



LATINA/OS AND THE MEDIA: A NATIONAL CATEGORY WITH TRANSNATIONAL IMPLICATIONS

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ABSTRACT: This essay focuses on the category of Latina/os, which was created in the United States to refer to the portion of the population with recent and/or historical roots in Latin America, and the love/hate or fear and desire relation of the US and Latina/os – desire of spectacular bodies and fear of working bodies – that is borne out by representations of Latina/os in mainstream media. The transnational circulation of these representations through popular culture expands their presence and meaning across the globe in ways that are unintended and deserve further study.

KEYWORDS: Latina/os, media, representation

LATINA/OS E A MÍDIA: UMA CATEGORIA NACIONAL COM IMPLICAÇÕES TRANSNACIONAIS

RESUMO: Neste artigo, discuto a categoria latina/os, criada nos Estados Unidos para se referir à parcela da população com raízes recentes e/ou históricas na América Latina, e a relação amor/ódio ou medo e desejo entre os Estados Unidos e os latinos – desejo por corpos espetaculares e medo dos corpos trabalhadores –, corroborada por representações dos latinos na mídia convencional. A circulação transnacional dessas representações, por meio da cultura popular, expande sua presença e seus significados ao redor do planeta, de maneira nem sempre intencional, mas que deve/merece ser estudada.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Latina/os, mídia, representação



Introduction

The category of Latina/os¹ was created in the United States to refer to the portion of the population with recent and/or historical roots in Latin America. Much of the impetus for the creation of this category came from national politics within the country wherein ethnic groups made claims upon the state based on longstanding presence and contributions. African Americans were the most visible minority in the United States until the turn of the century (late nineties and early 2000's). However the 2000 US Census demonstrated that in fact Latina/os had surpassed African Americans in terms of their proportion of the total population. Moreover from within Latina/o Studies scholarship, research had long documented the fact that not only did Latina/os date back their presence to the creation of the US in 1776, but also that they preceded Anglo populations in the territory now known as the US. Furthermore, subsequent wars which had reconfigured the national borders had crossed the Latina/o population so that it was not so much that Latina/os moved into the US proper but rather that the border crossed these populations and turned them into Latina/os whereas they had previously been Mexicans. Furthermore, the native population that preceded the presence of both Spanish and Anglo settlers never disappeared and often mixed with Latina/os, African Americans, and Anglos to compose an enduring hybrid presence in the national territory. This presence fans out globally both through human and cultural mobility.

I begin with the briefest of ethnic histories about the US to foreground a number of issues that will continue through this essay. First, Latina/os precede the Anglo and African population in the US territory. Second, the border crossed many Latina/os rather than Latina/os just crossing the border. Third, the US population has been ethnically diverse since its inception and

¹ Within Latina/o Studies there is a scholarly literature and history of the various words used to refer to this segment of the population. Dating back to the seventies, during the Nixon presidency, Hispanic was one such word. As well, in the Southwest US the term Chicana/o is widely used (see VALDIVIA, 2010).



continues to be so. Fourth, this diverse hybridity spans out globally through population and cultural flows.

This essay focuses on contemporary mainstream media. On the marquee of the moment stars such as Jennifer Lopez, Zoe Zaldaña, Sofia Vergara, Cameron Diaz, and Eva Longoria represent the prominence and heterogeneity of Latina/os and the media. Alongside these Latinas enduring tropes such as the Latina domestic continue to proliferate with a new television series, *Devious Maids*, once again mining that oft-trod narrative (MOLINA-GUZMÁN, 2010). On the other hand millions of un-named Latina/os are represented as nameless minimum wage workers, hordes of threatening marauders, or missing from the media altogether. Internal contradictions and tensions proliferate in terms of the love/hate or fear and desire relation of the US and Latina/os – desire of spectacular bodies and fear of working bodies – and this difficult relationship is borne out by representations of Latina/os in mainstream media.

Latina/o Studies scholars have historicized, analyzed, theorized, and documented the complicated and diverse relation that this ethnic category has had with and on the mainstream media. Since US mainstream media is largely produced by conglomerates, it is made with the goal of transnational distribution and profits. While the Latina/o category is produced within the US to make sense of historical and geographically specific historical, population, and cultural trends, global distribution requires contextualization so as to be understood beyond the US borders. Locally produced representations of Latina/os circulate globally yet draw on US American patterns of production and representation.

Latina/os as a category challenge facile approaches to the study of ethnicity and the media. Originally conceptualized as a homogeneous category – the “bronze” race – contemporary research illustrates the huge diversity within Latinidad, and by implication within all ethnic categories. Latina/os come in all shapes, sizes, and colors. As well US Latina/os come from a range of national origins and religions. For example, while the majority



of Latina/os are Roman Catholic, there are statistically significant Protestant, Jewish, Muslim, and other religious elements. Given this great heterogeneity, there is both solidarity and tension among Latina/os: “the solidarity of ‘Latinismo’ is a politics without guarantees” (DEL RÍO, 2006, p. 396). All of these diversities and complexities have implications for the production, circulation, consumption, and effects of media, both within national boundaries and transnationally. Latina/o media scholarship helps us understand issues of presence, representation, and belonging. As an in-between ethnicity, added to the previous binary of black and white, Latina/os expand the ethnic register in the US, and augur the acknowledgment of mixed race and hybrid populations that compose the contemporary global population.

Combining the fields of Media Studies and Latina/o Studies, this essay foregrounds an approach that blends issues of content and representation, and interpretation (MCQUAIL, 1987; VALDIVIA, 2003, 2010) with the ongoing work of Chicana/o and Latina/o Media scholars. Before the latest Latino Boom of the late nineties, these scholars provided the groundwork for the acknowledgement of the category “Latina/o” as central to the national imaginary of the United States and therefore as an element of transnational media circulated from this country. Critical race scholars have theorized and documented how the mainstream media help to naturalize the superiority of white people and justify a system of racial inequalities while denying that racism exists (GOLDBERG, 2009). Recent work taking up neoliberalism as a global economic and cultural formation, explores its intersection with the construction, or rather the denial of race (GOLDBERG, 2009) and the enduring tendencies against blackness that reproduce racial regimes even as theory declares race to be a social and contextual construction (CLARKE; THOMAS, 2006). All of these scholarly streams come together to enable the studies of Latina/os and the media today.

In the US acknowledgement of this ethnic category by the private sector means that Latina/os exist in numbers and disposable income large



enough to matter in terms of political constituencies, marketing products, and expanding audience, which leads to gathering data about Latina/os to regulate their presence and collect taxes, generate profit from commodification of Latina/o cultures that might not necessarily go to Latina/o individual or community coffers, and attempt to target the Latina/o audience with political, entertainment, and commercial messages (DÁVILA, 2001). From the top down, government and business attention to Latina/os have ramifications in terms of the objectives of the attention paid to Latina/os. Media created to attract the attention of Latina/os to inform the general population about Latina/os have liberatory and regulatory potential, which are likely to coexist in internally contradictory relationship to each other. From the bottom up, Latina/o solidarity and community formation promise to assert a presence and generate attention and services from government as well as intervene into media genres, paradigms, and practices. Yet, there is no guarantee that all Latina/os agree on cultural goals given their internal heterogeneity. These twin forces, from the bottom up and from the top down as well as the diversity within Latinidad, influence the dynamic and fluid character of media content, representation, and interpretation.

Content and representation

There is a prolific range of work about the content and representation of Latina/os in US media. The more quantitative content analyses of Latina/s reiterate the finding of symbolic annihilation: Latina/os are both under-represented and trivialized, marginalized, and/or sensationalized. Whether we look at television – shows and advertisements, movies, and the press – Latina/os are very underrepresented. Latinos are represented as a threat, often incorporated into previous stereotypes of Italian Americans as connected with underground crime, and also in relation to discourses of drugs, violence, and crime. Of course one of the major ways that Latinos appear in the news is as illegal border crossers. The current fixation with immigration politics in the



US guarantees the overrepresentation of border crossing Latina/os in daily news narratives.

Latinas tend to be represented in relation to discourses of deviant motherhood and sexualization. Other than the spitfire trope that represents Latinas as “hot to trot”, the most often used stereotype is that of the domestic. In fact in 2013 ABC Studios introduced *Devious Maids*, produced by Latina Eva Longoria, about Latina domestics. Lupe Ontiveros (1942-2012) estimated that she played the Latina maid in as many as 150 different productions. You can see her in shows or movies as diverse as *The Goonies* (1985), *Universal Soldier* (1992), and the television show *Punky Brewster* (1984-1988). In her break out role in the independent hit *Real Women Have Curves* (2002) she played the character of a mother working in a sweatshop. In a sense her professional history is more or less of a document to the opportunities available to actresses of her generation within the mainstream.

Representational analysis draws on the quantitative documentation provided by content analysis and builds a hegemonic or discursive approach. Spectacular Latina bodies are one form of sensationalization that overlaps with sexualization. We need to ask why Selena Gomez and Jennifer Lopez are so popular while simultaneously several states, including but not exclusively Arizona, repeatedly attempt to enact unconstitutional laws aimed at limiting the liberty and mobility of Latina/os (VALDIVIA, 2010). A second type of sensationalization overlaps with narratives of threat. For instance, the anti-Latina/o measures in a number of states, most notably in Arizona, where these measures are abetted by others such as mandatory disclosure of identity papers demanded by police and others because one may look as if one is Latina/o, evidence the representation of Latina/os as marginal and trivial – and more problematically – as implicitly dangerous, criminal, and undocumented.

As major scholarship on the tension between spectacular and everyday bodies, Molina-Guzmán (2010) illustrates the process foregrounding spectacular bodies – such as those of Jennifer Lopez and Cameron Diaz – and back-grounding or omitting the everyday bodies of Latina/o labor – citizens or



immigrants. Similarly, and focusing on individual stars, Parédez (2009) and Cepeda (2010) provide excellent book length monographs on the singers Selena and Shakira, respectively. Parédez (2009) convincingly asserts that the Latina/o boom exploded over Selena's dead body, and Cepeda (2010) highlights the Colombian roots of Shakira as she crosses over into mainstream US popular culture. In a more historical approach, bridging television and film, Beltrán (2009) foregrounds Latina/o star construction from the silent era to contemporary mixed Latina/os such as Jessica Alba. All four of these books underscore the great heterogeneity of Latinas and the mainstream tendencies toward syncretic representation wherein hybrid and fragmenting tendencies brought out by these artists are resolved toward an easily commodifiable product – the Latina star (LEVINE, 2001).

Scholars have also focused on popular music. Whereas many histories of genres have ignored the presence and contribution of Latina/os, a recent group of Latina/o Studies scholars have written extensive histories that promise to redraft the history of popular music. Two such notable books include Avant-Mier (2010) and Madrid (2008). The former suggests that Latina/os contribution to rock histories derives more from their symbolic marginalization with the US rather than their substantial contributions to the genre. The latter details the creative and expansive genre bending musical production at the border that not only fans out to the US and globally but also returns to the Mexican city Tijuana to redraw that city's cosmopolitan politics.

Scholars of Latina/o media also have identified two main narratives of Latinidad: the traditional and the tropical. As modes of representation, these two narratives speak to the implicit acknowledgement that not all Latina/os are alike. The traditional trope represents the Mexican American, the most numerous element of US Latina/os, as un-assimilable and “backward” in terms of looking back to Mexico rather than forward to the United States. The traditional trope uses a color palette that harks back to the hacienda iconography: brown, dull oranges, and muted yellows. Families in this trope are extended, working class, and often run by an autocratic male figure.



References in this trope hark back to Latin America in general and Mexico in particular. The sound track for this trope tends to have either ranchera or some other form of Mexican influenced type of music. Representations of women in this trope are as victims and self abnegated mothers.

The tropical is the other mode of representation and references the Caribbean immigrant stream. The tropical trope foregrounds more mobile and flexible subjects, rooted in a smaller family and also as a single person. This narrative is US referent and its subjects are upwardly mobile. The colors in this palette are bright and tropical, with fuchsias, neon yellows, and magenta reds. The musical track includes salsa, merengue, and reggaeton. Representations of women in this mode are more sexualized even as they include more agency, a post-feminist formulation of the US Latina.

The two tropes reveal a sophisticated approach to Latina/o representation even as they collapse the heterogeneity with the Mexican American and within the Caribbean Latina/os. Scholars also find that there is still a tendency to flatten all difference within Latinidad into a hodge podge of floating Latina/o signifiers. An example of this is the television show *Dora the Explorer* that has now become a doll line of global proportions with a wide range of synergized product offerings (HAREWOOD; VALDIVIA, 2006). Dora lives on an unspecified island with tropical and traditional elements: there is a Mayan looking pyramid as well as tropical palm trees and oak trees – she could be in Mexico, Puerto Rico, or Ohio. Her pet is a monkey, referencing the great Mexican painter Frida Kahlo and her nemesis is a fox. The music is salsa like and her clothing fits small, suggesting working class elements. The representation of Dora echoes much of Hollywood film wherein characters live in fictional “Latin” locales with improbable mixtures of geography, flora and fauna, architectural styles, and unusual customs. The flattening of difference remains a dominant way of representing the other.

All three approaches, the traditional, the tropical, and the flattening of difference rely heavily on long standing stereotypes. Moreover, the stereotypes continue to morph into the contemporary moment. Thus, for example, the



classic bandido stereotype has morphed into the criminal drug lord. An additional wrinkle surfaces when actors hyper accentuate stereotype and therefore provide a character that can be seen as ironic, though this implicit irony may be lost on general audiences. Sofia Vergara's character Gloria in the hit television show *Modern Family* exemplifies this latter development. Playing the gorgeous trophy wife, who always wears high heels, tight and low cut tops, perfectly flowing and bouncy brown hair, red lips, and – of course – the heavy Spanish accent, Vergara has crossed over into mainstream stardom with the lucrative deals that this success entails, such as a Coca Cola advertising campaign. Another ironic portrayal was the character of the domestic Rosario Salazar played by Shelley Morrison in the long running and much awarded *Will & Grace* (1996-2006). While Rosario talked back and verbally sparred with the other characters in the series, her maid character was the only recurring Latina/o actor. The enduring stereotypes persistently mark the Latina/o not only as other but also as eternally foreign, despite the fact that Latina/os predate Anglos in the continent.

Another form of representation ushered in by Latina/o visibility is the tendency toward ethnic ambiguity. Whereas a previous representational era extolled multicultural narratives of pluralist co-existence, that tendency is now joined by the ethnically ambiguous ethnic. Stars such as Jennifer Lopez, Jessica Alba, Eva Longoria, and Cameron Diaz are light enough as to pass as white and malleable enough as to be constructed as albino [as Jessica Alba performed in the *Fantastic Four: The Rise of the Silver Surfer*, 2007]; African American [Jessica Alba in *Honey*, 2003]; white/Italian [Jennifer Lopez in the *Wedding Planner*, 2001]; white [anything with Cameron Diaz]; or Latina [Jennifer Lopez as the Tejana *Selena*, 1997; Jennifer Lopez as the Newyorrican Marisa Ventura in *Maid in Manhattan*, 2002; Eva Longoria in *Desperate Housewives*]. Ambiguous ethnicity functions at two different levels. On one level the actor, such as Jennifer Lopez and Jessica Alba, are ambiguous enough to play a broad range of ethnicities. On another level, characters can be ambiguous enough so as to invite identification from a broad range of



ethnicities. Missing from this development are black characters and the black audiences as light brown ambiguous Latina/os displace the hard won presence of African Americans in US popular culture.

Less malleable are actresses with a noticeable accent such as Salma Hayek or Sofia Vergara. The ambiguity displayed by the above set of actresses is enabled by the fact that they speak flawless and unaccented English. Having an accent generates a much more constricted set of roles – that of the Latina and/or outsider whose range of characters is similarly reduced to hyper-marginalized or hyper-sexualized roles. We have already mentioned Sofia Vergara's turn as the trophy wife in *Modern Family*. Similarly Salma Hayek played a range of highly sexualized characters in films such as *Fools Rush In* (1997) and *Wild Wild West* (1999) until she morphed into a producer of Latina/o inspired and acted media including the phenomenally popular *Ugly Betty* television show (2006-2010) as well as *Frida*, the movie (2002).

Interpretation

“The construction of the Hispanic audience shapes as it creates notions of Latino race and ethnicity, U.S. nationalism, and cultural belonging... Dominant construction of the Hispanic audience is racially non-white, linguistically Spanish speaking, and socioeconomically poor” (RODRÍGUEZ, 1999, p. 47). Rodríguez's work (1999) identified the major characteristics of the construction of the Latina/o audience, not based on research but on received stereotypes. It is interesting that the construction of ethnic audiences, at least from a mainstream media industry perspective, remains rooted in stereotype, lack of knowledge, and prejudice. Dávila (2001) has also documented advertising executives' perspectives on Latina/o audiences, which draws on personal feeling rather than the immense research carried out by scholars and industry. In the intervening decade there has been a huge increase in the acknowledgement of the Latina/o audience as well as in the spending power of US Latina/os. The growing Latina/o population, especially



the increase in members of the middle class and upwardly mobile elements, make marketers turn their attention to this segment of the population whose spending power increased despite the bleak economic situation of the past five years.

Questions that are beginning to be asked in relation to the Latina/o media audience are: who is in the audience? Why are they in the audience? What do they get out of media? Are Latina/os part of the audience? What do non-Latina/o audiences think of Latina/os in the media? Are media produced with a Latina/o audience in mind? What audiences are Latina/os part of? Which Latina/os are part of the audience? How do Latina/os interpret media? What uses do Latina/os make of media? These questions deserve great attention yet are only beginning to be answered.

Latina/os can be active audiences by making demands of producers or beginning their own media ventures. If the latter are successful enough chances are that the mainstream media industry will take notice by attempting to purchase them into conglomerates. Previous community campaigns against the stereotyped character of the Frito Bandido demonstrate the activist power of the Latina/o community and the response of companies that seek to minimize controversy and embarrassment. Mainstream representation can be seen as a partial victory in that Latina/o presence is acknowledged, yet cultural specific, radical, or liberatory tendencies seldom show up in the mainstream. Commodification of ethnicity brings in profits, and ethnic audiences by and large prefer more than less representation in media. This results in a complex give and take in the construction of media audiences of ethnic populations in general and Latina/os in particular.

Dávila (2001) finds that there is a tendency to construct the Latina/o audience in a homogeneous Spanish speaking, working class, large family character. However, the author also explores the differential representation and therefore audience segmentation of the Latina/o audience. Latina/os know that there are different types within Latinidad. Dominicans are constructed as black and Argentineans as white, for example, demonstrating an



understanding that the Latina/o audience knows there are differences. Drawing on this work, Valdivia (2007) explores the different branding approaches between Jennifer Lopez and Penélope Cruz that suggest that the former spoke to a more working class and the latter to a more upscale segment of the audience. To be fair, Jennifer Lopez has come a long way since her cross over into the US mainstream through the movie *Selena* in 1997. Product endorsements, fashion and perfume lines, as well as the carefully cultivated diva image have propelled her into a more luxurious connotation. Nonetheless, the fact that each star was a spokesperson for a different range of products differentiated by price and cultural capital, suggests that marketers realize that the Latina/o audience is not a homogeneous mass. All of the above scholars see the “discovery” of the Latina/o audience as part of a broader move to commodify ethnicity and difference.

Latina/o Studies audience research about the relation to media in terms of cultural maintenance and assimilation finds that there is a great deal of audience heterogeneity within Latinidad. This first wave of Latina/o audience research mostly includes projects that explore women consuming Latina/o media and Latina/o women and girls consuming media in general. Both Mayer’s (2003) and Rojas’ study (2004), about audience groups in San Antonio and Austin, respectively, conclude with a finding of hybridity, in the construction of identity by the audience and in the media diet that transnational audiences consume.

Similarly Cepeda (2010) in a study of two groups of college student Latinas explored these women’s interpretation of the racialized cross over aesthetics informing the global marketing of many Latina music stars including Shakira, Thalía, and Paulina Rubio, among others. The research has found that there is a cross over aesthetic where not only language change is attempted, but also an entire set of aesthetic components such as blonder, lighter, and thinner versions of their former ethnic selves. Cepeda’s respondents understood that these stars had to engage in aesthetic negotiations in order to survive in the cut-throat world of global stardom.



Do global ethnic media connect to our representations of ethnicity? Issues of hybridity also open up new areas of audience research. The work on audiences and interpretation promises to link the work about content and representation with the work about effects of the mass media.

Conclusion

This essay has focused mostly on the post Latina/o boom of the late nineteen nineties as scholars note that this was but the latest boom given that Latina/os are repeatedly discovered within the US imaginary. Latina/os pose a challenge to previously binary conceptions of popular culture as either black or white. This challenge is utterly necessary and ultimately productive in that not only do Latina/os add an in between category, thus ushering the possibility for other in between categories such as Asian Americans, Native Americans, etc., but also by foregrounding the hybrid and mixed character of the “in between” Latina/os unsettle and disrupt any attempt to codify or fix Latinidad or, indeed, any ethnicity. Latina/os in the media thus prove immensely difficult and rewarding to study. The transnational circulation of Latina/o bodies and popular culture expand their presence and meaning across the globe in ways that are unintended and deserve further study. In the US the inclusion of Latina/os has both expanded the ethnic register as it has served to partly displace the previously dominant minority, African Americans. Enduring stereotypes survive next to increasingly powerful media companies, stars, and producers.

Genres, audiences, and some industry practices have been influenced by Latina/os and the inclusion of Latinidad. The neoliberal moment of individual responsibility and privatized engagement might consider this a success. It remains to be seen whether these changes lead to enduring media inclusion, and, more importantly to a decrease in ethnic exclusion.

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