

CHOKED BY CULTURE: U.S. LATINAS IN THE ERA OF
POSTFEMINISM AND THE MILLENNIAL GENERATION

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INTRODUCTION

In *The Beauty Myth*,¹ a groundbreaking book that opened the door for post feminism, Naomi Wolf argues that what we call “beautiful” is a cultural myth purposely framed to keep women under control by imprisoning them in their bodies. According to Wolf, becoming aware of this is the most effective way to finding a liberating solution to this “epidemic” problem. Almost 15 years later and after profuse academic debates, the influence of Wolf’s position on representations of beauty in Western media and its effects on feminine subjects is undeniable. As we progressed into the 1990’s we witnessed new faces and body shapes appearing more and more often in fashion magazines. Bending preexisting, though unwritten rules and queering body preconceptions, postmodern cultural studies eased their ways into pop-culture and prompted more liberating and inclusive possibilities.² This new diversity permeating mainstream media allowed for alternative beauty configurations that included naturally-aging bodies and faces in the nude, celebrations of motherhood, the aesthetics of chemotherapy and scars, the acceptance of the bizarre, etc. Along with the new imaging came its share of power and empowering to otherwise oppressed groups which, aided by the eruption of the internet, found easy dissemination in global cyberspaces and forums. In the United States, the new millennium nestled the eclosion of a new woman shaped by a discourse of self-assertiveness and determination that seems to have put, if only illusorily, old feminist grievances to rest.

In this context, William Strauss describes the birth of a new generation, the Millennials. According to Strauss, “each generation ‘rebels’ by breaking style from its pop-culture, correcting ‘mistakes’ of parents and leaders [and] filling a social role vacated by the dying generation”.³ In that respect, the Millennials separate themselves from their predecessors, the X-Generation, and embrace optimism and self - confidence with women occupying a foreground

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¹ Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth* (London: Vintage, 1990).

² For a range of new modes of classifying gender and sexuality, see Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1990).

³ William Strauss, *The Millennial Generation in the U.S.*, Western Association of Colleges and Employers Conference in Portland, Oregon, 4 June 2003, Southern Oregon University, <http://www.sou.edu/access/careers/millennials.html> (accessed April 12, 2005).

position in a nonchalant manner (see Chart 1). New representations of women poured into television, film, and other graphic media shaping a progressive profile more or less explicitly, more or less subliminally.

If such promising momentum has been or still is effective in granting American women a place of leadership in the new millennium, or if it will turn into another wave to vanish in the shores of conformism, it is too soon to tell. More urgent and more necessary an analysis at this time is the one focusing on U.S. Latinas, a subgroup within the broader category of U.S. women that, though sharing the same geography and citizenship, seems to lag behind in the cultural advances—real or represented—that Anglo-American women seem to enjoy. In trying to legitimize this shared space, identification problems come to mind. Cheryl Johnson-Odim, among others have equated them to the tensions between First World feminism and Third World women: “While it may be legitimately argued that there is no one school of thought on feminism among First World feminists—who are not, after all, monolithic—there is still, among Third World women, a widely accepted perception that the feminism emerging from white, middle-class Western women narrowly confines itself to a struggle against gender discrimination.”⁴ But despite attempts to include U.S. Latinas as part of the Third World, it seems inaccurate and misleading to impose already fallacious categories to groups that, though minorities, coexist with the mainstream in a technologically developed society.⁵ In other words, U.S. Latinas share educational, working and/or recreational spaces with other groups under the official label of “equal opportunities.” In that respect and focusing on the aforementioned group defined as the millennial generation, the following questions are in order: Should U.S. Latinas include themselves in the broader category of American women and catch up with the cultural struggle of the 21st century? If so, what challenges must they overcome within and without their communities? Are solutions to be found within the realm of multiculturalism, feminism, or both? What role, if any, does body image, gender-stereotyping, and media representation play on Latinas’ stronger subordination to patriarchal authority?

In the following sections I will take a closer look at the cultural ties that prevent U.S. Latinas from fully achieving their potential and accessing positions of leadership. Following Judith Butler’s formulations on performance and sexual identity in accordance with ethnicity and political regulations, the introductory section will draw from theory to delineate the imposed boundaries of “Latina” identity. I will begin with Joan Riviere’s concept of “masquerade” and trace its ramifications in association with women throughout the decades, from Lacan and Derrida to Laura Mulvey, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Donna

⁴ Cheryl Johnson-Odim, “Common Themes, Different Contexts: Third World Women and Feminism” In *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*, ed. Chandra Mohanty, Anna Russo, and Lourdes Torres, 314-15 (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1991).

⁵ Chandra Talpade Mohanty’s ample configuration of the Third World includes “black, Latino, Asian, and indigenous peoples in the U.S., Europe, [and] Australia, some of whom have historic links with the geographically defined third worlds.” See Mohanty, 5.

Haraway. Assuming with Butler that gender repetition may not only reinforce conservative culture but also parody the same culture, I will put forward the question whether Latinas do the former or the latter. By mapping elements of representation, discourse, and performance, both from inside and outside the group, as they appear in drama, film, and pop-culture, the subsequent sessions will expose common problems that Latinas face, such as patterns of self-imposed imaging endorsed by an objectifying male gaze. In the last two decades, those elements have emerged as spaces of parody and self-assurance. As we progress into the new millennium, it is valid to question this methodology and suggest new approaches to cultural deconstruction and awareness.

FIRST OBSERVATIONS: LATINA MASQUERADE

In my many years of working as a Spanish professor in different universities of the U.S. teaching language, literature, film and culture, my classes housed a diverse student population in terms of ethnicity and background, with the particularity that females always outnumbered their male counterparts. Blessed with the opportunity to teach in regions as diverse as my student body, I was able to trace three common trends that applied particularly to Latinas in a higher percentage and separated them from other females in the classes: 1) They were first-generation college students; 2) They lived with their parents in the area; 3) Their views and perspectives were extremely conservative for their ages, contradicting the old adage about the inverted proportionality between youth, heart, and socialism.⁶

Another commonality observed among Latinas was a sense of stereotypical femininity that outstood within the class when contrasted with their non-Latina peers and that seemed to underline Joan Riviere's concept of masquerade. If such strategy, first mentioned by Riviere, served a political purpose and originated a fructiferous debate that opened the doors for female advancement in 20th century Western societies, it did not seem to have embraced U.S. Latinas, suggesting that other variables may have contributed to their exclusion, at least partially, from the evolving waves of feminism. Now halfway into the first decade of the 21st century and bestowing a "post-" prefix unto the term "feminism," it is vital to consider Latinas' cultural insertion in the mix so they may face the same opportunities and bear the same challenges resulting in growth as females from other groups.

Women have been long associated with "the masquerade," a concept originated by Joan Riviere in her seminal article published in 1929 and since

⁶ I am referring to the famous phrase: "One who is not a socialist at 20 has no heart, and one who remains a socialist at 40 has no head." Attributed to George Bernard Shaw and Winston Churchill, and probably coined by French premier and former socialist Aristide Briand (1862-1932), the quotation is now part of American public domain.

then approached, revisited and many times distorted by intellectuals, feminists, and media alike. Riviere refers to womanliness as a mask worn by women both to hide the masculine components of their personalities and to divert the anticipated negative social reaction if exposed as masculinized.⁷ Exploring and expanding Riviere's formulations, Jacques Lacan equates masquerade with fantasy in the Woman's quadrant of his sexuation chart and, as such, he attributes her the agency of the object *a* of desire which extends to the phallus in the Man's quadrant as well as to the Other's *jouissance* in the Woman's realm.⁸ Equating Lacan's feminine *jouissance* to Derrida's concept of *différance*, as Frida Saal has convincingly argued, a subversive dimension flowing from desire to linguistics may be added. Embracing the dual concept of postponing and differing, *différance* allows for a game of repetitions and missed encounters in time and space which Saal equated to the Nietzschean mask, a space where representation covers/constitutes reality, and reality covers/constitutes a void with no other presence behind it.⁹

In the intersection of reality, representation and masquerading, women face a paradoxical situation where liberation may be masked as submission and vice versa. Both the fluidity associated with femininity and its ways of subverting patriarchal authority have been celebrated as mechanisms of social change while being perpetuated in literature, film, art, and theater as new non-conductive stereotypes. At this point, Judith Butler's distinction between expression and performativeness becomes of crucial importance:

If gender attributes and acts, the various ways in which a body shows or produces its cultural signification, are performative, then there is no preexisting identity by which an act or attribute might be measured; there would be no true or false, real or distorted acts of gender, and the postulation of a true gender identity would be revealed as a regulatory fiction.¹⁰

⁷ Joan Riviere, *The Inner World and Joan Riviere: Collected Papers, 1920-1958*, ed. Athol Hughes (London: Karnac

Books, 1991), 94. According to Riviere, in everyday life, the mask of femininity may take curious forms leading women to hide technical knowledge, to show anxiety dealing with men, and to choose extremely feminine attires in front of them. In Ellie Ragland-Sullivan's terms, "the feminine masquerade poses a question, while masculine identification with law, logos, or authority tries to stop the question." See Ellie Ragland-Sullivan, "The Sexual Masquerade: A Lacanian Theory of Sexual Difference" In *Lacan and the Subject of Language*, ed. Ellie Ragland-Sullivan and Mark Bracher, 75 (New York: Routledge, 1991).

⁸ Ragland-Sullivan, 78. Lacan proposes the asymmetry of gender interactions and hence accounts for all the different possibilities of human sexuation. See Raúl A. Galoppe, "From *Some Like it Hot* to Lacan's Sexuation Theory: 'Imperfect' Explorations of Sex, Gender, and Desire" In *The Marketing of Eros: Performance, Sexuality, Consumer Culture*, ed. Peter Schulman and Frederick A. Lubich, 138-50 (Essen, Germany: Die Blaue Eule, 2003).

⁹ Frida Saal, "Lacan & Derrida," *Tenth Symposium of the Fundación Mexicana de Psicoanálisis, on Writing and Psychoanalysis*.

February, 1994, Books and Tales, <http://www.booksandtales.com/talila/lacderen.htm> (accessed April, 30 2005).

¹⁰ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), 141.

Assuming that gender identity is constructed and imposed to U.S. Latinas by phallogentric regulations from within their own culture, a departure from self-indulged mimicry and perpetuation of already assigned feminine spaces and functions is desired and expected. In all likelihood, such departure will originate the long-awaited change-producing crisis that women from other groups encountered in the 1970's, 1980's, and 1990's. As we progress into the first decade of the third millennium, it is time for Latinas to become aware that they, as a group, will be the agents of change.

Decades of struggle and awareness of the variables of discourse, in terms of gender and body politics, have produced a perceptible displacement of the center-margin tensions as regards race, sexual orientation, and gender, placing women among other minorities in positions of visibility and power. Unfortunately, the aforementioned categories are too broad and may originate confusion. Before even considering if women's progress is real or being jeopardized by a glass ceiling, we must consider Latinas as a subcategory deserving special consideration within the broader label of U.S. Women.

As first, second, or even third generation of U.S. citizens, Latinas fall behind when compared with White, Asian, or African-American females. Wendy Swartz argues that such disadvantage among Latinas is due to economic and cultural reasons.¹¹ If the economic factors are common to all groups from poor or immigrant backgrounds, the cultural challenges are distinct and unique.¹² Hispanic tradition is believed to prioritize communal over individual achievements and women seem to abide to such rules.¹³

Swartz's arguments are accurate and reflect an undeniable state of affairs on the surface, especially regarding economic challenges. They even highlight important cultural issues but fail to link culture to gender as a imposition deeply rooted in discourse and patriarchy, something that, inherited

¹¹ Wendy Swartz, *Strategies for Improving the Educational Outcomes of Latinas*. ERIC Digest. New York, 2001. ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education, <http://www.ericdigests.org/2002-2/latin.htm> (accessed May 14, 2005).

¹² Some of the challenges facing Latinas in their efforts to achieve are common to all students from poor and/or immigrant backgrounds. Their families may lack the communication skills, knowledge, and experience to take advantage of educational, cultural, and social opportunities; and they may not have been able to foster development of school readiness skills. Equally important, the short-term economic needs of the family may supersede the desires of parents to support their children's long-term educational goals. See Angela Ginorio and Michelle Huston, *Sí, se puede! Yes, We Can. Latinas in School* (Washington, DC: American Association of University Women Educational Foundation, 2001).

¹³ The belief that the welfare of the family (and community) supersedes individual aspirations is fairly fixed in the various Hispanic communities. It can cause adolescents to drop out in order to bring another much needed paycheck into the household. It might also dampen Latinas' efforts to succeed in the classroom if achievement requires competition rather than cooperation with other students. Further, Latina adolescents often assume adult roles in their homes; their families expect them to do housework and take care of their elders and siblings, and, if needed, to serve as interpreters and intermediaries when contact with the outside world must be made (i.e., at medical appointments, job interviews, social service agency meetings). Premature adulthood can lead Latinas to feel ready for marriage and motherhood before completing their education. See Ginorio and Huston; Rafael Valdivieso and Siobhan Nicolau, *Look Me in the Eye: A Hispanic Cultural Perspective on School Reform* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, 1992); Jeanne Drysdale Weiler, *Codes and Contradictions: Race, Gender Identity, and Schooling* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000).

from medieval and modern Spain, has accompanied the Latino culture ever since.

In unveiling Spanish cultural archetypes coming from Medieval times and still present as part of the collective unconscious which serves to shape present-day idiosyncrasies and family structures, Javier Salazar Rincón distinguishes two categories of honor, the vertical and the horizontal.¹⁴ Vertical honor assigns the individual a position in the social scale matching higher ranks to higher honors. In ancient times, the monarch, his family, and the high nobility were maximum holders of honor and the rest of the social layers saw it shrink as the ranks decreased. Bestowed by a superior hierarchy, such as the king, honor was granted to the knights as nobility or a title. To a lesser degree, noblemen could also grant it to their earls by conceding privileges, respect, or friendship. It is therefore obvious that such pyramidal structure would create a tight network of homosocial negotiations among males, a practice very well captured in literature and drama and quite preponderant in present-day Latino politics.

Horizontal honor, in turn, was fueled by fame and reputation among peers and neighbors. Gained from noble status and rectitude, honorability had to be sustained by the daily acts that others could witness. Good fame among peers as well as respect and submission from those below in rank was paramount in maintaining a social position. No matter how spotless his conscience is, how self-assertive and sure of his own value and courage, a man was “defamed” if people did not consider him worthy of his honor. It is imaginable the extent of hypocrisy and secrecy families had to embrace to hide what, at the time, could qualify as questionable deeds or infamies. Collective feelings exerted an authentic tyranny over individual behavior. Even the strongest beliefs and the deepest convictions were betrayed to avoid becoming target of people’s scorn.

In guarding horizontal honor, women had a preponderant, thought pathetic role. Raised in a most rigid and oppressed social structure, they were sought by rival clans as the easy targets to make their family’s reputation collapse. Women became the center of a perverse game of desire and repression amid of which insinuation and restraint were the key elements. Publicly seen only in church, their faces always covered with veils, permanently chaperoned by brothers or ladies-in-waiting, women had to develop a way of circumventing the patriarchal law in order to survive in such grueling circumstances.

Cultural traits of the ancient Spanish code of honor and its archetypical implications permeate present-day Latina imaging and representation. At the center of homosocial negotiations, Latina women have been objectified with paradoxical attributes of saints and sinners in the same body construction. The stereotype may be defined within the binaries of the virgin and the whore or, as Alicia Arrizón and Lillian Manzor categorize, “the virginal *señorita* and the

¹⁴ Javier Salazar Rincón, “Honra horizontal y vertical en Cervantes” *Anales Cervantinos* 24 (1986): 93.

loose Latin spitfire”¹⁵ and, as such, it promotes a duality imposed by the patriarchal society, a dissociated antagonistic force by which mothers, sisters, and wives are saints while the remaining females are whores.

Contemporary Latinas changed the veil for a sexual mask to cover their true selves and conform to preconceived impositions of ethnic beauty. Fabricated by Hollywood during the era of the Star System and continued until the present via U.S. Hispanic television, the sexual objectification of Latinas as either exotic providers of pleasure or silent receptors of masochistic suffering bluntly indicates that the effects of different waves of feminism so helpful to women from other groups have not impacted the Latino culture, leaving Latinas unaware of the need for change and advancement in the social scale, in terms of sexual and gender roles.

BEAUTIFUL SEÑORITAS AND REAL WOMEN: PARODY AS RESISTANCE; RESISTANCE AS RESULT

Prolific Cuban-American playwright Dolores Prida has put her body of work to the service of feminist causes especially geared to create awareness among Latinas in the U.S. Her female characters face the dichotomy between American individualism, a unique personal experience that shapes the psyche and places the ego at the center of the universe, and Latino communal mores, a collective experience governed by family and community impositions.¹⁶ In *Beautiful Señoritas*¹⁷, Prida’s fictional women try to keep a balance by walking the tight rope of community traditions and individual freedoms. They fight *machismo* by deconstructing the male gaze and offering back a distorted, hyperbolic image framed in the convention of the American musical intersecting with the Cuban musical comedy. As Wilma Feliciano points out, “[e]mboldened by the consciousness raising by early feminism, the señoritas demand their freedom with satire and song”.¹⁸ But are they aware of their own ironies or do they pose just as male-pleasing babes? More important, do the audience, male or female, comprehend the subversive underlining message or do they see the play as an instrument perpetuating what it intends to undermine?

Beautiful Señoritas may be viewed as a parody of the war between the sexes. Structured as a beauty contest, it exposes the external markers by which society evaluates the worth of women. As a result of the pressure to look more feminine than female, more idealized than real, something that cuts across cultures and history, women derive their self-esteem from body image¹⁹ and build their sense of self from the feedback they receive from media. According

¹⁵ Alicia Arrizón and Lilian Manzor, *Latinas on Stage* (Berkeley, CA: Third Woman Press, 2000), 20.

¹⁶ Wilma Feliciano, “Language and Identity in Three Plays by Dolores Prida” *Latin American Theatre Review* 28-1 (1994): 125.

¹⁷ Dolores Prida, *Beautiful Señoritas and Other Plays*, edited and introduced by Judith Weiss (Houston, TX: Arte Publico P, 1991), 19-45.

¹⁸ Feliciano, 126.

¹⁹ Feliciano, 126.

to María Luisa Ochoa-Fernández, humor is used “to denounce and criticize pre-established definitions of Latina womanhood as conceived within and outside the Latino community in the U.S.”²⁰ Prida’s strategy lays in the deconstruction of such Latina stereotypes as the sexual bombshell of dubious reputation, the virginal woman kept immolated as a living token of sexual sacrifice, and the ever-suffering mother on an unreachable pedestal. Latinas’ oppression is capsulized within that paradoxical trinity. A woman must walk the fine line between the first two. She must be attractive and insinuate the most exotic of pleasures, but she should never deliver. She must manage to allure the male without succumbing to his insistence for love.²¹ If she succeeds and remains a virgin (or perceived a virgin) before marriage, she will access the third agency and, after she becomes a mother, will be venerated as a saint. The ever-suffering mother is condemned to suffering in silence as her man gears back to the first agency, the sexual bombshell, to redirect his female objectifications.

By exposing and deconstructing such stereotypes from inside the Latino community, “*Beautiful Señoritas* is aimed at awakening [...] Latinas [...] to an understanding of their oppression, in order to make them react and throw off a collective lethargy of many years.”²² For those culturally outside the community, the play functions as a mirror full of images that can be recognized easily because people have internalized all those stereotypes via Carmen Miranda, Chiquita Banana, and Charo, the images of Latina femininity and gender relations in the United States. Such images, imposed by the Anglo-culture as well as the patriarchal society for the purposes of entertainment and sexual pleasure, strip women from their discourse of subjectivity and reduce them to objects ready to be possessed and exploited by the Anglo-American audience. In an inverted, metatheatrical way, this could be extended to the hopeless situation of Latina actresses displaying themselves and their bodies, as well as their ethnicity, in order to please an audience from the dominant sector and to fulfill the scope of expectations of Latina stereotypes imposed by the Anglo-American’s way of perceiving their cultural image.²³

Beautiful Señoritas closes with the trinity (Woman, Girl, and Mother) discussing the “dangerous, deadly adventure of being a woman! The harassment of being a woman... So many parts to be played so many parts to be stifled and denied.”²⁴ Like a beacon of hope, the Girl looks into the future and concludes that “there are possibilities. That women that go crazy in the night, that women that die alone and frustrated, that women that exist only in

²⁰ María Luisa Ochoa-Fernández, “Ethnically Humorous: Dolores Prida’s *Beautiful Señoritas*” *Studies in American Humor* 3-8 (2001): 21.

²¹ As early on as the 17th century, this pattern of behavior was criticized by Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz in her famous octosyllabic quatrain in which she argues on men’s inconsistency when it comes to balance inclination and censorship in courting women. Men’s desire objectify women as pleasing sexual machines while their expectation forces them to retain their virginal purity and to avoid succumbing to masculine advances. See Elias L. Rivers, ed., *Renaissance and Baroque Poetry of Spain: with English Prose Translations* (Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press, 1988), 322-24.

²² Ochoa-Fernández, 32.

²³ See Arrizón and Manzor.

²⁴ Prida, 43.

the mind, are only half of the story, because a woman is...’’²⁵ And the Girl’s statement is finalized by all the women as they define themselves as “A fountain of fire! A river of love! An ocean of strength! Mirror, mirror on the wall...’’²⁶ Twenty-five years later, the concepts exposed by Prida seem to materialize in *Real Women Have Curves* (2002), a film by Venezuelan cinematographer Patricia Cardoso based on a play by U.S. Latina Josefina López.

Real Women Have Curves, the film, is based on López’s homonymous play and is the result of the collaboration between López, producer George Lavoo, and director Patricia Cardoso. Set inside a sweatshop in East Los Angeles, the original play addresses issues of development, conflicting cultural values, and immigration:

In this [...] play a group of plump women, ages 18 to 49, work almost around the clock for one week sewing cocktail dresses in tiny sizes to meet a Friday deadline. The comedy’s two acts stage the world inside a garment shop, with its confluence of work and personal matters, against the threats of the world outside, especially an impending raid by the INS. The protagonist and narrator [...], Ana, shares many of Maria’s desires to study, to be recognized as a thinking, creative person, to be free, and to attend college. But while Maria must leave home in order to be free to pursue her dreams, Ana finds a new home that nurtures her before she leaves for college and welcomes her when she returns as a graduate.²⁷

While keeping the main characters and the underlying conflict of the play, the film concentrates on Ana’s coming of age as she finishes High School in Beverly Hills and is accepted at Columbia University in New York. That transitional summer in her life will expose conflicting values inside and outside the Latino community to the extent that they jeopardize a young woman’s potential for growth and realization. Ana’s relations with the other characters will illustrate different feminist concerns applied to Latinas “by the book.” If such methodology might seem somehow outdated after decades of film and drama directly influenced by gender studies and postmodern cultural theories, it is valid to emphasize that such discourses had not reached Latino populations until recently, in many cases still being a field almost unexplored.

Cardoso’s film is populated with characters that, though psychologically complex, stand for pre-assigned cultural roles and serve the premise of the film well, despite their predictability. As a Latina born and raised in the U.S. while in the core of a Chicano family, Ana is aware of her

²⁵ Prida, 44.

²⁶ Prida, 44.

²⁷ Margo Milleret, “Girls Growing Up, Cultural Norms Breaking Down in Two Plays by Josefina López” *Gestos* 13-26 (1998): 110-11.

hybrid cultural identity and knows that her future as an assertive woman well-positioned in society depends on her ability to break into mainstream America and find her space as (her)self. Possessing a bright, inquisitive mind, she knows firsthand the advantages of an equal opportunity education and enthusiastically will pursue higher studies following vocation and opportunity, even if that means leaving her family, rather than conforming to family rules and staying close to home. Her sister Estela, on the other hand, acting like a suffering doppelganger, will embrace a job and working conditions within the job that adjust to the expectations her community casts upon women. Cutting, sewing, and ironing dresses for Bloomingdale's for a fee that screams exploitation, Estela and her female associates at the sweatshop face an unpleasant destiny from which the only escape comes along with marriage. Interestingly, the binary exploiter/exploited falls within the Latino lines of tension. Estela works for a company whose CEO is another Latina, exploiter for Estela, exploited in relation to the corporation.

As a character, Carmen, the mother, bears the hideous function of perpetuating the phallogocentric patriarchy that oppresses her and Estela and eventually would appropriate Ana's subjectivity and force her into submission and acceptance of the status quo. As Margo Milleret well notes:

Growing up into womanhood necessarily involves conflict between mothers and daughters since mothers are often the chief enforcers of patriarchal values against which daughters rebel. One study of mother-daughter relations written in 1986 that addresses the specific community in which López's plays take place found that among Chicano students from a Los Angeles middle school 50% of the girls did not want to marry or have children even though both girls and boys professed great love for their mothers.²⁸

Ruth Wodak and Muriel Schultz, the authors of the study alluded to by Milleret, conclude that "the role of the mother remains a contradiction in values in the Mexican-American community" (137).²⁹ In their assumption, the reasons are to be found in the contrast between the low social status of women in society and their high status in the home, a space that grants them centrality and cultural recognition.³⁰

To break away from home/cultural ties, Ana must break away from her mother, a goal she achieves in several gradual steps. First she prioritizes her final day of school over her mother's hypochondriac manipulation. She also rebels by not accepting her mother's impositions over her body image, something foreshadowed in the scene

²⁸ Milleret, 112.

²⁹ Ruth Wodak and Muriel Schultz, *The Language of Love and Guilt: Mother-Daughter Relationships from a Cross-Cultural*

Perspective (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1986), 137.

³⁰ See Wodak and Schultz.

when Ana tastes the flan despite her mother's admonition and escalated to the climax of the story when Ana leads all the other women at the sweatshop into removing their clothes and exposing their less than perfect bodies to find relief from the heat while affirming themselves as real women with curves.³¹ Finally, she steps away and leaves into a brighter future even though she does not get her mother's approval and blessing.

Although the film focuses mainly on the female characters, the male counterparts are constructed on the side of solidarity rather than confrontation. This is an important characteristic since it sweeps the binary male-female away from the stereotype and into deeper layers of signification. The four main male characters assume the role of facilitators in relation to Ana's desire and realization. Seeing Ana's intellectual potential, Mr. Guzmán, her schoolteacher, opens the possibility for further education and eases her way into Columbia University. Her father understands the importance of Ana's transition into higher academic grounds and opposes the maternal resistance to change and female advancement in society. Her grandfather connects with her in an almost mystical way and becomes her accomplice in matters of the heart. Finally, Ana and Jimmy, one of her Anglo-American classmates, begin to explore their sexualities in a sweet and natural, almost idyllic way. The interesting angle presented in the film in the context of the couple's sexual explorations resides in the fact that Ana is in control of her sexuality, she assumes a more active role than her male partner and even provides the condoms. They both know that their investment in the relationship is at the level of experimenting and mutual gratification, an approach rarely seen in films dealing with teenagers, much less in the case of Latinas. Ana celebrates the losing of her virginity as a passage to womanhood and, when confronted by her mother, manages to clearly dissociate the virgin from the social constructions of female purity within the Latino community.

A rare gem in Latina filmography, *Real Woman Have Curves* addresses important issues concerning women, body images, expectations, and potentialities that should not go unnoticed. Unfortunately, no matter how acclaimed the film was, it only obtained visibility among a reduced number of intellectuals. Most Latinos are not reached by its message. Instead, they turn to television channels operated by mainstream companies. Mass media serving the Latino communities ignore the advances in gender and feminism fostered by Prida, López, Cardoso and others. As we average the first decade of the third millennium, U.S. Latino television seems to be totally unaware of

³¹ As Josefina López and Patricia Cardoso explain, here the concept of curves alludes not only to the shape of Latinas' bodies but also to the complexities of their subjectivities. See *Featurettes 1 and 2, Real Women Have Curves*, dir. Patricia Cardoso, HBO Films, 2002.

such advances when it comes to portraying women in an alternative, non-chauvinistic way.

SÁBADO GIGANTE: LATINA BREAD AND MISOGYNOUS CIRCUS

Sábado Gigante is a weekly three-hour variety show that airs every Saturday evening on Univision, one of the U.S. Latino networks, and is viewed by a vast audience.³² Hosted by Don Francisco, a middle-aged Chilean personality oozing sexism and poor taste, the program is structured in five overlapping sections encompassing games, musical performances, comedy, contests, and specialists. All this occurs in front of a live audience while syncopated by three voluptuous female assistants that smile and swing their exposed navels to highlight every commercial break. The following observations correspond to the edition of *Sábado Gigante* that aired on May 28, 2005.

By hosting the games, several competitions for heterosexual couples striving to classify for the big prize, a paid wedding, Don Francisco had ample opportunities to interact with the participants. In most occasions his remarks were demeaning of women in relation to men, stressing strength inferiority, age difference or making comments on body types in a negative, pejorative tone. When presenting female performers, the host resorted to vulgar sexual insinuations in the form of double-entendres. All that verbal abuse against women disguised as humor or wit was received in a festive and hilarious mode both by the audience and by the targeted females.

The comic skits performed by actors kept adding to the misogynous theme of the show. All of them, without exception, portrayed women within two categories: the sensual exuberant, though a little stupid, babe and the ugly, ignorant and vixen wife. When it came to sexuality and sex, women were represented as insatiable bitches very much to the annoyance of their male partners. Not one comedy act presented men and women interacting in a more equal or positive way, not to mention the representation of women from positions of leadership or as mere average human beings.

Suddenly turned into a talk show, the program offered “The Panel of Love,” a group of “specialists” advising couples with marital problems. The tone of the segment was condescending and offensive, a clear case of exploitation where, once again, women were highlighted as “sinners.”

To top it all, “Miss Golden Beauty,” a beauty pageant segment presented a group of five blondes who, by strutting their minimal bikinis and attempting lascivious manners, strived to earn online votes from the viewers. The winner might get a car and \$5,000 (U.S. dollars). *Sábado Gigante*, still conforms to the objectification of women from a chauvinist perspective in a way we would have thought extinct after decades of feminism and women’s

³² For more information about the program, see *Sábado Gigante* with Mario Kreutzberger (Don Francisco), UNIVISION. WXTV, <http://www.univision.com/content/channel.jhtml?chid=6&schid=6761> (accessed May 28, 2005).

rights.³³ Sadly, this show is not a rare exception of women's exploitation in Latino media. It is the norm. It seems as if the hard work of Dolores Prida, Josefina López, Patricia Cardoso and many others could be deemed invisible by the gross strokes painted by mass media in their biased attempts to represent Latinas. At this point, it is of significant importance to understand the power of the gaze and the need for aberration in order to produce a social change. Parveen Adams distinguishes between the image of woman as such and the way in which it is gazed, and proposes a displacement of the feminine object to disrupt the smooth circuit of the scopophilic drive and hence disrupt the path of sublimation.³⁴ In other words, the chain of oppression will be broken when Latina identity comes not from an image pre-constructed by males but from a displaced, self-assumed multiplicity of female representations.

CONCLUSIONS

In the dawn of the new millennium it is desirable to witness the birth of a new U.S. Latina. Her emergence, imminent and unstoppable despite resistance from male-oriented hegemonies inside and outside the community, is foreseen among university student populations where Latinas driven by professionalism and career goals outnumber those who find marriage and motherhood as their ultimate objective in life (see Chart 2). As a launching platform, I would like to argue, Latinas may find useful strategies in the works of Judith Butler and Donna Haraway. Butler's idea that all gender and all sexual identities are performed prologues her concept of parody as a powerful cultural and political tool. In her own words:

Practices of parody can serve to reengage and reconsolidate the very distinction between a privileged and naturalized gender configuration and one that appears as derived, phantasmatic, and mimetic—a failed copy, as it were. And surely parody has been used to further a politics of despair, one which affirms a seemingly inevitable exclusion of marginal genders from the territory of the natural and the real. [...] The loss of gender norms would have the effect of proliferating gender configurations, destabilizing substantive identity, and depriving the naturalizing narratives of compulsory heterosexuality of their central protagonists: “man” and “woman.”³⁵

³³ Three decades ago, in her chapter devoted to “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” Laura Mulvey already pointed out that “[t]he actual image of woman as (passive) raw material for the (active) gaze of man takes the argument [...] into the content and structure of representation, adding a further layer of ideological significance demanded by the patriarchal order.” See Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1989), 25.

³⁴ Parveen Adams, *The Emptiness of the Image: Psychoanalysis and Sexual Differences* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 130-31.

³⁵ Butler, 146.

By equating the masquerade to other gender configurations, Latinas will embrace a diverse array of parodic representations that will undermine the univocal relation between the phallic signifier (man) and the object of desire (woman). As part of the millennial generation, they could conform to Haraway’s postmodern configuration of subjectivity as cyborgs inasmuch as they resist organic gender identification.³⁶ The premise behind the proposed destabilization of the binary that anchors masculine and feminine discourses to dual gender constructions as the norm allows for new participations, on all multiple sides of the sexual equation. This is the convergent moment for Latinas to take a stand in redefining themselves as subjects outside the impositions of their chauvinistic culture. As the present world of electronic communications blurs the gendered line that defines a human being and more women feel empowered when crossing that line, Latinas might also see such crossings as an opportunity to break away from self-imposed cultural restrictions. When that happens, a “True Woman” will emerge.³⁷ Although the solutions to these problems may not be prescribed from outside, the purpose of this address is to lay the ground for inside explorations that would allow breaking the cultural ties by means of deconstruction and mockery, self-imagery, and participation.

Chart 1: Generation X and the Millennial Generation³⁸

Generation X	Millennials
Born 1965–1976 51 million	Born 1977–1998 75 million
Accept diversity Pragmatic/practical Self-reliant/individualistic Reject rules Killer life Mistrust institutions PC Use technology Multitask	Celebrate diversity Optimistic/realistic Self-inventive/individualistic Rewrite the rules Killer lifestyle Irrelevance of institutions Internet Assume technology Multitask fast

³⁶ As a result of technological advances, subjectivity may be revisited, reformulated, and reestablished to suit cyberspaces and other forms of human interaction. See Donna Jeanne Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991).

³⁷ The “True Woman” rejects her association with the *object a* as staged by Man’s fantasy. For a discussion of the concept of the True Woman, see Jennifer Friedlander, “How Should a Woman Look?: Scopic Strategies for Sexuated Subjects” *JPCS: Journal for the Psychoanalysis of Culture and Society* 8-1 (2003): 99-108.

³⁸ See Diane Thieffold and Devon Scheef, “Generation X and The Millennials: What You Need to Know About Mentoring the New Generations,” *Law Practice Today*, August 2004, <http://www.abanet.org/lpm/lpt/articles/mgt08044.html> (accessed May 17, 2005).

Latch-key kids Friend-not family	Nurtured Friends = family
Mentoring Do's · Casual, friendly work environment · Involvement · Flexibility and freedom · A place to learn	Mentoring Do's · Structured, supportive work environment · Personalized work · Interactive relationship · Be prepared for demands, high expectations

Source: *The Learning Café and American Demographics*
Enterprising Museum 2003.

Chart 2: Latinas in the U.S. Survey

Participants: MSU Female Students (Traditional and Non-Traditional)

Topics	Subtopics	Latina %	Anglo %	Non %
Marital Status				
	Single	60	62	67
	Non-Single	40	38	33
Religion				
	Catholic	60	57	33
	Non-Catholic	20	24	43
	Non-Religious	20	19	24
Professional Interests				
	Within Gender Expectations	57	57	55
	Outside Gender Expectations	43	43	40
Living Arrangements				
	On Campus	20	52	27
	Off Campus	80	48	73
	Alone	7	14	12
	With Roommate	17	67	27
	With Spouse/Partner	23	14	12
	With Parents	53	5	49
Most Important Future Role				
	Mother	23	28	33
	Professional	60	48	61
	Wife	13	24	6

Least Important Future Role				
	Mother	47	38	36
	Professional	17	38	21
	Wife	23	24	43
Identifications				
	Within the Culture	34	67	12
	Outside the Culture	27	0	21
	Multicultural	14	10	43
Gender Beliefs				
	Men have more opportunities	40	48	48
	Sexism exists	80	76	88
	Biology is destiny	3	10	9
	Body image is conformed by gender	83	86	88
	Men and women are different	77	86	79

Source: Montclair State University: Spring Semester, 2005.

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