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Towards a *Latinidad Feminista*: The Multiplicities of Latinidad and Feminism in Contemporary Cinema

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This essay examines the multiplicities of Latinidad and feminism as portrayed in contemporary cinema. Using the films *Selena* (1997), *Girlfight* (2000), and *Real Women Have Curves* (2002) as case studies, the author argues that these films mark a moment in U.S. cinematic history in which diverse and complex *Latinidades feministas* are represented. This representational analysis offers insight into how these films demonstrate the dynamics and intersectionality of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and class while challenging gendered and racialized notions of authenticity. Ultimately, the author contends that despite their status as popular commodified forms, these films embody a *Latinidad feminista* that transgresses historical representations of Latinas in U.S. cinema in offering Latina subjectivities that are hybrid, fluid, and complex.

Latinas/os have traversed Hollywood since its inception at the turn of the 20th century. Most of these depictions, as with portrayals of other people of color, have been uni-dimensional and overall stereotypical (Noriega, 1992, 2000; Ramírez Berg, 2002; Valdivia, 2000). Latinas in particular have been visible, but their representation has not always been diverse. For example, Dolores del Río, Lupe Vélez, and Carmen Miranda reigned as Latina stars during Tinseltown’s Golden Age in the 1930s and 1940s as do Jennifer Lopez, Salma Hayek and Eva...
Mendes today. Although there have been differing trends in the quantity and quality of Latina/o visibility throughout the course of Hollywood’s history, very few scholars have focused on the intersection of gender and Latinidad in mainstream film. This essay explores the multiplicities of Latinidad and feminism as demonstrated in contemporary popular film, highlighting the diverse and complex forms of both these facets of difference in recent films in the U.S.

Latinidad (“Latinness”) has been theorized in three ways within different disciplinary contexts. First, in sociologist Felix Padilla’s (1985) study of intra-group Latina/o relations in Chicago (specifically among Mexicans and Puerto Ricans), the author uses the concept of “Latinismo” to describe how these ethnic groups form a “Latino ethnic conciousness,” or a strategic political alliance. In essence, I understand this deployment of Latinidad to be a political Latinidad. Secondly, media studies scholars (cf. Dávila, 2001; Levine, 2001) have focused on a commodified Latinidad to explain how mass media industries, especially advertising, construct a homogenous conceptualization of Latinidad, thus erasing the specific histories and cultures of specific national groups within this pan-ethnicity. During the 1980s and 1990s advertisers in particular co-opted Latinidad to sell to the so-called increasingly powerful “Hispanic market” (Dávila, 2001), with Hollywood and the music industry jumping on this bandwagon as evident in the “Latin music explosion” of the late 1990s. Lastly, ethnographers studying the intersections of space and Latinidad in everyday life (cf. Ricourt & Danta, 2003; Rúa, 2001) have understood the term as what I would call a lived Latinidad, or as a process of identity-making among Latina/os interacting with one another in everyday, local spaces. While the process of Latinidad has its institutional origins in the U.S. during the Nixon administration when the term “Hispanic” was construed as a social category for census purposes, and later appropriated by mass media for niche marketing purposes, it can also be understood as an “imagined community” in which social and political alliances are formed based on “lived experience and historical memory” (Flores 2000, p. 197). As such, Latinidad is simultaneously imposed from the outside (e.g. through the U.S. Census and marketing industries) and reconstructed by the inside through Latina/os organizing social and political alliances among various nationalities. In this essay, I understand Latinidad not solely as a commodified Latinidad, but as a conceptual framework “that allows us to explore moments of convergences and divergences in the formation of Latino/a (post)colonial

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3For the purposes of this essay, I am employing Lisa Lowe’s conceptualization of multiplicity as “designating the ways in which subjects are located within social relations are determined by several axes of power, are multiply determined by the contradictions of capital, patriarchy, and race relations, with, as Hall explains, particular contradictions surfacing in relation to the material conditions of a specific historical moment” (1996, p. 67).

subjectivities and in hybrid cultural expressions among various Latino national groups” (Aparicio, 2003, p. 93).

Similarly, the mass media has appropriated feminism, a political movement, to cash in on the “buying power” of the female audience. The genre of women’s film, initially with a focus on melodrama, emerged because of advertisers’ interests in the female consumer (Haskell, 1974; Kuhn, 1984). Hollywood and the advertising industry co-opted different strands of feminisms to attract women viewers. For example, liberal feminism, which promotes the equal treatment of women and men vis-à-vis access to education and professional employment, is constantly appropriated in the media, as in Nike advertisements featuring female athletes and films about white-collar (and often pink-collar) career women such as 9–5 (1980), Baby Boom (1987) and Working Girl (1988). The film industry has slowly incorporated other forms of feminism such as radical feminism, which views women as different and inherently better than men and focuses on issues that are often labeled “women’s issues,” such as domestic violence (Lorber, 2001) as evident in Thelma and Louise (1991) and more recently in Enough (2002). Furthermore, many feminist media scholars have argued that since the 1980s there has been a postfeminist streak saturating commercial media as popular culture shifted “to assume that feminism was no longer needed and therefore that women were beyond (i.e., ‘post’) the need for feminism and feminist activism” (Valdivia & Projansky, 2006, p. 289). Postfeminism can thus be understood as the commodification and de-politicization of feminism within the realm of representation. Moreover, lesbianism has also been commodified in this process (Clark, 1995) as “lesbian chic” (see Moritz, 1995). This work builds on feminist media studies scholarship (i.e., Arthurs, 2003; Clark, 1995; Dow, 1996; Modleski, 1991; Shugart, Waggoner, and Hallstein, 2001) that has examined the co-optation of feminism in popular culture by examining how the intersections of gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality and class shape Latina representation in cinema.

With both the rise of Latina/o and female representation in Hollywood, mainstream film has intertwined Latina/o and women’s films, particularly during the time surrounding the late 1990s “Latin explosion” in the U.S. media entertainment industry in which Latina/o stars such as Jennifer Lopez and Ricky Martin rose to mainstream fame. While the “Latin explosion” has contributed to increased representation of Latina/os in popular communications, it should be noted that this moment also “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 U.S. can integrate into its own logic” (Aparicio, 2003, p. 92), as does popular culture in general. During the current decade, tropes of Latinidad merged with feminism in several Hollywood and independent films such as Mi Vida Loca (1993), The 24 Hour Woman (2001), Luminarias (2000), Tortilla Soup (2001),
and Chasing Papi (2003) extending the initial impulses of Latinidad and feminism. Using the films Selena (1997), Girlfight (2001) and Real Women Have Curves (RWHC) (2002) as case studies from pivotal years in the history of Latinidad and popular culture, we can begin to chart Latinidades feministas (Aparicio, 2003) represented in mainstream film. It is important to note that while Selena is the only major Hollywood production in this study, Girlfight and RWHC are independent films widely distributed and recipients of Sundance awards. These films, along with others, point to shifts in Latina representation in mainstream popular culture before and after the “Latin explosion” and how several Latinidades feministas—moments of female agency among and between Latinas—have emerged from this process.

This article seeks to extend the burgeoning scholarly literature within Latina film studies, including the work of Mary Beltrán (2003, 2004, 2005b), Ana López (1998), Rosa Linda Fregoso (1993, 2003), and Angharad Valdivia (2000), along with the growing scholarship on Latina/os in film in general (i.e., López, 1991; Noriega, 1992, 2000; Ramírez Berg, 2002). Often these analyses are focused on Mexican American/Chicana/o characters that are usually played by non-Mexican actors (Zimmerman, 2003). For example, Puerto Rican actors Jimmy Smits and Jennifer Lopez have played Chicana/os in some of their major films (i.e., My Family/Mi Familia [1996] and Selena [1997]). This is partly due to the fact that historically representations of Latinos in Hollywood have been predominantly characters of Mexican descent, and that many of the major film scholars have been trained in Chicano Studies instead of a more pan-Latina/o academic background. However, increasingly within the last decade or so, more representations of other non-Mexican Latina/o characters are visible, especially Puerto Ricans and Cubans. Drawing from the foundational work done in Chicana/o film studies and emerging Latina film studies scholarship, I seek to foreground Latinidad in a comparative analysis across specific Latina/o nationalities (i.e., Mexican, Puerto Rican, Panamanian, etc.) situating Latinidad as a complicated and hybrid pan-ethnic identity formation.

Grounded on theories from Latina/o cultural studies and feminist media studies, this study is a representational analysis of Selena, Girlfight, and RWHC as they chart Latinidades feministas in contemporary popular culture. As such, these films are understood as “symptomatic” texts, or ones “that [speak] to larger cultural anxieties and issues surrounding women, male violence, and representation” (Walters, 1995, p. 10). This study employs a contextual and intertextual analysis in assessing how mainstream film has begun to reconceptualize representations of minorities (c.f. Shugart, 2003). These films were chosen specifically for two reasons. First, they mark a new moment in contemporary cinema when Latinidad is explicitly and centrally positioned in mainstream popular culture given that they are all products of the “Latin explosion.” Secondly, they are all “coming of age” films—a genre that historically
foregrounds masculinity—that feature young Latina protagonists. In many ways, these films can be understood as a response to the predominance of male-centered coming of age Latino films of the 1980s and 1990s such as *Zoot Suit* (1981), *La Bamba* (1987), *American Me* (1992), and *Blood In, Blood Out* (1993). Overall, these three films have overlapping themes of coming of age, female agency, and the centralization of a working class Latinidad, though each at differing degrees and trajectories.

“LA NUEVA MESTIZA”: THE MULTIPLICITIES OF LATINIDAD AND FEMINISM

Throughout these films, more hybrid, complex *Latinidades feministas* emerge on screen in comparison to historically rigid archetypes. Representations of Latinas in cinema have historically been sparse and stereotypical—limiting them to roles such as the spitfire, the clown, and the dark lady (Ramírez Berg, 2002). However, the films analyzed in this paper offer more complex and transgressive portrayals of Latinas that counter binaries, most notably the virgin/whore dichotomy. As such, these texts can be understood as a form of hybridity, or a “third space” (Bhabha, 1995), in which subjects occupy a space that is neither one nor the other, but a third form that constitutes itself through various and intersecting cultural influences. Nestor García-Canclini (1995) argues that within the context of globalization, no stable identities exist and instead there is hybridity, or a constant state of instability that produces different identities. García-Canclini’s understanding of hybridity challenges notions of authenticity and redefines relationships of power. In particular, Valdivia (2003) identifies Latina/os as a socially constructed group identity that demonstrates an inherent “radical hybridity,” in that it attempts to transgress traditional notions of both race and ethnicity (along with other differences such as religion and language). This notion of hybridity is also evident in Chicana/o border theory scholarship. For example, Chicana feminist Gloria Anzaldúa called this hybrid subjectivity “the new mestiza” using “nepantlism” (“an Aztec word meaning torn between ways”) to describe this process in which “la mestiza is a product of the transfer of the cultural and spiritual values of one group to another” (1987, p. 78). Further, Elana Levine (2001) applies hybridity theory to media studies in her deconstruction of how Spanish-language television constructs Latinidad in a syncretic fashion—that is one that melds all differences within this pan-ethnicity into one unproblematic culture. These themes of hybridity are central in the three films analyzed below.

Gregory Nava’s *Selena* is based on the life and death of the Tejana singer, Selena (Jennifer Lopez), who was preparing to crossover into the English-language pop music industry and achieved her mainstream fame posthumously. As evident in the trailer of the film, *Selena* was marketed as the story of a girl who achieves her
father’s American\textsuperscript{5} dream. Like Nava’s other films \textit{El Norte} (1982) and \textit{My Family/Mi Familia} (1995), the writer/director pushed for it to be publicized as a story about an American family in an effort to insert Latina/os into the U.S. mainstream imaginary. Nava finds some ease with promoting Selena as all-American as she comes from a traditional, patriarchal family structure—she grows up with both married parents with her father functioning as the dominating figure. In this way, this representation of Selena is not consistent with the prevalent Latina film archetypes of the 1980s and 1990s of the maid or the “welfare queen”—both of which deviate from the American ideal (Valdivia, 2000). \textit{Selena} did not receive rave reviews from mainstream critics that disliked what they considered its unoriginal narrative structure ( likening it to a “made for TV” movie) and for avoiding the complexities of race and gender with a “smile” (Murray, 1997). Some critics questioned the likelihood of Selena’s appeal to a mainstream audience asking “whether Selena ‘deserved’ her popularity” (Beltrán, 2005a, p. 158). Several critics did praise the cast, especially Lopez who was hailed for her acting abilities (Byrge, 1997; Guthman, 1997; Murray 1997). However, Beltrán (2005a) finds in her analysis of reviews of \textit{Selena} that many critics were responding to “Jennifer Lopez-as-Selena” instead of the life and iconography of Selena herself as represented in the film (p. 156).

\textit{Selena} featured an all-star Latina/o cast, with many of the same actors as in Nava’s earlier \textit{My Family/Mi Familia} and held a nationwide open call audition for the leading role. It is estimated that over 22,000 young Latinas auditioned for the part (Menard, 1997, as cited in Beltrán, 2005a), many of whom were not professional actresses. Rising star Lopez won the part of Selena earning one million dollars and becoming the highest paid Latina actress in Hollywood history (Holmund, 2002). The casting fueled a considerable debate within the Mexican American community given that Lopez is of Puerto Rican rather than Mexican origin.\textsuperscript{6} Frances Aparicio (2003) explores this tension within Latinidad in the casting of \textit{Selena} in her examination of the similarities of Selena and Lopez as colonial subjects whose racially-coded bodies were objectified. A \textit{lived Latinidad} is expressed through Lopez’s and Selena’s common status as colonized subjects who are second generation, English-dominant Latinas with bodies that defy Anglo beauty standards. Aparicio considers Lopez’s portrayal of Selena a

\textsuperscript{5}Although I understand “American” to refer to both North and South Americas, I employ it here and in other places in this essay to refer to the U.S. specifically given that is how the term is predominantly used in the popular culture examined.

\textsuperscript{6}This debate is not an isolated event and is indeed reminiscent of the protests of Mexican Americans in the 1970s over the casting of Puerto Rican-Hungarian Freddie Prinze for starring as the Chicano, Chico, in the sitcom \textit{Chico and the Man}. See Mark Zimmerman (2003) for a more in-depth discussion of the cultural and political significance of Puerto Ricans playing Mexicans in the history of Hollywood film.
“Latinidad feminista that is enacted through their resistance to dominant social constructions of both Latina bodies and vis-à-vis the dominant, objectifying gaze” (2003, p. 103). Furthermore, that so many Latina girls and young women of different nationalities living all over the U.S. identified with Selena despite her specific Tejana identity, as demonstrated in the film’s largest casting call in the history of Hollywood since the search for Scarlett O’Hara in Gone With the Wind (1939), suggests that Latinidad also became a practice enacted through fans’ identification with Selena as young Latinas (Paredez, 2002).

Not surprisingly, it is Selena, the only Hollywood film analyzed in this essay, which offers the least possibilities of a multicultural feminist reading. Liberal feminism is primarily foregrounded (and privileged more here than in the other two films examined) through Selena breaking gender barriers in the Tejano music industry as a female lead singer and her sister, Suzette (Jackie Guerra), playing the drums, both employments that are predominantly male professions. While Selena, the performer/celebrity, can be considered a subversive figure that crosses borders of gender, race (especially as an india and/or morena), class and sexuality (particularly considering that drag queens continue to imitate her and invite a queer reading of her performativity) (Limón, 1998; Portillo, 1998; Vargas, 2002), as a character in the film she is not represented as this dynamic. Perhaps this is because her story is told through the “schizophrenic” (Gaspar de Alba, 2003) “family narrative” (Holmund, 2002) of her father and the director. In the film, Selena’s sexual liberation, represented by her provocative stage attire, often competes with her “good girl/daughter” image. It could be interpreted that Selena is allowed to simultaneously be the traditional, family girl despite her explicit performance of sexuality through her clothing and dancing, because she is protected by her familial patriarchs: her father (Abraham), brother (A.B.), and boyfriend/husband (Chris) that constantly survey her. Furthermore, the sexuality she performs fits within normative codes of femininity and as such, does not heavily disrupt patriarchy.

Selena’s father (Edward James Olmos) constantly polices her body, though he eventually approves of her provocative dress after Selena explains that the commodification of her body will lead to success in her career. This contradiction takes place in one scene where Selena argues with her father after seeing her wearing a bustier on stage. After the show, Abraham scolds her saying: “You cannot go out there wearing stuff like that. It’s indecent.” With the camera looking down on Selena, she responds: “All the singers are doing it. It’s the style . . . Madonna, Janet Jackson, Paula Abdul.” As such, she argues for wearing the bustier because mainstream female performers do so. While one can interpret Selena’s choice of her performance attire as a form of agency, it can also be understood as a strategy of assimilation to mainstream codes of sexuality within the political economy of the music industry. Thus, it becomes acceptable for Selena to dress provocatively so long as it is to achieve the American dream, which in this case
involves adhering to the ideology of “sex sells.” Perhaps, her father also ultimately concedes because while performing on stage Selena can be protected by her male family and band members from the dangers usually associated with dressing provocatively, such as sexual harassment and rape. Furthermore, because Selena only dresses as such on stage it demonstrates that her overt sexuality is a performed part of Latinidad similar to Carmen Miranda’s artificial accent. Selena is only the “hot tamale” on stage, while she is virginal at home—the ultimate embodiment of the virgin/whore dichotomy. This type of representation makes a sharp delineation between how femininity ought to be performed in public and private spheres.

In the same respect, her father controls both Selena’s professional and personal lives. Abraham’s policing of her body is clear in the scene described above. The only other time Selena resists her father’s wishes is when she elopes with her guitar player Chris (Jon Seda). Ironically, in doing so she transfers Abraham’s patriarchal power to her husband whom she calls her “macho man” in the scene after they marry. Chris even assures her that he “will take care” of her financially despite the fact that Selena already has recorded several albums and at the time of her wedding was a rising star. In these ways, Selena takes on a passive role within the private, familial sphere that is at odds with the sexual agency she performs on stage. Aparicio (2003) argues that the portrayal of Selena as passive towards familial patriarchy is because of the film’s “patriarchal directives” referring to the male director Nava, and her father’s overseeing of the film. As Fregoso (1993, 2004) argues, “patriarchal discourses” are not exclusive to Anglo-produced films, but also appear in Latino-oriented features such as Selena.

However, Selena does highlight issues of hybridity extensively, as illustrated in the scene when Abraham says to Selena and A.B. that it is “exhausting” being a Mexican American trying to prove both his Mexicanidad and Americanism. Similarly, Selena also experiences a hybrid Tejana subjectivity. In particular, as a singer of Tejano music (a hybrid genre in and of itself) Selena fuses her music, dance, and fashion styles with Mexican, Spanish Caribbean, and African American cultural forms (Vargas, 2002). In addition, she also struggles with language as a signifier of authenticity, as several references are made to Selena’s limited Spanish, which is common among U.S.-born Latinos. For instance, in one scene the young Selena is made fun of by other Mexican students because she cannot understand what they are saying in Spanish. In another scene, Abraham worries that the Mexican press will “chew her up alive” upon hearing her Spanish. Selena affirms her hybrid identity when she answers the press’ questions in Spanglish or

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7 It is important to note that Deborah Vargas (2002) argues against understanding Selena’s (the performer, not the film character) performativity as merely Latina hyper-sexuality, but instead maintains that “the sexuality performed by Selena (i.e., prominently emphasized by glitter, rhinestones, and so on) reveals her musical influences from disco, funk, glam, and new wave” (p. 120).
“Chicano Spanish.” Fortunately, the Mexican press accepts her hybrid subjectivity despite Abraham’s doubts. Anzaldúa (1987) argues that “Chicano Spanish is a border tongue . . . [that] sprang out of the Chicanos’ need to identify ourselves as a distinct people” (p. 55). In this way, Selena continues a legacy of a Chicana/o language rooted in hybridity.

_Girlfight_, written and directed by Asian American Karyn Kusama, won both the Director’s Award and the Grand Jury Prize at the Sundance Film Festival. The film was later distributed by Columbia at theaters across the country. _Girlfight_ fared better with the critics than _Selena_, heralding the lead actress Michelle Rodríguez as having a strong presence (despite being a “beginner”) and most comparing it to the _Rocky_ films (Covert, 2000; Guthman, 2001; Hoffman, 2001; Parks, 2000) with one reviewer discussing its similarities with _Purple Rain_ (1984) (Wlozcyna, 2000). Blurring the boundaries between boxing and coming of age genres, _Girlfight_ can be considered transgressive as it was the first to foreground a female boxer and was later followed by Meg Ryan’s role as a male boxing manager in _Against the Ropes_ (2004) and Hilary Swank’s role as a female boxer in the award-winning _Million Dollar Baby_ (2004). _Girlfight_ is about a teenage Latina, Diana Guzman, who disdains her life at school and at home in Red Hook, Brooklyn. Her ethnicity is not explicitly mentioned, but the many Puerto Rican, Panamanian and Dominican flags suggest a hybrid background. In terms of race, she fits the “Latin look”—olive skin, dark eyes and hair (Dávila, 2001), and _mestizaje_ (racial mixture) is further implied in that her father is dark-skinned and Diana and her brother are olive-skinned (the mother has died and she is not shown in the film). She is “not the girly type” (as she says to her father when he asks why she does not wear skirts) and functions outside of femininity in a struggle for respect from her father and her peers. While the other girls at school are busy looking for boyfriends and applying the latest make-up, Diana rages and resists the gender roles to which her peers adhere. After beginning her training as a boxer, she far exceeds the other girls in physical strength, which ultimately renders her “unfeminine.” Her foil in the film, Marisol (Elisa Bocanegra) is portrayed as physically weak, hyper-feminine, and heteronormative in her emphasis on hair, make-up and boys. Hence, there is a stereotypical dichotomy made between associations of physically strong/masculine versus weak/feminine.

Diana’s father, Sandro (Paul Calderon) ignores her—in the few instances when he does not insult her—and focuses on the future of her brother, Tiny, by paying for his boxing lessons at the local gym. Watching her brother at the gym, Diana falls in love with boxing. She steals money from her father and convinces one of the reluctant coaches to train her. Diana trains hard without Sandro’s knowledge and later her loving brother Tiny supports her by giving her the money their father puts aside for the boxing lessons to pay for her training sessions. Eventually her father catches her in a match calling her a “loser” when
they get home. Diana then physically attacks him and we learn that Sandro physically abused her mother, provoking her suicide. Tiny watches on as his sister takes out all of her pent up rage on their father demonstrating to Sandro how it feels to be abused. She ends the fight by saying to Sandro, “you belong to me now.” The film portrays Diana as more powerful than her father—a male authority figure. In the end, Diana also falls in love with Adrian (Santiago Douglas), a male boxer, whom she eventually fights. It is unclear at the end whether the real prize is Adrian or the match, though the fact that she obtains both suggests a negotiation of the two in simultaneously complying with and breaking from patriarchal and heteronormative narratives.

Dawn Heinecken (2003) contends that “a guiding principle in Hollywood films is that women and their bodies are consistently disempowered and contained” (p. 3). Girlfight, like other recent female action heroes in film and television, resists this logic, and instead Diana’s body represents the ethnic female action heroine with a hard body, though she is not sexually objectified. Beltrán (2004) echoes this arguing that this representation differs from other Latina action heroes in film in that it is “an extremely physical role that showcased her intensity and ability to fight and was fully centered on her subjectivity” (p. 193). Diana’s portrayal can be read as an extension of women of color’s representation in blaxploitation films of the 1970s, in which Black women were allowed to exert a physical feminism outside of White femininity. Enacting the tenets of liberal feminism, Diana is placed in contrast to femininity and embodies what is considered masculine (i.e., hard body, violent nature). She is placed in binary opposition to her brother so that body and gender roles are reversed. Diana has a tough, hard body and loves boxing (coded masculine) whereas Tiny has a smaller frame, soft body and wants to be an artist (coded feminine). She even serves as his protector in a scene when she hits her brother’s opponent who bullies him after a practice match. Girlfight expresses more than just liberal feminism and expands to what some feminists call “amazon feminism.” Diana is a “female warrior” who can and does not only fight women but also men competitively, suggesting that women can be equal to men in terms of physical strength. Furthermore, there is a radical feminist theme in the film when Diana fights back against domestic violence—a core Western feminist issue that signifies feminism in Hollywood film. In addition, despite her urban, working-class background she is not the modern day stereotypical spitfire with “mall hair” as often depicted by Rosie Pérez (Valdivia, 2000). In this way, she does not discipline her body in normative feminine codes of Latina or Anglo beauty. Diana remains sexually inactive in the film and does not have to be sexy or perform sexual acts in order to “get the man.”

Ultimately, Diana’s character is the one of the most feminist Latinas ever portrayed on the bronze screen. She endures gender oppression because she does not conform to normative standards of adolescent femininity and asserts her agency through participation in a predominantly male sport. While Selena finds agency
through a hyper-feminine, hyper-sexualized identity. Diana gains agency through a masculinist framework. Both identities are problematic as they place femininity and masculinity in a binary opposition. While the multiplicities of feminisms are greatly explored in *Girlfight*, Latinidad saturates only the background, as issues of Latina/o identity are not discussed by any of the characters. Whereas her ethnicity is ambiguous, everyone around Diana is Latina/o, from a number of countries such as Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic and Panama. Other signifiers of Latinidad include that the characters speak and swear in Spanish, eat Latino foods, store Goya products in the kitchen and listen to traditional and/or urban Latin music. In particular, flamenco music is played during Diana’s workout sessions signifying a Latinidad tied to Spain that at once harkens to Latin America’s Spanish heritage and also flattens difference within this pan-ethnicity. Furthermore, Latinidad in this film is rooted in the urban working class and it is suggested that Diana will never be able to escape her community. However, despite Latinidad’s relegation as a mere backdrop to this film, it is important to note that this is one of the few Latinidades that Hollywood has represented outside of the predominant Chicana/o model.

*RWHC* is an independent film distributed by HBO that received a Sundance Audience Award. The screenplay was co-written and based on the experiences of Mexican American Josefina López and directed by Colombian Patricia Cardoso. The film was well received by critics considering it to have both feminist and other cultural critiques (Meyer, 2003; Mitchell, 2002; Norman-Culp, 2002; Puig, 2002; Strickler, 2002). Like *Girlfight*, and *Selena* to a lesser extent, the protagonist is a Mexican American young woman from East Los Angeles, Ana (América Ferrera), struggling with her identity against the backdrop of her family’s gender, class and ethnic oppression. Her mother, Carmen (Lupe Ontiveros), insists that she not attend college because of her duty as their daughter to help by working in her sister’s (Estela) garment factory/sweatshop. Ana’s mother constantly harasses her about her weight, calling her “fat” and reinforcing Anglo, colonial ideals of beauty and corporeal patriarchy. Ana is miserable at home, much like Diana, but also faces major class differences at the upper-middle class Beverly Hills high school she attends.

Ana is forced to work in Estela’s sweatshop for the summer and is in a constant ideological battle with all the women working there. These women are embedded in systems of patriarchy and internal racism, believing that this is the

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8*RWHC* is based on a play by the same name. The play is considerably different from the film (i.e., Estela and the sweatshop are the focus, immigration and citizenship issues are emphasized in the play).

9Although the film does not explicitly state that Ana and her family are of Mexican descent is can be assumed given the Mexican food both within and outside the home, the Spanish dialect used, and the Mexican flag on Ana’s bedroom door.
only type of work for them as working class *mexicanas*. These scenes have a postcolonial feminist streak in depicting how these female characters are exploited in the global economy by performing low-paying, gendered work. In response, Ana voices core liberal feminist tendencies saying that she has a right to her independence. For example, in one scene she heatedly responds to her mother during a discussion about virginity:

Carmen: Your husband is not gonna like you knowing so much.

Ana: Why is a woman’s virginity the only thing that matters? A woman has thoughts, a mind of her own. (Carmen looks baffled and scoffs.)

Similar to early liberal, White, middle-class feminists, Ana functions as an imperialist in that she finds their work demeaning without considering that these women find dignity in their work and have formed a bond because of their labor. In this way, Ana experiences an internal contradiction between solidarity with her fellow Latina workers and the upward mobility promised by the American dream. Ana assumes she knows more because she was born in the U.S., speaks standard American English, and is educated. Furthermore, Ana uses the English language to assert her superiority when communicating with her mostly Spanish-speaking mother. In doing this, Ana places liberal American feminism at odds with the gendered and racialized ways of life of these women. This marks a new kind of *Latinidad feminista*—one that demonstrates the social hierarchy and tensions between different generations within Latina/o communities.

As the plot unfolds, Ana resists her family’s prescribed gender role culminating in the popular scene where one day while working in the sweatshop she removes her shirt because it is too hot. Although the other women are initially shocked, they follow her and also take off their tops. Ana demands that her mother, her sister and the other voluptuous female workers love their bodies exclaiming: “real women have curves.” Although she has rebelled against her mother—and this can be considered disrespectful—Estela and her co-workers appreciate Ana for asserting their beauty and self-worth, a popular feminist moral surrounding body image issues. Also, this scene invites a potential queer reading as these women occupy what Adrienne Rich (1980) calls a “lesbian continuum,” or women’s bonding, in their corporeal liberation. Carmen continues to reject this openness of sexuality and walks out during this scene, thus reinforcing the archetype of the asexual Latina mother (Vargas-Geliga, 1996). Thus, *RWHC* attempts to address body politic within Latinidad, yet simultaneously seeks to offer a universal message to all women. This is often the condition of commodified texts that give a combined message of “love your body” with subtexts that only certain types of bodies are acceptable and have to be disciplined through consumption.
Lastly, Ana struggles with her parents to be able to attend Columbia University with the encouragement of Mr. Guzman (George Lopez), her Chicano teacher. Her father and grandfather support her decision to go away for college, but her mother continues to insist that she fulfill her duty as their daughter and stay home working at the factory. In this sense, Carmen again embodies the archetype of the asexual mother who is not sexually deviant and is invested in patriarchal and heteronormative norms. Within this trope, she is also depicted as infantile (e.g., when she thinks she is pregnant, but is actually beginning menopause) and manipulative. Carmen serves as a vision of the “Old World” that is constantly competing with her “New World” daughter who struggles with her hybrid identity. Given that Ana’s mother reinforces patriarchy, traditions of the “Old World” are gendered feminine, while her father’s, grandfather’s, and teacher’s support of her pursuit of higher education genders the progress of the “New World” as masculine. As such, tradition is signified as located in women and modernity in men. In the end, Ana rebels against Carmen, leaving for Columbia University without maternal support. Thus, the film illustrates a matrix of oppression, in which ethnicity, gender and class, fosters internal oppression among Latinas. Not only do working-class Latinas oppress each other, but so do upper and middle-class Latinas. For example, Mrs. Glass, a fellow Latina who is Estela’s contractor, does not care that the workers do not have adequate time or resources to finish the job asserting that she already has tried to help them by providing work. She adds: “you have to help yourself,” thus, promoting the ideology of meritocracy and refusing to be accountable for the women’s unacceptable working conditions.

Latinidad is explicit throughout the film, but also intertwined closely with feminism. Like Girlfight, Latinidad is a backdrop of the film signified in the tropicalization of the set. Drawing from Edward Said’s notion of Orientalism, Frances Aparicio and Susana Chávez-Silverman (1997) argue that tropicalism is “the system of ideological fictions with which the dominant (Anglo European) cultures trope Latin American and U.S. Latina/o identities and cultures” (p. 1) and the process of hegemonic tropicalization occurs through the troping of Latinidad as exotic and Other. Some of the signifiers of tropicalism include Latina/o characters as brown or olive-skinned, having dark hair and eyes, and voluptuous female bodies. RWHC foregrounds a tropicalization of Latinidad in that the set is decorated with colorful Mexican food and knickknacks in the home and bright art in the streets. Her neighborhood, the Boyle Heights section of East Los Angeles, is predominantly Mexican American and signifies the Third World, in binary opposition to her Beverly Hills high school with its mostly White, upper-class

10Like Selena, it also demonstrates Latinidad in the casting in that Ana, a lower-class Chicana from East L.A., is played by América Ferrera, a middle-class Honduran from the San Fernando Valley. Interestingly, this casting decision did not spark any debate among the Mexican American/Chicano community.
student body that represents the First World. In addition, Latinidad is gendered as feminine and issues of authenticity are some of the main contested points in RWHC. For example, in the scene when Carmen and Estela are watching a telenovela in the living room, Ana resists this traditional form of Latina consumption and instead rolls her eyes and smirks while she studies in the kitchen table apart from them. Here the film points to the complexities of Latinas as hybrid subjects who can never fully embody false notions of authenticity.

LATINA SUBJECTIVITY AS HYBRID

Each of these Latina protagonists embody a hybrid subjectivity—one in which identity is fluid and sometimes contradictory. Within these films, Selena, Diana, and Ana are all new mestizas in that all three are bilingual and multicultural—they occupy a third space in between Latin America and the U.S. These characters all challenge notions of an “authentic” Latinidad in that they are not the foreign other—they are second- and third-generation Latinas that speak English without a Spanish accent and counter the notorious stereotype of the heavily accented Latina in Hollywood. Although working-class subjectivity is often subdued under the trope of Latinidad (Valdivia, 2000), here it breaks with conventional codes that often render Latinas as non-citizens or as Other.

Body politics weave these three narratives together. One of the main Latinidades feminismas offered is the protagonists’ challenge to dominant, Anglo beauty standards. Selena defies traditional beauty standards with her black hair (many Latin American and U.S. Latina stars have dyed their hair lighter including Rita Hayworth, Shakira, and Jennifer Lopez) and her voluptuous body. However, had Selena lived to cross over in the mainstream, Aparicio (2003) argues that she too might have adhered to colonial notions of beauty as Lopez has today by losing weight and lightening her hair. In Girlfight, Diana resists the pressure to conform to these demands as she wears her hair natural or braided, shuns make-up, and wears loose clothes throughout the movie. Her look remains consistent throughout the film, which disrupts normative film conventions. Even when she wins the heart of Adrian at the end, it is not through wearing extra make-up or feminine clothing. Like Selena, Ana defies colonial beauty standards by presenting another corporeal model focused on curves as opposed to thinness (Figueroa, 2003). In her triumphant moment at the end of the film, Ana wears make-up and trendy clothes, signifying sophistication as a college student in New York City, yet her body size remains the same. In this way, Ana does not comply with beauty standards imposed on her, but instead creates and practices her own (Lewis, 2005).

Sexuality vis-à-vis corporality is articulated in each of the films, particularly for Selena in terms of dress code, Diana in terms of disciplining her body for
boxing, and Ana in terms of losing her virginity and the possible sexual appeal of her curves. All three protagonists have active and visible bodies: Selena sings and dances; Diana boxes; and Ana constantly walks the streets of Los Angeles and physically works in the sweatshop. They are also sexual agents in that Selena marries her boyfriend against her father’s wishes, Diana chooses not to become sexually intimate with her love interest, and Ana chooses to be sexually active with her romantic partner. As Chris Holmund (2002) argues of actresses Jennifer Lopez’s, Rosie Perez’s, and Lupe Ontiveros’ roles in contemporary film, these actresses/characters display “impossible bodies” that transgress traditional female casting practices—Selena (Lopez) and Ana (Ferrera) defy Anglo beauty standards with their voluptuous bodies (Lopez particularly with her derriere [Negrón-Muntaner, 2004]), brown skin and dark hair and Diana (Rodriguez) through her “hard” athletic body. These are transgressive roles for Latinas in popular cinema as their labor is no longer just to perform “‘service’ roles they often play as spitfires, maids and mamas” (Holmund, 2002, p. 111).

Lastly, another equally important intertextual theme (though not to be celebrated) is that Latinas tend to reinforce traditional culture, which is equated with patriarchy, while Latinos promote the New World or progress. This disrupts the dominant narrative of the cohesive Chicana/o family unit that Chicano filmmakers and nationalists often invoke (Fregoso, 2003). It is the male characters that are the catalysts for the women to step out of traditional, feminine gender roles. In Selena, her father pushes her to be a star, while her mother doubts that she will be able to overcome the patriarchy of the Tejano music industry. In Girlfight, it is Diana’s brother and her male coach who support her boxing efforts. This pattern is most apparent in RWHC when Carmen adamantly rejects Ana’s desires because she is a woman and her role is to serve her family while her father, grandfather, and Mr. Guzman all encourage her to pursue higher education. Thus, Selena’s, Diana’s, and Ana’s support systems are predominantly comprised of men who represent progress and feminism. This is consistent with Tania Modleski’s (1991) argument that postfeminism, as a trope in popular culture, often involves a problematic narrative in which men are positioned as more feminist than women and in turn de-centering women within feminism.

CONCLUSION

The selected films Selena, Girlfight, and RWHC demonstrate the uneven intersection between Latinidad and feminism in contemporary popular culture and offer hybrid and multiple representations of Latina subjectivity. These representations counter dominant archetypes of Latinas in Hollywood—as the spitfire, the clown, and the dark lady (Ramírez Berg, 2002), yet at the same time fit within the tropicalized trope of Latinidad. Selena offers an upwardly mobile, sheltered,
Tejana Latinidad while *Girlfight*, set in New York City, and *RWHC*, set in Los Angeles, represent an urban, working-class Latina subjectivity. Latinidad is an explicit issue in *Selena*, while feminism is only realized in its liberal form. On the other hand, in *Girlfight* feminism is at the core in its most radical and postfeminist sense while presenting Latinidad as a mere backdrop. The most recent film, *RWHC* offers a more nuanced integration of Latinidad and feminism, with a focus on class (coded as Latinidad) and body (coded as feminist) issues.

In many ways, these three films are counter-hegemonic in foregrounding difference within a film industry that has historically provided only uni-dimensional roles for Latinas and other women of color. On the other hand, like all popular culture, these representations are fraught with tensions and contradictions. For example, racism and sexism are explicitly dealt with in heteronormative terms ignoring the complexities of sexuality. Because each of the protagonists is paired up with a male partner, a queer reading of the film, although it is possible, is nonetheless discouraged. In addition, in terms of race, the amount of racial diversity within Latinidad is limited as these Latina protagonists all fall within the rubric of the tropicalized “Latin look” deployed across popular communications (Dávila, 2001).

Moreover, these films offer implicit and explicit constructions of Latinidad and feminism with hints of postfeminism and even post-Latinidad—a taken-for-granted and often commodified Latinidad that is racially and ethnically ambiguous as in the case of *Girlfight*’s Diana—and are representative of a turn in the history of popular culture focusing on the Latina. Tropes of postfeminism and post-Latinidad intertwine in these texts in simultaneously foregrounding and commodifying Latina bodies. This emphasis on the commodification of Latina culture is evident across media such as books, films, and music. However, I would argue that despite their commodified forms, these particular films rupture dominant narratives in cinema in that they portray complex, hybrid Latina subjectivities. Ultimately, the transgressive moments in these films hint at the everyday struggles of Latinas. Despite their problematic moments, these films begin to touch on multiple and intersecting identity politics, weaving both Latinidad and feminism together in both competing and complimenting ways, to create a new, hybrid *Latinidad feminista*.

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11By racism I am referring to Anglos’ discrimination against Latina/os. Racism within Latina/o communities is not addressed in the films analyzed. In fact, other than *Girlfight*, in which the Afro-Latina/o characters are villains, Afro-Latina/os are not even visible. This points to a pattern in popular culture that erases Afro-Latinidad.
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