



The Exotic Other: representations of Latina tropicalism in U.S. popular culture

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Abstract

U.S. Latina/o identity is a complex and panethnic construction. One of the most enduring tropes surrounding Latina women in US culture is that of tropicalism, which by erasing ethnic specificity helps construct homogenous stereotypes such as bright colours, rhythmic music, and brown skin that are represented in visual texts. Tropicalization helps position the Latina body as oversexed as well as sexually available; all that is identified with seductive clothing, curvaceous hips and breasts, long brunette hair or extravagant jewellery. The article concerns Latina images in US media and popular culture and focuses on such stars as Jennifer Lopez and Salma Hayek in order to explore the gendered signifiers surrounding Latinidad and Latina iconicity. The female ethnicity is depicted as other through its categorization and marginalization in relation to dominant constructions of Whiteness and femininity. The article bridges the approaches of gender studies and Latina/o studies with recent research on hybridity and transnational identities.

Keywords: Latina, tropicalism, popular culture, Jennifer Lopez, Salma Hayek

Introduction

The USA has been experiencing demographic changes with a rapid growth of the Latina/o population originating in the Spanish- and Portuguese- speaking countries of Central America, South America, and the Caribbean. Latino immigrants are changing and diversifying the ethnic landscape of the United States. Although this is a highly heterogeneous group, the US Latina/os are often represented as sharing a common identity which gave rise to the concept of 'Latinidad', defined by Valdivia as "the process of being, becoming, and/or performing belonging within a Latina/o diaspora" (Valdivia, 2011, p. 53). Latinidad and Latino/as have become vital issues in U.S. popular culture. This article examines representations of Latina tropicalism in U.S. media and popular culture and focuses on "the visual and narrative tropes associated with female Latinidad" (Guzmán & Valdivia, 2004, p. 205-206). The analysis focuses on two Latina icons: Jennifer Lopez, who became widely recognizable after starring in

Selena (Nava, 1997), and Salma Hayek, who gained international acclaim after her role in *Frida* (Taymor, 2002).

Films with Latina protagonists present a double construction of femininity and Otherness. Ethnic females are othered and marginalized in relation to the dominant construction of Whiteness. "In other words, Latinos are generally devalued and feminized, and Latinas fall beyond the margins of socially acceptable femininity and beauty" (Guzmán & Valdivia, 2004, p. 206). This article bridges the approaches of gender studies and Latina/o studies with recent research on hybridity and transnational identities. It explores their gendered signifiers of femininity and sexuality of US iconic Latinas in terms of their ethnic authenticity and tropes of tropicalization.

Hollywood productions have started to target Latino audiences of different ethnic, gender and class backgrounds. Films and television shows featuring Latina/o protagonists have been successful with both Latina/o and general audiences. Some portrayals of Latina artists conform to the dominant thin ideal, whereas others display the curvy shapes, specifically valued in Latino/a culture. This complexity is visible in the portrayals of mainstream Latina icons such as Christina Aguilera, Salma Hayek, Jennifer Lopez and Shakira. "Whereas many representations of these artists highlight their Latina identity and accentuate their curvy figures, following emergence in mainstream U.S. markets, media representations of these women became increasingly anglicized, with figures that became slimmer and slimmer and hair that became blonder or straighter" (Schooler, 2008, p. 136).

Latina hybridity and tropicalism

US mainstream popular culture tends to homogenize the constructions of Latina ethnicity, and not care about the real origin of Latina actresses. In fact, Latinas present a diverse panethnic background. Hybridity contradicts pure ethnic identity and results from mixed cultural and ethnic heritage. Latina/o hybrid identity arises from its transnational and transcultural exchanges between members of different communities, regions and nations. Latinas exist between the margins of American mainstream Whiteness and the borders of Blackness. Whereas Afro American actresses usually occupy a fixed discourse of Blackness in American cinema, the case of Latino Americans is more problematic.

Film images of Latinos exist as a part of a larger discourse on Otherness in the USA. The mainstream attitudes about Otherness can be understood via examining ethnic stereotypes. Latina stars present an exotic look and sexuality creating a strong visual and erotic impact. Women seen in Hispanic and Anglo television can be grouped into three categories. The first one is a *cantina girl* who

is represented as an easily available, often dancing, sexual object. The second type concerns a faithful, self-sacrificing *señorita* who is usually a good one at the beginning of the film but then she goes bad. The third category is represented by a *vamp* of devious nature who uses intellect to drive men to violence. Each of those stereotypes has some common characteristics such as physical beauty, passion and manipulation. At the same time each of those stereotypes are coded with particular types of clothing, behaviour and motivation (Merskin, 2011, 328).

One of the most enduring tropes surrounding Latina women in US culture is that of tropicalism, which by erasing ethnic specificity helps construct homogenous stereotypes such as bright colours, rhythmic music, and brown skin that are represented in visual texts. "The Latina body is presented as ethnically undifferentiated" (Esposito, 2012, p. 329). Tropicalization homogenizes Latinidad and helps position the Latina body as oversexed as well as sexually available; all that is identified with seductive clothing, curvaceous hips and breasts, long brunette hair or extravagant jewellery. Latina beauty and sexuality is marked as desirable and Other. The Latina tropicalized bodies have been excessively presented as exotic in US mainstream culture in which "Whiteness is associated with a disembodied intellectual tradition free from the everyday desires of the body to consume food, excrete waste, and reproduce sexually" (Guzmán & Valdivia, 2004, p. 211). Popular Latina representation emphasizes female breasts, hips and buttocks to indicate sexual desire and fertility. The tropes of tropicalism also involve expressive dancing, especially involving movement below the waist, which is linked to the popular construction of Latinidad and marked as Other. Latina is othered to "the extent that her body will always be a source of curiosity and fascination as an exotic object" (Esposito, 2012, p. 329). In other words Latinas are depicted with exotic Otherness which signifies them as beautiful, sexy and desirable.

The Hollywood industry recognizes actors according to their box office successes and create a special category of ethnic actresses with Latina and African American ones. This unique circle includes: Jennifer Lopez, Salma Hayek, Michelle Rodriguez, Penélope Cruz, Halle Berry, Angela Bassett and Vanessa Williams. Jennifer Lopez and Salma Hayek possess physical markers that enable them to be cast in roles in which their ethnic identity is ambiguous to determine and the film narrative merely signifies their Otherness by the characters' names or short Spanish dialogues. Both actresses have long brown hair, brown eyes, and somatically light skin. Although they have European facial features to some degree, their bodies suggest some exotic Otherness. Sometimes they play characters whose ethnic identity is ambiguous, e.g. Hayek's Serendipity in *Dogma* (Smith, 1999) or Lopez's Karen Sisco in *Out of Sight* (Soderbergh, 1998). In these

movies “racial Otherness is visually displaced and replaced within an exotic connotation of ethnic otherness” (Guzmán & Valdivia, 2010, p. 219). Lopez and Hayek have been competing for the roles reserved for Latina actresses. Although Lopez presents herself as Puerto Rican American, she was born in the USA. This fact allows Hayek to present herself as a more authentic Latina, having been born in Mexico. When Lopez managed to get the role of Selena, she was criticized as not being a true Latina. While Hayek’s strong accent has resulted in her being cast in more traditional Latina roles, both actresses have very attractive facial features but they differ widely in terms of body shape.

Latina icon: Jennifer Lopez

Jennifer Lopez has achieved wide recognition in a number of fields, especially film, music and dance, as well as new perfume and fashion lines. She also started her own production company, *Nuyorican Films*. Even her spectacular romances seem to be designed to guarantee her celebrity position and a permanent place on magazine covers. Lopez is famous not only for her acting achievements but primarily for her celebrated body emphasizing her sexy hyper-buttocks. “This is not to say that Jennifer’s face is excluded, but rather that the image works to guide one’s vision toward the butt” (Valdivia, 2005, p. 70). Lopez is characterized as a “sex goddess” which is itself an indication of tropicalization. Magazine covers present her Latina image, focusing on her exotic Otherness which is so different from the Anglo-Saxon norm. Despite that, Lopez is occasionally seen in “white” roles. Her fair skin allows her more ethnic mobility to perform roles to which darker women do not have access (Vargas, 2010, p. 124). Her body is sometimes portrayed as dangerous to the Anglo male characters. The viewer often sees the visual close-ups of her eyes, lips, breasts and buttocks. She reforms “the ideal of beauty through the marketing of her ‘shapely,’ or ‘womanly’ or ‘posterior’ beauty” (Guzmán & Valdivia, 2010, p. 213).

J Lo speaks classic Nuyorican, a second generation, Bronx inflected Spanish. Her fluency in English and ability to speak without a Spanish accent allows her to get roles which are reserved for Anglo American actresses and she often crosses over into mainstream representations. “Lopez’s ability to perform racial and ethnic ambiguity and multiplicity allows her to occupy more easily the privileged space and acceptable White sexuality ... Lopez has effectively tapped into her ability to perform the hybrid Latina body to meet Hollywood’s demand for the commodified exotic Other” (Guzmán & Valdivia, 2010, p. 224).

Lopez has been marketed as a generic Latina popular culture icon. However, her Puerto Rican ancestry was most emphasized when she was cast in the role of a Mexican (Genova & Ramos-Zayas, 2003, p. 86-87). There was a lot of criticism

about Lopez playing Selena Quintanilla, the famous Mexican American artist who was successful in Tejano music. Playing this role allowed Lopez to present her dancing abilities. She rehearsed extensively because “Dance as a performance of cultural identity has played a central role in the career development of both J Lo and of Selena” (Aparicio, 2010, p. 211). At first J Lo was supposed to lip-synch the lyrics but she was singing in some longer sequences. Moreover, tanning and make-up made her skin look like Selena’s. Lopez was very convincing in her performance as she looked and moved like the Mexican artist. Eventually, her role in *Selena* received excellent reviews and the film was also a box office success. Lopez treated this role as a way to reconnect with her ethnicity. “This realization of her ethnic identity through the music and dance of another ethnic star thus has allowed Lopez to perform her own ‘Latinness’” (Lockhart, 2007, p. 150).

In *Maid in Manhattan* (Wang, 2002) Lopez was cast as a Puerto Rican American from the Bronx where a multicultural fantasy takes place. Her role was a success, partly due to the time of its release – during the Christmas season. It is a Cinderella story about a Latina single mother named Marisa Ventura who works as a hotel maid. She sacrifices happiness and struggles to give her son a better life than in their home country. Racial and ethnic issues, together with immigrant status and single motherhood, complicate Marisa’s situation. The film evokes the desire for upward mobility to change the immigrant Other. At the same time it is a traditional fairy-tale romance in which the lower-status maid is rescued by a higher-status male confirming notions of white patriarchal power in American society. The message in popular culture is that women should look like models to gain a fulfilling relationship (Rios & Reyes, 2009, p. 102). In one scene the Anglo Saxon Marshall is unable to perceive the Latin American Marisa’s attractiveness in her work uniform, which proves that social position still plays an important role in enhancing women’s desirability. Moreover, it is the white man who first approaches and finally accepts the ethnic woman, not the other way round. Besides, Marisa’s character, as played by J Lo, must have a controlled sexuality that is not too dangerous for the white man. Thus, Marisa is only slightly sexualized (Haase, 2008, p. 209).

Although the narrative reflects the Cinderella love story, there is another meaning concerning a shifting of U.S. politics of race, class and gender multiculturalism. Lopez’s character speaks with Nuyorican accent and has brown skin. She is meant to evoke racial feelings when one day she meets a guest who is an upper-class Anglo Saxon man. The movie depicts “intersubjectivity between racially marked fantasy Latina bodies with their white other” (Nava, 2011, p. 102).

Latina icon: Salma Hayek

Salma Hayek got her first success starring in Mexican soap operas, and then she crossed the border and moved to Hollywood where in 1993 she was seen just for 30 seconds in the famous movie *Mi Vida Loca* (Anders, 1994). Hayek's characters in *Desperado* (Rodriguez, 1995) and *From Dusk Till Dawn* (Rodriguez, 1996) have been presented as hot. In the second movie Hayek plays a dangerous temptress whose sexuality brings destruction, similar to the case of the femme fatale from film noir. *From Dusk till Dawn* is a story of a pair of bank robbers who travel through the Southwest towards the Mexican border. The plot unexpectedly switches from an action to a vampire movie when the fugitives reach a roadhouse, the *Titty Twister*, where the bartenders and female strippers are vampires. Hayek plays the character of Satanico Pandemonium who performs a striptease with a white snake wrapped around her. Her solo dance and position above everyone in the audience indicates the strength and power of the vampire queen.

Hayek had a role in the first season of the popular *Ugly Betty* series (Gaitán, 2006-2010). Her character of Sofia Reyes reinforces the stereotype of the bombshell Latina through her sensual body, long, dark hair and mysterious accent. Sofia's exotification, eroticism and sexuality are further reinforced by the flamenco and Latin rhythms playing in the background. *Ugly Betty* depicts Hayek's Sofia as a manipulative person who gets what she wants, e.g. when the main male character, Daniel, refuses to fall in love with her she says: "You can call me a bitch, you can call me whatever you want, but it's how I've gotten where I am today. Otherwise I would still be dusting houses in Mexico with my mother" (Katzew, 2011, p. 306).

Hayek starred in the leading role of *Frida* (2002) as the avant-garde artist Frida Kahlo. After earning an Oscar nomination for this role Hayek has become widely recognized for her skill and talent and her pictures can be often seen on the covers of U.S. magazines. The life history of Frida Kahlo allowed Hayek to promote Mexican national identity and notions of the authentic Latina. Hayek's Kahlo is presented as a vibrant, erotic, determined and sensual Latina.

Despite her talent, Hayek cannot subvert her Spanish accent and this fact limits the roles available to her. On the other hand, her accent helps Hayek to get roles in films aiming to assert authenticity, like *Frida*. Consequently, she promotes herself as "the real" Latina, born in Mexico and only living in Hollywood, who speaks fluent Spanish with an authentic accent. In order to get more roles Hayek founded her own production company which produced *In the*

Time of the Butterflies (Barroso, 2001) and directed *El Maldonado Miracle* (2003) for Showtime Television.

Media images of Salma Hayek focus on her petite ethnic shape, emphasizing her breasts, small waist and curly hair. "Sexualized representations of Hayek center on her body as the stereotyped performance of Latina femininity" (Guzmán & Valdivia, 2004, p. 212). Hayek is often depicted dancing with the characteristic movement below the waist which immediately brings associations with the dynamic construction of Latinidad. With time Hayek has become less ethnic, more "Anglo"- looking and her hair has become much straighter. This new image proved to be a good strategy in Hollywood as Salma started to be more frequently seen in both supporting and leading roles.

Conclusion

Latinidad has become a permanent feature of American popular culture, starting with magazines, television programs and cinematic discourses. Although Latina actresses are presented as exotic Other, positioned on the margins of American Whiteness, what we can observe at the moment is the process of incorporating the diasporic Latina/o elements into the American mainstream culture. Their exotic Otherness has proved to be of commercial value helping to sell products, such as movie tickets, designed for the American mainstream audience.

Cinematic representations of the two analysed Latina actresses – Jennifer Lopez and Salma Hayek – focus on their sensual bodies and sexuality. Although both of them have followed different geographic trajectories, they have a lot in common. Firstly, they are both treated as Latinas, both emphasize their exotic look and fit into the stereotype of Latinas in U.S. popular culture. Both of them are neither too white nor too brown, so they can be considered for roles reserved for American mainstream actresses. What distinguishes them is the fact that Lopez is more often seen in ethnically undifferentiated roles, which is an indication of homogenizing Latinidad tropicalism, and Hayek is more likely to get roles of dangerous temptresses who use their exotic Otherness to manipulate men. Although Jennifer Lopez and Salma Hayek achieved wide recognition due to great roles in biographical films about Selena Quintanilla and Frida Kahlo, proving that both actresses are talented, popular culture depictions focus mainly on their sensual bodies.

The popular images of Latina bodies revolve around racialization, sexualisation, exoticization and tropicalization. The Latina icons challenge the Eurocentric standards of racial purity and present their hybrid identities with markers of tropicalism as new notions of authenticity in the USA. The Latinas

depicted in U.S. popular culture are transnational, bicultural, and bilingual characters building bridges between Latino heritage and American mainstream culture.

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