

**Latinas as Radical Hybrid:
Transnationally gendered traces in mainstream media**

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Is J-Lo more authentic than Salma Hayek? Why is the image of Frida Kahlo so compelling in the U.S. today? Where does Penelope Cruz fit in? And what about Cameron Diaz, Christina Aguilera, and Jessica Alba? Deciding who is a Latina/o and what counts as *Latinidad*, the culture produced by Latina/os and the practices of being Latina/o, has proven to be a nearly impossible task. The fact remains that it is nearly impossible to classify Latina/os by race, ethnicity, class, religion, language, food, dance and musical proclivities—to name but a few of the vectors of difference which often delineate the margins between one cultural group and another. Latina/os come from a variety of territorial origins. Many come from Latin America but many others predate the arrival of Anglo populations to the North American continent. Many speak Spanish, but many have adopted a new hybrid language [since Spanish itself is a hybrid]. A growing percentage of the US poor are Latina/os, but there is also an increasingly large professional middle class. While metaphors of the “browning of America” continue to be prevalent, Latina/os come in all the racial and ethnic possibilities. It is difficult to make generalizations about Latina/os and *Latinidad*, but it is imperative to study this contemporary most numerous minority group in terms of its relational construction within mainstream mass media and popular culture.

Whereas it has become nearly commonplace to begin nearly any U.S. Latina/o Studies essay with a small summary of the contemporary utopian with the dystopian—the

hotness of Latinidad in mainstream media and popular culture compared and contrasted to the still hostile reception of Latina/o bodies in this country; the Latin explosion in relation to the increasing rates of AIDS among Latina/os, etc., it is useful to foreground the interstices through which one can explore notions on radical hybridity from Latina/o Studies and communications paradigm. Foremost in this essay, is the need to combine the study of Latinidad in the United States through the prism of gender in general and through Latinas-- that is female subjects and bodies, in particular. Feminist scholars of many persuasions working on issues of mass media and popular culture, including Latina feminists (López, 1991; 1994; Valdivia and Guzmán, 2004; Rojas, 2004; Aparicio, 2003; Aparicio and Jáquez, 2003), Chicana feminists (Alarcón, 1994; Fregoso, 1993, 2003), and transnational feminists (Ghallagher, 2003; Shohat, 1991, 1998) to name a few, remind us over and over again of the continuing importance of the sign of woman. Woman as a sign stands for so much more than an individual woman. As Van Zoonen (1994) writes, it is no coincidence that both the United States and France (among nearly all countries) have a symbolic female figure as a stand in—the statue of Liberty for the U.S. and the revolutionary figure for the French. Rakow and Kranich (1991) document the different functions that different female signs serve in mainstream news—with white women signing in for all women and women of color signing in for just women of color. Ana López (1991), in an essay that treats Hollywood film as ethnographic, adds that women sign in for both nation and otherness. In this aspect Latin American women in Hollywood film pose a double threat of race and gender to the dominant global and U.S. order. In the U.S. national situation, Latina women represent the contemporary moment when, ahead of demographic projections, as of the third week of January 2003, the U.S.

census announced that Latina/os are the most numerous minority, outnumbering and outpacing the former most numerous minority, African Americans. Of course, this came as no surprise to anyone who had been following recent demographic trends. For example, already as of 1996 Latina/o schoolchildren had begun to outnumber any other minority in the public school classrooms. Public policy and fears as represented by, among other things, road signs, speak to the national awareness of this demographic growth. For instance, Ruiz (2002) foregrounds the highly politically and culturally charged sign on U.S. I-5 in Southern California where the silhouette of a woman occupies the front center of a road sign warning motorists to look out for humans crossing the freeway. The feminized image highlights the gendered nature of regional and national anti-immigrant hysteria, couched primarily in terms of Latina/os. The fact that Latina/os continue to be considered mostly immigrant, demonstrate their/our eternal outsider status in a country where their/our presence predates the Anglo population. Thus these instances are representative of a larger picture wherein the terrain of the representational speaks to the current historical situation, and in this terrain Latina subjects and bodies are foregrounded as symbolic of their recent most numerous minority status and of the concerns that this new status raise within dominant U.S. culture.

Yet the presence of Latinas and Latinidad also speaks to broader epistemological issues of ethnic studies. Whereas concepts of ethnicity, in relation to concepts of race, speak to cultural markers of identity, they still attempt to locate ethnic difference as a marker of difference. Shohat's "ethnicities in relation" approach (1991) posits ethnicities, especially as represented in film and other mass media, as dynamic and unstable, gaining meaning something only in terms of the representation of other

ethnicities within a given textual context. Latinas, of course, can be examined in this relational framework. Fitting somewhere between black and whiteness in the national imaginary (Davis, 2000), Latinas as a constructed category gain meaning by virtue of their supposed location as an in between ethnicity, not white yet not black. Yet this is not a simple process as the fact is Latinas are not uniformly brown. To further explore this category and its implications for media and popular culture representation we must turn to theories of hybridity.

The concept of hybridity is extremely useful to communications scholars for a number of reasons yet remains to be fully utilized by our interdiscipline (Kraidy, 1999, 2002; Murphy and Kraidy, 2003). Kraidy (2002: 317) proposes that we foreground this concept as it: “needs to be understood as a communicative practice constitutive of, and constituted by, sociopolitical and economic arrangements” that are “complex, processual, and dynamic.” Scholars from many disciplinary backgrounds have been seriously engaged in the potential of the concept of hybridity (e.g. Avtar and Coombs, 2000; Joseph and Fink, 1999; Werbner and Modood, 1997) within the humanities and social sciences.¹ Beyond its merely descriptive uses, hybridity also opens up the space for the study of cultural negotiations, conflicts, and struggles against the backdrop of contemporary globalization (Shome and Hegde, 2002a; 2002b). The concept is foremost a rejection of essentialist notions, either of gender or of ethnicity and race, as well as an acknowledgement that there is no purity to be found either at the level of culture, the body, blood, or DNA. Kraniaskaus (2000) differentiates between García Canclini’s (1995) socio-cultural hybridity and Bhabha’s (1994) more literary and psychoanalytic approach. Yet both Canclini and Bhabha counter more simplistic versions of

globalization studies where a celebratory mish mash of people and cultures are offered, and all difference is erased. To some hybridity might suggest a playful space, where one can try on different identities. Indeed studies of contemporary ethnicity (Dávila, 2001; Halter, 2000; Moorti, 2003) suggest that hybrid traces are very useful for commodification purposes and the marketing of ethnicity. In fact ethnic ambiguity is a most useful strategy as it has the potential of speaking to different segments of the audience with one economical image or set of images. As such hybridity and its accompanying strategy, representational ambiguity, certainly have their uses within late capitalism.

Against, or in relation to, overly celebratory approaches to the *jouissance* of the hybrid, we have to consider the tensions and pains of hybridity—the fact that it is not all fun and profits. Theoretical treatments of hybridity aim to retain some of the tensions, the power differentials, the pulls toward syncretism inherent in its inevitable flattening in mainstream mass media and popular culture. Whereas Shohat and Stam (1994) use hybridity, mestizaje, and syncretism interchangeably, Hamid Naficy (1993) distinguishes between hybridity and syncretism, proposing that the latter is more comfortable, stable, livable, longer lasting, and less ambivalent than hybridity. With its blends and shifts, sometimes the display of one culture more prominently than the other or others, the instability, and discomfort of hybridity has greater explanatory and analytical power for the lived Latina/o experience in the U.S. over the comfort and stability of the syncretic representational terrain (Levine, 2002). Of course, as Naficy argues, there is always a tendency and desire for syncretism among hybrid populations, usually resolved by the market and media industries as mere style differences through consumerism. Levine

(2002) extends his concept to *Latinidad*, arguing that contemporary mainstream popular culture in fact constructs a syncretic Latina/o identity. This can be explored through the representation on Latinas in popular culture as their bodies become the terrain of social struggle (Beltrán, 2002). This is especially evident in the mainstream media and popular culture.

Latina/os and the construction and deployment of *Latinidad* challenge binary constructions of identity. Especially in the United States where the discussion, rhetoric and discourse around race and ethnicity historically has centered and continues to do so around mutually exclusive categories of black and white populations, Latina/os, as well as other ethnic populations such as Asian Americans and Native Americans have metaphorically and literally fallen through the cracks of political and symbolic discourses. Latinas are a hybrid lot—we share much and we embody many differences. Like Duany (1992) says of salsa music, Latinas are a hybrid of hybrids—and therefore what I call a radical hybrid. Just as salsa music is composed of already hybrid traditions, Latinas embody the many complex traces of cultures and populations that come together at this moment in the United States. So, for example, the dominant tendency to reduce Latina/o heterogeneity to a brown race erases the diversity within Latina/os. Latina/os come from South America yet South America is not a racially homogeneous region—native American, European, African, Arab, and Asian traces permeate the region in addition to the more often mentioned particular Spanish and Portuguese traces. In addition every one of those categories, or regions, of people is composed of hybrid populations.

Beyond the wake-up call of including another ethnicity in the national imaginary and therefore expanding the ethnic register to a fluid spectrum rather than mutually exclusive categories, Latina/os remind us that there is no purity within Latinidad, or indeed within any ethnic category, and therefore there are no easy borders between ethnicities. Latina/os demonstrate what can appropriately be called radical hybridity (Valdivia, 2003). One could begin by the perplexing attempt, on the part of the Census Bureau, to account for Latina/os outside of Whiteness [as in “White, not Hispanic”] and Latina/os beyond the Americas, as in “including Spain and Portugal.” For example, Hispanic Afro-Caribbeans who face this form for the first time have as difficult a time deciding as White Hispanic Caribbeans, who had either thought themselves in terms of nation, as with the former, or of their whiteness, as in the latter. Neither of these groups is likely to possess purity of race, nor of any of the other components and indicators of ethnicity such as religion, etc. If we take another contributing hybrid category, the Spanish, we encounter the inevitable hybridity that pervades historical roots of Latina/os in the United States. Dating back to the Mexican *casta* paintings and before, the tendency has been to represent the Spanish as white (Klor de Alva, 1996), and indeed in contemporary times in both the United States (Valdivia, in press) and much of South America the use of the term “Spanish” continues to signify whiteness. Yet the easy conflation of Spain and whiteness is anything but accurate. As Menocal (2002) notes, *Al Andalus* was a complex region wherein Spanish, Moorish, and Jewish populations intermingled to create a syncretic culture and population, with established difference but also with the commonalities that result from centuries of cohabitation and inevitable intermingling. Spain neither was nor is the seat of whiteness anymore than Latin

America is. Spain and the main four Spanish languages remain a hybrid lot. This type of historical genealogy of hybridity, populations, language, and cultural forms, could be carried out for each and every one of the components of Latin America and thus of U.S. Latina/os. Hybridity permeates our roots, the roots of Latina/os, as well as the roots of all populations. Despite this undeniable presence, which dates back centuries to the days before the United States became a nation, Latina/os continue to challenge binary and essentialist approaches to race (Chabram-Dernersesian, 1999).

Transnational studies, much like hybridity approaches, offer a way to study the fluidity and mobility that characterizes popular culture at this moment (e.g. Shohat and Stam, 1994). The celebrated mobility of the upper and some of the middle classes, of course, has to be explored in relation to the forced mobility or immobility of huge proportions of the world population. Nonetheless cultural products, forms, and populations and bodies cross back and forth across national boundaries. Inspections, as Alejandro Lugo (2000 and forthcoming) brilliantly notes, slow the mobility of racialized bodies, especially after 9/11. Yet we have to acknowledge that cultural border crossing goes on nearly unchecked. Although both bodies and cultural forms mean different things in different places, they nonetheless travel across regional and national boundaries, with accompanying changes in meaning and status. Much of mainstream popular culture in the U.S. is made with a transnational distribution, and therefore profits, in mind. Not even the huge U.S. market is large enough to generate the profit necessary for blockbuster movies, for example. The investment in a popular music cd with star talent only makes sense in a transnational marketing paradigm. Similarly, from a transnational mainstream perspective, it makes little sense to market something or someone that will

appeal to only a particular ethno-racial group within a set of national boundaries. Thus many of today's prominent Latinas, their representations, and their cultural forms circulate globally. Many are easily recognizable in the United States, Latin America, and Europe, to name but three major global regions, as well as across ethno-racial lines so as to appeal to a range of identities in the U.S. and abroad. Given that transnational flows are decidedly asymmetrical, the circulation of mainstream Latinas bears traces of unequal power differentials and of a relational location between white ideals and the rejected blackness of the U.S. body politic.

It is important to study mainstream media and popular culture and the locations of Latinas and Latinidad within it for analytical and practical purposes. While there is a growing and long standing tradition of ethnic and alternative media and popular culture, many people live beyond the reach of or access to these forms of expressive culture. For example, in the Midwest of the United States there are long standing, more or less homogeneous, and newer heterogeneous communities, pockets, and singular Latina/os. In fact the Midwest and the South are the two U.S. regions with the fastest growing Latina/o population. Most of us in these regions only have exposure to the mainstream. We would love to see the Vancouver Latino Theater Group, El Vez, Univisión or Telemundo but we do not have access. And we are not the only ones, as most of the U.S. population experiences mainstream cultural products and is much more likely to know who Jennifer Lopez is than El Vez or Carmelita Tropicana. Whereas certain scholarly traditions treat non-mass media forms of popular culture as more authentic, media studies argues that people's experiences with the media cannot be dismissed as these compose a predominant part of contemporary life and therefore contribute to individual and group

identity formation. Authenticity claims often function as a way to police insider status within an ethnic formation as well as a way of constructing an authentic product in terms of marketing (McLean, 1992-93).

Nonetheless, to use Hollywood film as an example, there are egregious instances of the undifferentiated lumping of all things Latina/o or from south of the border. Perez-Firmat (1994) includes a delightful and hilarious example in his book Living on the Hyphen of the film *Too Many Girls* (RKO, 1940) wherein Manuelito Lynch an [U.S.] American football player from the Argentine provinces is offered a sports scholarship in an U.S. Ivy League school and ends up playing the conga drums in the film's finale in the desert. Perez-Firmat comments:

The picture of an Argentine Desi, dressed in football uniform, with a *tumbadora* slung around his neck, leading a conga in the New Mexico desert is a kind of mishmash that makes Lucy's Carmen Miranda seem authentic by comparison... *Too Many Girls* is a multiculturalist's nightmare. All of the principal American cultures are there—black, white, Indian, Hispanic; but every one is caricatured and distorted. . . . The town plaza becomes a melting pot. (p. 54)

Perez-Firmat focuses at once on Cuban American representations as well as on their relation to other Americanisms and the multicultural spectrum in the U.S. The iconic Carmen Miranda can be seen, and has been studied as, the epitome of the floating Latin signifier with strong shades of excess and hyperfertility (Shohat and Stam, 1994). For example, in the film *Copacabana* (1947), she stars with Groucho Marx in a musical that elides the difference between Mexican, Argentine, and Brazilian iconography to name the

three most prominent sets of signifiers in the film. In fact, in yet another instance of evidence that all difference, not just Latin American difference, functions in relation to the normalizing discourses of U.S. Whiteness, within *Copacabana*, Carmen Miranda portrays a performer who easily fools people by performing both a “Latin” Brazilian Bombshell, and a “French” persona, Mademoiselle Fifi! More contemporary examples include Salma Hayek’s performance in *Fools Rush In* where she plays a Mexican American woman whose salsa dancing harks to a much more Caribbean location than her landlocked rural Mexican origin would suggest. Fashion spreads as well as food layouts that mix the wide array of colors, settings, and flavors particular to a region into an undifferentiated Southwestern, Latin American, and Spanish flair can commonly be found in most contemporary lifestyle magazines. Similarly visits to most Latin or, worse yet, “world food” restaurants reveal a mish mash of ingredients, decorative details, musical and language use that can sometimes be downright scary. As Halter (2000) has written, the marketing of ethnicity seems to be the new U.S. American identity, replacing the melting pot metaphor. We now have a situation where everyone claims ethnic status and ethnicity is hyper-commodified and increasingly undifferentiated.

Differentiation within Latinidad

Despite the easily demonstrable ethnification of the U.S. imaginary, we must also explore diversity and hybridity among the Latina/o population. The contemporary Latina/o boom is often treated as if it referred to an undifferentiated and homogeneous group of peoples and cultural traditions. Arlene Dávila (2001) begins her book *Latinos Inc.* with a vignette of *Telemundo* launching its marketing strategy at a trade show with Antonio Banderas as the spokesperson for Latinos. “Latinos are hot, and we are not the

only ones to think so. Everyone wants to jump on the bandwagon, and why not? We have the greatest art, music, and literature. It's time we tell our stories" announces Antonio (p. 1). Whereas the fact that Antonio Banderas is Spanish [and continues to reside in Spain] is not deemed relevant in the launching of Latino marketing, what is important is that in terms of marketing Banderas signs in as quintessentially Latin thus demonstrating both the vexed relationship between Latinidad and peninsular peoples as well as the fact that, in some warped way, the U.S. Census Bureau's category of "Hispanic" speaks to a far more widespread cultural elision². Although Dávila (2001) correctly notes that "Following the nationalist underpinnings underlying contemporary representations of culture and identity, in which cultures are seen as bounded and contained entities, tied to a territory, a past, and a heritage, it is Latin America rather than a deterritorialized U.S.-Latino culture that has traditionally been valorized as the source of cultural authenticity in Latino/Hispano culture" (p. 79), we cannot ignore the enduring Spanish heritage that continues to be treated as a contemporary source of Latinidad, at least within the realm of commodified popular culture. If Latin America is the origin of authenticity in the United States, Spain signs in that role for much of Latin America, with notable but not predominant exceptions for an indigenous authenticity. Thus we have to recognize that the deterritorialization has to include the possibility of Spain, and to a lesser extent Portugal, as sources of authenticity.

In an essay on Spanish language media in the U.S., Dávila (2002) notes that Latina/o audiences recognize the marketing effort to acknowledge Latina/o difference yet resist the strategy that essentializes national characteristics leaving "us with the impression that there are no blacks in Mexico, blondes in the Dominican Republic, or

brunettes in Argentina” (p. 29). The groundbreaking work of Viviana Rojas (2004) begins the important project of laying out a matrix of interpretation among different sectors of the U.S. Latina audience. Rojas’ respondents demonstrate a keen awareness of discursive constructions of a gendered latinidad that many of them resist or reject.

Implications for Media Representation

Implications of radical hybridity translate into an uneasy approach to Latinidad within the mainstream. The dominant representational tendency continues to be the foregrounding of the stereotypical brown race. In a sense this is a new development in that until recently mainstream representations mostly included whiteness and a very small amount of blackness as racial possibilities. However, given the ethnification of U.S. society and culture, from a marketing perspective, it makes more sense to represent and appeal to a wider swath of the population than that which identifies itself with a particular, and singular, ethnic category (Dávila, 2001; Halter, 2000). Latinidad provides the mainstream marketing apparatuses with an ideal opportunity to abandon or reject binary ethnoracial categories in the name of a liberal multiculturalism and maximum profits. This is the flip side of Fusco’s (1995) argument for a strategical essentialism in the name of political and cultural representation. The marketing of ambiguity opens up a huge space for appealing to a “newly discovered” heterogeneous population. Ambiguity, something Latinas, because of our radically hybrid traces, embody and represent, promises to be the answer to ethnic cross dressing and cross marketing appeals. Thus Latinas who can border cross traditional ethnic lines are more likely to be favored in representations within the mainstream.

Evidence of this strategy abounds in today's mass media and popular culture. Once could say that Jennifer Lopez represents that ideal ambiguous body—the Latina who does not have to play Latina roles in film; the spokesperson for her own perfume, Still, who can be represented in a Marilyn Monroe-esque pose in the promotional campaign; the woman who can date P-Diddy or Ben Affleck—the ideal bridge and anything goes person. Whereas Lopez's identity as Latina precedes all of her cultural interventions, Jessica Alba is less well recognized as such. Her membership in the Disney children acting pool meant she was often a part of an ensemble cast wherein a racial palette was part of the narrative. Since graduating from Disney, she has played the hybrid, ambiguous, and post-apocalyptic *Dark Angel* as well as African American hip hop queen in the feature length *Honey* (2003). Her L'Oreal model stint had her in both ethnic and deterritorialized and ambiguous poses.

While these are name actresses, the wider representational terrain of the mainstream includes many fictional and nameless female figures. If we look at recent Gap underwear ads, the [usually] two page layouts include a range of ethnically ambiguous models ranging from a white one on the right to a light black one on the left. This is eerily similar to American Girl layouts wherein the girls pose in an ethnic paletter ranging from whiteness on the right to light blackness on the left. Recent releases of ethnic urban dolls, such as Bratz and Flavas, also illustrate this ambiguous ethnic palette. All of the and there is a range of mid-range ethnic dolls which fall somewhere between white and black. For example a white doll might have very kinky hair. However, as with the Gap and American Girl lay outs, while whiteness remains, and the ethnic ambiguity, retaining identifiable components of Latinidad such as hoop earring and the like, occupy

the middle ground, blackness recedes to the left of the page/screen and it becomes decidedly lighter.

The result here is two-fold. Latina actresses can play a broad range of characters, including black, white, and everything in between, thus providing casting directors with an easy way to foreground the few famous Latinas out there who by virtue of ambiguity can slip into these roles. This presents both an employment opportunity as well as the possibility of seeing more people of color on the screen and in print. However the second effect is that hybrid Latinas and ethnic ambiguity also provide mainstream culture with a chance to displace and replace blackness. Blackness once more gets pushed to the [left] margin.

Conclusion

Whereas the dominant tendency continues to be to talk about and represent people, culture, and populations as stemming from discrete ethno-racial categories, the “Latin explosion” which is anchored within contemporary Latinidad renders these efforts at best problematic and at worst untenable. Through an exploration of representations of Latinas in mainstream U.S. media we can see that Latinas can be any ethnicity or race they are needed or want to be. Moreover the women who represent Latinidad are not necessarily Latinas. The ambiguity lies both in the category and in the representation. They can be marshaled or marshal themselves to represent, and of course appeal or sell to, whiteness, but they can also represent generalized otherness as well as more specific stereotypical Latinidad and a range of other ethnicities. The rise of the ambiguously ethnic image also demands a lightening of the dark subject. While Blackness is still part of the racial spectrum, the introduction of Latinidad as an in-between location plays into

the continuing tendency to under represent or altogether ignore its presence within U.S. culture. Furthermore the rise of the ambiguous Latina simultaneously plays into the marketing needs of a complex heterogeneous society and underscores the fact that there is no purity within any given ethno-racial category or within the U.S. body politic. Finally once more the female body becomes the terrain over which issues of the national imaginary are struggled, or as Beltrán (2002: 71) notes “a site of social struggle.” The Latina body as a floating signifier represents the identity crisis of nation forced to acknowledge its heterogeneity, hybridity, and continued racism.

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¹ The term originally comes from racist efforts to uphold white supremacy in the terrain of "biology" in the eighteenth century.

² The category "Hispanic" in many government and state documents, including some financial aid forms for higher education funding, includes Spanish origin people. This means that potentially an upper middle class white immigrant from Spain qualifies for "Hispanic" scholarships designed to increase the proportion of underrepresented minorities, such as Latina/os, in the academy.