

## Talking Back

### *Spanish Media and U.S. Latinidad*

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FELIPE: The problem is those *novelas* in Spanish television. They are all white. It's like, I'm a dark-skinned Puerto Rican. And in these stations they are all white. They all look South American. They are racist. *(All interrupt)*

ARLENE (moderator): Let's hear one at a time.

FELIPE: If you watched TV you would think that Latinos are all white or looking like fucking, I don't know . . .

TRINY: That we all looked Mexican.

FELIPE: But Mexicans are Indian looking. It's all ridiculous.

TRINY: Yeah, we all have different elements in us, we have whites, Africans, you know, we are a mix of all those people, but even in commercials, all you see is white people eating Goya beans. It's crazy.

JENNY: Yes, we are a mix, you know.

TRINY: You don't see a lot of dark-skinned Latinos on *novelas*, just the housemaid.

—Exchange among Latino youth during a focus group

WITH LATINOS BEING targeted by more and more Spanish-language and Latino-oriented media, it is evident that these initiatives have been central to the development and conceptualization of U.S. Latinidad. In addressing Latinos as a single encompassing group, these initiatives have certainly helped shape and refurbish the existence of a

common Latino/a identity, but seldom have we looked at the ways people respond to these culturally specific media and to the "Latinness" so promoted by their programming and representations.<sup>1</sup> This chapter explores this void by providing a brief examination of the views and opinions voiced by a group of New York Latinos about some of the media directed at them and what their comments revealed about how Latinos position themselves within the all-encompassing category of identity in which these representations are predicated. My aim is to expose some of the range of issues that color people's consumption of these texts and, in particular, to analyze what the opinions of different Latino sub-nationalities with regard to the existence of a common "Latino media market" suggest about these media's impact on the public consolidation of U.S. Latinidad.

My discussion is based on a year-long ethnographic research project on the making of Hispanic advertisements for Spanish TV, which included some focus group discussions exploring their reception by the people toward whom they were geared.<sup>2</sup> They consisted of six groups of self-identified Latinos from different nationalities and displaying different levels of proficiency in Spanish, from nonspeakers to bilinguals to active users of "Spanglish," that is, code switching between Spanish and English (Zentella 1997). All participants had lived in New York from three to fifteen years and many had been born in the city and were quite knowledgeable about the U.S. Hispanic media environment. The discussions were intended to focus primarily on Hispanic advertisements, but they soon turned to the Spanish TV networks, Univisión and Telemundo, as well as to the city's Latin-formatted radio stations, such as La Mega (97.9 FM) and Amor (93.1 FM), providing revealing insights about people's views on different Latino-oriented media.

What follows are excerpts of these discussions and my analysis, which I offer not as conclusive statements of how all U.S. Latinos think about these media and their representation of "things Latino," but rather as "positioned stories" (Ang 1996), that is, as contextualized observations gained primarily from New York Latinos that are suggestive of how U.S. Latinos react to representations of Latinidad, an issue rarely studied. I stress "contextualized," because as will be evident below, participants' engagements with the media were always mediated by regionally specific considerations. In particular New York City's race/ethnic hierarchies, where the city's largest Latino subgroups, Puerto Ricans and Dominicans, are placed at the bottom of the hierarchy, were a

dominant reference in these discussions. Specifically, during their discussions of the media, participants would consistently draw on their perception of their place and that of others within these existing hierarchies while simultaneously expressing and communicating particularized identities along the lines of race, class, or ethnicity using the same conventions of Latinidad disseminated by the Spanish and Latino-oriented media. I will therefore suggest that while Spanish and Latino-oriented media have undoubtedly contributed to Latinization—the consolidation of a common Latino identity among different Latino subgroups—they have also helped forge and trigger existing hierarchies of evaluation among members of ostensibly the same group.

One of the most generalized beliefs advanced in different forms by focus group participants was that the Hispanic/Latino-oriented media are representative of U.S. Latinos and that their growth is indicative of Latinos' achievement and enfranchisement.<sup>3</sup> Again and again, participants would mirror the discourse of representation that the U.S. Spanish networks are so dependent on, attesting to the extent to which this discourse permeated almost all of my informants' diverse interpretations or evaluations of these media. These media were alternately praised or criticized, but always in relation to their position as an ethnic-specific (or culture-specific) product whose growth attests to Latinos' growing power and visibility. This view was succinctly voiced by a Puerto Rican participant who, when recalling with pride the rapid growth of the Hispanic media in New York City, insisted that this demonstrated that "They've had to adapt themselves to us, and could not survive if we stop consuming." Viewers' association of Hispanic media with Hispanics' "coming of age" in the public eye, however, does not mean they were oblivious to the exclusions generated by these representations, and it is this much less known fact that concerns me here.

Participants were particularly critical of the "foreignness" of the Spanish TV networks' programming, which they felt made the networks irrelevant to their everyday reality. One participant bemoaned the fact that there was too much Mexican programming, leaving little room for shows targeted to other nationalities. Most felt that the stations were geared only to audiences in the West, not to them, inasmuch as they featured ranchero music, Mexican artists, and soccer rather than programs from other Latin American countries where they could learn what was happening "back home," or even watch baseball, which is

avored over soccer by the city's Dominican and Puerto Rican Latino audience. To contextualize these comments we must note that, though the U.S. Hispanic TV networks project and sell themselves as the representative media of U.S. Latinos, they have historically functioned as a "transnational," not "ethnic," media, importing cheaper Latin American programming or else producing shows for export to Latin America, and hence with primarily the transcontinental Latin American, not the U.S., audience in mind.<sup>4</sup> In particular, the U.S. Spanish networks have tended to draw most of their programming and talent from the largest media exporting countries in Latin America, such as Mexico and to a lesser degree Venezuela, leading to a preponderance of Mexican actors and talent in the U.S. Spanish airwaves. The networks have tended to justify this trend on the grounds that Mexicans constitute 65 percent of the Latino population, but in New York City, where within a highly heterogeneous Latino population it is Hispanic Caribbeans who are predominant, the exclusion of other Latino subgroups ensuing from the network's reliance on exported programming was easily noticeable by most participants. Also highly represented in the U.S. networks are Cubans, as a result of the early entry of Cuban actors and media entrepreneurs who had been previously involved in Cuba's media and publicity industry, in the development of the U.S. Hispanic media and marketing industry since the 1960s. Again, such dominance of some Latino subgroups and the ensuing exclusions of others did not go unnoticed by focus group participants, who were quick to draw a connection between the whiteness of the world of Spanish TV and the dominance in it of some Latino groups over others. Thus, revealingly, when participants bemoaned the dominance of whiter and Mediterranean Hispanic models, it was Cubans and Mexicans who some participants blamed for this trend. As one stated, these groups had "shaped these images after themselves," a view I believe speaks less to participants' belief that Mexican and Cubans are indeed closer to these images, than to their awareness of the dominance of some Latino subgroups over others in the making of these representations.

Interestingly, the whiteness of the world of Spanish TV was of greater concern among the U.S.-born Latinos than among recent immigrants, reminding us that immigration and length of stay in the United States are central variables affecting an individual's experience and awareness of U.S. racism, and hence the likelihood that they would express dissatisfaction with the lack of racial representativeness in the

Spanish TV networks. Additionally, among U.S.-born Latinos, it was Hispanic Caribbeans, primarily Puerto Ricans and Dominicans, who were most concerned with issues of color. This, in turn, is not surprising, given the greater African racial influence in the Caribbean—a product of the islands' history of slavery. What I would like to suggest here, however, is that Hispanic Caribbeans' greater concern with this issue was suggestive of viewers' awareness that when black Latinos are shown on Hispanic TV, it is Hispanic Caribbeans (mostly Puerto Ricans and Dominicans, and to a much lesser degree Cubans) who have been made to stand for "color." For example, when dark-skinned maids are shown in Mexican soap operas, they tend to be from the Caribbean (such as in *La Usurpadora*). Another example is the casting of the black Puerto Rican actor Rafael José for the multinational team of *Despierta América*, Univisión's version of *Good Morning America*. Yet another example is provided by the short-lived Spanish version of *Charlie's Angels* by Telemundo, featuring a multiracial/multinational team of angels—a blonde, a brunette, and a black Latina, played by an Argentinean, a Mexican, and a Colombian actress respectively. Echoing what is a common trend in representations of Latinidad, the angels' skin color is increasingly darker among the actresses originating from the countries closest to the Equator as Spanish TV consistently leaves us with the impression that there are no blacks in Mexico, blondes in the Dominican Republic, or brunettes in Argentina.

Indeed, representations of Latinidad in the Spanish TV networks, when not revolving around generic representations that prioritize white Mediterranean Hispanic actors and talent, have generally reduced each Latino subgroup to a particular cultural index, be it music, race, or an artist. Accordingly, appealing to Puerto Ricans becomes tantamount to showing a Puerto Rican salsa group, and to Colombians to featuring Colombian model/actress Sonia Vergara, and so forth. This strategy of representation, however, as simple as it may make the networks' mission of appealing to different Latino nationalities, is no more inclusive than their regular programming fare of white models or Mexican shows. Thus, we are left with the following predicament: on the one hand, the dominance of Mediterranean Hispanic types in Spanish TV negates and leaves no room for acknowledging Latinos' racial and ethnic diversity, while diversity is accordingly reduced to iconic and essentialist representations that are presented as "belonging" neatly to some groups but not others.

Viewers were not oblivious to the networks' strict assignment of cultural traits, in this case color, to particular Latino nationalities. A particularly revealing example here surfaced during a discussion of a JCPenney ad for the Hispanic market that presents a multiracial collage of Latino youth of different nationalities, which we are led to deduce by the distinct words each uses for "cool" (*macanudo* used in Argentina, *chévere* in Puerto Rico and Central America, *padrísimo* in Mexico, and so forth). A Puerto Rican participant demanded to know why it was that when black Latinos were shown, if at all, they were always Puerto Rican, when in fact there are Puerto Ricans of all races and, like Argentinians, Puerto Ricans can also be blonde. Interestingly, nothing except the word *chévere* marks the black kid as Puerto Rican in the ad. In fact, the same character also says *órale*, more characteristic of Mexicans, while the creative staff who had done the ad confirmed to me that the model had been cast to be a generic Caribbean Hispanic, not Puerto Rican. This participant's comment was one more example of how participants' own backgrounds were always summoned as part of their interpretation of the ads, in this case, the informant's awareness of his own racialization and that of Puerto Ricans both in the greater U.S. society and in the "Latino" community. To put it another way, he had seen through the fact that the ad, though claiming racial and ethnic integration (its punch line reads, "It does not matter who you are or where you come from. We can all be cool by dressing JCPenney"), is predicated on assignments of color and race and even language idioms to particular nationalities that hinder the acceptance of racial diversity as intrinsic to all Latinos, not solely some groups, be they Puerto Ricans or other Hispanic Caribbeans.

Moreover, by associating different nationalities with particular ethnic indexes, the Spanish and Latino-oriented media end up negating the actual cross-fertilization that does occur among and across Latino subgroups. After all, Latinos do not live and operate from neatly defined ethnic enclaves isolated from other subgroups, and nowhere is this more evident than in New York City, which features one of the most heterogeneous U.S. Latino populations. In the past years, New York has seen a growing diversification of the city's Latino population: Puerto Ricans, who made up 80 percent of the city's Latino population in the 1960s, are now only 43 percent of all Latinos; a rapid growth of Dominican, Mexican, and Central American populations has rendered the city an important "homogenizing pot" of Latinidad. In this context, and

at the level of practice, popular culture emerges as a cross-fertilizing medium among and across Latino subgroups that cannot be neatly associated to any particular subgroup in the manner intended by the networks' strategies of customization.

Most significant, the media's strategies of customization become vehicles that expose and in so doing, help shape and naturalize essentialist conventions concerning cultural traits that are supposedly characteristic of particular Latino subnationalities. A good example of this trend is provided by a discussion of the city's Latino-formatted radio stations, regional media that easily lend themselves to customization, evidencing the media's "naturalization" of difference among Latino nationalities. The discussion revolved around La Mega (97.9 FM), targeted to Puerto Ricans and Dominicans through a fare of salsa, merengue, and bachata, and Amor (93.1 FM), geared to a pan-Latino audience through baladas, pop tunes, and Latin soft rock. It was triggered by recent programming changes adopted by the city's most popular radio station, the salsa- and merengue-formatted La Mega, to target more directly the city's growing Dominican community by playing more bachata and merengue and by featuring Dominican language mannerisms in spoken segments. The overall tone of the stations is irreverent—imagine a Latin Howard Stern full of sexual imagery and innuendos—and consequently, the goal of appealing to the Dominicans became tantamount to the D.J.s' use of Dominican slang and accent when speaking to *mamis* (girlfriends) over the airwaves. Thus, during a discussion among a group of Spanish-dominant Latinos, mostly South American (Colombian and Ecuadorian) and one Cuban as well as one Dominican participant, not surprisingly La Mega and the Dominican participant were soon turned into the embodiment of Dominican culture and hence of the stereotypes about Dominicans and Hispanic Caribbeans. Briefly, one of the Colombian women denounced the sexual innuendo that pervades the dialogue between the D.J.s' and their call-in public, to which an Ecuadorian man responded by evoking the stereotype of the hot Dominican male and the more open and eroticized Caribbean culture: "that's Caribbean culture for you. Change the station to Amor and you'll see that they speak different because they are not from the Caribbean." In this group, the Dominican female participant had previously explained, in relation to a similar insinuation of Dominicans' un-repressed sexuality, that Dominican culture is not the way it is represented in the Latin media and that such profanities would not be heard

in the Dominican Republic, where, she claimed, a Commission of Public Entertainments would prohibit them from being aired. Such objections notwithstanding, the issue continued to surface, with the salsa-merengue radio station serving as the indisputable proof of Caribbeans' lustfulness versus South Americans' more "restrained" sexuality, which one would encounter on another station. Again, I stress that participants made these distinctions concerning the so-called morals and sexual dispositions of different Latino subgroups by contrasting the merengue/salsa-formatted La Mega with the pop-formatted Amor, and through associations that were predicated on the strict and essentialist equations between different types of music and particular Latin countries and nationalities.

In reality, however, such strict associations of countries and particular types of music are quite superfluous. In fact, the same participants who shunned La Mega would later reveal that they did in fact listen to salsa and merengue, and appeared to be quite familiar with the station's programming—as did most participants irrespective of their nationality. Obviously, then, people's negative comments on La Mega did not necessarily reflect their listening habits, but rather their generalized association of salsa/merengue stations with Dominicans and Puerto Ricans, who in these discussions were treated as the embodiments of low culture against which other New York Latinos would distinguish themselves as more moral, respectable, and authentic. Moreover, such comments were also intertwined with issues of class, which were similarly indexed and negotiated in relation to various media and in reference to particular nationalities. Specifically, while all groups admitted liking and listening to La Mega, it was common for people to make claims about their status and class for themselves and others by shunning or taking issue with the station's vulgar and offensive content, or else by being more or less open about their listening to this station. Again, the former stance was embraced by many irrespective of nationality, although relative to Puerto Rican and Dominican informants, who constitute the station's main target groups, Central and South Americans were more likely to shun the station, as evident in the above discussion.

To grapple with these responses we need to acknowledge the existence of particular ethnic and racial hierarchies at play among Latinos, informed and affected by their different histories, the specific conditions leading to their immigrations, such as the prior relationships between the United States and the immigrant countries of origins, as well

as each group's position within the city, variables that are also regionally specific (Flores 1996, Grosfoguel, and Georas 2001). In New York City, for instance, Hispanic Caribbeans, particularly Puerto Ricans, the oldest large-scale Latino immigration to the city, are positioned at the bottom of the city's ethnic and racial hierarchy, necessarily constituting the group against which other Latinos distance themselves in the process of claiming a space in the city. These dynamics have been documented by Robert Smith (1996) and Philippe Bourgois (1995), who have analyzed interethnic relations between Mexicans and Puerto Ricans in New York City. As they note, the negative perceptions of Puerto Ricans by Mexicans and presumably other recent arrivals to the city suggest, among other factors, Puerto Ricans' historical subordination in the city, which has vested them with the stigma of being the ultimate marginal minority, and their long-time association with African Americans, with whom they share similar positions in the city's racial and ethnic hierarchies.

At the same time, I am not suggesting that New York Puerto Ricans were mere victims of these hierarchies of representation. They too asserted their standing and identity in ways that simultaneously demeaned other Latino subgroups, and these dynamics were also communicated through their discussion of particular media. A general trend among U.S.-born English-dominant youth was to embrace hip hop and rap and their media as legitimate sites of *Latinidad*, where Latinos could prove their contribution to mainstream culture. Hip hop and rap served as reflections of their everyday realities, which they conceived in terms of alterity and marginality vis-à-vis mainstream culture. During these discussions, participants would identify Latin hip hop artists whom they had discovered were Latin, such as Fat Joe or Big Punisher, or African Americans they had thought were Latin, but in fact were not, pointing out in this way the mutability and cross-fertilization between black and Latino youth culture, and so highlighting the contributions of Latin artists to rap and hip hop. In particular, discussions of the media by young U.S.-born Latinos provided clues to alternative definitions of *Latinidad* beyond the dominant definition of "Latino/Hispanic" projected by the Spanish TV networks, which emphasizes knowledge and mastery of the Spanish language, whiteness, and direct connections to a specific Latin American country. Some even overtly criticized the dominant Hispanophilic representations in the Spanish TV networks (recall our earlier discussion), asserting instead an anti-

Hispanic version of *Latinidad* rooted in a mixed black and mestizo culture. As one young Puerto Rican participant explained, "I don't have Spanish blood so I am no Hispanic." Their views and lack of self-recognition in the Spanish media are evidenced in the discussion quoted in the chapter opening, this discussion continued by touching on the representation of women as symbols of hypersexuality.

FELIPE: I feel that they misrepresent us. And I don't like to watch it.

ARLENE (moderator): How about you, Manuel, what do you think?

MANUEL: No, I don't like it. It's boring, all they give is soap operas.

HERB: Just for older people.

MANUEL: I was catching myself the other day. I am twenty-five, you know, and I was thinking that every time I pass my sister [i.e., any Latina] on the subway I catch myself looking at their ass, I just do it. (*All laugh*) 'Cause all you see is women in bathing suits every time.

SANDY: Like in *No te duermas*, caliente and with the big butt.

HERB: No se ve más [You don't see anything else].

MANUEL: Always is like hoochy mama, you know, something like that.

Yet, as critical of these representations as the youth were, some of them also gave evidence that they have internalized dominant definitions of Latinos promoted by the networks (that Latinos speak Spanish and have some connection and rooting with Latin America), by assuming that they lacked or may be perceived by others to lack the "appropriate" cultural capital of *Latinidad*. While I was recruiting participants for the focus groups, more than one English-dominant youth declined to participate on the grounds that he or she spoke no Spanish, until I explained that my study included all Latinos, be they code switchers or Spanish- or English-dominant. Another recruit (who failed to appear in the focus group) had identified herself as a second-generation Puerto Rican and a Latina, but was ready to add that she may not be the right person for this study because she neither spoke Spanish nor watched the Spanish-language channels, as if qualifying her own authenticity as a Latina on the grounds that she lacked the right language and media

skills. It is therefore important to problematize the strict association promoted between Spanish and *Latinidad* by the Spanish media. Indeed, not surprisingly, putting down the Spanish TV networks surfaced as a common strategy among U.S.-born and English-dominant Latinos with which to reverse their peripheral position within this strict association. As was evident in the exchange above, they saw Spanish-language media as predictable, boring, and alien to their everyday realities. This stance, however, was not without problems. It was at the cost of the Spanish TV media, which along with its viewers were put down as unsophisticated and tacky, that the youth communicated their greater sophistication and street smarts.

In conclusion, it is evident that discussions of the media would lead not only to critical assessments but also to the expression of particularized forms of identification, be it along the lines of race, class, or nationality, destabilizing in this manner the neatness of "Latinness" as an all-encompassing category of identification. It is important to recognize, however, that this category was always a central reference in all the discussions, functioning as a recourse that participants mobilized as needed. After all, all comments were made in terms of a generalizable Latino culture, bringing to the forefront the fact that despite all their critical assessments of the U.S. Hispanic media and their representations of *Latinidad*, participants ultimately identified themselves with the same category that merged them into that "Other" Latino that everyone had been trying so hard not to be.

Separately and collectively, the responses suggested that, despite their criticisms of the category of *Latinidad* and its representation in the media, participants have in fact internalized, or made theirs, particular dynamics and conventions of *Latinidad* disseminated in the media. As we saw, commercial representations were actively used by participants to assert their own and others' place and level of "belonging" to this category or to distinguish particularized forms of identification along the lines of class, race, morality, and nationality. The irony is that all of these insidious distinctions deployed by participants to differentiate among themselves fall short of challenging—and in fact re-inscribe—the pre-eminence of whiteness and of the "nonethnic" as the abiding reference against which one of them is rendered suspect. After all, an overarching assumption in these discussions was that the Spanish and Latino-oriented media were beholden to and needed to be representative of all Latinos. This concern, as unfeasible as it may be for any type of media,

is one fueled by the all too real omission of Latinos in the general "mainstream" media. My guess is that participants were all too aware of this predicament; hence their abiding concern with the representativeness or lack thereof of these productions.

#### NOTES

1. Noted exceptions include Aparicio (1998) and a recent study by the Tomas Rivera Policy Institute on Television (1998).
2. The groups included three Spanish-dominant groups ranging from the late twenties to mid-sixties, with an average age of thirty-eight, one of South Americans, mostly Colombians and Ecuadorians, another of Puerto Ricans and Dominicans, and a third made up exclusively of Mexicans. There was also an English-dominant group of youth (ages eighteen to twenty-five), most of whom were Dominican, Puerto Rican, but which also included Central Americans, and a fifth group of bilingual/English-dominant adults (Dominicans and Puerto Ricans). All the groups were moderated by me, except the focus group with the Mexican informants. For a longer discussion of my use of focus groups, see Dávila 2001.
3. For the purposes of this essay I use "Hispanic and Latino-oriented media" to denote media that are geared to the U.S. Latino population. These media encompass a range of formats and genres, but my analysis will focus primarily on the most popular media sources among New York City Latinos: the nationwide Spanish TV networks, Telemundo and Univisión, and the FM radio stations La Mega and Amor.
4. The distinction between transnational and ethnic media is discussed by Naficy (1993) and the Latin American foundations of U.S. Hispanic media by Rodríguez (1999) and Wilkinson (1995).

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