

CONTEMPORARY MAINSTREAM LATINIDAD: DISNEY TALES AND SPITFIRE ENDURANCE*

LATINIDAD CONTEMPORÁNEA MAINSTREAM: CUENTOS DISNEY Y PERSISTENCIA DEL (ESTEREOTIPO) SPITFIRE

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RESUMEN

Este ensayo explora la presencia contemporánea de la *Latinidad* en la cultura popular *mainstream* de Estados Unidos. Desde dentro de la situación contemporánea de lo post-racial, post-feminista, neoliberal y de los discursos del meztizaje racial, este ensayo utiliza teorías de los estudios de medios de comunicación, mestizaje y etnicidad para investigar a las *Latinas* contemporáneas generadas por la industria, especialmente por Disney, y a través de sus propios esfuerzos para permanecer en la popularidad más allá del encasillamiento al estereotipo *spitfire*.

Palabras Clave: Latinas, Latinidad, hibridez, etnicidad, post feminismo, post-racismo, neoliberalismo, raza mixta, spitfire, Disney.

ABSTRACT

This essay explores contemporary presence of Latinidad in mainstream US popular culture. Set within the contemporary situation of post-racial, post-feminist, neoliberal, and mixed race discourses, this essay uses theories of media studies, hybridity and ethnicity to investigate contemporary Latinas as produced by industry, especially Disney, and through their own efforts to stay in the mainstream beyond a stereotyped spitfire typecasting.

Key Words: Latinas, Latinidad, hybridity, ethnicity, post feminism, post racism, neoliberalism, mixed race, spitfire, Disney.

Visual racial difference appears to confirm the truth of race. But because audiences read multiracial bodies differently across contexts, those bodies are a crucial site of confrontation with our experience of race as always and transhistorically legible. (Nishime, 2014, p. XII).

Ultimately, in trying to simultaneously appeal to a broader female audience and a narrow Latina/o audience segment, Devious Maids illustrates the difficulties cable networks like Lifetime experience in trying to diversify programming that will attract highly segmented audiences, while also maintaining their larger audience base. (Báez, 2015, p. 54).

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The year is 2016. The two quotes above are indicative of the complex terrain of identity and representation for Latinas in mainstream media today. Mainstream media functions in an era of great global flows, of bodies and cultures, and Latinas face the challenges and opportunities that a transnational and conglomerized mediated system offers. Latina/os are present in mainstream popular visual culture, but the question is how and under what conditions. For example, Latinas are present in both mainstream television and post-network digital offerings. In legacy television—that is, the historical broadcasting networks ABC, CBS, and NBC in addition to newer participants CNN and Fox—the most bankable current Latina appears in the ensemble cast mockumentary dramedy *Modern Family* (ABC), which continues to gather high ratings and accolades in the Golden Globe US television awards. Sofia Vergara, the breakout star of the series, has become the highest paid television star—not the highest paid Latina but the highest paid US television star overall. Similarly *Devious Maids* in Lifetime channel extends its offering to audiences who still miss *Desperate Housewives* which ran on ABC until 2012, and *Jane the Virgin* in the CW follows on the footsteps of ABC television's *Ugly Betty* (2006-2010) with a nuanced and ironic dramedy. Meanwhile in the post-network digital world of Netflix and Hulu, original series such as *Narcos*, *Orange is the New Black*, and *East Los High* contain a range of Latina/o protagonists and sidekicks. Other than these particular television shows, the Spanish television landscape seems to be shifting as *Telemundo* dethrones Univision as the top Spanish language network in the US, with both of them garnering increasing segments of the US—not just the Latina/o—audience. Furthermore during global sports spectacles such as the World Cup and the Olympics, even mainstream—read English-speaking—audiences prefer Spanish language networks' more expansive coverage. Tensions between legacy and digital media are amplified by the additional tension between English and Spanish language media. Both of these overlapping tensions result in opportunities and challenges for media industries as well as for Latina media production, representation, and audiences.

The above brief, and partial, overview of some of the examples of Latina/os on mainstream

television suggests that identifiable Latina/o presence is a fact. Yet Latina/os continue to appear in the US mainstream mostly according to stereotype and more often in sidekick or background roles than as protagonists in entertainment genres. Realist and fictional genres, such as news and drama, illustrate an overlap of germinal changes with enduring tropes. In the news, other than in Spanish language media, the issue of immigration foregrounded by the current Republican presidential candidate refocuses attention on Latina/os as illegal border crossers, and worse, as a criminal element—despite evidence to the contrary. Conversely, recent coverage of police killing black males omits the many killings of Latino males in similar manner as well as in the militarized Mexican-US border. In the highly gendered and racialized space of network news programming, even highly competent and popular newscasters such as Soledad O'Brien find themselves moved from daily programming to less regular production of documentaries (Stelter, 2013), although this is represented as an opportunity. The recent 2016 Oscar ceremonies lacked any major nominations for people of color including Latina/os generating the hashtag #OscarsSoWhite, and the recent Emmy Awards for primetime US television totally ignored Latina/o talent in any of the top categories (Echegaray, 2016). Digital gaming includes first person shooter games that position the gamer killing border crossing Latinos such as *Ethnic Cleansing*, *White Law*, and *Shadow Warrior* even as game scholars note that most games lack the presence of minorities including Latina/os (Nakamura & Chow-White, 2012) although industry figures reveal that Latinos drive video game sales (Saylor, 2012). Not to be forgotten, children's media also becomes a terrain of contestation with attempts to appeal to the young audience, whose choices will drive the consumer economy for decades to come. Never one to be left behind, in July 2016 Disney launched the first Latina Disney princess, Elena of Avalor, joining the far more numerous Eurocentric beauties in the Disney archive. This is the heterogeneous mainstream mediated terrain wherein Latinas are present and absent, always in highly commodified ways that seek to increase audiences and consumption to generate profits.

However we cannot pretend that nothing has changed. In addition to the data derived from the 2000 Census demonstrating that Latina/os compose

the largest minority in the US, a consistent set of reports documents that the spending power of Latina/os continues to grow into the multi-billion dollar range. Rationally one would assume that given the numbers and the spending power, in a capitalist system—given that global media is undeniably a capitalist enterprise—there would be more attention paid to this segment of the audience. However the growth curves of population and spending sometimes run counter to representation and inclusion. Indeed, numerical analyses show both representational gains and losses that complicate linear hopes of incremental improvement based on factual data showing growth curves in absolute numbers and in spending power. So in some ways, some of the numbers are worse now than before—not the type of change expected by Latina/o media advocates. This is the Latina/o media paradox, despite growth in numbers and purchasing power, media representation not only is not keeping up with this growth, but, in some measures, it is actually declining (Latino Media Gap, 2014).

How does this happen? The fact is that rational capitalist media industries are supposed to foreground profit as the major outcome and goal of production, circulation, and exhibition. The expansion of markets—in the case of mainstream media audiences—is the most logical strategy. Despite this institutional value of profit above all else, much of the contemporary media industry's decision-making is informed not by scientific and rational numerical measures but by ideological and received "truths" that are not necessarily supported by research. As some of these assumptions are taken as nature, these dogmas fall within the realm of ideology. For instance, the current crisis facing legacy television, with audiences shifting to post-network platforms, is only partly technological. While it is true that lucrative segments of the audience consume televised content through platforms other than over the air or cable television, and mostly through digital technology, this does not mean that audiences have stopped consuming content nor that legacy content cannot be consumed in new digital platforms. Audiences that consume content and can therefore be delivered to advertisers remain the mainstay of media industries. Moreover, there is still a significant segment of the audience that—for a range of reasons from affordability, accessibility, and preference—still

relies on legacy media. If the issue remains how to reach desirable audiences, which in turn are formed by cultural formations within the population, one logical strategy has to be reaching previously ignored segments of the audience. Potentially, developing visual mainstream culture that includes a wide range of narratives and representations and therefore interpellations, including Latinas, can expand the audience base of mainstream popular culture, as Báez (2014) noted.

To make matters more complex, post racism (Squires, 2014) and post feminism (Tasker & Negra, 2007) circulate as powerful discourses linked through neoliberal logics torn asunder from political economic reality but nonetheless presenting a recurring rhetorical stream that structures production, representation, and audience responses within a narrow field of play (Mukherjee, 2015). To deviate from individualist and pro-marketplace solutions, especially to suggest that social forces are at play presently and historically, relegates one's input into a marginal terrain of derision and into omission, earning one the label of alien, foreigner, and/or unpatriotic.

In the post-race moment, another component of a revised audience strategy is the uses to which the recent acknowledgment of mixed race as a statistically significant portion of the US population is put to by media industries. If everyone is mixed race does that not make race irrelevant and thus the post-race rhetoric an actual description of fact? In other words, why bother with representing race when it is no longer a factor? In *Undercover Asian*, LeiLani Nishime (2014) seeks to understand how "ideological narratives of race, sexuality, gender, and nation intersect to create or erase multiracial representation (...)" (p. 7). Similarly in the contemporary moment, this essay seeks to understand some of the ways that mainstream visual media represents Latinas who are intrinsically mixed race¹. Recent census efforts to account for mixed race, reveal that a growing segment of the population identifies as such (Muntaner, 2014). While the deployment of race as a discursive construct has resulted in major swathes of the global population identifying themselves as members of a particular race, genetic research shows that all of us are mixed race. If race is more of an effort to account for and regulate populations than an actually verifiable biological and genetic fact, then mixed race provides both

the possibility of ignoring race and the complexity of creating newly muddled categories that impede decades and centuries worth of efforts to control and regulate national and global populations. Furthermore, discussions and research on race and mixed race position the concept of hybridity at the center of media production, representation, and interpretation strategies.

Hybridity is a complex concept with a complicated and sometimes violent history. Conceptually hybridity goes against theories of race as purity poles with undesirable mixtures, syncretisms, *mestizajes*, or third spaces. Eurocentric colonialist policies were predicated on the fantasy of purity and the undesirability of racial mixture, even as invasion and oppression yielded precisely the outcome of population hybridity (Stoler, 1995). Of special relevance to contemporary Latinidad, the Spanish not only mis-represented themselves as a pole of white purity—something quite questionable given the nearly eight century Moorish occupation of the Iberian peninsula (roughly 711 to 1491)—, but also sought to visualize the racial mixture possibilities through *casta* paintings, primarily produced in Mexico and Peru, their two most profitable locations in the Americas. The *casta* paintings simultaneously proposed the presence of purity while also depicting the many mixture outcomes between a range of pure archetypes: white (Spanish), black (African), native (Americas), and Asian (Chinese). Privileges and rights in the American colonies were granted according to how close to the white/Spanish pole and away from the indigenous and black poles people's mixtures at the level of skin color appeared. From a twenty-first century perspective we know that none of these poles of purity were actually pure. Beginning with Spanish whiteness through African blackness, there was pre-existing mixture in every continent and between continents—including in the Americas and Asia. This brief and highly abridged historical overview reminds us that hybridity and globalization, and efforts to represent them, are not recent phenomena but rather can be traced back at least to the fifteenth century colonial period as contested ideological narratives to shore up regimes of power.

If we fast-forward to the twenty-first century, we continue to encounter hyper-hybridity and global movement of culture and populations, which mainstream media tries to manage and tame through

the reification of racial categories and insistence on a representational terrain of whiteness in relation to all other racial possibilities. Massive statistical evidence and research demonstrating that the US population, and therefore the audience, is far more diverse than popular culture slowly nudges the mainstream toward inclusion, and this impetus, like previous moments such as the Newton Minow "television is a vast wasteland" speech (May 9, 1961), creates the conditions for Latinas/os to produce and be represented in mainstream popular culture.

New audiences in the twenty-first century must include previously ignored segments such as women, working class people, non-heteronormative people, and people of color. Latinas are part of all these targeted audiences. Global circulation of mainstream media means that narratives and situations must be produced with acknowledgment of global diversity. The additional advantage of US media industries, in addition to creating globally recognized genres, is that given the size of the population and large amounts of media consumption, expensive media productions can recoup a large portion of their production costs within the national audience. The digital transportability of audiovisual media also means that almost instantaneously, US media can travel transnationally, thereby exponentially increasing potential audience. The onus on more diverse production appears to be a rational strategy for survival in the cutthroat competitive world of mainstream media, even as it transitions from legacy media to "new" digital platforms.

Against this historical, theoretical, demographic, and industrial backdrop, this essay will explore some salient nodes of Latinidad in contemporary mainstream US popular culture. While the terrain of mainstream Latinidad is immense, I will focus on two items. First I will discuss Disney strategies of avowal and disavowal in relation to fictional and real Latina princesses. Second, I will discuss career strategies for Latinas in the mainstream. Through these two moments in the dynamic contemporary situation of Latinidad, we can gain insight and understanding on the tensions, challenges and opportunities facing both media industries and Latinas.

Disney and Latinidad

As a top five global media conglomerate with headquarters in the US, Disney figures in the

landscape of mainstream Latinidad. To begin with *Modern Family*, the show wherein Sofia Vergara represents a modern day spitfire, is broadcast on the ABC network, which is part of Disney holdings. As well *Devious Maids*, on Lifetime channel, was originally produced for ABC but when the network passed on the offering Lifetime channel, which is partly owned by Disney, picked it up (Baez, 2015). Conglomerate media ownership enables the transition and utilization of shows and actors from one holding to another, to increase profit by the parent company.

Disney television channel has long targeted the tween audience (Valdivia, 2009, 2011). Indeed Disney reached its global prominence precisely by banking on that newly created gendered audience category. Drawing on a huge and virtually priceless archive of popular media, Disney continues to grow a global audience for its family programming. In the new millennium, for many of the reasons listed in the first part of this essay, Disney has joined other media in an effort to target the Latina/o population.

High School Musical (HSM) (2006, 2007, 2008) the massively successful Disney franchise that inspired a return to primetime musical programming such as the Fox television show *Glee*, included a post-racial strategy of ambiguous ethnicity/light Latinidad. In HSM Gabriella Montez (Vanessa Hudgens) the female half of the lead romantic couple composed by her and Troy Bolton (Zac Effron), was an ambiguous Latina. The spelling of her first name with an extra "l" and the scarce screen time devoted to her family life until the third movie, left her Latinidad unrecognizable to most of the non Latina audience. Set in relation to the very blonde Sharpay Evans (Ashley Tisdale) and the recognizably African American Taylor McKessie (Monique Coleman), Gabriella's long dark hair and slightly tanned skin constructed her as the in-between racial character, a usual position for Latinas in popular culture. However, one could easily read her as a tanned white girl, after all the movie is set in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Nevertheless for those in the audience whose Latina radar is acute, you could see that the beautiful, smart, upper-middle class, and likable co-protagonist of Disney's highly successful franchise was Latina.

Somewhat similarly Disney's *Lizzie McGuire* (2011-2014) featured a white protagonist played by

Hillary Duff with two sidekicks, Miranda and Gordo. Miranda Isabella Sanchez (played by Lalaine), like Gabriella, was an ambiguous/light Latina. We seldom heard her full name, and her middle name "Isabella" also ambiguates her ethnicity as it introduces the possibility of Italian-ness. Like Gabriella, Miranda was seldom contextualized in relation to Latinidad, a family, or a culture that would foreground her ethnicity. Also like Gabriella, Miranda's dark hair and slightly but barely darker skin, are set in relation to Lizzie's blonde hair and white skin. Miranda's hair is not only darker but always slightly more coiffed than Lizzie's. For example, in the first episode to Lizzie's braided crown hairdo Miranda has large spider like pig tail holders. Miranda's Latinidad is rendered more visible precisely at the time that she stops being present in the show. Both in the last few episodes as well as in the feature length movie made after the show was over, Miranda is supposedly visiting her grandmother in Mexico City thus cementing her Mexican-American-ness through her absence.

Disney's gingerly forays into Latina representation in the new millennium, extended to the Disney princess genre. In 2012, Disney introduced *Sofia the First*, a different type of Disney princess, in that she is a child girl rather than adolescent or early adult like the rest of the classic and modern Disney princesses and that she was introduced on television through Disney Junior rather than through a feature film. Sofia, a peasant, becomes a princess by virtue of Miranda, her mother, marrying the king. Therefore she is a step child to the king as well as a commoner. Sofia lives in Enchancia, a Disney invented story book name that must be somewhere in Europe yet nowhere at all. This indeterminacy is a hallmark of Disney movies. For example, in *The Princess Diaries* (2001, 2004), the protagonist Mia is destined to rule Genovia, a small Germanic looking country.

In October 2012 a Disney producer identified Sofia as Disney's first Latina princess. One can hardly blame executive producer Jamie Mitchell from asserting that Sofia is Latina (Rome, 2012). After all Sofia has both the brown hair, slightly darker skin, and a name that usually accompany Latina roles in mainstream US popular culture. Enchancia also sounds like it could be a Spanish name, especially as it suggests to many Latinos a correspondence with enchantment which is the official slogan of Puerto Rico, la tierra del

encanto/the land of enchantment. As well Sofia is a former peasant, in accordance with working class provenance of many Latina/o characters in US television. Moreover, Sofia's mother is darker than Sofia, and is named Miranda. As we saw in *Lizzie McGuire* Miranda was the name of Lizzie's ambiguously Latina buddy. Finally Miranda is voiced by Latina actress Sara Ramirez, from *Grey's Anatomy* an ABC television show. All of these elements would seem to point to Disney's first ever Latina princess.

Joe D'Ambrosia, vice president of Disney Junior original programming was a little less assertive about Sofia's Latinidad. He claimed Sofia's ethnicity was not called out to encourage all children to identify with Sofia. Back tracking about this ethnic identity, soon after the press began to cover Sofia as the first Latina Disney princess, Disney was quick to follow with clarifications. Nancy Kanter, senior vice president of original programming and general manager of Disney Junior Worldwide, corrected that actually Sofia was Spanish, her fictional country of Galdiz was actually inspired by Spain (quite similar to the Andalusian city of Cadiz). Kanter went so far as to meet with Alex Nogales, the president and CEO of the Hispanic Media Coalition to assure him that "'Sofia the First' is in fact not a Latina character and that the producer of the television program misspoke" (Rome, 2012). To ensure no more Latinidad aspersions, Craig Gerber, a co-executive producer, asserted that Sofia's birth father was of Scandinavian like descent. Thus Disney put to rest any thought that Sofia was Latina by proposing an Eurocentric hybridity while simultaneously opening a window to a future Latina princess by announcing that there was such a project in gestation.

By 2016 Disney was ready to roll out its first Latina princess Elena of Avalor. Princess Sofia literally creates a spin-off by setting Elena free from an amulet in which she has been trapped for centuries. In fact Craig Gerber, Sofia's creator, is also the creator for Elena. Gerber claims that the misunderstanding about Sofia's Latinidad alerted him to the fact that there was a demand and an audience for a Latina princess. Disney constructed a team of experts to bring to reality this first Latina princess.

As the "first princess of Hispanic descent" (Williams, 2016), Elena is voiced by Aimee Carrero, a Latina actress of Puerto Rican and Dominican

descent. Elena is her own hero, scripted to pursue activities other than romance. Unlike Sofia who is a little girl, Elena at 16 matches the age of other Disney princesses [such as Ariel of *The Little Mermaid*, Belle of *Beauty and the Beast*, and *Cinderella*]. As such her body bears the unmistakably iconography of Disney adolescent princesses: her hair is virtually about a third of her body size (Lacroix, 2004), her eyes are large and almond shaped, and her waist is tiny in comparison to her chest and hips (IZI 2008). She combines these generic princess traits with the Latina dark skin, dark brown hair, red lipstick, and huge gold hoop earrings. The show also includes musical numbers—at least one by Elena in every episode. In the first episode sixteen year old Elena leads her royal team as she simultaneously plays the guitar.

By the time Aimee Carrero is rolled out as the voice of Elena in the inevitable press round that accompanies the introduction of new programs, especially when the parent company through synergy is able to populate its morning talk show *Good Morning America* on its television network ABC, Aimee is outspokenly and openly Latina, tracing her family's engagement with Disney back to her grandmother. Carrero speaks at length and with pride both about her Latina heritage and about the meaning of this role for her and for Latina/os. Disney proudly claims its first Latina princess despite previous arguments about preferring an unmarked ethnic strategy designed to appeal to as broad an audience as possible.

Career Strategies for contemporary mainstream Latinas

Latinas have appeared in Hollywood film since its inception. The Dark Lady and Spitfire stereotypes date back to early Hollywood film with Dolores del Rio performing the former and Lupe Vélez the latter. As Hollywood has presided over more than one Latino boom due to its tendency to re-enact the myth of discovery, Latinas have come and gone from the mainstream spotlight. Of course, the contemporary notion of Latina as someone from the US with Latin American roots—recent or past—did not apply at the beginning nor the middle of the last century. So, for instance, in the nineteen-forties Carmen Miranda, who became known as the "Brazilian Bombshell" was actually born in Portugal and never became a Brazilian citizen while also being processed as a "Latin"

phenomenon in the US. In 1945 she was the top paid entertainer in the US, and by 1955 she died of a heart attack. Despite her brief career, partly fueled by US geopolitical aims through the “Good Neighbor” policy, Miranda’s legacy influences Latina presence in the mainstream until today (Enloe, 2014). Many have said that Sofia Vergara partly draws on Miranda’s malapropisms, for instance, and contemporary advertisements often draw on Carmen Miranda imagery.

The detour into Carmen Miranda serves the purpose of illustrating that Latina salience in popular culture has been historically influenced by geopolitics, which means that the presence wanes once the political winds change. Not to be deterministic, this essay offers a brief exploration of Latina efforts to keep a career going, somewhat of a Herculean task given that female stars, in general, regardless of ethnicity, experience diminishing opportunities as they age —Hollywood being an intensely sexist industry. Following the cross-over, when a Latina performer gains access to the mainstream, Latinas in popular culture find themselves in a double bind. Lupe Vélez, Carmen Miranda, Rita Moreno, Rosie Perez, Jennifer Lopez, Salma Hayek, and Sofia Vergara—to name a few—crossed over into the mainstream through some version of the spitfire stereotype. As Isabel Molina Guzman (2012) remarks in relation to the historical trajectory of this stereotype.

The performances of Latina spitfire characters beginning with Lupé Vélez and Dolores Del Rio’s Good Neighbor films in the 1940’s often focused on the comedy of errors created by intercultural miscommunication and the comedic tensions inherent in the romantic relationship between the Latina star and her white US paramour (Vélez’s portrayals in a series of “Mexican Spitfire” movies generated the popular Latina stereotype). Also referred to as the “female clown,” the ideological role of the spitfire archetype was to make foreign Latin America less threatening through humor while celebrating the potential for intercultural exchange and heterosexual romance.

The prerequisites for the spitfire, include ability to dance and sing, as so much of a spitfire’s performance include sexy musical numbers and movement. Many a Latina has mined this stereotype to gain access to the mainstream. The inherent danger, often borne out, is that this vehicle—if you will—becomes a lifelong type-casting from

which the Latina performer cannot get away. As the performer tries to transition into other roles, either the industry and/or the audience do not support this change, and the career winds down, and eventually ends. Dolores del Rio literally went back to Mexico to continue her career. Vélez suffered an early death through a suicidal overdose. Miranda died young of a heart attack, after nearly a decade of pursuing a career as a lounge singer following her rapid decline in popularity. Rita Moreno crossed over into stardom after a long career through the iconic *West Side Story* (1961), for which she won an Oscar as Supporting Actress, the first such accomplishment for a Latina in Hollywood. However Moreno was typecast, even as she freely admitted to using the spitfire role to cross over (Beltrán, 2009). Beltrán details Moreno’s post Oscar trajectory in order to carve out a career beyond the spitfire roles she was constantly offered. Moreno began to get involved in anti-war and Civil Rights movements; advocated for Hollywood inclusion of minorities in front of and behind the camera, taking a stance against racial barriers in the industry’s famously racialized casting practices, which are being investigated in 2016 by the Department of Justice; and continued to act in movies, television, and on stage. In 2014 she was awarded the SAG (Screen Actors Guild) Lifetime Achievement Award, and remains the only Latina to earn an Oscar, a Grammy, and an Emmy. Arguably while remaining professionally and politically active, she transitioned out of the mainstream after the Oscar².

Other recent Latina stars have been able to achieve a mixed outcome following their spitfire crossover. Rosie Perez enjoyed a brief period of prominence in the late nineteen-eighties and early nineteen-nineties only to begin to disappear from the mainstream following highly stereotypical roles (Valdivia, 2000). Rosie was part of the nineteen-nineties latest version of a Latino boom—a recurring discovery of Latinidad wherein mainstream popular culture re-“discovers” the presence of Latina/os and our lively popular culture, in order to profit from Latina/o cultural production. Following her Oscar nomination for the drama *Fearless* (1993), in which she played a grieving mother, against spitfire typecasting³, she more or less continued her transition out of the mainstream, appearing in less than popular films, becoming an awarded choreographer, especially in the afro-centric

television show *In Living Color* (1990-1994), voicing roles in animated film, appearing in television series, and briefly joining the panel of women in the ABC morning television talk show *The View* (2014-2015). Notably Perez's short membership in *The View* ended immediately after an on-the-air disagreement with Kelly Osbourne who made a disparaging comment about Mexicans⁴. Like Rita Moreno, a fellow Puerto Rican performer, in her post-mainstream career, Rosie Perez lent her celebrity status to political causes, specifically participating in Spanish language AIDS information campaigns and protesting US presence in Puerto Rico's Vieques island. Perez remains an active performer and political activist.

Jennifer Lopez, quite literally, crossed over into the mainstream over Selena's dead body (Parédez, 2009) by earning the lead role in Gregory Nava's *Selena* (1997), a biopic about the murdered Tejana music star. Early career included being a dancer in *In Living Color* choreographed and chosen by Rosie Perez. Lopez's innovation was to isolate her spitfire performance, or rather redirect the mainstream gaze, to her butt. Once crossed over into the mainstream, Lopez mined her butt then methodically made moves to go beyond the spitfire image into a beyond Latina, ambiguous ethnic, branded celebrity with product lines in a range of mainstream arenas (Mendible, 2007; Molina-Guzman & Valdivia, 2004; Beltrán, 2009; Valdivia 2010; Molina Guzman, 2010). Through a very intricate strategy of mainstream presence, which includes Latina/o media production and representation, Lopez remains present in mainstream projects, such as a recent judge in *American Idol* (2012-2016) and starring in an NBC television police crime series *Shades of Blue* (since 2016)⁵.

Nearly coinciding with Lopez's ascendance as the reigning Latina celebrity, Salma Hayek crossed over from Mexican telenovela stardom into Hollywood spitfire roles, appearing in a number of movies, often times barely clad in outfits that highlighted her curvaceous body. Hayek transitioned out of mainstream spitfiredom through creating Ventanarosa, a production firm designed to develop Latina/o themes and projects. One of her most successful ventures was the production of *Frida, the movie* (2002), in which she also starred (Molina-Guzman, 2006; 2007). As well, and not to the same extent as Jennifer Lopez, Hayek constructed a career of celebrity endorsements and

product lines. Like Moreno and Perez, Hayek also engages in political activism, in particular campaigns against anti-women violence and breastfeeding advocacy. Her presence in the mainstream as of 2016 consists of celebrity appearances in awards shows, premieres, and fashion shows. The latter is greatly enhanced by her marriage to François-Henry Pinault, multi-billionaire CEO of Kering, a transnational luxury goods company that includes Gucci and Balenciaga among its holdings. In mainstream media Salma's latest appearances include the voice of Taco in "Sausage Party" (2016), and supporting roles in little heard films —i.e. *Some Kind of Beautiful* (2014)— where she is always cast as a Latina —Bella Flores, Elena, Teresa the lesbian Taco, etc.

The latest Latina spitfire, and a very successful one at that, is the Colombian born Sofia Vergara. Within Colombia, Vergara is seen as a more specific type of person and performer, a costeña hailing from Barranquilla, a city in the Caribbean coast of Colombia⁶. Sofia Vergara crosses over from Colombia, to Univision, to mainstream US television through her role as Gloria Pritchett, the show's Latina trophy wife to Ed Pritchett, the major headliner for the series, played by Ed O'Neill, of *Al Bundy* fame in the Fox television show *Married with Children* (1987-1997). Originally a virtual unknown within the ensemble cast series, having played a number of stereotypical spitfire roles, Vergara has become the breakout star from the series, surpassing all other members of the cast in popularity and income. Interestingly, Vergara is originally blonde but had to dye her hair brown to conform to US expectations of a Latina stereotype. As the series and her role in gain in popularity, her hair has been gradually lightened closer to her original color. It's almost as if Vergara's success allowed her to bring a transgressive hair color —blonde— to the spitfire stereotype.

Much has been written about this latest spitfire. For example Molina-Guzman (2012) reads the Gloria character as simultaneously soothing "racial anxieties through a familiar figure of domestic Latina femininity" while rupturing stereotypes through a very complex character. Indeed Gloria can be read as performing the typical spitfire or ironically using the stereotype to get her way both within the narrative of the show and, in real life, all the way to the bank. (Valdivia in McDonald, 2015). It is much less clear how audiences, or, rather, which segments

of the audience, interpret her character in dominant or rupturing ways. *Modern Family*'s success has translated into Vergara co-starring in *Hot Pursuit* (2015), a Hollywood film, with Academy Award winner Reese Witherspoon wherein she plays a classic spitfire—a Colombian drug lord's woman to Reese Witherspoon's postfeminist poster child for failed femininity, a joyless and styles police officer. Nonetheless, Vergara is not resting on her laurels and in true recent cross-over spitfire, seeks to expand her career into lucrative spokesperson contracts, with COVERGIRL make-up, Head and Shoulders™ shampoo, Pepsi, a K-mart clothing line, and Ninja coffee maker. In fact, previous to making her cross-over, when she was working in Univision, Vergara founded Latin World Entertainment to represent Latino talent—both in relation to expanding opportunities for Latina/os as well as to handle their representation ethically⁷.

Conclusion

What are we to make of an era touted as post-racial and post-feminist that nonetheless relies on recycling and reiteration of old stereotypes? The two mini-case studies provided in this essay focused on Disney's efforts to include the Latina in order to expand its target audience and, conversely, on Latina spitfires' efforts to construct a long-standing career after their cross-over. Mainstream media tries to have it both ways—they try to target this "new" audience of Latina/os as they use their usual ways of representing Latina/os. Baez (2015) noted this tension in her conclusions about the television show *Devious Maids*:

Devious Maids is a contested text that is simultaneously conservative (in its keeping with long-standing archetypes of Latinas as the "señorita/maid and the spitfire) and progressive (in its inclusion of an ensemble Latina cast that to some extent challenges dominant notions of Latina womanhood). (p. 66; emphasis in the original).

As the opening quote alerted us, the expansion to new audiences is carried out in relation to not alienating the original assumed principal audience, the white middle class. Working within these parameters, mainstream media and Latina performers, attempt to carve out a new area or

representation, on the part of Disney, and use a stereotype to gain entry and permanence on the part of Latina performers. From the side of industry and the side of performers, the common ground is a long standing profitable strategy, carried out in the contemporary cultural moment that denies both gender and race as continuing structural formations and ideological narratives.

Disney attempts its Latina target strategy through ambiguity and disavowal. Disney's Latinas are light and upper middle class, in the case of Gabriella in *HSM* and Miranda in *Lizzie McGuire*. They are ambiguous enough that most members of the mainstream audience do not recognize their Latinidad. Disney does not go out of its way to mention their ethnicity. These ambiguous Latinas are tamed for the mainstream, indeed barely noticeable as Latinas. In terms of including Latinas in their wildly successful princess genre, Disney gingerly entered through a nearly Latina but ambiguously Spanish Princess Sofia. As well this princess was different in age and introduced in television rather than in feature film. After testing the waters, as it were, Disney executives, as voiced by Gerber, creator of both *Sofia the First* and *Elena of Avalor* suddenly "noticed" the Hispanic audience, to use their words. It is highly unbelievable that a major media conglomerate whose business model relies on keeping abreast of audience trends, partially informed by changing global demographics and consumer spending, would not have realized the size and aggregate spending power of the US Latina/o population. Nonetheless Elena has entered the world of television—not film, like other adolescent Disney princesses—and her success and longevity are a matter of conjecture. Disney's recent moves suggest that it is not yet quite convinced of the trade off between the market potential of the Latina/o audience and its potential alienation of the mainstream audience.

Disney is not the place to look for revolutionary change. As a mainstay of mainstream popular culture Disney treads carefully—many would say too carefully—with diversity and inclusivity. Also, whatever steps are taken toward an inclusive goal are done with an eye to increased profit. Toward that end ambiguous ethnics safely deliver new audiences while not alienating the old ones. Of course just as highly political issues and topics are seldom included in the Disney children's television and film universe, so ethnicity is portrayed as

individual style and barely recognizable hair and skin tone rather than connected to a culture and history. Veiled political themes, such as borderlands in *The Lion King* (1994) and heteronormativity in *Mulan* (1998) are displaced historically and geographically, as in most Hollywood film.

As a way to transition into the spitfire Latinas, it is useful to remember that today's reigning spitfire stars in an ABC television network show. As well Rosie Perez was briefly on *The View*, also an ABC show. ABC is a Disney holding, lending more evidence to the notion that Disney knows full well about the Latina/o audience and is developing ways to target it while bringing along its traditional mainstream—read white—audience. Disney's many media property allow for a range of experimental efforts, some of whose lackluster success might be moved to less prominent properties—perhaps that was their thinking about moving *Devious Maids* from ABC to Lifetime. Conversely, a huge megahit such as *HSM* develop into a feature film after proving its audience popularity in television. It remains to be seen whether *Elena of Avalor* will merit her own movie one day, or even, if she will remain part of the Disney children's television lineup.

The efforts on the part of Latina performers to gain access to and stay successful in the mainstream are Herculean and suggest some historical patterns as well as recent ruptures. While for some performers—and we have absolutely no idea how many others tried this cross over unsuccessfully—the spitfire role provides a window to climb into the mainstream, very few of them are able to maintain an enduring presence in the mainstream. To be fair, very few women are able to remain in the spotlight, period. Nonetheless, Latinas have tried many strategies to build an enduring career, even if it is not in the mainstream.

It appears common to try to move beyond the spitfire after the cross over. However this is very difficult to do. So what's a Latina girl to do in order to keep a career? From the brief treatment of a few stars included in this essay, many, such as Carmen Miranda, transition into more serious yet less successful roles in terms of mainstream popularity. Some Latinas transition into television roles. For example Rita Moreno was a regular in the highly awarded children's public television show *The Electric Company*⁸ (1971-1977). As well all of these former spitfires have had some

form of employment voicing television and/or film animated characters. Often these animated characters also bear out elements of the spitfire stereotype, such as was the case with Teresa, a lesbian taco, voiced by Salma Hayek in the movie *Sausage Party* (2016). Given that spitfires have to be able to dance, the professional dancers among them are able to extend their careers in that arena of performance. For instance, Rosie Perez choreographed for *In Living Color*. As well the contemporary daytime television genre of women's talk show has evolved to include an ethnic palette, which means there is Latina and African American in a group of women. Through that inclusion strategy, Rosie Perez briefly appeared in *The View*. Many Latina spitfires transition into production, such as Salma Hayek and Sofia Vergara with mixed results. This particular strategy is not confined to Latina spitfires and it promises to deliver more inclusion if successful.

Contemporarily an essential part of stardom is branding oneself into a media and other products mogul. Jennifer Lopez has successfully branded herself as a mogul with perfume, fashion, and make up lines in addition to keeping a career going through recorded music, television deals, and movie appearances. She has also engaged in production of media. Other contemporaries such as Salma Hayek and Sofia Vergara also have lucrative endorsement contracts as well as have ventured into production. This enterprising engagement with entrepreneurialism fits nicely within post feminist and neoliberal discourses of individual success in the marketplace. Moreover, post feminist popular media highlights performance and beauty as strategy and goals of a successful post feminist individual, whose agency relies on performing femininity within ideals of beauty enabled by the marketplace.

Another tactic, to engage in political activism, represents commitment to inclusivity in the face of post-racial and post-feminist discourses that frown upon, indeed preclude, acknowledgment of politics. For to engage in politics takes up historical and social issues of exclusion, discrimination, and inequality, all of which fall outside of the "posts", which reduce politics to individualist marketplace engagement. Political activism violates unwritten rules of engagement unless successfully linked to neo-liberal phillitainment (Bulut, Media, & McCarthy, 2014), wherein the political subject

links through philanthropy and corporate name brands simultaneously.

The fact remains that some Latinas are more successful than others at the transition game, even as they play the post-feminist neo-liberal game. Undoubtedly Jennifer Lopez has managed to stay in the mainstream, with ups and downs to be sure, but nonetheless she remains a bankable Latina whose roles are not limited to playing Latinas. Arguably her less successful roles in the mainstream, other than *Selena*, have been her Latina focused movies. Latina spitfires with noticeable accents have not been as successful in veering from the stereotype. Both Salma Hayek and Rosie Perez were not offered the more ambiguous roles upon which Jennifer Lopez was able to extend her career. For instance, romantic comedies in which Lopez played leading ambiguous ethnic roles with a white male protagonist such as *The Wedding Planner* (2001), *Maid in Manhattan* (2002), and *Monster-in-Law* (2005) were not offered to Perez or Hayek. Indeed in the post-racial era one way to erase racial and ethnic specificity is through ability to speak in unmarked English in addition to being light enough to be able to be interpreted

as white, Italian, Native American, European, or whatever. The post-racial era invites ambiguous ethnicity as it strives to suggest that race and ethnic specificity do not matter.

The terrain of Latinidad in contemporary mainstream popular culture is full of challenges and opportunities. Unsurprisingly Latina bodies and performers encounter more challenges and mainstream media industries experience expanded opportunities. Whereas Disney continually “discovers” the Latina audience in both children’s and general audience programming, it derives profits and kudos for its efforts. Latina performers, on the other hand, step into discursive stereotypes that allow entry for a limited time despite effort and ability. Transitioning into production, if possible, extends one’s career and potentially leads to more Latina/o inclusivity such as that enabled by many of the Ventanarosa productions spearheaded by Salma Hayek. The most successful approach thus far appears to be the one wherein the cross over includes the ability to leave behind one’s ethnicity when so demanded, as Jennifer Lopez has often done, and therefore perform the ideal hybrid and post-racial post-feminist roles.

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Notas

- ¹ By “intrinsically” I mean that the category Latina/o is composed of population that comes from long histories of hybridity and mixed race.
- ² To be fair, the Best Supporting Actress award has been called the “kiss of death” for the person earning it. Many an actress’ highpoint is that award, only to begin a slow of rapid descent from the limelight afterwards.
- ³ In Valdivia (1998), Rosie Perez is analyzed in this movie as both reiterating the stereotype of the working class, spitfire dress style Latina while also palying a very tragic, non comical role.
- ⁴ There has not been a confirmation that this was the reason for Rosie leaving *The View*. There have been denials, in the form of Perez saying she was already committed to many other projects. As well ABC denied firing Rosie, or even asking her to leave. However, despite the fact that Kelly voiced an offensive remark about Mexicans, it was Rosie to had to apologize to Kelly for making her feel racist. A more extensive analysis of this episode is forthcoming in my book *The Gender of Latinidad*.
- ⁵ Entire books, journal articles, and book chapters, not to mention countless popular press stories, have focused on Jennifer Lopez. For the purposes of this essay, I briefly explore elements most relevant to spitfire transition and ability to remains in the spotlight.
- ⁶ While teaching a Masters Seminar at the Universidad del Norte in Barranquilla, Colombian students pointed out that both Shakira and Sofia Vergara are from Barranquilla, as such coded as Caribbean within Colombia. Furthermore, they asserted that Sofia Vergara is not representing a spitfire in the US sterotype version, but a costeña in the Colombian popular culture version.
- ⁷ There is much anecdotal evidence that sometimes Latino talent are encouraged to sign contracts that are not in their best interests.
- ⁸ Personal disclaimer —I was a total fan and me and one sister used to learn English.