

# LATINAS ARE MY FAVORITE FRUIT: CONSUMPTION OF HISPANIC WOMEN IN HOLLYWOOD CINEMA

Sonya Herridge, Creighton University

## **Conflated Latin Fruit**

What image goes through your mind when you think of Latin fruits; mangoes, dragon fruit, bananas, pineapples, papayas? We continually conflate the image of the European-born Carmen Miranda with essential Latina-ness (Ovalle 2011, 49-56). She is consumed repeatedly in our memory as a Latina fruit with Latina flavorings falsely imbued into her flesh. We consume her exoticized body and body parts (hips, arms, bare stomach, and eyes), her dance, her colorful and barbaric costumes, her heavily accented English, and symbolic meaning repeatedly (Ovalle 2011, 49-53). Miranda has become the generic, marketable Latina despite being a Portuguese-born Brazilian immigrant (Ovalle 2011, 50). Carmen Miranda is not the earliest nor the most outlandish Latina consumed by Hollywood, those honors seem to be reserved for Dolores Del Rio (Ovalle 2011, 24-48). Her story, despite her Euro-Brazilian background, is very typical of how Latina images, bodies, and labor are exploited and commodified by US capitalism and how Latinas must negotiate this exploitation and commodification in order to earn a living both on and off screen (Ovalle 2011, 54). Consumption, commodification, and exploitation can and often does occur in both directions.

## **“Stuff”**

The theoretical and inspiration framework from this paper stems mostly from Coco Fusco and Nao Bustamante’s play entitled “Stuff:”

“Stuff” is our look at the cultural myths that link Latin women and food to the erotic in the Western popular imagination. [...] Latin American literature is full of references to cannibalism – as the European colonial’s fear of the indigenous Other as cannibal, as a trope for European and America’s ravaging of Latin

America's resources, and, finally, as the symbolic revenge of the colonized who feed off the colonial. If food here serves as a metaphor for sex, then eating represents consumption in its crudest form. We are dealing with how cultural consumption in our current moment involves the trafficking of that which is most dear to us all: our identities, our myths, and our bodies. "Stuff" is our commentary on how globalization and its accompanying versions of "cultural tourism" are actually affecting women of color both in the third world and in Europe and North America, where hundreds of thousands of Latin women are currently migrating to satisfy consumer desires for "a bit of the Other." (2001, 257-8)

Through "Stuff," cannibalism is used to symbolize colonialism and the Latino colonial/post-colonial backlash (Fusco and Bustamante 2001, 258). The oppressed devour their oppressors through their labor (Fusco and Bustamante 2001, 269). This dog-eat-dog relationship is born out of necessity. It is through these problematic negotiations that this Latina's place in relation to the US mainstream is found. It is through her labor that she is defined as "other" (Fusco and Bustamante 2001, 258). Despite whatever privilege a Latina may have, there will always be someone who has more (Fusco and Bustamante 2001, 280).

## **Intersectionality**

It is through black feminism and feminist social work that we uncover the interlocking and interdependent complexities of oppression that surround the topics of race and gender labeled intersectionality (Mehrotra 2010, 418). There is a growing movement to include other axes of identity beyond race, class, and gender to include sexuality, ability, nation, migration, and other positionalities of social and diverse identity (Mehrotra 2010, 418-9). Great debate has arisen on how to apply intersectionality – even broaching the question if it is even academically useful (Mehrotra 2010, 418). "Stuff" premiered in late 1996 (Fusco and Bustamante 2001, 257), but included theoretical work that was not formally proposed until 2005 (Mehrotra 2010, 418-9), signifying the importance and avant-garde nature of its work. Mehrotra urges scholars to continue to grapple with the murkiness, complexity, and ambiguity of intersectionality to accommodate the multiplicity of women's lives (2010, 427).

## Latin@ Labor

By analyzing Latina labor, both on and off screen, multiple positionalities are analyzed; obvious ones include gender/sex and ethnicity, but others include race, sexuality, class, nationality, age, history of migration/immigration, privilege, power, poverty, color, and a myriad of other characteristics (Mehrotra 2010, 419-21). There are spaces in US labor where many of these intersections are erased, simplifying Latinas into a single commodity.

These intersecting forces of oppression are present in and around what we think of as Latina labor and Latina characters on the Hollywood screen. Naturally, there are exceptions to this, but they are not easily represented in the master narrative because these women are not easily and readily consumable. However, this image is necessary to sustain the image and idea of the consumable, replaceable, non-human Latina. Both *Dance and the Hollywood Latina* and *Consuming Mexican Labor: From the Bracero Program to NAFTA* echo similar sentiments concerning the nature of Latin@ labor despite dealing with polar opposite spectrums of labor. Both of these texts portray that Latina labor is expendable, that it is easy to replace one brown woman with another. In

*Dance and the Hollywood Latina*, Carmen Miranda is folded into Latin American racial complexity into “an oversimplified and hyperexoticized version of the brown female body that exemplified the marketability of in-betweenness in the progression of the screen Latina’s mythology” (Ovalle 2011, 19). Ovalle draws out Miranda’s mistaken identity by analyzing the movies she was in, which was surprisingly few in number, ultimately taking it as a sign that Miranda’s profession may be been honorable but was definitely expendable (2011, 67-8). Perceived nationality, race, and class become the way in which one is labeled as brown (Ovalle 2011, 9-10). Bodies are identified as brown so we know where to place them in the black-white spectrum of racial relations (Ovalle 2011, 8-19). Ovalle specifically excludes Afro-Latinas from her text to highlight the nonwhite, nonblack inbetweenness that is crucial to the longevity of the Hollywood Latina (2011, 11). This distinction allows for a certain type of contrived diversity to be present in cinema, especially in times of racial unrest (Ovalle 2011, 11). The placing and reading assigned to the bodies of brown women in expendable roles has the consequence of legitimizing imperial position of the United States despite the women’s countries of origin (Ovalle 2011, 19). The Hollywood Latina’s brown body will always be looked at as foreign regardless of her nationality, race, and citizenship status (Ovalle 2011, 21).

In *Consuming Mexican Labor: From the Bracero Program to NAFTA*, Mize and Swords go through great lengths to demonstrate the expendable nature of Latin@/Mexican/migrant labor (2011, XVII). Just like in Ovalle's text, a worker's real identification in regards to race, ethnicity, nationality, and immigration are almost immaterial because these groups are blurred together – oversimplified brown bodies lumped together under the nationally-specific moniker laden with the political and colonial undertones of Mexican (Mize and Swords 2011). Most people are already familiar with the term Mexican mistakenly acting as a synonym for Latin@, Hispanic, or brown. It is also well known that this labeling is so pervasive that those in this group label themselves as Mexican. This does not appear to be what is occurring in this text, rather something much more historic occurs in labeling the workers as Mexican. Mize and Swords write with the intention of casting a net that includes both native/domestic labor and “the relationship of immigrant labor in the (post-) industrialization of the US economy” and how “Mexican [...] labor has been central to the settlement and development of the Western states” (Mize and Swords 2011, XVI-II). They close the book's preface by stating:

The central basis for *Consuming Mexican Labor* is that relations between the United States, Canada, and Mexico have always been inextricably intertwined. Initially they were intertwined in the colonial projects and today are more fully interconnected because major US production sectors depend on Mexican labor. [...] We examine the post-ware experiences of Mexican laborers in the US economy and how commodities and services bought by US consumers are increasingly, though not exclusively, built on the backs of Mexican laborers. The situation in Canada is much more complicated but most recently, with the passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), is quickly catching up with the US historical pattern of Mexican labor exploitation. (Mize and Swords 2011, XVII)

With that being said, it appears that utilizing Mexican labor is done within the context of colonialism and empire, very similarly to how brown female bodies are constructed in cinema. There is a significant difference, however. Ovalle does not argue that cinema is increasingly built upon the back of brown women. In fact, the opposite seems to be true. This is a vast departure in similarities.

What is not a departure in similarities is the expendable nature of brown bodies. “The most egregious characteristic of the forms of exploitation of Mexican labor for North American consumption is unquestionably the callous view that labor is disposable” (Mize and Swords 2011, XVI). When Mize and Swords inform readers “Mexican immigrant workers are 80 percent more likely to die on the job,” [...] thus becoming the “group with the highest occupational death rate,” their expendable-ness becomes quite apparent (Mize and Swords 2011, XVI).

In both texts, brown bodies are constructed in relationship to the United States’ imperial and colonial nature. In both texts, brown bodies are expendable. In the case of Latinas actresses, their livelihood could be at stake if they do not conform to certain expectations. In the case of Mexican laborers, their lives are at stake simply by working. Both forms of labor and their stories exist in relation to one another and in their relationship to the hierarchy based on gender/sex, ethnicity, race, sexuality, class, nationality, age, history of migration/immigration, privilege, power, poverty, color, and a myriad of other characteristics that pervades all aspects of the United States.

## **Careers**

Instead of analyzing individual filmic texts, this paper has chosen to analyze the careers of Latina actresses. It is a known fact that actors and actresses are subject to being typecast. However, actresses of color are subject to permanent typecast based on their adherence to the dominant cosmetic codes and how and where they are located in relation to whiteness and blackness as the default racial and representational identity in Hollywood cinema (Ovalle 2011, 10).

Beltran posits that there exists an all-too-visible glass ceiling for Latin@s who look a certain way (2009, 129). Latinas seem to be cast into one of two roles: the domestic (maid, babysitter, mother, grandmother) or the hot tamale (the love interest, sex object, other woman, siren, sex kitten, salsa dancer, seductress) (Beltran 2009, 129). Building upon Ovalle’s finding that “nonblack Latina performers retain limited privileges if they adhere to the dominant cosmetic codes that are organized around whiteness as the default racial and representational identity” (2009, 10), Latin@ “actors with darker skin and clearly indigenous features” are overlooked because they lack marketable features (Beltran 2009, 129). Such Latinas are often

relegated to play the domestic (Beltran 2009, 129). While they may enjoy many work opportunities, they will not experience much fame or other associated perks (Beltran 2009, 129). It seems as if these two roles, domestic or love interest, are the cinematic Latina stereotypes because these are the only roles available for Latina actresses (Navarro 2002). Ovalle agrees with this assessment, especially after the period that the racialized and sexualized Hollywood Latina myth became entrenched into the US psyche (2011, 102). Occasionally, a role will find combine both the love interest stereotype and the domestic, like in *Maid in Manhattan* (Ovalle 2011, 142).

Beltran quotes Gary Keller as noting “the growing population power and consequently political, economic, and cultural importance [of Latina/os] spurred all sorts of film, television, and video initiatives for and by US Hispanics” (2009, 113-4). It seems that Ovalle would disagree with the order of that statement. She declares, “the balance of sameness and difference required of the Hollywood Latina builds her professional and social agency while cultivating an illusion of diversity and sexual liberation in US cinema” (Ovalle 2011, 11). Whatever the case may be, it is clear that Latina actresses have privilege that many others do not. They have much more privilege than the people they are representing in these films, especially laborers. We must recognize that these actresses had and have a level of agency and privilege that is not available to the Mexican laborers from the Mize and Swords text – which they may or may not represent on screen – because they themselves are laborers, but in a different field.

### Rita Moreno

Rita Moreno is most remembered for her role as Anita in *West Side Story* in which her character anchors the image of the Nuyorican woman in the US imaginary (Ovalle 2011, 115). When introducing Moreno, Ovalle places her at the intersection of race, gender, ethnicity, and sexuality (Ovalle 2011, 101). Moreno is notable for two distinct reasons: her accolades and her criticism. “She is the only Hollywood Latina nominated for any mainstream award of achievement and remains one of the most critically acclaimed performers in Hollywood: she has won an Academy Award, a Tony Award, two Emmys, and a Grammy” (Ovalle 2011, 103). It is through Moreno’s open criticism of the barefoot and teeth mashing roles – that is, ambiguously ethnic – she was offered, such as Gypsies, Spanish señoritas, to Mexican or Italian peasants (Ovalle 2011, 105-6). She did not want her body to be used for mainstream audiences to consume a bit of exoticism. Her criticism paralleled the political goings-on at the time, specifically concerning the relationship Puerto Rico and New York (Ovalle 2011, 106-10). Other

criticisms include her lost battles against racism, sexism, and ageism (Ovalle 2011, 124). Her battles were not without effect, however. While she may not have won more varied roles for herself, she advocated for the importance of Latin@-produced mainstream media that target a diverse audience (Ovalle 2011, 124).

Ovalle credits Moreno with creating the foundation and paving the way politically for Jennifer Lopez and other Latina stars to refashion what Latina-ness is and sounds like (Ovalle 2011, 125). She was able to quite literally play with the roles that were available to her and made them subtly political (Ovalle 2011, 21). Ovalle focuses greatly on Moreno's playful-yet-biting strategic approach to her appearance on *The Muppet Show* (2011, 122). "Moreno's willingness to critique the media industry, coupled with the historical moment of her critical acclaim, powerfully distinguishes her from many other Hollywood Latinas" (Ovalle 2011, 103). She fought back against the consumption of her brown body. When she could not win, she played with the role enough to win awards. She consumed right back.

### Lupe Ontiveros

During an interview with the New York Times, Lupe Ontiveros estimates that she has held the role of a maid at least 150 times (Navarro 2002). Ontiveros makes a point to communicate that these roles do not parallel her personal narrative, stating that she grew up in a middle-class in El Paso and graduated from Texas Women's University (Navarro 2002). When questioned about the number of times she's portrayed a maid, she laments that, "It's their continued perspective of who we are. [...] They don't know we're very much a part of this country and that we make up every part of this country" (Navarro 2002).

The experience of the characters she portrays are so far removed from her that she – like other Latina actresses before her – has had to utilize a fake accent in order to obtain a role (Navarro 2002). When she uses her normal speaking voice, she will not get the job (Navarro 2002). However, unlike other Latina actresses, she shared that she does not regret these roles (Navarro 2002). These roles as a domestic helper have provided her with a steady job, and she feels honored to portray working people honestly (Navarro 2002). "I'm proud to represent those hands that labor in this country. I've given every maid I've ever portrayed soul and heart" (Navarro 2002). Ontiveros's roles represent many actual life experiences.

Unlike other Latina actresses, despite the fact that these roles are quite stereotypical, she has garnered a sense a pride from these parts. She did not consider herself to be consumed by

these roles; she felt it was a privilege to represent real people. Perhaps she also bestows dignity onto an otherwise invisible and thankless profession. It almost does not matter how or why these roles were written because Ontiveros imbues dignity and humanity into whom she represents. Their efforts are valorized (Kaplan 2013).

### Jennifer Lopez

Jennifer Lopez needs no introduction. Ovalle considers her the apex of the Hollywood Latina (2011, 126). Her start involves her actively commodifying her nonwhite female body for specific types of consumption (Ovalle 2011, 126). Her body inhabits the space between whiteness and blackness, specifically an urban space (Ovalle 2011, 130-1). Of note, her dance and *derrière* act as a stand-in for black female sexuality (Ovalle 2011, 131). “By mobilizing race and shaking her assets, the Hollywood Latina uses the myth to get paid” (Ovalle 2011, 23). Lopez has used multiple venues to utilize her assets that parallel the five senses: “sight (film/video), sound (music), smell (perfume), touch (clothing), and taste (style or, including her now defunct restaurant, food)” (Ovalle 2011, 127).

Because of the political work undertaken by Moreno, Lopez is able to retain her “Americanness” by capitalizing on her Nuyorican background (Ovalle 2011, 135). Because she inhabits a more American space, she loses the threat of the foreign, but still remains a non-white figure (Ovalle 2011, 135). Lopez is able to completely circumnavigate the American racial hierarchy from white to non-white to black and has duly capitalized on it (Ovalle 2011, 135-7). Because her body is meant for everyone’s consumption, she is able to consume a greater quantity of capital that results from that consumption, contributing to her success. She becomes the cannibal’s cannibal.

### Jouissance

To be clear, there are types of consumption that exist outside of problematic cannibalism. In a more lascivious part of “Stuff,” a little bit of *jouissance* is found:

I once asked an astronaut what he missed most about Earth, and he replied, “food and sex.” I can relate to that. I am eating her and she tastes so tangy, a bit like a rusty papaya, unlike any other person I’ve tasted. Women taste strong, not like men. Men don’t taste like anything if they are properly washed. Women always have a taste even if they are freshly bathed. When you consume a woman there is a taste and a smell left in your mouth and in your nose, which are connected by



the way, as are your asshole and your mouth. But a woman's flavor changes depending on what she has eaten, how aroused she is, where she is in her cycle, and who is in her vicinity. They say it's the same for men, with semen, but whatever, to me the taste of semen is repulsive. I think those who enjoy eating women must enjoy the flavor and scent of seriously potent fruit...I've eaten both, and it takes more raw talent...to eat a woman. (Fusco and Bustamante 2001, 271)

Consumption can be pleasurable or necessary, but it depends upon who is eating and who is being eaten.

### Eva Longoria

Eva Longoria is a contemporary of Jennifer Lopez. The only significant difference lies in what media their work is most known in. Longoria most famous for her television activities while Lopez is a force to be reckoned with in many others (Kaplan 2013, Ovalle 2011). Continuing in line with her television presence, Longoria is an executive producer of the Lifetime television show entitled *Devious Maids* (Kaplan 2013). Even though this instance deals specifically with television, Longoria makes a point that resonates with all media. When faced with Latin@ criticism that viewed working as a maid and being Hispanic as “demeaning and stereotypical,” Longoria shares that her grandmother worked as a maid (Kaplan 2013). Longoria defended her choice by stating that these stories are worth telling (Kaplan 2013).

Longoria and Ontiveros share the same sentiment; these stories belong to actual people and thus are worthy of being told. Because these stories are told with such respect and care, they do not have an end towards cannibalistic consumption. These are stories told by Latin@s for an inclusive audience, achieving Moreno's goal. As long as there are Latina maids and domestics, there will be stories about Latina maids and domestics. As long as the stories are told and/or portrayed with respect and dignity, they will not be shameful. They can and will be enjoyed outside of the context of the mainstream, but are available for mainstream understanding as well. These women – both maids and stars – deserve that recognition for the fruits of their labor, their stories.

## Conclusion

Latinas in Hollywood have relatively few choices; they can be a maid, a love interest, and sometimes a maid that becomes a love interest. It is the love interest role –the exoticized and sexualized role – that is made for mainstream cannibalistic consumption. Maid stories are not necessarily for consumption because they can and do depict actual life stories of real people, but the context of who is telling the story is of utmost importance. Despite capability of consumption, both roles can be used to generate money and privilege. “Hollywood film embodies and renders visible the racial, sexual, and gendered ideologies of the United States and these representations function as recognizable – if exaggerated – versions of the US social/racial hierarchy” (Ovalle 2011, 5). Using the style of Fusco and Bustamante, the Latinas are monetarily feeding off the colonizers who culturally feed off of them. The cycle of cannibalism continues as long as it is within the social/racial hierarchy (Beltran 2009).

## Bibliography

- Beltran, Mary C. *Latina/o Stars in U.S. Eyes: The Making and Meanings of Film and TV Stardom*. Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2009.
- Fusco, Coco, and Nao Bustamante. "Stuff." In *Feminist Locations: Global and Local, Theory and Practice*, edited by Marianne DeKoven, 257-281. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2001.
- Kaplan, Don. "Domestic Disturbance 'Devious Maids' stirs Latino Criticism of Stereotyping." *Daily News: New York's Hometown Newspaper*, June 24, 2013.
- Mehrotra, Gita. "Toward a Continuum of Intersectionality Theorizing for Feminist Social Work Scholarship." *Affilia: Journal of Women and Social Work* 25, no. 4 (2010): 417-430.
- Mize, Ronald L., and Alicia C.S. Swords. *Consuming Mexican Labor: From the Bracero Program to NAFTA*. North York, Ontario: University of Toronto Press Incorporated, 2011.
- Navarro, Mireya. "Trying to Get Beyond the Role of the Maid; Hispanic Actors Are Seen as Underrepresented, With the Exception of One Part." *New York Times*, May 16, 2002.
- Ovalle, Priscilla Pena. *Dance and the Hollywood Latina*. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2011.