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### Publication Date

2017

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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA  
RIVERSIDE

Transformative Critical Media Literacy:  
Negotiating Latinidad and Girl Culture through Theatre Pedagogy

A Dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Ethnic Studies

by

Renée Lemus Elisaldez

September 2017

Dissertation Committee:  
Dr. Anthony Macias, Chairperson  
Dr. Jennifer Najera  
Dr. Dionne Espinoza

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2017

The Dissertation of Renée Lemus Elisaldez is approved:

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Committee Chairperson

University of California, Riverside

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Writing this dissertation, and embarking on the journey that is a Ph.D. has been an emotional roller coaster. At first, I thought my toughest challenges would be my course work and trying to find my footing in an intimidating grad program. I had to figure out what exactly my work was about, and then confront the challenge of articulating it within my field. Then there was the qualifying exam process that exhausted me to no end. However, none of those were quite as challenging as what was to come in my life. I was given the green light to write my dissertation in the spring of 2012, already pregnant with my older son, Cruz. I completed my fieldwork just weeks before he was born. Motherhood and a newborn would be the first biggest challenges I faced. I remember being in labor looking at my midwife and saying, “I thought getting a Ph.D. was hard, this is harder!” I was still trying to make time to write, but the allure of motherhood called to me in a way I had not expected. Because I had to help financially support our family, I took to working, still trying to write when I could. Then I decided to have another child, which added to my busy life. And in the middle of all this, a tragedy hit: my father suddenly passed away due to a heart attack and complications in surgery. This happened while I was pregnant with my younger son, Santos. I was working, trying to be a good parent, and mourning the loss of my father. The dissertation kept creeping to the bottom of my priority list, until I was faced with a decision.

I came to a time when I had no motivation, no energy, no will to finish, and I was ready to call it a day. Then I had a conversation with my brother, who said the words I

needed to hear, “Dad would have wanted you to finish.” And just like that, I had the motivation I needed, and I recommitted myself to completing this burdensome task.

I was not alone on this journey; all along I have been accompanied by an enormous amount of support and love on all levels. Therefore, I must give thanks to those who gave me the strength, the confidence, and the wisdom to reach the finish line.

I would like to extend my thanks to the professors on my dissertation committee. I want to thank my Committee Chair, Professor Anthony Macias, for guiding me through this process, keeping me on task, and copyediting my writing. Thank you for challenging me when I needed the push, as well as for hearing me out when I wanted to stand firm in my ideas. To Profesora Jennifer Najera who became my Chicana feminist grounding in unfamiliar territory. You kept it real with me, always had my back, and yet pushed me to be better. To Profesora Dionne Espinoza, it was in your classes at Cal State L.A. that I was first inspired to pursue the Ph.D., where I fell in love with academia, where I realized my calling in life. Thank you for the continued inspiration and support. To Dr. Tiffany Lopez, though you were not able to serve on my final committee, it was my work with you that opened my eyes to the power of theatre and changed the course of my research. Thank you for giving me a space to bridge the gap between theatre and critical pedagogy.

Coming from a state school M.A. program, I was intimidated by academia when I first began the Ph.D. program. It was not until I walked into a class in the English Dept. full of Latinas, that I had found my academic home of sorts. I especially want to thank Sonia Rodriguez, Tracy Zuniga, and Regis Mann Fox for the genuine friendship, the

support, and all the amazingly fun times outside the classroom. Without you all I might not have survived the stress of grad school.

I need to acknowledge my family, including all my aunts, uncles, and cousins, too many to name. Thank you for keeping me grounded and reminding me who I am when I was overwhelmed with emotions from academia. I am just a simple girl from Pico Rivera, with dreams of changing the world – a daunting task, but when I am with my family, I don't feel like I have to be anything other than myself, for better or for worse. Whether I was feeling pressured by my career or my school, they were always there with a hug and a shot of tequila.

To the women in my life, my amigas, my best friends who often had more faith in me than I did. Priscilla Medina, you are more than just my cousin, my lifelong best friend who I have fought with and stood by in tough times. Life has always been easier because I knew I would always have you, your beautiful heart that you wear on your sleeve, and your love. Sandy Giraldo, what can I say? I have not always had luck with friends, but you have been a rock in my life. The one I would call at all hours of the day and night, with problems or questions about life. You are always there to reassure me and give me the confidence I need in myself. Both of you amazing women never hesitate to be there for me when I need you, driving out to Riverside without a complaint, listening to the stresses of grad school life. I love you both forever!

To my grandmother, who I call Wela, short for Abuela. At 82 years young, you are the wisest woman I know. With nothing but a 3<sup>rd</sup> grade education and a lifetime of experience, you are an inspiration, a survivor, and a true woman of faith. Your strength

gives me strength. Your passion for life, for peace, and for social justice guides my intuition, lets me know I am on the right path.

To my brother Dr. Hector Lemus, my hero, my role model, and the person whose footsteps I am proud to follow in. You were the trailblazer, and I just followed the path you laid out. If not for you, grad school and getting a Ph.D. would not have even been on my radar, and in fact, I still vowed to never follow that path. Less than 1% of Latinos go to grad school, much less attain their doctorate. As a statistician, you know those are bad odds. Yet, you made it seem possible, you made it a realistic option for me. It has not always been easy for you, the first in our family to go this route. But your challenging moments made it that much easier for me because I knew what to look out for and what to expect. You gave me the guidance you never had, and for that I am eternally grateful.

To my mom Lupe Lemus, one major goal in life for her was to have her kids graduate from college. Our whole lives, she made education the number one priority above all else. We understood early on that college was a given. My parents gave us the great gift of paying for our undergrad education. But as much as my mom prepared us for college, she could not prepare us for what was to come after, because she could not know, because she had not even gone to college herself. Moreover, she could not prepare us for the feeling of being lost once we graduated from college. All we knew was school, school, school. So, we just kept going, until both my brother and I realized we liked school so much that we would make it our career. Really, I have to thank my mom then for prioritizing education, because it led us to our calling in life, and that is a gift I can never repay her for. Thanks mom, I love you!



To my husband Tommy Jon Elisaldez, thank you for taking this journey with me. You have been by my side on this roller coaster, riding all the ups and downs with me. You never hesitated in following me in whatever direction I was going. It has been that unconditional love that keeps me going, that keeps me safe that gives me a place to call home no matter where I go in life. You have supported me in ways that make all of this possible: our life, our kids, our careers. You are not a man of many words, but your actions speak loud and clear. To know you will always be by my side is what sustains me when times get tough. I thank you so much, and love you always.

To my kids, Cruz and Santos, who challenge me to be a better person every day. They are my motivation to keep going, to move forward in life. I want to be the best me I can be for them. Once I realized that the time I spend away from them is to work on something that will benefit all of us in the end, it made it easier to focus on completing this dissertation. They teach me how to not sweat the small stuff and to instead focus on the big picture. Motherhood can definitely be challenging, but the love they give knows no bounds and gives me life to keep pushing. I love my monkeys!

Lastly, but maybe most importantly, I need to acknowledge my father, Hector Lemus. He was with us when I began this journey, and crossed into the spirit world before I could finish. Losing you in this world has been the most difficult thing I have faced in life, and I miss you every day. I am sad I will not be able to look out into the audience at my graduation and see your proud face. I am sad I won't get to hear your feedback on my dissertation. I am most sad that we won't get to share in this moment together. My dad was an immigrant from Mexico who came to the U.S. at a young age, growing up just

trying to survive and live a happy life. He worked his whole life, shed blood, sweat and tears to give my brother and me a better life. His efforts are all the more meaningful in this current political climate, when the 45<sup>th</sup> president of our country ran and won based on a platform of blatant racist, anti-Mexican, and anti-immigrant sentiments. This puts my father's life and mine into greater perspective: I am my father's American Dream. My family came from humble ancestry, but within one generation we have been able to achieve the highest academic achievement possible. This is why immigrants come to this country. Of course, I recognize we are the exception, we are less than 1%, thus I know my success is due to all the support I list here. But especially when I think about my father, I know my success is what he worked all his life for. I know you watch from heaven, and I dedicate all of this to you. I love you dad, siempre en mi corazón.

For my husband Tommy, my children Cruz and Santos, and my parents Hector and Lupe.

None of this would be possible without all of your unconditional love and support.

In Loving Memory of My Father

Hector Lemus

January 8, 1953-November 25, 2014

Que Descanse en Paz

## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Transformative Critical Media Literacy:  
Negotiating Latinidad and Girl Culture through Theatre Pedagogy

by

Renée Lemus Elisaldez

Doctor of Philosophy, Graduate Program in Ethnic Studies  
University of California, Riverside, September 2017  
Dr. Anthony Macias, Chairperson

This dissertation utilizes textual analysis of media representations of Latinidad and girl culture in order to demonstrate the multiple subjectivities Latinxs inhabit as well as highlight the power relations structured by race, gender, class and sexuality embedded in the mass media. This analysis considers the challenges young Latinas face when negotiating their identities with, through and against the oppressive images of the mass media. Drawing on the work of Chicana/Latina feminist educators, I term this pedagogical project Transformative Critical Media Literacy, defined as learning how to critically read images produced and put forth by the mass media and recognize them as representations of institutionalized oppression so as not to internalize and perpetuate the

oppressive messages. TfCML can facilitate a process by which media viewers can imagine ways to transform the oppressive image to one of empowerment and liberation. TfCML is made up of methods that draw from Latinx media studies, Chicana/Latina feminist epistemology and pedagogy; and theatre studies methods as articulated by Augusto Boal and his Theatre of the Oppressed. TfCML offers Latinxs a space to negotiate their own process of identity while developing a critically conscious relationship with the mass media and hopefully become invested in social transformation and liberation.

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## INTRODUCTION

Michelle Habell-Pallán, scholar of Chicana/o popular culture claims, “Popular culture constitutes a terrain where not only are ethnic and racialized, as well as gender, identity contested, reproduced, and transformed, but also the struggle for and against social equality is engaged.”<sup>1</sup> Similarly, cultural studies scholar Stuart Hall states, “popular culture is one of the sites where the struggle for and against a culture of the powerful is engaged: it is also the stake to be won or lost in that struggle. It is the arena of consent and resistance.”<sup>2</sup> Habell-Pallán and Hall both highlight popular culture as an important site where symbolic meanings of identity are defined, constructed, and made real in the minds of people. In other words, popular culture or mass media has a deep impact on the way people come to know the world, as well as themselves. Hall also states, “the media construct for us a definition of what race is, what meaning the imagery of race carries, and what the ‘problem of race’ is understood to be.”<sup>3</sup> Because the United States is a country founded on white supremacy, heteropatriarchy and settler colonialism, mainstream mass media works to maintain these oppressive hierarchies and to ensure the perpetuation of the status quo. Those of us invested in equality must recognize the oppressive power of the mass media and seek ways to push back on its force to transform oppressive power into a space for liberation. The mass media is an important pedagogical tool; therefore, we must understand how those in power use it to maintain the status quo. Then we must learn how to use this pedagogical tool to dismantle systems of oppression.

This dissertation focuses specifically on how popular culture and the mass media impact young Latinas, whose identities live at the intersections of multiple systems of

oppression, in their own constructions of identity. I am interested in how Latinas navigate and negotiate media images in relation to their identity formation. I am also interested in how Latinas can resist the oppressive hierarchies maintained in popular culture. I argue for the absolute need to educate all young people on the importance of critical media literacy. Without a critical perspective on the mass media and its dominant construction of Latinx populations, those perspectives may continue to replicate oppressive messages and be internalized by viewers. Therefore, this dissertation works to create a practical methodology to engage young Latinas in critical media literacy.

I would like to first situate my scholarly work as motivated by and grounded in my personal experiences. I follow the suggestion of Latinx critical pedagogy scholar Alejandra Elenes who contends, “Chicanas’ own personal experiences become central to their political work toward liberation.”<sup>4</sup> My passion for this project was born at an intersection of experiences. My undergraduate training as a journalist gave me insight into the political economy of the mass media, while my time as a high school teacher at an all-girl Catholic school gave me insight to how young girls engage with mass media. My graduate school training in Chicana and Ethnic Studies gave me insight into the history of systemic oppression, while my earlier experiences at an all-girl Catholic school education provided me with a fundamental understanding of social justice. My work is also highly informed by my lifelong evolution with feminism and my struggles with identity as a light-skinned Latina. I was witness, both in myself and as a teacher of young girls, to the deeply problematic ways mass media impacts the way girls are socialized to think about themselves and their priorities in life. We are socialized to adhere to



heteropatriarchal gender norms that subordinate, dismiss, and otherwise marginalize girls and women. We are also socialized to believe our self-worth is innately tied to our beauty as defined by a white standard constructed by the media, and our self-worth is tied to our ability to “get a man” and to our ability to perform femininity in a way that commodifies our sexuality. These social constructions are further defined by racial discourses and white supremacy, complicating the experience of women and girls of color in a society that marginalizes them. Pushing back on and challenging these race and gender norms has been an ongoing battle of mine, a battle central to my feminism for many years.

During my time as a high school teacher, social media was in its inception and students navigating this new world were often putting themselves in vulnerable and compromising situations. Several students were portraying themselves online in sexually suggestive, and self-degrading manners, labeling themselves “bitches” and “hoes.” There were cases of online bullying. Students often walked around with expensive handbags suggesting their ability to afford such commodities, or were talking about their lavish quinceañeras and sweet sixteen parties. In just the four short years since I had graduated from high school in 2000, I felt it was truly a different era with the world of social media at our fingertips. After all, music videos had been showcasing women in hypersexualized and objectified ways for a long time and magazines had always constructed a particular standard of beauty. So had I not noticed how these media representations had infiltrated youth culture until now? Or perhaps I simply thought, as many young people do, that “that doesn’t affect me.” It was not until I put these observations into context with my undergraduate student work—when I studied the political economy of the mass media as

a journalism major—that I understood that marketers and the media industry feed on and exploit women’s and girls’ self-worth while commodifying sexuality. I found it frustrating to see young girls mimicking the hypersexual, objectifying images of women in the mass media, and wanted so desperately to give them other options and teach them how to critically engage with the media, but I did not have the tools to do so. Furthermore, I still was grappling with my own relationship to media images.

I also understood early on through my Catholic school education the reality of inequality and oppression. I was very fortunate to have liberal religion teachers who were grounded in liberation theology. One particular religion teacher, a priest, was very adamant that we understand the world outside our classroom walls. I remember him telling us that traveling was the best education we could ever get. He would take a group of students every term to a home for single moms run by a group of nuns devoted to the work of Mother Teresa. When visiting this home, we would prepare meals to feed the homeless and then drive around the streets of Los Angeles offering people a meal, some clothes and shoes, and a prayer of course. The naïve, sheltered young teenager I was never understood just how real poverty and capitalist oppression was until it was staring me in the face eager for a meal and generosity. I questioned how we could have such wealth in this country, and look down on underdeveloped countries, when there were people right here in such economic despair. In fact, I remember having a debate with my parents that ended with them saying my ideas sounded like communism, or socialism, which at the time felt dismissive, for all I understood of socialism was that it was a dirty word. Yet, it was in this moment that I was called to the work of social justice.

I possessed different pieces to a puzzle I was putting together as I went through life. I understood economic inequality, racism, sexism, and the media's political economy as I observed the impact of the mass media on young girls and on myself. But how did these pieces fit together, how were they all part of the same problem, and how do we fix this problem?

Thus, I set off on a journey in search of answers to these questions, one that motivated me to learn and to research these issues. Eventually, the endless amount of research I did validated my observations that the mass media does in fact impact behavior and identity formation in young people, helping to further sustain economic, racial and gender inequality in our society. Furthermore, these inequalities are systemic, institutionalized, and fundamental to our country's origin as a colonized nation. When coming to these revelations, I was simultaneously validated to know I was not the only one thinking about these things, but also disheartened that not *everybody* was thinking about these things. I was frustrated that I did not learn this information earlier in life, or that our young people did not have access to this knowledge. How did students not have access to a space to contextualize their own experiences with systemic oppressions? I recognize I was privileged in life to not only attain a formal education, but to also have the time and space to ponder these ideas. Thus, I feel a responsibility to share what I have learned with others and offer young people the tools that I have gathered along the way so that they too might recognize oppressive images in the mass media and consciously decide how to engage with them. Critical media literacy is vital to the empowerment of young people, offering them space to recognize how the media perpetuates systems of

oppression. It allows them to understand and construct their identities in more holistic ways. Moreover, critical media literacy is a vital step toward the dismantling of institutionalized oppression.

My definition of critical media literacy is defined as follows: The ability to critically read and analyze images produced and put forth by media sources, including film, television, internet, print, social media, etc. In an increasingly media-driven society, critical media literacy must be central to the education of our youth. Companies engage in conscious marketing at an early age. Children as young as six-months of age can recognize company logos<sup>5</sup> and, as a result, learn how to read media images in the ways intended by media producers. We are all products of a lifetime of media producers guiding us to read media images. For example, when we see an advertisement for a particular product, we are not just sold the product itself, but the lifestyle the product guarantees. No one ever sat us down to teach us what ads are doing; it happens on a subconscious and subliminal level. The difference between media literacy and critical media literacy is the ability to recognize the carefully constructed intention of the media image, to see the mechanisms of manipulation, and to consciously decide how to engage with that image. Media images are everywhere. Because they are unavoidable, their messages have a deep, insidious impact on our lives. They can influence our taste in music, fashion, and other forms of pop culture we engage in. Media images can influence the way we come to know and think about the world, about other people, and about ourselves. Their deeply embedded messages can impact our self-esteem, including the way we regard ourselves, form our identities, and, most importantly, understand

constructs of race, class, gender, and sexuality. Moreover, because systems of oppression are established through these social constructs, it is imperative that we install a filter between the problematic messages of the mass media and its impact on us. We must be able to critically read and analyze these images so that we can see through the manipulation of the mass media, fight against the perpetuation of systems of oppressions, and move toward liberation.

For this dissertation, I focus on young Latinas as a central analytical point because of my own experience as a Latina navigating images of Latinidad in the mass media, and because of the unique ways media images work to marginalize Latina identity and sexuality, marking them as other. In general, the mass media more directly targets the vulnerabilities of young girls, as Jean Kilbourne notes,

The self-esteem of girls in America often plummets when they reach adolescence. Girls tend to feel fine about themselves when they are 8, 9, 10 years old. But they hit adolescence, and they often hit a wall, and certainly part of this wall is this terrible emphasis on physical perfection...Girls exposed to sexualized images from a young age are more prone to eating disorders, depression, and low self-esteem.<sup>6</sup>

Kilbourne points out the blatant ways media works to disseminate heterosexist ideologies, thus maintaining a patriarchal society by telling young girls their self-worth is defined by their ability to meet a particular standard of beauty. Young Latinas often internalize the stereotypical, limiting, and often dangerous images of Latinidad in the mass media, either because of pressure to fit into American girl culture, or because of an assimilationist perspective of ancestral identity, forged by the U.S. national imaginary. Latinxs in general must also navigate discourses around race, class and sexuality that construct Latinidad as stereotypical at best and as inferior at worst. Thus, young Latinas

need to be equipped with the tools to critically engage with the media so as to circumvent the internalization of these images.

It is not enough to critique the negative portrayals of Latinxs in the mass media. Rather, we must concern ourselves with how there are so few representations of Latinx identity that we never get a well-rounded, complex, or deep-rooted understanding of what it means to be Latinx. We rarely see self-empowered Latinxs exercising agency over the construction of their identity. Furthermore, you rarely see the ways in which Latinx identity itself is contested on different levels or the ways in which it continually shifts and changes. In short, Latinidad is never dealt with in any complex way in the mass media. Yet, if we look hard enough, there are those Latinxs invested in representing an alternative to the stereotype by creating nuanced representations of Latinx identity. And we must look to these culture producers as models for alternative identity construction. This all must be part of critical media literacy.

This dissertation formulates a strategy for enacting a critical media literacy pedagogical project that can empower all young people to critically read media images. This pedagogical methodology offers space to not only construct a language that interrogates and identifies the oppressive images, but which presents alternative options for identity formation. Ultimately, this process facilitates critical consciousness.

This dissertation utilizes textual analysis of media representations of Latinidad and girl culture in order to demonstrate the multiple subjectivities Latinxs inhabit, and highlights the power relations structured by race, gender, class and sexuality embedded in the mass media. This analysis considers the challenges young Latinas face when

negotiating their identities with, through and against the oppressive images of the mass media. Drawing on the work of Chicana/Latina feminist educators, I term this pedagogical project Transformative Critical Media Literacy, defined as learning how to critically read images produced and put forth by the mass media and recognize them as representations of institutionalized oppression so as to not internalize and perpetuate the oppressive messages. TfcML can facilitate a process by which media viewers can imagine ways to transform the oppressive image to one of empowerment and liberation. TfcML is made up of methods that draw from Latinx media studies, Chicana/Latina feminist epistemology and pedagogy, and theatre studies methods as articulated by Augusto Boal and his Theatre of the Oppressed. TfcML offers Latinxs a space to develop a critically conscious relationship with the mass media as they negotiate their own process of identity.

My project also considers how Latinas in particular are forced to navigate American girl culture. Mass media's traditional construction of girl culture portrays girls as inherently white, while innately catty, manipulative, and passive aggressive. I argue that this portrayal is a construct partially created by the mass media in order to perpetuate patriarchy, binary gender norms and white supremacy. Thus, TfcML offers Latinas a method to recognize this toxic, ersatz girl culture and imagine other ways to interact with each other.

Central to TfcML is the use of theatre as pedagogy. I employ theatre studies methods as articulated by Augusto Boal and his Theatre of the Oppressed, which is a methodological practice that offers students a space to explore complexities and envision

alternative possibilities and representations of identity. This dissertation demonstrates, on an everyday level, how young teenage girls are impacted by media representation, as the media studies literature argues. My project is invested in understanding the correlation between media representation and identity formation, as well as in teaching critical media literacy to young girls. TfcML answers the Chicana/Latina feminist call for an embodied knowledge that facilitates critical consciousness about the oppressive forces embedded in the mass media, while also offering oppositional representation. I am modeling a Chicana feminist pedagogy grounded in alternative and oppositional epistemologies that catalyze critical consciousness, blended with the methodology of Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed. I employ the methods of Boal to enact such an epistemology. In other words, whereas Chicana feminists emphasize the importance of embodied knowledge in the classroom, Boal actually provides the physical, practical steps with which to do so.

In addition to theatre methodology, I examine oppositional representations of Latinidad in order to demonstrate deviations from mainstream constructs of Latinx identity. I conclude that identity is always in flux, and Latinxs have always navigated and negotiated their identities through, and/or against media representations. And yet, TfcML offers Latinxs a method by which to take control of that negotiation and be in the driver seat of identity formation so as not to succumb to the manipulative forces of the mass media.

TfcML, as laid out in chapter one, is a pedagogical methodology specifically formulated to facilitate critical consciousness in regards to the mass media. However, many of the methods and activities can be utilized in other disciplines as a means of



facilitating the process of critical consciousness raising. TfCML is meant to serve as a collection of pedagogical tools from which educators can pull from in order to integrate critical thinking activities into the classroom. My hope is that it simultaneously serves as a path toward dismantling the oppressive system of education grounded in the banking concept,<sup>7</sup> as well as offers a space for students to think critically and imagine transformative possibilities for liberation in regards to the mass media as well as other oppressive forces.

## **Methods**

I conducted fieldwork in which I ran a series of workshops with high school teenage girls to assist these young women in developing critical media literacy skills. After receiving IRB authorization, as well as written permission from the high school, these workshops took place at an all-girl Catholic high school in a suburb located about 20 miles southeast of downtown Los Angeles. This school has a majority Latina population, but also includes white, black and Asian students. Due to the students' status as minors at the time, no other identifying information can be disclosed. I arranged to conduct the workshops during one of their regularly scheduled class periods. I held about eight workshop sessions over eight weeks, for an hour and a half each. There were a total of eleven participants. Because it was an already established class, the demographics of the students were of all ethnicities, although most were Latina. Over the course of the eight sessions we discussed the following topics: the business of mass media, television, film, music, music videos, magazines, and advertisements. I explain in more detail the proceedings and the outcomes of the workshop series throughout the dissertation.

These workshops served as a pilot project to formulate my curriculum for TfCML. Because it was my first time facilitating this kind of pedagogical practice, I inevitably ran into challenges due to time constraints, as well as other administrative restrictions. I was stepping into a regularly scheduled class of which I did not have full administrative control. Therefore, the participants did not demonstrate full investment in participating in the activities. In chapter one, I discuss in more detail the other challenges I faced in successfully facilitating these workshops. However, as I made clear previously, because these methods are meant to be used across disciplines as a means of basic tools to facilitate critical thinking, I have integrated these methods into my subsequent teaching work. Over the last five years, I have taught over twenty classes, twelve different courses across various disciplines including: history, Chicana Studies, and Women's Gender and Sexuality Studies. In every single class I have taught during this time I utilized many if not all of the methods from TfCML. I took what I learned from the workshops I conducted, made adjustments based on subject matter, and continuously perfected the activities and assignments for better success. Admittedly, some of the central methods of TfCML did not work successfully in my first attempt during the media workshops, but have proven very successful in my subsequent attempts. Throughout the dissertation, I will discuss the details on how I utilized these methods in my classes and their successes.

### **Defining Terms**

I want to take a moment to define some of the terms I use throughout to be clear precisely how and where I situate my work, since the language used to label identities is, like cultural identities themselves, always in flux. When I first began writing this

dissertation, Latina/o was used as a term to include both men and women, so that the masculine “o” in Latino would not be the default term to reference both genders, as is the case in traditional Spanish language. More recently, the term Latinx has been adopted in many circles both in and out of academia. This term is meant to be inclusive of all gender identities, including those that fall outside the binary of cisman and ciswoman. For this dissertation, I also use the term Latinx with an X to be inclusive of all people of all genders who identify with Latinx ancestry. Finally, the term Latinx, refers to groups who identify with ancestry from any Latin American country, including Mexico as well as Central American and South American countries. At times, I will specifically use the term Latina when I am referencing all those who identify as women and girls with ancestry from a Latin American country. I will also sometimes reference the term Chicanx, or Chicana when specifically talking about people or women with Mexican ancestry, but born and raised in the U.S. Often, throughout the dissertation, my use of these words is in direct reference to the way the scholars whose work I engage with use these terms.

### **Chapter Outline**

The first three chapters in this dissertation lay a theoretical framework, buttressing my use of particular concepts and literature, as well as my intervention in the several scholarly fields I am engaged with, including education, Latinx media studies, theatre studies, and girl studies. In each of these chapters I apply the theoretical literature to my fieldwork findings and teaching experiences in order to illustrate the validity and value of TfCML. I also apply particular theoretical concepts through the use of textual analysis.

After a critique of the traditional schooling system in the first chapter, I track the different pedagogical philosophies from which I draw to create TfCML. I then detail what the methods of TfCML are. In the next two chapters I outline the many ways the mass media impacts identity formation both through a gender and race analysis centered on the images of Latinxs in media. In addition, I highlight my utilization of the methods of TfCML in response to these gender and race analyses. In the fourth chapter, I return to the concept of identity, arguing for a more complex approach to understanding identity formation. In the upcoming section I will give a brief summary of each chapter so as to demonstrate how they build on each other.

*Chapter 1- Staging Transformative Critical Media Literacy: A Pedagogical Intervention*

Grounded in the work of Paulo Freire, in this chapter I discuss my critique of dominant epistemologies, pedagogies, and the overall educational system. I highlight the inability of the traditional schooling system to facilitate critical thinking. I recognize that because my pedagogical project of TfCML urges a new mass media critical consciousness, it would be incompatible within the traditional institutionalized schooling system. Therefore, I look to the work of Chicana and Latina educators and scholars who emphasize the need to use alternative, ancestral and decolonial epistemologies and pedagogies that can both undo the oppressiveness innate to education and make room for critical thinking.

I discuss the pedagogical intervention my project attempts to make. In other words, my project intervenes in the dominant pedagogical practice, answering the call of Chicana/Latina feminists by creating a practical methodology using theatre methods. In

this chapter, I advance the conversation between Chicana/Latina feminists and Boal by unpacking Freire's critiques of pedagogy and education and then clarifying how Chicana/Latina feminists, Boal, and I are addressing these critiques. I then discuss how my project, specifically, sheds light on this conversation, and how my pedagogical methods worked. I also stress the importance of embodied knowledge to the process of critical consciousness, bringing into conversation how both Chicana/Latina feminist and Boal articulate this concept. From my first-hand findings, I show how the idea of embodied knowledge contributes to the facilitation of critical media literacy for teenage girls. The mass media creates a particular discourse around the body, I argue, thus young girls can use their embodied knowledge to fathom and deconstruct that discourse.

In this chapter, I also draw from traditional critical media literacy scholarship in order to develop both my theoretical paradigm and my practical pedagogy of TfCML. I outline the methods and activities that make up the pedagogical methodology of TfCML. I discuss the successes and challenges in teaching TfCML in the workshops, both from the perspective of the student and the instructor. I also discuss other ways I have utilized these methods in my subsequent teaching experiences. My work articulates a critique of dominant pedagogy and education, offers alternative pedagogical methods, and clarifies that regardless of whether or not young girls acknowledge or recognize the true nature of the mass media, it is not for me to convince them of what it is. Rather, the goal of TfCML is to facilitate a process through which they can discover it for themselves.

## *Chapter 2- Are These Our Only Options?: Latinidad as Symbolic Colonization*

In chapter two, I draw from Isabel Molina-Guzmán's theory of symbolic colonization. The mass media's construction of Latinidad is superficial, narrow, and stereotypical, which marginalizes the experience of Latinxs and marks their very being as other within the U.S. national imaginary. I also scrutinize the ways Latinidad in the mass media is constructed as representing a homogenous group by highlighting particular racial markers to make Latinxs easily identifiable as marketable consumers, allowing advertisers to commodify Latinidad, profit from cultural appropriation, and exploit Latinx consumership, all while maintaining white supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchy.

In this chapter, I define three stereotypes of Latinidad constructed by the mass media that Latinxs must contend with as they negotiate their own relationship to Latinx identity. I posit that the following stereotypes of Latinxs in the mass media help to define Latinidad within narrow parameters, inscribing racial signifiers and relegating Latinxs to a marginal position within U.S. society: 1) The safe, benign, assimilable other; 2) The threatening, criminal, immigrant, unassimilable other; and 3) The desirable/desiring female body. With these in mind, I contextualize the scholarship regarding the impact of mass media on identity formation, highlighting the particular ways this affects Latinxs.

After contextualizing the scholarly literature on the impact of the mass media, and my own assertions about the stereotypes of Latinidad, I apply these concepts to my fieldwork findings. Specifically, I analyze my initial arguments for the impact of mass media on identity formation, hoping to answer some of the following research questions: In what ways are teenage girls of color, and especially Latinxs, engaging with the mass

media? What do they understand about the mass media before and after the workshops? What are their critical perspectives about popular culture and the ways it impacts their lives? I interpret my findings to conclude that the participants in my workshops utilized three approaches in their engagement with mass media: conscious acquiescence, disconnected recognition, or critical curiosity.

The scholarship on media studies in general, and Latinx media studies in particular, validates the notion that mass media deeply impacts identity formation. My articulation of the three stereotypes explores the mechanisms through which mass media functions. My fieldwork then studies real teenage girls to see how they engage with mass media, the results of which reveal a lack of understanding about the depth and breadth of the mass media impact.

### *Chapter 3- From Mi Vida Loca to Mean Girls: A Textual Analysis of Girl Culture*

In this chapter, I interrogate the way media images perpetuate toxic and stereotypical representations of girl culture, which consequently impacts teenage girls. Media representations typically construct girl culture, and girls themselves, as inherently catty, competitive, and superficial, which can lead to abusive and violent interactions among girls. I suggest that this representation is a distorted, misogynistic, and ultimately oppressive perception of girl culture perpetuated by the media in order to regulate societal gender roles and maintain hegemonic power structures.

I discuss my textual analysis of several mainstream films, television shows, and reality shows, including: *Mean Girls*, *Bring it On*, *Bad Girls Club*, *East Los High*, *The Real Housewives*, *The Bachelor* and *Mi Vida Loca*. I explore how these films construct

toxic girl culture through whiteness, erasing the experience of girls of color. I argue that when girls of color are portrayed, they are tokenized in ways that do not complicate their participation in white girl culture, and that even media images that make girls of color central to the narrative still perpetuate a pathological, toxic relationship among girls, which can be defined as an assimilationist narrative. I also claim that even women portrayed in media images participate in toxic girl culture, as exemplified in *The Real Housewives* franchise, as well as in *The Bachelor*, both of which advance stereotypical racial discourses.

Once again, I hypothesize that TfCML offers a space to encourage girls to identify the problem of representing girl culture through toxic portrayals. By doing so, they can learn to recognize toxic girl culture as a bi-product of patriarchal socialization and a white heteronormative structure, rather than innate female biology or psychology. TfCML teaches young media viewers to interrogate images through an understanding of political economy and textual analysis. Therefore, it could also encourage girls to interrogate how media constructions of girl culture perpetuate patriarchal notions of femininity, and then to question the overall political investment in this kind of representation. TfCML could thereby create a space to not only examine the problematic images of girl culture in the media, but also question social and ideological notions of toxic girl culture.

#### *Chapter 4- Oppositional Representations*

In this chapter, after analyzing several oppressive discourses which impact girls and Latinas, I conclude that it is through a differential relationship to identity that Latinas



combat the negative stereotypes perpetuated by the mass media. With exposure to oppositional representations of Latinidad, Latinas can better understand fluidity of identities, and practice a differential relationship to mass media representations of Latinidad. My analysis also engages with Melissa Harris-Perry's work, in which she draws from 1950s cognitive psychology, using the concept of the crooked chair in a crooked room. I use this metaphor to explore the complex ways that Latinxs either conform or dis-identify with the media's distorted representations of Latinidad. I then offer several examples of representations of Latinidad that present alternatives to the crooked images, including the music of La Santa Cecilia and Quetzal. Ultimately, I contend that Latinxs continue their historical negotiation of media representations using a differential form of consciousness, in which Latinidad is defined by the constant movement of the crooked chair in the crooked room, rather than by any stagnant notion of what is vertical or authentic. Toward this end, I incorporate Chela Sandoval's *"Methodology of the Oppressed,"* in which she defines a "differential form of consciousness" as "[enabling] movement 'between and among' ideological positionings considered as variables, in order to disclose the disjunctions among them."<sup>8</sup> In her work, Sandoval refers to moving between modes of social movement in order to obtain social justice and equality. I apply this concept of differential movement to the relationship Latinxs have to media representations of Latinidad; this relationship is defined by a perpetual movement between and among expressions of identity. Latinxs can ameliorate the identity crisis by embracing the crooked chair in the crooked room, accepting the fluidity of identity, and understanding that Latinidad is not defined homogenously or

stagnantly. This revelation, in turn, assists Latinxs in better recognizing oppressive images and feeling empowered to construct positive representations of identity in a more holistic and nuanced manner. Thus, a truly transformative critical media literacy pedagogy would create space for young Latinxs to embrace this notion of differential identities.

This project is interdisciplinary and thus grounded in an intersectional analysis of systemic oppression and media studies. This was motivated by a deep passion for effective tools to teach critical media literacy to young Latinas in particular, providing a practical pedagogy to be used in order to: understand the deep impact of media on identity formation; understand how real life teenagers engage with the media; teach students a language with which to critique media images; offer students alternative representations to the ones offered by the mainstream mass media; and give students a space to recognize oppressive images in the mass media and then to imagine a more liberated future. Ultimately, my goal is to show students a path they can follow to acquire the ability to negotiate the ever-contested terrain of identity in a more empowering way.

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<sup>1</sup> Michelle Habell-Pallán, *Loca Motion: The Travels of Chicana and Latina Popular Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 5.

<sup>2</sup> Stuart Hall, "The White of Their Eyes," in *Gender, Race, and Class in Media a Critical Reader*, by Gail Dines and Jean M. Humez (Thousand Oaks (Calif.): SAGE Publications, 2015), 2.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> C. Alejandra Elenes, *Transforming Borders: Chicana/o Popular Culture and Pedagogy* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2011).

<sup>5</sup> Jean Kilbourne, *Still Killing Us Softly: Advertising's Image of Women*. Cambridge, MA: Cambridge Documentary Films, 1987).

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 2000), 71.

<sup>8</sup> Chela Sandoval, *Methodology of the Oppressed* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2008), 57.

## **CHAPTER One**

### **Transformative Critical Media Literacy: A Pedagogical Intervention**

This dissertation seeks to facilitate a process that offers young girls a space to identify and interrogate media images. My hope is that young people gain a critical perspective in their relationship to the mass media and learn to build a language that critiques media images and identifies its oppressive messages. Furthermore, if “a typical American teenager will process over 3000 discrete advertisements in a single day and 10 million by the time they’re 18,”<sup>1</sup> educators must not ignore the pervasiveness of the mass media and its influence on the way students relate to and understand the world around them, including education. Critical media literacy must be taken seriously as an imperative within our education system. In fact, it must be part of the curriculum.

However, before we can integrate critical media literacy into any curriculum, we must first interrogate the ability of the traditional education system to foster such critical thinking. In order to support such a critique, I engage Paulo Freire’s highly influential scholarship, which argues that the institution of education maintains hierarchical structures of power. Furthermore, because my goal with this project is to begin to outline a critical media literacy curriculum invested in cultivating critical consciousness, I seek a pedagogical and epistemological methodology that in and of itself undoes the oppressive nature of education. Therefore, I ground my project in the work of Chicana/Latina feminist scholars who call on Chicanx educators to center historical and ancestral Chicana/Latina epistemological methods including testimonio, embodied knowledge, and lived experience. I answer this call by looking at the work of Augusto Boal, who in his

germinal book, *Theatre of the Oppressed*,<sup>2</sup> offers what he calls the “poetics of the oppressed,” and whose main objective in the world of theatre is “to change the people—‘spectators,’ passive beings in the theatrical phenomenon—into subjects, into actors, transformers of the dramatic action.” Boal is interested in the audience becoming part of theatrical experience as critical actors, so as to imagine the possibilities of change. I similarly use Boal’s methods to invite students to identify oppressive images in the media and then imagine the possibilities for change.

Just as the mass media works to maintain oppressive hierarchies, likewise, traditional pedagogical methods do the same within the system of education. While Boal argues that theatre maintains the oppressive status quo in society, he also feels theatre can be used to combat this oppression. Therefore, Boal demonstrates for me a practice by which to put a Chicana/Latina feminist pedagogy of critical media literacy, interested in undoing oppressive systems in education, into action.

In this chapter, I bring several fields of inquiry into conversation, including: Freire’s critique of dominant and oppressive pedagogical practices, Chicana/Latina transformative feminism, Boal’s *Theatre of the Oppressed*, as well as established pedagogical practices of media literacy. This chapter culminates in the bridging together of different theoretical and practical literatures, thus creating the foundation for the methods of Transformative Critical Media Literacy. I will discuss the pedagogical techniques grounded in theatre games and media literacy activities I used to create the methodology of TfcML, and then demonstrate the successes and challenges I encountered putting these methods to use. Ultimately, I emphasize the process of critical

consciousness rather than the end goal. In other words, I focus on enabling the possibilities of change rather than seeking change itself.

### **The Problem with Education**

According to Freire, school, our traditional space for learning is a tool for the oppressor to structure the institution of education so that students can be indoctrinated into their inferior positions in society at large. Describing the problematic dynamic of the teacher-student relationship, he points out its “narrative character,” in which the teacher is positioned as the “narrating subject” and the students as the “patient, listening objects.”<sup>3</sup> Freire then explains the consequences of this narrative dynamic:

Narration (with the teacher as narrator) lead(s) the students to memorize mechanically the narrated content. Worse yet, it turns them into “containers” into “receptacles” to be “filled” by the teacher. The more completely she fills the receptacles, the better a teacher she is. The more meekly the receptacles permit themselves to be filled, the better students they are.... In the banking concept of education, knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing.<sup>4</sup>

In other words, this “banking” concept of education, as Freire refers to it, creates a one-way dynamic in which students are positioned as mere receptacles of uncontested knowledge given to them by the all-knowing teacher. This creates a dysfunctional learning dynamic for both the teacher and the student. For the teacher, they are unrealistically expected to know absolutely everything about a particular subject, which is realistically impossible and unnecessary. Conversely, student success is based on the ability of the student to “meekly permit themselves to be filled” with knowledge bestowed them by the teacher. Students are rewarded for merely regurgitating the information given to them by their teacher and are penalized if they question anything the

teacher says, which creates passive learners instead of critical thinkers. Consequently, education in this sense is not about learning, but rather about the ability of the student to memorize and repeat a particular literature of knowledge constructed by the dominant culture.

Furthermore, this student-teacher relationship also creates a hierarchical power dynamic between the teacher and the students in which the teacher holds the authoritative power and students are taught to unquestionably obey that authority. This dynamic then bleeds over into life outside school, in which civil society is structured by the idea that the people indisputably obey those in positions of power without questioning neither the reasons nor methods by which they attained those positions, nor the fundamental merits of such a hierarchical system. Aside from learning a particular set of knowledge constructed by those in power, students also learn how to embrace their inferior position in the learning process, which makes it easier for them to embrace their inferior position in society at large. Traditional schooling normalizes oppressive and hierarchal relationships, making it seem as though they are a natural part of life.

The banking concept of education is innately an oppressive dynamic by assuming students know nothing. The reality is that many students experience and recognize oppression, but to allow them to contextualize that experience within the content of the classroom would reveal the oppressive nature of the world and label it as such. However, as Freire argues, this is not the intention of traditional education. In fact, Freire contends that the intention is to normalize and institutionalize oppression to the point of invisibility, arguing, “The more completely [students] accept the passive role imposed on

them, the more they tend simply to adapt to the world as it is and to the fragmented view of reality deposited in them.”<sup>5</sup> Thus, the goal in education is not to create critical thinkers who will go out and make an impact on society. Instead, the goal of education is to maintain the status quo, as well as to maintain and support the structures of power as they are. In this way, the banking concept of education maintains hierarchical power for the oppressors, “who care neither to have the world revealed nor to see it transformed.”<sup>6</sup> To reveal the oppressive nature of the world would allow for the possibility of challenges to, and transformation of, that world. Therefore, the banking concept of education ensures that “the more students work at storing the deposits [of uncontested knowledge] entrusted to them [by the all-knowing teachers], the less they develop the critical consciousness which would result from their intervention in the world as transformers of that world.”<sup>7</sup> In essence, education is not meant to give students a critical awareness of the world they live in, but to actually make them passive participants in their own oppression.

In addition, students in the traditional school system are taught to adapt to an individualistic, capitalist world that emphasizes the economic possibility of education over any intellectual value. From the very beginning of their education, students are trained to be workers, instructed on how best to contribute to the labor force. In fact, the rhetoric around higher education emphasizes that attaining a college degree will help to get a better job and ultimately make good money. College is viewed as the place to teach students the skills they need to be workers and become “better fit for the world.” This premise supports the notion of meritocracy: that hard work will always result in economic success. In reality, this promise of education is only meant for those who

already have access to employment opportunities. Poor and minority students who lack this access are given the same promise and thus are told they are failures when they cannot find employment as readily.

If the intention of education is to create cogs in the machine of capitalism so the wealthy few can maintain their economic position, privileged status, and societal power, then in fact the oppressors are so successful with this model, that often the oppressed themselves cannot make the connection between their own experiences and the nature of the world at large. Therefore, they may think their failures and the failures of others are isolated and caused by internal, intellectual, or even cultural deficiencies. This “fragmented view of reality” to which Freire refers, creates a false notion of an even-playing field or meritocracy. The oppressors construct social rhetoric so that failure is not a matter of institutional disparities, but rather a lack of personal ability to try hard enough. The elites create a power dynamic meant to keep them in power, all the while instituting the fragmented view of reality which tells the oppressed that if they just learn how to work harder and adopt the ways of the oppressor, they too can become powerful and successful. And yes, there are examples of this kind of success for those who have been historically oppressed. There are people of color and women who have achieved power and success in a white man’s world, but at what cost?

In order for the oppressed to succeed, they need to learn how to emulate the oppressor’s power dynamic, for success is defined by power. However, power is also contingent on oppression, such that if historically oppressed people attain power it is at the cost of perpetuating further oppression; the oppressed become the oppressors. Bell



hooks makes a similar argument in her book *Feminism is for Everybody*, when referring to white feminists who defined feminism by the ability to gain equality vis-a-vis men, so that “once [white women] began to gain economic power within the existing social structure,” all thought of radical reform went out the door, such as that which called for an “overall restructuring of society so that our nation would be fundamentally anti-sexist.”<sup>8</sup> Hooks points out the problem with this kind of economic power now evoked by these white women is that it is “power gained through the exploitation and oppression of others.”<sup>9</sup> This gift of power, then, is not a note about the structure’s ability to allow for equal opportunity, but rather it is merely a reflection of the lower class members’ ability to emulate the existing power structure without actually critiquing the structure itself.

A good example of this is President Barack Obama, the first black president. Upon his election in 2008, many citizens heralded the historic moment as the end of institutional oppression for all black people in America. The idea was that if he could do it as a black man, then any other black person could as well. His success was touted as an example of the outcome of hard work and dedication to overcoming obstacles. His success exemplified the idea of meritocracy and the level playing field. In reality, this idea disregards the fact that Obama is actually the exception in a long history of institutional racism and discrimination. One need only to look at the 43 other presidents before him and study the faces of those who ran to replace him. The ratio of white presidents to non-white presidents is still enormously disproportionate. Thus, this notion of success rings false, for although President Obama overcame the structural barriers laid before him, his presidency did nothing to actually undo institutionalized racism. In fact,

many of his policies have reified the white supremacist structure. For instance, within his first four years as president, more undocumented immigrants were deported under his presidency than any other in history.<sup>10</sup> Yet, this is the fragmented view of reality that the oppressors want to proliferate, highlighting moments of exceptional success, while maintaining the existing structures of power.

Our institutions of education are very much invested in teaching and maintaining this fragmented view of reality, this pretense of equal opportunity. In fact, students are taught they can become the teacher in as much as they can demonstrate their ability to reproduce the oppressive student-teacher dynamic, thus revealing the mechanisms by which the vicious cycle continues. This fragmented view of reality does not take into account net wealth and generational white privilege. While students are taught that if they work hard enough they can grow up to be anything they want, there is no mention of the fact that their success is contingent not only on the quality of education that they receive, but also on the political and bureaucratic access available to the student.

Thus, both the school system and the educational curriculum fail students of color in many ways. In school districts with a primarily minority population, schools are underfunded, leaving teachers over-worked and underpaid, all of which affect the quality of instruction the students receive. In addition, underfunding results in a lack of technological resources, which means that schools fail to prepare students for technologically advanced academic systems, such as those found in universities. Furthermore, in terms of student learning outcomes, expectations are such that the priority is to focus on retention and graduation rather than preparation for college and

beyond.<sup>11</sup> In cases such as these, often the blame is put on the family and culture for not emphasizing the importance of college and education in general. I would argue that this lack of prioritization of education is not innately a cultural thing, but rather an outcome of poverty and economic instability. When families and whole communities are in a tight economic state, it is difficult to see beyond the immediate need to simply survive. Families that are struggling with living day to day may consider it frivolous for someone to go to college and forgo the opportunity to support the family through immediate work. This is aside from the fact that often the economic burden of college tuition only makes it less appealing. The low expectations for students of color are not based on some innate cultural deficiency, but are rather part of a failed economic system founded on white supremacist ideologies.

In addition to the broken economic and misguided school systems, the contemporary curriculum also fails students of color in that it does not reflect their ancestral history and real-life experiences as people of color in the U.S. Students of color do not see themselves in the textbooks and therefore cannot make a connection between their lives and the people they read about. The curriculum feels irrelevant to them, causing students to disengage as they simultaneously create a dysfunctional relationship to school. And again, this inability to engage gets misconstrued as a cultural deficiency rather than a symptom of a failed educational system.<sup>12</sup>

Furthermore, this dysfunctional relationship to a failed educational system gets labeled as student apathy to learning. In my over 10 years of experience as an educator, I have heard many fellow educators dismiss students as simply apathetic and not willing to

do the work required of them by school. Early on in my teaching career, I have to admit I felt this way about students, especially because my work ethic as a student was very different than what I saw in my students. What my fellow educators and I do not and did not account for is this oppressive learning dynamic imposed on students, as well as the various and complex reasons for why students become disengaged from education.

Even aside from the institutional racism that so deeply permeates the education system and the curriculum, teaching methods used in traditional schools fail to acknowledge the diverse learning abilities of the student body. In an interview with Annette Gutierrez,<sup>13</sup> an educator and former employee of Fusion Academy,<sup>14</sup> she speaks to a lack of deep understanding of the differences in the ways students learn. She explains how learning disabilities and learning differences often get conflated in complex and problematic ways, urging me to argue that the traditional school system is not equipped to deal with either. Gutierrez differentiates between learning difference and learning disability by distinguishing between a neurotypical and non-neurotypical student. A non-neurotypical student who is diagnosed with a learning disability is usually found to have actual neurological deficiencies. In this case, things are not connected properly in the brain, which could lead to things like ADHD, ADD, auditory processing issues, and other conditions. These are only discovered after a long, intense process of testing and diagnosing of such issues. Conversely, for neurotypical or what we would call “normal” students, one of two things happens: 1) the student has no actual neurological issues, but just learns in a different way than that of his/her peers, and cannot adapt to different styles of learning, which is known as learning difference; or 2) the student has no actual

neurological issues, and can adapt to different ways of learning. The traditional school system trains its teachers to teach only to the latter type of student, the one that can adapt to learning styles. Thus, traditional teaching methods fall usually within the following learning styles: auditory, i.e. lectures, visual, i.e. writing on the board, or kinesthetic, i.e. letting students work in groups. Gutierrez argues that traditional classrooms' frequent employment of these methods is still not sufficient to account for even these 3 types of learning styles.

So what happens to the student with a learning difference who cannot adapt to these methods? First of all, the learning difference might not be as easy to detect because it can manifest as either disengagement from class, behavioral issues, or what might look like apathy. When the teacher is confronted with such issues they have one of three options: 1) figure out if it is a learning difference and then try to adapt the teaching methods to accommodate the student, which can be a particularly difficult task if the teacher lacks training and resources; 2) unnecessarily categorize the student as having a learning disability so as to not be required to change the teaching methods in any way, putting the student in a special education program that also has limited resources; or 3) ignore the issue altogether and chalk it up to the student's apathetic relationship to learning. The parent of the student is also placed in a bind when such situations arise. Parents can either ask for the student to get an official diagnosis so that the proper resources can be made available to the student, or they can resist their child being diagnosed and consequently stigmatized or un-challenged. Gutierrez points out that even special education programs are not fully equipped to accommodate the differences among

those with learning disabilities, so that often you will have a “special day class” with students who range from being improperly diagnosed with learning disabilities when they actually have a learning difference, to students with severe ADD, ADHD and even autism. These students are put in one class and teaching methods used in that class only accommodate the average, and can either be too challenging for those with more severe neurological issues, or not challenging enough to those with mere learning differences. As a result, the students suffer all the way around. Further complicating these categories of learning abilities is the student’s psychological and emotional response to this dysfunctional system. For example, if you have a student who merely has a learning difference and just cannot learn algebra by the teacher writing problems on the board, the immediate institutional response to this student is to assume they must not be paying attention, they must not care, or they must just not be good at math. The student might even internalize these assumptions and believe they are not good at math. They then become disconnected and disengaged from school, not because they are actually bad at math, but because the traditional school system cannot and does not take the time to figure out if it is merely a matter of a learning difference which can be accommodated. Therefore, apathy does not stem from an innate dislike or intellectual deficiency, rather it flows from the student’s frustration with the school’s inability to accommodate them, and from their own inability to communicate their needs.

I have personally seen several cases of this kind of dysfunctional school dynamic when dealing with students who do not fall within the normal ways of learning. My brother, for example, was diagnosed with dyslexia when he was very young, after years

of having reading and comprehension issues. He always scored low on standardized tests and was often placed in remedial English classes. Finally, his 7<sup>th</sup> grade teacher realized he was actually excelling in math while failing all other classes. She, along with my mother, worked with him to get him by in his other classes while trying to foster his talent in math. Fast forward to the end of high school, he was taking advanced math courses. Yet after taking the SAT seven times, and even taking an SAT class, his best score was a 980/1600. Worse, it seemed every time he took the exam he scored higher in math, but lower in English. This limited his options for college, but nonetheless he was accepted by Cal Poly Pomona where he initially majored in Aerospace engineering. After a few years struggling to pass his classes, an advisor told him that maybe he was not cut out for this major. After much contemplation, he eventually changed his major to applied math. He went on to become a math tutor, earned his bachelors and master's degree in applied math, and a doctorate in bio-statistics. He currently works as a professor in the department of Public Health at San Diego State University. I mention this story not as an example of what a kid who was diagnosed with a learning disability can accomplish against all odds, though it is true. Rather, I am illustrating the point that his inability to score high on the SAT was not a reflection on his intellectual ability or inability, nor was his mediocracy in other subjects besides math about his apathy toward learning. In fact, it was about the school system's inability to see, understand, and harness his intellectual strengths in order to help him better succeed in those subjects. In other words, was there a skill he possessed in math that could have been applied to other subjects to make them better understandable? This is not to blame any individual school or teacher, for it took

the work of some individual teachers, a willing school environment, as well as a highly involved mother, to get him to where he is now. This problem is systemic and structural. Kids who cannot learn in the manner the oppressors have deemed fit are often left to fend for themselves. Students similar to my brother are put in special education programs that are often even more underfunded and underprepared. Parents of these children, many of whom are busy trying to put food on the table, are not prepared to know how to handle the situation. Arguably these students are not learning disabled, just differently abled in the way they learn. My brother was very fortunate to have such an active support system, but what about students who do not? Many students like my brother either get labeled with a learning challenge or pushed into special programs that still cannot necessarily help them either.

Students disengage from school for various reasons, whether undetected learning challenges, economic instability at home, an irrelevant curriculum, or a host of other causes. However, far too often, these conditions are not taken into consideration by the school system, or by teachers and/or administrators. Time after time, the student's alleged apathetic relationship to school is blamed. I highlight these examples to further complicate the ways in which the school system fails students of color, and how education is structured in a way to maintain a hegemonic structure of power. The current condition dictates only one way to teach, one way to learn, one set of knowledge, and if students, teachers, and even parents cannot adapt to these methods, this failure manifests in teacher burnout, parent frustration, and most importantly, student disengagement.



The film *Precious Knowledge*, on the one hand, demonstrates the dysfunction of the school system and its resulting student disengagement, and, on the other hand, showcases an example of teachers trying to address and combat this issue. This film centers on the Mexican American Studies Program in one school in the Tucson Unified School District. One particular scene reveals a discussion among the teachers about the student's disengagement with school. When a teacher argues that students "are apathetic, are lazy," Dr. Jeff Duncan-Andrade replies, "The same narrative about the deficiency of our children has run the history of public schooling in the United States and we just change the way we explain our inability to engage kids. There's nothing wrong with kids. I've never met a kid with a dysfunctional relationship to learning, I've met a lot a kids with a dysfunctional relationship to school."<sup>15</sup> Dr. Duncan-Andrade notes the distinction between the relationship to learning and the relationship to school. It is not that kids do not want to learn, or are too lazy, or do not care, but that the school system has failed them to the point that they become apathetic to education. With this hypothesis in mind, along with the fact that the Latino high school dropout rate is near 50%, educators in the TUSD created the Mexican American Studies Program. Their idea was to create a curriculum that centered the experience of Mexican Americans in the history of the United States. Subjects such as literature, history, and political science were taught from that perspective. In addition, they integrated a social justice component, so that as they were learning about their ancestors' experiences in this country, their contributions to society, and their interactions with non-Mexican Americans, they also learned about the injustices faced by their forebears and those of other minority groups. Basically, they did

what Ethnic Studies scholars like myself do, teach about U.S. history, in all of its complexities, and acknowledge how a history of injustice impacts the world we live in today. The program was very directly addressing the dropout rate by graduating upwards of 80% of their students, many of whom went on to college.

Meanwhile, at the state government level, SB 1070 had been brought to the Senate, establishing a lot of anti-immigrant and anti-Mexican sentiment in the state. Pursuant to that bill, the TUSD school board began to investigate the Mexican American Studies program, accusing it of teaching anti-American sentiment. The school board consequently defunded and then banned the program altogether through the enactment of HB2281, which states the following:

The legislature finds and declares that public school pupils should be taught to treat and value each other as individuals and not be taught to resent or hate other races or classes of people. A school district or charter school in this state shall not include in its program of instruction any courses or classes that include any of the following: 1. Promote the overthrow of the United States government. 2. Promote resentment toward a race or class of people. 3. Are designed primarily for pupils of a particular ethnic group. 4. Advocate ethnic solidarity instead of the treatment of pupils as individuals.<sup>16</sup>

The underlying assumption was that the Mexican American Studies Program promoted the overthrow of the U.S. government, fomented resentment of white people, excluded non-Mexican American students, and advocated ethnic solidarity among Mexican Americans. These accusations against the program are almost laughable for so many reasons. To wit, there is no talk of overthrowing any government, nor of resenting white people. Rather, the program is about understanding the reality that the U.S. was founded on ideologies of white supremacy and white privilege. Also, these classes are open for anyone to take. Granted, they do advocate ethnic solidarity, but it is false to

assume that this is something negative or damaging. Mexican American students are well aware of their marginalization in society at large, so why should they not come together? But debunking these ridiculous accusations is beside the point. My intent in discussing this case is to demonstrate the hypocrisy of the TUSD school board, since the very things they accuse the Mexican American Studies program of doing is what traditional education has done since its inception. Historically, education was established for white students only, as evidenced by the cases of *Mendez v. Westminster* and *Brown v. the Board of Education*. Although the result of these cases was the so-called integration of schools, the curriculum has not changed much. It is still meant to reflect the experience of a mostly white population, so that even in a multi-cultural society, education teaches to and from a white perspective.

Furthermore, by discussing this case I am highlighting how the oppressors push back against any pedagogical project that tries to highlight the oppressive nature of education. The MAS program looked at the many ways the school system was failing Latino students and tried to address the problems by integrating a curriculum that would speak to the experiences and history of Latino students, so as to keep them engaged in the learning process. Nevertheless, the TUSD school board felt this work directly challenged the supposed purpose of education, and in that respect, they are right, because the MAS program tried to undo the oppressive dynamic of education by pointing out that it is indeed oppressive. The school board and the politicians did not like this and labeled it anti-American. Just as Freire argues that oppressors “care neither to have the world revealed nor to see it transformed,” the MAS program revealed the realities of the

oppressive world and gave students the tools to transform it. This is a blatant example of deeply entrenched oppressors—in this case, Arizona government and school board—maintaining the space of education as an institution of white supremacy by undercutting the motions toward a more critical pedagogy.

As we see these oppressive dynamics debilitate education, similar dynamics of white supremacy, knowledge regulation, and propagation of the “fragmented view of reality” play out in the mass media. The media claim to merely represent reality, and yet this so-called reality is tied up in notions of meritocracy, distorted understandings of multi-culturalism, and equality. So, when the media only portray a few stereotypical representations of Latinas, those who do not see or know real Latinxs learn about Latinidad from these distorted images. Moreover, for Latinxs who struggle with identity in a world that marginalizes Latino culture in favor of white American culture, if the only media images of themselves are negative representations, Latinos must negotiate those representations with their own cultural identities. The media’s symbolic colonization of Latinidad is part of large dynamics at play. Just as education seeks to create people fit for the world the oppressors create, so too does the media seek to create consumers whose participation in the market benefits the world the oppressors have created both economically and ideologically. Just as dominant education is designed to produce passive learners, the media is meant to make people passive viewers and consumers. Steven Goodman, critical media literacy scholar, more clearly illustrates this point:

One thing that has struck me in my work with urban kids is the odd congruence between two very different systems: the systems of global media that wants young people to be spectators and consumers rather than social actors, and a factory system of schooling that wants young people to be passive and willing vessels for

a prescribed set of knowledge and skills. For poor and minority children, a third system is congruent with the first two: a social and political order that wants to monitor and control their behavior in order to minimize risks to the white, middle-class community. Although the content of these systems differs greatly, their form, structure, and outcomes are oddly parallel. They all are one-way systems that seek to repress the agency and self-determination of young people.<sup>17</sup>

The institutions of media and education work hand in hand to maintain oppressive hierarchies while normalizing the very idea of hierarchies so as to conceal any true understanding of hegemonic power. Indeed, media is in and of itself pedagogical in that the lessons not learned in school can be taught through media images and messages.<sup>18</sup>

Of course, because students are not inherently passive receptacles, the banking concept of education is always working to reify its structure. As Freire argues, “[students] may perceive through their relations with reality...the contradiction in which banking education seeks to maintain them, and then engage themselves in the struggle for their liberation.”<sup>19</sup> When students contextualize the realities of their lives in relation to the false promises of the school system, a spark of consciousness ignites their imagination. But as Freire clarifies, “the revolutionary educator cannot wait for this possibility to materialize. From the outset, her efforts must coincide with those of the students to engage in critical thinking.”<sup>20</sup> In short, as educators we cannot assume that students will figure it out eventually or that our job is simply to prepare them for the world the oppressors have constructed. Rather, our job as “revolutionary educators” should be to encourage critical thinking, facilitate the process of critical consciousness, and provide space for strategizing change and liberation.

## **The Solution**

### *Problem-posing Education*

Freire gives us a new pedagogical concept to use that will facilitate critical thinking better than the banking concept. In order to make this happen, Freire suggests, “Education must begin with the solution of the teacher-student contradiction, by reconciling the poles of the contradiction so that both are simultaneously teachers and students.”<sup>21</sup> He goes on to describe the way this works:

Through dialogue, the teacher-of-the-students and the students-of-the-teacher cease to exist and a new term emerges: teacher-students with students-teachers. The teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach. They become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow. In this process, arguments based on “authority” are no longer valid; in order to function, authority must be on the side of freedom, not against it. Here, no one teaches another, nor is anyone self-taught. People teach each other, mediated by the world, by the cognizable objects which in banking education are “owned” by the teacher.<sup>22</sup>

In other words, whereas the banking concept creates a hierarchical dynamic between the student and teacher, positioning the student below the teacher; in problem-posing education, this dynamic disappears and everyone in the space of the classroom learns from each other. The teacher is no longer the only holder of knowledge, but rather the knowledge of the students is held in an equally high regard to that of the teacher. Freire further describes, “The teacher presents the material to the students for their consideration, and re-considers her earlier considerations as the students express their own... the problem-posing educator constantly [then] re-forms his reflections in the reflection of the students.”<sup>23</sup> Again, this undoes the hierarchical relationship of the classroom and creates a more democratic and mutual learning environment. This kind of

dynamic encourages critical reflection on both the side of the teacher and the student. It gives value to the knowledge students come into the classroom with. If we imagine what this can look like in a real setting: the teacher brings a particular topic to the class to be discussed, offers her perspective on it based on her experience, knowledge, and certain degree of expertise. Then she opens the topic up for discussion among the students and listens with an open mind, facilitates conversation, and considers all other perspectives on the topic. In this way, space is made to ask questions, not just of the teacher but of each other. And I would also argue it relieves the teacher of the responsibility to feel they have to be experts on any given topic. They can be more transparent about their own limitations, while allowing the students to offer a certain degree of expertise. As a teacher who tries to use this method, I learn something new from my students every term, despite the challenges that arise, which I will discuss later in this chapter. Most of my students have experiences that I will never have and therefore have unique perspectives to offer on any range of topics. This pushes me to reconsider my own ideas on this topic, taking into account this new perspective I have encountered.

The banking concept of education forces students to learn a body of knowledge based on Euro-American customs and values of meritocracy and white supremacy. Whereas the banking concept leaves no space for critical reflection and thinking, Freire's problem-posing education fosters and encourages these very things. Freire ultimately argues that to re-imagine education in this way can undo the oppressiveness of the educational system, arguing, "To resolve the teacher-student contradiction, to exchange the role of depositor, prescriber, domesticator, for the role of student among students

would be to undermine the power of oppression and serve the cause of liberation.”<sup>24</sup> I would further that argue this kind of methodology pulls back the curtain on the “fragmented view of reality.” If we allow students to contextualize their own life experiences within the context of the classroom, they might begin to understand and identify the structures of power that permeate education and even society at large. Problem-posing education gives students a language by which to discuss and critique oppression. So, the dynamic of education is completely flipped upside down. The teacher no longer holds all the knowledge to be bestowed on her students, but in fact, the students hold very powerful knowledge, and teaching is no longer about obedience and memorizing information, but rather about facilitating the process of consciousness.

#### *Chicana Feministsø Transformative Pedagogy*

Similar to Freire, Chicana feminists make a critique of the education system, calling out its Eurocentric foundation in white supremacy and the marginalization and delegitimization of other forms of knowing. Lindsey Pérez Huber, a scholar on education, in her article titled, “Disrupting Apartheid of Knowledge: testimonios Methodology in Latina/o Critical Race Research in Education,” describes this “apartheid of knowledge” as “the racial divisions that exist between dominant Eurocentric epistemologies and other epistemological stances, which create a separation of ‘legitimate’ and ‘illegitimate’ forms of knowledge.”<sup>25</sup> Eurocentric knowledge production is privileged over that which comes from people of color, establishing a hierarchy of knowledge, wherein anything outside a Eurocentric perspective is viewed as inferior. Look at reading lists for English classes all the way from elementary up to college and even into graduate school; most authors read



by students are white. Very few books read by students represent an experience outside a Eurocentric perspective. In fact, literature by authors of color is viewed as too narrowly focused, whereas European, or Euro-American literature is viewed as speaking to a universal experience. I discussed the similar way this happened in entertainment in the previous chapter, in that films with a primarily Latino cast are viewed as only for a Latino audience, where a film with an all-white cast is viewed as meant for a universal audience. Ultimately, what this does is create the notion that literature by people of color does not count in the same way that literature by white authors does. This devaluation of the work of people of color and the over-valuation of works by white authors also implies that unless one studies the literary greats, all of whom are white and male, one cannot consider themselves an expert in literature. Thus, a call must be made to include writers of color on reading lists.

However, simply wanting to be included in the dominant literary canon poses a danger, for mere representation does not create structural change and can, in fact, reify colonial structures of knowledge. To explain this, I look to the work of Emma Pérez in her book *The Decolonial Imaginary*, in which she interrogates both historiography and historians, arguing that even in its attempts to be oppositional, Chicano history reinforces colonization by practicing only colonial historiographic methods. In her book, she attempts to turn historiography on its side, to deconstruct it as a field, and point to new methodologies that both include traditionally silenced voices, like those of women, as well as to decolonize history in and of itself. Pérez states, “I want to provide another paradigm, an alternative model for conceptualizing a subaltern and self-consciously

oppositional Chicano/a historiography that can account for issues of the modern and postmodern, immigrants and diasporas, and genders and sexuality.”<sup>26</sup> This new paradigm is important for Chicanos/as because though they are often left out of history, Pérez argues that even when writing our own history, if we use the methods of the colonizer which “already deny and negate the voice of the other,” then our histories will be “influenced by the very colonial imaginary against which they rebel.”<sup>27</sup> Pérez is, therefore, critiquing current Chicano/a methods of historiography, and attempting to point to alternative ways to decolonize these methods that are in and of themselves already in opposition to a colonized history rather than exclusive to it. Using colonial methods to tell the story of the colonized will only work to further oppress the colonized. Pérez calls for truly de-colonial methods to tell the story of the oppressed.

Even though Pérez’s work is specific to history, we can apply the same ideas to epistemology. In fact, her work makes two important points about knowledge production: 1) Those who are traditionally marginalized or left out of the dominant epistemological narrative often seek inclusion or representation in their oppressors’ narrative rather than seeking a whole new paradigm, which, as Pérez suggests, undoes the hierarchical understanding of knowledge in the first place; 2) Those truly invested in undoing the oppressive dynamic of education must work from a two-pronged approach, seeking both representation in the curriculum as well as looking to alternative epistemological methods that can begin to create a whole new paradigm for learning.

Sylvia Gonzalez, in her article entitled “Toward a Feminist Pedagogy for Chicana Self-Actualization,” describes the dangers in only seeking representation rather than

structural change, arguing, “The struggle takes on the aggressive battle to replace the oppressor. Therefore, we find minority males and some white females seeking symbols of power without necessarily working to change the nature of that power.”<sup>28</sup> In other words, rather than understanding the systematic cause of the violence of power, minority groups often get caught up in wanting representation within a hierarchical society rather than critiquing the hierarchy itself. We often get caught up in attaining positions of power, i.e. replacing the oppressor, without acknowledging the ways that position can further oppress others. The idea is not to replace the oppressor but to undo the structure of power which created an oppressive hierarchy in the first place. Therefore, Gonzalez pushes for “A feminist pedagogy of liberation and self-actualization for Chicanas [that] requires that the sources of oppression...be identified and attacked.”<sup>29</sup> She attempts to state the need for a pedagogy that does not reify colonized methods of education that are always already oppressive. Rather, she seeks a pedagogy that reveals these oppressions and allows for liberation. Similar to the paradigm shift that Pérez offers in the realm of history, Gonzalez argues that “a feminist education would be the tool for linking knowledge of our oppression with a new statement of power.”<sup>30</sup> In this way, we not only see the inherent oppressiveness of the education system, but we also create new methods not founded in white supremacy or hierarchy. Gonzalez goes on to say, “Women can create a new definition of power by refusing to participate in the old structures. Women must not force change on others, but instead require change by changing themselves. It is through this feminist pedagogy that we can release the old duality of oppressor and oppressed, conqueror and conquered and establish a new order of friendship between the sexes and

each other.”<sup>31</sup> Freire, Pérez, and Gonzalez all refer to a new way of doing things, a new paradigm to replace hierarchical structures such as white supremacy and patriarchy. They all allude to the undoing of the notion of hierarchy in order to get to a place of liberation. Freire demonstrates that for us in his problem-posing education, while Chicana Feminists demonstrate this for us through their emphasis on embodied knowledge.

### *Embodied Knowledge and Lived Experience*

Much of the literature on Chicana/Latina feminist epistemology and pedagogy greatly emphasizes the centrality of the lived experience to the construction of knowledge for Chicanas and Latinas. The contributors to the book *Chicana/Latina Education in Everyday Life* attempt to intervene in the discourse of epistemology in several ways: 1) by centering Chicana/Latina epistemological methods such as testimonio, the body, and the land; 2) they do this in order to illuminate the ways in which epistemology is embedded and implicated in oppressive colonial projects that seek to maintain sexist, racist and homophobic structures of power; 3) they also participate in such an epistemological project so as to define Chicanas and Latinas as “active thinkers who build on their cultural foundations to form political and practical meanings about learning, knowing, teaching, and power,”<sup>32</sup> in other words, to place value on the inherent knowledge of Latinas; 4) to illustrate how Chicana feminist epistemological projects give agency and hold space for Chicanas and Latinas to negotiate the complexities of their identity formation; and finally, 5) these authors are attempting to give educators and researchers invested in the Chicana/Latina community models to conduct research that disrupts and deviates from culturally deficit models which “blame the cultural beliefs,

values, and practices of Latina/o... students for low educational outcomes.”<sup>33</sup> It is from these core values that Chicana/Latina epistemology and pedagogies emerge.

Conversely, our present-day education system, especially at the level of the university, is greatly inspired by the Age of Enlightenment, which valued reason and science as the wave of the future. The thought was that science based on evidential proof and observation was to be the foundation for knowledge and civil society, rather than religious doctrine, as had been rule until then. This thought incited the notion that scientists were un-biased observers and interpreters of knowledge, with the ability to separate their personal lives, experiences, or worldviews from their work. All Western knowledge was then based on the idea that reason happened in the mind and was based on indisputable scientific evidence. Essentially, the Enlightenment encouraged a disconnection between the mind and the body. Although the body might feel emotion, or physical sense, only the mind could know; only the mind could attain knowledge, and never the two shall meet. Thus, all science, including social science, was founded on this idea. Personal and lived experience had no place in academia, and therefore no place in any space of learning. Cindy Cruz in an article titled, “Toward an Epistemology of a Brown Body,” discusses how this separation of mind and body is so engrained in our ways of knowing that even in de-colonial spaces, these colonial epistemologies reign superior. She states:

The absence of the specific physicality of the body in feminist theory reminds us that even when feminists have consistently contested the argument that the functions and activities of the mind are somehow more fit than those of the body, we as educational researchers find ourselves entrenched in the Cartesian dichotomy of public/private and theory/experience. Never mind our rallying cry that the personal is political, the sets of sanctioned attitudes and behaviors in the

social sciences that emphasize the mind over the body, such as the values of the rational, autonomous, independent, isolated researcher, somehow dismiss corporeal approaches that validate the lived experiences of the body. Texts that are “messy,” in which experience is performed and not explained, texts about betrayal, desire, and shame, are narratives that are often dismissed, unread, and untheorized.<sup>34</sup>

Cruz highlights several problematic engagements with social science scholarship by, for, and about people of color. First of all, we “educational researchers” invested in oppositional scholarship often dismiss lived experience in our quest to legitimize our work within the larger canon of scholarship, a space that was not intended for bodies of color in the first place. Secondly, we are told, lived experiences do not count as scientific evidential proof because real life is often so varied, complex and dependent on one’s ability to recount the experience through storytelling, which in and of itself is not a reliable scientific tool. Furthermore, even when these “messy” texts, as Cruz refers to them, are read, they are only useful to social science in as much as they can be interpreted through a Eurocentric scientific framework. For example, a text about desire, shame, or betrayal, regardless of the subject, would be psycho-analyzed using traditional psychology based in European theories.

Ultimately, scholars of color are told their own experience with race, gender, ethnicity, and other identity markers have no place in their work because it creates a bias. The reality is that all research is bias. Science itself is founded in Western/ European thought, with no regard to alternative perspectives. Also, no human can completely separate their perspective from their work. The notion of the ability to separate one’s work from one’s personal life is a false notion meant to create epistemological hierarchies. Let’s think about scientific racism for a second, which was a theory

researched in “legitimate” science labs, and written about in medical journals. Besides understanding the field as a rationale for slavery, genocide and institutional white supremacy, scientific racism also created a hierarchy between European white epistemology and all other epistemologies. Providing scientific evidence for the racial inferiority of an entire people not only allowed for European colonization all over the world, but it also entrenched the notion that those more connected to their physical bodies were not as developed as the white man. The history of Sarah Bartmann tells how she became the pathological example for all black women based on the notion that she possessed a hyper-sexuality because of her larger body features. The idea was black women were only bodies that could not be connected to the mind and therefore able to control their “animal-like” sexual appetites. Therefore, it was both the Enlightenment and scientific racism that solidified the separation of epistemologies of the mind and of the body, and relegated the latter to an inferior status.

However, “for the Chicana educational researcher” to dismiss the body as a vessel of knowledge is to be fragmented because as Cruz states, “in this case, theory becomes a bodiless entity, a concept and a framework whose interests lie outside our social environments, unaffected by the workings of our everyday material realities.”<sup>35</sup> For the Chicana educational researcher, our work is directly impacted by our everyday material realities and vice-versa; we live and breathe the impact of our work. Those who are privileged enough to be able to separate the work from their life have no interest in liberation of the oppressed, and thus the oppressed must take it on as their work, even as they live the oppression in their daily lives. For example, although my work is invested in

looking at the impact of mass media on identity formation and self-image, I myself cannot say I am outside this influence. I often find myself doing the very thing I encourage my students not to—buying into problematic and oppressive images. I often find myself falling into the trap of self-objectification and viewing through the white male gaze, yet this makes my work all the more relevant. To separate myself as the researcher from that acknowledgement would give my work a false sense of authority. Also, the critiques I make of the education system are most relevant to me as my oldest son begins his educational journey. My search for a better system of education is embodied in my hopes for a better educational future for my children. My investment in the research stems from a place of urgency. I cannot afford to disconnect my mind from my body, my research from my lived experience. To do so would be to deny my body and myself, which becomes a self-oppressive, self-hating practice.

Furthermore, Cruz also argues:

In this sense, the scholar in possession of a brown and lesbian body or, in this case, the body inscribed as “messy text,” is not only disruptive to the canon, but is also excessive in its disorderly movements and conduct. Nothing provokes the custodians of normality and objectivity more than the excessiveness of the body.<sup>36</sup>

Chicana educational researchers possess bodies that are hyper-visible within the space of education, so even in the attempt to seem objective, the scholar of color and their work is always already read through a racial lens. Furthermore, often for the Chicana educational researcher, the investment in research stems from their personal lives and encounters with institutionalized structures of power. Therefore, rather than trying to separate ourselves from our bodies to legitimize our work, “the brown body must be made central in any



consideration of an epistemology of women of color...our production of knowledge begins in the bodies of our mothers and grandmothers in the acknowledgement of the critical practices of women of color before us.”<sup>37</sup>

Chicanas and Latinas cannot separate knowledge of the mind and knowledge of the body, as hegemonic Anglo discourses of knowledge and education instruct us. Too often, constructions of knowledge from people of color are marginalized or erased within academic, educational, and “intellectual” circles because of the dominant cultural emphasis on the brown body. But because of the very material needs and conditions of people of color, we must “validate the lived experience of the body”<sup>38</sup> in order to highlight those oppressive conditions and create change. The body must be that different starting point where “we can reimagine history or postmodernity (or education) the mestiza/indígena way and transform conceptual frameworks as the starting point for envisioning a future way of being—a way that allows coalition building across differences to address societal inequalities.”<sup>39</sup> The importance of the body is in giving agency to the lived experience of Chicanas and Latinas as epistemological methods.

The social sciences and academia in general completely dismiss the body and the lived experience as a valuable site of inquiry or space for intellectual theorization. Therefore, we as Chicana/Latina academics and researchers must braid our “cultural knowledge with our interdisciplinary academic training,”<sup>40</sup> as Francisca E. Godinez has done. Centering the body and the lived experience creates space for critical thinking and the growth of critical consciousness. As Michelle A. Holling contends, “that creating pedagogical assignments that have Chicanas and Latinas center and critically analyze

particular lived experiences, heightens their sense of consciousness.”<sup>41</sup> Since we are called to use different starting points as tools of analysis, Holling suggests that the lived experience be such a starting point because Chicanas and Latinas already come to the classroom with a knowledge base that can be complimented by theoretical literature. When teaching a class entitled “Chicana/Latina Experiences,” Holling consciously centers the lived experiences of her students and uses the readings as ways to “assist in their understanding of culture, identity, power, and resistance.”<sup>42</sup> In this way, the mind and the body remain connected, while the readings are made relevant to everyday life, giving students an investment in the work and the class. Conversely, the readings provide the students a language by which to articulate the struggles and hardships of their everyday lives. Unlike traditional classrooms, here they can use their lives as points of analysis to understand the institutionalization of oppression and domination.

Teresa McKenna, in her article entitled “Intersections of Race, Class and Gender: The Feminist Pedagogical Challenge,” advances this pedagogical argument and is clearly and directly in dialogue with Paulo Freire and Gloria Anzaldúa. She positions her articulation of a feminist pedagogical project at the intersection of Freire’s work and Anzaldúa’s and other Chicana feminists’ mestiza consciousness, and oppositional consciousness.<sup>43</sup> Since critical consciousness, rather than merely the dissemination of uncontested hegemonic knowledge, is the ultimate goal for a Chicana feminist pedagogical project, McKenna states, “[The classroom] has always been a politicized space because it is there that systems of thought, cultural and political hierarchies are affirmed and denied.”<sup>44</sup> Therefore Chicana feminist pedagogy is invested in

acknowledging the problematics of the banking concept in pacifying the student, and also acts as “a resistance to the mutilation of the mestiza body. This is a deliberate search for the possibilities of narrative and theory mending and suturing a body complete.”<sup>45</sup>

Chicana feminist pedagogy offers Chicanas/Latinas the space to contextualize their own lives within the theories of the classroom in order to understand the intricacies of institutionalized oppression. It also offers Chicana educators the space to reconstruct the relationship between the mind and the body, between academic training and the corporal experience of oppression.

Alejandra Elenes adds yet another layer to this paradigm in her book *Transforming Borders: Chicana/o Popular Culture and Pedagogy*, in which she outlines what she calls a border/transformational pedagogy. One of her main objectives is to interrogate the construction of knowledge as it is articulated within the hegemonic white American system of education. She also examines cultural production and popular culture as pedagogical and epistemological practices that guide the formations of subjectivities and identities for Latinxs, in often contradictory ways. I engage her work in order to argue for Latinx popular culture and cultural production as a space for critical analysis and liberatory opportunity.

Elenes, engaged in the Chicana feminist epistemological paradigm, grounds her work in the concepts of “conocimiento/epistemology, borderland subjectivities, and third space feminism”<sup>46</sup> in order to situate popular culture as a powerful form of knowledge and space of learning. The conceptual framework of conocimiento/epistemology highlights how Latinas come to know and understand “structural forms oppression and

resistance”<sup>47</sup> through their everyday lived experiences, as well as “how personal experiences [contain] larger political meanings.”<sup>48</sup> The personal and lived experiences of Latinas is central in border/transformational pedagogies that seek to empower and liberate Latinas. In addition, these lived experiences are inherently epistemological in that “Experience and community memory often times serve as the bases for the process of constructing knowledge.”<sup>49</sup> At the same time the Enlightenment hierarchized forms of knowledge, it also dismissed any place outside the university or schoolhouse as a space of learning. Border/transformational pedagogies therefore gives agency to the lived experiences of Latinxs as epistemological methods that resist the oppressiveness of the system of education.

Elenes further engages with the concept of borderland subjectivities, situating Latinx identity formation as a continually fluid and unstable process, influenced by constructions of race, class, gender, sexuality, and other identity markers. She acknowledges the limitations of this influence while simultaneously illustrating the liberatory opportunities of a fluid identity, underlying the often contradictory, and multiple subject positions of Latinxs. Therefore, Elenes emphasizes the need for border/transformational pedagogies to be invested in an intersectional mode of analysis that encompasses race, class, gender, and sexuality as complex structures of power that maintain white supremacy. To this end, Elenes theorizes third-space feminism, which depicts the intersections of these different subject positions as a space to negotiate often opposing ideologies. Elenes also draws from Chicana feminists Chela Sandoval’s idea of

oppositional/differential consciousness, which urges Chicanas to move between and among contradictory tactics and strategies that can often be both oppressive and liberating.

Elenes makes clear the importance of popular culture as “a terrain of possibilities where the conflict over the construction of meanings of social or cultural events...is played out.”<sup>50</sup> I argued in chapter one that Latinidad and Latinx subjectivity within popular culture leave little room for the articulation of the multiple subject positions actual Latinxs inhabit. Thus Elenes, by looking at how Chicana feminists have reclaimed the iconic figures of La Malinche, La Llorona, and La Virgen de Guadalupe, attempts to show the possibilities within popular culture to actually create a space for a critical analysis of identity and subject formation. She makes clear that “popular culture...refers to more than cultural productions or products, but also to beliefs and practices of particular social groups and cultures.”<sup>51</sup> She articulates the pedagogical power of popular culture in forming our beliefs and practices, but again ultimately does so in order to explore cultural productions as “sites where the conflicts over the construction of Chicana/o subjectivity are represented.”<sup>52</sup> Elenes bridges together both the study of pedagogy as well as the study of Latinx popular culture in order to illustrate how “bringing such cultural practices to a variety of educational settings and analyzing the conflicts over their meanings is a pedagogical practice where knowledge is produced, and alternative subjectivities can be explored.”<sup>53</sup>

This work supports my argument that as much as identity formation is partly informed by popular media representations that construct Chicana/Latina identity in order

to maintain oppressive hierarchies, and as much as media representations of Latinidad fail to demonstrate the power relations and material inequalities that exist for Chicanas/Latinas within the larger dominant Anglo-American society, so too can Latinxs themselves use popular culture to combat this oppressive representation. Ultimately, I contend, the space of popular culture and mass media is very powerful and influential in the construction and representation of Latinx identity as well as influencing Latinx identity formation, and yet it can also be used as a tool in the practice of transformative pedagogy.

Elenes defines border/transformational pedagogies as invested in understanding and revealing institutional domination and oppression, which have historically marginalized Chicana feminist epistemologies. Thus border/transformational pedagogies on the one hand highlight oppressive structures of power that dominate the institution of education and, on the other hand, centralize Chicana feminist epistemologies that seek to transform and decolonize our minds. Accordingly, I ground my critical media literacy project in a border/transformational pedagogy that both reveals the inherent oppressiveness of the mass media while undoing the equally oppressive dynamic of the system of education. Ultimately my hope is that this kind of pedagogical project will offer alternative constructions of Latinx identities and empower young Latinxs with the ability to recognize particular cultural representations as oppressive, and enable them to then construct their own identities on their own terms.

Furthermore, a border/transformational pedagogy rooted in an epistemology advocating an oppositional construction of knowledge offers us a way to empower young

Latinxs to deconstruct “hegemonic definitions of womanhood.”<sup>54</sup> Therefore, if, for example, the representation of Latinas in the media can only offer a superficial representation of Latinx sexuality as predicated in hyper-sexualized, exotic, and erotic stereotypes, then critical media literacy grounded in a border transformative pedagogy and Chicana feminist epistemology can work to deconstruct that representation as oppressive. If the media only portrays narrow representations of Chicana/Latina identity, by using border transformative pedagogies that fully take into account the complex subject positionality of young Latinxs, we can offer young girls alternative modes of identity formation. Moreover, this kind of critical media literacy would help to give young girls the tools to construct their own identities in a more nuanced manner, based on alternative, oppositional and critical representations of Chicana/Latina identity.

*Theatre as Transformative Pedagogy- Dqcnøu"Vjgcvtg"qh"vjg"Qrrtguugf"*

With my investment in critical pedagogy, as articulated by Chicana feminists, I argue theatre studies, specifically Augusto Boal and his Theatre of the Oppressed offer me a method by which to put a Chicana feminist pedagogy into action. Furthermore, using theatre in the context of a project focused on Latinxs makes sense because theatre has always been a part of Latinx and Chicanx cultural history. Luis Valdes, founder of Teatro Campesino during the Chicano Movement, has said of his *actos*, they “inspire the audience to social action. Illuminate specific points about social problems. Satirize the opposition. Show or hint at a solution. Express what people are feeling.”<sup>55</sup> Theatre has always been a central literary and education tool, specifically for Chicanxs. It makes

sense to use the work of Boal, who is arguably of the same thought as Valdes in regards to the liberating power of theatre.

Boal was a revolutionary theatre practitioner in Brazil, who recognized the power of theatre to influence and impact the masses. He made critiques of the dominant theatrical style, referring to it as “Aristotle’s Coercive system of tragedy.” Boal states, “this system functions to diminish, placate, satisfy, eliminate all that can break the balance—all, including the revolutionary, transforming impetus.”<sup>56</sup> He understood the theatre’s power to maintain the oppressive status quo in society, much like my argument about mass media’s power to maintain institutional inequality, and the education system’s power undermine critical consciousness. However, Boal also felt theatre could be used to combat this oppression. In his seminal book *Theatre of the Oppressed*,<sup>57</sup> he offers us what he calls the poetics of the oppressed, whose main objective is “to change the people—“spectators,” passive beings in the theatrical phenomenon—into subjects, into actors, transformers of the dramatic action.”<sup>58</sup> Theatre of the Oppressed (hereto referred to as TO) is a pedagogical method used by Boal to incite critical thinking in theatre audiences as well as theatre practitioners. Boal defines TO by making the distinction between the work of Aristotle, the German theatre practitioner Bertolt Brecht, and himself:

I hope that the differences remain clear. Aristotle proposes a poetics in which the spectator delegates power to the dramatic character so that the latter may act and think for him. Brecht proposes a poetics in which the spectator delegates power to the character who thus acts in his place but the spectator reserves the right to think for himself, often in opposition to the character. In the first case, a “catharsis” occurs; in the second, an awakening of critical consciousness. But the poetics of the oppressed focuses on the action itself: the spectator delegates no power to the character (or actor) either to act or to think in his place; on the contrary, he himself assumes the protagonist role, changes the dramatic action, tries out solutions, discusses plans for change—in short, trains himself for real action. In



this case, perhaps the theater is not revolutionary in itself, but it is surely a rehearsal for the revolution.<sup>59</sup>

Boal refers to the ways theatre engages and manipulates the audience, much like the way the mass media engages and manipulates its audience. Boal argues that the spectator of the dramatic action is trained to be a passive viewer. In the same way, I argue mass media trains its viewers to be passive consumers. While Brecht offers a way for the spectator to acknowledge this manipulation, Boal takes it one step further, by inviting the spectator to actually become part of the scene. This might be the difference between critical media literacy that teaches viewers how to read images, versus my project that creates a space to imagine a different kind of image. Boal refers to this invitation as the “spect-actor,” where one is both spectator and actor. He blurs the line between the theatrical work and the audience by making the audience a part of the theater, thus, giving them agency to create multiple possibilities for the direction of the plot. By doing so, the spect-actor imagines and plays out new, creative and critically engaged possibilities for the future of society at large. This is the ultimate goal of my project, to assist young teenage Latinxs in changing from passive consumers of the mass media into subjects, actors, who can identify the oppressive force of the mass media and then transform their oppressed state within that system, and create alternative possibilities of representations as well.

Boal also articulates the importance of the body, as Chicana feminists do, as a foreground of knowledge. Therefore, as Chicana feminists call for a pedagogy that reconnects the mind and the body in order to highlight oppression, Boal gives us a method by which to put this into practice. In his book, *Games for Actors and Non-Actors*,

Boal argues that the body has been “mechanized, automated in its muscle structures and insensible to 70 per cent of its possibilities.”<sup>60</sup> He goes on to state that this occurs because the body has been “hardened by habit into a certain set of actions and reactions.”<sup>61</sup> In other words, Boal argues that our bodies have been trained to act and react in very particular ways to certain situations, “denying [ourselves] the possibility of original action every time the opportunity arises.”<sup>62</sup> This is just another part of the oppressive system theater works to maintain. I would argue that mass media, as well as the system of education, do this kind of work as well, since they both discipline and police our bodies to conform to a normative set of acceptable behaviors, so that behaviors that go outside this norm are deemed inferior or immoral.

If we think particularly about early childhood education, young children are taught that to be a good student is to sit still and do what the teacher says unquestionably. If a student does not conform, meaning if they get up from their seats, or choose to question the teacher, the student is labeled a problem-child with behavioral issues. From the inception of education, bodies are policed and trained to sit in a seat, listen to the teacher and only move when instructed by the teacher. Young students are taught the only way to learn is to sit and listen, thus suppressing their own innate ability to think and learn with their bodies through play and activity.<sup>63</sup> A more suitable approach would be to work within the parameters of age-appropriate behavior, rather than insisting on children conforming to behaviors they are developmentally not ready to perform. I would further suggest that works like that of Boal could offer other methods that emphasize the body as a vessel of learning. Similarly, the mass media disciplines and polices bodies through the

reinforcement of specific body types and racial stereotypes, thus the need for critical media literacy to be equally invested in embodied knowledge.

In seeking such a pedagogy that allows for critical consciousness and a connection to embodied knowledge, I propose we must do as Boal suggests, “start with the ‘de-mechanisation,’ the retuning (or detuning) of the actor...[and] learn to perceive emotions and sensations he has lost the habit of recognizing.”<sup>64</sup> Boal references the ways our bodies inherently know how to perceive things such as oppression, but have been trained to understand it as a normal part of society and life. Boal, therefore, makes the body central to our understanding of knowledge, as Chicana feminists call for. He asks the question, “How do we know what we know through our bodies?” He argues that in fact we are trained to ignore our embodied knowledge by ascribing to habitual bodily reactions, which take the place of critical thinking. He then offers us TO, which gives us a step-by-step method to decolonize our bodily reactions and free our minds to imagine more liberating possibilities.

Specifically, when looking at the impact of mass media on young girls, using techniques such as those laid out by Boal will help facilitate critical media literacy by highlighting the oppressive forces embedded in media images. Moreover, TO can offer a space to explore alternative possibilities and solutions to these oppressive forces. Peter Duffy, the editor of the book *Youth and Theatre of the Oppressed*, offers the following:

If you think about internalized oppressions and the way our bodies have been trained to react to situations, we need to work with the students to create the language they need to recontextualize the behavioral framework they have so they can see other possibilities. Often it’s about opening up options and asking, ‘What else could you do?’ It doesn’t necessarily change behavior, but it can give students an opportunity to show each other what other alternatives exist.<sup>65</sup>

This is exactly the goal I have for my project, to help young girls to envision and demonstrate alternative representations of what it means to be a woman and/or a Latina. To imagine what that would even look like, to know alternatives exist.

### *Media Literacy*

Along with using Chicana feminist transformative pedagogy and Boal's TO, I also look at more traditional critical media literacy methods. In their book *Media Literacies*, Michael Hoechsmann and Stuart R. Poyntz engage with different pedagogical paradigms in media literacy in order to articulate the historical shifts in the field as well as consider new directions in media use by young people in order to understand how to best create a media literacy pedagogy that suits the youth of today. The first pedagogical paradigm they engage with is the following key concepts as found in the resource guide produced by the Ontario Ministry of Education in Canada, and are the basis of other such concept lists. These concepts would be used to structure media education:

- 1) All media are constructions.
- 2) The media construct reality.
- 3) Audiences negotiate meaning in the media.
- 4) Media have commercial implications.
- 5) Media contain ideological and value messages.
- 6) Media have social and political implications.
- 7) Form and content are closely related in the media.
- 8) Each medium has a unique aesthetic form.<sup>66</sup>

Next, they look at the work of Richard Johnson who offered a model illustrated as a circle with four places of analysis. In all my research on critical media literacy, this model seems to be the one most used or referenced, either directly or indirectly, in some form, even by Angharad Valdivia in the book entitled *Latina/os and the Media*. Thus,

using a mix of both Johnson's and Valdivia's articulation, I define these four points of analysis as: 1) production/political economy 2) textual/content analysis 3) audience and reception 4) effects, cognition and influence on lived culture.

Hoechsmann and Poyntz argue their intervention into the field is to take these four points of analysis to a new level given the direction of media in the digital age, with their seven C's of contemporary youth media practices. These are laid out as follows, along with my short description of each.

- 1) Consciousness- identity formation
- 2) Communication- social networking, and otherwise communicating on-line
- 3) Consumption and surveillance- individualized marketing and advertising through cookies
- 4) Convergence- exposure to large data base of information without understanding contexts in which this information is produced and circulated.
- 5) Creativity- self produced media, not commercially produced
- 6) Copy-paste- re-mixing and mashing up of different types of media to create new forms of expression, i.e. memes
- 7) Community- developing and interacting in virtual communities, brings people together who might not otherwise be able to interact<sup>67</sup>

The point here is that people learn at a very young age how to use and interact with media, and are in fact often times more literate in media forms than their elders. In these seven C's, Hoechsmann and Poyntz describe how students are already engaging with the media in order to see these as spaces for critical engagement. Their work questions whether students are already communicating and creating community via social networks, and if so, then how can that be used as an opportunity to teach critical thinking about the political impact of media, so that they become critically aware of social networks' impact on self-identity?

These three pedagogical paradigms define traditional critical media literacy, and in fact are very useful in offering students a space to develop a language with which to critique media images. However, very few media literacy scholars have taken into consideration oppressive structures of power both at the mass production level and the personal level. In other words, how do students of color engage with media that is inherently oppressive? It is one thing to teach students to read media images in ways that students can recognize the production methods used, the political economy of the media, how to navigate media forms, and how to create media; but students should also be able to discuss the dynamics of power and structural forms of oppression imbedded in all of these things. Furthermore, even in the push to have students create their own media outside of the corporate media structure, part of the discussion needs to address access to media and access to technology to create media. I would argue that whereas white students might find it liberating to create YouTube videos without any corporate sponsorship, students of color may not have access to the technology to do the same. Furthermore, students of color might engage with media images in a very different way than white students since they have to negotiate stereotypical representations.

Supporting this argument, and looking to expand the field of critical media literacy, Ernest Morrell in his book *Critical Literacy and Urban Youth*, addresses the field in a much more nuanced way, arguing, “the dominant discourses surrounding literacy instruction usually treat literacy as an autonomous and, therefore, neutral entity or skill set, namely the ability to read and write. These discourses fail to take into account that literacies are multiple, situated, ideological, and tied to power relations in society.”<sup>68</sup>

Morrell understands the lack of consideration for complex subject positions in relation to media and calls for a more transformative paradigm. He states,

In order to define ourselves on our own terms, we must understand the role of language and texts in the construction of the self and the social...[we] must also intervene in [these constructions]; [we] must speak back and act back against these constructions with counter-language and counter-texts. Critical literacy, therefore, is necessary not only for the critical navigation of hegemonic discourses; it is also essential to the redefining of the self and the transformation of oppressive social structures and relations of production. Confronting ideological language and texts is a requisite activity, but resistance and transformation are also textually based practices for the critically literate citizen.<sup>69</sup>

Morrell argues how impactful media texts can be on identity formation, and that critical literacy is an important step toward self-determination. I would interject here that critical media literacy is then imperative in order to define Latinidad outside the scope of the mass media. Even more than that, not only must we be able to recognize the inherent oppressiveness of media images, and try to define our identities outside of that, Morrell calls for us to demand more of media itself. We must go so far as to create our own texts that speak against the stereotypical images of Latinidad. In this way, critical media literacy is more than just about learning to read the texts and identifying the oppressive message, but it is about becoming socially and politically active against these images. Freire, Anzaldúa, and Chicana feminists alike would argue that is the ultimate goal of critical consciousness: to recognize the oppression, call it out as such, resist it, and demand change.

Still, the most useful contribution to my engagement with critical media literacy is that of Lucila Vargas in her book *Latina Teens, Migration, and Popular Culture*. Vargas specifically focuses on the “relationship between media use and transnational femininity

and gendered expressions of cultural citizenship” of mostly foreign-born Latina teenagers. She defines media literacy as:

a set of competencies that includes production skills as well as critical thinking skills, such as the ability to apply analytical tools when examining one’s own media practices; the ability to examine the connections between media practices and subjectivity; and the ability to understand the political economics of global media conglomerates, their power as socializing agents, and their role in the constitution of identities.<sup>70</sup>

Vargas refers to her particular brand of media literacy as transnational media literacy, “grounded in the scholarship on globalization and transnationalism.”<sup>71</sup> Her work, much like my own, attempts to bridge traditional critical media literacy with social justice scholarship in order to specifically address the need of young Latinx teens in their engagement with mass media. The major difference between us is that I focus on mostly U.S. born Latinxs and I use theatre techniques as central methods in my pedagogy. Thus, the heart of my project is to foster critical media literacy in young Latinxs so that they may be able to recognize the hegemonic power of media images, and then ultimately create and/or demand more nuanced and complex images so that they and others like them might have more options by which to form their cultural identities in relationship to Latinidad. For me, critical media literacy must be transformative.

### **My Project: Transformative Critical Media Literacy**

My pedagogical intervention into critical media literacy emerges at the intersections of Boal’s TO, Chicana feminist transformative pedagogy, and Freire’s problems-posing education, all of which engage in a critique of dominant epistemologies, and establish a need for critical consciousness. Thus, I contend, “Theatre studies enables a focus on the body as a central source of knowledge formation. Chicana/Latina feminist



discourse focuses on the body and draws attention to the imposition of western ways of knowing. Theatre studies make the connection clear and makes it visible and renders it physical through the staging of the body. It brings the theoretical into the practical and makes the idea of reconnecting with the body a possibility by offering a methodology for thinking and working through embodied knowledge.”<sup>72</sup> Whereas Chicana/Latina feminists and Freire call for an emphasis on alternative epistemologies and pedagogies, Boal answers that call, giving us a methodology that quite literally enacts and stages an alternative epistemology and pedagogy. Therefore, my project establishes and draws from an archive of multiple and varied techniques and methods, ranging from traditional critical media literacy, Chicana feminist transformative pedagogy, and Boal’s TO in order to create a curriculum that develops what I refer to as Transformative Critical Media Literacy for young Latinxs.

The following is my five-step outline of Transformative Critical Media Literacy (hereto referred to as TfcML<sup>73</sup>). This is not meant to be a linear method in which one step happens after another, as all five steps take place almost simultaneously. I lay them out this way to show how they build on each other, and how to acquaint students with the method in a way that makes sense to them. This also demonstrates my thought process in why this method is so useful in achieving the goal of critical media literacy for young Latinxs. Therefore, I discuss how I put this method into practice in the media workshops, which served as the pilot project for this work. The media workshops brought TfcML to life, but were met with some challenges. Therefore, I also offer examples of how I have utilized these methods in my teaching at community colleges and state universities with

great success. It should also be clear how I am pulling from the different scholarly fields with which I am engaged in order to ground my method.

### *1-Political Economy*

Scholars of media literacy including those invested in social justice agree attention must be brought to the political economy of the mass media, because it demonstrates the power dynamic that connects mass media to capitalism and globalization. Thus, this is where I begin, with a lecture and discussion tracking the economic pipeline of the mass media. I start by simply asking my students to follow the dollar, and pay attention to the connection between media funding and content. One particular exercise I assign to explain this involves asking students to pick up any magazine and count how many pages of content there are and compare that to how many pages of ads there are. Typically, the ratio is 70% ads to 30% content, and even the content includes ads, especially in women's magazines. I also ask students to think about social networking sites that do not charge users, yet are making enormous profits off of the ads that pop up on their sites. Lastly, we discuss the process of media conglomeration in that media outlets are consolidated to very few conglomerate companies, leaving very little variety in the market. Thus, I present my students with the following questions to discuss and ponder:

- 1) If media gets the majority of their money from ads, what kind of influence can advertisers have on the content of the information we as viewers and consumers receive?
- 2) How can the particular ideological biases of the advertisers influence the messages and intent of the images portrayed?

- 3) If there are only very few conglomerate companies disseminating media images, how does this impact the variety of identity representations portrayed in these images?<sup>74</sup>

Leaving these as open-ended questions allows students to think about their own relationship to media and to consider how seemingly benign engagements might actually be purposefully constructed by those in power. Learning about the political economy of the mass media is but the first step in TfcML, which involves acquainting students with the business of media.

### *2-The Language of Textual Analysis*

The language of critical media literacy is not something we learn about in traditional education. We might be able to see an image and know there is something wrong about what it represents, but we may not be able to articulate that in words; thus, the image remains free of any coherent critique, making it difficult to recognize its oppressive message. Again, media literacy scholars point to the importance of textual analysis to the development of critical media literacy skills. But we must begin with a space to learn, and to create a language by which to analyze a text in the first place. We cannot assume students even know how to articulate an oppressive moment in an image. For example, we are so inundated with similar images of objectified women, the objectification is then normalized to the point of seeing it as benign and even often as comedic. The key then is to encourage students to develop their critical language, and offer them a space to practice that language.

In the second session of my workshop series, I screened the film *Killing Us Softly 3* in which Jean Kilbourne goes through multiple media images from magazine ads and

the like, offering an analysis based on an understanding of discourses of race and gender. It plays like a slide show of images, to which she adds her critique pointing out the racist and sexist messages. After viewing this film, the consistent response from the participants in the workshop was that Kilbourne was “reading too much into” the images. There was a resistance to the need for textual analysis. However, I persisted and proceeded to hand out a list of questions that we would pose to a collection of ads that were both contributed by the students and collected by myself. I was careful to have the media images come from the students themselves so that their experiences with media could be brought into the classroom. In the session previous to our discussion of ads, I asked the participants to email me ads and commercials that we can look over. One particular commercial that was offered by a participant, is a Burger King commercial showing a woman in a bikini eating a hamburger. We went through the images like a slide show, similar to Kilbourne’s method. For each image, some of the questions posed were as follows:

- What assumptions does the ad make about gender?
  - Are these assumptions realistic? Why or why not?
  - Do these assumptions challenge stereotypes about gender identity?
- What assumptions does the ad make about race?
  - Are these assumptions realistic? Why or why not?
  - Do these assumptions reinforce or challenge stereotypes about racial identity?
- What is the overall message of the ad?
- What are the possible consequences of these messages?
- Do the messages create unrealistic expectations for people? Why or why not?

The basic process was that we as a class would look at one particular image and go through all these questions. We asked similar questions of each TV, film, and music video clip we looked at throughout the workshop series. The basic idea was that if we repetitively asked the same questions about racial, gendered, and other stereotypes by

going down the list of questions for each image, then these questions would become second nature. I wanted to encourage students to subconsciously ask these questions of all media images they come across. Asking these questions of media images creates a critical language because it places concepts of oppression (like racism, sexism, and classism) onto an image for better or for worse. By dissecting the oppressive messages in each image, we begin to see the varied ways in which these forms of oppression manifest in media images.

Textual analysis is the process of asking critical questions of media images and identifying the underlying message of the image. In a traditional school system, students are not encouraged to think critically in general, much less are they encouraged to think critically about media images, especially because there is no formal space to do that work. Therefore, textual analysis is key in developing TfCML skills, because it offers this space to interrogate media images in a critical way, highlighting the underlying oppressive message. However, asking critical questions of images is not the only way to do textual analysis, since embodied knowledge also comes into play. We can use the body to read images critically and even imagine more liberating possibilities.

### *3-Embodied Knowledge*

Although textual analysis and learning the language of critique is important, equally important is the way our bodies process and interpret oppressive images. I mentioned that people might actually subconsciously know when an image is problematic but often dismiss that sense because they do not have a language to communicate that feeling, consequently demonstrating the disconnection between our mind and our body.

Our bodies might sense something alarming, but our minds do not know how to process that information. Thus, textual analysis must inherently work in conjunction with embodied knowledge. However, because students have been so trained to disconnect from that embodied knowledge, we must begin by fostering the re-connection of the relationship between mind and body. This is where I apply Boal's work.

The first step in Boal's poetics of the oppressed is to reconnect the mind and the body so the person "will be able to practice theatrical forms in which by stages he frees himself from his condition of spectator and take on that of actor, in which he ceases to be an object and becomes a subject, is changed from witness to protagonist."<sup>75</sup> This is my ultimate goal with TfcML: to open the possibility that Latinxs can combat the mass media's urge to make them passive viewers and consumers of stereotypical representations of Latinidad. We can then no longer sit idly by as viewers of sexually and otherwise objectified representations of women of color. My purpose in using embodied knowledge in TfcML is to literally embody an image in order to recognize the objectification and then alter that dynamic by using the body to create a more empowering message. First, we must acknowledge the body as a site of knowledge. Boal offers the following outline of stages that will bring on such a transformation and highlight the senses so that our embodied knowledge comes to the forefront:

First Stage: *Knowing the body*: a series of exercises by which one gets to know one's body, its limitations and possibilities, its social distortions and possibilities of rehabilitation.

Second Stage: *Making the body expressive*: a series of games by which one begins to express one's self through the body, abandoning other, more common habitual forms of expression.

Third Stage: *The theater as language*: one begins to practice theater as a language that is living and present, not as a finished product displaying images from the past:

First degree: *Simultaneous dramaturgy*: the spectators “write” simultaneously with the acting of the actors;

Second degree: *Image theater*: the spectators intervene directly, “speaking” through images made with actors’ bodies;

Third degree: *Forum theater*: the spectators intervene directly in the dramatic action and act.

Fourth Stage: *The theater as discourse*: simple forms in which the spectator-actor creates “spectacles” according to his need to discuss certain themes or rehearse certain actions.<sup>76</sup>

Here, Boal outlines the steps toward transformation of the body and gives us a process by which to reconnect the mind and the body.

### *Putting TO into Practice*

Using Boal’s book, *Games for Actors and Non-Actors*, and modifying his techniques to my purpose, I began by simply introducing the idea of moving our bodies in a traditional classroom setting. Some of the games I used are as follows:

- Name game
  - Everyone go around, say your name and one word that describes how you feel right now.
  - You may not repeat a word once someone else has used it.
- The Cross and the Circle
  - In your desk begin to make a circle with the right foot. Stop.
    - Now with your right hand write your name. Stop.
    - Do both at the same time. If you want you can switch it up.
  - Now stand up. Make a circle with your right hand.
    - Make a cross with your left hand, at the same time.
- Circle with Knots
  - In three groups, stand close together, and grab the hand of two other people. Now try to untangle yourselves.

In alignment with Boal’s first stage: *Knowing the body*, my goal in using these games was to simply introduce the idea of using our bodies to learn, analyze and discuss.

Boal's next stage is to make the body expressive, in other words, using the body to communicate. In order to encourage this, I facilitated the following games, again modified from Boal's techniques:

- Rhythm with chairs
  - I need five volunteers. Each of you is asked to create a pose, any pose or posture you want with your body.
  - The rest of you will move around the room. When I call a number, you must make the same pose as the person in the middle with that number.
    - At some point I will call out two numbers and you will have to try to do both poses at the same time. And I might even get up to three numbers.
  - At some point we can switch up the people in the middle.
- Theme/Guess
  - I will tell one person the theme, and she will begin to act it out as best she can. If someone is able to figure out what the theme is, she will join the person in the action, and the next person can follow so on.
- Check in
  - Go around the room, say your name and a noise and movement that describes how you feel right now. Again, no movement or sound should be repeated.

Using these games is an effort in connecting students to their bodies in a classroom setting, and to give them a space to see their bodies as knowledgeable and communicative. The participants seemed to feel silly and uncomfortable with these activities, but my hope was that it would introduce this kind of method in order to make activities I would later introduce more palatable. In my teaching experience, I use these activities more as ice breakers in the beginning of the semester, to a better response. Furthermore, doing these activities at the beginning set the tone for the class, letting students know this is part of my pedagogy.

The most transformative stage in this process, and really the jewel of TfCML, is the third stage in which participants begin creating interactive theatre and are situated as



spect-actors, both audience and actors of the theatrical work. Boal's most popular form of theatre, and the one I have attempted to use in my own work, is called forum theatre. This is a "theatrical game in which a problem is shown in an unresolved form, to which the audience as spect-actors are invited to suggest and enact solutions...the problem is always the symptom of an oppression."<sup>77</sup> In this way, Boal demonstrates the possibilities in theatre to make people the actors, to give them agency to act as they see fit in a particular situation rather than being trained to react in a predetermined manner. It offers them a way to envision a multitude of possibilities. Furthermore, as Mady Shutzman and Jan Cohen-Cruz suggest, TO makes the often invisible sources of oppression "physicalized, animated, and addressed as 'real' antagonistic forces."<sup>78</sup> In other words, TO makes oppression recognizable through the body.

In my media workshops, I first introduced this method by discussing films. First, I asked the participants to write their top five favorite films on a piece of paper. I collected them and tallied which films were mentioned the most. The overwhelming favorites were: *Ujgøu"vjg"Ocp*, *Mean Girls*, *Bridesmaids*, and *The Little Mermaid*. I separated the students into groups and assigned each group one of these films. Each group had to re-enact a scene from their assigned film. Before this re-enactment, I first facilitated a few games to again foster the connection of the mind and the body, but to also familiarize students with the characters they would be playing. I first assigned a character activity in which they write the answers to questions like the following as if they were the character:

- What is your occupation?
- What do you aspire to be when you grow up?
- Who is your crush?
- Where do you see yourself in 10 years?

- Do you think you will go to college? Or what college did you attend?
- Do you feel you are a good person, why or why not?
- Should others look up to you, why or why not?

I did not collect the responses to these questions, for I wanted students not to feel inhibited and to be as creative as they wanted. This was an exercise in moving toward embodiment of the character. After familiarizing themselves with the character in their mind, I led the following activity in which half the students stood in a circle facing out, and the other half of the students stood in a larger circle surrounding the other facing in. Boal calls this the wagon wheel. One student from the inner circle would face another from the outer circle as I posed a question they would each have to answer to the other. Then I asked either circle to rotate right or left to get to another partner to answer another question. The questions were the following:

#### Wagon Wheel

- What is one trait of your character you wish you had and why?
- If your character came to this school, how would they fit in or would they?
- Would you be friends with your character, why or why not?

As your character:

- Where do you see yourself in 10 years?
- What do you think about being here today?

These activities were meant to get the students acquainted with the character before they proceeded to perform the chosen scenes. The scenes were to be a straight forward re-enactment of the original scene from the film. The critical part came when after each performance we would discuss the following questions:

- How did you feel as your character in the scene?
- Did you feel like you had power? Why or why not?
- Did you feel victimized in any way? Why or why not?
- Do you feel your character portrays a positive or negative image for teenage girls?
- How would you change the scene in any way to create a more realistic or positive outcome?

In this exercise, the students are not simply looking at the images on a screen, they are actually embodying the image, performing the image with their bodies, becoming the text to be analyzed, and making the analysis much more palpable and relevant. The critical discussion questions are different here, for I am not asking to discern the problematic message of the image, but rather I am asking them how it *felt to be* the image.

#### *4- Oppositional Representations*

Aside from the process of learning critical language and connecting to the body, it is equally important for students to be exposed to representations that fall outside of the mainstream and are oppositional to the stereotypical representations offered by the mass media. Circulating images of Latinidad that are more complex and varied offers alternative options for identity formation, giving Latinxs more options to construct their own identities. Additionally, oppositional representations can also create a basis for political critiques against the mainstream rhetoric around Latinidad.

I will explore these representations more in my final chapter. For now, I include this as part of my pedagogy, but in this chapter I focus on the facilitating the process toward embodying critical consciousness.

#### *5-Staging Critical Consciousness*

In this final step, rather than having students discuss the oppressiveness of an image after performing it, students are asked to create alternate endings to the scenes opening it up to possibilities for a more empowering message. Thus, as in Boal's fourth and final stage, "*The theater as discourse*: simple forms in which the spectator-actor creates 'spectacles' according to his need to discuss certain themes or rehearse certain

actions.”<sup>79</sup> My final step calls on students to create alternate endings for an image that imagines the possibility of a world liberated from all oppression. When discussing music videos, I had students in groups choose a particular song. As a class, we watched a clip of the video, read the lyrics, and discussed the overall message, offering a partial textual analysis. They were then to write a script for a new version of the video in which the problematic message would be made one of empowerment. Due to time constraints, the participants in my workshops were not able to have enough time to invest in re-writing these scenes. They had just about 30 minutes in class, and they wrote scripts but the performances were lacking in nuance and a grasp of the directions for the assignment. However, I have assigned a similar activity in almost all classes I have taught including those not centered on media. I am able to prepare them for this project right at the beginning of the semester, and they have a clear understanding of how this will impact their grade. Thus, there is more of an investment in producing quality work.

Usually the assignment is as follows: students are required to get into groups of between 3 to 6, and pick a topic relevant to the class, sometimes from a list that I assign. They are then asked to research this topic, and write a skit. When I teach in a Chicana Studies department, I refer to this skit as an *acto* in the tradition of *Teatro Campesino*. I also make clear as part of the assignment that whether it be a skit or an *acto*, the tone of the script must, as Luis Valdez makes clear about teatro, “inspire[s] the audience to social action. Illuminate specific points about social problems. Satirize the opposition. Show or hint at a solution. Express what people are feeling.”<sup>80</sup> As part of the assignment, the students are allowed to either perform the skit live or film it and present it to the class.

The performance, whether live or filmed, must contain some production value and demonstrate preparedness and time investment. Students are also required to write a four-page essay that summarizes the topic they chose and evaluates the creative process. In the essay, they are to answer questions such as: How did performing this event as an act give you a new insight or perspective on history? Did you learn something in this process you had not previously learned? Do you think theatre is a good learning method? Why or why not?

When I teach Mexican-American history, I ask my students to write an act performing a historical moment, and to write and perform an alternate ending that would lead to a more liberated future society. In other classes I have taught, like in Women's Gender and Sexuality Studies (WGSS), I ask them to write a skit based on a topic that demonstrates a more empowering vision of society. I will discuss one such example in chapter three. For now, I want to highlight an example from my Mexican-American history class.

One particular group of students chose to perform the capture of the Mexican drug lord El Chapo. Rather than capturing him and taking him to prison, they instead took El Chapo to meet with the Mexican government in order to come to an agreement or peace treaty of sorts. Without having to articulate it through discussion and traditional analysis, these students recognized the inherent oppressiveness of this situation, alluding to the ways in which the drug war and the Mexican government are interconnected in both public and extra-legal manners. Furthermore, they demonstrated their ability to comprehend and process the situation to imagine a possible solution that would create a

more positive outcome. Writing a simple 10-minute skit demonstrated the students' analytical skills in a way that traditional methods might not be able to assess as clearly. For example, giving a written exam may create pressure for students that would hinder their ability to prove their analytical skills. Also, though I do assign research papers, I find that students get so caught up in form and structure that their analysis gets lost. However, when I see the performances, whether live or on film, there is a clear demonstration of their grasp of the topic, the nuances for the literature, and an analytical perspective.

Theatre as a pedagogical method offers solutions to the many failures of the traditional education system because the use of theatre can more aptly account for a variety of learning abilities, encourage critical thinking and analysis, connect students to their embodied knowledge, and offers space to brainstorm solutions to societal problems. However revolutionary and amazing this method, it is not without its challenges.

### **The Challenges of Transformative Pedagogy**

Although I lay out these methods with high hopes and some varying success, it was not without challenges. My media workshop series was the first time I used any of this methodology, and many of the activities I facilitated were met with resistance, disinterest and the like. This I attribute to being somewhat of a guest lecturer in a class in which my assignments were not mandatory and would not contribute to their grade. However, I have since used these methods in other classes with much more success.

Nonetheless, one consistent challenge in any of these situations has been students' reactions to this new methodology. Students have been trained for so long throughout

their education to sit in a desk and take notes, that by the time they get to me at the college level, or in the case of these workshops, as high school seniors, it is very hard for students to break out of this mode. This is the kind of mechanization that Boal refers to: how students are trained to learn in only one way and are in fact rewarded by the banking concept.

When a new method comes along that does not offer rewards in the same way, it is very difficult to understand. Critical pedagogy is about rewarding students with a path toward critical consciousness, not with grades and high test scores. Students often do not see an incentive to do the work of critical thinking, and they take comfort in their ability to take notes and regurgitate information in order to pass the test and earn a good grade.

When I ask students to get out of their seats and use their bodies to learn and explore topics, they seem to be very uncomfortable initially. Furthermore, I often observe discomfort with critical discussions that bring up issues of race, gender, sexuality, and other markers of oppression. I argue this discomfort comes from having to admit possible complicity in such structures of oppression. Even in classes where writing a theatre piece is part of their grade, I am often met with reluctance from at least one student who shares their fear of public speaking, performance or group work. And although I like to leave space for those real fears that are often the result of growing up in an oppressive world, I try to communicate the purpose of the method. I emphasize that the purpose of the method is to connect them to their embodied knowledge, and also to prepare them for a future where public speaking and collaboration might be necessary for success. Furthermore, in an oppressive world that often silences or dismisses the voices of young

people of color, I also have encountered moments when students are hesitant to participate in discussions, afraid what they might say will be wrong. Again, this idea stems from the banking concept, which says there is only one right answer, rather than leaving room for multiple perspectives. Students yet again feel uncomfortable in discussion settings because they expect to be lectured at, rather than welcomed into a dialogue.

On the other hand, there are also particular challenges that have nothing to do with the student and are placed on educators at all levels. Educators are often limited to their training both in formal education and their lifelong training as students. In other words, teachers teach the way they were taught, by teachers with limited teaching methods. Furthermore, even contemporary educators have little to no access to training in alternative teaching methods or multiple learning abilities. Educators are also held to very strict and rigid institutional standards and regulations which their job depends on, leaving little room to explore alternative pedagogical methods. There is also a lack of institutional and/or political support and/or policy to support any investment in alternative pedagogies. Furthermore, for those educators invested in critical pedagogy and who practice it to the best of their ability, there is also the pressure to prepare students for a future in education that is more rigid. As a community college instructor, I personally find myself trying to strike a balance between practicing critical pedagogy, while also trying to prepare my students for four-year colleges that practice more traditional pedagogy. I want to meet them halfway in their writing challenges, but I also want them to be prepared for the



expectations that will be demanded of them in upper division classes. This creates a huge challenge to practicing critical pedagogy to its fullest potential.

There are schools that follow more alternative pedagogies like private and charter schools. However, private schools are often very expensive, and charter schools limit their enrollment, thus limiting access to these schools to either the wealthier, or the very few lucky ones who can get into charter schools. Therefore, there remains a lack of quality education for most students, especially those from poor and minority communities.

Ultimately, the challenge in implementing new pedagogical methods is an institutional problem. The current system is broken, and educators and policy makers alike are aware of this. However, there remains an investment in short-term, superficial fixes like Common Core that fail to address the necessity for more structural changes to meet the needs of all students. In fact, the investment in these short-term fixes is constructed with the intention of maintaining the status quo and not changing anything on a more institutional level.<sup>81</sup> Common Core and other such educational and institutional standards are still grounded in the banking concept of education.

Educational policy makers believe they do encourage critical thinking through the integration of these standards. However, one of the most critical changes to be made on an institutional level regarding education, aside from the pedagogical philosophies, is the way students come to understand the purpose of education. As it stands, many students, especially at the college level, think that the purpose of college is to be in a position to have access to better, more satisfying, high-paying jobs. Unfortunately, the reality is

those jobs may not even exist at the end of it all, for various reasons. Therefore, I always encourage my students to think about college as a space to gather knowledge, to learn about the world around them, to encounter other people outside their communities who have both similar and differing thoughts and opinions than themselves. College was meant to be a place to learn, to think and ask questions of everything, to search for answers freely. And yet, of course, historically the university was never meant for us; free thought was meant for only the elite, white, male scholars and philosophers.<sup>82</sup> What would it mean for the oppressed to co-opt the space of the university, to think freely and critically as well? It might mean liberation, or at least it holds the possibility of creating the process toward liberation.

### **Focus on the Process**

However hopeful I am that critical media literacy is transformative for young Latinxs, ultimately my investment is to facilitate the *process* of consciousness rather than completely altering the way teenagers view and engage with media images. I can encourage students to think differently, and I can make a call for action, but I cannot guarantee anything will change for these students, especially given the limits and challenges of traditional education, which makes my attempts at a pedagogical shift a process as well. My goal is to establish a pedagogy of transformative critical media literacy that takes into account structural oppressions and relations of power, that understands media's impact on identity formation, and that ultimately promotes critical consciousness, social justice, and change. Using theatre methods to teach transformative critical media literacy not only does this work, but it also undoes the oppressiveness of

the traditional education system as well. Non-traditional teaching methods such as theatre games get students out of their seats, connect them to their embodied knowledge, and therefore inherently promote critical thinking. Transformative critical media literacy creates space for students to recognize the impact of the mass media on their lives as well as the way it acts as an institution of oppression, while also inspiring possibilities for a more positive and empowering future, the focus being “on the process and not the informational product.”<sup>83</sup>

I hope to foster a seed of consciousness, to get students to start thinking critically about the media, in the hopes that somewhere down the line, they will begin to become socially and politically active. As Boal states,

“The poetics of the oppressed is essentially the poetics of liberation: the spectator no longer delegates power to the characters either to think or to act in his place. The spectator frees himself; he thinks and acts for himself! Theatre is action! Perhaps the theater is not revolutionary in itself; but have no doubts, it is a rehearsal of revolution.”<sup>84</sup>

In that same spirit, I contend transformative critical media literacy is the literacy of liberation: where the viewer no longer delegates power to the mass media to construct complex representations of identity. TfcML is a space for the media consumer to free herself, to think and act for herself. And maybe TfcML is not revolutionary in itself, but it surely offers a space to rehearse for the revolution.

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- <sup>1</sup> *The Merchants of Cool: A Report on the Creators & Marketers of Popular Culture for Teenagers*, dir. Douglas Rushkoff (USA.: PBS HOME VIDEO, 2001).
- <sup>2</sup> Augusto Boal, *Games for Actors and Non-Actors* (London: Routledge, 1992), 122.
- <sup>3</sup> P Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 2000), 71.
- <sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.
- <sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.
- <sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>8</sup> bell hooks. *Feminism Is for Everybody: Passionate Politics*. (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2000), 4.
- <sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.
- <sup>10</sup> <http://www.npr.org/2016/08/31/491965912/5-things-to-know-about-obamas-enforcement-of-immigration-laws>
- <sup>11</sup> This assertion comes from observation made as an educator for many years. When I discuss college application with high school administrators, especially at schools with a majority Latinx population, I am met with response like, "we just want them to graduate high school." I understand this concern as the high school dropout rate for Latinxs is high, but without any focus on higher education, those number will not increase either. I would argue for a strategy that encourage both graduation and higher education. Again, this would require an overhaul of our educational system.
- <sup>12</sup> This assertion is based off a statement made by a teacher in the documentary film *Precious Knowledge* of which I discuss in Chapter One.
- <sup>13</sup> Anet Gutierrez. Interview by author. February 25, 2016.
- <sup>14</sup> Fusion Academy is a one-on-one school that specializes in addressing the needs of students with learning differences, disabilities, and other challenges.
- <sup>15</sup> *Precious Knowledge* (Dos Vatos Films, 2011), DVD.
- <sup>16</sup> United States, Arizona State Legislature, House of Representatives, *House Bill 2281* (Arizona State Legislature, 2010)
- <sup>17</sup> Steven Goodman, *Teaching Youth Media: A Critical Guide to Literacy, Video Production & Social Change* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2003), 2.
- <sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>19</sup> Freire, 75.
- <sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.
- <sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.
- <sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.
- <sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.
- <sup>25</sup> Lindsay Pérez Huber, "Disrupting Apartheid of Knowledge: Testimonio as Methodology in Latina/o Critical Race Research in Education," *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 22, no. 6 (2009): 640, doi:10.1080/09518390903333863.
- <sup>26</sup> Emma Perez, *The Decolonial Imaginary: Writing Chicanas into History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 4.
- <sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>28</sup> Sylvia Gonzalez. "Toward a Feminist Pedagogy for Chicana Self-Actualization." *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, Chicanas En El Ambiente Nacional/ Chicanas in the National Landscape, 5, no. 2 (1980), 50.
- <sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.
- <sup>32</sup> Dolores Delgado Bernal, *Chicana/Latina Education in Everyday Life: Feminista Perspectives on Pedagogy and Epistemology* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), 25.
- <sup>33</sup> Huber, 642.
- <sup>34</sup> Cruz, Cindy. "Toward an Epistemology of a Brown Body." *International Journal of* 15, no. 5 (2001), 61.
- <sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

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- <sup>36</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>37</sup> Ibid., 60.
- <sup>38</sup> Ibid., 61.
- <sup>39</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>40</sup> Chicana/Latina Education, 29.
- <sup>41</sup> Ibid., 82.
- <sup>42</sup> Ibid., 81.
- <sup>43</sup> Chela Sandoval
- <sup>44</sup> McKenna, Teresa. "Intersections of Race, Class and Gender: The Feminist Pedagogical Challenge." *Pacific Coast Philosophy* 25, no. 1/2 (November 1990), 36.
- <sup>45</sup> Cruz, 64.
- <sup>46</sup> C. Alejandra Elenes. *Transforming Borders: Chicana/o Popular Culture and Pedagogy.* Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2011), 48.
- <sup>47</sup> Ibid., 49.
- <sup>48</sup> Ibid., 62.
- <sup>49</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>50</sup> Ibid., 6.
- <sup>51</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>52</sup> Ibid., 7.
- <sup>53</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>54</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>55</sup> Luis Valdez, *Nwku"Xcnfg//gctnf"Yqtmu<"Cevqu."Dgtpcdg."cpf"Rgpuc okgpvq"Ugtrgpvkpq* (Houston, TX: Arte Publico Press, 1990)
- <sup>56</sup> Boal, 47.
- <sup>57</sup> Boal's work is directly influenced by Freire's book, in title and in theory.
- <sup>58</sup> Ibid., 122.
- <sup>59</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>60</sup> Ibid., 29.
- <sup>61</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>62</sup> Ibid., 30.
- <sup>63</sup> Barnes, Henry. "Learning that grows with the learner: An introduction to Waldorf education." *Educational Leadership* 49, no. 2 (1991): 52-54.
- <sup>64</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>65</sup> Peter Duffy and Elinor Vettrano, *Youth and Theatre of the Oppressed* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 3.
- <sup>66</sup> Michael Hoehsmann and Stuart R. Poyntz, *Media Literacies: A Critical Introduction* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012)
- <sup>67</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>68</sup> Ernest Morrell, *Critical Literacy and Urban Youth: Pedagogies of Access, Dissent, and Liberation* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 4.
- <sup>69</sup> Ibid., 5.
- <sup>70</sup> Lucila Vargas, *Latina Teens, Migration, and Popular Culture* (New York: Peter Lang Pub., 2009), 102.
- <sup>71</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>72</sup> Quote taken from transcribed notes from a meeting between myself and Professor Tiffany Ana Lopez. Transcribed by Professor Lopez.
- <sup>73</sup> I use the acronym TfCML because Lucila Vargas used TCML as an acronym for Transnational Critical Media Literacy.
- <sup>74</sup> John Vivian. *Media of Mass Communication*
- <sup>75</sup> Boal.,7.
- <sup>76</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>77</sup> Ibid., xxiv.
- <sup>78</sup> Jan Cohen-Cruz and Mady Shutzman, *A Boal Companion: Dialogues on Theatre and Cultural Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 4.

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<sup>79</sup> Boal, 7.

<sup>80</sup> Luis Valdez

<sup>81</sup> This assertion comes from my years as an educator, as well as my conversation with other educators and parents of students who navigate Common Core, and other such educational standards.

<sup>82</sup> Paul F. Grendler. "The Universities of the Renaissance and Reformation." *Renaissance Quarterly* 2004 57:1, 1-42.

<sup>83</sup> McKenna, 37.

<sup>84</sup> Boal.,7.

## CHAPTER TWO

### **Are These Our Only Options?: Latinidad as Symbolic Colonization**

In the television show *Modern Family*, Sofia Vergara portrays a Colombian immigrant who marries a rich, white, older man. Her character, Gloria, is very clearly identified as Latina, racially marked by her curvaceous body and her over-the-top fiery personality. As Michelle Habell-Pallán and Mary Romero ask, “To what degree have crossover performers arrived without having to portray cultural archetypes: Latina spitfire or suffering Madonna, exotic erotic or hot-blooded macho, stoop laborer or drug warlord, illegal immigrant or exiled freedom fighter?”<sup>1</sup> I argue that in this and other contemporary representations, Latinas in mainstream American media clearly exemplify these very cultural archetypes. For example, Shakira and Jennifer Lopez represent the exotic erotic in music videos, and although playing against gender stereotypes, Salma Hayek, in Oliver Stone’s recent film *Savages*, plays the Mexican drug warlord. Latinas are constrained by the very few stereotypical roles available to them, so that if Vergara and others like her did not take on these roles, Latinas might be erased from media all together. So are these our only options?

I employ the theoretical concept of symbolic colonization, as articulated by Isabel Molina-Guzmán, to ground my critical engagement with mass media in general, and its construction of Latinidad specifically. Molina-Guzmán defines symbolic colonization as “an ideological process that contributes to the manufacturing of ethnicity or race as a homogenized construct. It is the storytelling mechanism through which ethnic and racial differences are hegemonically tamed and incorporated through the media....symbolic

colonization is the ways in which media practices reproduce dominant norms, values, beliefs, and public understandings about Latinidad as gendered, racialized, foreign, exotic, and consumable.”<sup>2</sup> In this chapter, I will illustrate specific examples of mass media’s symbolic colonization of Latinidad by representing Latinos as a consumable and consuming homogenous culture and relegating individuals of that culture to the following stereotypes: the safe, benign, assimilable other; the desirable and desiring female body; or the threatening, criminal, immigrant, non-assimilable other.<sup>3</sup> I argue the U.S. mass media has a deep investment in maintaining these constructions of Latinidad in order to clearly define an American national imaginary from which Latinos are marginalized, suppress histories of colonization, and maintain the status quo in terms of hierarchical power relations and material inequalities along racial, gendered, and classed lines.

Furthermore, constructions of Latinidad help create an easily identifiable and marketable consumer group whose distorted versions of authentic identities can be bought and sold by both Latinxs and non-Latinxs. I also contend Latinxs are constantly negotiating the terrain of popular culture, identifying or dis-identifying, contesting or reproducing, or otherwise disrupting representations of Latinidad. Therefore, I consider how the participants in my media workshops discuss their relationship with mass media and images of Latinas by asking: In what ways are teenage girls engaging with the mass media? What do they understand about the mass media before and after the workshops? What are their critical perspectives about popular culture and the ways it impacts their lives? How does the mass media impact the lives of these particular teenage girls? Does the mass media, in fact, exert an impact on their identity formation? Ultimately, I



interrogate constructions of Latinidad as symbolic colonization, and highlight the voices of participants in my media workshops in order to articulate the complex structures through which Latina teenagers specifically come to understand their identities and their relationship with media images.

### **Latinidad as Homogenous Identity and Constructed Consumer Group**

The mass media uses specific racial markers to communicate racial identity representing Latinxs as a homogeneous people with similar if not the same cultural experiences. Molina-Guzmán highlights the way Hollywood films in particular construct Latinidad assuming all people from Latin America, regardless of country of origin, share “common signifiers” such as “language, linguistic accents, religious symbols, tropical and spicy foods, and brown skin as a phenotypic marker of racial identity.”<sup>4</sup> The symbolic colonization of Latinidad assumes all people from Latin America have the same experience as Latinxs in the U.S. and moreover, they have the same social, political, and economic relationship to the nation-state. None of these characterizations takes into account the vastly different political histories Latin American countries share with the U.S. For example, immigration from Mexico is a very different political issue than immigration from Cuba, where immigrants to the US are seen as political refugees, or from Puerto Rico which is a U.S. territory and whose inhabitants are granted, albeit limited, American citizenship. Furthermore, immigration from Central American or South American countries is spurred by different political histories than Mexico. Central and South American immigrants are often fleeing countries suffering from civil war and political warfare. Meanwhile, Mexican immigrants are escaping economic oppression

and increasing drug violence at the hand of a global economy that continues to exploit Mexican labor on both sides of the border.

However, despite the complexities and differences among the different Latinx nationalities, the mass media's symbolic colonization of Latinidad seeks to represent a pan-ethnic identity, which homogenizes all Latinx nationalities into one gendered and racialized group. Guzmán argues the investment in such a syncretization of ethnic identity is to create a Latino/a market defined as “consumers who share Spanish language, conservative values, Latin American cultural practices, and racially ambiguous physical characteristics,”<sup>5</sup> and that even Spanish language media “contribute to the formation of a distinct, long term, syncretic identity.”<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, Arlene Davila argues that constructing a homogenous identity such as Latinidad neatly packages Latinxs as a self-contained consumer market. Davila states, “Latinos are repackaged into images that render them pleasing to corporate clients, such as in the garb of traditional and extremely family-oriented and stubbornly brand-loyal consumer, which [she] suggests responds more to mainstream society's management of ethnicity rather than to any intrinsic cultural attribute of the Latino consumer.”<sup>7</sup> Marketers are literally creating and constructing a “self-contained market” and defining the parameters through which the market group can be identified. Furthermore, marketers construct the very racial signifiers that make Latinidad easily recognizable. Often these racial signifiers will include such traits as dark skin, bright color palettes, music and dance, accents, or even Spanish-language use.

We see a clear example of this in the 2012 advertising campaign for Dole fruit juice featuring Bruno Tonioli and a mariachi band.<sup>8</sup> It is important to note that previous to the airing of this add an article in *Adweek*'s online publication in July 2009 reported Dole would be launching "a campaign to connect with Hispanic consumers in Los Angeles through public entertainment events as well as cash and juice prizes."<sup>9</sup> The article quoted Andy Harrow, chief marketing officer of Dole's parent company, Tropicana, who states, "The events are a way for Dole to build and strengthen its relationship with its Hispanic consumer base."<sup>10</sup> This clearly illustrates Dole's recognition of Latinos as an important consumer group and yet, as Davila and Guzmán point out, in order to market to a group you must clearly delineate not only the group's definition, but also their wants and needs. Dole clearly defines and articulates the "Hispanic market" by creating a tagline in Spanish, "Sacándole jugo a la vida" ("Squeeze the most out of life").<sup>11</sup> According to the article, the "tagline is meant to relay the message that Hispanic consumers who drink the brands juice 'place a high value on the moments in life that bring them together,' per Dole." Dole marketers are working from a constructed notion of the Hispanic market, racially marking them as inherently "family-oriented." This may not necessarily be a negative stereotype, but it illustrates how Latinidad is constructed through media and advertising to generalize that all Latino groups, regardless of the differences in nationalities, have the same essential qualities, cultural customs, and practices. Here we see marketers inscribing these racial signifiers on Latinos, neatly packaging them into a single entity to sell them juice.

Just three years after this article was published, Dole aired the Bruno Tonioli commercial. Tonioli is an Italian judge from the ABC network reality competition show *Dancing with the Stars*. In the commercial he is wearing Brazilian samba attire, aka Latino traditional garb, and accompanied by a Mexican mariachi. There are two things to notice here: first of all, despite Tonioli's Italian heritage, his accent marks him as Latino based on the other racial signifiers in the commercial, like his colorful, ruffly sleeves and the mariachi music; secondly, Brazilian and Mexican cultures are conflated under the umbrella of Latin culture, because within the scope of the U.S. imaginary there is no recognition of the distinction between these cultures. In fact, when I showed this commercial to the participants in my media workshops, they collectively stated they did not know Tonioli was Italian, rather they assumed he was Latino. This commercial demonstrates how the mass media clearly reifies a particular construction of Latinidad within narrow parameters. Latinos are expected to recognize themselves in this image, understand that they are being directly marketed to, and then go out and buy Dole juice and support the brand because Dole understands Latinos.

This scenario demonstrates how Latinidad is defined within very narrow and superficial constructions, as if Latinidad can be easily reduced to these few cultural aspects. But because these are the kinds of images continually being put forth, the lines between authentic culture and constructed culture become blurred, so that Latinos themselves recognize these racial signifiers as representing them. Furthermore, this advertisement, and many others like it, demonstrate how Latinidad conflates all Latino nationalities into one homogenous, ahistorical metaculture. Here, Dole is not only

creating an ad to market to a specific consumer group, but they are actually constructing an easily identifiable market.

### **Defining an American National Imaginary**

The investment in constructing a homogenous identity and consumer group goes beyond just market interests. Mass media's construction of Latinidad as easily recognizable and the inscription of racial signifiers both position Latinidad as marginal to the dominant U.S. national imaginary. In other words, non-Latinos are able to effortlessly recognize Latinidad according to constructed racial signifiers, and therefore identify Latinos as non-white, exotic and other, i.e. Latinos are not American. Juan Piñón discusses this kind of marginalization writing about Latino/a representation amongst media producers. He specifically looks at the television show *Ugly Betty*, within the larger scope of the different manifestations of the original telenovela *Yo soy Betty, la fea*, in order to complicate the notion of representation of Latinos/as behind the camera and to understand the complex work that is required of Latino/a producers. He defines what he calls cultural translators, as "Latina/o producers [who] managed to build a cultural bridge to mainstream audiences while also luring bilingual Hispanic viewers to the show."<sup>12</sup> Piñón makes clear that as cultural translators, Latinxs who produce media within the television industry are expected to produce shows that appeal both to an Anglo-American audience as well as ethnically Latinx audiences. Additionally, their job is to translate Latinx culture for an American audience, presumed to be mostly non-Latinx.

This cultural translation creates the need to make ethnicity palatable to an Anglo-American audience, thus forcing the producers of *Ugly Betty* to "translate Colombian-

Latin-American-ness into pan-Latino-ness for U.S. mainstream consumption,”<sup>13</sup> which in general allows for the “construction of a sanitized Latinidad by mainstream media corporations [which follows] the distinctive cultural traits of some groups that are considered economically more valuable than others.”<sup>14</sup> In other words, because the Latino/a population in the U.S. is made up mostly of Puerto Ricans, Cubans, and Mexicans, those are the particular ethnicities by which a pan-Latinidad is defined, with little to no acknowledgement of the different historical contexts of each group, or the experiences of people from other Latin American nations. In this way, in the U.S. national imaginary, all Latinos are the same. Therefore, it would not make sense to represent Betty as Columbian, but rather to make her pan-Latino so all Latinos can feel represented in her image, as if one person can be a fair representation of all the diverse peoples included in Latinidad.

Furthermore, Latinidad must be represented in a way for white Americans to understand. Piñón explains this in discussing the process of adapting *Ugly Betty* for U.S. television, revealing another issue of institutional racial oppression within the television industry. He points out “the systematic insistence in the trade press that Betty would avoid melodramatic undertones” which Pinon argues “is an expression of such conceived differentiated cultural tastes embodied in television genre rules that situate the United States as different than [and arguably above] the Latin-American audience,”<sup>15</sup> further referring to this concept in terms of “taste hierarchies.” The production of *Ugly Betty* received initial concern because the telenovela format with its “melodramatic undertones” was seen as ethnic and foreign and therefore not palatable to a U.S.

audience. The very notion of “cultural translation” signifies the idea that Latinidad is innately non-American and needs to be translated for an American audience inscribing the notion that American is defined as white, and Latinos are subsequently defined as non-American. Pinón concludes by pointing out the consequences of *Ugly Betty*’s Latino/a production team’s role as cultural translators, “given their understanding of the genre, [they] were able to de-Latin Americanize it, [otherwise referred to as] de-telenovelization, only to later U.S. Americanize it, in which the notion of ethnicity, particular pan-Latinidad, is reconfigured through a process...[of] symbolic colonization.”<sup>16</sup> Producers are defining what it means to be American and what it means to be Latino. The U.S. national imaginary very clearly defines American as middle class, white, and English-only speaking. On the other hand, Latino customs, even those constructed through the national imaginary, and language are defined as perpetually foreign, non-American, and other.

### **Maintaining Oppressive Hierarchies**

The other component of the U.S. national imaginary is the idea that Latinos can assimilate to American culture, and that all who want to can be integrated into Americanness. However, I argue that in fact the opposite is true: Latinidad can never be fully a part of the U.S. national imaginary. The only way Latinos can participate in Americanness is through their racially marked ethnicity. In other words, they can be Latino-American, but never just American because they are not white. Also, they may only identify as such as long as their cultural practices pose no threat to the hegemonic U.S. national imaginary and they do not highlight any acknowledgement of structural and

material inequalities. In other words, the fantasy of the melting pot is a false notion in that it was always only meant to include those that could eventually be white. This is not to say that this ideal is what we should strive for, but rather that the false promise of assimilation leads many Latinos to think assimilation will put them on equal playing ground with white Americans, when in fact that is not the case. Although within Latin-American countries whiteness has its own racial context, in the U.S. Latinos are racialized as non-white, based on their ethnic culture.

In addition, regarding the mass media, I question how representations of Latinidad address Latinx identities being formed through social contexts implicated in hierarchies of race, class, gender, and sexuality. I argue that although we might have images of Latinxs that go outside stereotypical representations, these images fail to make explicit “the reality of [the] power relations”<sup>17</sup> to which Latinas/os are subjected. In fact, the reality of these power relations is that Latinas/os remain a marginalized and oppressed group and have been historically represented in the media in ways to reinforce that marginalized and subordinate position. Habel-Pallán and Romero contend, “narratives about cultural images and icons are key in struggles to define superior or inferior cultures, to establish what is central and what is marginal, to dictate official and forgotten histories, and to reinforce and police external and internal representations of social relations.”<sup>18</sup> The authors are speaking of the importance of popular culture and mass media as a site to define meaning, where cultural representation results in real-life impact on the material inequality Latinxs face. Because Latinidad and Latinx culture are so often represented in popular culture and media within very narrow parameters, the



popular understanding of these is one that maintains Latinidad as inferior to that of a hegemonic dominant white American culture. For example, any practice of Latinx culture is constructed as marginal to American culture rather than a part of it.

These authors help to illustrate my claim that popular culture and mass media are institutions of power seeking to articulate and maintain oppressive hierarchies. The parameters of representation of Latinidad in the mass media are limited to distinct archetypes. Maintaining these archetypes inscribes the idea that Latinidad can only be defined within these articulations, and because these archetypes are always represented as marginal to the dominant culture, always racially marked, and always inferior, it reifies the notion that Latinidad is therefore inferior. Hence the institutional oppressive hierarchies that exist in society are cemented through mass media's representation of Latinidad as marginal and inferior to that of the dominant white American culture. Although one might argue there is more visibility of Latinos in the media, I am not concerned with the amount of representation, but rather with the depth and complexity of these representations. Without depth or complexity, these representations are left vulnerable to co-optation that only reify Latinas/os' subject position as inferior and marginal. It is not enough to be represented if those representations do not highlight the complexity of the Latinx experience.

### **Stereotypes of Latinidad**

I now turn my attention to the stereotypes that get articulated within mass media, defining Latinidad within narrow parameters and inscribing racial signifiers and

relegating Latinos to a marginal position within U.S. society. I also highlight the complex images through which young Latinos must come to understand Latino identity.

*The Safe, Benign, Assimilable Other*

The safe, benign, assimilable other is the most valuable to the U.S. national imaginary because it re-inscribes the melting pot fantasy that Latinos can be integrated into the fabric of America if they can assimilate to American cultural values while practicing only a benign form of cultural heritage. This representational archetype also conveys the possibility of progress toward the American Dream while dismissing any talk about inequality or injustice. In other words, it says there is an equal playing field and as long as you follow the rules you can achieve success in the U.S.

I argue success is defined in the U.S. national imaginary by individual financial wealth and capital power based on supposed meritocracy. As for the American Dream, although relative, it looks something like a Norman Rockwell painting: a husband and wife with 2.5 children, in a home owned by the family, with a white picket fence in a suburb away from the evils of urban blight. So where does this leave Latinos? The representational archetype of the safe, benign assimilable other demonstrates that the American Dream is a real possibility and that assimilation equals progress.

An interesting case to examine is George Lopez and his many incarnations in the mass media. He himself would admit to undergoing a comedic evolution from stand-up comedy filled with stereotypical Mexican references, to his family sitcom representing an assimilationist version of a Mexican-American family, back to his stand-up shows grounded in a more political message. For the purposes of my argument, I want to focus

on his sitcom and his articulations of that moment in his life which he describes in the documentary film *Brown is the New Green*.<sup>19</sup> *The George Lopez Show*, now in syndication, portrays Lopez with a wife, two kids, and his mother, living in the suburbs, working as a manager of an aviation factory. In the show, Lopez seemingly is living out the American Dream of owning a home and having a nuclear family. We might see this as a positive portrayal of a Mexican family, yet this construct of the family sitcom is contingent on an assimilationist perspective of American culture.

One can only assume from the tone of the film that green refers to the buying power of Latinos. In the film Lopez discusses having to compromise himself at times in order to survive in the network television world. He states in the documentary:

I think I kind of compromised myself a little bit in some of the material coming up because you got to get in. I don't think I was as hard-edge in the beginning as I kind of like to be now. You know, I've been in meetings with Warner Bros. where I wasn't particularly happy with what I was hearing, and the Chicano would say, you know what? F--- this, eh, and f--- you guys, I'm leaving. But when you leave, you're out, so I'd make myself stay. And probably a lot of people will say, you know, that's selling out, but it isn't selling out, it's the way the business is set up.<sup>20</sup>

Lopez highlights the dilemma he faces as a Latino on TV who must negotiate with non-Latino industry executives. The film gives no context as to the specifics of what Lopez had to compromise, but based on the way he articulates his contemporary work as “hard-edge,” we might assume that he was not allowed to be that way on his show. And if we look at some of his contemporary stand up shows and the moments when he points out the racism in politics, maybe those were the things he was forced to compromise.

Assumptions aside, what we can definitely gather from Lopez is that in the business of television, if you do not compromise you will be gone. He refuses to call it selling out but

rather articulates it as institutional rules of show business. Lopez goes on to say in the film, “In the business, the minute you write a Mexican story, they don’t want to do it because it’s a Mexican story.”<sup>21</sup> Again, the film does not give particular context to this comment, but I believe it demonstrates Lopez’s frustration with the television industry and possibly the way his show would be constructed. This is especially true when network executives are making comments about Lopez and his struggle to break into television: “I think it was harder because his [Lopez] features are so Mexican or part Indian or whatever it comes from.”<sup>22</sup> There are two dynamics at work here, on one hand Lopez cannot escape his racially marked body, which network executives admit. On the other hand, his stories are always reduced to “Mexican stories,” which Lopez himself says the industry rejects. So what options are left for him? He cannot pretend to be white even if he wanted to, and the networks do not want a Mexican show. So, he must prove to be the safe, benign, assimilable other so that he can prove that in fact he is more American than Mexican.

And thus we have the *George Lopez Show*, articulated by one network executive as, “This is a family, an American family first, and then as time went along, we introduced more and more cultural elements.”<sup>23</sup> Several things are being said here: 1) American is being distinguished from “cultural” aka Mexican, thus Mexican does not equal American. So what is American? I argue that without any “cultural elements” American refers to white, because white always stands in as the universal American experience. 2) The network exec makes this comment to point out why the show is successful, because it is not innately a Mexican story; it is an American story with

interspersed Mexican elements, reinforcing the notion that to truly be American any practice of cultural customs must come second to American culture. Assimilation equals success.

What is most disturbing about this however, and what stood out to me since the first time I saw this film, is the way Lopez himself buys into the notion that sprinkling Mexican elements on top of a supposed universal American sitcom is enough to be ground breaking. He says, “And I told the writers, early, don’t write ethnic stuff, man, just write me funny and I’ll take care of the other stuff, I’ll be the barometer of what is ethnic and what is not.”<sup>24</sup> Because Lopez is racially marked by his dark skin, he feels compelled to transcend this racial marker by appearing less interested in his ethnicity and more focused on comedy, as if the two are mutually exclusive. However, Lopez assumes in saying this that it only takes one Mexican, himself, to be representative of the culture, and fails to acknowledge any variation in the experience of being Mexican-American. Furthermore, this leaves the show with a mostly white writing staff<sup>25</sup> because there was little to no concerted effort to have Latino writers because, much like the American experience is universal, being funny is universal and thus, colorblind. And it must begin with funny and then be made Mexican rather than beginning with the Mexican experience and then be made funny. Lopez himself recognizes the lack of Latinos in the industry, but then does no work to hire Latino writers because his focus is on being funny so his show can be successful and he can prove to the world that a brown face can be successful on TV. He is not trying to do anything to undo institutional barriers in the industry by calling out racist hiring practices or writing story lines about social

inequalities that Mexicans encounter. He in fact reifies institutional barriers both in front of and behind the camera. On camera he portrayed a specific experience of Latinidad, while behind the camera a lack of real diversity influenced the direction of the show. And yet on the other hand, as Lopez acknowledged himself, if he did not make these compromises he would be out, so the only options left for Lopez then was to be the benign other or be left out of the conversation altogether.

Piñón talks about this dilemma faced by Lopez and by many others in arguing, “Latinos/as are most often left out of the production process of television and are then only allowed in if they meet particular standards. They must be able to ‘pass’ in which Whiteness and middle- and upper-middle-class social status conceived as conditions of privilege can advance the position of Latina/o producers and executives.”<sup>26</sup> In this way racial markers, like that of being Latino/a enough to be representative of a viable market population while being white enough to produce “acceptable” television, are conceived as valuable “career capital.”<sup>27</sup> Because Lopez does not have the ability to phenotypically pass as white, he must do so in other ways like that of playing down his ethnicity in the content of the show.

The important aspect of this archetype is that it is benign, it is not harmful to the U.S. body politic. This benignity is contingent on maintaining the status quo, buying into the rhetoric of the U.S. national imaginary about the American Dream and assimilation, and most importantly buying into the idea of an even playing field with no regard or attention to any institutional inequalities or injustices. And this is the key: do not talk about racial inequalities or racism on any level. Racism is an antiquated idea that we as a

nation have progressed away from. So if you are going to be Latino, be an American of Latino decent. And if you are going to practice any cultural customs, do so alongside or subsequent to your practice of American customs. In this way, you will be a good Latino and we will accept you.

The reality of the benign other however, is that the promise of acceptance based on a willingness to assimilate remains empty. Because though this archetype might be benign at the moment, there remains the potentiality for criminality, such as in the next archetype I discuss.

*The Threatening, Criminal, Immigrant, Non-assimilable Other*

Different from the benign other that is promised citizenship and integration into Americanness through assimilation, is the threatening, criminal, immigrant, non-assimilable other, which is positioned in complete opposition to the American ideal. It is a threat to the body politic, perpetually viewed as alien and meant to be eradicated. Thus you have the civilizable Latino, and the non-civilizable Latino.

Colonial ideologies of the native were the first to articulate this notion of the “other.” In their attempt to distinguish themselves from the natives, position themselves as superior, and justify domination, European colonizers described the natives as savages who must be tamed through Christian conversion and civilization. Those who could not be Christianized or civilized were doomed for extermination, for the un-civilizable savage native was like an untamable animal that should be put to death so as not to propagate this dangerous species. These un-civilizable natives were labeled as hostile savages who were stubborn to give up their savage customs and replace them with more

civilized European customs. These notions of conversion and civility are what fueled colonization and the genocide of indigenous people.<sup>28</sup>

This notion of the “other” similarly gets inscribed on to Latinos, especially in the rhetoric that circulates around the issue of immigration. I mentioned earlier that the U.S. national imaginary defines American as middle-class, white, English-only speaking, and civilized, whereas Latino customs and language are defined as perpetually foreign, other, non-American, savage, and uncivilized. Thus, both historically and contemporarily, there has been a push for assimilation to American customs—Americanization—in order to civilize the savage Latino.

Vicki Ruiz in a chapter from her book *From Out of The Shadows: Mexican Women in Twentieth-Century America*, describes the work of Americanization programs of the early 1900s as, “Imbued with the ideology of ‘the melting pot,’ teachers, social workers, and religious missionaries envisioned themselves as harbingers of salvation and civilization.”<sup>29</sup> This is evidence that early on Mexican immigrants were viewed as savages who need to learn civilized, American customs and values. Ruiz quotes a Methodist missionary as stating, “[Our Church] is a Good Sheppard guiding our folks out of darkness and Catholicism in to the good Christian Life.”<sup>30</sup> Since the U.S. was founded on the principles of a White Anglo-Saxon Protestant ideology, it is no wonder that Catholicism, especially “as practiced by Mexicans”<sup>31</sup> was looked down upon by the protestant religious leaders of the Americanization programs. Furthermore, the very notion that this religious woman felt an obligation to guide “folks out of darkness” demonstrates how Mexican customs were viewed as savage in need of civilizing.



Basically, these Americanization programs were meant to assimilate Mexican immigrants to American cultural customs and values by forcing them to give up their “savage” Mexican customs and values.

Even within a contemporary context, Mexican immigrants are treated as the savage native was treated, in need of civilization through the learning of American customs and values. However, just as the un-civilizable savage was meant to be eradicated, so too is the immigrant who fails or is unwilling to assimilate. Furthermore, Latino immigrants find themselves in a more complex social dynamic that extends beyond just the notion of civilization in that even attempts to civilize, or assimilate, their legal status or lack of citizenship further place them in a marginal position to the U.S. national imaginary. Ruiz states, “While one group of Americans responded to Mexican immigration by calling for restriction and deportation, other groups mounted campaigns to “Americanize” the immigrants.”<sup>32</sup> George Sanchez similarly argues, “Our historical narrative must also explore the contradiction between the economic and political spheres in the United States, one which sought to serve the labor needs of United States capital with all races while the other tried to limit national citizenry by race, language, and culture.”<sup>33</sup> Both these scholars highlight the limited options Mexican immigrants, specifically, have in confronting the U.S. national imaginary. Ruiz says Mexicans can either be deported or Americanized, while Sanchez says these options are constructed based on the contradictory economic and political interests of the majority population in the U.S. So the U.S. has an interest in immigrants so far as they provide cheap labor and economic sustainability, while at the same time they are denied the rights of citizenship.

What are these Mexican immigrants left to do? They can stay in the U.S. providing a cheap labor force and assimilate to American culture, but never really be accepted as full American citizens, or they can be deported. Furthermore, even if they assimilate, learn the language and the customs, just as the Dreamers argue they have done, they are still not allowed into Americanness because their mere presence is deemed criminal and therefore innately un-American.

Arizona's 2010 Senate Bill 1070 clearly demonstrates this argument by, among other things, "Requir[ing] a reasonable attempt to be made to determine the immigration status of a person during any legitimate contact made by an official or agency of the state or a county, city, town or political subdivision (political subdivision) if reasonable suspicion exists that the person is an alien who is unlawfully present in the U.S."<sup>34</sup> The bill's proponents argued it merely enforced the federal immigration law already in place, while those opposed to the bill argued it invited racial profiling against Latinos, questioning what a reasonable suspicion is to believe that a person is undocumented.

In 2010, California's 50<sup>th</sup> district Representative Brian Bilbray went on MSNBC and claimed that the bill would not in fact insight racial profiling as professionals were trained to spot undocumented immigrants. When asked by Chris Matthews how so, Bilbray responded:

They will look at the kind of dress you wear, there's different type of attire, there's different type of ...right down to the shoes, right down to the clothes. But mostly by behavior it's mostly behavior, just as the law enforcement people here in Washington, DC does it based on certain criminal activity there is behavior things that professionals are trained in across the board and this group shouldn't be exempt from those observations as much as anybody else.<sup>35</sup>

Essentially, he is saying that professionals, i.e. law enforcement are trained to spot undocumented immigrants, who in Arizona are mostly Latino, by the clothes they wear and their behavior. Bilbray is not clear as to what type of behavior these immigrants have, nor is he clear as to what type of clothes and shoes identify a person as “illegal.” Yet he makes the statement with such certainty so as to assume we all know what he is referring to. I argue this is, by its very definition, racial profiling. The recognition in these behavioral and aesthetic attributes distinguish undocumented immigrants, and by default all Latinos, as other, from white Americans and mark them as potential criminals. In fact, for undocumented immigrants, their mere existence makes them criminals.

The underlying assumption of this archetype is that all Latinos, or in this case all Mexicans, are immigrants, possibly illegal; and because all illegal immigrants are criminals, therefore all Mexicans are potential criminals. Additionally, because in the U.S. national imaginary there is no distinction between Latinx nationalities, all Latinxs are potentially Mexican, and therefore potentially criminals. In the U.S. national imaginary, the only way to escape this potential criminality is to prove your loyalty to the U.S., to assimilate, and to Americanize. This is why the benign other is so important, because it exemplifies the possibility to civilize the savage criminal immigrant, and it upholds the notion that all can be unified within Americanness, as long as you give up any ties to uncivilized cultural customs.

Furthermore, aside from criminality, Latinos also pose a threat of spreading disease, both biological and social. In the summer of 2014, a large number of women and children immigrants from several Latin American countries were detained in Texas. The

number apprehended was so great many had to be transferred to different facilities. In Murrieta, California, buses of these women and children were met with protesters, holding up signs saying “go back to your country,” and chanting “U-S-A, U-S-A!”<sup>36</sup> One of the major concerns of these people was that these children were not immunized and contained diseases that would be spread to their children.

I posted a video of this incident on my Facebook page that summer expressing my concern over such hateful sentiments being defended as patriotism. For me it was especially disconcerting given it was around the 4<sup>th</sup> of July and the FIFA World Cup was taking place. It seemed as if the spirit of patriotic sports fandom had bled over into social politics and I expressed my concern. I then received the following comment on my post: “When a conundrum like this comes up I look at how my Nana and Tata came through the system just like how they are supposed to. It’s like if someone came into your house and decided what to take was theirs. We have a process for a reason. Unless they show demonstrable proof that they are persecuted or will face death if they go back to their home country, I think they should be shown the door and go through the proper channels. I hate to think that the halfway houses that these people are in are potentially disease filled, since most of the people there do not have adequate medical care in their country.” This comment explicitly demonstrates the way the U.S. national imaginary, as well as some fellow Mexican-Americans, think about Latinx immigrants, as innately infested with disease, both biologically and meta-biologically to which the U.S. is vulnerable. The thought goes “immigrants spread diseases because of a lack of immunizations, and also because they spread brownness into an imagined white American society.” As I have

previously argued, the U.S. national imaginary imagines itself as universally white and even brown people must eventually at least try to assimilate to whiteness. Yet, as I have also argued, no matter what, Latinos can never really be white, so the more Latinos there are, the less white the country is. That is the real threat immigration poses: too many brown people.

*The Desirable, Desiring Female Body*

Whereas the criminal, non-assimilable other is most often marked as male, Latina women, on the other hand, though not criminal in the U.S. imaginary, are relegated to either a hypersexual stereotype, or the perpetually suffering, sacrificing and overbearing mother. This binary construct falls in line with the virgin/whore dichotomy, in that Latinas are either hypersexual, or they are constructed as non-sexual beings merely meant to serve as emotional supporters or antagonists. An example of this would be the mother character in *Real Women Have Curves*, who discourages her daughter from going to college in order to support her family. In mainstream images of Latinidad, the mother stereotype is often rendered invisible, conflated with the construct of the maid or the laborer. For the purpose of this dissertation I focus on the hypersexual stereotype because it is the one most visible in mainstream depictions of Latinas, and because even the mother stereotype can still be hyper-sexualized as exemplified by Vergara in *Modern Family*. I focus on grappling with the paradoxes of hyper-sexuality in order to highlight the complexity of representations Latinas must negotiate.

Hyper-sexuality gets inscribed on the Latina body as exotically desirable and innately desiring. The Latina body is stereotyped as curvaceous and sexy, thus meant to

be desired by both Latino and non-Latino men. However, the Latina body is held in stark contrast to the sexy white woman body, in that her sexuality is inscribed as normative, moral and fitting within the U.S. national imaginary, while the Latina body is inscribed as exotic, mysterious and hypersexual.

Laura Mulvey theorized the male gaze as that which sexually and otherwise objectifies the female body, separating the body from its humanity and leaving the woman in that body vulnerable to exploitation and even sexual violence.<sup>37</sup> However, other scholars have argued that women of color are even further left vulnerable in that historically white women are redeemed in their whiteness, which says that the separation of the body from humanity is only temporary and is regained through moral virtue or sexual purity. The image of a white woman objectifies her, but the woman can regain her subjectivity if she remains virtuous in her sexual life. The bodies of women of color are innately hypersexual even before the image objectifies her. Through the body of Sarah Bartmann, black women were constructed as hypersexual based on her body type: curvy hips, large buttock, and supposedly larger than “normal” genitalia.<sup>38</sup> For white women there can be a distinction between the sexual women in an image and “real” women with morals. For black women, and similarly Latina women, there is no distinction made. She is only understood as far as her image portrays her. Therefore, because most media representations of Latina women are hypersexual, Latinas must be innately hypersexual, which further inscribes the notion of the Latina woman as innately desiring the attention her body receives, and ready and available for men who desire her.

When critiquing the representation of Latinas in the media, on one hand, as I have argued, there is an acknowledgement of the racialized and gendered construction of Latinidad and the Latina body. However, on the other hand there are scholars identifying the space for agency within those representations. For example, in Deborah Paredez's book *Selenidad: Selena, Latinos, and the Performance of Memory*, she very clearly articulates how Selenidad and "Identification with Selena provided alternative possibilities for Latina subjectivity beyond these representational and material confines [to which Latinas are subjected to as second class citizens or even non-citizens in the U.S.], revealing, as Elin Diamond notes, 'the radical power of identification to override the constraints of identity.'"<sup>39</sup> The "constraints of identity" that most scholars agree with are what can only be described as a paradox for Latina identity and more specifically Latina sexuality and the Latina body. In fact, I argue that in mainstream U.S. media representations, Latina sexuality is only defined by the Latina body.

Paredez acknowledges "prevailing cultural and legislative practices invested in reinscribing whiteness as normative and of the patriarchal confines within Latina/o communities, wherein Latina sexuality has been traditionally policed."<sup>40</sup> Paredez points out the first side of the paradox Latinas are held to "conform to dominant (white) standards of feminine beauty,"<sup>41</sup> so that the Latina body, according to Maria Figueroa, signifies the racialized and ethnic other "against which [whiteness] can construct itself."<sup>42</sup> On the other side of the paradox is the fact that within dominant media representations there is a lack of Latina visibility so that in the case of Selenidad, Selena "encouraged many Latinas to inhabit the space of Selenidad as a means of negotiating and moving

beyond the established, restrictive parameters of Latina (in)visibility.”<sup>43</sup> Again, Paredez is arguing that Selenidad offers a space for agency and negotiation of racialized and gendered identity formations. Paredez further mentions Cherríe Moraga’s observations of the girls who were auditioning to play Selena in the film about her life: “Selena gave these girls a way to have Chicana sexuality...They’re being a sexuality.”<sup>44</sup> Paredez then uses this observation to argue, “For young Latinas routinely subjected to sexual policing [including being held to a white standard of beauty in dominant U.S. culture, and being subjected to strict gender roles within Latina/o cultures], “being a sexuality” is a bold assertion of ownership over one’s body.”<sup>45</sup> In other words, because Selena did not conform to white standards of beauty and challenged the patriarchal confines within Latinx communities, those who emulate her are then asserting agency over the construction of their sexuality.

However, Paredez fails to mention something that Figueroa argues in her essay, “Resisting Beauty and *Real Women Have Curves*” in the anthology *Velvet Barrios: Popular Culture and Chicana/o Sexualities*:

The risk [in reclaiming the body in mainstream popular media, as both Selena and Jennifer Lopez have done] is that the body suddenly becomes *only* a Latina body, racially marked for cultural and commodified circulation. As a result, the racialized Latina body may revert to the initial position of the over sexualized and voluptuous or luscious Latina. Body parts remain on sale, just as sex does, and may therefore leave interested and invested Latinas in a state of powerlessness and vulnerability. Therefore, if bodies are for sale and consumption, how can they be claimed for ownership?<sup>46</sup>

This last question seems to be in direct conversation with Paredez argument of the assertion of ownership over one’s body, for if that sexuality is only based on the Latina



body, then it leaves actual Latina bodies vulnerable. Latinas defined only through their bodies become commodifiable, available for consumption and exploitation, thus dehumanized.

Although, as Paredez argues, Selena asserts a sexuality that falls outside the normative white standard of beauty and allows Latinas themselves a space to move beyond restrictive parameters of Latina identity, it cannot do so without also exposing the Latina body as available for commodification and readily accessible to men both Latino and non-Latino. For as Denise Sandoval argues, in her chapter on *Low Rider Magazine*, “women’s bodies...are ultimately prostituted to serve market interests and the male gaze.”<sup>47</sup> In other words, Figueroa and Sandoval question Latina agency over their sexual representation when that representation is contingent on a hyper-sexualized body.

Sandoval analyzes the representation of Latinas in *Low Rider Magazine* in order to articulate the other vulnerabilities of Latina sexuality that are contingent on the body. She draws from Antonia Darder’s examinations of two Latina women’s magazines, *Moderna* and *Latina* to argue how all of the magazines “[replicate] social and institutional hierarchies of power along gender lines.”<sup>48</sup> Sandoval goes on to quote Darder,

The photographs encompass what [these magazines] perceive to be the idealized Latina fantasy image of both men and women. Moreover, young Latinas are subtly and not so subtly coerced to adopt and replicate these stilted images of femininity and sexuality. Images that generally represent the antithesis of power, strength, self-reliance, competence, and dignity in their everyday lives.<sup>49</sup>

The danger in defining Latina sexuality on the body is that most images of the Latina body are not as assertive as some have argued for Selena’s image. Most images portray

Latinas within very narrow constructions of gender and racialized sexuality. And although Selena offers us a possible escape from those constructions, her image is still only contingent on the power of the image of her body.

In the introduction to the anthology *From Bananas to Buttocks*, Myra Mendible poses the following question in light of the argument that Latina sexuality and the Latina body represent a deviation and oppositional body type than that of the hegemonic white normative body type: “then why are prominent ‘Latin beauties’ still dyeing their hair blonde, slimming their bodies, or wearing blue contact lenses to “whiten” their looks?”<sup>50</sup> This question is further complicated when talking about the “crossover.” Mary C. Beltran defines the crossover, specifically for Latino stars, as “non-white performers who succeed in becoming popular with white audiences.”<sup>51</sup> However, Beltran also points out the limitations of the crossover when she states that “nonwhite star images must resonate with white notions of ethnicity in order for an actor to achieve crossover success.”<sup>52</sup> Beltran further refers to this as the white gaze, in that ethnic others can perform their ethnicity as long as they do so within the confines of a white articulation and representation of that ethnicity. So Latinas can celebrate and represent their Latinidad only as long as it remains within the constraints of the American multicultural imaginary, which means Latinas are only allowed to play the hypersexualized bombshell or the maid. If we apply this to stars like Jennifer Lopez or Shakira, we can celebrate their Latina sexuality only in terms of their body. To illustrate this point, Beltran refers to Richard Dyer’s analysis of Paul Robeson, “the foremost African-American actor and singer from the 1920s through the 1940s.”<sup>53</sup> Dyer argues that in order for Robeson to

maintain crossover success he had to appeal to white audiences, “This was accomplished, in Robeson’s star discourse aimed at white audiences, involving, among other things, an emphasis on fetishized notions of the black male body and Robeson’s portrayal of African American heroes with a prominent profile among the white mainstream...through this inscription of white notions of blackness, the potentially transgressive element or race was deactivated.”<sup>54</sup> Beltran points to Robeson’s performance of blackness in order to understand how, similarly, Latinas perform Latina sexuality with an emphasis on fetishized notions of the Latina body. Therefore, Jennifer Lopez and even Selena’s representation of the Latina body, even though representing an oppositional body image, still remain within the confines and continue to perform white notions of Latina ethnicity and sexuality. Because the curvaceous, hypersexualized body can easily be identified as Latina, it does not disrupt the normative white standard of beauty.

Mendible further argues this point in stating, “This binary relationship between body types [the normative white body type and the hypersexualized Latina body type] helps to structure and define the “all-American” self against its others.”<sup>55</sup> In other words, the hypersexualized Latina body type actually helps to further re-inscribe the normative white body type because they are represented as opposites to each other. In fact, the white normative body type defines itself against what it is not: curvaceous and sexual. Therefore, the Latina body type becomes marginal, that which is outside the norm, which causes it to be seen as a threat. Mendible articulates this threat, stating, “Since the early nineteenth century, her [the Latina] racially marked sexuality signaled a threat to the

body politic, a foreign other against whom the ideals of the domestic self, particularly its narratives of white femininity and moral virtue, could be defined.”<sup>56</sup> Here we see that this “binary relationship of body types” stands in for more than just body image, but actually represents the definition of “moral virtue.” Again, white femininity defines itself by what it is not: sexual and therefore morally promiscuous and without virtue. Again, it is acceptable for the Latina body to be an alternative representation of body image, because it remains defined as Latina and cannot corrupt the white standard of beauty. So although Jennifer Lopez and Selena might offer young Latinas a different option in terms of defining their own sexuality, the white standard of beauty remains a powerful force.

In fact, Beltran mentions that deducing Latina sexuality to the body works to “nullify potentially transgressive elements of difference in the construction of non-white representations [described as] containment, deactivation, or neutralization...such media representations also contain the potential to upset the primacy of whiteness inherent in the Hollywood star system and thus norms of beauty and the body.”<sup>57</sup> In other words, because Latina sexuality is only defined by the Latina body within dominant media representations, it actually “serves to reinforce racial hegemony.”<sup>58</sup> It robs the Latina body of the radical and oppositional power to stand in contrast to the white standard of beauty. Although the Latina body offers an alternative to the white standard of beauty, it does nothing to question or disrupt that standard; the standard remains intact. In fact, the Latina body helps to further define the white standard of beauty because it becomes its opposite.

Shakira, the Latina pop star, may very well exemplify this kind of superficial representation that, although successful at gaining mainstream popularity, does not do any work to undo deeply-rooted racialized and sexualized meanings of Latina identity. I return to Romero and Habell-Pallán's question, "To what degree have crossover performers arrived without having to portray cultural archetypes: Latin spitfire or suffering Madonna, exotic erotic or hot-blooded super-macho, stoop laborer or drug warlord, illegal immigrant or exiled freedom fighter?"<sup>59</sup> I argue that for many Latina artists, crossover success is in fact contingent on one or several of these cultural archetypes. For example, in the case of Shakira, the Colombian born music artist with part Lebanese heritage, her image was originally marked by her long dark hair with red highlights, the not-so-subtle Lebanese influence in her music, and her heart wrenching ballads. This image of a Latina rockera made a huge transition, however, in the late 1990s to the early 2000s with the surge of Latina/o music artists experiencing "crossover" success, a "Latin Explosion" as it was called. This "crossover" for the most part consisted of Latin music artists who traditionally recorded music in Spanish, now recording and producing music in English. Aparicio solidifies this concept of the "Latin explosion, stating, "Ricky Martin's show-stopping performance at the 1999 Grammy Awards took this phenomenon to another level. Martin's personal success opened the door to a growing number of Latino artists, including...other Latinos such as...Shakira."<sup>60</sup> Latin music shifted from its place as a marginal musical genre to center stage. However, an interesting note about Shakira's crossover is that it was accompanied with dying her hair blonde and losing some weight, which in the vein of Beltran's reading of Dyer, proves to

be an example of a Latina artists attempting to appeal to a white American audience by performing white notions of Latinidad.

Nonetheless, after experiencing just a short moment of success, the so-called “Latin Explosion” began to fade, as predicted. Latin music shifted back to its marginal place in American music. In fact, after only a few years of airing the newly founded Latin Grammys on CBS, this awards show was moved to a Spanish language television channel, no longer worthy of a mainstream American audience’s attention. Shakira, however, having already experienced the power of U.S. mainstream success, was determined to find a way to stay relevant within that realm. She produced music alongside well-known Caribbean music artist Wyclef Jean, cashing in on the exotification of Latina women’s bodies, with the song “Hips Don’t Lie.” She also partnered with Beyoncé in the song “Beautiful Liar” with a music video that consists of the two women thrusting their hips and back sides in ways that again play into the stereotype of the hyper-sexualized women of color. These songs allowed her to maintain a semblance of relevancy in the dominant mainstream American music industry, while other Latina/o artists were again relegated to a marginal status.

Not too long after this decline in popularity of Latin music, the musical genre reggaeton hit the music scene. Reggaeton’s musical sound blended Caribbean and reggae sounds with hip-hop beats and Latin beats, truly tapping into an Afro-Latino culture. However, much like hip-hop and rap, despite the fact that reggaeton originated in the underground clubs as a unique cultural expression, it soon converted into a commercial, formulaic and degrading form robbed of its substance. This transition occurred, of course,

when it hit the mainstream and was accepted into the larger dominant U.S. music industry. With artists like Daddy Yankee and Pitbull, whose songs are widely aired on English language pop radio stations, and whose music videos top the charts on MTV, it seems as if a resurgence of a Latin Explosion might be taking place. On the heels of this Latin resurgence, Shakira seems to be taking full advantage by producing songs with that reggaeton vibe, such as “She-Wolf,” and “Loca.” Both of these music videos show Shakira either caged up in a nude leotard or roller skating in a bikini. Similarly, the song “Rabiosa,” aside from suggesting that she may have resorted to the formulaic approach to music since it sounds very much like “Loca,” features a music video that shows Shakira pole dancing. The song also features the reggaeton artist Pitbull, which again could mean she is trying to jump on the bandwagon of success that reggaeton currently experiences.

I call attention to the ways she is portrayed in her music videos to make the point that Shakira is in fact maintaining the stereotypical archetype of the hyper-sexualized, exotic erotic Latina. We can argue that with these recent music videos, Shakira is merely exploring her sexuality and working to re-define her image. And yet, these explorations of sexuality remain contingent on the body. She is not exploring her sexuality on her own terms for her own means, but rather some hegemonic, misogynistic, racist version of sexuality, reflecting what a white American audience expects of a Latina. Her crossover success is contingent on the commodification of her body, for it is not just a coincidence that her “crossover” consisted of dyeing her hair blonde, losing weight, and sexualizing her image. She went from Latina rockera to cookie cutter blonde bombshell in only a

span of 10 years. I contend she is exploiting her image as an exoticized sexy Latina and using it as her gimmick in the dominant mainstream U.S. music industry.

This stereotype of the hypersexualized Latina body allows Latina women specifically to be part of the U.S. national imaginary, but only in as much as their body serves as a sexualized object meant to be commodified for white male consumption at the expense of exploiting Latina women. Not only does this create a theoretical vulnerability for the image of the Latina body, but it also creates a real life, visceral vulnerability for Latinas who are sexually objectified in their everyday lives. If Latina sexuality is only contingent on the body as a commodity, then all Latina bodies, outside the image, are potentially for sale as well. If hyper-sexuality is innately linked to Latinidad, then real Latinas can also be viewed as innately desiring sex and/or sexual attention. This is best exemplified in the image of Sofia Vergara in the television show *Modern Family*, in which her character Gloria accentuates her voluptuous body in her clothing choices. In fact, there have been several episodes that make it clear that Gloria not only likes the attention she gets for her body but actually seeks that attention. Mulvey argues that women in images are meant to be looked at, which in turn sends the message to real women that they are to take pleasure in being looked at and in being objectified.<sup>61</sup> Again, this can apply to all women, but it is most alarming for Latina and other women of color, because rarely are there any redeeming representations of Latinas as there are for white women. Furthermore, as Gilman argued that Sarah Bartmann became representative of all black women and thus all black sexuality, so too do the proportionally few depictions of Latina women in the media come to represent all Latinas and all Latina sexuality.



Because the only representations of Latina sexuality we see in the media are those that are hypersexual, Latina sexuality outside the images gets predicated as hypersexual, sending the message that all Latinas are innately sexy and sexual. Again, this becomes dangerous for real life Latinas who, regardless of their intentions, are read as innately inviting sexual attention. Furthermore, because Latinas are so often marked as hypersexual, Latinas who do not, or choose not, to fit this stereotype, yet themselves identify hyper-sexuality as a marker of Latinidad, dis-identify with Latina identity in attempts to disassociate themselves from this stereotype. Or it can push Latinas to buy into the stereotype and adhere to it, using it to define their sexuality. In other words, the world sees them as hypersexual so they perform it for the world and seek sexual attention. Either way, these are constructed identities that cannot account for the diversity of Latina women and their sexual lives.

As a young Latina coming to terms with my own sexuality in Shakira's rocker days, I looked up to her as a role model for a strong eclectic woman who could be sexy in platform boots, multi-colored hair, and braids. However, I am not sure what she stands for now. Is dancing on a pole or in a cage and roller skating in a bikini our only options for expressing our sexuality? Again, therein lies the real issue: the lack of options available in the popular mass media for expressions of Latina sexuality. What about what Latina women have to say? Is our only contribution to society limited by our bodies? What about Latinas who do not look like the stereotypical Latina body type?

If mass media, and specifically the music industry, work from the premise that "sex sells," I question what kind of sex is being sold to us, and why is Latina sexuality so

easily commodified? In the case of many Latina artists, like Shakira, Jennifer Lopez, and even Latina actresses like Sofia Vergara, only a very narrow and limited version of sexuality is offered to us and therefore continues to marginalize and objectify Latinas. I call for the need to see more than just one version of Latina sexuality, and to expand how we define sexiness. In order for Latina sexuality to ever mean more than just the exotification of our bodies, we need more, complex, and deeper-rooted images and portrayals of Chicana/Latina sexuality.

Furthermore, reading Shakira's image in this way exemplifies my assertion that cultural representation itself is not as important as recognizing the limitations of these representations and how few of them exist. When placing her image within a multi-culturalist paradigm that understands representation only as a matter of visibility, Shakira might be considered a success for Latinas. However, when we take a deeper look we see that not only does her image maintain those age-old stereotypes of Latina sexuality, her image also fails to articulate the complexity of her identity formation as a Lebanese-Columbian in the U.S. whose country of origin struggles with its own political efforts, not to mention the way Columbians are traditionally portrayed in the dominant U.S. popular media as drug-lords and criminals. Because we consider her a "crossover" success, these histories and social contexts are silenced or erased from the national body politic.

Young Latinas look up to Shakira as an example of the possibilities for success, but what possibilities does she actually represent? I argue that her image, as it stands, does not give any insight into the realities of the power relations and material inequalities

that young Columbian or Latina girls might be dealing with. I do not think Shakira herself should be held responsible for bringing these issues to light with her image. However, I do argue that her image does work to mask these power relations and material inequalities so that she stands as an example of what Latinas can achieve without acknowledging the institutional barriers set in place to uphold white supremacy. Furthermore, because her image only showcases over-sexualized representations, then she merely offers us a very limited and narrow understanding of Latina identity.

In my teaching, when presenting on the topic of the sexualized and objectified image of women, I draw from the methods of TFCML in order to highlight the mass media's construction of sexuality. I use Latinas and black women as examples of the intersectional oppressive systems at play when sexuality is defined within media images. I first introduce the concept of objectification by assigning Laura Mulvey's article "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." After analyzing the nuances of her argument, our discussion lays a foundation for a critical language that encourages textual analysis, especially the concept of "the male gaze." As a class, we discuss the nuances of the male gaze and how both men and women inhabit the male gaze. Furthermore, we discuss bell hooks's critique of the male gaze as centering a white middle class experience. This discussion solidifies the concept of the male gaze while offering an intersectional critique. Furthermore, as a class we also discuss political economy by applying the concept of the male gaze to advertisements by questioning how marketers construct sexiness in order to sell products.

A few weeks later in the semester, I assign Sander L. Gilman's article, "Black Bodies, White Bodies: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late Nineteenth-Century Art, Medicine, and Literature." This article sets the ground work for understanding stereotypes, particularly of black women, and of the concept of hyper-sexuality. The article defines black sexuality in contrast to white sexuality, as I mentioned previously. Again here, students are building a critical language they can apply to contemporary images of women.

Finally, toward the end of the semester, after many discussions that more aptly flesh out the concepts of the male gaze and hyper-sexuality, I present my slide show of advertisements originally created during my media workshops. I give my students the very same questions I gave the participants in my media workshops, and similarly we go through each image performing a textual analysis. Prior to this, I screen the film *Killing Us Softly*. This film shows Jean Kilbourne giving a lecture on advertisements pointing to the ways women are sexually objectified in order to sell products, using textual analysis to highlight both gendered and racial stereotypes in advertising images. Kilbourne makes the argument that these images are oppressive to women, and because these are consistently the only types of images put forth by advertisers, they perpetuate patriarchy and rationalize sexual violence.<sup>62</sup>

When I did this activity in my media workshops, the participants hesitated to discuss any reaction to the film, until one participant said she thought Kilbourne was "reading too much" into the images, as if Kilbourne was desperately trying to find the stereotypical or oppressive interpretation. This subsequently made it difficult for

participants to do a critical textual analysis of the slide show of ads. However, in my own classes my students' responses to the ads are much more nuanced because I make an effort to offer articles that assist them in constructing a critical language. For example, I show them an ad that originated from the 20's selling Palmolive Soap. The ad depicts a white, blue-eyed, blonde woman wearing pearls looking at the camera, while a white man gazes at her in admiration. I then ask the students in my classes about the assumptions that this ad makes about gender and what the overall message of the ad is. There is a clear and direct analysis of the idea that the message of the ad is that if you buy this soap you can gain the attention of a man. They identify the literal manifestation of the male gaze. When asked about the assumptions that this ad makes about race, there is a clear and direct analysis of the idea that ideal beauty is defined as white, blonde and blue-eyed. I also have students who point out the class assumptions based on the woman wearing pearls, something I did not notice the first time.

This example demonstrates one way I have integrated the method of textual analysis, and critical language building from TfcML into my teaching. TfcML is not about convincing students that women are sexually objectified, but about offering opportunities to explore theoretical concepts through reading and discussion. It is through these discussions that a critical language is established, then applied to contemporary images that a critical textual analysis takes place. Often, I have students from these classes tell me long after the semester is over that they can never look at advertisements or other media images the same, always trying to find the critique to be made. Therein lays my goal with TfcML: to lift the hegemonic veil of the mass media so students

recognize the manipulative forces at play, and then consciously decide how to engage with them.

### **Negotiating Identities**

Habell-Pallán makes the distinction between identity and subjectivity, stating, “identity can be understood as how one perceives oneself, while subjectivity can be seen as how one imagines oneself in relation to others.” She goes on to engage with Rosa Linda Fregoso in stating:

In contrast, Fregoso understands identity as a formation: One becomes a “subject in process” and is never a “fixed self.” This understanding allows one to recognize that the production of cultural identity is dynamic and subject to historical, geographical, and political change. Thus, what was once considered to constitute Chicana and Chicano identity is not completely lost in the past but does in some way inform the construction of a future identity, though it does not necessarily determine it. Fregoso’s argument assumes that categories of race/ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and nationality are never biologically given—not inborn, immutable characteristics—but are instead shaped by history and are constructed through the stories people tell about them.<sup>63</sup>

She makes this argument in order to showcase how Chicana/Latina artists are able to re-define and construct Chicana/Latina identity away from a patriarchal Chicano nationalist model. However, by pointing out the fact that identity is a formation based on a particular historical, geographical, political and social context, Habell-Pallán, presumably argues that identity is socially constructed. Frances R. Aparicio, engaging with Stuart Hall, asserts that identity is in fact contingent on representation, and that Latina/o identity, specifically, is informed by stereotypical constructions represented in the mass media, the Hollywood film industry in particular.<sup>64</sup> Both these authors contend the mass media and the Hollywood film industry are positioned as institutions of power, recounting particular

and oftentimes problematic stories of people. Therefore, people see themselves or others reflected in these films and in turn these stories help to shape the way people think about themselves and others. Additionally, because identity is socially constructed, this argument demonstrates the vulnerability of Latinidad to influence, and even manipulation, by oppressive “regimes of representation,” since stereotypical representations of Latinidad put forth by the mass media work to construct Latina/o identity in ways that reify oppressive hierarchies.

Furthermore, Habell-Pallán contends that these “regimes of representation,” such as that of popular culture and mass media, even though working to construct cultural identity in particular ways, simultaneously seek to “maintain the illusion that [formations of identity based in the categories of race, class, gender, and sexuality] are immutable and have no relation to social context.”<sup>65</sup> So while popular culture and mass media actually put forth particular, clearly defined constructions of cultural identity, they purport to only represent already established expressions of these cultural identities. Popular media representations of Latinas/os are said to merely reflect existing identities without acknowledging their own implication in the formation of those identities. Of course, I am not arguing this is a one-way street, in which the mass media constructs identities and we as viewers form our identities solely based on these representations. In fact, there are many aspects that contribute to identity formation, and there are times when media representations do reflect particular identity formations that already exist. However, we must pay close attention to which identity formations the media represents, how they are represented and question how diverse these representations are. For if all we see are

stereotypical representations of Latinidad, and identity is socially constructed in part by these stereotypical representations, then we might be able to argue that Latinas themselves might come to know or understand their identities through these images. For example, if the only representations of Latinas in mass media are hypersexualized and emphasizing a curvaceous body, then not only do these become racial markers for non-Latinos to recognize and then marginalize, but Latinas themselves might come to recognize their own relationship to Latinidad as imbued by these socially constructed identity traits, and either dangerously identify or dis-identify.<sup>66</sup> In my work with teenage girls, especially for those who are 2<sup>nd</sup> generation or beyond, I have often found this to be the case.

On the one hand, you have the almost undisputed notion that Latinas have curvy bodies and so you have Latinas who identify with this notion and take it as a source of pride. To that I return to my argument about the dangers of defining Latinidad only by the body. In other words, identifying Latinidad with a curvaceous body is not a negative aspect in and of itself, it is when it becomes the only marker of Latina identity. On the other hand, you have those who, in light of this undisputed notion of the curvy Latina body, do not identify with this and therefore dis-identify with Latina identity altogether. The thought goes: “I don’t look Latina, therefore I don’t identify as such.”

Mary C. Beltrán articulates the impact of media representation in pointing to the ways it has both “provided images to non-Latinos of who and what Latina/os might be, [as well as] provided images to people of Latin descent that can affect how we see ourselves and what we make of ourselves.”<sup>67</sup> In other words, Latinos themselves come to



understand Latino identity through particular media representations. Which leads me to question whether Latinas themselves acknowledge this impact or if the media has made it so they think they are beyond any kind of manipulation. Do Latinas specifically understand the ways in which they negotiate their identities with the images they see in the media?

### **Fieldwork Findings on Media Impact**

In this initial attempt at facilitating TfcML in the media workshops, I ran into resistance from the participants in a way I had not expected. I was met with resistance to the idea that mass media images could be so manipulative, subliminal, and ubiquitous. I learned before getting into any conversation about textual analysis or critical consciousness that I had to foreground the reality of how impactful and influential the media is. The resistant reaction varied from “it is what it is” and “sex sells,” to “I don’t watch TV anyway so this does not matter to me.” I highlight here a few moments during the course of the workshop series that were most telling about what the participants understood about their relationship to media and its impact on them. The three moments I will discuss are the following: 1) the very first day of the media workshops when I discussed the political economy of the mass media including: where funding for the media comes from, how important advertising is to all forms of media, and how much revenue is generated by advertising. At the end of that first presentation, I asked several questions regarding the participant’s media use, and most importantly what their reaction was to the information they had learned that day. 2) On the day of the second workshop I screened the film *Killing Us Softly 3* by Jean Kilbourne, who has been producing versions

of this film since 1979.<sup>68</sup> I screened it for my participants as a way to introduce textual analysis, and as a critical language by which to analyze subsequent media images throughout the workshop series. 3) Lastly at the end of the workshop series, I had my participants answer several questions in a survey of which the last 2 questions were: Do you think you are affected by the media in anyway? How or how not? Do you think others are affected by the media in anyway? How or how not?

I categorized the responses to these questions into several groups: conscious acquiescence, disconnected recognition, and critical curiosity. Each of these reactions demonstrates how self-aware participants are of their own relationship to media images. As I explain each mode of relational understanding, I will interject the voice of the participants as evidence for my conclusions. I also analyze the possible reasons for why these reactions occur, for most of these are reactions I have consistently received every time I discuss this topic in any of my teaching experiences

#### *Conscious Acquiescence*

Many participants, in trying to articulate the impact of media on their life, would acknowledge that impact with conscious acquiescence. When asked on the first day of the series what their reaction to learning about the political economy of the mass media was, one participant said it was “information that I already knew! It’s sad and crazy information, I don’t see any way we can change that.”<sup>69</sup> Several participants made similar statements in that this was information they “already knew,” demonstrating their acceptance of this information without question or regard for a need to change anything. Therefore, they display consciousness of the information yet they acquiesce to it without

challenge. The thought goes “it’s just how the world is, people are innately drawn to sexually tantalizing material, and advertisers are just giving people what they want.” Some might call this apathy, in that they know the information and are aware of the impact of media, but they simply do not care. However, I argue it is not necessarily apathy, but rather discomfort with admitting complicity in a problematic and oppressive system. It is more of a defensive reaction, one which I have encountered most when presenting similar material at other times in other educational situations. I often get this response when attempting to critically analyze media images.

Along these same lines, I have also received the comedic defense, in that a particularly problematic image was just trying to be funny, as if any critique is negated because of its comedic intent. This reaction dismisses any conscious effort on the part of advertisers to construct and define what is sexy and, for that matter, what is funny.

What I find most problematic about this conclusion is it is the failure to acknowledge the hegemonic ideological power structure embedded both in the media business as well as in media texts. This is particularly problematic given the fact that this idea is hegemony at its best, convincing consumers that “sex sells” and is innately part of human nature, without any acknowledgement of the media’s complicity in constructing that idea. Additionally, as I have argued previously in this chapter, media and advertisers not only work to define standards of beauty and sexiness, but they also very clearly and deliberately construct pleasure and what it is that people “want.” I argue that advertisers define sexy, and then create market consumer groups that want that particular kind of sex. In other words, sex sells because advertisers want it to.

I like to use the MTV series *Jersey Shore* as an example of this, in terms of what party culture, as portrayed in that show, tells men they should seek from a sexual encounter. In most episodes the men would go to night clubs hoping to find a girl to take back to the house in order to have sex with her and then immediately kick her out of the house. It was interesting to see this play out time and time again, because after watching the show over several seasons I began to realize that, first of all, these men received pleasure from the hunt and in the bragging rights they attained after the sexual act, rather than in the sexual act itself, so one could argue the actual sex itself was of little significance. Secondly, I argue, along with other sexual mating practices of heteronormative American men, this show demonstrates that for young men, their ultimate goal should be to have as many sexual partners as possible with no intimate or mutually pleasurable exchange. This example illustrates clearly how media images perpetuate troublesome notions of pleasure for young men, leading advertisers to further perpetuate this idea in order to sell products like Axe body spray, which have a slew of problematic commercials. Because *Jersey Shore* is a reality show, the defense is that it is merely a looking glass into the reality of dating culture. This may be true for this particular group of men. However, because the show was so widely viewed, it then takes on a life of its own as a pedagogical media image for other men. Through these images, men are taught to hunt for sex and then promptly dispose of women, with the subliminal message being that using Axe Body Spray will make all of this possible.

My point in all this is to demonstrate the clear ways media works to construct images in ways meant to sell us products, as well as to perpetuate oppressive social

practices. However, because the media has such a powerful hegemonic hold on popular culture, media viewers do not or refuse to see this deliberate manipulation, even as they recognize they are being sold something. “We know it happens but there’s nothing we can do about it, so let’s just get over it.” Conscious acquiesce is dangerous because it allows us to ignore the real consequences of these images. As Kilbourne argues, sexual images of women in the media do not necessarily directly lead to sexual violence, however,

They normalize dangerous attitudes and they create a climate in which women are often seen as things, as objects. And certainly turning a human being into a thing is almost always the first step for justifying violence against that person. And that step is constantly being taken with women and girls, so the violence, the abuse is partly the chilling but logical result of this kind of objectification.<sup>70</sup>

Similarly, the danger is not necessarily in the hypersexualized stereotypical images of Latinas, but in the normalization of that stereotype and how it impacts the way both Latinos and non-Latinos come to understand Latina identity and sexuality.

#### *Disconnected/Projected Recognition*

In this reaction, participants seem to recognize the impact of the media but feel they are disconnected from it because they consciously choose not to be affected by it. The thought goes, “others are impacted by the media, but I don’t really let it impact me.” In this way participants acknowledge the manipulative powers of the media on others, but do not feel they personally are susceptible to that manipulation.

The following response from a participant in the workshops falls into this line of thinking: “No, I don’t think [I am affected by the media] because I hardly ever 1) watch TV, 2) listen to the radio, 3) let others’ opinions change mine. Yes, I think [others are

affected by the media] because as soon as they see it's a hit for those people they choose to do so as well."<sup>71</sup> This response makes the impact of media a choice that she consciously chooses not to participate in. What is notable about this participant's reaction is how she describes her media usage. She claims she does not spend a lot of time watching TV, only "once a week for 3-4 hours," but she does spend a lot of time on the internet, "once or twice a day every day."<sup>72</sup> I would argue her internet usage is substantial regardless of the fact that she does not watch as much TV, not to mention that the internet is filled with advertisements that are actually geared to the user's taste.

Many participants in this group, like the previous group, are dismissive of the information presented because they assert they are already aware of the information. In this case, however, it goes beyond saying that nothing can be done to change it. In fact the claim is made that we can control how the media impacts us. Participants in this group made it clear they are above any impact or manipulation the media might have, while simultaneously acknowledging it can impact the way others choose to live their lives. For example, I teach a Women's History course, in which we discuss the history of gender roles, particularly the expectations on women to be domestic. This discussion inevitably leads to the contemporary expectation of women and their roles in the home, and the way these expectations are influenced by media images. An example of this might be household cleaning products that usually depict women using these products, which arguably perpetuates the notion that women are innately domestic. In reaction to this discussion, I had a male student defend his mother's role as a stay at home mom, arguing she did this not because of any expectation but because of her own enjoyment of

that role. He went on to argue that he did not perpetuate these sexist expectations because he does not watch TV, is not on social media, and altogether does not pay attention to sexist media images. He went further, arguing something along the lines of “we need to stop paying so much attention to media images and just live our lives.”

There is an undertone of moral judgement in this line of thinking, by making it clear that they can control how the media impacts them, but others are not as strong to not fall for the manipulation of the mass media. This example, as well as the workshop participants whose responses fall in this line of thinking, demonstrate the ability to recognize the impact the media has on others, while distancing themselves from this impact and simplify it as a matter of ignoring what the media says. This reasoning oversimplifies the effect of the media to say that it is a conscious decision to block the images and messages the media puts out. However, hegemonic power does not work like that in the media; it is not merely a matter of turning off the TV, because media images are everywhere. It is also not merely a matter of ignoring the negative messages because often these messages are not easily recognized as negative but actually constructed as societal norms.<sup>73</sup> The argument in this line of thinking is that stereotypes exist in the media and media has a negative impact, but we can consciously choose not to pay attention to them, to shut them off even as we are continuously exposed to oppressive images. Media images work on a subconscious level, constantly giving us similar images in order to normalize particular ideologies. In order for someone to really not be affected by media images, we might literally have to be blind.

What is most problematic about this response from the participants is that it allows them to detach themselves from the evils of the media while recognizing its impact on others. The thought goes “Yes, media is bad because it’s manipulative, but I am too smart to be manipulated, I choose not to let myself believe in what the media tells me.” This response concerns me the most because as someone who prides herself on being hypercritical of media images, I still cannot say I am above any subconscious effect by the media especially because the media affects us at such an early age, and because the media’s hegemonic ideologies on race, gender, class, and sex are so well institutionalized. I am left to question why these participants have such responses, and why these are in fact the responses I get most often when discussing this topic. I conclude that maybe those that consciously acquiesce are not really disinterested in changing things but rather that they do not or cannot see a way to change things. Real change requires several steps which can be challenging to those who are confronted with the realities of the media. First of all, change requires critical consciousness which in turn requires first admitting our complicity in an oppressive system, admitting that racial, sexist, homophobic, etc., stereotypes exist and sometimes we ourselves perpetuate them by either not calling them out, or laughing at them. Secondly, critical consciousness requires admitting to finding enjoyment in things that are problematic, which might mean that you have to give up things you like so as not to perpetuate the stereotype. This is not an easy step when it is what we’ve known and enjoyed for so long.

A quick example of this is Gwen Stefani, who has appropriated many different cultures over the length of her career. I grew up with the music of her band No Doubt,



and loved her work for over a decade. I remember when she appropriated chola culture for a music video, and I let her slide. Then she appropriated Hara Juku culture, and I cringed but turned a blind eye. But after she appropriated Native American culture in a recent video, I had to say enough is enough, I gave up my fan card. I consciously choose to no longer listen to her music, or buy any of her merchandise, a difficult decision for me being that she was such a part of my musical taste for so many years. I mention this to serve as an example of how challenging it can be to admit that things we have enjoyed and even supported can be offensive.

In this way, change requires us to alter the way we act as consumers in the market. Another example of this is my choice not to shop at Walmart because of their deplorable labor practices. This poses a challenge because in this ever-vulnerable economy, Walmart has the best prices on everything, but I choose to stand for something larger than my own wallet. Again, I mention this not to judge those who do shop at Walmart, but rather to point out why these responses seem so defensive. Learning about the realities of the media or any institution that is ingrained with oppressive ideologies often feels like an assault on our behavior or even our identity. Learning that your favorite show has racist depictions of characters can feel like you are being accused of being racist, and maybe we are, which is where the disconnected recognition response comes in. This response allows people to acknowledge the problems in media images while not admitting their own complicity in perpetuating the oppressive stereotypes. The thought goes, “Some media images are racist, but I am not because I do not pay attention to those images.” Rather than being so defensive, I think we need to get to a place where

we can admit we take pleasure in problematic images, and still be critical of them as well. For example, I love the show *Modern Family*, and I love Sofia Vergara's role in that show. And yet I am completely aware that her portrayal of that character is rife with stereotypes, and I am vocally critical of it. Enjoyment and critical consciousness are not mutually exclusive. This brings us to the last set of responses from participants in the workshops.

### *Critical Curiosity*

The difference in this response is the participant's use of the word "I" illustrating what the previous group fails to do, admitting that, for better or for worse, they are impacted by media. Some responses were: "Yes [I am impacted by the media] because sometimes I want to live up to how they are dressed and how they look" and "Yes, I am affected by the media...It affects us on our outlook on things."<sup>74</sup> Participants whose responses fall in this group accept and acknowledge their own participation and interaction with the media and the ways they are impacted by it, unlike the previous group who projects that impact on others while negating their own relationship with media. In fact, this group might be the "others" the previous group is referring to, the people who the disconnected recognizers feel are being manipulated by the media.

However, what I am most struck by in these responses is the genuine surprise these participants demonstrate at learning the political economy of the media and the way it constructs ideas about the world. When asked the first day about their responses to information about advertising and media political economy some responses were: "The information presented today was actually pretty surprising. I didn't realize how much ads

cost and how big it impacted products” and “I was surprised when she said that 70% of magazine content is advertisements and only 30% is content...I realized that advertising impacts our lives in every way. I was shocked by the fact that 30,000 to 40,000 advertisements are seen by children each year.”<sup>75</sup> This reaction of surprise and shock demonstrates how unaware these participants are of how the business of media works. Yet this reaction also shows curiosity to want to know why this happens and how this directly impacts their lives. One participant even said, “Excessive advertising is so common in every form of media that it doesn’t faze us when watching.”<sup>76</sup> You can see the seeds of thought and critical consciousness in this response, in that she is genuinely interested in the information because she recognizes the prevalence of media use for girls her age and how impactful it can be. These participants show a curiosity to learn more, to become more conscious about the connection between her and her peers’ actions and media images.

If the first step in critical consciousness is to admit complicity in an oppressive institution, then I argue these girls are well on their way. They have no problem admitting that they are influenced by media in very specific ways. And rather than be defensive about it, they seem to soak up the information offered to them, and begin to formulate a critical lens by which to view media, and a critical language with which to critique it. I will be discussing how this played out in my workshops in subsequent chapters. For now, I return to my questions: Do Latina teenagers acknowledge the impact of the media or do they think they are beyond any kind of manipulation? Do Latinas specifically understand the ways in which they negotiate their identities with the images they see in the media?

The responses of the participants clearly demonstrate there are those that do acknowledge media's impact and those that do not. Even for those that do acknowledge the impact of media, they are still in the early stages of critical consciousness so that they might not even be able to articulate the specific ways they negotiate their identities as Latinas through images they see in the media. In other words, the participants whose responses fell into this line of thinking were most open to the idea of learning more and critically interrogating their own relationship to the media. Whereas the other responses made them less willing to engage in a textual analysis that identified oppressive imagery, it was these participants who were open to admitting how problematic the images we analyzed in class were in regard to race and gender stereotypes. Thus, if you are open to critical textual analysis, you can be open to transformative possibilities. At the end of the day, critical consciousness is about opening the mind and the body to self-critique, about acknowledging the realities of the world around us, and a willingness to move toward liberation. This is not to say that those who do not acknowledge the impact cannot get there, for it is all a process. But in terms of moving toward transformative possibilities, those with critical curiosity can move toward critical consciousness quicker.

Ultimately, I conclude, my research proves that media only puts forth narrow representations of Latinas in the media, leaving very few role models for Latina teenagers to emulate and come to understand their identities. Furthermore, if Latina teenagers do not necessarily understand how the media can impact their identity formation, it makes negotiating stereotypical representation of Latinidad that much more difficult, often leaving room for internalized oppressive ideas.

I cannot say for sure how these participants will ever use this information, and if it will in fact help them to see media differently. But the fact that they seem open to the information I offered them tells me there is possibility, which is really what I set out to do with this project: create the possibility for critical consciousness.

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- <sup>1</sup> Mary Romero and Michelle Habell-Pallán, "Introduction," in *Latino/a Popular Culture*, ed. Michelle Habell-Pallán and Mary Romero, (New York and London: New York University Press, 2002), 6.
- <sup>2</sup> Isabel Molina-Guzmán, *Dangerous Curves: Latina Bodies in the Media* (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 9.
- <sup>3</sup> For further information on scholarship on Latinx stereotypes see Charles Ramirez Berg
- <sup>4</sup> Isabel Molina-Guzmán, "Mediating Frida: Negotiating Discourses," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 23, no. 3 (August 2006), 235.
- <sup>5</sup> Arlene M. Davila, *Latinos, Inc.: The Marketing and Making of a People* (Berkeley (Calif.): University of California Press, 2012), 236.
- <sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 236.
- <sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.
- <sup>8</sup> This commercial aired in 2012, and is no longer in rotation. After searching the internet for it many times I have not been able to find any trace of it, other than links that have been taken down.
- <sup>9</sup> Elana Glowatz, "Dole Juices Up Hispanic Marketing," *Adweek*, July 21, 2000, accessed June 13, 2017, <http://www.adweek.com/brand-marketing/dole-juices-hispanic-marketing-106159/>.
- <sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>12</sup> Juan Piñón. "Ugly Betty and the Emergence of the Latino/a producers as cultural translators." *Communication Theory* 21 (2011), 394.
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 393.
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 395.
- <sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 401.
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 407.
- <sup>17</sup> Habell-Pallán, 26.
- <sup>18</sup> Mary Romero and Michelle Habell-Pallán, "Introduction," in *Latino/a Popular Culture*, ed. Michelle Habell-Pallán and Mary Romero, (New York and London: New York University Press, 2002), 6.
- <sup>19</sup> *Brown Is the New Green: George Lopez and the American Dream*. Directed by Phillip Rodriguez. 213 Projects, 2007. DVD.
- <sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>25</sup> The late Michelle Serros was on the writing staff for one year in 2002, but was seemingly the only other Latinx voice on the show.
- <sup>26</sup> Piñón, 397.
- <sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>28</sup> Vicki Ruiz. "Chapter 1." In *From out of the Shadows: Mexican Women in Twentieth-century America*. (New York: Oxford University Press), 1998., 33.
- <sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.
- <sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.
- <sup>33</sup> George J. Sanchez, *Becoming Mexican American: Ethnicity, Culture, and Identity in Chicano Los Angeles, 1900-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 71.
- <sup>34</sup> "SB1070 - 492R - Senate Fact Sheet." SB1070 - 492R - Senate Fact Sheet. Accessed October 16, 2015. <http://www.azleg.gov/legtext/49leg/2r/summary/s.1070pshs.doc.htm>.
- <sup>35</sup> "Hard Ball with Chris Matthews." MSNBC, April 2010.
- <sup>36</sup> *Immigrant Buses Blocked by Protestors*, USA Today, accessed July 2, 2014, [http://www.usatoday.com/videos/news/usanow/2014/07/02/12001345/?fb\\_ref=Default](http://www.usatoday.com/videos/news/usanow/2014/07/02/12001345/?fb_ref=Default).
- <sup>37</sup> Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16, no. 3 (1975): doi:10.1093/screen/16.3.6.

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- <sup>38</sup> Sander L Gilman "Black Bodies, White Bodies: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late Nineteenth-Century Art, Medicine, and Literature." *CRIT INQUIRY Critical Inquiry* 12, no. 1 (1985): 204. doi:10.1086/448327.
- <sup>39</sup> Deborah Paredez. *Selenidad: Selena, Latinos, and the Performance of Memory*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 129.
- <sup>40</sup> Ibid., 136.
- <sup>41</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>42</sup> Figueroa, Maria. *Velvet Barrios: Popular Culture & Chicana/o Sexualities*. By Alicia Gaspar De Alba. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 266.
- <sup>43</sup> Paredez, 134.
- <sup>44</sup> Ibid., 140-141.
- <sup>45</sup> Ibid., 141.
- <sup>46</sup> Figueroa, 271.
- <sup>47</sup> Alicia Gaspar De Alba, *Velvet Barrios: Popular Culture & Chicana/o Sexualities* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 195.
- <sup>48</sup> Ibid., 188.
- <sup>49</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>50</sup> Figueroa, 3.
- <sup>51</sup> Mary C. Beltrán, "The Hollywood Latina Body as Site of Social Struggle: Media Constructions of Stardom and Jennifer Lopez's "Cross-over Butt"," *Stardom and Celebrity: A Reader*, 2007, 74, doi:10.4135/9781446269534.n26.
- <sup>52</sup> Ibid., 79.
- <sup>53</sup> Ibid., 78.
- <sup>54</sup> Ibid., 79.
- <sup>55</sup> Myra Mendible, *From Bananas to Buttocks: The Latina Body in Popular Film and Culture* (Austin: University of Texas, 2007), 6.
- <sup>56</sup> Ibid., 8.
- <sup>57</sup> Beltrán, 80.
- <sup>58</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>59</sup> Romero & Habell-Pallán, 8.
- <sup>60</sup> Frances R. Aparicio. "U.S. Latino Expressive Cultures." In *The Columbia History of Latinos in the United States since 1960*, by David Gutierrez. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 381.
- <sup>61</sup> Mulvey.
- <sup>62</sup> Jean Kilbourne, *Still Killing Us Softly: Advertising's Image of Women*. Cambridge, MA: Cambridge Documentary Films, 1987).
- <sup>63</sup> Habell-Pallán, *Loca Motion*, 7.
- <sup>64</sup> Frances R. Aparicio, "Jennifer as Selena: Rethinking Latinidad in Media and Popular Culture," *Latino Studies* 1, no. 1 (2003): 381, doi:10.1057/palgrave.lst.8600016.
- <sup>65</sup> Habell-Pallán, *Loca Motion*, 9.
- <sup>66</sup> I recognize there are more contemporary images of Latinidad that attempt to grapple with these stereotypes like that of *Jane the Virgin* and *Devious Maids*, but they are still far and few between. Most images of Latinidad still remain superficial, narrow lacking complexity in representing Latinidad in a nuanced manner.
- <sup>67</sup> Mary C. Beltrán, *Latina/o Stars in U.S. Eyes: The Making and Meanings of Film and TV Stardom* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 2.
- <sup>68</sup> Jean Kilbourne, *Still Killing Us Softly: Advertising's Image of Women*. Cambridge, MA: Cambridge Documentary Films, 1987).
- <sup>69</sup> Elisaldez, Renee Lemus. Media Workshops. Raw data., California. 2012
- <sup>70</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>71</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>72</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>73</sup> Jean Kilbourne.
- <sup>74</sup> Ibid.

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.



## CHAPTER THREE

### **From *Mi Vida Loca* to *Mean Girls*: A Textual Analysis of Girl Culture**

While researching media literacy and facilitating media workshops with teenage girls, I have immersed myself in the field of girl culture. Literature on girl culture has proliferated since the turn of the twenty-first century, along with the emergence of online social media and of bullying as a prominent part of the national discourse. Many scholars before me have published in-depth research and writing on this topic, producing a rich secondary scholarship that I draw on in this project. However, my work in relation to this field interrogates how teenage girls are impacted by the way media images perpetuate toxic and stereotypical representations of girl culture. Media representations often construct girl culture, and girls themselves, as innately catty, competitive, and superficial, often leading to abusive and violent interactions among girls. Through such representations, I contend, the media create and perpetuate a distorted, misogynistic, and ultimately oppressive perception of girl culture in order to regulate societal gender roles and maintain hegemonic power structures. Furthermore, for Latina girls, they must navigate a more complex girlhood based on gender, race, class and sexuality constructs.

My research on both the social-science literature and media representations of girl culture examines how together these fields construct the experience of middle-class white girls as the norm. I create a textual analysis of the iconic film *Mean Girls* in order to demonstrate the kind of toxic girl culture represented in media images. Conversely, the experience of girls of color in general, and Latinx girls in particular, are at best marginalized, tokenized, or otherwise negatively stereotyped. At worst, their experiences

are erased from the discourse altogether. My textual analysis of the film *Bring it On*,<sup>1</sup> and the reality show *Bad Girls Club*<sup>2</sup> clearly demonstrates the mass media's inability to sufficiently represent the nuanced and complex culture of girls of color, while perpetuating dangerous stereotypes. Therefore, I look to the film *Mi Vida Loca*,<sup>3</sup> as well as the TV show *East Los High*<sup>4</sup> which center the experience of Latinx girls, to examine how media images represent Latinx girl culture.

I also contend that even as girls grow into women, in media images the same kind of representation persists so that the toxicity of girl culture transforms into toxic woman culture. This concept of toxic woman culture is best exemplified by my textual analysis of *The Real Housewives*<sup>5</sup> franchise and the reality show *The Bachelor*.<sup>6</sup> In addition, these shows also perpetuate stereotypical representations of women of color.

In light of these negative and toxic representations of girl culture, again I look to Transformative Critical Media Literacy as a way to encourage a more comprehensive evaluation of these images. This chapter demonstrates the kind of textual analysis that is central to TfcML, illustrating the kind of critical lens I hope TfcML fosters in young girls. Moreover, I point to several examples in my workshops as well as my teaching experience of how the theatre methods of TfcML offered girls a space to envision and imagine a different, healthier way to interact and interrelate with each other.

As a young girl, I myself navigated girl culture, both toxic and supportive. I also experienced bullying in various ways, the memories of which have followed me into my adult life. The experiences in my pre-teen and teenage years affected my self-esteem, my perception of others, and much of my character formation. Through much self-reflection

and retrospective analysis, I have recognized and processed the occasionally negative emotional impact of these crucial years in my life. I mention this to illuminate the importance of understanding the complexity of girl culture, as well as to advocate the need for healthier representations of girl culture in the media. Additionally, this chapter refocuses our attention away from pathologizing girls as innately petty, selfish, and malicious, towards analyzing the ubiquitous societal pressures that possibly provoke young girls to exhibit such “mean” behavior.

### **What is Girl Culture?**

In the introduction to the anthology titled *Girl Culture: An Encyclopedia, Volume 1*,<sup>7</sup> Editors Claudia A. Mitchell and Jacqueline Reid-Walsh attempted to define girl culture while pointing to the inherent complexities of defining “girlhood.” For example, does girlhood begin in pre-teen years? Does it end in the early adult years? These chronological markers leave room for a wide range of experiences, hence the heterogeneous experience of girl culture. Nevertheless, Mitchell and Reid-Walsh provide several categories as “a way to think about how girl culture is organized, at least within popular culture and popular representations of girlhood.”<sup>8</sup> These categories are as follows: social practices, material culture, media, space, rites of passage, girls’ bodies, people, social relations, and theoretical and social concepts about girl culture. The editors also provide “a number of key themes in the treatment of girlhood within girl culture as represented in the media, popular culture and everyday events,” including: sexuality, devaluing girl’s culture, ephemerality, lost girlhoods, agency, and girls just want to have fun.<sup>9</sup>

In my work, I define girlhood in the way media often label particular representations with the term girl. For example, the show *Bad Girls Club* is actually made up of women over the age of 18, but because the label “girls” is part of the show, I examine it within the media’s construction of girl culture. More specifically, I define girlhood as the years between preteen and early adult. For the purposes of this chapter, I specifically focus on the category of media, not only the way media represents girl culture, but also the ways girls interact and engage with media images that create girl culture. I also unpack the category of social relations, which Mitchel and Reid-Walsh describe as:

friendships (girlfriends, best friends, breaking up with friends, social networking), hostile relations (bullying—including cyber-bullying—meanness, social aggression, gossip), and heterosexual relations (dating, crushes, breaking up with a boyfriend, date rape, sexual relations, birth control, unprotected sex, HIV and AIDS, STDs). Social relations and girl culture can also be explored through alternative cultural practices such as lesbianism and gay identity, as well as girls as tomboys.<sup>10</sup>

In other words, I pose questions like: How do girls learn to get along with each other? What expectations do girls have of other girls, of their friends and peers? How do girls come to understand these relationships through the lens of media images? What is the expectation for the ways these relationships are supposed to play out? This dissertation argues that identity is partially constructed through society’s perception of race, gender, and other identity markers. I contend that girl culture is also socially constructed and informed by the images presented in the media, so that the trope of the mean girl(s) becomes an expected norm for girls.

Furthermore, in the same way I argued in chapter one that mass media has a deep investment in maintaining oppressive constructions of Latinidad in order to maintain hierarchical power relations and material inequalities along racial and gendered lines, so too is the mass media invested in perpetuating oppressive representations of girl culture in order to regulate “the traditional boundaries of appropriate femininity.”<sup>11</sup> Even more alarming is the “suspect” scholarship on girl culture that pathologizes meanness as an innate response to too much masculinity in girls. Jessica Ringrose and Valerie Walkerdine, in their contribution to the anthology, *Girl Culture*, titled “What Does It Mean to Be a Girl in the Twenty-first Century?” state the following about the pathology of meanness in girl culture:

Meanness is becoming a dominant motif for contemporary Western girlhood—one that does not disturb the traditional boundaries of appropriate femininity, but rather entrenches them. Meanness (either to others or to oneself) lies within the boundaries of normative, repressive femininity. Meanness shores up the lack of fit experienced by the girl/woman trying on masculine subjectivity in the realms of school, office, and personal relationships—girls’ incapacity for rational fraternity. Girl power folds back into the age-old story of femininity claiming that girls and women cannot express their newfound opportunities for success in normative, positive ways and that they are plagued by pathology and lack, and at the risk of slipping into cruelty and/or violent excess.<sup>12</sup>

This fascinating argument makes clear that constructing girl culture as pathologically prone to meanness actually reinforces traditional notions of femininity. The idea is that when girls participate in traditionally male spaces such as that of school and work, they are thus performing masculinity, which is supposedly not part of their nature. Consequently, when girls perform masculinity, the only possible outcome is meanness, and because meanness is not, or should not be a part of femininity, girls who exhibit mean behavior must be regulated back to their feminine nature. This distorted perception

of girl culture creates consequences for girls who step outside their prescribed gender roles.

Following this binary, gendered, double-standard logic, girls who attempt to perform masculinity will ultimately be led into unhealthy modes of competition, and competition breeds indirect aggression and violence in girls. In other words, girls are not capable of handling competition and thus act out aggressively and manipulatively. But what about boys? Constructing girls as incapable of handling competition or anything perceived as masculine solidifies the binary notion of femininity as only for girls and masculinity as only for boys. Furthermore, because traits like aggression and violence are always already outside of femininity and inside masculinity, society views girls driven to meanness as wayward youths needing correction. Conversely, for boys, things like competition, aggression, violence, meanness, etc. are viewed as innately masculine qualities, and are therefore normalized. Heeding the age-old axiom, “boys will be boys,” it is okay for them to be violent and mean with each other because that is part of their nature. However, girls who act like this must be guided back to their femininity, and by default, their inferior position in a patriarchal society. I am not advocating that violence should be okay for girls any more than it is for boys, but it is problematic when meanness is viewed as the only possible outcome for girls’ participation in masculine spaces. In addition, we must question the notion of boys as innately violent, of public spaces as inherently masculine arenas suitable only for masculine bodies, and the equating of violence with masculinity and boyhood which can be equally as dangerous for boys as it is for girls.

When girls are perceived as pathologically led to meanness in regards to social interactions, Ringrose and Walkerdine's theorization arguably stems from the traditional model of the separate spheres paradigm, which relegates women to the private sphere of the home, inherently described as a feminine space, while men are empowered to interact in the public sphere, which includes school, work, and social spaces traditionally marked as masculine. This separate sphere paradigm developed during the era of the Cult of True Womanhood,<sup>13</sup> which also made clear that women who participate in the public sphere violated traditional gender norms, which included expectations for female sexuality constructed through the virgin/whore dichotomy. In essence, women who remain in their traditional, feminine gender roles are considered pure and respectable by societal standards, while women who step outside these roles in any way are seen as promiscuous and unbecoming of respectable femininity.

Meanness is viewed as the normalized outcome of an excess of masculinity in girls, and any masculinity whatsoever in girls is excessive. From this perspective, mean girls are girls attempting to perform masculinity by participating in the public sphere, and their desire to participate in the historically masculine arenas of school, work, and social spaces is articulated as the product of feminism or "girl power" (as referred to by the scholars of this field), which calls for equality among the genders. True gender equality, however, would require men to relinquish the power and privileges they have benefited from for centuries, which, in a hegemonic patriarchal worldview, goes against nature. Thus, according to patriarchal ideology, feminism makes for power hungry girls who

become mean in the excess of girl power. In reality, meanness is a response to a society that creates insecurities and encourages superficial validation for girls.

Nevertheless, there is something else at play in this conversation about mean girls, for as Ringrose and Walkerdine state, “One effect of these narratives, as pointed out by the U.S. criminologists Chesney-Lind and Irwin, is a focus on middle-class mean girls as the new culprits of schoolyard bullying, a postfeminist backlash, where neoliberal imperatives for success and normative regimes of heterosexual competition are ignored in favor of an individualizing focus on pathological girls.”<sup>14</sup>

In chapter two I mentioned Laura Mulvey’s theory of the male gaze,<sup>15</sup> and the way women are objectified in media images. The male gaze portrays women through a heterosexual cis man-to-cis woman desiring lens. In other words, images of women in the media are often constructed to be sexually attractive for heterosexual cis-gender men. This happens to the extent that all media images are constructed through this lens, so that even women come to view themselves and other women through the male gaze. Through constant exposure to media images constructed through the male gaze and objectifying women, women themselves come to understand their own beauty and worth through their ability to be attractive to men, thus, the ultimate goal for women is to be desired by men. Mulvey refers to it as “taking pleasure in being looked at,” so that women are taught to invite objectification as a validation of their beauty and ultimately their worth. Aside from this idea of seeking male attention, women are still largely taught that marriage and children are the ultimate life goals that they should strive to achieve. Thus, they must use their desirability to ultimately attract a husband. These are messages women receive



through media images and age-old western societal norms at a very early age and all throughout their youth. It is with these messages that girls are led into competing with one another for the attention of boys. If a girl's worth is defined by her ability to be desirable, it forces her to look to other girls as her inherent enemy in that mission. It forces girls to compare themselves to other girls, to women in media images, in their appearance and ability to gain the attention of a boy. While not all girls do this, by and large this is the message girls receive very early on as something they should care about.

This is a concept I will explore more when I discuss my textual analysis of the TV show *The Bachelor*. I foreground this concept now in order to highlight how these clearly constructed and misogynistic notions of gender, gender norms, and societal expectation are what actually lead to meanness in girls. Yet, as Ringrose and Walkerdine point out, “the research on girls’ indirect and relational aggression...represents this behavior as natural and as a universal phenomenon, representing the feminine as repressive and pathological, obscuring larger structures or discourses of gender, sexuality, and power...This positions...the problems as a pathology within the girl to be corrected.”<sup>16</sup> The focus is not on how society drives girls to be mean, but on their innate inability to adjust their feminine nature to a masculine world outside the home.

### **Media’s Toxic Representation of Girl Culture**

In the media workshops I conducted, the participants collectively voted *Mean Girls* as one of their favorite film.<sup>17</sup> A group of participants performed a scene from the film. In the scene, the popular girls who call themselves “the Plastics” meet the protagonist of the film, Cady, for the first time and proceed to give her underhanded

compliments that Cady immediately recognizes as judgments. The Plastics ultimately invite her to join their group and the conversation ends with the infamous line, “We wear pink on Wednesdays.” The group of students chose to perform the scene with three of the students playing the popular girls who call themselves “The Plastics,” while the other student played Cady, the new girl to the school. The students performed the scene just as it was in the film, with the three girls in the Plastics sitting behind a table, and Cady standing alone in front of them. After the scene was performed, the student who played Cady used words like shame, embarrassed, and judgment to describe how she felt as she played that role, while the students who played the Plastics admitted to feeling bad for their judgmental behavior but ultimately feeling powerful. This conversation demonstrated the students’ ability to recognize the oppressive moment in this scene without actually articulating it in that way. They understood it through their bodies and through the body’s reaction to the dynamic in the scene. One might presume from these responses that the participants recognized the toxic dynamic of girl culture playing out in this film. I further observed a moment of contemplation from the class as they questioned their enjoyment of a film that glorifies toxic girl culture. Thus, a critical textual analysis is happening through the body and possibly changing the way these students see that movie or one like it.

My textual analysis of the film concludes that the cinematic theme of the mean girl(s) normalizes toxic girl culture as a customary rite of passage for young women, while failing to highlight how toxic girl culture not only impacts the ways adolescent girls interact with each other, but also inhibits them from recognizing this effect, and its

long-lasting repercussions. The internalization of this kind of toxic girl culture does not allow young people (of all genders) to imagine any other way for girls to be friends. Furthermore, mass media's careless representations of girl culture fail to highlight either the emotional violence of this kind of interaction or the white, heteronormative, patriarchal rhetoric it perpetuates. In this way, media fails to recognize the structural pressures on girls that create this toxic girl culture.

The film *Mean Girls* is based on the book *Queen Bees and Wannabes: Helping Your Daughter Survive Cliques, Gossip, Boys, and the New Realities of Girl World*<sup>18</sup> written by Rosalind Wiseman, with the screenplay written by Tina Fey. The book is promoted as a book to help parents understand and help their daughters navigate girl world. This chapter focuses on the film and how it interprets the book. I contend that the film *Mean Girls* perpetuates and normalizes the notion that meanness in girls is pathological. The clear underlying message throughout the film is that all girls are mean, or will eventually be mean, and that this is just how girls are; it is the normal way girls behave and interact with each other.

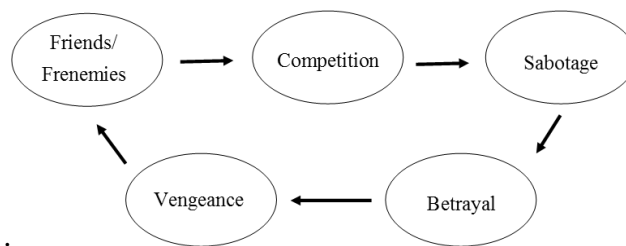
The film revolves around several characters, particularly the protagonist, named Cady Heron. She is a new student at the school, having recently transferred from Africa, where her parents were doing academic research. At the beginning of the film we see her trying to adjust to school life, as she had previously been homeschooled. Throughout the film, we hear her voice through her inner dialog as she discusses her interactions with what she refers to as "girl world." She explains, both to herself and the audience, the rules of girl world as she attempts to navigate and survive this new environment.

Several analytical themes emerge in the film that demonstrate the pathological assumptions about girl culture. For example, as the scholarship on girl culture looks at the normative regimes of heterosexual competition among girls, the film makes competition among girls its central focus. The film constructs and perpetuates a perception of girls as seeking validation and self-worth through toxic engagement in girl culture without articulating it as such. In other words, the film does not explore this search for validation as the driving force behind this toxic relationship to girl culture. Rather, it positions toxic girl culture as an inevitable part of girlhood. There is no recognition of the ways toxic girl culture is actually constructed through societal gender norms and expectations. As I have previously argued, the media transmits the following message to girls: your value as a girl is measured by your ability to be attractive to, and to gain the attention of men, as well as by your physical appearance and always adhering to a white standard of beauty. Further complicating the idea of self-worth as defined by attractiveness and beauty is the competition among girls to validate that self-worth. Only through the ability to be the best can you achieve full validation in your beauty. Not only is there a societal expectation of girls to be beautiful by very strict, narrow standards, but they must be the *most* beautiful, the *most* attractive, the *best* at everything, and better than all other girls. Therefore, in order to prove that they are the best and validate their self-worth, they must invalidate other girls' self-worth. They have to prove that they are the best by making others seem less than they are. This is the very notion that defines toxic girl culture, one the film *Mean Girls* portrays as normal and pathological, without attempting to interrogate the problem as one created by a patriarchal society.

This film also portrays another way girls are socialized to find self-worth: in the ability to exhibit power through popularity. The more people love you, or at least pretend to love you, the more you are validated. Whether through attention from boys or popularity among fellow girls, the validation comes from the outside in, not from the inside out. Girls are not taught to value themselves for who they are or their personality, but for how much attention they are able to attract from people outside themselves. Nevertheless, at the same time other girls pose a threat to this validation. If there are other equally beautiful and popular girls, they become a threat to your popularity or your ability to attract men, thus they pose a threat to your self-worth. In these cases, girls are socialized to feel insecure about this threat, which sets up this disturbing environment of competition. This subsequently leads to toxic girl culture in which everybody is competing against each other to be the queen bee.

#### *Toxic Cycle of Friendship in Mean Girls*

Thus a toxic cycle of friendship is constructed, one which is demonstrated throughout the film. This cycle begins with a friendship that leads to competition for validation, which leads to sabotage of those that pose a threat to this validation, then a betrayal of the friendship, vengeance for the betrayal, and meanness manifested as passive aggression, disingenuous friendship, and manipulation.



In *Mean Girls*, Cady is befriended by two different social groups: the art students made up of Janis and Damien, as well the “The Plastics” composed of Regina (the queen bee), Gretchen, and Karen. Immediately, we can see that these two groups are in opposition: the Plastics are the popular group, while the art students are the outsiders in girl world. The art students befriend Cady first, and thus she initially feels a sense of loyalty to them. Once she is befriended by the Plastics, Janis, who we later find out used to be best friends with Regina, asks Cady to spy on Regina as a means of revenge for some conflict they had in the past. This toxic cycle of friendship already exists between Janis and Regina long before Cady gets there. Cady begrudgingly does as Janis says, and forms a disingenuous friendship with the Plastics so as to seek vengeance for Janis and remain friends with her.

Cady enters her own toxic cycle of friendship with Regina when she begins to develop a crush on Aaron Samuels, without realizing he is Regina’s ex-boyfriend. When Regina finds out about this crush, Regina tells Cady she will talk to Aaron for her in order to set them up. Regina does go and talk to Aaron about Cady, but comes to find that Aaron has a crush on Cady as well. Regina immediately sees this as a threat to her ability to be the most attractive to this boy and thus decides to sabotage any chance Cady has with Aaron by talking negatively about Cady to Aaron. When Regina realizes that despite her efforts Aaron still has feelings for Cady, she decides to kiss Aaron and tries to take him back as her boyfriend. Regina does not actually have genuine feelings for him anymore, but she does not want him to like Cady, because doing so would give Cady more validation and more power and worth in girl world, which would be power that

would be taken from Regina. Consequently, Regina starts a relationship with Aaron with disingenuous feelings solely as a means to exert her power and worth over Cady. This moment clearly highlights the concept of normative regimes of heterosexual competition. There is almost a separation between genuine attractiveness and using the attention of this boy as a means of competition, validation, and displaying power. Because Regina does not actually like Aaron, she is in fact using passive-aggressive means to sabotage Cady so that she can win the competition for the attention of Aaron.

Cady sees Regina kiss Aaron and feels immediately betrayed by Regina. From the feeling of betrayal seethes the need for vengeance. At this point, I question where this need for vengeance comes from, which leads me back to the work of Ringrose and Walkerdine, whose “research on aggression and bullying...shows that masculine assertiveness or direct confrontations among girls at school...were quickly recouped by demands to “get along” and talk it out nicely” rather than engage in open conflict.”<sup>19</sup> I refer to this work because it clarifies that girls are not supposed to have conflict at all because it defies their feminine nature. Girls are supposed to be inherently nice to each other, and when they are not, the solution is to remind them of their femininity and suppress any frustration or conflict. According to Ringrose and Walkerdine, “Responding to constant imperatives to be good and nice, girls described learning to downplay conflict and to hide disputes and emotions from teachers and parents.”<sup>20</sup> In this statement, girls learn that certain behavior is appropriate and inappropriate, and that conflict must be dealt with in ways that do not bring attention to them from adults. As a result, because societal gender norms dictate that to have conflict with other girls contradicts their

feminine nature, vengeance does not manifest in a physically aggressive way, or even in any overtly aggressive way. Rather, girls are forced to use manipulative and passive means of aggression. Thus, in the film Cady goes to Janis and together they strategize ways to dethrone Regina from her queen bee position. Their plan of action is to sabotage her physical appearance, her relationship with Aaron, and her popularity with the Plastics. This clearly demonstrates that it is these three things that are supposed to validate a girl's self-worth, because the assumption made here is that without these she will have no more worth in girl world, which would in turn validate both Cady and Janis.

Furthermore, part of this plan of action is for Cady to remain friends with Regina, so as to be in a better position to accomplish the sabotage. This demonstrates this odd way in which friends, through sabotage, betrayal, and vengeance, become "frenemies" or fake friends in girl world. The concept of frenemies is central to toxic girl culture, again because of the societal expectations of girls to get along. Ringrose offers an example from her research when there was a conflict among a group of girls who were then advised by a teacher to "just be friends." Ringrose then argues,

The phrase "just be friends" at once trivializes and obscures the competitive heterosexualized economy of the school and re-marshals the girls into "heteronormative femininity", deflecting responsibility for coping with, and ultimately negating, conflict back to the girls. It is no wonder that secrecy and repression (read as manipulation and meanness) prevail ...<sup>21</sup>

Because girls are not allowed to openly engage in conflict, they must appear to be friends, and deal with their issues in secretive ways. In this way, a superficial friendship is made while resentment and competition fester just below the surface. In fact, the friendship is used to turn that sabotage back on the other person, which puts them all



back in this vicious, toxic cycle. Another interesting aspect of this toxic cycle of friendship demonstrated in the film is how as much as these girls feel resentment towards each other, they still want to maintain this superficial friendship because of the validation and power that friendship offers. In the film, Cady is successful in turning Regina's friend Gretchen against her, leading Gretchen to feel betrayed by Regina and to seek vengeance. Yet as Cady's inner dialogue points out, there is still more power in being "Plastic" than there is in not being "Plastic." Cady says in the film, "The meaner Regina was to her, the more Gretchen tried to win her back. She knew it was better to be in the Plastics hating life than to not be in at all."<sup>22</sup> Validation is found in being as close to the best as possible, and if Gretchen cannot be the queen bee, then she wants to remain as close to that as possible. So even though she resents Regina, and even though she wants to bring her down, she doesn't want to lose that friendship because that would be a threat to her validation.

The culminating scenes in the film begin when Regina realizes Cady has been sabotaging her and decides to seek the ultimate form of revenge. Prior to Cady's involvement with the Plastics, they had compiled what they called the "Burn Book," where they documented nasty things about the other girls in their class. When Cady first sees it, she feels pressured to contribute. As her act of vengeance, Regina later brings it to the school administration and tries to blame it on Cady while pretending to be a victim of the "Burn Book." Regina also decides to make copies of all the pages with all the nasty rumors of all the girls in her class and distribute it throughout the school. When all the other girls see this, they realize how they all are actually participating in toxic friendships

and all the girls feel betrayed, which leads to physical violence. The film comically depicts the entire class of girls physically fighting in the hallways, leaving other classmates afraid, and having one teacher call the principal's attention to it saying, "The girls have gone wild!"<sup>23</sup>

At this point, the male principal pulls the fire alarm and orders all the junior girls to the gym for a meeting. He then states, "Never have I seen such behavior, and from young ladies... What the young ladies in this grade need is an attitude makeover... Now, what we're gonna try to do is fix the way you young ladies relate to each other ... Lady to lady."<sup>24</sup> These statements clearly communicate the idea that meanness is not only pathological in girls, but that the way to deal with it is to remind them they are ladies because ladies do not act aggressively. It is interesting to note that Tina Fey a self-regarded feminist wrote the script for this film and had the male principal remind the girls of their place and roles as ladies, in turn who regulating their femininity. Even more telling is Fey's role in the film. After Ms. Norbury, Fey's character, is advised by the principal to help the girls with their self-esteem, she replies, "It's not a self-esteem problem. I think they're all pretty pleased with themselves."<sup>25</sup> This statement demonstrates a misunderstanding of mean girl culture altogether. Meanness stems from insecurity, not narcissism; it is not a matter of over-confidence in themselves, but a matter of surviving in a culture of competition that socializes girls to be mean so as to mask their own insecurities in their search for validation.

The constant message of the film is that girls are innately manipulative and passive-aggressive; yet the film fails to address how this aggressiveness stems from

insecurities. These insecurities are created because girls are taught to find validation in superficial things like physical appearance and popularity. If they begin to feel a threat to those things then they start to feel insecure. They then turn to mean behavior in order to feel better about themselves. However, they are not allowed to express un-lady-like feelings of insecurity, because that would demonstrate an inability to perfectly balance the masculinity and femininity, which is the only way girls are allowed to participate in the public sphere. Therefore, if girls cannot prove that they are perfect, then insecurity sets in, which inevitably leads to meanness.

Since they are prevented from openly expressing feelings of anger and frustration, the manifestation of anger must be covert or sneaky so that no one realizes that they are mean. All of this is portrayed as a normal part of girlhood. Their feelings of insecurity are devalued, dismissed, and policed. When the principal tells the girls, “You need to act like ladies,” what he’s really saying is that they need to regulate their aggression. This suppression (or “management”) of anger and the subsequent pathologizing of meanness blames the individual, as if girls are mean just for the sake of being mean, as if meanness is just a natural trait of girlhood, a product of girls’ inability to survive in a traditionally masculine space. According to these cultural values, meanness is a girl problem on an individual level.

#### *Redemption from Meanness through Self-Transformation*

Redemption from meanness is possible. A mean girl can be forgiven for her behavior, but only through individual transformation and accountability. In the film, Cady experiences that epiphany when she attends the mathlete competition and goes up

against another girl, whom she immediately criticizes based on physical appearance. As she begins to criticize this girl, she realizes “making fun of Caroline Krafft wouldn't stop her from beating me in this contest. Calling somebody else fat won't make you any skinnier. Calling someone stupid doesn't make you any smarter. And ruining Regina George's life definitely didn't make me any happier. All you can do in life is try to solve the problem in front of you.”<sup>26</sup> She has a self-transforming moment when she realizes her toxic participation in girl culture is silly because meanness doesn't have any real positive outcome. In other words, as much as she attempts to find validation through her mean behavior, Cady realized meanness only perpetuates more meanness and no one will truly feel validated in that. In the end, after having this revelation, she is redeemed and in fact rewarded for this redemption when she is voted Spring Fling Queen, gets Aaron Samuels to like her, remains friends with the arts kids, and has everyone else forgive her for the Burn Book. Furthermore, her moment of self-transformation transcends to the other girls as well, who have their own personal transformations: Regina finds sports as a way to release her pathological aggression, and Gretchen finds “another queen bee to serve.” The message: meanness is an individual, pathological issue. Thus, society is not held accountable to the way it constructs gender and girl culture.

Aside from the implication of mean girl culture as pathological and redeemable through regulation of femininity and self-transformation, the film falsely portrays the lasting impact of meanness and toxic girl culture. At the end of the film, Cady says, “All the drama from last year just wasn't important anymore.” This trivializes meanness by implying that once the moment of self-transformation occurs, all is forgotten and

forgiven, as if none of the nasty things that were said are internalized, or as if meanness does not traumatize. It also wrongly assumes that the toxic cycle of friendship only lasts for one year in high-school. The film thus ignores the need for deeper healing that must happen among girls. If this deeper healing does not occur, this same cycle of toxic friendship can extend itself over into adult-hood, which I discuss later in this chapter. .

In my media workshops, after the performance of the scene from *Mean Girls*, and after our embodied analysis of the oppressive moment, I asked if anything like this could or did happen at their school. They alluded to the existence of a digital online version of a Burn Book, and then proceeded to say that the school administration discovered it and shut it down quickly. Thus, the participants seemed to think that because the school administration was on top of it, there was no lasting impact of the things said in the Burn Book. In fact, they said that meanness was not a problem on their campus because the administration stays ahead of it. I then asked, “What about the girls who were talked about in the Burn Book, how do you think they feel? Do you think they just got over it once the book was taken down?” There was no response to this question, which left the girls thinking and wondering, for what seemed like the first time, about the feelings of these girls. There seems to be a complete disregard for the trauma of meanness when it is deemed a mere rite of passage. This conversation also demonstrates how the participants moved through their reactions to a film they like, from benign enjoyment to critical thinking. The performance of the scene and subsequent discussion offered these participants a space to think about how they, or the environment of their seemingly sheltered school, participated in mean girl culture.

*Pathologizing Meanness without Social Context*

Overall, my interpretation of the scholarship on mean girl culture and this film reveals the premise that meanness is not a pathological force in girls who are trying to navigate masculine arenas, but rather meanness comes from the insecurities and pressures girls face as they navigate a world that places high value on superficial things like appearance. In effect, meanness is a response to being disempowered. They can be led to feel this way because their value and their worth is so invested in all of these superficial things that they are not given a space to figure out who they really are outside of those things, therefore becoming insecure. Girls are told to be thin, pretty, likeable, and feminine in order to attain validation. A narrowly constructed standard of beauty is nearly impossible for girls who are told to compare themselves to media images of objectified women. When girls cannot meet these standards, they may resort to meanness in order to make others seem less than. This helps them feel better about themselves for not meeting the impossible standards of beauty.

They do not have the space to talk about these pressures, and they rarely even have a language with which to articulate that. When blame is put on them for being mean, it is regarded as an individual problem that girls need to be held accountable for. Maybe they can articulate that they feel these pressures about being perfect, but these feelings are not put into the context of “mean girl” behavior; they are viewed as two separate issues. These two matters—the pressures of societal beauty standards, and the difficulties of surviving mean girl culture—are in fact intertwined. We need to understand the correlation between these if we really want to help girls navigate this pivotal time in their

lives. Without this understanding and compassion, we perpetuate a toxic representation of girl culture that blames mean behavior on girls, normalizes the inevitability of “mean girl” behavior, and absolves society and patriarchy of their responsibility for “mean girl” culture. Furthermore, without a comprehensive understanding of how meanness is socially constructed, young girls may internalize this perception of girl culture, just as they do with other toxic media representations, and behave in ways that perpetuate this toxicity rather than explore other forms of friendship.

In my classes, though we do not directly cover the topic of girl culture, similar dynamics are analyzed when discussing topics like slut-shaming. In discussions about beauty standards and gender norms for women, many students often interject that they try not to pay attention to trends and just do what makes them feel comfortable. Yet, they admit there are other women who get caught up in looking a certain way to meet a particular beauty standard. This response correlates with my assessment of responses from my media workshops in the disconnected/projected recognition group. These students are willing to admit beauty standards exist, but not willing to explore how they themselves are influenced. In response to these reactions I ask the class the following: “If a woman is walking down the street in a short skirt and tight top what is your immediate thought about that woman?” This is a question I pose in all my classes at some point in the semester. And almost every time, the response to this question falls along similar lines: “She is a slut,” “She’s asking for attention,” or some other variation of these. I then ask the students why they have these thoughts about this woman based on what she is wearing. Thus, begins a discussion about slut-shaming and rape culture. As a class, we

unpack patriarchal standards of beauty, definitions of respectability, as well as the pervasiveness of the male gaze. We discuss these topics under the umbrella of gender norms and the ways girls and women are socialized to be judgmental of each other. Slut-shaming is a central part of toxic girl culture, clearly exemplified in the film *Mean Girls* when the ultimate insult is being called a “fugly slut,” as Regina wrote about herself in the Burn Book to frame the other girls.

When my students recognize their own complicity in slut-shaming, they also recognize their complicity in standards of beauty. They realize even if they do not hold themselves to these standard, they clearly hold other women to these standards through their judgments. Furthermore, these students begin to question how they can stop this cycle of toxic girl culture and stop judging other women. This is where TfCML offers the space to explore these topics and imagine more supportive possibilities. In the spring of 2017 I taught several classes in a Women’s Gender and Sexuality department. I assigned, as I do in most other classes, a final project in which they were to choose a topic relevant to class, do research, and then write and perform a skit that explores that topic. One group of students chose the topic of slut-shaming and body positivity.

The script they wrote was reminiscent of a scene from *Mean Girls*. In the film, Cady and the Plastics are in Regina’s room looking at themselves in the mirror pointing out their flaws. When the girls turn to Cady to talk about her flaws, Cady realizes that the notion of never feeling good enough is part of “girl world.” This scene reinforces the idea that standards of beauty are to be sought after, but can never really be attained.



Furthermore, friends need to endorse each other's imperfections as an act of loyalty and so that no one feels they are above the rule of girl world.

This is why my group of students who wrote a skit turning this dynamic on its head was so refreshing. The skit showed a group of women getting ready to go out. Some of the women wanted to wear a t-shirt and jeans, and another woman questioned her choice. The first woman responded by asserting her comfort with her choice. We might assume there would be a judgmental response from the other woman, as would occur in toxic girl culture. Rather, the woman responded with approval and affirmation of that choice. Another scene in the skit showed one of women putting on make-up, with another woman who preferred to not wear make-up questioning that choice. The first woman responded that wearing make-up made her feel comfortable and confident. Again, in toxic girl culture, a response of judgement might be expected. Rather, the woman responded with affirmation of that choice. At the end of the skit, one of the women says to the other women, and seemingly to the audience as well, that "it's cool if you want to wear make-up, it's cool if you just want to wear a t-shirt and jeans... whatever makes you feel comfortable is all that matters." The other women agree and the scene ends with them leaving to go out. When I saw this performed, it was clear these women understood the traditional dynamics of interactions and relations between women, and were trying to speak against them and create an oppositional representation of girl culture. This example demonstrates the ability of TfCML methods in offering a space to explore alternative possibilities for girls to interact outside of the toxic culture so pervasive in mass media images.

## **Girls of Color**

The message in *Mean Girls* is clear: meanness in girls is inevitable and pathological, but ultimately redeemable through self-accountability and self-transformation. The other message in *Mean Girls* and other films like it is that the experience of whiteness is universal. Mainstream American films that portray girl culture define the “typical” girl experience and assume all girls experience girl culture in this singular way. Nevertheless, because films like *Mean Girls* center the experience of white girls, these films normalize the experience of whiteness as universal. The white girl experience is framed as the typical American girl experience altogether. Conversely, the “typical” girl experience is inherently defined through the assumption of a white racial lens. *Mean Girls* contains almost no clearly visible girls of color, and yet as a representation of the supposedly quintessential experience of American girl culture, it presumes that girl culture is inherently constructed through normalized, universal, socially-constructed, white upper middle class experience.

### *Marginalization of Girls of Color*

Though girls of color are rarely seen in mainstream American films about girl culture, when we do see them, they are often tokenized, stereotyped, or otherwise marginalized. They are portrayed as one-dimensional characters that fail to demonstrate the complex experiences of actual girls of color. For example, in the film *Bring it On*,<sup>27</sup> we see a very superficial glimpse into black girl culture in a movie about rival cheerleading squads, one all-white, and the other all-black. The black girls in the all-black cheer squad are portrayed as minor characters merely there to help the protagonist

move forward in her own transformation. Because they are not central to the narrative, the film fails to provide a complex understanding of who they are and of the particular dynamics of their interactions among each other. On the other hand, central to the narrative is the all-white cheer squad. Unlike the movie's treatment of the all-black squad, we get a close, in-depth look at the conflicts among the white cheerleaders and how they are ultimately resolved. We see the way mean girl culture plays out among them: the complexities of that dynamic, the full range of emotions it brings up, and the cycle of friendship I described earlier. Eventually, the story of these girls ends in much the same way as *Mean Girls*: with that moment of self-transformation and final redemption from meanness into a happier and healthier relationality.

However, viewers do not get the same kind of understanding with the all-black cheer squad. The white girl experience is the central story, therefore, black girls are merely portrayed as plot points narrative foils against which the white girl protagonist compares herself. We never really see the range of emotions with the black girls or the range of complexity as we do with the white girls. All we see are very stereotypical representations of black girl culture, exemplified when the black squad angrily confronts the white girl squad for stealing their cheers, threatening them with physical violence. The only redemption we see from the black girls is to forgive the white girls for stealing their cheers after the black girls win the big cheer competition. There is no context to the source of the anger from the black girls, meanwhile they are represented in ways that perpetuate the stereotypes of blackness defined and embraced by the white American imaginary, such as the angry black girl.<sup>28</sup> When mainstream American films about girl

culture erase or marginalize the experiences of girls of color, they fail to consider the different cultural and socioeconomic influences on the lives of girls of color on which the experience of black girls is contingent. When girls of color are not represented as whole and complex human beings, they are doomed to perpetuate stereotypical notions of race that will maintain oppressive hierarchies.

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Stereotypical representations of girls of color serve to re-inscribe the definition of normative girlhood as rooted in whiteness, thus defining girls of color as innately outside normative girlhood. The work of Ringrose and Walkerdine clearly articulates this point using the example of UK British girl culture as constructed through a particular elite experience and perspective. They state:

Another effect of the mean-girl discourse...is to direct attention away from increasing discipline and criminalization of those girls who do not fit the “successful mean girl” mold. Indeed...while the middle-class mean girl is constructed as pathological, this profile is constituted as the expected norm. Indirectness and meanness reaffirm conventional femininity, repression, and pathology and is central in the regulation of the boundaries of normative girlhood and appropriate models of neoliberal subjectivity. These normative boundaries are constitutive of “others,” deviant and failed femininity in danger of slipping into unmanageable excess—for instance, hyper-sexuality, pregnancy, dropping out of school, or delinquency and violence.<sup>29</sup>

In this argument, a “successful mean girl” is one that can ultimately be regulated back to her feminine nature, thus redeemed as acceptable to society as a girl. This is the moment of self-transformation that plays out so often in American films about girl culture.

However, the authors note that there are those who can never be redeemed, and for whom femininity is not as easily regulated, leading to unacceptable consequences such as sexual promiscuity and violence. I argue that when applied to a U.S. context, this category of

other marked by deviant and failed femininity can be employed when looking at the representation of girls of color in media images.

Historically, people of color have always been categorized as other, deviant, inherently prone to hyper-sexuality, intellectual deficiencies, and violent behavior. I refer back to my articulations of the Latino identity archetypes of the threatening, criminal other, in which Latinos are often represented as inherently marked by criminality. Therefore, it is easy to see how meanness in girls of color is not only constructed as a pathological trait of their gender, but also of their race or ethnic/cultural background. For girls of color, meanness is seen as an inherent cultural trait rather than a bi-product of girl culture that can be “corrected” through proper socialization. Thus, in this argument, girls of color are not as easily redeemable as white girls. If white girls are mean because of their inability to cope with traditionally male spaces, the solution is to be guided back to their feminine nature, thus restoring acceptable behavior norms. Girls of color, in contrast, have historically been defined outside of traditional feminine expectations to begin with, in that only white women were defined as feminine, and by extension, as real women. Women of color, through a history of white supremacy, slavery and indigenous genocide were not designated the category of woman. Black women in particular were inherently defined as hyper-sexual in stark contrast to the sexual purity of white womanhood. Furthermore, black femininity was limited to the ability of black women to nurture white women and children, particularly under the institution of chattel slavery. By extension, women of color have historically been defined as inherently sexual and otherwise deviant. In much the same way that Ringrose and Walkerdine articulate the

way normative girlhood constitutes “others...in danger of slipping into unmanageable excess,”<sup>30</sup> so too have women of color been historically marked as other, prone to hypersexuality, teen pregnancy, juvenile delinquency, and violent criminal activity.

Something happens when we apply this history of defining the other alongside a toxic definition of normative girlhood: girls of color who exhibit mean behavior are viewed as not-so-easily regulated by femininity due to their inherent racialized characteristics. Thus, girls of color are pathologized as non-redeemable and subjected to behavior policing, discipline and criminalization in ways very different than white girls. Ultimately, meanness in white girls is redeemable through regulation of femininity but meanness in girls of color cannot be redeemed because they lack femininity to begin with.

### *The Case of the ASBO Girls*

One particular example that Ringrose and Walkerdine offer further supports my conclusion: the case of the ASBO girls. ASBO refers to anti-social behavior orders, and according to the UK government website states:

Anyone over the age of 10 can be given an ASBO if they behave antisocially.

Behaving antisocially includes:

- drunken or threatening behaviour
- vandalism and graffiti
- playing loud music at night

Getting an ASBO means you won't be allowed to do certain things, such as:

- going to a particular place, e.g. your local town centre
- spending time with people who are known as trouble-makers
- drinking in the street

An ASBO will last for at least 2 years. It could be reviewed if your behavior improves.

Penalties for not obeying your ASBO

Breaking or 'breaching' the ASBO is a criminal offence and you can be taken to court. The sentence you get will depend on the circumstances and your age.

#### Young offenders

You can be fined up to £250 (if you're aged 10 to 14) or up to £1,000 (if you're aged 15 to 17). The fine may have to be paid by your parents if you're under 16. You might also get a community sentence or, if you're over 12, a detention and training order (DTO) for up to 24 months.

#### Adult offenders

You can be fined up to £5,000 or sentenced to 5 years in prison, or both.<sup>31</sup>

According to Ringrose and Walkerdine, girls who are found to be exhibiting too much “mean” behavior are typically given ASBOs, labeling them as deviant and in need of behavioral regulation “through class and culture-specific symbols, and [thus] shows also how those girls who transgress dominant models of white, middle-class femininity—whose behavior can be equated with deviant masculinity—are under increased scrutiny as objects of failed femininity and increasing discipline and criminalization.”<sup>32</sup>

However, what is more fascinating about the case of the ASBO girls is the creation of TV shows in the UK such as *ASBO Teen to Beauty Queen*, where “young girls with ASBOs from working-class neighborhoods in Manchester compete to become the U.K.’s first entrant to the Miss Teen International Beauty Pageant, held in Chicago.”<sup>33</sup> This show and others like it were created to showcase the self-transformation needed to regulate these deviant girls back to their feminine nature. Ringrose and Walkerdine state, “The girls are to transform from resistant troublemakers—bad girls, utterly defiant of middle-class feminine propriety—into subjects who can perform as appropriately passive-aggressive competitors for the title of beauty queen.”<sup>34</sup> In other words, the show is meant to help ASBO girls transform from deviant femininity, to the proper and expected norms of “conventional femininity, repression, and pathology...central in the regulation of the boundaries of normative girlhood and appropriate models of neoliberal

subjectivity.”<sup>35</sup> Unlike the normative girls who can self-transform out of meanness, ASBO girls, because of their deviant and failed femininity, must be forced into transformation through the criminalizing regime of the ASBOs.

On the one hand, while normal girls’ meanness is pathological and inevitable, it is also eventually redeemable through self-transformation, maturity, and movement through meanness as a rite of passage. Those marked as other, as not as easily regulated by femininity, or who have been deemed failures, are then not as easily redeemable.

Ringrose and Walkerdine state:

The ASBO girls on the show defies the image of neo-liberal success and adaptation, refusing to perform the tightrope balancing act of modeling masculine productivity and success on the one hand, and feminine passivity and sexual desirability on the other. Criminalization is possible and increasing because of the slippage into the wrong sort of masculinity, that of irrational violence. The ASBO girls are deviants whose qualities cannot be reconciled with the newest version of successful neo-liberal feminine subjectivity – the successful but mean super girl.<sup>36</sup>

If neo-liberal success and adaptation is defined by a girl’s ability to balance masculinity and femininity perfectly, then girls who cannot do this – girls who perform violent masculinity when they fail to be regulated by femininity – are marked as other, and potentially criminalized. The extent of their criminality is defined by their inability or reluctance to perform normative gender roles. Thus, we can conclude that even meanness falls under the purview of regulated normative gender roles in that there is a right way and a wrong way to be mean. The right way to be mean is in a passive-aggressive, repressive and controlled manner, while the wrong way is in a violent, sexually promiscuous, and uncontrollable manner. Because women of color have historically been defined as inherently hyper-sexual and violent, they then fundamentally flout the image



of neo-liberal success and adaptability instituted through whiteness and therefore innately fail femininity. The standard of beauty, also historically defined by whiteness, makes it even more impossible for women of color to achieve the ultimate level of femininity as defined through sexual desirability.

Note here that women of color are defined simultaneously as hyper-sexual and non-desirable, thus objectifying their sexuality as perpetually available for the male gaze, as is the case in my articulation of the archetype of the Latina desirable/desiring body. Thus, if women of color are innately defined as other within normative feminine gender norms, then we are to deduce that they are then innately prone to excessive masculinity and, by default, “irrational violence.” In other words, if the only options within girl culture structured through patriarchy are the normal mean girl dynamics regulated by femininity or the “other” marked by an excess of the wrong kind of masculinity, then girls of color can only fall into the latter option because of their supposed racial deficiencies. Hence, girls of color like the ASBO girls are “deviants whose qualities cannot be reconciled with the newest version of successful neo-liberal feminine subjectivity – the successful but mean super girl.”<sup>37</sup> Because girl culture is defined through whiteness, girls of color, by their mere existence as non-white subjects, are always already marked as the deviant other within normative girlhood and thus innately prone to irrational violence and promiscuity. In this way, they are not as redeemable as their white counterparts.

### *The Bad Girls Club*

A clear example that illustrates my argument that girls of color are innately othered within normative girlhood is the TV reality show *Bad Girls Club*. At its inception, it was promoted as a show that was meant to transform “bad girls” into respectable women in society, much like the shows in the UK. The IMDB website summarizes the show as “A group of rebellious women are put in a house together in an experiment intended to moderate their behavior.”<sup>38</sup> The means by which this was supposed to happen remained unclear, and ultimately the show gave way to prioritizing the display of violence among the girls. As a viewer of the show several years back, I noticed a mix in the racial make-up of the girls: some white, some girls of color. Often you would see them doing community service work and sharing sentimental moments with each other in their attempts at self-transformation. But in subsequent seasons, arguably due in part to the general evolution of reality shows toward more sensationalism, eventually the show focuses more on the physical altercations amongst the girls. Coincidentally, as this evolution occurred, the cast became comprised of more girls of color and less white girls. Even the 2017 season, judging by the promotional images online, boasts a cast made up mostly of girls of color. Most seasons begin the same: with the first episode showing a montage of all the physical altercations that will occur that season. The rest of the season plays out the situations that led up to those physical altercations. Thus, these clashes between the girls form the central thread in the show’s narrative.

It is important to note the unreality of reality shows. By that I mean that “reality” shows are in fact either lightly scripted or have controlled situations and scenarios. Especially with shows like *Bad Girls Club*, producers heavily construct the narrative with either controlled environments or strategic editing. I argue that because producers are invested in inciting drama (which is what attracts viewers), they create scenarios in which violent behavior is inevitable. This is done by supplying unlimited access to alcohol and nightlife activity, which often sets the stage for unruly behavior. This is not to say that alcohol and nightlife always lead to violence, but, given these circumstances it is not hard to see why these kinds of confrontations happen so frequently in this kind of environment. Producers deliberately set the stage for physical altercations to occur. They know the formula, they enact that formula, and then sit back and wait for the results. The producers of this show are many of the same producers who created the long running MTV series *The Real World*, which played out in much the same fashion. Therefore, we could argue these producers are experts in creating this type of narrative through the reality genre.

However, because this problematic narrative is centered on girls of color and makes violence central to the narrative, the show thus equates physical violence with the experience of girls of color to ultimately perpetuate the notion that girls of color are innately violent. Furthermore, this type of narrative constructs the notion that unlike white girls, girls of color may never find redemption or transformation, because they will always be bound to their racial deficiencies. In the finale of the show, we do not get to see the self-transforming moment we so often see when white girls are made central to

the narrative. Most often, mainstream representation of girls of color are going to fall into a similar narrative as that represented by *Bad Girls Club*: as one contingent on violence and hyper-sexuality. Meanwhile, representations of white girls will portray more complexity, thus constructing the idea that meanness in girls of color is innately a part of their racial inferiority. Hence, they are not afforded the same opportunity for self-transformation and redemption. What makes these representations so problematic is that, coupled with a lack of representation in general of girls of color, representations that highlight violent behavior serve to construct and perpetuate a negative racialized perception of the behavior of girls of color.

On the other hand, even when films or TV shows make girls of color central to the narrative without these problematic portrayals, the marketing of the film nonetheless marks girls of color as other within the construction of normative girlhood, since it is not marketed for a universal audience. For example, a show like *East Los High*, which makes the lives of Latina girls central to the narrative, is not viewed as having a universal appeal the way a show like *Pretty Little Liars*<sup>39</sup> or *Gossip Girl*<sup>40</sup> would have with a predominantly white cast. In this way, the entertainment industry itself defines normative girl culture through whiteness by marking shows with a predominantly white cast as universally appealing, while relegating shows with casts of color to sub-genre level. The assumption is that the experience of white girls could speak to all girls, including girls of color, but the experience of girls of color could never speak to white girls, therefore it is not universal.

### *Girls of Color and their Relationship to Representation of Girl Culture*

The most concerning part of the perpetuation of whiteness as the universal experience and the othering of girls of color is the problematic relationship it creates between girls of color and media images of girl culture. Elaine Correa, in her contribution to the *Girl Culture* anthology, states, “From the perspective of visible minority group members, the [popular contemporary] images of ‘girlhood’ ... tend to reflect the ‘typical’ experiences of being a girl from the perspective or viewpoint of the dominant culture.”<sup>41</sup>

In other words, girls of color, through a perpetuation of whiteness as universal in films about girl culture, are perpetually marked as “other,” making it so that real-life girls of color internalize this whiteness as “universal” and feel marginalized by their unique, ethnic, and cultural experiences. Furthermore, this could lead girls of color to feel a need to be accepted by the mainstream American girl culture that is always already constituted through whiteness, therefore promoting assimilation as the key to acceptance. Correa continues,

Young girls who experience differences in girlhood outside the representation of whiteness may internalize their experience as being less important or undervalued ... [they] may view their differences as preventing them from fully participating in socially ascribed activities, removing them still further from feeling embraced and accepted as part of the larger culture.<sup>42</sup>

Girls of color feel they need to prove they can be typical American girls by participating in normative rites of passage of U.S. girl culture through things like sleepovers, going to school formal dances, and other such activities that are depicted in dominant mainstream media. Yet Correa highlights that even as girls of color try to participate in these mainstream American aspects of girl culture, because they are perpetually marked as

“other” by their non-whiteness, they can never reconstruct themselves sufficiently to fit into the representation of girlhood as defined by the dominant culture. They cannot escape their “otherness,” so assimilation might never be possible, because they are not white.

In chapter two I discussed the distorted representations of Latinidad, which can incite Latina girls to feel disconnected from those narrow representations. These distorted images of Latinidad can urge Latina girls who do not feel reflected in these images to dis-identify with Latinidad in general. Correa arguably describes a similar dynamic occurring in the relationship to images of American girl culture. When girls of color are completely erased from media images, they feel disconnected from girl culture because they cannot relate their lives to that white experience, constructed as the “universal,” “normal,” and ultimately “right way” of being a girl. In this way, popular culture can foster feelings of cultural shame, rejection, and dis-identification. This can force nonwhite girls to question and possibly reject or dis-identify with their ethnic cultures in hopes of belonging to the dominant society, which is innately and subliminally defined as white.

We can even see how Latina girls change ethnic cultural traditions to make them look more like American traditions. For example, Correa points to debutante balls as the epitome of elite middle-class girlhood, events used to flaunt expense and economic wealth. In like fashion, the MTV series *My Super Sweet 16* showcases girls planning these elaborate and expensive birthday parties, including an occasional episode about a Latina planning her quinceañera, with a similar narrative of expense and extravagance.<sup>43</sup> I am also reminded of a time when I taught high school Spanish and one particular day a

Latina student walked into my classroom talking about the plans she was making for her quinceañera, and how disappointed she was in the venues she had seen. Her rhetoric was obviously influenced by the TV show *My Super Sweet 16*, in which the girls were often portrayed as spoiled and entitled, wanting nothing but the best and most expensive details. I did not think too much about this student's words until the next day, when another student of mine told me how she was sad that her parents would not be able to afford a quinceañera. At that point I realized I had to step in, and I spoke to the class about being sensitive to other people's feelings when discussing these events. I also put this experience into context with my own quite humble quinceañera celebration, and the history of quinceañeras in general. I argue that the emphasis on the display of wealth for these kinds of traditions are in fact influenced by a Western, neo-liberal imperative for capitalist and economic upward mobility. It seems that parties such as the debutant balls and sweet sixteen parties are a way to showcase wealth and ultimately validate the girl as part of the elite and dominant society. Are girls of color, who already lack media representation, turning the quinceañera into a similar custom so as to prove they too can be typical American girls? In other words, one could argue that constructing a quinceañera within the same narrative as a sweet sixteen party might turn the quinceañera from an ethnic cultural tradition into a neoliberal, American girl tradition that is more palatable and recognizable by the white American imaginary.

### *East Los High*

In a similar way, I argue that the Hulu show *East Los High* portrays Latina girls emulating white norms. I came across this show a few years back with an interest in how

this show might portray Latinas in a more positive way as opposed to the stereotypical representations so often put forth in mainstream media. When coming back to it recently, I watched the show keeping in mind the question of how this show portrays the unique experience of Latina girl culture. Ultimately, what I saw was that it reconstitutes and, in fact, perpetuates white girl culture marked as universally American in the bodies of Latina girls. We see many of the same themes we would see in a show about white girls, similar to the dynamics of girl culture we saw in *Mean Girls* and films of the like, just with an all-Latina cast.

There are culturally specific dynamics of Latino life represented, but often they still fall into the same stereotypical tropes of Latinidad and without social context or commentary. We see things like drug dealing, gang life, and teen pregnancy, but we do not get a sense of the socioeconomic circumstances that make them specific to Latino culture. Without context as to how poverty and disenfranchisement can create these issues, they become stereotypical representations of Latinidad that perpetuate the notion that these are just an innate part of the Latino culture.

However, if we focus just on how the show portrays girl culture and Latina girl culture specifically, the show still perpetuates and maintains the notion of girl culture as defined by a pathological impulse toward mean-girl behavior, competitiveness, and cattiness. An example of this is in the first season when the popular girls, who are cheerleaders, try to prevent another girl from join the squad because a popular girl's ex-boyfriend is showing interest in this new girl. Just as *Mean Girls* does not contextualize why girls are led towards meanness, *East Los High* does not contextualize the particular



and complex socioeconomic circumstances and patriarchal influences on Latina girl culture. Even a show that makes Latinas central to the narrative upholds the same pathological idea of female meanness. It does nothing to undo that mean-girl trope, even as it makes Latinas central to the narrative. In fact, the show works to make Latina girl culture imitate white girl culture. No attention is paid to cultural differences of girlhood; the only defining differences communicated are through stereotypical racial markers, such as dark skin and living in East LA. I was left disappointed by *East Los High*, because although it stars Latinas and highlights Latina issues, it does not convey the complexity of Latina girl culture, which it portrays like normative white girl culture exemplified in the mean girl behavior that emulates that of *Mean Girls*.

#### *Mi Vida Loca*

In 1993, director Alison Anders's independent film *Mi Vida Loca* not only makes Latinas central to the narrative, but it highlights a particular subgenre of Latina girl culture: chola/gang girl culture, which it represents through a slightly more nuanced and complex perspective. We do not see the same perpetuation of mean-girl culture, even when the two central characters, Mousie and Sad Girl, fight over the man with whom they both had children.

The film tells the story of how these girls were once best friends, until Mousie falls in love with Ernesto, has his child and seems to disappear into motherhood. Sad Girl feels somewhat abandoned, as does Ernesto, who then starts a relationship with Sad Girl and proceeds to have a child with her as well. Mousie, of course, feels betrayed by Sad

Girl and a rivalry begins. However, when Ernesto dies in a drug dealing dispute, we see the women come together in their mourning and create a sense of family for their children.

We do not see the same kind of cycle of toxic friendship that we saw in *Mean Girls*, and we actually get to see a moment of self-transformation in a way that we do not get to see in other representations of girls of color. We also see that these girls might not be motivated by the same investments in neo-liberal regimes of competition, because gang culture in general is arguably constructed in defiance of market capitalism and other such neo-liberal paradigms.<sup>44</sup> Gang culture is created out of a necessity for survival, and a demand for black market production and exchange. Therefore, whereas normative white girl culture is motivated by a need for material wealth, superficial validation, and emotional independence, we might argue that gang girl culture is motivated by economic survival, community stability, and interdependence. Though the film does not explicitly highlight this difference, we do get to see a more positive and holistic relationality among the girls. We see that although there are moments of disagreement, fights, and arguments, the film ultimately shows these girls coming together in moments of crisis, putting the needs of the community before their own self-interests.

For example, when Ernesto dies and Mousie and Sad Girl are left without a father for their children and in need of financial support, they discover he had a valuable and highly sought-after low rider truck. There are a lot of conversations in the community about what should be done with the truck to honor Ernesto. The Locos (male gang members), decide they should put the truck in a car show as Ernesto had planned.

However, the Locas (girl gang members) brought together by Mousie and Sad Girl, come together to discuss a more practical use for the truck. They ultimately conclude that the car should be sold, and the money should be divided amongst Mousie and Sad Girl for their children, but also for the Ernesto's mother and for Whisper who was also shot in the same incident as Ernesto. This moment of the Locas coming together demonstrates a more holistic relationship among them. Despite their differences and the drama that has occurred, they do come together in the end for the betterment of their community. We get to see a more nuanced and complex understanding of girl culture represented among these chola girls.

The film *Mi Vida Loca* is not without critique, for despite its ability to demonstrate more complexity in representing Latina girl culture, there is still a missing piece. For me, as a critical viewer, I enjoy the holistic relationship that these girls have. It is so refreshing and different from a movie like *Mean Girls*. However, the film ignores the socioeconomic circumstances that create the gang lifestyle and drive its unconditional loyalty and motivation. In general, films that make Latinas central to the narrative omit social commentary on how the dynamics of the Latinx experience is constructed through socioeconomic issues such as institutionalized systems of oppression, immigration status, poverty, and quality of education. Without these, representations of Latinidad will be hard pressed not to resort to stereotypical portrayals.

#### *We Still Need More Options*

Even when we see Latinxs represented in media images, they are so far and few between that white girlhood continues to be perpetuated as the norm. For all the good that

*East Los High* does—like making Latinas central to the narrative—it is not enough. For all the positive representations in *Mi Vida Loca*, it is still not enough. Representations of girls of color and Latina girls specifically are still disproportionate to the representations of white girls. Therefore, we need more representations of girls of color if we're going to see more complexity of experiences or get a better sense of socioeconomic influences on girls of color. Because Latina girls are impacted by these representations, we need to pay attention to the ways that the perpetuation of normative girlhood (as defined through whiteness) can leave Latinas wanting to emulate whiteness rather than embracing cultural uniqueness.

In response to this need for more options, I argue TfCML offers students the space to imagine other possibilities. The most powerful tool TfCML could offer in respect to the interrogation of toxic representations of girl culture is to encourage girls to imagine and even rehearse other, healthier ways of interacting with other girls and resolving conflicts. Using theatre games as I do in TfCML would give girls the opportunity to literally act out alternative representations of girl culture that are more supportive, uplifting, loving and mutually empowering. Theatre as a method could also allow for more holistic approaches to conflict resolution. Rather than relying on passive aggression and sabotage, girls could use theatre methods to rehearse alternative methods of resolving conflicts.

Therefore, in regards to this toxic representation of girl culture, TfCML could offer methods to imagine and rehearse alternative, less oppressive, and more empowering frameworks for relationships among girls. If, as the scholars on girl culture argue, these

toxic representations serve to maintain patriarchy, then we need make sure we do not normalize this idea for girls and find ways to break from meanness and encourage compassion, empathy and loving friendships. The scars of toxic girl culture can be long lasting and create resentment and further toxicity among women. Thus, we need to look carefully at how media images represent toxic girl culture and consider this a serious issue, but not merely from the perspective of teaching girls and their parents about how to manage toxic girl culture, as so many parenting books do. Rather, we need to approach girl culture from the perspective of understanding how patriarchal social norms construct this kind of toxic relationality in the first place, in order to encourage other forms of girl-to-girl interactions.

### **When Girls Become Women**

#### *The Real Housewives of Women Culture*

I have to fully admit that the *Real Housewives* franchise of shows on the Bravo network, is a not-so guilty pleasure of mine. I have been watching every series in the franchise since its inception with the original show *The Real Housewives of Orange County*. The show was meant to give viewers a look into the glamorous lives of wealthy “housewives,” their families and friends. From the original setting in a wealthy suburb in Orange County, the show spun off, with shows that take place in other cities such as New York, Atlanta, New Jersey, and Beverly Hills. In its 10-plus years on the air, I have seen the evolution of these shows in light of the overall shifts in reality TV. The first season of the *Real Housewives of Orange County* played like a documentary about rich white women, with the audience getting a glimpse into how the other side lives, focusing on the

opulence, glamour, and beauty of their lifestyles. Most first seasons of each franchise played out in a similar way, simply showcasing how fabulous the lives of these women are, turning the viewers into an envious fly on the wall. Yet by most second seasons of each franchise, the tone of the show changes quite drastically, from a look into the lavish lives of rich women, to a focus on conflict, arguments, rumor spreading, and even physical altercations. In fact, there are particular episodes of these shows that look no different than an episode of *Bad Girls Club*. Admiring the fabulousness of rich women can grow stale quickly. Because producers need to maintain interest in the show, they choose to highlight conflict and make it central to the narrative of the show. These conflicts often arise out of arguments over petty situations where miscommunication and rumors drive a minor conflict into major confrontations, which include personal insults or under-handed comments made about family, friendships, and even financial status.

Through the seasons and through its different iterations, the different *Real Housewives* franchises have evolved into a paradigmatic representation of woman culture. The show constructs a very clear narrative about women. Just as normative white girlhood stands in as the universal experience, so too does white womanhood. The narrative is that catty behavior is not exclusive to teen or young adult years; that even older women will succumb to their innate meanness given the opportunity and if not properly regulated. Aside from conflicts that lead to confrontations, we see similar themes of toxic friendship as we do in representations of girl culture. Because these shows usually center the lives of rich women, aside from beauty and popularity, financial

wealth also becomes a marker of validation for these women, so that insulting another woman based in her financial status is viewed as highly offensive.

I generalize the different franchises of the show because most follow very similar narrative trajectories, illustrating how contrived the shows are; blurring the lines between reality and caricature. Most seasons start off pretty light-hearted, with each woman catching the audience up on their lives. By the second or third episode, lines of friendship are drawn about potential conflicts or past resentments. Usually, conversations become about someone behind that person's back, usually with judgmental conclusions and disparaging comments. Word of those conversations gets out to the rest of the women, especially to the women who were talked about, and the rest of the season plays out in an attempt to hold the women who spoke negatively accountable to their actions.

A similar cycle of toxic friendship plays out in these shows as it does in films about girl culture. The women start out as friends who fall into regimes of competition manifested as judgments on lifestyle, wealth, relationships, and parenting. What is interesting about the difference between toxic woman culture from toxic girl culture is that the sabotaging is even more covert and underhanded. It is almost as if by the time girls become women, they have perfected the skill of passive aggression. Not to mention that the issues used to cut someone down cut far deeper, when things like a woman's ability to mother are insulted, or when the validity of marriages are questioned. For example, in the last several seasons of the *Real Housewives of Beverly Hills*, a new woman joined the cast. Erika Girardi is married to a well-known, high-powered attorney in LA. She also lives a double life of sorts as a music artist specializing in dance and club

music. Her personae as a music artist is very sexualized and provocative. When she first joined the cast, questions about her marriage were raised because she was quite younger than her husband and did not come from generational wealth like many of the other women on the show. Essentially, they were assuming she was a kept woman. This is not the first time in the history of the show where this line of questioning has come up. Even in the first season of the original show *The Real Housewives of Orange County*, Gretchen Rossi was questioned about her relationship to an older rich man. These women are portrayed as gold-diggers, almost marking them as whores in comparison to the more respected women in society. When this issue comes up, it becomes an easy target for the other women to criticize, and creates for the toxic cycle of friendship that calls on women to degrade and judge each other.

Another prevalent theme throughout the shows has been to question the sexuality of a woman's husband. Questions have been raised as to whether or not a woman's husband is gay, to the point of alluding to husbands' gay affairs. What makes this problematic is how it is framed as an insult both to the man and to the marriage. The insult alludes to the assumption that the marriage is fraudulent and therefore invalidates the woman's ability to attract a man. As articulated earlier, girls and thus women are socialized to find validation through their ability to attract men. Thus, to call their husband gay is the ultimate threat to that validation. Of course, this idea is wrapped up in homophobic and heteronormative notions of attraction. And yet many times, the women go to great lengths to prove their husband is not gay, highlighting inherent homophobia in taking allegations of gayness as the ultimate insult.



Throughout the different franchises of the show, rarely do we get to see women interacting together in a positive and supportive way. We might see them occasionally show up for each other in times of need, but those sentimental feelings quickly subside when word of rumors and judgmental comments gets out. What are usually the most riveting episodes to watch are the reunion shows, when the women come together after filming is done and after several if not most of the episodes have aired, in order to clarify and often times defend their actions on the show. Usually, these reunions lead to the most heated confrontations of the season. Andy Cohen, an executive producer and co-creator of the show, serves as host and mediator for these reunion episodes. He is often portrayed as the voice of reason to settle arguments between the women, again relying on the rationale of a man to regulate the inherent meanness of women. To this point, the husbands of the women are often portrayed as the innocent bystanders in the conflicts among the women, seeming less interested in the petty conflicts of women, which perpetuates the idea that women only argue irrationally while men are capable of more rational behavior.

What is more problematic is the way a show with a cast of all black women, like that of *The Real Housewives of Atlanta*, is further stigmatized by racial stereotypes. Porsha Williams joined the cast a few seasons ago when she was married to her now ex-husband, former NFL football player Kordell Stewart. When she first appeared on the show she was portrayed as the uncompromising, submissive wife. The audience got to witness the dynamic between Porsha and her then-husband as she played the housewife with intentions of becoming a mother. When she began to show interest in having a career

outside the home, her then-husband was vehemently opposed to the idea, making the argument that she would not be able to juggle both motherhood and a career. The other women in the cast began to chastise her for her voluntary participation in what they saw as a controlling relationship. By the end of the season, tensions between Porsha and Kordell rose after the reunion tape, when Porsha announced they had filed for divorce.

The subsequent season highlighted major conflicts between Porsha and one other cast member in particular, Kendra Moore. Kendra often alluded to Porsha's violent and bitter nature, which eventually came to fruition at the next reunion show. Kendra began to antagonize Porsha, calling herself a queen in reference to her time as Miss America. Kendra held a scepter in her hand as she threw insults at Porsha as well as the other women. Eventually, Porsha grew frustrated with the taunting and initiated a physical altercation with Kendra. The two women had to be pulled away from each other, and the moment became iconic in *Real Housewives* history. Kendra talked later about wanting to press criminal charges, and from that point on Porsha was marked as a violent and angry person. Several seasons later, this incident, along with other physical conflicts she participated in, led the entire cast of women to believe that she needed anger management for her unpredictable, and violent behavior. In the current season, she does in fact go to anger management, and is seen working through her anger issues. The other women, however, still maintain that she is inherently violent and unpredictable and use it to ostracize her.

What most interests me as a critical viewer is the narrative trajectory of Porsha's story. She went from married submissive housewife to angry violent divorcee, almost as

if to convey that when left unregulated by a man, she resorts to her gendered and racialized character flaws. Not to mention that as a black woman, she gets so easily deduced to these flaws and the incidents are never considered as isolated occurrences. On other franchises of the show that have a majority white cast, physical altercations are dealt with individually and rarely become a central defining characteristic of those women. For example, in the first season of *The Real Housewives of New Jersey*, Theresa Guidice notoriously flipped a table in the face of another woman with whom she was having an argument. She later famously went on to be convicted of tax fraud, spending over a year in jail. And yet, she is portrayed and represented as a woman in search of forgiveness and redemption, as someone deserving of compassion. With Porsha, there is clearly a distinction because her violent behavior is highlighted as a central narrative plot throughout the season, showing a lack of compassion for her situation even as she seeks redemption through her participation in anger management. This is problematic because it helps to construct and perpetuate the stereotype of the perpetual angry and irrational black woman.

With cattiness and competition as the common denominator among women, this franchise perpetuated another problematic narrative. Hence, despite the wealth and socioeconomic status of these women, what is supposed to make them just like all other women is their propensity toward mean, catty behavior. If meanness is the mark of a girl and therefore of a woman, just because these women are rich does not mean they can escape those characteristics that bind all women together. In fact, it is the propensity for mean and catty behavior that equalizes women of all classes. It is almost as if to say, “See

these rich women are just like us, because they fight with each other just like all other women and girls.” This also clearly sends the message that even as adults, women cannot escape their inherent character flaw of meanness. Even if you found redemption in girlhood after a self-transformative moment, toxic mean girl culture will re-constitute itself again and again throughout your life as a woman. Thus, the overall message is that women cannot be friends, ever, without eventually becoming frenemies and participating in mean behavior toward each other. Arguably, this kind of representation of women as innately catty even as adults is meant to discourage female friendships and comradery among women, as well as to regulate femininity even into womanhood.

### *The Bachelor*

The ABC show *The Bachelor* further entrenches the notion of inherent meanness in women and is arguably the most problematic and misogynistic of all reality shows, perpetuating the worst stereotypes about women, and most especially about women culture. The show sets women up to fail from the very beginning. This is, in fact, the very essence of the show. The producers of *Bad Girls Club* set the stage for physical altercations, making them a central part of the narrative, and yet these are portrayed as occurring organically and as a bi-product of the show’s actual purpose to help these “bad girls” self-transform. The producers of *The Bachelor*, on the other hand, do not even mask the altercations between the women as a bi-product, preferring to make them a fundamental part of the show. It is not like the women happen to fight with each other while doing other things. On *The Bachelor*, they are supposed to fight with each other because they are competing to be chosen by the “bachelor,” and thus confrontations are

not just encouraged by the production team, but are considered as part of the path toward winning the competition. The prize for the competition is supposedly finding love with the bachelor.

This show epitomizes the notion of normative regimes of heteronormative competition. No longer are these regimes covert, but in fact, the show makes them central to its premise. Women are literally in competition for the attraction of the bachelor, represented on the show as “love.” The show follows the bachelor as he goes on dates with the many women, as week by week he eliminates women until he ends up with the one he supposedly truly loves. Much of the show, however, highlights the conflicts among the women who begin to find ways to sabotage each other’s chances at being the one chosen in the end. The dynamic among the women does not even rely on the toxic cycle of friendship, in that it negates all possibility for friendship because the women are in competition from the very beginning. Therefore, these women solely rely on sabotage and passive aggression in order to win. One of the most strategic ways the women sabotage each other is to talk negatively about the other women to the bachelor. This is the very strategy Regina George used in *Mean Girls* in order to win back Aaron Samuels and sabotage Cady’s chances with him. But what is most alarming about all of this is how this notion of competition is normalized as a path to love. Love is therefore constructed as an innate competition to see who can be the victor and get the man. The entire show is produced, constructed, narrowly defined, and edited, under the guise of “finding love.” However, often, the relationships produced from the show end quickly after the show

finishes airing. I find this no surprise given the circumstances under which the relationships are born.

Aside from this distorted representation of love, the representations of the women on the show again perpetuate the idea that women are inherently catty, mean, and engaged in perpetual competition. It in fact exploits the notion of inherent competition among women and uses it as the central plot point. The show further reaffirms heteronormative patriarchal notions of love and relationships as what drives women to mean behavior. It makes the man central in the competition among women, as if that is the biggest reason for why women fight with each other. This perfect display of normative regimes of heteronormative competition therefore does not defy a patriarchal notion of femininity but rather re-inscribes it as innately dependent on men to be regulated, and to find validation.

Media representations of girl culture and woman culture both perpetuate the notion that meanness in girls and women is innate, part of a feminine nature that is in excess of masculinity, and proof that girls and women need to be regulated by femininity. Thus, girls can internalize these notions and act in accordance with these stereotypes without questioning how this form of girl culture is socially constructed. Therefore, I offer Transformative Critical Media Literacy as a way to discuss and analyze the social construction of girl culture. TfcML lifts the veil on the way media images in general perpetuate structures of oppression and maintain the status quo in terms of hierarchical power relations and material inequalities along racial and gendered lines. TfcML methods encourage girls to identify the problem of representing girl culture through toxic

portrayals. Discussions on slut-shaming in my classes assist students in recognizing toxic girl culture as a bi-product of patriarchal socialization and hegemonic ideology, rather than innate female biology or psychology. TfcML teaches young media viewers to interrogate images through an understanding of political economy and textual analysis. In that vein, TfcML also encourage girls to interrogate how media constructions of girl culture perpetuate patriarchal notions of femininity, and then question the overall political investment in this kind of representation. As exemplified in my example of the women who wrote a skit demonstrating a more positive interaction among women, TfcML creates a space to deconstruct and dissect not only the problematic images of girl culture in the media, but to also question social and ideological notions of toxic girl culture. Media representations of girl culture portray it as innately toxic, thus normalizing toxic girl culture as an unquestionable social reality. However, because TfcML questions the investment of media images in maintaining hierarchal structures of power, it encourages young girls to question traditional notions regarding girl culture and to think about whether these are in fact reality or distorted representations meant to uphold patriarchal social norms. The outcomes from my media workshops and the participants' reactions to the film *Mean Girls* demonstrates TfcML's ability to offer girls a space to interrogate their own complicity in toxic girl culture by encouraging them to question why girl culture is portrayed as innately mean, and how these representations impact the way they themselves interact with other girls.

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- <sup>1</sup> *Bring It on*, dir. Peyton Reed (Beacon Pictures, 2000).
- <sup>2</sup> Bunim-Murray Productions, prod., "Bad Girls Club," WE Women's Entertainment, 2006-present.
- <sup>3</sup> *Mi Vida Loca*, by Allison Anders, dir. Allison Anders (United States: Sony Pictures Classics, 1993).
- <sup>4</sup> Hulu, prod., "East Los High," Hulu, 2013-2016.
- <sup>5</sup> "The Real Housewives," Bravo, 2006-present.
- <sup>6</sup> "The Bachelor," ABC, 2002-present.
- <sup>7</sup> Claudia Mitchell and Jacqueline Reid-Walsh, "Introduction," in *Girl Culture: An Encyclopedia* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2008).
- <sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, xxvi.
- <sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, xxvii.
- <sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>11</sup> Jessica Ringrose and Valerie Walkerdine, "What Does It Mean to Be a Girl in the Twenty-first Century? Exploring Some Contemporary Dilemmas of Femininity and Girlhood in the West," in *Girl Culture: An Encyclopedia*, by Claudia Mitchell-Kernan and Jacqueline Reid-Walsh (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2008), 10.
- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>13</sup> Ellen Carol DuBois and Lynn Dumenil, "Chapter 4," in *Through Women's Eyes: An American History with Documents* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2016).
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.
- <sup>15</sup> Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16, no. 3 (1975), doi:10.1093/screen/16.3.6.
- <sup>16</sup> Ringrose and Walkerdine, 11.
- <sup>17</sup> *Mean Girls*, dir. Mark Waters, by Tina Fey (Paramount Pictures, 2004).
- <sup>18</sup> Rosalind Wiseman, *Queen Bees & Wannabes: Helping Your Daughter Survive Cliques, Gossip, Boyfriends, and the New Realities of Girl World* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2009).
- <sup>19</sup> Ringrose and Walkerdine, 8.
- <sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.
- <sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>22</sup> Mean Girls
- <sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>27</sup> I chose to analyze this film because it fell in line with the genre of film centering girl culture, and at least showcased girls of color as opposed to most other films in the genre that merely include girls of color as part of the backdrop. This film demonstrates an attempt to highlight girls of color, and yet my analysis illustrates how it fails to complicate the experience of girls of color.
- <sup>28</sup> Melissa V. Harris-Perry, *Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes, and Black Women in America* (Place of Publication Not Identified: Yale University Press, 2013).
- <sup>29</sup> Ringrose and Walkerdine, 12.
- <sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>31</sup> "Antisocial Behaviour Order (ASBO)," Antisocial Behaviour Order (ASBO) - GOV.UK, accessed June 13, 2017, <https://www.gov.uk/asbo>.
- <sup>32</sup> Ringrose and Walkerdine, 12.
- <sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>38</sup> "Bad Girls Club (TV Series 2006–)," IMDb, accessed June 13, 2017, [http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0914829/?ref\\_=nv\\_sr\\_1](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0914829/?ref_=nv_sr_1).
- <sup>39</sup> "Pretty Little Liars," ABC, 2010-Present.



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<sup>40</sup> "Gossip Girl," CWTV, 2007-2012.

<sup>41</sup> Elaine Correa, "Whose Girlhood? Race, Representation, and Girlhood," in *Girl Culture: An Encyclopedia*, by Claudia Mitchell-Kernan and Jacqueline Reid-Walsh (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2008), 116-117.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> "My Super Sweet 16," MTV, 2005-2015.

<sup>44</sup> Phillippe Bourgois. 2003. *In Search of Respect: Selling Crack in El Barrio*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### **Differential Identities and Oppositional Representations**

Media rarely portray any complex notions of Latinidad, and often conflates Latinidad with criminality or hyper-sexuality so that society comes to know and understand Latinxs through these representations. Real-life Latinxs must navigate a complex relationship with these media representations, which may or may not closely resemble them. When faced with derogatory images, Latinxs must work to prove they cannot be reduced to those stereotypes. Furthermore, if these are the only representations of Latinidad in the media, Latinxs might feel a crisis of identity, questioning what it means to be American and wondering how to relate, construct and practice that identity, particularly if they are generationally from the country of their ancestors.

Young Latinxs confronted with a distorted construction of Latinidad might learn to navigate their own identities in relation to these representations, either by internalizing and then perpetuating the negative stereotypes as a desperate move towards inclusion, or by dis-identifying with Latinidad altogether in order to distinguish themselves from the stereotype. Or, as Gloria Anzaldúa suggests, “we will decide to disengage from the dominant culture, write it off altogether as a lost cause, and cross the border into a wholly new and separate territory. Or we might go another route. The possibilities are numerous once we decide to act and not react.”<sup>1</sup> Latinxs historically and contemporarily negotiate both the pressures to assimilate and accommodate, and yet we still maintain a connection to culture, ancestry, and an investment in social justice. In this chapter, I explore all the

pressures of identity with which Latinxs must negotiate, while highlighting our agency and self-determination.

In my own personal journey of identity, because I am light-skinned with blonde hair and green eyes, I do not fit the stereotypical representation of a Latina in the U.S. mainstream media. Thus, I am forced to explain to those who meet me how it is possible that I do not “look Mexican,” all because of the power of media images to define what Latinxs are supposed to look like. Regardless of my own feelings towards my identity, I have always been forced to respond to other people’s preconceived notions and expectations of my identity. My experience is but one example of the identity crisis media representations of Latinidad can create for Latinxs navigating a society that inherently marginalizes their experience and identity.

Latinxs reside in an eternal state of negotiation, navigating stereotypes, all while trying to survive in a society marked by racial inequality. This perpetual process often leaves Latinxs searching, thirsting, and wanting something more, something to be proud of, with little to no examples in the mass media of Latinxs defining Latinidad on their own terms. This can be especially challenging on a personal level when it feels like the mass media continues to define your identity for you, while political and social infrastructures are formed based on these stereotypes, making it difficult to challenge these racial markers. Resisting stereotypical identities formed and re-formed in the mass media can take an emotional and mental toll, leaving Latinxs vulnerable to conforming to or dis-identifying with the stereotype.

In order to further explain this identity crisis, I employ Melissa Harris-Perry's use of the "crooked room," which she appropriates from post-World War II cognitive psychology research on field dependence in order to explain black women's relationship to stereotypical representations of black women in the media. The crooked room refers to "one study, [when] subjects were placed in a crooked chair in a crooked room and then asked to align themselves vertically."<sup>2</sup> She equates this task of finding an upright position in a crooked room to black women's experiences with media images of themselves. She states, "Bombarded with warped images of their humanity, some black women tilt and bend themselves to fit the distortion."<sup>3</sup> Harris-Perry uses this work to "understand why black women's public actions and political strategies sometimes seem tilted in ways that accommodate the degrading stereotypes about them,"<sup>4</sup> arguing the accommodation might actually be a strategy of survival and/or resistance. In this same vein, I argue Latinxs, too, are "standing in a crooked room, and... have to figure out which way is up."<sup>5</sup> In other words, when faced with stereotypical representations of Latinidad, Latinxs must figure out how to define or construct their own identities in relation to the images represented in the media. Will they tilt in ways to accommodate the problematic image, or will they tilt all the way in the other direction and dis-identify with Latinidad? Using Harris-Perry's crooked room analogy, I explore how Latinxs' different relationships to mass media representations of Latinidad can be both problematic internalizations as well as mechanisms of survival.

In addition, I explore how notions of authenticity play into this relationship. I argue that even when so-called authentic images of culture and ethnicity are portrayed in

the media, they are often co-opted through previously constructed, colonized versions of culture. Over time, through colonization, distortions of historical narrative, and stereotypical portrayals, any so-called authentic depiction of Latinidad has already been filtered through these lenses and thus might already inherently be formed by problematic power structures. Consequently, Latinxs themselves in search of authenticity can unknowingly perpetuate a narrow, constructed version of Latinidad. And yet knowing this can lead one back into a crisis of identity if not grounded in critically conscious methods of empowerment.

Ultimately, the way out of this bind and crisis cycle is through exposure to alternative representations of Latinidad, acceptance of identities as fluid, and differential relationship to mass media representations of Latinidad. I use the work of Chela Sandoval's *Methodology of the Oppressed*, in which she defines a "differential form of consciousness" as "[enabling] movement 'between and among' ideological positionings considered as variables, in order to disclose the disjunctions among them."<sup>6</sup> In her work, Sandoval is referring to moving between modes of social movement in order to obtain social justice and equality. I apply this concept of differential movement to the relationship with media representations of Latinidad, which is defined by a perpetual movement between and among expressions of identity. Latinxs can ease their identity crisis by embracing the crooked chair in the crooked room, accepting the fluidity of identity, and understanding that Latinidad is not constructed or defined homogenously or stagnantly. This revelation in turn assists Latinxs in better recognizing oppressive images

and feeling empowered to construct positive representations of identity in a more holistic and nuanced manner.

In this chapter, I adapt Harris-Perry's crooked chair in a crooked room metaphor to explore the complex relationship Latinxs maintain with the media's distorted representations of Latinidad, either conforming or dis-identifying with them. I then analyze several examples of representations of Latinidad that offer alternatives to the crooked images, including the music of La Santa Cecilia and Quetzal. Ultimately, I contend that Latinxs have historically and continue to negotiate media representations using a differential form of consciousness, in which Latinidad is defined by the constant movement of the crooked chair in the crooked room, rather than by mainstream visions of authenticity. It is through a differential relationship to identity that Latinxs combat the negative stereotypes perpetuated by the mass media.

TfCML offers space for young Latinxs to embrace this notion of differential identities, by interrogating oppressive media images, reflecting on the impact of those images, and then re-inventing them to allow for complexity of identity. Integrating TfCML methods in my classes has proved fruitful in encouraging students to imagine more liberating possibilities.

### **The Crooked Chair in the Crooked Room**

Harris-Perry pulls from a particular study on cognitive psychology meant to test field dependency that asks, "How dependent are we perpetually on the field that we can see for figuring out what is straight up and down?"<sup>7</sup> Harris-Perry goes on to note that the study concluded that most people are field dependent and they "can get themselves tilted

in that chair as much as 45 degrees but perceive themselves as straight up and down because they are in line with the crooked images all around them.”<sup>8</sup> And thus she asserts that for black women, it can be difficult to figure out what upright is when confronted with an image that seems empowering and complex, especially when “compared to the offering we typically get.”<sup>9</sup> She uses the example of the film *The Help*, when she argues Viola Davis’ portrayal is a perpetuation of the mammy stereotype and yet “feels not so crooked” because she “performs the role with such ability.”<sup>10</sup> Harris-Perry arguably makes clear that because Davis plays the role with such humanity and complexity, something not usually afforded to black characters, that the role’s foundation in a problematic stereotype gets overlooked, and consequently, the stereotype is perpetuated without protest. Furthermore, because of this inability to recognize the image as crooked, Harris-Perry argues black women can “accommodate the image and experience it as [their] authentic sel[ves].”<sup>11</sup> It appears, Harris-Perry contends, that black women might not recognize an image as crooked and thus see it as an authentic representation of blackness in that when they themselves perform in accordance with the stereotype, they do not recognize it as accommodation but rather organic self-expression. Harris-Perry argues that for black women, self-expression can be formed by the crooked images.

With this interpretation, the crooked chair in the crooked room analogy lends itself to how Latinxs negotiate media images, sometimes accommodating the image by conforming to the stereotypical representations or otherwise affirming it; or by tilting in the opposite direction and dis-identifying with Latinidad in order to distance oneself from the stereotype. Harris-Perry discusses the stereotypes of black women, like that of the

mammy, jezebel, and sapphire. She also explores how black women contend with these images “as political actors.”<sup>12</sup> She asks questions like, “Does the pervasive notion of the mammy help explain why black women are suspicious of coalitions with white women? Do black women often defer to black men’s religious, familial, and political leadership because they reject the idea that they are angry and domineering?”<sup>13</sup> Harris-Perry attempts to explain why black women perpetuate these stereotypes, arguing they do so either as a means of survival, or as a result of historical oppression. She highlights the complexity of the relationship between black women and the stereotypes about them in a way that reminds us these stereotypes are a product and consequence of white supremacy, not of self-hatred, allowing for an analysis that ascribes more agency to black women than just being reduced to sell-outs. In a similar way, I explore how Latinxs negotiate crooked images and I explain which social and political circumstances motivate Latinxs to accommodate or dis-identify with Latinidad.

#### *Accommodating the Crooked Image*

In chapter two I described the only representations of Latinidad in the media are that of the benign other, the criminal other, or the hypersexual body. With these in mind, I wonder why so many Latinx actors are so ready and willing to continue to play these roles, like George Lopez who played the assimilated Mexican on his TV show, or Sofia Vergara as the hypersexualized Latina on *Modern Family*. In my interrogation of George Lopez, he made it very clear that his entire relationship with that production was a negotiation to survive in the industry. He admits to having to compromise or risk being pushed out.<sup>14</sup> Thus, as problematic as it is, I cannot blame Lopez for playing into the



benign stereotype, for he is simply trying to navigate his way in an industry Latinxs are marginalized from.

More than the actors themselves and their negotiations with the stereotype as a means of survival, I also question why Latinx audiences flock so frequently to these distorted representations of Latinidad. Thus, I have to reflect on my own relationship to media images. Despite how stereotypical Sofia Vergara's portrayal of Latinas is, I question why I myself love her so much in that show? I asked myself a similar question several years ago when I encountered a film titled *From Prada to Nada*.<sup>15</sup> The film follows a Mexican family of a single father and his two daughters who are very wealthy and live a lavish lifestyle. When the father dies, the sisters, due to unforeseen circumstances, must move in with their aunt who lives in a less affluent, mostly Latinx populated town. One of the most problematic parts of the film is how the actress who plays one of the sisters is obviously wearing make up to make her look darker skinned. This was just one of several questionable cultural references. So again, I had to ask myself, why did I like this movie? I realized for the first time that I was always so desperate for a film that portrayed something that remotely represented my experience that I was willing to support even the most problematic of images. The Latinx experience is too often marginalized, completely ignored, or even erased from mainstream media. This leaves both Latinxs entertainers and audiences desperate for inclusion and representation, knowing that if we reject the stereotype outright we might be thrown out altogether. As George Lopez said, "If you leave, you're out."<sup>16</sup> In this case, accommodating the image is about inclusion, visibility, and survival.

So then I return to Sofia Vergara. Her character on the show, as I demonstrated in chapter two, is clearly racially marked by her accent and sexuality. She even used this same archetype in outside forums, most recently on several award shows. When presenting an award, she made herself the butt of a joke by mispronouncing dialogue and acting confused about what she was saying.<sup>17</sup> On a separate award show, she put her body on display on a revolving stage as a means to highlight diversity in television.<sup>18</sup> In both cases, she is reduced to her problematic Latina racial markers, and yet when questioned about whether she is playing into these stereotypes of Latinas, she has responded by clarifying that she is in on the self-deprecating joke. I would argue, she, like Lopez, is trying to maintain a certain level of success in an industry that in her case has commodified her sexuality. Furthermore, because she has become so successful as one of the highest paid actresses on television, and because Latinidad is so conflated with Latina hyper-sexuality, we might argue she has accommodated the image to the extent that she experiences it as her authentic self, rather than a caricatured performance of Latinidad constructed by the mass media. In other words, she does not even recognize her performance of Latinidad as problematic because she has internalized the stereotype to the point that she embodies it as a natural and organic manifestation of her Latinidad.

Real-life Latinas might also experience Vergara's portrayal of Latinidad as authentic because compared to other representations of Latinas, her role on *Modern Family* portrays the stereotype in a way that garners love and admiration from other characters on the show, as well as from Latinx and non-Latinx fans alike. Just like Davis's portrayal of the mammy in *The Help*, Vergara's portrayal of the hypersexual,

feisty Latina is not easily recognizable as problematic or crooked because she does it so well, it is funny, and she is beloved by all. It is almost as if because she has gained such admiration by a mainstream American audience, she has become a marker of the possibility for acceptance of Latinidad by American culture. I explained how this is a false sense of acceptance in chapter two by pointing out that acceptance is still contingent on being marked as other. This can be very confusing to every day Latinas who struggle with negotiating the stereotype because it feels real, it feels accepted, and positive. The diversity of Latinidad is not highlighted, leaving very little space for Latinxs to explore their own identities that deviate from this model. I would argue that this might happen for Vergara herself. Does she ever get to not be objectified, reduced to her sexuality? I recall watching an interview with the entire cast of *Modern Family*, and her fellow cast mates mocked her for her accent.<sup>19</sup> This clearly demonstrates that she cannot escape the caricatured nature of Latinidad. Even in real life she is reduced to her racial markers, they are made the butt of jokes, and she gets dismissed as just another silly Latina with an accent. Thus, Latinas who internalize this stereotype and perpetuate and perform it might not understand how oppressive it actually is, and how it can impact how other people read them.

On the other hand, however, we could also argue Vergara represents a deviation from the white standard of beauty that promotes a sense of confidence in a particularly Latina representation of sexuality. In chapter two I reference work on Selena and how she represented a deviation from white sexuality and thus could be read as an empowering image for Latinxs.<sup>20</sup> My critique was that to define sexuality only through the body is

limiting and ultimately perpetuates sexist stereotypes, thus calling for the need for more options that define Latina sexuality outside of these stereotypes. Yet, for the time being, because these are the images we must negotiate, embracing the kind of sexuality represented by Sofia Vergara or by Selena must be analyzed as a complex web of both empowerment and oppression.

I look at myself and my close women friends who see images that define the standard of beauty and know we will never achieve that standard whether it be because of skin color, body type, or weight. Therefore, when we see Latinas like Vergara or Selena, we see more than just the stereotype; we see sexuality defined by a curvy body type, unashamed of her sexual power, unapologetic about her loud and feisty personality. I clearly remember reading an interview with Selma Hayek in *Latina* magazine many years ago, when she was asked how she was able to make it in the American entertainment industry, she responded with a Spanish saying, “Calladita se ve mas bonita” (One looks prettier when they stay quiet).<sup>21</sup> This is unfortunate coming from a fellow Latina, but the message was one that was made clear to me much of my life: a woman who is too loud is often dismissed as irrational and “crazy,” and our value is caught up in how pretty we look. So when I watch the show *Modern Family* and Vergara’s character, yes she is the stereotypical hyper-sexualized, hot-headed Latina, and yet she represents a deviation from the expectation of quiet or soft-spoken femininity. Therefore, women who choose to accommodate the image of the hyper sexual Latina and who define their own sexuality through these stereotypical representations, might be internalizing these sexist ideas, but they might also be learning to embrace their sexualities in ways they could not otherwise.

The thought process might be something like, “I am Latina, Latinas are sexy, and therefore I am sexy.” Vergara’s representation of Latina sexuality is not the problem in and of itself, since it leaves room for Latinas to accommodate this stereotypical image as a means of sexual empowerment. The problem arises when this representation is the only image defining Latina sexuality, or when, as Latinas, we only seek empowerment through our sexuality.

With few alternatives to the stereotype, the perpetuation of the hypersexual, feisty Latina will continue. Despite Vergara’s problematic portrayal of Latinidad, just as with George Lopez, without the power of her body, representations of Latinas would be in danger of erasure, thus leaving us to choose between hypersexual representations or invisibility. Of course, I have consistently argued that we need more options so that we are not left to answer this question, but as it stands these are the options we must negotiate.

Harris-Perry grapples with the complexity of accommodating the image by interrogating how black women interact with the particular stereotype of the angry black woman. She argues that accommodating this image and performing the angry black woman can actually be useful when trying to bring attention to political issues. She states, “You want to at least keep angry black woman in your back pocket... There are times when you gonna wanna bring her, and do her, and make her do work for you, because you recognize that that expectation exists of who black women are, and so when you can go ahead and embody it, it can have this very powerful effect.”<sup>22</sup> Similarly, I argue, Latinas can embody the stereotype of the hypersexual, and/or feisty and loud Latina in

order to embrace sexuality, to make Latinidad visible, or also to bring attention to political issues. However, Harris-Perry suggests,

...that when we accommodate that image, there is still a way in which that is not a fully authentic expression of self. That even when you are angry and have every right to be angry that because that anger is being read through the crooked lens, through the tilted image, the anger doesn't come off as an authentic expression of something about inequality, it just comes off as being angry about something again.<sup>23</sup>

Indeed, a similar thing happens for Latinas. Seen through the crooked lens, embracing our sexuality through the hypersexual Latina stereotype is regarded as an embodiment of promiscuity, rather than of empowerment. Even when we try to re-appropriate them for our benefit, because of a deep institutionalization of racial discourses, Latinas are still always one step away from being reduced to just the stereotype, not viewed as complex beings with humanity and sexuality. In turn, when Latinas are reduced to the stereotype despite their personal relationship to the crooked image, they are often dismissed as unintelligent, irrational and not taken seriously.

This vulnerability to being reduced to the stereotype leaves Latinas in an ever-complex relationship to the crooked images in the mass media. Stereotypes of Latinidad are inherently oppressive, and yet Latinas might find room within those stereotypes to find momentary empowerment, which might then get co-opted and used against Latinas. Ultimately, it is not about finding a stagnant position between problematizing images or reading it as empowering, it is about the ability to navigate the crooked images, about finding the place between oppression and empowerment and using that space to move toward liberation. I will discuss this movement when I define differential identities.

### *Dis-identifying*

Even more problematic than accommodating the image is that of dis-identifying<sup>24</sup> with the image. If we think about the crooked chair in the crooked room, all the objects in the room are tilted slightly. Accommodating the tilt would be to tilt yourself so that you perceive things to be straight up and down, even though you are clearly leaning in one direction. But what if, as Harris-Perry points out, “you overcompensate back the other direction?”<sup>25</sup> What if “you know it’s off but you can’t quite figure out my how much,”<sup>26</sup> so you tilt in the opposite direction. This is what I would argue occurs with dis-identification.

When looking at a particularly stereotypical representation of Latinidad in the media, like that of a Latino playing a criminal for example, one might feel the need to distance themselves from that notion of Latinidad, so as not to be perceived as a criminal. This idea goes hand in hand with assimilation because criminality and other negative perceptions are so conflated with Latinidad, that someone who does not want to be associated with those things might feel the need to distance themselves not only from the stereotype, but from anything considered Latinx, inherently defined in mainstream society through the stereotype. The thought process might be something like, “I am not a criminal, I am not illegal, therefore I am not really Latino, I am American of Latino decent.” This is a phrase I have heard many times from Latinxs. Furthermore, as I discussed in chapter two, the promise of assimilation is such that there is more of an incentive to dis-identify with Latinidad so as to achieve success defined by the American national imaginary.

The other reason people might dis-identify with Latinidad is because of a feeling of distance from any cultural connection maybe due to generations of assimilation, or an internalized distorted understanding of their ancestral culture. I remember a student of mine once came to me with questions about her identity, asking if she could really consider herself Mexican since she didn't speak Spanish and because she wasn't "really Mexican" like her cousins. I then asked her what she meant by "really Mexican," she responded by alluding to the type of music her "real Mexican" cousins listen to and the way they dress. I realized in that moment that her perception of what it means to be Mexican was shaped by a homogenous construction of identity, possibly shaped by distorted media images. Other students share that they do not feel connected to their ancestral heritage because they do not practice any cultural traditions. Therefore because of a lack to connection to these ancestral traditions, as well as a reliance on narrow and stagnant definitions of Latinidad from the mass media, for many Latinxs there is no investment in identifying themselves as such.

Latinxs might dis-identify with Latinidad in order to be closer to whiteness, which equates to success in the American national imaginary. They might also dis-identify because they do not feel a connection to what they perceive to be Latinx culture. Either way, the mass media construction of Latinidad contributes to this dis-identification because it does such a good job of narrowly defining Latinidad, primarily through negative stereotypes that most Latinxs do not want to be associated with it. Although those who dis-identify are trying to navigate perceptions of Latinidad as a way to survive and thrive in an inherently racist society, dis-identification remains problematic. Latinxs



who try to dis-identify perpetuate the notion of Latinxs as other by not claiming Latinidad, while, in reality they can never truly escape Latinidad, because if they “look” Latinx, they will always be reduced to that identity by others, regardless of their personal relationship to it.

However, there are moments when performing dis-identification might help navigate spaces Latinidad would not allow us to. For example, racialized minorities in academia must navigate a space not created for us, and in fact fundamentally created to push us out, further marginalize, disenfranchise, and oppress us. There is an academic jargon does not come easily to people of color, who are often raised in areas where a more colloquial dialect is spoken. For. As a result, those of us who choose to work in academia must learn to be literate and proficient in this professional language. We do so to survive in this field, to get taken seriously as scholars, to be included in scholarly dialogues. This is not exactly dis-identification, but consider those of us who work in areas of study that center social justice, like that of Ethnic Studies. We must learn the language of academia, but because much of our work is rooted in a larger, deeper community outside the academy, we often find ourselves having to prove our work is valid and valuable to the academy. Thus, we might find ourselves momentarily dis-identifying or distancing ourselves from Latinx stereotypes in order to validate our work. Through our ability to speak and write in an academic language, through our downplaying of our radicalism in certain scenarios, we strategically use dis-identification to distance ourselves from the stereotypes of Latinidad in order to prove we are scholars, not criminals.

The failed federal Dream Act was also contingent on dis-identification because students must show “good moral character” in order to work toward citizenship. In short, they have to prove they are not like other Latinxs, criminals, or of bad moral character. Dreamers are forced to distance themselves from what is perceived and constructed as Latinidad in order to prove they are American. Thus, again, we cannot fault the use of dis-identification in these scenarios or others like it. However, we must question, to what extent is dis-identification a strategic strategy, but not the end game? In other words, dis-identification can be positive if used as a temporary strategy as we move toward liberation, but it cannot be the end goal in and of itself.

*Finding the Upright- a note on authenticity*

In the face of very few representations of Latinidad and those few constructed through distorted and problematic representations, it is no wonder why Latinxs are faced with the dilemma of either accommodating the image or dis-identifying with Latinidad. However, identity construction is much more complex than what these options provide, in that not all Latinxs at all times willingly fall into either one of these categories. There are those who recognize the crooked images as tilted and refuse to accommodate the image, while their continued investment in maintaining a deep connection to ancestral traditions and culture keeps them from dis-identifying with it. There are those who do maintain that connection through a concerted effort at resisting the hegemonic images of Latinidad, and are able to practice alternative ways of living in a colonized society. However, even those who do this work are still forced to engage with the crooked images. Therefore, I argue, it is inevitable that Latinxs are confronted with a struggle to

navigate stereotypical images of Latinidad. Latinxs often find themselves negotiating with problematic images as they grapple with their own relationship to their identity. This is especially true if there has been any generational disconnection from ancestral tradition or any assimilation to American culture, due to the antagonistic relationship between complex Latinidad and mainstream American culture.

The legacy of colonization erases or distorts historical memory and Latinx ancestral culture, reducing it to a stereotype that reinforces white supremacy. Consequently, many Latinx are left searching for a way to recuperate and practice an authentic form of Latinx culture as a means to reconnect to it despite the generational assimilation and legacy of colonized history. However, part of this discussion involves dissecting the complexity of authenticity, which itself is often a result of historical power structures and which can result in problematic formations of identity.

For example, Isabel Molina-Guzmán complicates the notion of authenticity, which, she argues, governs constructions of Latinidad within the film *Frida*.<sup>27</sup> She states, “In *Frida*, the performance of Mexican identity is constrained by popular audience notions and expectations of Latina/o authenticity.”<sup>28</sup> Guzmán makes clear that there are certain markers of Mexican identity that need to be signaled in the film in order to be recognized as authentically Mexican. These markers such as, “the use of Spanish-accented English, music, color, and exotic mise-en-scene,” stem from previous conceived notions of what it means to be Mexican rather than the reality of the environment in Mexico. Furthermore, Guzmán claims, “Discourses of authenticity override the complexity of difference, erase the voice of the group being represented, and may be used

to create social hierarchies.”<sup>29</sup> In other words, the markers of Mexican identity elicit one very specific identity formation without regard to the diversity among Mexicans and the Mexican experience. There is tremendous diversity among Mexicans, with experiences and realities varying drastically based on social markers such as class, race, and gender. There is no one monolithic Mexican experience, yet the concept of authenticity would make it seem as if there were.

Tellingly, Guzmán implicitly points to the ways in which Latinxs themselves are complicit in this kind of discourse of authenticity. Guzmán looks at the production and media coverage of the film and ultimately concludes: “the film is a solicited, collaborative text crafted through a set of acknowledged cinematic practices for consumption by an imagined global audience, [with an imagined understanding of Mexican identity]. As a form of cultural discourse, the movie contributes to popular knowledge about gendered ethnic identity.”<sup>30</sup> The producers acknowledged the market for a movie about the Mexican icon, but ultimately portrayed a narrowly constructed icon by drawing on already circulating ideas of Mexican women without articulating the complexity of her own identity formation. There were particular understandings of what a Mexican woman should look and act like, and the film played within those understandings rather than against them. Guzmán thus helps us complicate how *Frida* portrays Mexican female identity. For instance, Guzmán argues that Hayek’s portrayal is not a true representation of the artist, because to do so would entail a more nuanced approach to her identity formation. Rather, it is another attempt at reifying already embedded notions of Mexican women. In other words, to be recognizable as a Latinx

film, it must have particular signifiers so that a non-Latinx audience can place it within their understandings of Mexican identity, and so that Latinxs can see it as an “authentic” portrayal. Signifiers such as dress, hair, language, and overall aesthetics.

Furthermore, as I argued in chapter one, and as Guzmán notes, marketing of culture helps to construct authenticity. Marketers are literally creating and constructing a “self-contained market”<sup>31</sup> and defining the parameters through which the market group can be identified. Furthermore, marketers construct the very racial signifiers that make Latinidad easily recognizable. Often these racial signifiers will include such traits as: dark skin, bright color palettes, music and dance, accents, or even Spanish language use. In this way, Latinidad can literally be bought and sold, to both non-Latinos as some exotic artifact, and to Latinos themselves as a distorted version of authentic identity. Latinos recognize particular racial signifiers as authentic to their cultural experience, at times without recognizing how those cultural experiences might already be shaped by appropriated constructions of identity. Latinos often take pride in these representations of Latinidad because they feel that these representations are speaking directly to them, or at least that Latinos are being included in the U.S. national imaginary in some form.

A perfect example of the appropriation of cultural authenticity is La Plazita Olvera, or Olvera Street in downtown Los Angeles. Upon arrival at this historical site, one will encounter an array of cart vendors at the center of a long corridor surrounded by other shops and restaurants. Vendors sell artifacts of all kinds; there are shops that sell “traditional garb” including guayaberas, folklorico costumes, etc. These things help to racially signify this space as authentically Mexican for Mexicans looking for somewhere

familiar to their ancestral home. Conversely, it is also a space for non-Latinos to feel like they are getting to experience authentic Latin culture. And yet, Olvera Street helps to depict particularly Mexican culture through a monolithic lens. It paints a picture of Mexican history at the intersection of a romanticized Aztec indigenous identity and the bright colors and artifacts of Mexican folk culture. This can be problematic as it undermines the complexity of Mexican history, erases the reality of the existence of contemporary indigenous people in Mexico, frames Mexican culture as only defined by bright colors, quaint artifacts, and humble people. What is not highlighted, especially for non-Latinxs, is the diversity of culture in Mexico depending on region, class and ancestral heritage. Of course, this is done so as to easily package Mexican culture to be sold to tourists as a souvenir.

As vexing as this might be, the fact that Mexicans are selling this pre-packaged version of their culture to non-Latinxs, does leave space for agency. White supremacy, a history of colonization, and contemporary globalization have made it so that people of color are dependent on a tourism economy, even those living in the U.S. Olvera Street allows non-Latinos to visit Mexico without actually leaving the country, and because Latinos know this is the reality, they make Mexican culture readily available to sell to these tourists. We also need to consider what Olvera Street means to Mexicans themselves, including recent immigrants, and those who have been here for generations. It is often the only place to find and experience things that look familiar to an ancestral culture. Where else can I buy guayaberas for my brother's wedding, sugar skulls for Dia de Los Muertos, or folklorico costumes? Just as the history of colonization has made it so

that Mexicans are reliant on the tourism economy, it has also made is so that the connection to ancestral customs, practices and traditions have been marginalized, delegitimized or de-historicized. Thus, Olvera Street offers a connection to those practices and traditions when it cannot be found elsewhere.

Consider the case of Day of the Dead and the increasing popularity of the celebration in mainstream popular culture. In recent years, places like *Party City* sell Day of the Dead costumes and *Target* sells any number of Day of the Dead themed decorations. Many critics have called out the commercialization of the traditionally spiritual celebration and the ways in which American culture has appropriated it as an extension of Halloween. I would agree with these critics that when this particular tradition becomes commercialized it strips it of its deep spiritual and ceremonial history and de-historicizes it, conflating it with another Americanized holiday. Yet, what about Mexican Americans who have been disconnected to ancestral culture through generational assimilation and forced acculturation. For those who might be in search of a deeper connection to their ancestral culture, could the mainstreaming of this celebration be a pathway to re-discover a tradition long forgotten in their family? Could the commercialization of Mexican culture and Dia de Los Muertos in particular make it more accessible to Mexicans looking to recuperate traditional practices erased by the history of colonization and assimilation?

Likewise, think about George Lopez's stand-up comedy, both before and after his sitcom aired. His stand up was so successful to Latinx audiences because it rang familiar to so many Latinxs. I clearly remember listening to his stand-up specials and laughing out

loud in my car because he was seemingly describing my experiences. Because he is one of only a few Latinx comedians in the mainstream, all Latinidad gets reduced to his interpretation of it, although since it is coming from a fellow Latino it rings authentic and true. I remember thinking, “It’s funny, because it’s true.” The problem is: what about Latinxs who do not relate to his comedy or experience the things he talks about in his comedy? Are they less or not Latinx because they do not share similar experiences of Latinidad? I would argue, some Latinxs are left feeling this way, like in the case of my student I mentioned earlier, and many other students who feel disconnected to Latinidad because they do not share experiences like those that even Latinxs themselves describe as inherently Latinx. In other words, Latinxs themselves often define Latinidad by a particular practice of culture, including traditions, customs, celebrations, etc. How are those who do not practice their culture in this way to relate to Latinidad even when defined by a so-called authentic source? This is not to mention the fact that cultural practices change over time and vary from family to family, complicating any sense of homogenous Latinidad. Again, this calls for the need for more images that represent a diverse experience of Latinidad. In the meantime, Latinxs might find themselves asking existential questions like, “What makes me Latinx if I don’t look, act, or talk like that?”

In the end, Mexicans ourselves can be implicated in perpetuating a narrow representation of an authentic Mexican identity. Especially for those who are disconnected to a practice of ancestral culture, the crooked image will look authentic. Nonetheless, Latinxs relationship to the mass media is complex and creates a contested space where we negotiate our identities both through and against these “authentic”



representations. We are so desperate for a space, for a place, for something to call our own within the mainstream that continues to marginalize our culture. Furthermore, as problematic as it might be, Olvera Street and the commercialization of Dia de Los Muertos has allowed cultural practices marginalized by a legacy of colonization to flourish. Authenticity is tricky because culture always evolves, changes and shifts over time and place throughout history. To call anything truly authentic is to undermine that history, to ignore that movement. To try and define what is truly authentic Latinidad can never be defined in any fixed way. Thus, the relationship of Latinxs to it will also be complex and ever-shifting, a la differential identities, as I will discuss later.

### **Oppositional Representations**

*La Santa Cecilia- Marisol Hernandez*

Regardless of the negotiation with authenticity, the thirst for and recuperation of traditional ancestral culture has allowed for cultural production by Latinxs to flourish in a new era for a new generation of Latinxs, like that of La Santa Cecilia and Quetzal. In a radio story by NPR music, Marisol Hernandez, the lead singer of the band La Santa Cecilia, discusses the roots of her music and her band as born and emerging from Olvera Street. In her description of her own relationship to Olvera Street and of the history of the band, she addresses the complexity of this space and what it means for Mexican culture:

Olvera St. is like the heart of L.A., it's a little street with little shops resembling any little town in Mexico or Latin America. My family has a shop with Mexican gifts, my grandfather started the classic burro... It's a classic L.A. shot. I grew up on Olvera St. ...this is like the base of where I learned my singings trait, ...Olvera St. was a big part of us (La Santa Cecilia) coming together. We're born here from immigrant parents...feel a real strong tie to where our parents came from but also feeling a root and a tie and a love for the States for being from the United States, for having opportunities and for taking advantage of that because I think that's

important...sometimes we only see the struggle of our parents or we see numbers and immigration and all these bad things about immigration and it's not...it's not that because there's a lot of art, a lot of music, a lot of writing, there is beauty. Not just the nonsense.<sup>32</sup>

In a space already filled with the tensions between cultural preservation and cultural appropriation, Hernandez relieves that tension, that negotiation of identity, through her music. Her band, La Santa Cecilia, is influenced by various musical genres, but is fundamentally rooted in a uniquely Latin sound and visual aesthetic. She represents a way to hold on to traditional culture and infuse it with her experience in American culture. Because the fundamental sound of the music is familiar and comforting, it resonates with an older generation as well as a newer generation when performed by modern artists.

Furthermore, Hernandez represents a deviation from the stereotype of the hypersexualized Latina marked by thin, yet curvy body features. Hernandez, though curvy, is not nearly as thin as Sofia Vergara and the like, and yet embraces her body and her own expression of sexuality. Furthermore, as Vergara's fashion aesthetic is marked by tightfitting clothes, Hernandez's fashion aesthetic looks more like Olvera St. itself, bright beautiful colors reminiscent of Mexican folk wear with a modern twist. It is refreshing to see such eclectic fashion always centered in a uniquely Mexican aesthetic.

Both through her music and in her visual aesthetic, Hernandez and La Santa Cecilia stand clearly as an alternative representation to the stereotypes offered by the mass media. She stands as an alternative to the stereotype by representing a Latina identity that embraces sexuality while not relying on hyper-sexuality. Through their music, La Santa Cecilia bridges the gap between Mexican traditional sounds, and

American and global influences. Thus, it resonates so much with Mexican-Americans whose experience is embodied in the eclectic sound of their music.

*Quetzal- Martha Gonzalez*

The artistry of the band Quetzal, like La Santa Cecilia, represents a sound and an aesthetic that not only deviates from the stereotypical representation of Latinidad, but it acts as a mechanism of resistance to the internalization of the stereotype. Both these groups define their work as rooted in social consciousness, activism and social justice. They represent the missing piece I was looking for when analyzing the TV show *East Los High* and the film *Mi Vida Loca*. Their work is more than just about entertainment or art for the sake of art, rather their work is innately invested in creating change. Thus, I argue, they represent what Latinas can look like, what they can do in a much more complex and empowering way than the images offered by the mass media.

According to Martha Gonzalez's personal website, Quetzal is described as follows:

Quetzal is an ensemble of highly talented musicians, joined for the goal of creating good music that tells the social, cultural, political, and musical stories of people in struggle. Martha Gonzalez (lead singer, percussionist, and songwriter) calls it an "East LA Chican@ rock group," summing up its rootedness in the complex cultural currents of life in the barrio, its social activism, its strong feminist stance, and its rock and roll musical beginnings. Besides being a rock band, the group and its members participate in a much larger web of musical, cultural, and political engagement.<sup>33</sup>

Just from their own description of themselves, the band situates their music as grounded in social consciousness and "rooted in a community." Thus, their music is inherently invested in social change, in a dialogue of social activism. To take that stand and to have

it be the foundation of their art is a powerful statement and representation of empowerment and resistance.

The bio also states:

The group Quetzal emerged out of a particularly contentious time generated by events such as the 1992 Los Angeles uprising, the 1994 Proposition 187 campaign (to deny medical and public services to undocumented immigrants and public education to undocumented children), and the repercussive reach of the Zapatista insurrection in Mexico. These events spurred a powerful synergy, in which avenues of expressive culture such as music and public art emerged as platforms from which to voice marginalized people's desires, opinions, and resistance to the conditions in which they found themselves. The proactive strategy of Quetzal and other artists was to maneuver through the societal problems that were affecting the communities in which these artists were living. As a prominent force in this East L.A. creative culture scape, Quetzal vividly portrays how music, culture, and sociopolitical ideology come together in a specific place.<sup>34</sup>

Defining their music as a uniquely East L.A. production highlights the community as an important space of political action and powerful artistry, especially in light of the anti-Mexican rhetoric coming from the political arena. Furthermore, this description highlights the unique aesthetic and musical influence of East L.A., making it a hub of cultural production. This is ever so important because of the marginalized, economically disenfranchised people who live in this area. Furthermore, East L.A. is often constructed as a crime-infested area full of racial tensions. It is often ghettoized in the U.S. national imaginary. Thus, to embrace East L.A. as a center of cultural production highlights the beauty and richness of the people who live there, and validates their experiences as worthy of celebration and notoriety.

The band further describes themselves as *artivistas* or art activists, making social activism foundational to their music. In other words, their music is born from the spirit of social activism. It is not that their music can be interpreted as political, it is that their

music is created as a means of political resistance, innately infused with a socially conscious message. Because there is such a conscious investment to describe themselves in this way, it makes the band a powerful symbol of cultural production that seeks to foster social change. Also, because they have reached such popularity not only within their own community but from an international audience as well, their music represents the possibility of the power of activism to take the message of social change to the masses.

The face of the band is Martha Gonzalez, the lead singer, who

... affirms a strong female perspective in the group's creative projects. In her words, "part of being in the band is having a Chicana feminist analysis. The presence of women in the group is not 'eye candy' or a tokenized gesture toward balancing any sort of gender scale: it's an honest recognition of the poetic, musical, and compositional strengths the female musicians in the community possess."<sup>35</sup>

To clearly and directly articulate the group as feminist is revolutionary in light of a music history that is often man-centered and/or man-dominated. It is clear that Gonzalez understands the importance of an intersectional approach to feminism and other forms of social activism. This intersectional approach is clearly engaged and demonstrated by an understanding of the complexity of identity as marked by race, class, gender and sexuality. The fact that the band consciously defines themselves as invested in a feminist perspective breaks from much of the traditional Chicano rhetoric. It is important to note that Gonzalez is also an academic scholar. According to her website, she is an assistant professor in Chicana/o and Latina/o Studies at Scripps College.<sup>36</sup>

In this way, Gonzalez, who circulates in the worlds of academia, art, music, and social activism, truly stands as an amazing oppositional representation of Latinidad.

Furthermore, because she so strongly articulates her work as grounded in social justice activism, this makes her a great role model for young Latinxs navigating their identities. She represents the extent of multiple possibilities for an empowering future.

Exposing young Latinxs to these representations can be very powerful. If the relationship Latinxs have to mainstream images of Latinidad is antagonistic at best, and oppressive and self-degrading at worst, viewing images of Latinas who fall outside the mainstream stereotype could offset those feelings and demonstrate other possibilities for the expression of identity.

For example, when teaching Mexican American history, I include the history of Catholicism in Mexico and the reverence for the Virgin Mary. The students and I discuss our personal relationships to the image of the Virgin Mary, and her symbolism as a model of Mexican womanhood. I offer the Chicana feminist critique of her symbolism that makes clear her image was co-opted through a patriarchal perspective emphasizing purity and submissiveness. This discussion culminates in the viewing of Alma Lopez's digital art piece entitled "Our Lady." This is meant to serve as an oppositional representation of Mexican womanhood emphasizing sexual freedom and assertiveness. The responses I received from the showing of this image have varied throughout the years. Many have found it offensive to their religious beliefs and practices. Others have found it refreshing and empowering. One particular exchange between two students when presenting this image in a Chicano literature class illustrates this debate. When I asked the students what their reactions were to this image, the class fell silent. When I proceeded to ask if anyone was offended, I saw a few nods from students. And then I asked if anyone wanted to

share why they were offended. One male Chicano student said that he was offended because this was oversexualizing the Virgin Mary and felt it was inappropriate to do such a thing. When I pressed him further, he could not say more than repeat, “you just don’t do that with her image.” He was very adamant that this was an offensive image and it made him upset. In response to what he was saying, another student in the class, a queer woman, asked him why it was so offensive to see the Virgin Mary as sexual. This sparked a conversation about the duality of women and people in general to simultaneously be virtuous and sexual. Furthermore, the discussion included theorizations about Chicana queer sexuality and the possibilities this image opens up for Chicanas grappling with their sexual identities.

Many Chicana feminists have made such a critique of the image of the Virgin and have sought to reconcile their own sexuality with a practice of spirituality that reveres La Virgen, while expanding the meaning of her symbolism. Many of the queer women in the class expressed an understanding of that concept and embraced the image as a symbol of feminism and resistance to heteropatriarchal gender norms. This exchange among students demonstrates, on one hand, the need to expose them to these types of images in order to spark these kinds of debates so as to encourage a critical analysis of not only traditional Mexican religious spirituality, but also of Mexican culture and agency. On the other hand, the image itself was recognized as an oppositional representation of Chicana sexuality, thus offering the students a familiar icon reimagined through a much more complex and differential identity formation.

## Differential Identities

The art of Marisol Hernandez, Martha Gonzalez and Alma Lopez represent an image of Latinidad that greatly deviates from the stereotypes of Latina women offered by the mass media. Their work, both musically and aesthetically, showcases a complexity of identity, an empowered negotiation between a complex ancestral culture and an eclectic contemporary and future vision of Latinidad. They seem to make sense of the identity crisis that images in the mainstream media create for Latinxs. Influenced either directly or indirectly by the theories of our Chicana foremothers like Gloria Anzaldúa, Cherríe Moraga, Emma Pérez, and Chela Sandoval, Hernandez and Gonzalez stand as symbols of a Latina identity that simultaneously resists the problematic stereotypes while offering a more empowered representation for the possibility of identity. I would argue they practice and embody differential identities.

Chela Sandoval defines differential consciousness as enabling “movement ‘between and among’ ideological positionings.”<sup>37</sup> Accordingly, I contend that Latinxs often find themselves negotiating identity by moving between and among media representations of Latinidad. In other words, As Harris-Perry describes the crooked chair in the crooked room and the perpetual search for the upright, Latinx identity *is* the chair, *is* the constant movement between accommodation of the image and dis-identification of it. Sandoval further describes the differential as the following:

The differential mode of consciousness functions like the clutch of an automobile, the mechanism that permits the driver to select, engage, and disengage gears in a system for the transmission of power. The differential represents the variant; its presence emerges out of correlations, intensities, junctures, crises. Yet the differential depends on a form of agency that is self-consciously mobilized in order to enlist and secure influence; the differential is thus performative.<sup>38</sup>



Sandoval's metaphor of the clutch of an automobile is similar to Harris-Perry's use of the crooked chair in the crooked room, in that it places the person in the driver's seat of identity with agency over how they maneuver themselves. When Sandoval refers to engaging and disengaging "in a system for the transmission of power,"<sup>39</sup> I relate this to Latinxs and their relationship to the mass media. People like George Lopez and Sofia Vergara negotiate identities and accommodate the image as a means of navigating the systems of power at play in the entertainment industry. Both Lopez and Vergara searched for access to an industry that historically leaves people like them out, thus they had to abide by industry rules for Latinxs in order to gain access.

Sandoval, however, also alludes to how the idea of the differential occurs often out of moments of crisis. I would argue that when real life Latinx are confronted with stereotypical images, a struggle arises when attempting to form their own identities in relation to these images. Thus, they take on the task of being in a crooked chair in a crooked room and forced to negotiate with the media images and their own self-awareness. Even then however, it is never as simple as choosing to either accommodate the image or dis-identify. On the one hand, if you choose to dis-identify with Latinidad so as to prove assimilation to American cultural values, it is always just as easy to be deduced to the color of your skin and racially marked as other. On the other hand, when you accommodate the image, buying into and performing the stereotype because it may seem like an authentic expression of culture, you might find identity is much more complex than what any stereotypical image is able to demonstrate. In other words, even for those of us who willingly agree with the stereotype that Latinas are hypersexual and

feisty, the stereotype immediately crumbles when we meet a fellow Latina who does not meet that stereotype, not because they are not “really Latina” or because they are “washed out” or because they have assimilated, but rather we are confronted with the complexity of identity in a way that stereotypes could never account for. Assimilation is always just on the verge of being deduced to the stereotype, and the stereotype is never complex enough to account for the diversity of the Latinx experience. Thus, we have an identity crisis.

And so I return to the work of my Chicana feminist foremothers, who remind us that Chicana identity is not found on either side of the border, but rather on the border itself, as Anzaldúa makes clear. Sandoval takes that notion even further, contending that Chicana identity is in the movement between the border, the movement to and from all sides of the border. She declares that this movement requires consciousness and agency to understand the power in this differential movement to “secure influence.”<sup>40</sup> I return again to the example of George Lopez and how his early work might be perceived as selling out, and yet it was a negotiation he had to make to gain access to the industry. Therefore, now that he is in a well-established position of power, I argue he has the responsibility to use that position to make more social commentaries and push for structural change. It remains to be seen how well he can do this; most recently he was called out for perpetuating sexism and heteronormativity. Sandoval goes on to say:

The differential mode of social movement and consciousness depends on the practitioner’s ability to read the current situation of power and self-consciously choosing and adopting the ideological stand best suited to push against its configurations, a survival skill well known to oppressed peoples. Differential consciousness requires grace, flexibility, and strength: enough strength to confidently commit to a well-defined structure of identity for one hour, day,

week, month, year; enough flexibility to self-consciously transform that identity according to the requisites of another oppositional ideological tactic if readings of power's formation require it; enough grace to recognize alliance with others committed to egalitarian social relations and race, gender, sex, class and social justice, when these other readings of power call for alternative oppositional stands. Within the realm of differential social movement, ideological differences and their oppositional forms of consciousness, unlike their incarnations under hegemonic feminist comprehension, are understood as tactics—not as strategies.<sup>41</sup>

Sandoval makes a call for action while acknowledging how Latinxs have historically negotiated the crooked image by moving between accommodating the image, dis-identifying with it, or resisting it as a tactic of survival. Still, she makes clear it is not enough to understand how differential consciousness works, but that we must use it to push through the stereotypes, calling out the systems of oppression at work and moving toward liberating possibilities.

This is the transformative piece of TfcML: to move beyond understanding how to critically read images produced and put forth by the mass media and recognize them as representations of institutionalized oppression, so as to not internalize and perpetuate the oppressive messages. TfcML is about facilitating a process by which media viewers can imagine ways to transform the oppressive image to one of empowerment and liberation. TfcML is about facilitating a process of critical consciousness so as to encourage an investment in social transformation.

One of the most transformative moments in my life was reading the last chapter in Anzaldúa's book *Borderland/La Frontera*, the chapter titled "La Conciencia de la Mestiza: Toward a New Consciousness." Prior to reading this chapter, I was undergoing an identity crisis of my own. As a light skinned Latina, I felt like I never quite fit into any particular social group, feeling like I always had to prove myself to fellow Latinxs. At the

same time, though I did socialize in non-Latinx spaces, I felt out of place especially when wanting to practice cultural traditions and customs. It was in reading Anzaldúa's work that I realized I was living a borderlands of identity. She helped me to realize I did not have to choose either side, either my traditional Mexican culture, or the American culture in which I was raised. Finding peace in my identity was about embracing the in between, finding comfort in the movement among cultures.

In that spirit, I share Anzaldúa's work with my students hoping she offers them a language with which to identify their own negotiations with their identities. I have engaged with her work for such a long time that it has become foundational to my identity as a Chicana feminist. Though my students may not articulate that sentiment in quite the same way, it is evident they are grappling with similar challenges and often use the assignment of the skit to explore and express these negotiations with identity. One semester a group explored the story of La Malinche and the co-optation of her image by heteropatriarchal histories. They started the skit showing Malinche in turmoil over her pregnancy of a child conceived with Cortez. In her sleep, she is then visited by La Virgen who takes her on a dream journey where she speaks with Pocahontas, Eve (from the bible story of Adam and Eve), and Lilith (the mythical and historically debated character said to have preceded Eve). Each of the women express to Malinche their own journey of turmoil with their socio-political positions and situations. These women also share with Malinche their frustrations with how they are historically remembered. They each remind her of a woman's ability to overcome and survive these historical forms of violence and empower Malinche with the spirit to endure while encouraging her to make decisions on

what's best for her and her baby. This aesthetically beautiful act performed live for the class, demonstrates the ability of the students to address this historical moment in a complex and nuanced manner. By giving Malinche agency, rather than calling her a selfless traitor as Chicano history often portrays her, this group re-tells her story from a feminist perspective. They illustrate an alternative vision of the future where we remember Malinche as a victim of circumstance and colonization. The students envision a future that empowers women as part of a legacy of strong women who historically survive colonial violence. Furthermore, the students demonstrate an understanding of a patriarchal lens on history, and a grasp of this history's impact on contemporary Mexican culture. Rather than an assessment of patriarchy as a result of colonization, it is often through these stories that Mexican culture is defined as innately patriarchal. This is what creates an antagonistic relationship for Chicanas to their cultural identity. In this case, TfcML offered a space to play out these antagonisms and seek resolution.

TfcML also offers an opportunity to become invested in social justice issues and practice methods of empowerment and liberation. In another semester, a group of students explore the issue of the disappearance of women in Juarez. They wrote a skit showing a woman's journey into sex work, and her eventual kidnapping. This story humanized sex work and illustrated the exploitation and violence done to these women. At the end of the skit, the performers held up a sign with resource information for anyone who might be interested in learning more about this topic or getting involved in political action. It was in that call to action that most clearly demonstrated to me TfcML's ability

to transform the student into a political actor as part of the assignment itself. In this case, the skit was not just a way to perform this tragedy, but it was a mechanism of social awareness.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter seeks to demonstrate the complexity in negotiating with stereotypical images of Latinidad in the mass media. It points to the need for movement on a path toward liberation, utilizing accommodation, dis-identification, or any other useful relationship to media images in order to move along this path. Latinxs in the entertainment industry must be called on to play the stereotype when it works to gain access and power, but quickly move out of it to critique its very construction. In this way, the stereotypes can be made into temporary stops on the way toward change and liberation, so as long as we have the critical consciousness to deconstruct the image even as we accommodate it. In turn, this work can fuel us to move through the stereotype and call for or create more nuanced representations of Latinidad. It is not enough to acknowledge that Latinxs have always been forced to either accommodate or dis-identify the stereotype as a means of survival, for we have. However, if we want change, we must be able to recognize the crooked images, call them out as part of systems of oppression that require accommodation or dis-identification as a survival tactic, and work to dismantle white supremacy and heteropatriarchy.

Moreover, for real-life Latinxs, even when we accommodate or dis-identify, these options must be temporary strategies on the way toward liberation. If we use them as momentary positions in order to gain trust and power, we cannot get comfortable in that

space, because we will be in danger of perpetuating the stereotype and further entrenching white supremacy; or we will get dismissed as just another stereotype and not be taken seriously. We must be able to move out of accommodation and out of dis-identification into other modes of identity grounded in critical consciousness and empowerment so that we can dismantle white supremacy.

Beyond a call for action, Sandoval defines identity as flexible, adjustable, and adaptive. Arguably, she recognizes that Latinx identity is never stagnant. Instead, it is ever-evolving, both because of society's organic progression and because of Latinxs' own awareness of self, history, oppression, and social justice. Society, through sources like the mass media, works to define and perpetuate stereotypical meaning of Latinidad, but that does not mean that we as Latinxs are limited to those definitions. For we have always defined ourselves somewhere between the stereotype and the complex understanding of our own ancestral histories and our contemporary experiences. However, this skill should not be limited to making sense of our own identity crises, but we must also use our differential identities, our skill to negotiate meanings of Latinidad, in order to dismantle white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, and other manifestations of oppression. We accommodate or dis-identify, or resist and then change it for the better.

We cannot deny the deep impact that mass media has on identity formation, and how, especially for Latinxs, it can be a complex negotiation between internalizing the image and resisting it. Transformative Critical Media Literacy offers Latinxs a space to recognize oppressive images and imagine other possibilities, exposing Latinxs to oppositional representations. TfCML serves as a filter through which problematic images

can be analyzed so that their impact on identity formation does not go unchecked. Our identities are complex results of a culture filled with historical antagonisms, genocide, and assimilation, coupled with present day distorted media constructions and institutionalized systems of oppression. Thus, we are left to navigate the many influences on our identities in order to make sense of who we are, what the world thinks of us, and who we want to be. Our identities are inherently differential. We have always moved in and out of definitions and manifestations of identities. We have historically been negotiating between survival by assimilation and acculturation to colonized culture, and holding on to ancestral traditions in order to pass them on to future generations.

This chapter was about pointing out how Latinxs navigate the influences on identity in terms of media constructions of Latinidad, both as people who are the images and people who view the images. Ultimately, the transformative part is in recognizing our ancestral ability to move between strategies of survival, and embrace that as a mechanism for liberation. If TfcML is meant to inspire a process of critical consciousness, differential identity is what we do with that information. We analyze, critique, and highlight the oppressive messages, all while negotiating our own internalization of the crooked images, before we move toward change, decolonization, and liberation.



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- <sup>1</sup> Gloria Anzaldúa. *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*.
- <sup>2</sup> Melissa V. Harris-Perry, *Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes, and Black Women in America* (Place of Publication Not Identified: Yale University Press, 2013).
- <sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.
- <sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>6</sup> Chela Sandoval, *Methodology of the Oppressed* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2008), 57.
- <sup>7</sup> *Sister Citizen: Shame Stereotypes and Black Women in America*, perf. Melissa Harris-Perry, YouTube, December 15, 2011, accessed June 13, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b1X2YHdqUJA&t=1335s>.
- <sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>12</sup> Harris-Perry Book, 32.
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>14</sup> *Brown Is the New Green: George Lopez and the American Dream*, dir. Phillip Rodriguez (213 Projects, 2007), DVD.
- <sup>15</sup> *From Prada to Nada*, dir. Angel Garcia (Oddlight Entertainment, 2011).
- <sup>16</sup> Lopez
- <sup>17</sup> Hollywood Foreign Press Association, prod., "Golden Globes," 2017.
- <sup>18</sup> Television Academy, prod., "Emmy Award Show," 2011.
- <sup>19</sup> *Paley Fest- Modern Family*, Los Angeles, 2015.
- <sup>20</sup> Deborah Paredez. *Selenidad: Selena, Latinos, and the Performance of Memory*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 129.
- <sup>21</sup> Christy Haubegger, ed., *Latina Magazine*, 1996-present.
- <sup>22</sup> Harris-Perry Video.
- <sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>24</sup> I recognize Jose Esteban Munoz and other queer scholars use the term disidentification in a particular context, I distinguish myself from this use of the term, and refer to my definition of it as I articulate in the chapter.
- <sup>25</sup> Harris-Perry Video.
- <sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>27</sup> *Frida*, dir. Julie Taymor, perf. Salma Hayek (Handprint Entertainment, 2002), film.
- <sup>28</sup> Isabel Molina Guzmán. "Mediating Frida: Negotiating Discourses." *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 23, no. 3 (August 2006), 235.
- <sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>31</sup> Arlene M. Davila, *Latinos, Inc.: The Marketing and Making of a People* (Berkeley (Calif.): University of California Press, 2012).
- <sup>32</sup> La Santa Cecilia, *Take A Trip To Downtown L.A. With La Santa Cecilia*, National Public Radio, 2012, accessed June 13, 2017, <http://www.npr.org/2012/06/22/155576278/take-a-trip-to-downtown-l-a-with-la-santa-cecilia>.
- <sup>33</sup> "Martha Gonzalez - Chicana Artivista," Martha Gonzalez - Chicana Artivista, accessed June 13, 2017, <http://marthagonzalez.net/>.
- <sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>37</sup> Sandoval, 57.
- <sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 60.

## CONCLUSION

My intention with this dissertation was to formulate a pedagogical methodology that offers space for Latina youth to think critically about media images and the impact of these on their lives. Central to Transformative Critical Media Literacy is its analysis of the institutional systems of oppression perpetuated by the mass media, and its encouragement of Latinas to imagine more liberating possibilities. In the first chapter, I described the methods that make up TfCML as inspired by Freire's critique of the banking concept of education, Chicana/Latina feminist pedagogy and epistemology, Latinx media studies, and by Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed. Providing a textual analysis of the mass media's representation of Latinidad and girl culture, I demonstrated the impact these social discourses have on the way Latinas negotiate and formulate their identities. I also provided examples of how the methods of TfCML offered Latinas and young people in general the space to explore the complex pressures on identity formation.

Specifically, using theatre methods like that of creating skits and actos provides my students the opportunity to engage with theoretical concepts relevant to their lives in a comprehensible manner. TfCML provides students a space to put language to the oppressive dynamics they observe in media images and in the world around them. When students write and perform these skits and actos, many of which are filmed and uploaded to YouTube, the students become media makers themselves. Students perform oppositional representations, creating media images from a perspective that considers the complexity of discourse of race, gender, class and sexuality.

Every semester I am pleasantly surprised at how well this assignment works for students. I let students know from the very beginning of the semester that they will be required to do a group project in which they will write and perform a skit based on a topic relevant to the course. Later on in the semester, when I give the full instructions, some students express concern with the fact that it is a group project, for many have had very bad experiences with group assignments. I assure them that I have built accountability into the assignment, requiring a group assessment as part of the written portion of the assignment. In the end, most groups express ease in completing this assignment as a group because of the joy they take in working together on such a creative project. I have groups of students who bond and build friendships through this work, and wish they could do more assignments like this.

Moreover, I have students who after the semester come back to tell me how much they learned from my class, especially because of the types of assignments I require. I also have students who after taking my class become more invested in social justice issues. For me this is the proof that TfcML is doing what I intended it to do: get students learning in a different way. A way that is fun, gets them out of their seats, and promotes critical consciousness.

When I first attempted this methodology in the media workshops I conducted, some of the techniques were not successful. However, I feel that was due to the administrative and time constraints for this pilot project. I was conducting these workshops at an all-girl Catholic school which limited my ability to cover certain topics that might not be approved by Catholic doctrine. I was also only able to meet with the

students 8 times over a period of 8 weeks, which gave me little time to prepare students for this particular assignment, and for them to be able to put a full effort into what I was asking of them. However, this pilot project helped me create the curriculum outline for TfcML, and laid a foundation of methods I have since been able to adjust and use in my subsequent teaching work.

I integrate TfcML methods into all of my classes, like performing plays in class to learn about historical topics, for example Luis Valdez' *La Conquista de Mexico*, or Culture Clash's *The Mission*. This helps students embody these histories rather than merely reading about them in a book or hearing about them through lecture. Reading articles that help to define critical terminology is crucial to developing the language of critique, hence my assigning articles and discussing these terms at length. Discussing political economy by complicating perceptions of sex workers, textually analyzing images from the media, and writing and performing student skits and actos, are all methods of TfcML that I bring to my classes. My goals are to encourage critical thinking, highlight institutional oppression, and de-colonize the classroom as best I can. These might be similar methods used by other teachers, yet TfcML brings these methods together as a collection of techniques that inherently work to foster critical consciousness on a path toward social transformation and liberation. Whereas these methods might be used as fun pedagogical tools, my intention is to move beyond the classroom so that the students are transformed by the learning process and become invested in social justice. Therefore, I hope other educators invested in my same goals can pull from these methods and use them in their classrooms, whatever the subject or discipline may be.

This project was first motivated by my work with teenage girls as a high school teacher, as well as my education in interdisciplinary approaches to, and analyses of, social and economic inequality. In the process of writing this dissertation, I gave birth to two children, and thus the push to come up with a practical way to teach critical media literacy became even more urgent, as I was now responsible for raising children and putting my theories to practice in my own home. Although I understood on some level how impactful media images were in my life, I do not think I quite understood the impact mass media has on a societal level until I became a teacher to young girls. I felt a responsibility to gather as much information as I could on the topic, articulate the problem, and then find one possible solution. This dissertation is the culmination of that mission.

I draw from the scholarship of Latinx media studies and general media studies in order to validate the idea that the mass media directly impacts and influences people on a day-to-day basis. Most importantly, the mass media's perpetuation of stereotypes of Latinidad informs identity formation for Latinxs. These stereotypes are grounded in oppressive racial discourses that uphold white supremacy and heteropatriarchy. The media is a tool for institutionalized structures of power, helping to define Americanness through whiteness. Hence, in the U.S. national imaginary everything non-white is other, thus Latinidad is perpetually marginalized, only acceptable through an assimilationist trajectory. Furthermore, the stereotypes are often internalized by Latinxs, creating identity crises and an often confusing and contested relationship to identity.

The most troubling aspect of this relationship between Latinidad and the mass media is that it often goes uncontested because the mass media normalizes oppressive racial discourses. Latinxs often internalize racial discourse because it is presented as the norm, not as a contrast of the mass media. My fieldwork proved fruitful in highlighting the disconnect young people have of how impactful the mass media is on their lives. Very few of my media workshop participants wanted to admit they were directly impacted by the images in the mass media. Since then, when I discuss this topic in my other teaching experiences, there are those who want to believe they can turn a blind eye to the problematic messages of the mass media. Unfortunately, no one can escape it. We live in a world where you cannot go a hundred yards without some sort of ad, whether it is on a billboard or on your phone. We cannot escape the impact of the media, and to be in denial of that is to perpetuate oppression.

Part of Transformative Critical Media Literacy is for people to recognize how deeply we are all connected to the power of the media, and to admit our complicity in racist/sexist discourses. This is a crucial step toward critical consciousness. TfCML is about removing the hegemonic veils of the mass media to uncover the ideological intentions of those who make the media (the few rich white men who own all the world's media outlets). Furthermore, TfCML helps formulate an understanding of the mass media as an extension of a capitalist system inherently founded on the principles of exploitation and commodification. White supremacy, heteropatriarchy, and settler colonialism use the mass media as a tool to maintain the status quo and assure the oppressed will not recognize the power dynamics at play.

On a functional level, the mass media disseminates and perpetuates racist, sexist, and homophobic ideologies, marginalizing those who are not male and white. Women are sexually objectified and commodified, socialized to find their value in beauty and their allure to heterosexual men. People of color are portrayed as the perpetual other: degraded, criminalized, and hypersexualized, with assimilation, acculturation and cultural genocide as their only options to cash in on the promise of upward mobility.

I argue, for Latinas especially, we are left with few options in mainstream media that grapple with the complexity of our identities. There are few role models, often problematic in themselves that showcase how beautiful Latinidad actually is. When all we see of Latinidad in the media is criminals and hypersexual women, it is not surprising that we have a president who is allowed to get away with such disparaging remarks about Mexicans, Muslims, women, and other marginalized groups. Our 45<sup>th</sup> president is a clear example of how central racism and sexism are to our socialization, especially when remarks about sexual harassment are dismissed as “locker room banter” and a matter of “boys will be boys.”

In a society that clearly, directly and innately makes whiteness central to defining the American experience, how are Latinxs left to negotiate their identities in a positive way that preserves cultural tradition, heritage and pride when there are no models in the mainstream media who do this? And why do we continue to see the same age-old stereotypes of Latinidad? Why have we not called for true diversity, not just tokenized representation? Why are we so afraid to call it all out? Maybe it is because we do not know where to start, what to do, or how to do it?



I cannot argue TfCML is the cure all for these questions, but I hope it offers one path, one possibility toward empowering ourselves, our youth, and our future. I hope TfCML offers us a space to read media images critically, to have a language with which to articulate the oppressive message, recognize the dynamic of power at work, imagine more liberating futures, and be critically conscious. I offer a step-by-step curriculum of sorts, a pedagogy inherently grounded in Chicana/Latina feminism. TfCML draws from theatre studies to formulate a process of connecting to embodied knowledge, to physicalize the oppressive images, as well as physicalize the possibilities for a liberated future. TfCML offers a space to “[rehearse] for the revolution.”

I hesitate to make promises for what TfCML could create, as I am not interested in results, but rather I am invested in fostering the process toward critical consciousness. It is about the movement in that direction, allowing the results to flourish at the will and imagination of those who take that journey. I often tell my students that we do not all have to march, riot, protest, or boycott to create change, stand for something, and work for social justice. Although these are powerful tools, and those who are called to use them must be supported, they are not the only tools. It is as simple as calling out someone in your social circle when they make a sexist or racist remark. It is as simple as opening space for a dialogue about institutional oppression. If we can impact but one person, we have done our part toward the dismantling of systemic oppression. I hope TfCML offers a practical method to feel empowered to take whatever action we feel comfortable with in order to make a difference in the world.

As for myself, I begin at home, with my children. I try to be cognizant of what they watch, not limiting their exposure to media, but rather offering them alternative options in addition to the mainstream images they see. I also try to instill, early on, a critical language by asking them questions when they watch a film or TV show. Questions like: did you like that movie? What was your favorite part? Why was that your favorite part? Was there anything you didn't like about it? These questions are often met with silence, or answers like "I don't know." And I am not really looking for answers anyway, what I am trying to do is to get them to take a moment to reflect on their thoughts, to get in touch with their feelings regarding what they see. If something makes them feel uncomfortable, they need to be able to recognize that, even if it is just to themselves. This is critical media literacy in its simplest form, taking a moment to think about how you feel about what you just viewed. I'm not sure how well it is working, only time will tell, but as I was working through this dissertation and figuring out how to parent as a feminist academic activist, this is what I came up with. Again, it is about facilitating a process, for myself as a parent/teacher, for my children, and for my students. I still learn and grapple with how to be critically conscious about the media every day, as I am on my own journey toward critical consciousness. TfCML is as much about helping myself in that journey as it is an invitation to others to join me.

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