



CONTESTED IMAGES

Women of Color in
Popular Culture



EDITED BY ALMA M. GARCIA

music was based on disco music and culture. Although some of the more upscale downtown New York clubs excluded black and Latino teenage b-boys, this was not a break from traditional class and racial hierarchies in New York nightlife, and plenty of uptown disco clubs were in operation. Instrumental disco singles served as the musical accompaniment for several early raps, and disco's transformation of the role of the DJ into a "master of musical ceremonies" set the stage for rap's DJs' providing much of the inspiration for rap's collage-oriented mixes. For a discussion of the substantial link between disco and rap, see Nelson George, *The Death of Rhythm and Blues* (New York: Pantheon, 1990), pp. 188–91. For a discussion of disco as a black and a black gay musical culture, see Reebee Garofalo, "Crossing Over: 1939–1989," in Jannette L. Dates and William Barlow, eds., *Split Image: African Americans in the Mass Media* (Washington, DC: Howard University Press, 1990).

11. Nelson George, "Rap's Tenth Birthday," *Village Voice*, 24 October 1989, p. 40.
12. Dominique Di Prima and Lisa Kennedy, "Beat the Rap," *Mother Jones*, September–October 1990, pp. 32–35; Jill Pearlman, "Rap's Gender Gap," *Option*, Fall 1988, pp. 32–36; Marisa Fox, "From the Belly of the Blues to the Cradle of Rap," *Details*, July 1989, pp. 118–24; Judith Halberstam, "Starting from Scratch: Female Rappers and Feminist Discourse," *Revisions*, 2 no. 2 (Winter 1989): 1–4.
13. Nancy Guevara, "Women Writin', Rappin', Breakin'," in Mike Davis, et al., *The Year Left 2: An American Socialist Yearbook* (London: Verso, 1987), pp. 160–75.
14. Angela Davis, "Black Women and Music: A Historical Legacy of Struggle," in Joanne M. Braxton and Andree Nicola McLaughlin, eds., *Wild Women in the Whirlwind: Afro-American Culture and the Contemporary Literary Renaissance* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1990), pp. 3–21.
15. Hazel V. Carby, "it jus Be's Dat Way Sometime: The Sexual Politics of Women's Blues," *Radical America* 20, no. 4 (1986): 9–22.
16. Roxanne Shame was the first commercial breakthrough female artist. Her basement-produced single was "Roxanne's Revenge" (1985). See also more recent works by Yo-Yo, Monie Love, Ms. Melodic, Harmony, Antoinette, Oak-town 3-5-7, and Shazzy.
17. Cited in Jill Pearlman, "Rap's Gender Gap," *Option* (Fall 1988): 23–36, 34.
18. Cited in Di Prima and Kennedy, "Beat the Rap," p. 34.
19. Pearlman, "Rap's Gender Gap," p. 34.

Chapter Eleven

Jennifer as Selena

Rethinking Latinidad in Media and Popular Culture

Frances R. Aparicio

In cultural studies and the expressive arts, Latinidad has been partly defined as the ways in which the entertainment industry, mainstream journalism, and Hollywood have homogenized all Latinos into one undifferentiated group, thus erasing our historical, national, racial, class, and gender subjectivities.¹ While the resistance to, and the political/theoretical ambivalence toward, Latinidad as a conceptual framework on the part of many Chicano/a and Latino/a scholars has had to do with the anxiety toward erasing the national identities (and academic fields) that have taken so long to claim as part of the American body politic (and the university), the fear of the erasure of our cultural specificities and complexities through the discursive construct of Latinidad finds its justification in the reiteration of egregious stereotypes and images that continuously populate advertising, television, and films, despite our historical and systematic attempts at critical deconstruction.

In *Latin Looks*, Clara Rodríguez (1998) identifies some of the most egregious realities of Latino representation in U.S. media. Our underrepresentation, coupled with the criminalized stereotypes of Latinos, reveals a politics of representation that seems to worsen as the demographic changes increase our presence. The title of the book, *Latin Looks*, was "purposely chosen to underscore the tendency to view Latinos as if they all looked the same." (6) Indeed, Spanish Cable TV as much as Hollywood have not taken into account, nor recognized, the particularities of each national group. Therefore, a Latina actress is discursively defined in the public sphere because of her generalizability as a Latina rather than because of her uniqueness as a Boricua or Mexican American or Cuban American. For instance, the Latin music boom, while specifically constituted by Caribbean and Puerto Rican

Coast figures—Jennifer López, Ricky Martin, Marc Anthony—was never articulated as a Boricua boom, but rather as a Latin music boom. The term itself, Latin music, in contrast to Latino music—or, for that matter, Puerto Rican music, Afro-Caribbean music—is a central signifier of the dominant constructions of Latinidad. Yet, if the so-called Latin music boom is a direct result of the demographic growth of U.S. Latinos as a consumer power, and Mexican Americans constitute about 60 percent of that sector, why do the music figures that metonymically represent this sector happen to be mostly Puerto Rican and Caribbean? This phenomenon is the result of the direct, historical colonial relations between the United States and the Hispanic Caribbean. It is informed by the diachronic continuity of dominant representations that have cannibalized the local cultural productions, and particularly the music and rhythms that have emerged, ironically, as forms of resistance to those dominant institutions and hegemonic powers that be. The term Latin music boom *deflects* the social, demographic, and cultural realities of everyday life among U.S. Latinos and *replaces* what is socially real Latino with historically familiar, acceptable, and contained images of Latinos that the United States can integrate into its own logic. Yet we also know that the systematic exclusion of Mexican-American musical productions from most of the Latin music boom, which is historically informed by their exclusion from national citizenship as “illegals,” has been also duplicated by the hegemonic, Miami-based, Latino musical industry in the first presentation of the Latin Grammy Awards.

Another dominant construct about Latinidad is the more recent image of the Latino “cultural wars,” as articulated in a 2002 *New York Times* article (Kugel) that attempted to examine the social transformations and cultural tensions between Puerto Ricans in New York and the newer immigrant groups there. Titled “Latino Cultural Wars,” this piece addresses the impact that the influx of so-called “other” Latino groups have had on the cultural public presence of Puerto Ricans in New York. I mention this article because it frames the social interactions among various Latino groups exclusively as conflictive competitions for cultural hegemony. It describes contemporary and new forms of cultural negotiations taking place among various Latin American national groups in specific urban spaces, such as New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, and Miami, as “cultural wars,” a term that echoes the right-wing attacks against multicultural education throughout the 1980s. While the “cultural wars” in the 1980s were, in effect, struggles of power enacted by Anglo-dominant sectors in positions of public power and within institutions, the “cultural wars” suggested in this article are not equivalent, or even comparable, to its original referent. Indeed, power dynamics among Latinos in the United States still need to be teased out and understood, given the complexity of social positionings, class differences, race, gender identities, colonial histories, immigration status, and a myriad of other factors

that can produce or reduce power. These inter-Latino negotiations do not mirror the “cultural wars” of the 1980s because the majority of Latinos are not positioned in major sites of institutional power, although of course certain groups such as the Cuban exile and many Latin-American immigrant professionals and elites do hold power in their respective fields. Because of the diverse ways in which U.S. Latino/as exercise and articulate power, and because of the multiple subjectivities and identities that we embody, the processes of interlatino transculturations are much more complex than what this article on “cultural wars” suggests. While I have previously explored what I called the “competing authenticities” that constitute the larger space of Latinidad (Aparicio, 1999), it is equally true that there are still numerous forms of negotiations, mutual transculturations, cultural divergences, and power hierarchies that need to be identified as these are themselves socially emerging in the new Latino urban spaces and in other smaller cities and rural areas. The *New York Times* article, for instance, refers to the fact that a recent Guatemalan immigrant girl named Gabriela Minueza, age 9, sang “Preciosa,” one of the most significant, patriotic hymns that praise Puerto Rico, to her Latino school community. It uses this event to argue that the Puerto Rican cultural hegemony in New York is obscuring or oppressing other Latino cultural identities. However within a decolonial imaginary and logic, to use Emma Pérez’s (1999) theoretical proposal for understanding women’s agency in Chicano history, I want to propose that this event could also be iconic of the analogous forms of colonialism and ensuing hybridity that Latino groups may share, despite the specific historical differences between their national countries, their immigration histories, and the political relations to the United States. The fact that a Guatemalan immigrant sings “Preciosa” is a testament to the ways in which cultural texts, such as this patriotic Puerto Rican song, are multiply layered semantically within the context of their local performances. Gabriela does not stop being a Guatemalan at that moment, nor does she become a Boricua. This very moving example of Latinidad, in effect, reveals to me that such a song, as a cultural text, evokes in its audience, and perhaps in its interpreter, an analogous structure of feeling having to do with the pain of exile and of geocultural displacements. What the author of the *New York Times* article missed in his unilateral reading of such a moment of Latinidad is the palimpsest of displacements and migrations that have been effected by the history of colonialisms in the Americas, a multiple layering that indeed brings Guatemalans and Puerto Ricans closer together. That Rafael Hernández composed most of his songs in Mexico and in New York, that Marc Anthony has performed “Preciosa” in a salsa version to reaffirm his Boricua identity as a Nuyorican, and that now a Guatemalan immigrant would sing it to her schoolmates constitute three historical layers of an articulation of the pain of colonialism.

Rather than deploying Latinidad in its two extremes—as a site of homogenization or as a site of cultural wars—in this essay I propose to approach Latinidad as a concept that allows us to explore moments of convergences and divergences in the formation of Latino/a (post)colonial subjectivities and in hybrid cultural expressions among various Latino national groups. This approach allows us to rethink the ways in which national categories of identity have limited and elided the new forms of identity formation emerging in Latino/a communities as a result of inter-Latino affinities, desires, and conflicts. By exploring such inter-Latino sites, that is, those sites where two or more Latinos from various national origins encounter, construct, and transculture each others critics can reinfuse the term “Latinidad” with alternative ways of knowing the content of our lives and why we do what we do. It is an approach that moves us beyond the cautious demonizing of the term itself because it tends to homogenize all sectors, or because it is a term that has partly been deployed by the media and the entertainment industry. By rethinking Latinidad through media and popular culture as a site through which we produce knowledge about a Latino other and we explore our (post)colonial analogies, we are, in fact, proposing a “decolonial imaginary,” to use Emma Pérez’s term, in two ways: we are constructing inter-Latino knowledge that allows Latino/as from various national groups to understand their Latino counterparts, a knowledge that itself represents an alternative discourse given the silenced knowledge about each other that has been our educational legacy; secondly, an approach to “Latinidad” that searches for the analogous (post)colonial conditions and experiences among the various national groups allows us to appropriate the exhausted term and to reinvigorate it with an oppositional, decolonizing ideology that will be much more liberatory than what previous approaches to the term have yielded. If Emma Pérez proposed the term “decolonial imaginary” in the context of reclaiming that “third feminist space” (33) in which the historical agency of Mexican-American women would not be silenced or elided, I would like to use it here to frame an analysis of inter-Latina identifications in the context of popular music and film. The case of Jennifer López performing—and being transformed into—Selena for the film by Gregory Nava brings forth certain dynamics of identification and disidentification among two women, one Tejano singer, Selena, and Jennifer López, a Nuyorican from the Bronx. This, in turn, suggests how both Jennifer López and Selena, as U.S. Latinas (an identity constructed through their audiences, the industry, and the content of their work, but also through the history of ethno-racialization), have shared similar historical experiences as colonized subjects. In addition, their respective bodies also became the object of various cultural gazes and dominant, patriarchal forces, in the public space. They are both, then, embodiments of the colonial conditions of U.S. Latino/as and of “the publicly performing Latina body” (Paredes, 2002: 84).

IDENTITY POLITICS IN CASTING, OR THE RE-CASTING OF JENNIFER INTO SELENA

The death of Selena in 1995 triggered numerous forms of memorialization: the funeral itself, attended by thousands of fans from all over the country; a statue in Corpus Christi; the re-recording and anthologizing of her songs; the line of clothing that she had designed; the photo of her face imprinted on t-shirts sold on the streets of Texas, in her boutiques, and through mail orders; issues of *People*, *Texas Magazine*, and other print media dedicated to her life and musical career; films, such as Gregory Nava’s *Selena*, Lourdes Portillo’s feminist documentary, *Corpus: A Home Movie for Selena*, and *Selena Remembered* (made for TV), among others; and books that were written and published like fast food immediately after her death: *Selena: La última canción* (in bilingual format), written by Geraldo Ruiz and recipient of the Premio Internacional de Crónica y Reportajes, appeared in 1995 and was partially endorsed by the Quintanilla family (Ruiz, 1995); and Joe Nick Patoski’s (1996) *Selena: Como la Flor*, which contextualizes the role that she played in the larger history of Tex-Mex music and the significance of her persona as a cultural hero and role model for the Mexican-American community in Texas and the Southwest. Among these publications, we also have examined as another instance of a Latina reconstructing another Latina in the public sphere.

Selena’s role as a cultural hero for the Mexican community in Texas, and as role model for thousands of young Mexican-American girls, can be understood in various ways. First, she was the first woman in the male-dominated industry of Tex-Mex music who broke the record in terms of sales (Vargas, 2002: 117; Patoski, 1996: 101–44). In this light, the potential for identification between her young female, Mexican-American fans and the singer was tapped, thus creating a larger audience than what was traditionally expected for this musical genre and style. Second, Selena’s mythification after her death as a saint, martyr, and healer (compared to Pedrito Jaramillo and others) was a direct result of the way in which she died, her young age, and the charisma that she had exerted throughout her life, a social power and attractive personality that allowed a largely disempowered community to feel a sense of hope in their own futures. Thus, the power that she held with her largely Mexican-American audiences has been examined in the context of the postmodern condition in Latin America and the United States. Chicano anthropologist José Limón (1998: 188–91), for instance, has examined the displacement and failure of the traditional intellectual and the ensuing ascendance of media figures, singers, and the visual image as central figures and sites in the development and definition of cultural politics and identity for-

mation. Limón has argued, in the context of Tejano culture, that Selena's popularity was established as a result of the disillusionment of the Texas Mexican community with its own politicians and leaders. The sense of hope that Paul Gilroy (1993: 132–34) describes among fans and listening audiences, the politics of fulfillment as he calls it, derives by default, then, in a sort of metonymic relationship to the failures of the state as these are embodied in the figures of elected officials.

It has been commonly argued that Selena's popularity outside of the Mexican-American community was a direct result of her untimely death. In addition, it has also been suggested that Selena became a "Latina" public figure as the result of the production of a larger national audience that came to know her and her music posthumously. Deborah Paredez, moreover, has argued that Selena's tragic death, memorialization at the national level, and in particular the musical based on her life, were sites through which "Selena provided many Latina/os with a compelling discursive space in which to decry both past and concurrent tragic consequences they faced as a result of new nativist hysteria that marked the decade as well as to imagine a future wherein Latina/os would gain significant political, economic and representational ground in the light of the 2000 Census projections and findings" (Paredez, 2002: 67). In this political context, then, Selena's figure, music, life, and death were deployed by Tejanos, Mexican Americans, and other Latino/as as symbolic sites for the claiming of Latino/as as full American citizens.

This process by which Latino and Latina listeners "discovered" Selena's musical work, and thus reconstructed her within the larger space of a United States "Latinidad," was also the direct result of the film, *Selena*, starring Jennifer López. I clearly remember the first time I watched the film at the movies, hearing others in the theater comment that they didn't know that this was based on a real life story. While many non-Latinos came to see the movie without any knowledge of Selena's historical existence, many non-Mexican-American Latinos were in the same situation. Frances Negrón-Muntaner (1997) observes, in the opening lines of "Jennifer's Butt," that the Puerto Rican families in suburban Philadelphia who came to the movie were perhaps moved by "an intense necrophilia, momentarily followed by spasms of melancholia and sadness for the loss of a young life, a frequent occurrence in inner-city Latino-America" (181) and perhaps also by the ways in which Selena exemplified the American Dream and its tragic demise simultaneously (182). Thus, a space for the potential identification and disidentification among and between Latino/as of various national origins was carved by her untimely and tragic death, not only because of the national coverage that it received, but because this coverage and memorialization allowed non-Tejano Latinos to both grieve for themselves (as Paredez and Negrón-Muntaner suggest) and to imagine a more powerful future as Latino/as. It is also significant that the immediate news programming and coverage that ensued imme-

diately after her shooting on March 31, 1995 and the national coverage of the trial against Yolanda Saldivar was predominantly produced by Univisión's Miami crew of newscasters and journalists. Maria Celeste Arrarás's book-length testimonio of her role in this coverage, of her experiences in South Texas as a Puerto Rican journalist and public figure within the predominantly Cuban enterprise of Univisión, is another instance of an inter-Latino historical moment mediated through the central figure of Selena. The fact that the Bronx-born Boricua actress Jennifer López was chosen to visually embody Selena in the Gregory Nava film, the film that made itself into the authoritative visual narrative of her life, into its master narrative, is also significant for understanding inter-Latino identifications as sites of postcolonial affinities and recognitions, as "decolonial imaginaries."

As Deborah Vargas argues, while Selena reaffirmed a Tejana identity through her repertoire, her fashion and style, and her persona, it is also true that her musical selections, arrangements, and hybrid fusion of Tejano music with other musical forms, allowed Selena to create a larger, Latin American and Latino/a audience that identified with her. In fact, according to Vargas, "Selena's music was popular in various parts of Latin/o America, particularly Mexico, El Salvador, and Puerto Rico. As such, the history and culture that mark the music of Tejas discursively engaged the histories and cultures of new populations" (121). Her musical collaborations with the Barrio Boyz, with Honduran pop singer Alvaro Torres, her musical arrangements and incursions into "disco, funk, glam, and new wave" (120), are indexes of these inter-Latino articulations and of the transnational circulation of sounds that made them possible. Thus, that Selena could reaffirm and maintain her Tejana identity, while simultaneously constructing a larger Latino/a identity through her music and audience, is evidence of the multiple subjectivities that traverse and inhabit the space of Latinidad. It is also a clear instance of how identities are the result of the construction by others of a public self. These multiple identities defy the linear conceptualizations of identity shifts that Negrón-Muntaner, for instance, proposes when she writes (184): "Selena went from being a Tejana (a territorialized 'regional' identity) to being a Latina (an 'ethnic minority')."

If it is true, as Clara Rodríguez argues, that there is a homogenized "Latin look" produced by the entertainment industry, isn't it also true that Jennifer López and Selena's physical similarities are not necessarily only a result of this dominant homogenization, but perhaps, as I argue here, visual embodiments of the colonial conditions and historical experiences of second-generation U.S. Latinas who have been public objects of racial sexualization? While the film *Selena* is clearly the product of Hollywood, it was also largely influenced by two powerful Latino men, Gregory Nava and Abraham Quintanilla. Thus, gender ideologies within Latino cultures, beauty standards and patriarchal notions (both Mexican and Anglo) of the Latina body, all played a

role in the ways in which Jennifer López “became” Selena for the film. These gender ideologies are overtly discussed in Lourdes Portillo’s documentary, while in the Nava film they are silently, but visually articulated.

Latina scholars have been so preoccupied with differentiating ourselves to the larger Anglo world that we have overlooked the fact that there are physical similarities among some of us. The similarities of the real bodies of both Selena and Jennifer López speak to the reality of a “Latina look” that is, in this case, not a homogenized result of Hollywood, but in fact two concrete, real Latina bodies. The uncanny coincidences between the body measurements of Jennifer López and Selena at the time of the filming were foregrounded by Selena’s seamstress, who remarked: “All the costumes in the movie were made from the original patterns. So when they told me what to make, I just went into my boxes.” “Jennifer had only an inch difference in her waist, but she brought a trainer in and she lost it.” Manuel Peña (1999: 203–7) has argued that Selena played a double function in terms of her physicality and body. He frames this doubleness in terms of “use value” and “exchange value” to explain how Selena served both as a cultural hero with which her community could identify, at the same time that she was capitalizing on her sexuality to serve as an object of desire for mainstream audiences. The double-edged sexuality, constituted both through the virginal, good daughter image and the emerging sexual symbol that Selena constructed for herself through her “bustiers” and revealing costumes, is not necessarily informed by a segmented audience, as Peña suggests, but rather by patriarchal discourses that, through processes of racialization and erotization, objectify Latinas’ bodies. It is interesting that according to some of the theories above, Selena could only be “sexual” for Anglo or non-Latino audiences, a cultural projection that masks the potential desire of the Mexican male for the young Tejana singer.

In the cultural realm, the body curvature, the long, dark hair, the full lips, and the rear end of both Latina entertainers, Jennifer López and Selena, have become symbols of their pride in their racial and ethnic identities, a pride that both singers articulated as part of their public personae. If critics recall López’s moment of reaffirmation of her sexualized and racialized “butt” in Cristina’s talk show when she responded that “todo es mio, it’s all mine” (Negrón-Muntaner, 1997; Paredez, 2002), Selena was consistently remembered for having reaffirmed her Tejana identity, for having resisted the colonial beauty standards of both Mexico and the Anglo industry (in Mexico she was called a *naca*, derogatory term used by dominant Mexicans to refer to those who are “Indian” looking). Yet the social, cultural, racial, and gendered meanings of these two public Latina bodies are not exclusively sites for resistance to colonization and to patriarchy. Their social meanings are much more complex. For instance, Negrón-Muntaner asserts in her “epistemology of the butt” that “a big *culo* does not only upset hegemonic (white) notions of

beauty and good taste” (189) but also that Jennifer López’s rear end allows the “Puerto Rican diaspora” to have “a big *culo* to call our own, ending a long stretch of second-class citizenship in both the United States and Puerto Rico” (191). This claim can only be valid at the level of symbolic speculation, for Puerto Rican subordination continues to be strong despite López’s fame and fortune. Because the bodies of Latinas, Afro-Caribbeans, and women of color have been historically constructed so as to satisfy the erotic desires of men in dominant society as well as the labor needs of colonial and imperial economies, one can not dismiss the sedimented patriarchal and racialized values that Selena and Jennifer López’s butts still trigger for many non-Latino viewers as icons of cultural subalternity, not to mention their status as “patriarchal synechdoques” (Aparicio, 1998: 142–53) in the larger grammar of masculinist discourses.

In the film *Selena* the young Tejana’s body had to be reproduced through the analogous figure of a Boricua whose live butt resurrected notions of racialized and gender differences and “excesses” in Selena’s own musical career. Yet these “excesses” were muted and undermined by the film’s patriarchal directives, which represented Selena as a mostly virginal, good daughter rather than as a young woman with sexual desires and needs of her own. The movie scene when Selena is eating pizza with Chris Pérez and she comments that she never diets is an attempt to “naturalize” her body weight and to undermine Selena’s own constructedness of her sexuality on stage, attempts that were also foregrounded by her radical introduction of the “bustier” onto the stage but that were consistently disparaged by the patriarchal authority of her father. The historical fact is that both Selena and Jennifer López ultimately experimented with transforming their curvaceous bodies into more acceptable white notions of beauty (Selena had liposuction and Jennifer López has significantly transformed her body and her hair since the movie). This reveals the difficulties of said resistance in the entertainment industry. (Shakira’s case and controversial blonde hair is another case in point). My point here is that the bodies of both Selena and Jennifer López were literally sites through which hegemonic notions of physical beauty and value were being contested and struggled. Both bodies were public enactments and physical embodiments of simultaneous colonial desire and subaltern resistance. While internet and journalistic accounts of the process of casting, make up, costume making, and other aspects of the production of the movie foregrounded the physical similarities between Selena and Jennifer López, none of these narratives accounted for the ways in which the struggles over these bodies and body parts articulated the historical experiences of second-generation Latinas in the United States as racialized subjects.

Yet these similarities were offset by the debates and controversies around national identity: why was a boricua from the Bronx chosen to play the lead role of a Tex-Mex singer? If casting has been a process inflected with iden-

tity politics and with the expectations that actors and actresses from one national group can only perform another subject from that same group, as reflected in the discussion about Benjamin Bratt's role as Miguel Piñero (Kim, 2002), then the case of the selection of Jennifer López to play Selena was inevitably wrought with debates around the Puerto Rican/Mexican divide. On the one hand, the casting call to select the actress who would interpret Selena in the movie triggered the participation of 20,000 young Latinas in five major cities in the United States. This is the second largest casting call in the history of Hollywood (texmexqueen.com/selenamovie.htm). When Gregory Nava called Jennifer López to see if she would be interested, "she did, and the rest was history" (texmexqueen.com). I quote this phrase because it suggests that López's personality, style, and charisma was comparable to that of the Tex-Mex singer. Yet, in contrast to other Mexican actresses who were also considered for the role, there are, in fact, similarities between the Bronx Boricua and the Tex-Mex singer, that were articulated in and through the casting process and that reveal the effects of colonialism on Puerto Ricans and Mexicans as historical minorities.

The differences between a Mexican-American Latina such as Selena, and other Mexican actresses such as Bibi Gaytan and Selma Hayek, were evident at the level of language, culture, and national location. Bibi Gaytan was automatically eliminated once it was known that the film would be produced in English. Selma Hayek "had too deep of an accent" (texmexqueen.com). This is significant evidence of the heterogeneous social, linguistic, and cultural locations between Selena and these Mexican superstars. Despite the geographical proximity to the U.S./Mexico border, Texas-born Selena's identity as a Mexican-American young girl, and as a Tejana, shares more with Bronx-born Jennifer López than with Hayek or Gaytan. The linguistic gaps foregrounded in the coverage about casting decisions indicate that Mexicans and Mexican-Americans are not the same thing. (Is it a coincidence that *El Show de Johnny Canales* is very popular among New York Puerto Ricans?) The visibility of Hayek and Gaytan in Hollywood also reveals the transnational importation of Mexican superstars into Hollywood, a phenomenon that in many ways displaces and replaces the need for the development of local, national, Mexican-American talent in the acting profession. In fact, this planned migration of stars from Mexico to the United States mirrors the importation of programming from Latin America into the United States that is the base for Spanish Cable television (Davila, 2001a: 178). There is, then, a Latina experience constituted by a history of cultural, linguistic, and economic colonization that both Selena and Jennifer López have embodied, particularly in terms of their dominant language as English-speaking Latinas who did not necessarily identify with the major issues of their respective homelands. Likewise, the inverse colonization, one may say, of Spanish-cable television programming, suggests that U.S. Latino/as as audiences still

do not have media productions that are controlled nationally or mostly produced by our own communities. While it is true that the debates around casting foregrounded Jennifer López as a Puerto Rican rather than as a Latina (Negrón-Muntaner, 1997: 184), they also allowed López to articulate her affinities with Selena as U.S. Latinas: "Selena and I are both Latinas and both had the common experience of growing up Latina in this country. This was good enough" (Negrón-Muntaner 1997: 184).

FROM HIP HOP TO CUMBIA AND BACK

However, it is not only the body that makes the actress or the singer. The narratives that summarize the process through which Jennifer López was transformed into Selena foregrounded regional differences that surfaced most evidently in the dancing. While both bodies were very similar in physical terms, curvature, and in the dominant gaze that they both have triggered, it is clear that each of these bodies was socialized into a particular set of movements, rhythms, and footwork that originated in the heritage and traditions of their local and regional cultures. Narratives about the casting process summarize the following:

"The part also gave López a chance to showcase her natural talents as a live stage/musical performer." She broke into entertainment as one of the kinetic Fly Girls on Fox's comedy series "In Living Color," and playing Selena allowed her to revisit her dance training. López rehearsed extensively with choreographer Miranda Garrison to faithfully recreate Selena's fluid, natural style. López remembers, "One of the biggest challenges was the dance part. It's very hard to unlearn everything your body is accustomed to doing and that it does naturally. I had to learn what Selena did, which is very different from my own dance instincts." These comments reveal the ambiguous ways in which dance is defined: it is both "natural" and "instinctive" yet it is also locally, regionally, and culturally inflected and "learned." Dance as a performance of cultural identity has played a central role in the career development of both Jennifer López and of Selena. If the movie itself dedicated a scene to the moment when Selena's mother teaches her to dance the *cumbia* (an interesting musical tradition transmitted here from woman to woman), Jennifer López's own musical career has also been based on her dance performances in videos. Yet López's beginnings with "In Living Color" and the musical arrangements of her cuts locate her more centrally in the pop, R&B, and hip hop categories. Although Selena and Los Dinos capitalized on merging Tex Mex with pop styles and arrangements, her *cumbia* dancing and choreographic movements still retained the basic, traditional footsteps of this dance form so popular among *nortenos*. Yet the regional

identities between these dance traditions and styles may mask some of the commonalities between them. If *cumbias* originated as one of the many rhythms developed by African slaves in the eighteenth century in the Atlantic coast of Colombia, then its hip-swaying moves are historically analogous to those of salsa dancing. In fact, while the trotting foot movements of *cumbias* may differ from the more syncopated footwork of salsa dancing, *cumbias* also feature “repeating keyboard patterns” which are in fact borrowed from salsa. While Tex-Mex *cumbias* are supposedly “simpler than the Colombian counterpart, the “shuffling steps . . . come, as folklore tells us, from slaves who were dancing while wearing leg irons and chains” (Burr, 1999: 78). Thus, the common African elements of *cumbias*, Afro-Caribbean dance styles, and hip hop could be foregrounded as a common racial genealogy that has been partially silenced by the national values associated with these dance forms. In the case of Tex-Mex music, this Africanness is transculturated into Mexicanness through the shift to the accordion, while in the urban East Coast the Africanness of hip hop and salsa dancing is mediated by the Hollywood, mainstream images that are incorporated into the musical videos. (In Jennifer López’s case, her somatic transformation into lighter hair, less butt, and weight loss serves as a reminder of these whitening impulses constantly at work, while the framing of musical videos such as “Waiting for Tonight” as a tropical jungle speaks to the historically cemented, lingering, hegemonic constructions of Latin American identity.) It is not unsurprising that Willie Colón, whose musical projects have explored the historical processes of racialization and whitening (“Color americano”), performs a song entitled “Cumbia bomba,” which merges both Afro-Puerto Rican bomba rhythms with the Colombian *cumbia*. Yet this production has emerged out of his relocation to Mexico City, and to me it serves as another example of the Puerto Rican/Mexican analogies that can be found through an oppositional genealogical project that uncovers the African, subaltern elements in both cultural canons.

The fact that Jennifer López paid homage to Selena in her first touring concert, which began in San Juan, Puerto Rico, speaks of the ways in which Latinidad and inter-Latina affiliations are realized not only at the level of symbolic discourse but in more concrete, real ways. López sang “I Could Fall in Love,” and “apparently when she sang the song she began to cry as they flashed images of Selena on a big screen.” It has been reported that “it was the best Jennifer sounded all night in her concert” (pub50.exboard.com/fejjanorosefm1.show . . .). This homage to Selena and the “emotional” performance triggered by it has, on the one hand, rescued Jennifer López from some of the vestiges of the debates on the politics of identity behind the casting process. One fan writes:

I gotta say that a lot of Selena fans have held bad feelings against Jennifer because it seems like she forgot that it was Selena that gave her her big break, but apparently Jenni has surprised us all and showed that she remembers very well who Selena is and even did a tribute in her first concert ever. My hat is off to Jennifer. (pub50.exboard.com)

But what does this performative decision suggest? In the contest of this previous discussion on Latinidad, it seems that Jennifer López’s embodiment of and transformation into Selena is a revealing instance of, first, a Latinidad feminista that is enacted through their resistance to dominant social constructions of both Latina bodies and vis-à-vis the dominant, objectifying gaze. The Jennifer López/Selena dyad also reveals that U.S. Latinas will continue to explore their commonalities as colonized subjects, as historical minorities that continue to engage in struggles of discourse and power with dominant institutions. Thus, the fact that Jennifer sang Selena’s songs in San Juan, Puerto Rico, is quite meaningful. It parallels the uncovering of analogous forms of colonialism that continue to affect the everyday lives of many U.S. Latinos across national groups. The presense of Selena in San Juan represents, also, a continuation of, and a foregrounding of, the silenced history of Mexicans in Puerto Rico, a historical presence that dates back to 1810 and earlier (Picó, 1994: 19).

The case study of Jennifer López and Selena proposes itself as a model for using Latinidad as an approach that unveils the affinities between and among historical minorities such as Mexican-Americans and Puerto Ricans. The identification of Jennifer López with Selena, an individual one, as well as the potential identificatory process of Latino/a audiences with Selena and with Jennifer López, open up as possible spaces through which Latino/a cultural critics can advance the knowledge about U.S. Latinas as we begin to face the challenge of our demographic diversification and our inter-Latino dynamics and interactions. To dismiss Latinidad as an exclusively hegemonic site is to dismiss the potential for continuing to explore our (post)colonial historical experiences and for finding affinities and similarities that may empower us rather than fragment us. Jennifer’s performance as Selena, her visual resurrection of the slain Tex-Mex singer was perhaps one way of achieving such an awareness. This form of oppositionality may have been masked by the identity politics of casting decisions and by the privileged economic position that López holds as the best paid Latina in the history of Hollywood, a status that the film *Selena* ironically made possible. These power differentials are still to be identified and more fully understood.

NOTE

1. While it is impossible to trace here a genealogy of the term "Latinidad" as it has been deployed by major Latino/a scholars, I want to emphasize that the multiple meanings of the term have to do with the fact that it has been defined in various contexts and from various disciplinary vantage points: from Felix Padilla's social and political approach to "Latinismo" (1985) that stressed the strategic, collective mobilizations between Puerto Ricans and Mexicans in Chicago, to Arlene Dávila's (2001a, b) analysis of Latinidad as a transnational, hemispheric imposition of Latin American programming on U.S. Latino viewers, to diachronic analyses of the shifts from the cultural nationalism paradigms of the 1970s to pan-Latino imaginaries during the 1990s (Gaspar de Alba, 1998; Dávila, 2001b), to Mérida Rúa's (2001) proposal of a "Puerto Rican Latinidad" based on the everyday lives, encounters, and affiliations between Puerto Ricans and other Latino groups in Chicago. "Latinidad" refers then to a diversity of processes and cultural interactions based on the disciplinary approach from which it is defined. See also Sandoval-Sánchez (1999), Aparicio and Chávez-Silverman (1997), Laó-Montes (2001), the Latina Feminist Group (2001), and Obolei (1995).

REFERENCES

- Aparicio, Frances R. (1999). "Reading the 'Latino,'" in *Latino Studies: Toward Re-imagining Our Academic Location*, *Discourse: Journal for Theoretical Studies in Media and Culture* 21, no. 2: pp. 3–18.
- Aparicio, Frances R. (1998). *Listening to Salsa: Gender, Latin Popular Music, and Puerto Rican Cultures*. Hanover and London: Wesleyan University Press/University Press of New England.
- Aparicio, Frances R. and Chavez-Silverman, Susan (1997). "Introduction," in Frances R. Aparicio and Susan Chavez-Silverman, editors, *Tropicalizations: Transcultural Representations of Latinidad*. Hanover and London: University Press of New England, pp. 1–17.
- Arraras, Maria Celeste (1997). *El secreto de Selena*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Bun; Ramiro (1999). *Tejano and Regional Mexican Music*. New York: Billboard Books.
- Davila, Arlene (2001a). *Latinos Inc.: The Marketing and Making of a People*. Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press.
- Davila, Arlene (2001b). "Culture in the Battlefield: from Nationalist to Pan-Latino Projects," in A. Laó-Montes and A. Davila, editors, *Mambo Montage: The Latinization of New York*. New York: Columbia University Press, pp. 159–182.
- Gaspar de Alba, Alicia (1998). *Chicano Art Inside/Outside the Master's House: Cultural Politics and the CARA Exhibition*. Austin: The University of Texas Press.
- Gilroy, Paul (1993). *Small Acts: Thoughts on the Politics of Black Cultures*. London and New York: Serpent's Tail.
- Kim, Jae-Ha (2002). "Bratt finds rhyme, reason in poet role," *Chicago Tribune*. January 20, 1D, 10D.
- Kugel, Seth (2002). "The Latino Culture Wars," *New York Times*. February 24: pp. 7–8F.
- Laó-Montes, Agustín (2001). "Mambo Montage: The Latinization of New York City," in A. Laó-Montes and A. Davila, editors, *Mambo Montage: The Latinization of New York*. New York: Columbia University Press, pp. 1–52.
- Latina Feminist Group (2001). *Telling to Live: Latina Feminist Testimonios*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Limón José, E. (1998). *American Encounters: Greater Mexico, the United States, and the Erotics of Culture*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Negrón-Muntaner, Frances (1997). "Jennifer's Butt," *Aztlán* 22, no. 2 (Fall): pp. 181–94.
- Obolei, Suzanne (1995). *Ethnic Labels, Latino Lives: Identity and the Politics of (Re)Presentation in the United States*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

- Paredes, Deborah (2002). "Remembering Selena, Re-membling Latinidad," *Theater Journal* 54, pp. 63–84.
- Patoski, Joe Nick (1996). *Selena: Como la Flor*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company.
- Peña, Manuel (1999). *Música Tejana: The Cultural Economy of Artistic Transformation*. College Station: Texas A & M University Press.
- Pérez, Emma (1999). *The Decolonial Imaginary: Writing Chicanas into History*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Picó, Fernando (1994). "Los mexicanos en Puerto Rico," *Claridad*, 18–24 November, p. 19.
- Rodríguez, Clara E., editor (1998). *Latin Looks: Images of Latinas and Latinos in the U.S. Media*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Rúa, Merida (2001). "Colao subjectivities: PortoMex and MexiRican perspectives on language and identity," *Centro: Journal of the Center for Puerto Rican Studies* 2, pp. 116–33.
- Ruiz, Geraldo (1995). *Selena: La última canción*. New York: El Diario Books.
- Sandoval-Sánchez, Alberto (1999). *Jose, Can You See?: Latinos On and Off Broadway*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Tracy, Kathleen (2000). *Jennifer López*. Toronto, Ontario: ECW Press.
- Vargas, Deborah R. (2002). "Bidi Bidi Bom Bom: Selena and Tejano Music in The Making of Texas," in M. Habell-Pallan and M. Romero, editors, *Latino/a Popular Culture*, New York: New York University Press, pp. 117–26.