

Brain, Brow, and Booty: Latina Iconicity in U.S. Popular Culture

ISABEL MOLINA GUZMÁN

Institute of Communications Research and Latina/o Studies Program,
University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign

ANGHARAD N. VALDIVIA

Institute of Communications Research,
University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign

We were shooting on the steps of the Metropolitan Museum one night. It was lit romantically, and Jennifer was wearing an evening gown, looking incredibly stunning. Suddenly there must have been a thousand people screaming her name. *It was like witnessing this icon.* (Ralph Fiennes in the *New York Times*, 2002, p. 16, emphasis added)

This stamp, honoring a Mexican artist who has transcended “la frontera” and *has become and icon to Hispanics, feminists, and art lovers*, will be a further reminder of the continuous cultural contributions of Latinos to the United States. (Cecilia Alvear, President of National Association of Hispanic Journalists (NAHJ) on the occasion of the introduction of the Frida Kahlo U.S. postage stamp; 2001; emphasis added)

“Nothing Like the Icon on the Fridge” (column about Salma Hayek’s *Frida* by Stephanie Zacharek in the *New York Times*, 2002).

The iconic location of Latinas and their articulation into commodity culture is an inescapable affirmation of the increasing centrality of Latinidad and Latinas to U.S. popular culture. We live in an age when Latinidad, the state and process of

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Address correspondence to Angharad N. Valdivia, Institute of Communications Research, University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, 288 Gregory Hall, 810 S. Wright St., Urbana, IL 61801. E-mail: valdivia@uiuc.edu

being, becoming, and/or appearing Latina/o, is the “It” ethnicity and style in contemporary U.S. mainstream culture. This construction of Latinidad is transmitted primarily, though not exclusively, through the mainstream media and popular culture. We also continue to live in an age when women function as a sign, a stand-in for objects and concepts ranging from nation to beauty to sexuality (Rakow & Kranich, 1991). This article examines the representational politics surrounding three hypercommodified Latinas in contemporary U.S. culture, Salma Hayek, Frida Kahlo, and Jennifer Lopez. We recognize there is growing cadre of women currently circulating through U.S. popular culture, such as Cameron Diaz and Penélope Cruz, who are sometimes identified by media producers as Latinas despite their problematic location within that social identity.¹ Nevertheless, the three women central to this analysis are foreground in relation to their Latinidad and respective identities as Puerto Ricans and Mexicans. Furthermore, these three women, more so than Cruz and Diaz, are most often inscribed by journalists and other media professionals within the visual and narrative tropes associated with female Latinidad. Thus, in this project, we focus on the contemporary representations of Hayek, Kahlo, and Lopez in order to explore the gendered and racialized signifiers surrounding Latinidad and Latina iconicity; and investigate the related processes of producing and policing Latina bodies and identities in mainstream texts such as films and magazines.

Decades of research on ethnic, racial, and feminist media studies demonstrate that there exists the tendency to racialize and genderize media representations (Aparicio and Chavez-Silverman, 1997; Fregoso, 1993; Lopez, 1991; Perez-Firmat, 1994; C. E. Rodriguez, 1997; Ramirez-Berg, 2002; Shohat and Stam, 1994). The concurrent processes of racialization and gendering render feminized images less powerful and valuable than masculine images, often resulting in a double-edged construction of femininity and otherness. As a result, the female ethnic subject is othered through its categorization and marginalization in relation to dominant constructions of Whiteness and femininity, and the male ethnic subject is othered through its categorization and marginalization in relation to dominant constructions of Whiteness and masculinity. In other words, Latinos are generally devalued and feminized, and Latinas fall beyond the margins of socially acceptable femininity and beauty. By examining popular representations of Latina identity and physicality, we explore the representational dialectic created through the linked processes of racialization and gendering.

Specifically, this article bridges the theoretical approaches of Feminist Media Studies and Latina/o Studies with recent scholarship on hybridity and transnational identities (Bhabha, 1994; Brah & Coomber, 2000; García Canclini, 1995; Valdivia 2003; Werbner & Modood, 1997). We begin by contextualizing the contemporary situation of Latina/os and Latinidad within U.S. media and popular culture, and continue by locating Hayek, Kahlo, and Lopez within the terrain of Latina iconicity. Next we examine popular representations of Hayek, Kahlo, and Lopez in order to study dominant signifiers of Latinidad and Western discourses

of femininity and sexuality as well as the resulting racialized prescriptions of Latina bodies and sexuality in contemporary popular culture. Following an analysis of the representational tension between the use of Latina bodies for the commodification of ethnic authenticity and the symbolic resistance embodied in hybridized Latina bodies, identities, and cultures, we conclude by theorizing how contemporary Latina iconicity connects to broader transformative notions of transnational identities in order to problematize Western gendered and racialized narratives of ethnicity and to theorize beyond them.

Contextualizing Latina/os and Latinidad in the United States

While it is important to remember that the United States historically has been a multiracial and multiethnic society, according to the 2000 U.S. Census those identifying as Hispanic increased by 38.8% from the 1990 U.S. Census creating major demographic shifts throughout the United States. The proportion of the population that identifies as Hispanic or Latina/o is increasing by a rate five times faster than the rest of the population. By contrast 1971 was the last year Anglo Americans reproduced at a rate that maintained their proportion of the total population (Hacker, 2000). In California, the most populated state in the United States, “non-Hispanic Whites” are no longer the majority racial group, and Latina/os have surpassed African Americans as the second largest ethnic-racial group in the United States (U.S. Census Reports, 2003). From politicians to media marketing specialists, mainstream U.S. institutions are slowly recognizing the social, economic and political presence and power of one of the fastest growing ethnic groups. (Russel Foundation, 2002).

Nevertheless, U.S. Latina/o identity is a complex and contradictory post-colonial panethnic construction. Although the social formation of Latina/os as a panethnic group is recent and the label itself remains problematic and contested, the use of the terms Latina/o and Latinidad are gaining scholarly and political exigency (Darder & Torres, 1998; Flores, 2000; Oboler, 1995). As a demographic category, Latinidad describes any person currently living in the United States of Spanish-speaking heritage from more than 30 Caribbean and Latin America countries. It is an imagined community of recent, established and multi-generational immigrants from diverse cultural, linguistic, racial, and economic backgrounds. Within Latina/o studies scholarship there is much tension surrounding the use of this emerging ethnic identity category. Whereas Juan Flores (2000) asserts that Latina/o is nearly always an identity, a subjectivity, that is partially complete, so that one identifies as a Mexican-American Latina or a Chilean Latina or a Puerto Rican/Dominican Latina, Achy Obejas (2001) counters that we now have a growing community of Latina/os who identify themselves specifically as Latina/os. Long-standing roots in the United States as well as a diverse mixture of backgrounds and affiliations make such an identity possible.

As such, *Latinidad* epitomizes the contemporary situation of globalization and hybridity that partially defines the lived and symbolic experiences of transnational communities (Shome & Hedge, 2002a, 2002b). This dynamic, celebratory, and contested concept of *Latinidad* allows us to explore a broad range of popular signifiers associated with representations of Latina/o identity in the United States. We frame *Latinidad* as a social construct informed by the mediated circulation of ethnic-specific community discourses and practices as well as mainstream economic and political imperatives through the cultural mainstream. Thus *Latinidad* is a category constructed from the outside with marketing and political homogenizing implications as well as from within with assertions to difference and specificity.

Latina Iconicity in U.S. Popular Culture

The contemporary demographic shift in the United States, popularly dubbed the “browning of America,” is causing the U.S. government and corporations to rethink hegemonic constructions of U.S. citizenship, marketing, and consumption (Dávila, 2000; Halter, 2000). For the past 20 years Latina/o marketing and advertising agencies have worked diligently to reframe dominant discourses about the U.S. Latino audience as ethnically homogenous, racially non-White, Spanish-dominant, socioeconomically poor and most often of Mexican origin (Astroff, 1997; Dávila, 2000; A. Rodriguez, 1999). Slowly Latina/o marketing professionals are redefining mainstream industry perceptions about the U.S. Latina/o audience by highlighting actual and projected increases in the U.S. Latina/o population; the commercial profits from dual language marketing; and, the existence of more than one million Latino/a households with incomes of more than \$50,000 living in the United States (Sinclair, 1999).²

In the overall climate of “shopping for ethnicities” corporations are moderately increasing spending levels on “Hispanic” marketing (Goodson & Shaver, 1994; Halter, 2000). Additionally, strong demand from Latin American audiences for U.S. programming and from U.S. Latino/a audiences for more inclusive programming are increasing the production of film and television shows that appeal to audiences across a matrix of race, ethnicity, gender, and class. Beginning with Warner Brother’s 1997 release of *Selena*, starring Jennifer Lopez, Hollywood has realized the potential of movies that target Latin American and U.S. Latino/a audiences, as well as a spectrum of ethnic and racial categories. Throughout the past few years Latina/o faces also have appeared in increasing numbers on television programming. ABC’s *George Lopez Show* (2002) featuring a multiethnic Cuban and Mexican-American family is one of the network’s more popular prime time situation comedies. Gregory Nava’s dramatic PBS series *American Family* (2001) featuring a Los Angeles Chicana family continues to receive wide critical acclaim. Nick Jr.’s *Dora the Explorer* has been a resounding success in the preschool television market with a broad spectrum of synergistically successful products ranging from books and toys to clothing and food. In 2001 Jay Leno hosted Los

Aterciopelados, a Colombian rock band who sing and speak only in Spanish; and in 2000, CBS and its Spanish-language network affiliates aired the first live Spanish-language program on U.S. prime-time television, the National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences Latin Grammys. Celia Cruz's death in the summer of 2003 was covered by all mainstream news and entertainment outlets. The success of films, television shows, and popular music featuring Latina/os demonstrate the viability of Latina/o programming with both Latina/o and general audiences.

Given the media industry's growing interest in Latina/o artists, culture, consumers, and audiences, the iconic position of Latinas within U.S. popular culture presents a critical space from which to study the racialized and gendered construction of meaning surrounding transnational identities and hybrid bodies. Iconicity, as a form of representation, involves the transformation of meaning that arises through the interactive relationship between an image, the practices surrounding the production of that image, and the social context within which the image is produced and received by audiences. As Giles and Middleton (2000) propose it is not so much that iconic images communicate a specific meaning or message, but that they "resignify" the meanings surrounding a particular image, event or issue through their circulation in popular culture. Within contemporary U.S. popular culture, three women—Salma Hayek, Frida Kahlo, and Jennifer Lopez—have gained iconic status as representatives of feminine Latinidad. In other words, popular representations of each woman communicate more than the visuals, instead the images are invited to sign-in for mainstream narratives about Latina identity and sexuality. The rest of this article analyzes the representational politics surrounding these three Latinas in order to examine the ways that they signify Latinidad and Latinas as a whole. Simultaneously, we problematize the homogenizing narratives of Latina iconicity circulated through U.S. popular culture by highlighting the lived and symbolic differences between Hayek, Kahlo, and Lopez.

Jennifer Lopez

At \$13 million dollars per movie, Lopez is the highest paid Latina identified actress in Hollywood history. The industry's recognition of her box-office draw places her in a unique category in relation to other actresses like Michelle Rodriguez, Salma Hayek, and Penélope Cruz, and African American actresses like Halle Berry, Vanessa Williams, and Angela Bassett. Unlike Cameron Diaz whose Latinidad remains relatively invisible by virtue of her proximity to and performance of Whiteness, Lopez has explicitly highlighted and in some instances subverted her malleable ethnic and racial identity. In unprecedented fashion Lopez has catapulted her on-screen image to multiple domains most notably the music, clothing, lingerie, perfume, and television industries. Like other actors seeking greater control through interventions behind the camera, Lopez has started her own production company Nuyorican Films. With three hit albums and a string of successful Hollywood films and spectacular romances, as well as

the requisite bomb *Gigli* (2003), Lopez (a.k.a. La Lopez, J-Lo or Jenni from the block) remains a rare film/music/dance sensation. Cosmetic and fashion line deals pushed Lopez's projected \$35 million per year income into the number 12 spot on *Forbes'* (2002) top 25 list of U.S. entertainers. New perfume and fashion lines as well as forthcoming films and albums are part of a carefully orchestrated effort to remain at the forefront of the mainstream. It is impossible to predict whether these efforts will prove successful in terms of an enduring career, but contemporarily J-Lo continues to grace more magazine covers than most any other star.

Salma Hayek

The fall 2002 release of *Frida* by Miramax catapulted its producer and star Salma Hayek onto the cover of U.S. magazines, ranging from *Parade* to *Elle*. Her success in Mexican soap operas inspired Hayek to cross the entertainment border, where her first Hollywood role was a 30-second stint as a sultry and angry Chicana ex-girlfriend in Alison Ender's 1993 film *Mi Vida Loca*. As Hayek's hair has gotten progressively straighter and thus more "Anglo"-looking, her on-screen image also has become less stereotypically ethnic, consequently yielding more complex supporting and leading roles. While not achieving the multimedia profile of Lopez, Hayek is one of the most prolific contemporary Latinas in Hollywood, recently earning an Oscar nomination for her role in *Frida*, a rare achievement perceived as recognition of an actress's skill and talent. Like Rosie Perez, Hayek's inability to subvert the linguistic accent that clearly marks her as ethnically different limits the roles available to her. Despite the problematic nature of ethnically pure notions of identity, Hayek is using her accent and Spanish fluency to promote herself as "the authentic" Hollywood Latina thereby privileging her ethnicity in relation to other Latina performers, like Diaz and Lopez (Molina Guzmán, forthcoming). Because of Hayek's growing discomfort with the roles available to her, she founded her own production company, which among other projects produced *In the Time of the Butterflies* (2001) and directed *El Maldonado Miracle* (2003) for Showtime Television.

Frida Kahlo

Although we recognize that Kahlo differs from Hayek and Lopez along several dimensions, she occupies the representational foreground in contemporary mainstream popular culture in a very complex manner. One of the ironic ways through which Latina and Latin American women reach fame in U.S. mainstream culture, despite reaching fame while alive elsewhere, is through death—Evita, Selena, Frida, and Celia Cruz being prominent examples (Fusco, 1995). Decades after her death, Kahlo is one of the most popular and commodified mainstream images of Latinidad globally, and in the United States particularly. One can find Frida Kahlo stationery, posters, jewelry, hair clips, autobiographies, cookbooks, biographical

books, chronological art books, refrigerator magnets, painting kits, wall hangings, and wrapping paper, to mention a few of the items in bookstores and novelty stores throughout the U.S., Mexico, Puerto Rico, and Spain. Kahlo exhibits, such as “Diego y Frida: Amores y Desamores,” held at the Centro Cultural de Madrid; La Casa Azul in Coyoacan, Mexico (Kahlo’s blue home); and assorted other collections, draw on a growing transnational fan base. Images of Kahlo circulate from the popular, in the form of U.S. Postal Service reproduction of her artwork, to the elite in the form of museum exhibits and special collections. Her paintings received the highest ever bid for a Latin American artwork auctioned at the prestigious House of Sotheby. Highlighting Kahlo’s representational significance Hayek and Lopez raced to release biopics of the artists.³ Thus, it is not so much the art works themselves, including her own self-representational images, in which we are interested, but rather how Kahlo the symbol transcends the high and low culture divide by signing in for Latina identity and authenticity.

Racializing Latina Bodies and Sexuality in U.S. Popular Culture

One of the most enduring tropes surrounding the signification of Latinas in U.S. popular culture is that of tropicalism (Aparicio & Chavez-Silverman, 1997; Perez-Firmat, 1994). Tropicalism erases specificity and homogenizes all that is identified as Latin and Latina/o. Under the trope of tropicalism, attributes such as bright colors, rhythmic music, and brown or olive skin comprise some of the most enduring stereotypes about Latina/os, a stereotype best embodied by the excesses of Carmen Miranda and the hypersexualization of Ricky Martin. Gendered aspects of the trope of tropicalism include the male Latin lover, macho, dark-haired, mustachioed, and the spitfire female Latina characterized by red-colored lips, bright seductive clothing, curvaceous hips and breasts, long brunette hair, and extravagant jewelry. The tropes of tropicalism extend beyond those people with Caribbean roots to people from Latin American, and recently to those in the United States with Caribbean and/or Latin American roots.

Sexuality plays a central role in the tropicalization of Latinas through the widely circulated narratives of sexual availability, proficiency, and desirability (Valdivia, 2000). For centuries the bodies of women of color, specifically their genitals and buttocks, have been excessively sexualized and exoticized by U.S. and European cultures (Gilman, 1985). Not surprisingly popular images of Latinas and the Latina body focus primarily on the area below the navel, an urbane corporeal site with sexualized overdetermination (Desmond, 1997). Within the Eurocentric mind/body binary, culture is signified by the higher intellectual functions of the mind/brain while nature is signified by the lower biological functions of the body. That is, Whiteness is associated with a disembodied intellectual tradition free from the everyday desires of the body, and non-Whiteness is associated with nature and the everyday needs of the body to consume food, excrete waste, and reproduce sexually. Dominant representations of Latinas and African

American women are predominately characterized by an emphasis on the breasts, hips, and buttocks. These body parts function as mixed signifiers of sexual desire and fertility as well as bodily waste and racial contamination.

Contemporary Latina iconicity inherits traces of this dichotomous representational terrain. Despite Jennifer Lopez's multimedia successes, it is her buttocks insured by Lopez for \$1 billion that most journalists and Lopez herself foregrounds. Like other popular Latinas, Lopez is simultaneously celebrated and denigrated for her physical, bodily, and financial excess. Whenever she appears in the popular press, whether it is a newspaper, a news magazine, or *People*, Lopez's gorgeous stereotypical Latina butt is glamorized and sexually fetishized. Indeed, she is often photographed in profile or from the back looking over her shoulders—her buttocks becoming the focus of the image, the part of her body that marks Lopez as sexy but different from Anglo female bodies. Lopez's bootie is marked as unusually large, abnormal, irregular, and by implication not Anglo-Saxon (Barrera, 2000; Beltrán, 2002; Negrón-Mutaner, 2000). Despite the successful marketing of her curves, Lopez recognizes the discourse of exotic otherness that surrounds her body. While Lopez continues to use her increasingly thinning body to commodify herself, she is also becoming frustrated with the U.S. media's obsession with the state, weight, and firmness of her butt (Beltrán, 2002).

Likewise, while news media images of Lopez foreground her buttocks, photographs of Hayek emphasize her bountiful breasts, small waist, and round hips. Hayek's petite yet hyper-curvaceous frame embodies the romanticized stereotypical Latina hourglass shape, a petite ethnic shape that stands in opposition to the resonances of blackness surrounding Lopez's hyper-buttocks and music video representations. Profile shots of Hayek in movies and magazine covers show both her breasts and her perfectly shaped booty. Frontal shots of Hayek's body highlight her deep cleavage as well as her long dark hair, worn straightened when performing a more glamorous image, and by implication Anglo identity, or curly when performing a more exotic ethnic identity.

Accompanying images of her body are journalistic texts that ultimately frame Hayek's body and identity within narratives of Latinidad, in particular references to her personality, voracious appetite, and loud, talkative nature. Thus, unlike Lopez whose sexualized image primarily foregrounds her racialized booty, sexualized representations of Hayek center on her body as the stereotyped performance of Latina femininity. However, regardless of the dichotomy in news media representations between the sexual excessiveness of Lopez and the sexual femininity of Hayek, with the exception of Lopez's roles in *Blood and Wine* (1996) and *U-Turn* (1997), cinematically it is Lopez who most often is allowed to perform "Whiteness." Although Lopez is the professional singer and dancer, it is Hayek who is depicted sexually gyrating to music in *54* (1998), *Dogma* (1999), *Dusk Till Dawn* (1996), and *Wild Wild West* (1999). Dance, especially the type involving movement below the waist, is

often racialized and sexualized within mainstream U.S. culture and not surprisingly linked with the dynamic construction of Latinidad (Aparicio, 1998; Desmond, 1997; Valdivia, 2001).

The marginalization of Latina bodies is defined by an ideological contradiction—that is, Latina beauty and sexuality is marked as other, yet it is that otherness that also marks Latinas as desirable. In other words, Latina desirability is determined by their signification as a racialized, exotic Others. For example, in the movies *Blood and Wine* and *U-Turn* Lopez's body is framed as animalistic, primitive, and irresistibly dangerous to the Anglo American male characters. In both movies, Lopez's body is fetishized through extreme close-ups of her eyes, lips, breasts, legs and buttocks, visuals that often link her highly sexualized body to the physical environment around her. Similarly, Hayek's characters in *From Dusk Till Dawn* (1996), *54*, and *Timecode* (2000) construct the ethnic feminine other as a temptress, a source of sexual and racial contamination, whose sexuality ultimately destroys her.

Consequently, representations of Hayek's body provide a symbolic bridge between the racialized and sexualized narrative of Lopez's buttocks and the ethnic and desexualized narrative of Kahlo's self-representations of her physically injured body. Whereas Lopez's body, especially her butt, signifies a racialized exotic sexuality, Kahlo's body asserts her ethnicity and foregrounds her identity beyond or outside of her sexuality. Portraits and images of Kahlo emphasize her face, in particular her hyper-eyebrow as a signifier of ethnic-difference, feminine-strength, and intellectual rather than bodily work. Nevertheless, intellectual efforts by Kahlo to complicate both her identity and Latina body do not necessarily transfer into twenty-first century commodifying practices. Instead we get the reification of difference through the everyday commodification of her face in the form of earrings, shirts, and other mainstream products, and her intellectual labor is resignified as aberrant and exotic. Within these popular products, the emphasis on her colorful-ethnic dress and facial hair, both physical markers of ethnic bodies, work to mediate her ethnic identity for capitalist consumption. In the end, the physical representations of all three women are informed by the racializing discourses of ethnic female bodies as simultaneously physically aberrant, sexually desirable, and consumable by the mainstream. These discourses cannot be examined outside of a framework of analysis that allows for fluidity and mixture.

Hybridity, Authenticity, and the Latina Body

Hybridity as a theoretical concept is particularly significant for analyzing popular representations of ethnic populations whose histories of colonialism and imperialism have resulted in the continuing construction of what Homi Bhabha defined as the "third space," Gloria Anzaldúa has called *nepantla*, and Mary Louise Pratt has termed "the contact zone" or that space where bodies and identity resist

stable categories, and meaning is ambivalent, contradictory, and historically shifting. Critical hybridity theory explores the cultural arrangements and expressions arising from transcultural and intercultural exchanges between members of different social, political, and economic powers within and between particular communities (Kraidy, 2002). The contemporary experience of Latinas, which also holds true of other populations shaped by colonialism, globalization, and transnationalism, is informed by the complex dynamics of hybridity as a cultural practice and expression (García Canclini, 1995). *Latinidad* gains its postcolonial exigency, not from the ideological stability of dominant social classifications, but through the cultural, ethnic, and racial fluidity of Latina/o identity. Thus, Latina/o identity, as a hybrid form within U.S. culture, remaps dominant hierarchies of identity and challenges popular notions of place and nation.

Due to their mixed cultural and ethnic heritage, Hayek, Kahlo, and Lopez as hybrid women often problematize and work against the discursive field of popular ethnic and racial categories. While remaining at the margins of representations of whiteness, they also exist outside the marginalizing borders of blackness. Instead, they occupy a racialized space in between the dominant U.S. binary of Black or White identities. Given their dark, full-bodied hair, brown eyes, somatically olive skin, and a range of more or less European facial features, they are physically “any-woman”—with the perception of their identity determined both by the context of reception and the relationally encoded setting of production. Moreover, this undetermined space extends to the categorization of their ethnic backgrounds. Because of their hybrid cultural and personal histories none of the women can lay claim to an authentically pure ethnic identity, rather they may claim or reject a multiplicity of ethnic identities—Mexicana, Chicana, Latina, Nuyorrican, Puerto Rican, “American.” The ability to occupy and shift between racial and ethnic categories ruptures dominant identity discourses while the commodification of ethnicity within mainstream U.S. popular culture reifies difference.

Not coincidentally, within the realm of cinematic discourse Hayek and Lopez have portrayed characters whose ethnic identity is ambiguous and peripheral to the role, text and narrative action of particular movies. In at least five movies, *Dogma*, *Enough* (2002), *Out of Sight* (1998), *Timecode* (2000), and *Gigli* (2003) Hayek and Lopez perform characters whose ethnic and/or racial identity are “absent” from the text. This narrative absence has proven historically difficult if not impossible for actresses who explicitly identify as African American and are always already marked by the relatively fixed discourse of Blackness in the United States. This is not to say that Lopez’s and Hayek’s race or ethnicity are not read by audiences, but rather that the dominant discourse of racial otherness is displaced within the narrative and replaced with a more complicated signification of ethnic-otherness. For instance, in at least seven films, Hayek’s *54* and *From Dusk Till Dawn* and Lopez’s *Anaconda* (1997), *The Cell* (2000), *Angel Eyes* (2001), and *Maid in Manhattan* (2003) the ethnicity of the characters is only subtly referenced through contextual signifiers like the character’s name, splices

of Spanish dialog, or passing references between characters. Lopez fought for her character in *Anaconda*, initially cast as an Anglo woman, to have a Spanish surname—Terry Flores a “home girl from the Southside of L.A.” In addition to *Selena* (1997), Lopez also portrays the Mexican immigrant Maria Sanchez in *Mi Familia* (1995); in *U-Turn* she portrays a part Native-American woman; and in the *The Wedding Planner* she plays a second-generation Italian American. In perhaps her most ethnically stereotypical role, the working class, single mom, hotel maid in *Maid in Manhattan*, the character’s Latinidad is communicated only through splice of Spanish language, such as the use of phrases like *mi hija* or *papi*, her ethnically marked mother, and her ethnically ambiguous surname, Ventura. Likewise, although her character’s ethnic identity is never mentioned, Hayek’s character in *54* is identified as Latina only through her Spanish given-name, Anita. Together Hayek and Lopez are provided an unprecedented space for signification not overtly determined by racial or other physical markers of difference.

However the ability of Hayek, Lopez, and other Latina actresses to shift across racial and ethnic representations is limited by language as an additional signifier of difference, especially for Latinas whose skin tone may not be “colored” enough to create ethnic or racial ambiguity. Like the ethnically ambiguous star of James Cameron’s hit sci-fi series *Dark Angel* (2000), Jennifer Lopez’s English-language fluency and the lack of an accent that can be clearly coded as Spanish, and therefore coded as racial-other in the United States, allows her access to a range of cinematic texts that would normally be slated for Anglo actresses. For example, Lopez’s agent convinced the producer of *The Wedding Planner* (2001), who did not want to recast it as a Latina role, that she could play the non-Latina character originally scripted as Eastern European. More so than Hayek, Lopez has tapped into the ability to perform a panethnic other in order to meet Hollywood’s desire for the commodified exotic other. On the other hand, Salma Hayek directed actors to perform accents in the *Frida* (2002) movie in order to signify Latinidad in an effort to assert authenticity even though the movie was filmed in English. Thus, the accent that often serves as a professional barrier for Hayek is reframed to provide her with the role of a lifetime. Like the everyday practices of some Latina/os, language can be and is often used in a multiplicity of ways depending on the specific situation.

Despite the emancipatory potential of hybrid bodies within U.S. popular culture, Hayek and Lopez are often caught within intra-Latina conflicts over ethnic specificity and authenticity. Because of the homogenizing constructions of Latina ethnicity circulated in U.S. mainstream popular culture, the actresses themselves have sometimes engaged in a battle over who is the true or authentic Latina in order to win coveted roles. For instance, the selection of Lopez to play the role of Selena was highly criticized by Mexican American activists who wanted a Mexican American actress. Although Lopez was born in the United States, her parents are of Puerto Rican origin. By alternating between identifying herself as Puerto Rican, Nuyorrican, and “American,” Lopez exemplifies the

transnational identity of most U.S. Latina/os. Both women, one Nuyorrican and the other Tejana, embody the emerging politics of Latina/o identity (Aparicio, 2003) by problematizing mainstream tendencies toward homogenization and the erasure of difference. More recently the conflict over the *Frida* biopic foregrounds the tension between Latina panethnicity and ethnic authenticity lived through Lopez as an U.S. Nuyorrican and Hayek as a Mexican woman. Whereas Lopez refused to engage in the public discussion over Latina and Mexican authenticity by privileging her identity as a Latina and the shared experiences of Latinas, Hayek waged a publicity campaign explicitly arguing that she as the “true” Mexican should be the one to portray Kahlo’s life. In an interview foregrounding the debate over authenticity, Hayek stated:

I don’t believe in the so-called Latino explosion when it comes to movies. Jennifer Lopez doesn’t have an accent. She grew up in New York speaking English and not Spanish. Her success is very important because she represents a different culture, but it doesn’t help me. I grew up in Mexico, not the U.S., and the fact is that there just aren’t any parts for Latin actresses. I have to persuade people that my accent won’t be a problem. (<http://www.imbd.com>, 2001)

Ironically, Hayek did not engage in similar arguments when she auditioned for the role of Selena, a Tejana who did not speak Spanish, or the lead role as an Indian woman in the cinematic adaptation of Salman Rushdie’s *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*. Like Kahlo and Lopez, Hayek’s identity is itself complicated. Her father is a Lebanese businessman and her mother is Spanish, making her barely a first-generation Mexican. Frida herself was half Mexican and half German-Hungarian and prominently identified herself as Jewish like her father, especially in anti-Semitic circles. Indeed, she actually adopted the clothing and hairstyle most associated with her performance of Mexican ethnicity from indigenous Mexican cultures, which remain economically and politically marginalized.

Moreover, Frida Kahlo’s iconicity is itself grounded within narratives of ethnic authenticity that harken back to Latin America as the mother continent. Within this narrative U.S. Latina/os are never authentic, as the boundaries of identity are policed by both the U.S. and specific Latin American national-ethnic cultures. Kahlo is such a powerful signifier of identity because she signs in for the motherland of Latin America in general and Mexico in particular. Central to narratives of the motherland are Eurocentric narratives of authenticity that erase the precolonial experiences of indigenous, African, Asian, and other populations by looking back to Europe, in this particular instance Spain. This Spanish “fantasy heritage,” so prevalent in Southwest mid-twentieth century historiography (Garcia, 2001) constructs Spain as the privileged site of whiteness, regardless of the fact that the Spanish empire was fueled by the occupation of the North African Moors and remains a multicultural society (Menocal, 2002). Additionally,

this fantasy heritage erases diasporic and hybrid population and cultural traces thus accomplishing the purifying function of myth (Barthes, 1973). Given that Spain is often privileged as the motherland by many Latina/os, it is unsurprising that Penélope Cruz, who does not identify as Latina and foregrounds her Spanish citizenship consistently is treated within the mainstream as a Latina. Moreover, in relation to Jennifer Lopez' embodied butt, Cruz signs in for culture and class rather than exotic nature (Valdivia, forthcoming). These narratives of authenticity and origin mythologize a pure White Spain as motherland—and that, like all other discourses of purity, proves to be untenable.

Contemporary Latina/o studies interrogates this vexed notion of authenticity. The fact is not all nor most U.S. Latina/os necessarily speak Spanish. For example, pop music sensation Christina Aguilera toyed with the idea of taking the “h” out of her name to more explicitly assert her Latinidad through a traditional Spanish spelling. Musical diva Mariah Carey recently considered recording in Spanish although it would mean learning a new language for her. Jennifer Lopez' much awaited concert broadcast on U.S. television in December 2001 highlighted her less than facile use of the Spanish language. The experiences of Lopez, Carey, and Aguilera as U.S. Latinas are typical in that none of them speak Spanish flawlessly or fluently. The very controversy and tensions in the Latin Grammys over the use of Spanish and the representation of specific Latina/o nationalities underscore and foreground the complex contemporary situation of hybrid communities vis-a-vis discourses of authenticity. Indeed, it is difficult to find a person of pure racial or ethnic identity, and if it were possible Latino communities would not be the place to look for racial or ethnic purity. Although Moraga and Anzaldúa (1981) may not exactly have had this in mind when they edited *This Bridge Called My Back*, Latin American women historically have been forced or have chosen to engage in mixed racial and ethnic relationships. The growing literature on La Malinche, especially Chicana and Latina feminist scholarship, attests to this history of hybridity by refraining the masculinist framework of sexual and cultural prostitution, of selling out one's body and culture in favor of the progressive and redeeming feminine narrative of inter-cultural translator and creator of a new hybrid, cosmic race (Alarcón, 1994).

Conclusion

Whether we examine women's magazines, television programs, cinematic texts, girl's toys, clothing, pulp fiction, road signs, medical videos, or popular music and dance, it is difficult to avoid the unmistakable presence of Latinidad and its gendered components in mainstream U.S. culture. While these contemporary representations may provide the opportunity for individual Latinas to open spaces for vocality and action, they nevertheless build on a tradition of exoticization, racialization and sexualization, a tradition that serves to position Latinas as continual foreigners and a cultural threat. As such Latinas occupy a liminal space in U.S. popular culture, that is, we can be both marginal and desired. Recently

popular representations of Latina booties as large, aberrant yet sexy, desirable, and consumable contribute to the reification of racial dichotomies where Latinas occupy that in between space between the White booty (or the pre-adolescent invisible androgynous White booty) and the Black booty whose excess falls beyond the boundary of acceptability and desirability within U.S. popular culture. For this booty economy to retain its value, popular culture representations of Latinidad must continue to construct that mythical brown race that falls somewhere between Whiteness and Blackness and elides the dynamic hybridity of Latinidad that spans across the entire racial spectrum.

Nevertheless, the representational tensions surrounding the three iconic Latinas highlighted in this article present a potentially emancipatory challenge or at least an unsettling intervention to Eurocentric discourses of racial and ethnic purity. Kahlo, Lopez, and Hayek are an iconic presence that engage the stereotyped representation of Latinas to sell products and open a space from which Latina bodies can vex notions of racial and national purity and therefore authentic ethnicity. Although historically Latina actresses have been relegated to exist within the racialized binary narrative of virgin and whore, popular discourses surrounding Salma Hayek, Frida Kahlo, and Jennifer Lopez disrupt some of Hollywood's symbolic boundaries surrounding ethnicity, race, gender, and sexuality. The commodification of Latinidad has signaled a homogenization of Latinidad and simultaneously provided access to roles previously unavailable to Latinas. Despite the exoticized nature of the representations surrounding the bodies of Lopez and Hayek, they successfully have marketed themselves in order to sell mainstream movie tickets, music, clothing, and perfume.

Furthermore, as transnational figures these three icons exist within the representational conflict between the hybrid and the authentic that many diasporic cultures occupy. Kahlo, a German-Hungarian- Jewish-Mexican, recuperates female sexuality and indigenous Mexican culture as a way of challenging the imperialistic Western gaze. Mainstream circulation of her image reinscribes difference, especially in terms of the ubiquitous unibrow, but also inescapably represent her head, her face, and, through her intellectual efforts, her brain. As such, given binary tendencies in our culture, one would expect Kahlo to exist outside the realm of the sensual. However Hayek's further rerepresentation of Kahlo takes Kahlo into the sensual and sexual thus fully completing her signification as a contemporary iconic Latina. Lopez, a U.S. born Puerto Rican, a Nuyorrican, privileges both her U.S. Americanness and her Puerto Ricanness as way of challenging dichotomous discourses and the erasure of Latina bodies in Hollywood films. Repeated affirmations of love and marriage also firmly place her within that Roman Catholic component so predominant in popular constructions of Latinidad. Finally, Hayek, a Lebanese-Mexican, foregrounds the bodies of Latinas themselves as a way of challenging mainstream narratives about women and Latinidad and uses Eurocentric discourses of authenticity to position her self in relation to other iconic Latinas.

Hayek, Kahlo, and Lopez are not simply passive subjects manipulated by the media and popular culture, but transnational women caught in the dialectic between agency and the objectification of identity that operates within many mediated products. Although the stereotypic representation of Latina sexuality continues, the popular representations of Hayek, Kahlo, and Lopez also problematize emerging constructions of Latinas within dominant discourses about gender, ethnicity, and race. As independent, racially and ethnically undetermined, and transnational women, Latina iconicity ruptures and affirms the borders that surround contemporary popular significations of Latinas they create territorial and deterritorialized images of Latinas that serve as both norm and periphery, of subordination and domination. Latinidad and iconic Latinas render Eurocentric discourses of racial and national purity untenable, and challenge us to acknowledge the uneasy harnessing of transnational, hybrid, and gendered bodies towards a reductionist commodification that exists in tension with a media industry acknowledgments that hybrid bodies are the contemporary site for the production and consumption of identity.

Notes

1. We recognize that the category “Latina” is fluid and porous. As such, Penélope Cruz, who is Spanish, is often categorized by both the popular press and websites as “Latina.” As well, although Cameron Diaz is currently (February 2004) Hollywood’s highest paid actress, only *Latina* magazine claims her as Latina. Neither she nor most coverage of her ever mentions her Latinidad.
2. Sinclair (1999) notes that many of these industry officials come from the Latin American media and middle class and reinscribe the outsider status of U.S. Latina/os and U.S. Latina/o popular culture.
3. Madonna also tried to produce a biopic of Kahlo. A Mexican-produced biopic predates all three U.S. attempts.

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