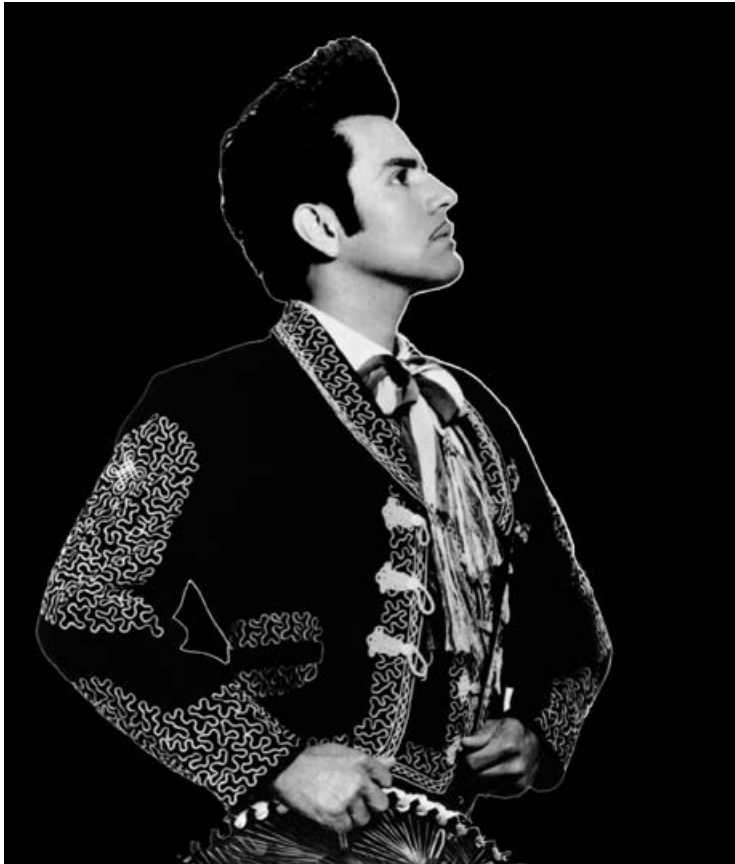
You May Call Me El, You May Call Me Vez: Artist, Personage, Performance Persona, Character, and Icon

I first saw El Vez in 2002, when he played one of his many shows at Minneapolis' legendary rock club First Avenue. Given his name and my general impression of Elvis impersonators as a benighted, rather pitiable category of performers, I expected the show to be totally earnest and, most likely, terrible. I did not anticipate political engagement, productive spectacle, or musical virtuosity. However, I quickly realized that El Vez addressed everything I thought and cared about in my serious academic way—and I could dance to it. Physically energized in the way that music performance makes possible, and intellectually enthused by all that an El Vez show contains, I became an instant fan and a voracious researcher, seeking to learn more about El Vez through interviews, popular coverage, Elvis impersonator news, and scholarly analyses, especially those of José David Saldívar and Michelle Habell-Pallán, whose thinking unbinds my project.³ Both Saldívar and Habell-Pallán position El Vez as a transculturator who uses popular culture to create a hybrid public discursive space that resists essentialist tropes as it allows for ambiguities and contradictions to emerge.

El Vez shows pack an abundance of meaning into a highly energetic few hours. Though they function under the frame of music performance, they incorporate a distinctly theatrical sensibility and are richly polysemous in text, image, and sound. More than just a collection of songs to be performed, they foreground a theme or an idea; whether grouped around holidays (Cinco de Mayo and Merry MeX-Mas), national politics (El Vez 4 Prez), or a specific topic of inquiry (The Gospel Tour's interrogation of religion and religious intolerance, or the Rock and Revolution Tour's discussion of social justice), El Vez shows always wrestle with contemporary social, cultural, and political issues. Performances

³ José David Saldívar, *Border Matters: Remapping American Cultural Studies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); "In Search of the 'Mexican Elvis': Border Matters, Americanness, and Post-state-centric Thinking," *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* 49, no. 1 (2003): 84–100; Michelle Habell-Pallán, *Loca Motion: The Travels of Chicana and Latina Popular Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2005).

PHOTO RANDALL MICHELSON



El Vez profile shot advertising the show

follow a dramaturgical arc: they use stage banter and reworked lyrics to express subversive ideas; costumes (including multiple costume changes), props, and spectacle to reinforce a loose storyline; and sound to create a genre-defying performance. As a result, they surpass categorization: they are deeply political, but not as stridently message-driven as political theatre; they are theatrical, but use performative elements to make meaning differently from traditional theatre; they rock, but match musical abandon with intellectual engagement; they are money-making endeavors, but are refreshingly anti-corporate. The robust intertextuality of the shows, which feature campy performativity and a postmodern layering of references, allows Lopez to wrap a subversive message in highly entertaining form, potentially reaching a diverse audience to craft a unique social space.

In *Make the Dream Real*, I argue that El Vez performances stage a counterpoint to neoliberalism in both content and form by taking on our nation's most divisive issues. El Vez sings against the processes by which individuals are devalued and vilified. For example, in the 1990s, he took on California's controversial Proposition 187 and was outspoken in his critiques of immigration policy.⁴ He pointedly calls out how US domestic and foreign policy has brought harm to millions and confronts larger social problems head-on, as when he addressed the War on Terror and its aftermath throughout the Bush and Obama administrations, or when he identified the rise of white Christian nationalism under Trumpism and predicted the restriction of rights for women, the LGBTQ+ community, and BIPOC individuals. Most importantly, he offers a counternarrative of mutual respect and support of difference, all while creating an alternative social space. Lopez's artistic practice resists the atomizing and containing mechanisms of neoliberalism, offering a model of subversion that can be harnessed by others who seek to promote social change. Finally, his form of engagement—a rock concert, in which communal revelry is the norm—short circuits the extreme partisanship rampant in our national discourse. *Make the Dream Real* posits that El Vez shows hold the United States to its egalitarian promises, voicing and enacting (however fleetingly) a just, richly inclusive society through performance, and it digs into the why and the how of this.

As the call for this essay cluster makes clear, biography is an immensely popular yet undertheorized form that holds a somewhat tarnished reputation. Eric Homberger and John Charmley refer to biography's "Troubled Face" and lament that biographies are often written for "personal motives: wanting to tell an interesting story, to resurrect a wronged or neglected reputation, to reinterpret the role of an individual."⁵ As Binne De Haan and Hans Renders note, "Biography is often called the bastard child of historiography and literature . . . not recognized by either discipline as being fully worthwhile."⁶ Nigel Hamilton, in turn, warns that "biography is considered intellectually off-reservation,"⁷ and elsewhere states that biography was "relegated . . . to inferior status as a sub-branch of literature, devoted to the lives of individual *men*," which "allowed other disciplines to sniff at" the form. However, Hamilton counters that "the pursuit

⁴ Michelle Habell-Pallán's work tracks how El Vez performances in Germany resonated with Turkish immigrants during this time period.

⁵ Eric Homberger and John Charmley, eds., *The Troubled Face of Biography* (London: Macmillan Press, 1988), ix.

⁶ Binne De Haan and Hans Renders, "Towards Traditions and Nations," in *Theoretical Discussions of Biography: Approaches from History, Microhistory, and Life Writing*, ed. Hans Renders and Binne De Haan (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 15.

⁷ Nigel Hamilton, foreword to Renders and De Haan, *Theoretical Discussions of Biography*.

of biography, controversial in its challenge to received ideas of privacy and reputation . . . is integral to the Western concept of individuality and the ideals of democracy as opposed to dictatorship or tyranny.”⁸ Renders and De Haan add that biography has “a goal of illuminating what is public, explained and interpreted in part from the perspective of the personal.”⁹ This interplay between the individual and democracy, the public and the personal appeals to me, as I track what Lopez’s art says about our own sociopolitical moment and how it enacts new ways of being and feeling together. But I would be dishonest if I did not admit to wanting to protect my scholarly *bona fides* from the perceived dangers of biography.

My analysis focuses on the performances of El Vez as a site of world-building, and dissects how Lopez’s tactical use of different performance elements help theatre scholars and artists reconsider these elements. Yet with its sole focus on El Vez shows, and with its inclusion of Lopez’s insights via the extended dialogue between us that has spanned decades, *Make the Dream Real* differs from a more traditional theatrical academic text, existing somewhere between the two forms. In part, this is due to the unique nature of Lopez’s art: he has performed as El Vez for over thirty years, and he is still going strong. More to the point, he has created a character that only he embodies and that is strongly informed by his own biography; Lopez’s subjectivity as an artist provides the basis of the interrogation of social issues that happen through El Vez. At the same time, Lopez quite consciously crafts El Vez as separate from himself, evidenced by several differences between them: El Vez is straight, Lopez is gay; El Vez is an optimist, Lopez a pessimist; El Vez embraces the American Dream, Lopez critiques it. Though art and artist are always interconnected, El Vez both reveals and obscures who Lopez is.

El Vez performances necessitate the careful parsing of just what it is we see when we see El Vez. In his book *In Concert: Performing Musical Persona*, Philip Auslander posits that musical performance is a “socially defined interaction between performers and their audiences,” based primarily on frame, genre, and persona.¹⁰ Though Lopez-as-El-Vez subverts the conventions of all three of these, audience expectations are nonetheless informed by the fact that he primarily plays rock shows in rock clubs. Auslander posits that musical performance combines “three signifieds: the real person, the performance

⁸ Nigel Hamilton, *Biography: A Brief History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 2, 4.

⁹ Renders and De Haan, introduction to Renders and De Haan, *Theoretical Discussions of Biography*, 2.

¹⁰ Philip Auslander, *In Concert: Performing Musical Persona* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2021), 2–3.

persona, and the character [of the song lyrics—KJM].”¹¹ Auslander adds nuance to the understanding of “real person” by citing David Graver’s concept of personage: “not a foundational reality, but . . . rather, a way of representing oneself within a particular discursive domain.”¹² Performance provides “the sense of being in the presence of liminal phenomenon that mediates between” the personage and the performance persona.¹³ Auslander stresses that performance persona is:

the single most important aspect of the performer’s part in that process. The persona is of key importance because it is the signified to which the audience has the most direct and sustained access, not only through audio recordings, videos, and live performances, but also through the various other circumstances and media in which popular musicians present themselves publicly.¹⁴

Audiences generally negotiate these multiple signifieds with relative ease, though in music performance they may assume the distance between the real person/personage and performance persona to be closer than, say, an actor playing a role.¹⁵

Lopez-as-El-Vez departs somewhat from the model Auslander presents. Lopez, the real person, is the artist, present through his aesthetic choices: the theme, the song selection, the lyrical revisions, the musical mash-ups, and the overall dramaturgical arc. But in performance, Lopez recedes. Rather, El Vez functions as both personage and performance persona. Carefully constructed to be the ultimate fake, the personage of El Vez comes complete with an infectious positive personality and an impossibly absurd history. He was born in East LA on the Cinco de Mayo, the Fourth of July, or Christmas Eve, 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 Preacher Revolutionary in all the world. He embodies excess, exuding both Elvisness and

¹¹ Auslander, *In Concert*, 33–34. There is not enough room in this article to discuss Lopez’s current project, Mr. Bob’s Unhappy Hour, which makes use of a personage and performance persona that draws even more from Lopez’s biography and thus collapses the distance between these signifieds even further.

¹² David Graver quoted in Auslander, 88.

¹³ Auslander, 88.

¹⁴ Auslander, 36.

¹⁵ Frame and genre play into this understanding as well. Auslander suggests that audience might expect a more authentic persona from a singer/songwriter such as Taylor Swift than they would of the band Kiss, decked out in full hair, makeup, and costumes.

Chicanidad and playing with the stereotypes that surround both. 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 (via Courtney Love):

i am heralding the un-authentic
 the impersonator
 the fake
 impersonate so real
 so real i am beyond fake.¹⁶

Through costuming, movement, stage banter, and audience interaction, El Vez is also the performance persona. Not surprisingly, he is biggest when onstage, dancing, tearing off his costumes, and flirting with the Lovely Elvettes and his audience. Yet the El Vez persona also appears in other public sites—at the merch table after the show, in interviews, and (especially in the 1990s) on television and in print. Finally, the El Vez persona will interact with the characters of the songs.¹⁷

Moreover, there is a further layer: El Vez's relationship to Elvis. El Vez activates Elvis, critiquing the status quo The King is seen to represent and harnessing the many discourses attached to Elvis as a pop culture icon. As Gilbert D. Rodman dissects in his book *Elvis After Elvis*, a multitude of often contradictory meanings circulate around Elvis, each of them tapping into larger tensions that mark the USAmerican cultural landscape. Argues Rodman, Elvis has become a mythological formation, a point of articulation around which sets of related myths coalesce. These myths are intimately intertwined with understandings of America, and are used to define and dispute the concept of American-ness itself. Elvis as an icon becomes a site for battling out just what America was, is, and will be.¹⁸

Lopez asserts, "Whatever thing I [do] can work on at least three levels—a Chicano stance, an Elvis stance, a rock and roll stance."¹⁹ He capitalizes on the way that Elvis is linked to competing mythologies and discourses, allowing these many meanings to circulate throughout his performance. As such,

¹⁶ Lopez, email to author, September 29, 2005.

¹⁷ For example, El Vez assumes the character of a newly-arrived immigrant in "Immigration Time" and of a Latinx everyman in "Takin' Care of Business."

¹⁸ For instance, Elvis is viewed by many to have stolen Black music and culture, yet others see him as harbinger of cultural mixing and future integration. Both views articulate a different understanding of us society: as a nation of oppression and appropriation, or as a society that values diversity and strives toward equality.

¹⁹ Lopez, interview with author, May 22, 2018.

Lopez engages in a variation of the Black linguistic tradition that Henry Louis Gates, Jr. has dubbed signifiy(n)(g): the playful (re)doubling of language, images, and sound to defer, repress, hide, or altogether set aside “official” meaning so that new meanings can be brought forward. Through performance elements such as lyrical rewrites, musical citations, costuming, and other visual references, he offers “repetition and revision, or repetition with a signal difference” to critique and revise USAmerican popular culture, and Elvis’s place within it.²⁰ Elvis is inextricably tied to Black culture, even if his physical body absents it. In essence, Lopez’s signifiy(n)(g) calls up the Blackness that Elvis erased, using double-voiced utterances that vacate and subvert the rhetoric of dominant whiteness.

Lopez also draws on his identity as a gay Chicano punk to create a disidentificatory performance. In *Disidentifications*, José Esteban Muñoz posits that political power is encoded into cultural fields, making a “phobic majoritarian public sphere” that is hostile to minoritized subjects.²¹ Disidentification enacts a personal language of “identities in difference” to “transform [their] cultural logic[s] from within.”²² Says Muñoz:

disidentification is a step further than cracking the code of the majority; it proceeds to use this code as raw material for representing a disempowered politics or positionality that has been rendered unthinkable by the dominant culture.²³

Disidentification not only transforms the cultural logic of white supremacist heteronormative capitalism embedded in Elvis’s status, but also allows for world-making to occur through El Vez shows. If signifiy(n)(g) critiques the culture that made Elvis, disidentification allows Lopez to remake him into El Vez, and to build worlds around him. Lopez’s biography interacts with El Vez’s personage and performance persona, the characters of the songs, and the icon of Elvis to write a new biography of the nation.

²⁰ Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifiy(n)(g) Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), xxiv.

²¹ José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 4.

²² Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 6, 11–12.

²³ Muñoz, 31.

Love Me Tender: The Critical Proximity of a Dramaturgical Methodology

After that first El Vez show, I dutifully went to the merch table to get my chance to talk to (the self-proclaimed) “*El Rey de Rock and Roll*.” There were several specialty items for sale—a temporary tattoo; a key card used during The Gospel Tour; a lock of hair cut by El Vez’s barber, Pedro of Oxnard; a piece of fabric from an El Vez costume. I bought the temporary tattoo, which he signed “Karen / Love Me / El Vez.” These items reveal a lot about El Vez performances; they also can tell us something about the allure of the celebrity biography. The specialty items all come affixed to colorful cardstock printed with humorous text, resonant of the wit and clever wordplay Lopez-as-El-Vez deploys in concert, and exemplifying the way he playfully assumes Elvis’s stardom as his own.²⁴ “Show your eternal devotion to El Vez with a temporary tattoo!” proclaims one; “The Key to El Vez’s heart!?!” teases another, before responding, “No! But the key to his hotel room!” Their construction conveys the DIY aesthetic that runs through an El Vez performance. That they are somewhat off-kilter, unevenly cut and inexpensively made, adds to their mystique; one can imagine El Vez, or someone closely affiliated with him, cutting the cards by hand and stapling the items to them after printing them at a copy shop. They point to a proximity to El Vez that fans at the merch table cannot personally achieve, but can approximate through their purchases. Through their material histories, these items mark the limits of self and other—fan and star—as they also bridge that divide. Celebrity biographies similarly promise access to the “real” person behind the personage of the celebrity image. Like these specialty items, the celebrity biography often spins a narrative that allows the reader to feel intimacy with the star, partaking in different exploits and ordeals. This explains why gossip and scandal often feature in the biography; the taboo nature tantalizes the fan while also suggesting a level of vulnerability for the celebrity, narrowing the distance between the two. Lopez certainly has observed this desire among his fans, who will ask, “Do you really love Elvis? Are you really a Mexican activist? . . . Are you really this? Are you really that?”²⁵ Perhaps because he so effectively signals El Vez’s

²⁴ I discuss these items through the theoretical lens of thing theory in my chapter, “Relic, Souvenir, of Just Hair? Exploring the Complexities of Objects as Actants and Things as Mementos in the Merchandise of El Vez, The Mexican Elvis,” in *Performing Objects and Theatrical Things*, ed. Joanne Zerdy and Marlis Schweitzer (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 174–184.

²⁵ Robert Lopez, interview with author, May 22, 2018.



Specialty items purchased after an El Vez show

inauthenticity on stage while at the same time convincingly embodying him,²⁶ fans desire to know who he is and what he *really* thinks.

Though I do share anecdotes gleaned from the life of a Mexican Elvis, *Make the Dream Real* does not promise to spill sordid details as a means of fostering feelings of connection between the fan and the artist. Indeed, I bristle at the thought of a tell-all.²⁷ I do not want to delve too deeply into the personal details of Lopez's life, except when they are relevant to the art he creates. If *Make the Dream Real* offers intimacy, it is that of a close reading of the meanings made in and through performance and a deep analysis of Lopez's approach to making

²⁶ Lopez-as-El-Vez includes in his banter biographical details (many false, but some true). Audience members likely discern Lopez's Elvis fandom along with his general political stance through the show content.

²⁷ Because it will be included in my tenure portfolio, I also must ensure that my university views *Make the Dream Real* as properly academic.

art. Using what I describe as a dramaturgical methodology, I marry theoretical inquiry to theatrical practice, putting both to work in the interrogation of the performances of El Vez.

A dramaturgical methodology begins with dramaturgical thinking. In his foundational text, *Toward a Dramaturgical Sensibility*, Geoff Proehl describes what he dubs the dramaturgical sensibility, a devotion to inquiry that “exposes us to landscapes and journeys that confirm both how much we have to gain and how much we have to lose in the acquisition of the most trivial piece of information.”²⁸ Proehl posits that a dramaturgical sensibility is fueled by “the sometime sublime potential of *knowing*,”²⁹ referencing those thrilling, almost transcendent moments in which art opens up and speaks to the most profound aspects of the human condition. Proehl charts four components key to a dramaturgical sensibility: the desire for—and questioning of—deep knowledge marked by both abundance and loss; an awareness of one’s subjectivity and one’s situated knowledges, which allow for distances and intimacies between scholar and scholarship; the importance of time and the impact of temporality in any engagement; and finally, a relentless commitment to inquiry, through which new discoveries continually unfold.³⁰ Each of these core components are evident in my research practice. For instance, the deep knowledge I have of Lopez and his art results from the extensive time I have spent on this project. I have seen countless versions of El Vez shows over the years, often attending multiple nights of the same tour. I am keenly aware of the innovations he makes to keep his music and his critiques vitally relevant. I have seen him perform everywhere from street fairs to art centers; small bars to big clubs; at festivals and in grand concert halls, and I note how each of those settings impact the meanings made. We have even collaborated on performance lectures that combine his artistry with my scholarship. In my writing, I embrace the multiple positions I maintain—fan, researcher, fellow artist, and friend—by clearly articulating and situating myself in them and asking questions of them.

A dramaturgical methodology values intellectual and methodological flexibility; dramaturgs select from and sometimes combine various research methodologies in order to best serve the project. Theatre historiography and performance studies theory factor into my analysis. I engage in qualitative analysis through my ongoing dialogue with Lopez, and autoethnography as

²⁸ Geoffrey S. Proehl, *Toward a Dramaturgical Sensibility: Landscape and Journey* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2008), 17.

²⁹ Proehl, *Toward a Dramaturgical Sensibility*, 6, italics in original.

³⁰ Proehl, 16–17.

a participant-observer at El Vez shows. Caroline Heim's participant-observer methodology, which includes adhering to an ethos, watching and listening, prizing, and above all, maintaining adaptability, resonates with my own.³¹ Like Heim, I always introduce myself as a researcher, which is not only ethical, but also puts people at ease and often prompts them to volunteer their opinions to me. I also rely heavily on reflexive autoethnography, which Deborah Reed-Danahay has defined as "a form of self-narrative that places the self within a social context."³² Tony E. Adams, Carolyn Ellis, and Stacy Holman Jones have recognized autoethnography's power to capture how "personal experience is infused with political/cultural norms and expectations."³³ They posit that autoethnography can speak against dominant cultural scripts, thereby filling in gaps in knowledge and articulating insider understandings about "aspects of cultural life that other researchers may not be able to know."³⁴ Specific to theatre, Signy Lynch suggests that autoethnography can be used to make visible "the subjectivity and individuality of audience response, and the political stakes of interpretation" while it also "untangle[s] the complexities and affective nuances of audience experience."³⁵ In my practice, I offer thick descriptions of El Vez shows that include my intellectual, emotional, and somatic responses. I seek to capture the full experience, using lively, detailed prose "to create evocative and specific representations of the culture/cultural experience and to give audiences a sense of how being there in the experience feels."³⁶

A final aspect of my dramaturgical methodology includes setting aside calls for objectivity and instead embracing critical proximity. Dramaturg Shelley Orr stresses that we have much to gain by practicing critical proximity, suggesting that while "several benefits accrue, the most notable is an increased level of trust among the collaborators."³⁷ Orr traces critical proximity to its roots in feminist research and cultural studies, when scholars sought to make their personal

³¹ Caroline Heim, "Participant Observation in Practice and Techniques for Overcoming Researcher Insecurity: A Case Study at the Deutsches Theater," in *Impacting Theatre Audiences: Method for Studying Change*, ed. Dani Snyder-Young and Matt Omasta (London: Routledge, 2022), 29.

³² Deborah Reed-Danahay, *Auto/Ethnography: Rewriting the Self and the Social* (Oxford: Berg, 1997), 9.

³³ Tony E. Adams, Carolyn Ellis, and Stacy Holman Jones, "Autoethnography," in *The International Encyclopedia of Communication Research Methods*, ed. Jorg Matthes, Christine S. Davis, and Robert F. Potter (Wiley Online Library, 2017), 1.

³⁴ Adams et al., "Autoethnography," 3.

³⁵ Signy Lynch, "The Gaze Turned Inward: A Reflexive Autoethnographic Approach to Theatre Research," in Snyder-Young and Omasta, *Impacting Theatre Audiences*, 88, 97.

³⁶ Adams et al., "Autoethnography," 2-3.

³⁷ Shelley Orr, "Critical Proximity: A Case for Using the First Person as a Production Dramaturg," *Theatre Topics* 24, no. 3 (2014): 242, <https://doi.org/10.1353/ft.2014.0036>. While Orr's article primarily focuses on the production dramaturg in the rehearsal space, it can be broadened to discuss research practice.

investments clear. Rather than striving for objective distance, critical proximity instead encourages the scholar to bring her whole creative self to a project. The field of fan studies similarly grapples with subjectivity through its articulation of the aca-fan, where the researcher occupies both positions. Notes Henry Jenkins in the twentieth anniversary edition of *Textual Poachers*:

There are at least three things at stake in the use of the aca-fan concept: the acknowledgement of our own personal stakes in the forms of popular culture we study, the accountability of the ethnographer to the communities we study, and the sense of membership or affiliation with the populations at the heart of our research.³⁸

Jenkins suggests that the aca-fan is invested in their fandom, but treats it with appropriate critical rigor. One difference between Jenkins' project and my own is disciplinary focus: put simply, fan studies seeks to produce knowledge about fans and their fandom, whereas a dramaturgical methodology seeks to elucidate the meaning-making that occurs in and through performance and the creative labor of the artist in its production.

Critical proximity cultivates openness and generosity between the researcher and the artist, which enlivens deep conversations about the art, the process, and its aims. It has also made possible a wealth of research opportunities. Lopez has been exceedingly welcoming, allowing me to peek behind the curtain, as it were: I have jumped in the El Vez tour van and stayed in his hotel rooms and at his house. I have rooted through his costume closet and manned his merch table. Applying critical proximity to my El Vez scholarship means glimpsing the full scope of the labor of a touring musician: the hours spent on the road; the unique relationships of an ensemble; the hauling, sorting, packing, unpacking, and upkeep of costumes, props, and merch; the experience of walking into a new venue, doing the same show each night to a brand-new audience. Undeniably, I'm still a fan, taking pleasure in the performances. But my familiarity with the El Vez oeuvre allows me to see what is new—some funny bit of stage banter, a particularly apt pop culture reference, a unique interaction with an audience member, a performance goof that Lopez covers with improvisational skill, and the inventive reworking of the music and the inclusion of new songs. Like Jenkins's, my research is marked by "a constant movement between these two levels of understanding [academic and fan—KJM] which are not necessarily in

³⁸ Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2012), xiii.

conflict but are also not necessarily in perfect alignment.”³⁹ Being an aca-fan surely presents challenges. Because I believe in Lopez’s project and align with the worldview he presents as El Vez, I am perhaps prone to overlook issues within his work, or might fail to formulate criticisms of it; I might find his performances to be more or differently impactful than other audience members do. Yet I believe the benefits of critical proximity outweigh the risks, by allowing me to move into a deeper understanding of El Vez and Lopez. Ideally, following Ruth Behar, it allows me to grapple with “the dialectic between connection and otherness that is at the center of all forms of historical and cultural representation.”⁴⁰

A dramaturgical methodology takes both time and familiarity, as it results from what Proehl characterizes as the “thoughtful and persistent engagement with the ways that theatrical performances emerge from their first dreamed indeterminacies to their most recent staged incarnations.”⁴¹ I have learned much from Lopez, especially regarding the business end of El Vez (another methodological challenge: I tend to view El Vez as artistic expression, sometimes forgetting that El Vez provides Lopez’s income). Take, for instance, the specialty merch that I mentioned. Conceptualized and produced by Lopez, these items are designed to delightfully put El Vez in conversation with the memorabilia that surrounds Elvis, but also to add to his earnings, eking a few more dollars out of a costume that can no longer be worn or a key card swiped from a hotel. The announcer who hypes up the crowd? Lopez, of course, in his unaccented speaking voice, from the side of the stage. Critical proximity has benefitted my research tremendously, granting me access to insider knowledge and the ultimate primary source: Robert Lopez, who is now research subject, archive, and dear friend. *Make the Dream Real* reflects our deep dialogues.

If I Can Dream: Concluding Thoughts on Structure

In our initial email exchange, Lopez wrote, “El Vez is art. Good art at times needs to be framed. The frame is ELVIS/MEXICAN.”⁴² The same applies to scholarship about good art, so I will conclude with a brief discussion of structure. *Make the Dream Real* is designed to make visible the arsenal of performative elements Lopez uses to make meaning as El Vez, and to consider how he stretches the

³⁹ Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*, 5.

⁴⁰ Ruth Behar, *The Vulnerable Observer: Anthropology That Breaks Your Heart* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 20.

⁴¹ Proehl, *Toward a Dramaturgical Sensibility*, 20.

⁴² Robert Lopez, email to author, September 29, 2005.

boundaries of these elements in surprising ways. After opening with a celebrity foreword written by Lopez, the first two chapters offer a theoretical foundation and a succinct history of El Vez. Subsequent chapters further interrogate the relationship between Lopez, El Vez, and Elvis; the dramaturgical functions of costuming, props, and merchandise; and the de-essentializing work of music and sound. I then offer a brief analysis of El Vez's "outside" work as actor, host, and DJ, before ending with a consideration of Lopez's artistry during and after COVID. Breaking an El Vez show down to focus on each of these meaning-making elements is necessary, as each aspect offers a complex mode of engagement that contributes to the dramaturgy of the performance overall. Interrogating them individually offers a focused study of what happens simultaneously in concert.

Each chapter is framed with an exploration of a specific El Vez site—a song lyric, a music video, a poster—a structure that I have modelled here by beginning the section on methodology with a discussion of El Vez's specialty item merchandise. I provide a close read replete with detailed description to demonstrate how the site produces meaning in performance (e.g., as an item of merch that fans purchase as souvenirs) as well as how it produces meanings that exceed performance (e.g., as a means of considering fan–star relationships and the celebrity biography). This structure is useful in two ways. First, it offers readers different "tastes" of what El Vez does, to paint a fuller picture of Lopez's art and make tangible just how much fun it is. Second, these close reads allow for the deep inquiry of a dramaturgical methodology to emerge. Through these theoretical engagements, Lopez's art opens up to speak to bigger issues.

Finally, I intentionally embed in my writing the way that Lopez shares information with me, unfolding certain details over the course of the chapter. When I first interacted with Lopez, his responses were clever and pithy. Well versed in self-promotion, he had several stock answers at the ready. It took time to build the trust of critical proximity that engenders more intimate dialogue, and it has taken the writing of *Make the Dream Real* to truly know him as an artist, in all the fullness that Proehl describes. That said, I want readers to experience the fun of the fantasy that Lopez constructs. When I think back to that first concert, I remember El Vez being bigger than life. Lopez later told me, "I want fans to believe El Vez lives 100% in his own world and life that is always wonderful."⁴³ On that freezing Minnesota night, I absolutely did believe it—and I wanted to live in that always-wonderful world. I hope to share that feeling with readers. Proehl reminds us that knowledge is accompanied by loss: by its very definition,

⁴³ Lopez, email to author, September 29, 2005.

a first encounter is bounded by time; it singular, irretrievable. Critical proximity has enhanced my thinking about Lopez's art, but I am now rarely swept away in the fantasy of it. I want to carve out a little space for the reader that lets them sit in that joy for a moment. To really know El Vez, you have to see him perform. I hope that *Make the Dream Real* inspires people to go to a show—because if you don't know El Vez, then I feel sorry for you.



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