

Rebecca Pero: *La Trajinera*

“Is that your mother?” I asked my Mexican father Agustin with wonder and delight while watching *María Candelaria*, a movie that was filmed along the canals of Xochimilco in 1943, just 30 kilometres south of Mexico City. With a warm smile on his face, he replied “yes, she was the principal actress’ extra in the film. They paid her 5 pesos for the part.” “See,” he continued with pride, “their complexions are so similar.” “Qué maravilloso,” I exclaimed.

The film, directed by Emilio Fernández, stars Mexican actors Dolores del Río as María and Pedro Armendáriz, as María’s love interest Lorenzo. The opening scenes depict the canals’ flowing waters within which the reflections of willow trees can be seen. The film’s portrayal of María’s life as an outcast in the *chinampas* (floating gardens) of Xochimilco captured theatre audiences both in Mexico and places beyond Mexico’s North American borders. As the first Mexican film to be screened at the Cannes International Film Festival, *María Candelaria* was awarded the Grand Prix in 1946, becoming the first Latin American film to receive the honour.

The canals of Xochimilco, and the agricultural mounds they surround, are not the only images central to the film’s storyline. While the film focuses on María’s ability to produce her own land, and her reliance on the *chinampa* to sustain her and Lorenzo, it also illustrates the need to access land and for a suitable method of transportation. Many scenes in *María Candelaria* characterize the significance of *trajineras* as a primary mode of transportation of both people and the area’s resources. *Trajineras* are wide, flat-bottomed canoes, which were used to take people and diverse types of agricultural products from one place to another. For example, a scene in Fernández’s film features multiple *trajineras* docked at the town’s main delivery site with a variety of produce packed in crates. These crates would then be loaded onto *trajineras* to be transferred for sale, presumably to be taken to larger markets in the region. *Trajineras* were important to the movement of crops and the sustenance of people, shaping understandings of place and space as well as relationships with nature.

Trajineras are key representations of Mexican culture and the image of these canoe-like boats has travelled widely. As Fernández’s film was first circulated in the 1940s, even Kingstonians (who at that time were enjoying numerous downtown one-screen theatres) might have had the chance to see the *trajinera* float across the screen, if not in *María Candelaria*, then in Disney’s 1944 film *The Three Caballeros*. Today, in contemporary Xochimilco, *trajineras* transport tourists and help the neighbourhood’s inhabitants subsist in a different manner, through the selling of their wares to visitors and foreigners as part of the tourism industry. My object for the workshop was a small model of a *trajinera* purchased as a souvenir. Gone are the days of María Candelaria’s Xochimilco. But while the land no longer produces as it once did, the image and use of *trajineras* in Xochimilco continues to shape not only regional identities, but national identities as well.



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