Fragile Intersections: Portrayals of the Latina in Hollywood

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A thread which can be followed through the history of American film is the idea of the ‘other’. Despite, or perhaps because of, being such a racially and ethnically diverse nation, the dominant narratives of the United States position the non-white minority in opposition to the white majority, creating a character that is not only subjugated but defined primarily by their race or ethnicity. The Latin American ‘other’ has been imagined in the American consciousness since the colonization of the New World. The Latin American woman, as an image, has been dually constructed and ‘othered’ by Western paradigms of both race and gender. This is further complicated by notions of nativity and belonging. Since the early days of American cinema, the Latina character has shifted from an exoticized and exciting foreigner to a marginalized domestic minority. This parallels a demographic shift – from 1930 to today, the percentage of the U.S. population with Latin American origins has increased from 1 percent to 16 percent.1

Examining the experiences of several Latina actresses shows that their off-screen personas are as relevant to this discussion as their on-screen roles. In responding to the social and political forces at work around them, Latin American women in and on film have constructed American society’s perceptions of ‘The Latina’, and have found great success by both subverting and affirming these constructions.

One of the first Latin American women to break into American film, Brazilian performer Carmen Miranda, quickly became an icon in the U.S., and she set a precedent for those who would come after her. Beginning with her U.S.

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stage debut in 1939, she was characterized by her costumes: always colourful and resplendent with fruit, flowers and other symbols of Latin America. Although not a trained dancer, she danced in many of her films, thus establishing a cornerstone of the Hollywood Latina portrayal—a body in constant motion. She sang and spoke with a thick accent, which was exaggerated by both the press and film directors, who positioned her to match the stereotype of the ignorant or primitive foreigner. That she was actually of Portuguese birth was largely ignored by the U.S. media, who became enamoured with the distorted idea of Latin America they felt she represented. In fact, neither the directors nor the audiences of her films seemed to be able to differentiate between the individual countries of Latin America. Alongside her most famous work, That Night in Rio, she was cast in films such as Down Argentine Way and Weekend in Havana. Here, her Portuguese and Brazilian ethnicity appeared to be freely interchangeable with the settings and culture of Spanish-speaking Latin America. But her Brazilian identity was already questionable—much of the music and costume that became her recognizable signature had been appropriated from the rural black culture in Brazil. The image was further distorted by the wide range of films into which Hollywood directors placed her. To U.S. society, Carmen Miranda was a generic Latina—titillating, humorous, flamboyant, and most of all, exotic. Miranda’s willingness to play along with these sweeping generalizations disappointed her Brazilian fan base, who felt she was not representing their country properly to America—and by extension, to the world. Her Portuguese citizenship, combined with her perceived lack of respect for cultural distinctions within Brazil—and between Brazil and neighbouring nations, led some to question the authenticity of her Brazilian identity. Hollywood, however, adored her and the ideas she represented and made eighty-four films about, or set in, Latin America by the year 1945. This trend was partially influenced by global politics; in the years of and leading up to World War Two, European and Japanese markets were virtually closed, and so Latin America became the “safe” foreign destination. The U.S. government officially encouraged this and under the Good Neighbour Policy, sponsored cultural exchanges (such as bringing Carmen Miranda to America) designed to foster good relations with the countries of Latin America during the war. Many of Miranda’s films paid homage to this policy, with Latina characters who taught their culture and male American characters who readily accepted it as something that could be learnt in the space of a few musical numbers. This contributed to a strong mental association between Latinas and their culture. In the minds of America, Latin American women were nothing more than the exotic songs, dances, words and foods of their home countries, paired with an appealing female body. Carmen Miranda’s fame undoubtedly helped to shape Hollywood’s perception of Latino and Latina performers, but it also had an enduring effect on the generations of Latin Americans who would come after her, seeking their fame in America. Specifically, anyone of Brazilian origin, seeing Miranda as a cause of both pride and shame, felt the need to constantly reaffirm their loyalty to their nation, both in word and in deed. This led to more pronounced and offensive Latin American stereotypes than had existed in Miranda’s day, although the stereotypes addressed specific countries rather than a homogenized South America. Many of the most well-known Latinas on film today were born in the U.S. and must negotiate the expectations of American Hollywood, as well as those of their own ethnic communities, while struggling to position themselves as not American or foreign, but someone in-between.

While they were active during the same period, the Hollywood experience of Mexican actress Lupe Vélez was quite different from that of Carmen Miranda. As a very young woman, Vélez got her start directly in films, as opposed to singing and dancing on stage, and only briefly dabbled in Broadway later in her career. This beginning established her persona as distinct from the musical Latina who is always in motion. While she played a

5 Tompkins and Foster, Notable Twentieth-Century Latin American Women, 191.
6 Ibid.
9 Davis, “To Be or Not to Be Brazilian?”, 238.

13 Davis, “To Be or Not to Be Brazilian?”, 245.
variety of ethnicities in her early work, she became best known for the series of comedic films in which she portrayed an exaggerated Mexican stereotype, married to a white man.16 The very titles – The Girl from Mexico, Mexican Spitfire, and so on – convey the idea that this female character's stubbornness and ignorance are a direct result of her Mexican identity. While these films may have been motivated by the same political sentiment as Carmen Miranda's, they were not intended to sow seeds of goodwill and encourage the embrace of Mexican culture. Rather, they played into the American insecurity about immigrants.17 The proximity of Mexico virtually removed the element of the exotic unknown that characterized the portrayals of South American Latinas. Having been an established cliché in American narratives since the days of cowboys in the Wild West, the Mexican was no longer fascinating to U.S. audiences; they were a known entity. By portraying an immigrant woman from Mexico who was passionate and unintelligent, the filmmakers satisfied the public – as this was what they had come to expect – and downplayed the threat of dangerous border-crossers. In the later part of Vélez's career, this stereotype had been repeated so often it became fixed and stale, which only heightened the comedic effect.18 The “Mexican spitfire” persona, while countering traditional ideas of demure and delicate femininity, relied on hypocritical judgements about female expressions of emotion and through these judgements contributed to the burgeoning Hollywood construction of the Latina.

In her public persona, distinct from her film roles, Lupe challenged traditional Mexican and American femininity and was often accused of being promiscuous and aggressive.19 Moving from conservative, Catholic Mexico to the relative freedom of Los Angeles exposed the seventeen-year-old to new ideas about how women could dress and behave, and she crafted a female identity which did not revolve around the sanctity of marriage and motherhood. The Hollywood rumour mill churned out accounts of her various liaisons, fuelled perhaps by the preconceptions about sexually indiscriminate Latin American women.20 While obviously an incorrect generalization, it is possible that stereotypes such as this created more freedom for Vélez to transgress gender norms. Her behaviour was often regarded as normal or expected for a woman of her race.21 Conversely, a white woman would have been morally condemned for the same acts. It is, however, important to remember that Vélez lived in the privileged and permissive community of Beverly Hills, and as such, her experience does not reflect that of most Mexican women in the U.S. at the time. Of course, this privilege had a price; Vélez had a double set of standards placed upon her as a film star and a person, and she had to navigate between the conflicting personas she wanted and had to portray. Even off-screen, her star image fed America's desire for the foreign, exciting, and comedic, and thus helped to shape how the nation considered Latina, and specifically Mexican, women.

While evidently addressing the topical issue of racial and ethnic conflict in the 1950s, the musical film West Side Story also contributed significantly to the construction of the Latino image in the American consciousness. Following in the footsteps of Carmen Miranda's characters, the Puerto Rican women of West Side Story are invariably sexualized and associated with a generic “Latin” culture.22 Unlike most of the Latino characters in Miranda's films or Lupe Vélez's Mexican immigrant, these women have established themselves permanently in America. This was a defining moment for the history of the Latina in American film, not because being American inherently made the characters superior, but because it made them more relatable for filmmakers and audiences, who regarded these Latina characters a greater degree of subjectivity or selfhood. Paradoxically, the increased individuality of these characters was supported by the film's

17 Ibid., 20.
18 Ibid., 31.
emphasizes on groups and communities.23 In Carmen Miranda’s films, she was often the lone Latina, juxtaposed with Americans, which contributed to her characterization as an exotic import.24 The plot of West Side Story, however, is driven by the relations between the heroine, Maria, and her close-knit Latino community, including other women such as her friend, Anita. Validated by this identity, Maria exists as a person (albeit one subjugated by her gender) before she encounters the white male gaze – a small step in a positive direction for the Latina on film.

An inescapable reality of Maria’s portrayal is, of course, that she was portrayed by Natalie Wood – a well-known white actress who donned brown-face for the role.25 Alongside Wood, the secondary female role of Anita was played by Rita Moreno, one of the film’s few Puerto Rican cast members. This provides an excellent way to examine the virgin-whore dichotomy which has plagued female characters for centuries. The virginal, naïve Maria, despite her unconventional love for a white man, is also virtuous (according to a patriarchal definition of virtue) and is barely sexualized in the film. In contrast, Anita’s character is brash, hot-blooded and sexually experienced within the Puerto Rican community. This implies that desiring a “superior” white man, as opposed to a Latino, will morally elevate a Latina woman. Importantly, it should be noted that it is only under the gaze of her white love interest that Maria “feels pretty.” At the same time, Natalie Wood’s whiteness teaches us that a truly virtuous, authentically Latina character is, at this point, still not considered viable in American cinema. Hollywood seemingly has no problem suggesting that Anita’s sexuality, and thus her immorality, is implicit in her Latin-ness.26 While obviously limited by the morality of their time (enforced perhaps more strictly upon women of colour than white women), the Latinas in West Side Story were, and continue to be, influential in shaping not only white America’s idea of the Latina, but the identity of Puerto Rican women in the U.S.27

A modern-day counterpart of sorts to Maria and Anita, actress and pop culture icon Jennifer Lopez is of Puerto Rican heritage, but was born and raised in New York City. Her portrayals of Latinas – and, importantly, non-Latina – characters, along with her career in dancing and singing, have made her the top-earning Latina in Hollywood.28 Her body, her ethnicity and the intersection of the two have been central to her commodification as a sexual object by the global consumer – and to her success. While it is tempting here to argue that today’s entertainment industry is far more sexual than in decades past, the evidence points to the contrary – Carmen Miranda’s body was highly sexualized in the 1940s as a complete form, while today’s stars are sexualized for their specific body parts. The twirling skirts and dangling fruit, with their allusions to a sexual body, have given way to tight-fitting and low-cut clothing, which allude to sexual parts. The desirability of female Latina bodies, in a culture dominated by white men, is directly tied to their otherness, their opposition to white female bodies.29

In Lopez’s case, this is complicated by her dual success in Latina and non-Latina roles – her ability to play “maybe, sometimes, white.”30 When cast in a part that is not overtly Latina, Lopez appeals to white standards of beauty, but simultaneously, perhaps very subtly, subverts them.31 ‘Playing white’ may be seen as a disservice to her heritage and ethnicity – she is downplaying what traditional Latino communities celebrate, yet by broadening the definition of beauty, even slightly, she is setting a precedent for other non-white actresses to succeed in Hollywood. She is also challenging a paradigm which was discussed earlier in relation to West Side Story: the idea that the Latina body is inherently sexual while the white body is pure and beautiful. In a role which is not overtly Latina (and by default, white) she is less prone to overtly sexual objectification.

Whether Lopez’s non-Latina roles are steps forwards or backwards for Latino representation in American film is beyond the scope of this paper, but her “crossover success” is certainly of historical importance.

An interesting counter-point to Lopez’s career is that of Penelope Cruz. A Spanish actress, she has achieved great success as an ‘othered’ Latina woman in Hollywood. Superficially, the two women have similar skin tones and ethnic features, but their star images differ greatly. In the media, Lopez’s image is focused on her sexualized body, whereas Cruz’s acting work, rather than her body, is usually the focal point of the attention she gets. This suggests a hierarchy, with Lopez being placed closer to primal blackness and Cruz closer to cultured whiteness – despite the fact that both fall in the middle of that racial spectrum.32 It also suggests an inherent American reverence for the otherness of Europeans, which is
in contrast to contempt for the otherness of Latin Americans. Although Cruz does not quite figure into the history of Latin American women, she is an important reminder that the physical characteristics of ethnicity are not, and have never been, the only barriers which Latinas in Hollywood face. The invisible barriers of nationality and origin can be equally as divisive. An inherent component of all storytelling is the archetype – a recognizable character that allows us to locate ourselves and the people in our world within the world of the story. As a popular medium, film has historically both reflected and constructed our perceptions of othered people through its use of archetypes, particularly those which have become too general, static, and over-simplified. Latinas have been on screen since the earliest days of film, and the women discussed above are proof that no generalizations can be made about them as people – except to say that they all maneuvered skillfully within a hegemonic culture to find success. The last century of U.S. history has been volatile, especially whenever America has encountered the foreign. Living and working at this fragile intersection between two cultures, between race and gender, and between war and peace, Latinas in Hollywood have responded in diverse ways to many conflicting social forces, but the belief that minoritized people must constantly be challenging expectations is, in itself, merely a social construction. However, subversion need not always be aggressive – sometimes, working within society's expectations is the best way to force societal change.

Works Cited


