

THE MARGINALIZED OTHER: DISTORTIONS AND LIMITATIONS IN THE REPRESENTATIONS OF LATINA WOMEN IN AMERICAN MEDIA

CLARICE A. BLANCO

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH, COLLEGE OF LIBERAL ARTS, TEXAS STATE UNIVERSITY
MASTER OF ARTS IN RHETORIC AND COMPOSITION

BACKGROUND

Western society, specifically the United States, has put a great emphasis on physical appearance to the point of near obsession. There is an abundance of research that claims the American Beauty Standard, also known as the Thin Ideal, has dominated American society as the epitome of perfection all American women need to attain, even though it is so near inhuman perfection (Engeln; Goodman; Viladrich et al.). Nonetheless, American women still spend a great deal of time worrying about their bodies, especially since social comparison to idealized media images is unavoidable in this digital age (Engeln 156). Therefore, beauty obsession has become a cyclical sickness; the more media pushes beauty focused content, the more women consumers will want such coverage. On the topic of Latinas, the limited media representations of Latinas—a small pool of celebrities like J. Lo and Salma Hayek—only displays two body shapes that adhere to the American trope of tropicalism which, as a result, oppress Latinas who do not conform to these shapes. In other words, the trope of tropicalism dictates the media portrayals of Latinas in American mainstream culture by presenting Latino stereotypes (rhythmic music, bright colors, brown skin, curvaceous bodies) as a standardized (Latinidad) body shape that further marginalizes and others Latinas.

METHODOLOGY / METHODS / THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Methodology

- Critical discourse analysis
- Rhetorical analysis

Methods

- Critically watched the Super Bowl Halftime Show
- Researched comments about the show
- Critically watched *Fools Rush In* for instances of overt, stereotypical racial actions (See second image of Salma Hayek)
- Conducted scholarship research for theories on bodies, race, and representation.

Theoretical Framework

- Tropicalism
 - a trope that dictates the media portrayals of Latinas in American mainstream culture by presenting Latino stereotypes (bright colors, brown skin, curvaceous bodies) that further marginalizes and others Latinas (Martynuska).
- Karma Chávez’s validation
 - White male bodies are validated and invisibilized because they are the norm
 - Any body that does not fit the white, male norm are visible and, therefore, work to be validated and accepted in society.
- Lisa Flores’s raced bodies
 - “[R]aced bodies—bodies that *look* other” are restricted and contained (8).
- Latinidad
 - unifies all Latinos, yet disregards Latinos of black and indigenous origins, as well as assumes all Latinos have the same culture and identity (Martinez).
 - establishes the standardized Latina body: curvaceous and sexually charged

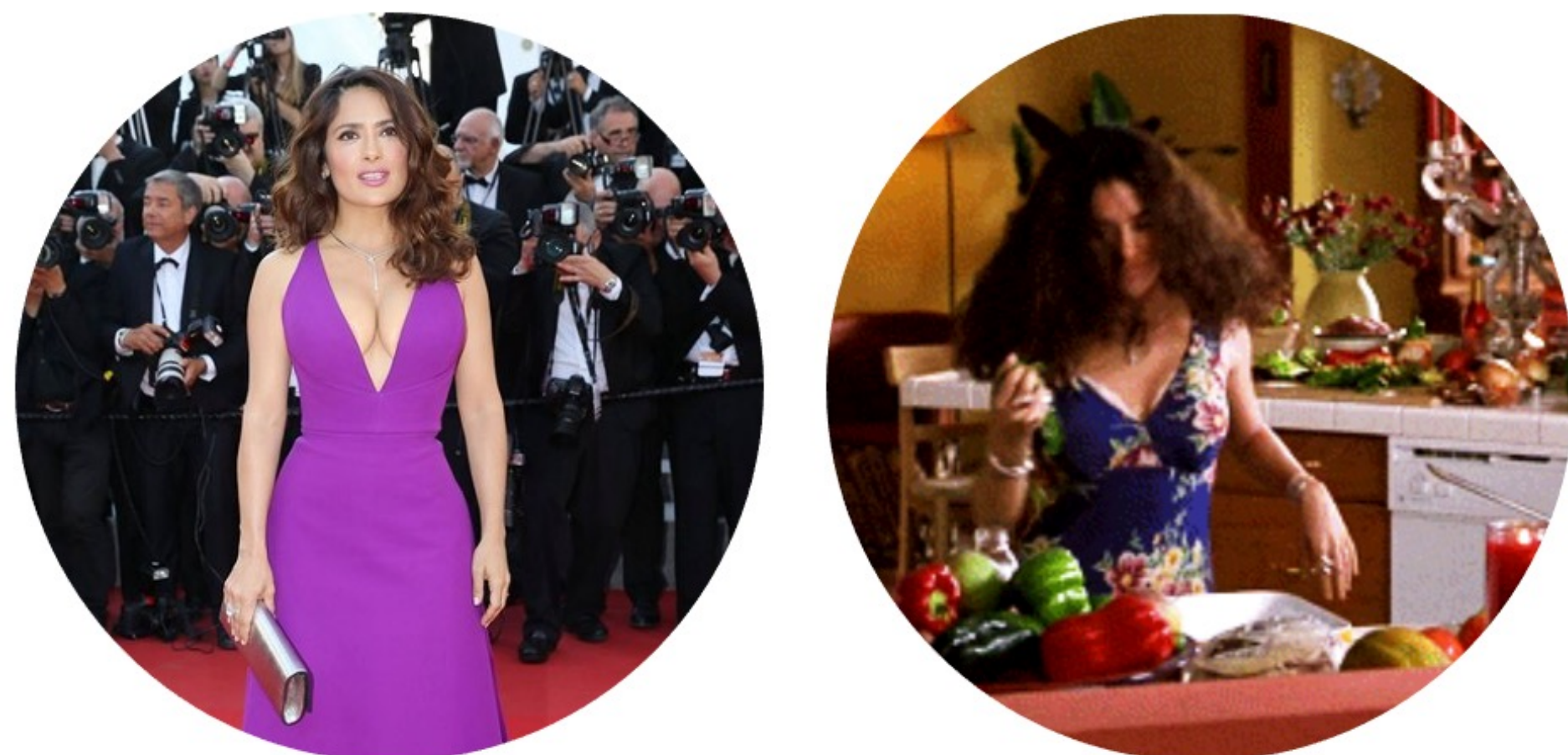
FINDINGS

Media Representations

- Latina celebrities, like Lopez and Hayek, challenge the dominant White cultural narrative. As a result, the White Gaze aims to control and contain depictions and constructions of Latinas in the media through Tropicalism and Latinidad: hypersexualized, exoticized, standardized.
- Latina bodies are exploited by the media to fill diversity quotas
- Latina celebrities, like J. Lo and Hayek, are overlooked for their success and, instead, criticized for their bodies.

Counterargument

- Instead of perpetuating this harmful standardized body image, it is argued that Latina celebrities, like J. Lo and Hayek, are actually validating Latina bodies by helping them become widely recognized and, eventually, accepted in society.
- It’s an empowering act, but it still reduces these Latina celebrities to sexual and desirable objects.



IMAGES 1 AND 2 (LEFT, RIGHT) : A SEXUALIZED SALMA HAYEK

- Represents the romanticized Latina body: small waist and curvaceous hips and breasts
- Her characters are “sexualized ethnic spectacle[s]” (Molina-Guzmán 120).
- Tropicalism racializes and sexualizes dances; therefore, in *Fools Rush In* (1997), Alex Whitman (the WASPy Vegas husband/baby-daddy) is seen falling in love with Hayek, a fiery and free-spirited Mexican American when she dances “exotically” with her hips while making a salad (Image 2).
- Hayek has also been overtly sexualized with her red carpet looks and character wardrobe that show off her tiny waist and large breasts.



IMAGES 3 AND 4 (LEFT, RIGHT) : AN ETHNICALLY DISTINCT SALMA HAYEK

- Despite the fact she portrayed a strong Latina character (Frida), she is still only recognized for her body.
- She is often criticized for her lack of variety in characters because she displays herself as an Authentic Latina, thereby marginalizing her career to only play ethnic roles because of her ethnically distinct body shape and accent.
- For instance, in Image 3 Hayek is dressed in fluffy, puffy, wavy hair in her *Fools Rush In* role because that further determines her ethnic identity.

DISCUSSION

Practical/Social Implications

- This study sheds light on the ways American media implicate body image issues on Latinas.
- The media has created hypersexualized depictions of Hayek and Lopez to sell, because sex sells. As a result, “‘ethnic’ beauty is [...] turned into a spectacle of inclusion and participation” (Mendible 13).
- The limited and lack of realistic media representation of Latinas leaves them feeling invisible and unappreciated because they don’t fit this standardized shape or exotic beauty standards.

Value of the Project

- The value of this project comes from understanding the how and why Latinas are racially marketed for their visually ethnic otherness in American media.

Limitations

- Only the popular culture representations of Latinas were studied, and, even then, only two of many Latina celebrities.

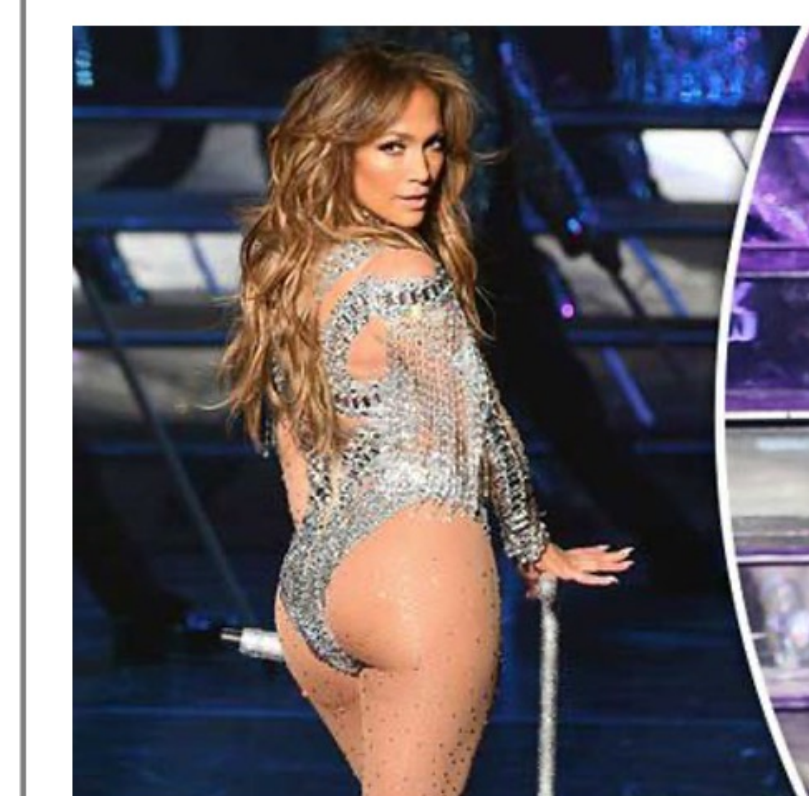
Future Research

- Study the lack of diversity even among diverse groups, such as Afro-Latinas, Indigenous Latinas and Trans-Latinas—groups that Latinidad ignores.
- Another topic to study would be Latinas in a professional field or setting, such as politicians, activists, professors, and more.



IMAGES 1 AND 2: AN ETHNICALLY DISTINCT J. LO

- Despite the fact she portrayed a strong Latina character (Selena), pop culture depictions still focus on her body (particularly her *ass-et*).
- J. Lo has been able to pass in some American films as ethnically ambiguous such as her role in *The Wedding Planner* (2001).



IMAGES 3 AND 4: A SEXUALIZED J. LO

- Represents qualities stereotypically associated with Afro-Latinas, specifically in relation to her Puerto Rican heritage and rounded buttocks.
- “Her body mattered—not her talent” (Gonzalez 70).
- Similar to Hayek, tropicalism also sexualized and racialized her dancing, especially since her singing career focused on dancing. As a result of the booty-twerking, hip-shaking hip-hop and Latin performances of the Super Bowl Halftime Show, there were multiple complaints made about the hypersexualized performance.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS / GOALS

How does the standardized Latina body, that is portrayed throughout American mainstream media through celebrities like J. Lo and Salma Hayek, dictate representations of Latinas in American popular culture and, ultimately, affect Latina Americans?

The goal of this study is to examine the persuasive strength of the media.

PURPOSE

The purpose of this study is to understand how and why Latinas are racially marketed in American media, and how that can potentially affect Latina Americans since these Latina celebrities are the most accessible role models.

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