## Chapter 7 - Feminist Perspectives in Latinx Media

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A range of ancestries, dialects, cultural histories, and circumstances shape Latinx identities in the US and inform their perspectives as media producers and consumers. This chapter explores this diverse landscape, first offering a glimpse at its theoretical roots, then suggesting some of the ways that Latinx feminist perspectives respond to and inform media practices. Given the global reach of contemporary digital platforms; the ubiquity and endurance of certain stereotypes and tropes in Hollywood films; and the proﬁt-driven consolidation of media industries, the cultural politics of representation serves as a useful organizing framework for investigating multiple Latinx feminist perspectives. Indeed, representation is a site of contention and resistance, an intersection where the dynamics of class, gender, race and sexuality converge. It offers a unique vantage point through which to explore feminist perspectives in Latinx Media.

Representation is always mediated through power, as those who create or control images and stories inform public attitudes, opinions, even policies. Practices of representation (both visual and discursive) produce forms of knowledge, ways of seeing the world and interpreting one’s place in it. Representational perspectives in media theory and practice interrogate the ways that ideology operates through visual and textual images to “normalize” ethnic, racial, gender or other inequalities. Latina feminist theories focused on the politics of representation help complicate, subvert, or revise how popular notions about “Latin women” or “**latinidad**” are articulated or internalized in Latinas’ own formulations of group and self-identification. As media producers, Latinx feminists may challenge enduring stereotypes, not merely to replace these with uplifting, “positive” images, but to expand a repertoire of themes, messages, and perspectives. Latinx feminist practices, in all their multiplicity, aim to empower Latinas as media subjects, producers, and consumers.

### Feminism: Who Speaks, and for Whom?

Before considering specific examples of Latinx feminist theory and practice, let us address a question you may be asking: Why the need for a “*Latina* feminism”? Doesn’t “feminism” advocate on behalf of *all* women? While the **second-wave feminist movement** of the late 1960s and 70s launched significant challenges against patriarchal economic and social structures, it also sidelined issues of vital importance to many women of color. Universalizing “woman” as white, middle-class, and heterosexual, the movement’s leaders tended to overlook critical distinctions among women that further complicated their roles in society, their access to educational and economic opportunities, and their relationship to the state and its institutions. What this universalizing tendency obscures is that women face inequalities and discriminatory policies based not only on gender, but also race, class, ethnicity, sexuality and other markers of identity subject to distinct forms of control. Issues related to citizenship status, cultural differences, language usage, labor practices, and policing, for example, which impacted Latinx communities and shaped Latina feminist perspectives, scarcely informed the movement’s priorities. As white feminist scholar Rachel Blau Duplessis later wrote, “we thought all women were us, and we were all women” (106).

Latina feminisms grew out of these disparities and omissions, first inspired by Black and Chicanx liberation movements, then spreading into wider Latinx constituencies. Latina feminist activists also looked inward, challenging intra-group sexism, homophobia, racism, and colorism. They developed an intersectional lens with which to explore, for instance, the subordinated status of Afro-Latinas and the heteronormative roots of machismo within Latino social or political groups. They organized to dismantle sexism from within the ranks of **Chicano**, **Boricua**, and other Latino movements (e.g. **Young Lords, Brown Berets, La Raza Unida**), where women were frequently relegated to menial tasks or secondary roles. As a result of these and other challenges, Latinx Feminist media scholarship, as well as Latinx creative expression, cultural production, and political agency, were irrevocably enriched.

### Crossing Borders: The Emergence of Latinx Feminist Theory

These tensions, power dynamics, and changing landscapes found expression in formative Latinx feminist theories and practices. By the 1980s, the rise of Spanish language television networks, Univision and Telemundo, brought Latinx-centered stories and news broadcasts into American living rooms (see Chapter 10 for a detailed discussion of this development). This decade also saw the emergence of independent US Latinx film, the “discovery” of US Latinos as a viable niche market (Valdivia) and the slow integration of Latinx scholarship and visual media into university Media Studies courses (Cepeda). But it was the pioneering work of Latinx scholar-activists during this period that helped a new generation of Latina feminists confront “the many-headed demon of oppression” (Alarcon 289). Gloria Anzaldua and Cherríe Moraga’s anthology, *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color,* first published in1981 and now in its fourth reissue*,* showcased “the complex confluence of identities—race, class, gender, and sexuality—systemic to women of color oppression and liberation” (xix). The publication of Anzaldua’s *Borderlands/La Frontera, The New Mestiza* (1987) further contributed new ways of thinking about borders as symbolic, psychological, linguistic and sexual constructs. Anzaldua formulated *mestizaje* identity as a borderland, a site where two or more cultures or ways of being collide, blend, and coexist. “Mestiza consciousness” represented the erosion of rigid boundaries and mutually exclusive categories such as Indigenous/European, Spanish/English, black/white. A pivotal figure in Chicana feminist, queer, and indigenous activism, Moraga’s continuing work as an award-winning playwright and director highlights Chicanx cultural history and experiences, offering perspectives that erode rigid linguistic and social boundaries. Still building bridges of solidarity, she recently founded, in collaboration with Chicana artist Celia Herrera Rodriguez, *Las Maestras Center for Xicana Indigenous Thought & Art Practice,* a collaborative site for Chicanx creative expression and scholarship ([www.lasmaestrascenter.ucsb.edu/](http://www.lasmaestrascenter.ucsb.edu/)).

Many other Latina feminist writers, activists, and organizers contributed to emergent Latinx feminist theory and praxis, including writer-activist Martha Cotera, who responded to sexism within the Chicano nationalist movement by co-founding the *Mujeres de La Raza Unida* (Women of the Raza Unida) political party in 1973. Her book, *Diosa y Hembra: The History and Heritage of Chicanas in the US* (1976) offered a seminal history of Chicanas’ feminist activism in social justice movements, a perspective excluded from school curricula and public memory. Cotera and Linda Garcia Merchant later founded the Raza Digital Memory Collective (<http://chicanapormiraza.org/>) to ensure preservation of civil-rights era Chicanx and Latinx oral histories and personal archives. Latinx feminists have worked tirelessly to dismantle or expand Eurocentric frameworks, redefining traditional notions of ethnic identity, “Americanness” or citizenship. Feminist community organizer and writer Elizabeth Martinez, Swarthmore College’s first Latina graduate (1946), for example, co-founded the influential newspaper *El Grito del Norte* in 1968. While focused primarily on exposing social injustice against Chicanx communities, the paper also had an anti-imperialist bent, challenging power at the local level while aligning Latinx feminisms with broader international human rights struggles. In 1997, Martinez founded the Institute for Multiracial Justice, fostering coalitions on behalf of women's rights, LGBTQ rights, racial justice and immigrant rights.

In her efforts to bridge differences and build coalitional movements, noted scholar-activist Chela Sandoval introduced methods gleaned from Third World Feminism to help confront postmodern forms of oppression. In her essay “US Third World Feminism: The Theory and Method of Oppositional Consciousness in the Postmodern World” (1991) and later in a groundbreaking book, *Methodology of the Oppressed* (2000), Sandoval proposed strategies for accommodating women’s varying positionalities and building a decolonizing “coalitional consciousness” (78). Grounded in a well-defined identity-politics, her approach entails the flexibility to “shift gears” and adapt perspectives as needed to forge strategic alliances “between and among” various kinds of oppositional ideologies and political strategies (13–14). Sandoval’s methods situated Latinx feminism at the forefront of US postmodern feminist theory and practice.

These foundational texts and movements confronted a range of issues related to racism, violence, the exploitation and also empowerment of women; they highlighted Latinas as speaking subjects rather than objects of a “white” discursive gaze. Latinx feminist scholar-activists initiated modes of self-representation and intervention capable of negotiating and traversing a complex postmodern media landscape. In so doing, their collective efforts inspired the transnational, intersectional approaches that inform contemporary Latinx feminist media theory and praxis.

### Representing Latinx Feminist Perspectives Onscreen and Onstage

Some *feminista* approaches draw on a political definition of representation, that is, on methods for advocating on behalf of others or in processes that “give voice” to diverse constituencies. Others see representation as a tool for reconstituting or reimagining (re-imaging) Latinx identities through aesthetic and visual media production. For example, Aida Nieto Gomez, the first female president of the **Chicano Student Movement to Aztlan** (MEChA) and co-founder of ***Hijas de Cuauhtémoc***, a Latinx feminist-centered publication, used visual media to counter images of Mexican women as domesticated, passive victims of *machismo.* Her screenplay for the groundbreaking film *CHICANA,* produced in 1979, traced a long history of contributions by women of Mexican- and indigenous-descent—as workers, activists, organizers, educators, and leaders. A notable figure in Latinx media, the film’s director, Sylvia Morales, followed up with a sequel in 2009, *A Crushing Love: Chicanas, Motherhood and Activism*, honoring the legacies of five Latinx activists in the US: Dolores Huerta, Elizabeth “Betita” Martinez, Cherríe Moraga, Alicia Escalante, and Martha Cotera. Similarly, Aurora Levins Morales used poetry, essays, and scriptwriting to focus attention on Puerto Rican women’s experiences and contributions to the radical US Puerto Rican women’s movement. She also participated in the Chicago Women’s Liberation group (1970-1), performed with La Peña Cultural Productions Group, and produced radio programs.

Filmmakers, screen-writers, and playwrights also set the stage for contemporary Latinx creative talents, showcasing viewpoints mostly absent from mainstream productions. US Chicana filmmaker, director and producer Lourdes Portillo explains that she “was drawn to filmmaking because I never saw people like me – and stories like mine – on the screen” ([www.lourdesportillo.com/](http://www.lourdesportillo.com/)). She launched her filmmaking career with *After the Earthquake* (1978), which focused on the struggles of a Nicaraguan woman living in San Francisco. Portillo’s internationally renowned documentary, *Las Madres:* *The Mothers of Plaza de Mayo*, featured mothers whose sons and daughters were “disappeared” by the Argentine dictatorship during the “Dirty War” (1976-1983). These women turned grief into action, risking their lives by organizing and staging ongoing demonstrations demanding government accountability. The film was nominated for an Emmy and an Academy Award for Best Feature Documentary in 1986. Portillo is the subject of an anthology, *Lourdes Portillo:* The Devil Never Sleeps *and Other Films* (2001)*,* edited by Rosa Linda Fregoso (<https://utpress.utexas.edu/books/frelou>). (Additional information on Portillo can be found in the Key Creatives section of this book).

A new generation of Independent Latinx feminist filmmakers, such as Frances Negrón-Muntaner, expanded this legacy further, examining homophobia, racism, colonization, and Puerto-Rican identities on the island and US mainland. Influenced by late 1960s and early 1970s Chicanx and Puerto Rican feminist filmmakers, Negrón-Muntaner’s first film (with Peter Biella) in 1989, *AIDS in the Barrio,* examines the devastating impact of the disease on Puerto Rican communities in north Philadelphia. Her award-winning 1994 film, *Brincando el Charco: Portrait of a Puerto Rican,* highlights the difficulties of navigating diverse aspects of identity--as a lesbian, a Puerto Rican living in the US, and a light-skinned Latinx female. Alberto Sandoval-Sánchez calls the film “a foundational text” in giving visibility to Puerto Rican lesbians and gays striving to articulate their “relationships with the father, the family, the home, the nation, the burial place, and even with the myth of the eternal return’’ (160). In addition to several films, monographs, edited collections and articles, Negrón-Muntaner has generated research data that broadly informs current media scholarship, including “The Latino Disconnect: Latinos in the Age of Media Mergers” (2016) and “The Latino Media Gap: A Report on the State of Latinos in US Media” (2014) both of which document Latinx underrepresentation in US broadcasting and film industries.

<Fig. 7.1 here> *Claudia (Frances Negrón-Mutaner) reflects on race and identity in while reflecting on her privilege as a light-skinned Latina in* Brincando el charco: Portrait of a Puerto Rican.

Latinx feminist playwrights such as Irene Fornes, Milcha Sanchez Scott, Coco Fusco, and Josephina Lopez also helped set the stage, literally and figuratively, for emergent 21st century talents such as Alexis Sheer, Melinda Lopez, Hilary Bettis, Tanya Saracho, and Caridad Svich, whose plays expand the repertoire of Latinx characters and themes today. Blending aesthetic and cultural influences, resisting linear plot structures and other “realist” devices, they disrupt dominant discourses about Latinx cultures and suggest possibilities for an ever-evolving feminist poetics. For example, Dolores Prida (*Beautiful Señoritas*), parodies dominant images of Latina bodies, while Milcha Sánchez-Scott (*Latina*) portrays the challenges of “brown” bodied actresses in a white-dominant theater world. Sánchez-Scott’s bilingual play, *The Cuban Swimmer*, captures the ambivalent and sometimes discordant aspirations shaping immigrant family dynamics; it also challenges generic and geographical borders, moving between realism and magical realism and among different spatial realities. These Latinx feminists, along with many others too numerous to list here, are agents of social change. They inform and vitalize transnational, anti-essentialist modes of apprehension and representation, chipping away at racialized, sexist paradigms and binary models of cultural difference that have worked to erase, displace, or devalue Latina subjectivities and creative expression.

### The Latina Body as Contested Site of Representation

The Latina body has long represented an ambivalent, troublesome presence in the US national imaginary. Assumptions about US Latinas as perpetual foreigners, racial hybrids (typified as neither white nor black), or hypersexual and hyper-emotional Others, form the basis of tropes promoted in popular film, magazine, news, and television images. As a site of knowledge production, Anzaldúa reminds us, “The body is the ground of thought. The body is text” (2015; 5). Latinx feminist media perspectives play a critical role in decolonizing representations of the Latinx body, carving out interstitial spaces for bi-cultural, bilingual, or hybrid subjects to tell their own stories.

The commercial success of “crossover” Latina film stars and the increasing participation of Latinas behind the camera play a crucial role in this process. As Mary Beltrán argues, “stardom operates on a national and increasingly global scale as a powerful social force. Stars—or the lack of stars from particular social groups in a society— ‘teach’ notions of identity and leadership to citizens from all walks of life, including lessons regarding the meaning of gender, class, race, and ethnicity in a particular time and place” (5). Latina star power is significant not only in terms of visibility and access, but for its role in facilitating Latinas’ participation as producers, directors, and screenwriters. US Latina film directors such as Patricia Cardoso and actresses-turned-producers like Salma Hayek help expand the kinds of roles available to US Latina actresses. Hayek founded her own production company, produced *In the Time of the Butterflies* (2001) and directed *El Maldonado Miracle* (2003) for Showtime Television. She was the first Latina actress nominated for a best actress Academy Award (for *Frida*, in 2003). A Mexican-American international star, she convinced ABC to pick up the TV series, *Ugly Betty* (starring America Ferrera) which went on to win a Peabody Award and run four seasons.

In 2007, Ferrera made history as the first Latina to win an outstanding lead actress Emmy for her role. The series was one of the first English-language shows to offer a positive fictional representation of an “illegal” alien, as Betty’s father, Ignacio, is an undocumented immigrant; it was also the first to show an interracial, same-sex adolescent kiss on primetime TV (Gonzalez). The “dramedy’s” hybridity captures its Latin American roots (it was first a Colombian telenovela), its protagonist’s ambiguous place within a US professional workspace, and the permeability of generic borders between melodrama, comedy, and the telenovela. Betty is also a self-identified feminist, with strong career drive and aspirations, whose humor often subverts notions about “authentic” Latinidad, beauty myths, or the American Dream. Ferrera’s success helped her bring other more complex Latinx images to the small screen. She produced a digital series that grew into *Gentefied*, a bilingual dramedy on Netflix. The series premiered in 2020, with award-winning Xicana screenwriter/producer Linda Yvette Chavez as co-executive producer and lead writer of the show.

Sundance Audience Award winner, *Real Women Have Curves* (2002), directed by Colombian Patricia Cardoso and also starring Ferrera, was based on a play by Mexican American Josefina López, who also co-wrote the screenplay. The film rejects beauty myths that privilege thin, blonde, white women’s bodies, celebrating the full-figured bodies of its Latina cast; it also foregrounds working-class Latinas, calling attention to the exploitation and disregard many of these workers face. Now an international star, Ferrera is a vocal activist for Latinas/os in the US, serving as spokesperson for *Voto Latino,* active supporter of DREAMers, and participant in the #MeToo campaign; she is also a founding member of the “Time’s Up” legal defense fund to help victims of sexual violence. In 2016, Ferrera won the Feminist Majority Foundation’s Eleanor Roosevelt Award for her many contributions to Latinx human rights activism.

<Fig. 7.?> *Ana (America Ferrera) and her co-workers in her sister’s sweatshop strip to their underwear in an effort to cool down, rejecting the body-shaming comments of Ana’s mother in* Real Women Have Curves*.*

Mexican-born film director/producer Patricia Riggen is also a rare breed: one of the most prominent Latina directors working in Hollywood today, Riggen’s debut feature film, *Under the Same Moon* (2007) starring Kate Del Castillo and America Ferrera, won the ALMA and Young Artist Award, among others. (The film is discussed in detail in Chapter 11). Riggen is part of a non-profit production company, “We Do It Together,” which produces and finances films, TV shows and other media dedicated to the empowerment of women. Actress/producer Eva Longoria, who has a master’s degree in Chicanx studies, has also used her fame to open doors for other women. An avowed feminist, she founded the Eva Longoria Foundation to empower Latinas in education and entrepreneurship. Speaking at the Women’s March in 2018, she called for “systematic change to the experience of women and girls in America. A change from fear and intimidation to respect. From pain and humiliation to safety and dignity. From marginalization to equal pay and representation.”

Afro-Latina actresses such as Gina Torres, Zoe Saldana, Gina Rodriguez, Rosie Pérez, Lauren Vélez, Rosario Dawson and Michelle Rodriguez overcame not only gender, but also racial discrimination to achieve stardom. (See Chapter 5 for a detailed discussion of the careers of Torres and Dawson). Yet they still face challenges in a casting system that functions within a narrowly prescribed set of binaries and assumptions. As Afro-Cuban actress Torres explains in a *Vibe* interview, “They didn’t care about the Latina part of me at all because I didn’t look like the Spanish, Eurocentric standard of what Latina women were supposed to look like.” Torres is the first Afro-Latina to create, produce and star in her own show, *Pearson*, on the USA Network. “I finally got into a position of power, and said, ‘We’re going to write this character as Afro-Latina. I’m going to use my Spanish as often as possible” (Reichard). After working with a Telemundo affiliate and as an on-camera host for public television, Kim Haas also became aware of the lack of Afro-Latinx representations, even in Spanish-language media: “We all know the power of television to create stereotypes, certain images, and people’s perceptions about other people. I wanted to be part of a change.” She started a blog “Los Afro-Latinos” (<https://losafrolatinos.com/>) and now hosts a PBS travel series, *Afro-Latino Travels* *with Kim Haas*, where she highlights contributions by Africans and people of African descent in the Americas ([www.cntraveler.com/story/afro-latino-travels-with-kim-haas](http://www.cntraveler.com/story/afro-latino-travels-with-kim-haas)). Afro-Latinas Jeannette Dilone (*Rizo*, 2020) and Janicza Bravo (*Zola*,2020) also give us a view of subjects and experiences rarely seen onscreen.

Today’s Latinx feminist activists are crossing spatial, linguistic, and representational borders using technologies not available to earlier *feministas*. Most have access to social media and other digital platforms that broaden their audiences and extend their transnational reach. Diverse Latinx feminist voices are now heard in podcasts such as “Latina Theory” (whose founder, Arianna Genis, also created the Latina Podcasters network); via “Latinx Twitter,” where Latinas build networks and connections (Gutiérrez); through blogs such as “Los Afro Latinos” (<https://losafrolatinos.com/>) and “We All Grow Latina” (<https://weallgrowlatina.com/>); and in Instagram accounts such as “Latina Rebels” ([www.instagram.com/latinarebels/](http://www.instagram.com/latinarebels/)). These expansive discursive and representational spaces empower a new wave of *latinidades feministas,* many inspired, informed andnourished by a rich heritage of Latinx activism and bridge-building.

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