## Chapter 8: Latina/o LGBTQ Identities

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Stuart Hall explains that “Identity is not only a story, a narrative which we tell ourselves about ourselves, it is stories which change with historical circumstances. And identity shifts with the way we think and hear [those stories about ourselves] and experience them” (8). The role that media plays in contemporary society makes it vital for us to think about the versions of identity that films and TV shows create about the different groups that comprise the US as a nation. This is particularly significant for those groups that have historically had more limited opportunities to tell their own stories within the larger arena of media culture, for example Latinas/os and LGBTQ people. In this chapter, I will examine films and TV shows that have addressed the intersection of Latina/o and LGBTQ people. I will focus on the representation and narrative role of Latina/o LGBTQ characters. The examples that I’ve selected are not meant to be exhaustive. They represent a point of departure for further exploration into these communities and their mediated versions. All the texts analyzed in this chapter also involve the social institution of the family. As Cherríe Moraga explains, “the Latino family, what happens in families, *punto*, is the heart of everything. The family is this private place, so everything is allowed to happen there, any kind of power exchanges, any kind of control …. It’s the first place where you learn to suffer and also the first place where you learn to love” (58).

*Queer*

During the late 1980s and early 1990s, LGBT activist groups like Act Up and Queer Nation reappropriated the derogatory term “queer” which had been used to demean mostly gay men, and turned it into a self-affirming word as part of their fight against their discrimination in the US. The government’s lack of action to curb the HIV/AIDS pandemic propelled these groups to demonstrate on the streets and demand changes in our society. During this same period, feminist scholars in disciplines like Philosophy, English, and Media Studies started to develop what is now known as queer theory. These writings questioned what our society has edified as normative roles and behaviors in terms of gender and sexuality, specifically as they relate to understanding identity as an essence—e.g., the idea that people are or behave in certain ways because they were born into a particular sex and not another. Examples of this essentialism would be that women are more emotional than men, or that men are more rational than women.

Queerness shifted the focus of gender and sexuality from biological determinism into notions of social constructionism and **performativity**, that is, although behaviors might appear natural, people learn to behave in those ways. The development of studies of queerness went beyond pointing out the hegemony of heterosexuality and its division of gender, to include criticisms of what became the dominant forms of “gay” and “lesbian” identities (white, bourgeois positions that looked for acceptance of and assimilation to heterosexual society). These studies also included other forms of gender and sexual expression that have often been disregarded, misunderstood or historically marked as deviant: bisexuality, transgenderism, sadomasochism, pornography, sex work, etc. These studies sought to expand and complicate not only what gender and sexuality have meant in our society, but the functions they have played too in broader discourses about power and identity formation. Scholars, activists, and artists such as Tomás Almaguer, Lawrence La Fountain-Stokes, José Esteban Muñoz, Ray Navarro, Frances Negrón-Muntaner, Yeidy M. Rivero, and Richard T. Rodríguez have examined the different ways in which queerness intersects with *latinidad* in general as well as nationally defined groups like Mexican Americans, Cuban Americans, and Puerto Ricans. Their writings explain the ways in which particular cultural discourses related to desire, colonialism, racism, Christianity/Catholicism, and machismo provide further specificity to the ways in which Latina/o/x queer subjects articulate versions of themselves.

*Cinema*

The emergence of discourses about queerness also found articulation in the arts. Many film- and videomakers started to use media to engage with the issues extant in their communities, especially the devastating effects of the AIDS pandemic for LGBT people as well as BIPOC communities. These works ranged from documentaries, educational videos, experimental shorts, as well as feature films. In 1992, B. Ruby Rich coined the term **New Queer Cinema** to characterize a “flock of films that were doing something new, renegotiating subjectivities, annexing whole genres, revising histories in their image” (164). Rich’s short history of new queer films included works by Derek Jarman, Christopher Münch, Tom Kalin, Greg Araki, Laurie Lynd, Sadie Benning, and Jennie Livingston, whose *Paris Is Burning* became central not only to the theorizing of performativity that queer theory proposed, but also to other projects such as the TV show *Pose* which will be discussed later in the chapter. While acknowledging the importance of their work, Rich laments that most of the critical attention and distribution deals were given to (mostly white) gay male directors even when lesbians were creating relevant and innovative films and videos. To address in part this lack, I would like to highlight three films released in 1994 that were directed by Latinas and focused on issues related to queerness.

*Go Fish* was directed and co-written by Rose Troche, an openly lesbian Puerto Rican filmmaker. The film won the Teddy Award for best feature film at the Berlin International Film Festival. The Teddy Award is the festival’s official queer award which was first given in 1987 to Pedro Almodóvar’s *La ley del deseo*/*Law of Desire*. *Go Film* revolves around a group of lesbian friends in the Chicago neighborhood of Wicker Park. As Troche explains, “Wicker Park was mainly a Latino area with artists, gays and lesbians moving in, as well as unwelcome yuppies who were attracted by the low rent estate costs” (17). Although the main storyline focuses on the constitution of the romantic couple of Max (Guinevere Turner) and Ely (V.S. Brodie), the film also provides insights into the lives of the other three lesbian characters. One of them is Evy (Migdalia Melendez), a young Puerto Rican nurse who is in a committed relationship with Kia (T. Wendy McMillan), a Women’s Studies college professor. Evy is divorced from a man called Junior (Alfredo D. Troche), and lives with her mother (Betty Jeannie Pejko), who doesn’t know her daughter is a lesbian. *Go Fish* addresses this situation in a scene where Evy’s mother confronts her daughter about her sexuality after Junior has outed Evy.

**<**Fig. 8.1 here**>** *Evy (Migdalia Melendez) is confronted about being a lesbian by her mother (Betty Jeannie Pejko) and ex-husband (Alfredo D. Troche) in* Go Fish*.*

During a tense confrontation, Evy’s mother asks, “Listen, so what are you? You sleep with women? You kiss women? What do you think you are—a man?” She further adds, “Oh my God, is that how I brought up, to become a ***pata***, is this what I taught you? *Ay, no me digas*. No wonder Junior left you.” The mother uses the Puerto Rican colloquial term ***pata***, a derogatory word for lesbian, as an accusation against her daughter. Evy’s lack of a clear and direct response to these recriminations leads her mother to voice an ultimatum: “As long as you live in my house you are going to go by my rules! … If you leave now, forget it, don’t you come back here.” Evy leaves after yelling “I’m getting the hell out of here,” and goes to Kia’s apartment. Once there, Max, Kia’s roommate, lets her in, and attempts to help Evy figure out her situation. At one point, Evy says, “Max, listen, I just got kicked out of the house. My mom thinks I’m going to hell. I don’t have a place to live.” Max earnestly responds, “But, Evy, you know you can live with us. We can be your new family.” With Evy’s affirmative response, “Fine,” the film redefines the concept of family as one that is chosen instead of given through birth. As John D’Emilio explains, gay men and lesbians “have had to create, for [their] survival, networks of support that do not depend on the bonds of blood or the license of the state, but are freely chosen and nurtured” (14).

Through Evy’s outing and expulsion from her home, *Go Fish* addresses the regrettable reality of discrimination that many LGBTQ people have lived, including from blood relatives. The film connects these painful experiences to unfair expectations of women in general and prejudices against lesbians in specific that exist in our society and, consequently, in Latino culture. Through the use of voice-over narration, *Go Fish* reveals how these expectations populate the psyche of two characters, Max and Evy. Before the scene where Evy’s fight with her mother, we see a sequence that starts with Max writing in her journal. Through a voice-over, we hear Max’s thoughts about how life would’ve been like had she not become a lesbian and had she followed the normative path of getting married to a man and having children. Her ideas are filmically illustrated through phantasmagoric images of six women (including her) playing the role of bride by getting dressed and undressed in a white bridal gown. A different voice-over in Spanish is heard after Evy leaves her mother’s house and is on route to Kia’s apartment. The voice-over includes the voices of a young girl and her mother. The film implies that these voices belong to a young Evy and her mother. The dialogue reveals the girl’s aspirations for the future, including becoming a teacher. The mother asks the girl if she would like to have a husband—one like her Papa. The girl says no and instead responds that she would like to live in a house with her best friend. Since the voice-over is not subtitled, only Spanish-speaking audiences would understand the exchange. The stylistic choice of using Spanish for this voice-over gives cultural specificity to the character of Evy and her experience as a Latina who is inculcated from an early age the normative script of the importance of (heterosexual) marriage.

Frances Negrón-Muntaner, an openly lesbian Puerto Rican filmmaker and scholar, directed, wrote and starred in *Brincando el charco*: *Portrait of a Puerto Rican*. The film’s main character isClaudia, a woman who, just like Evy in *Go Fish*, also suffers family rejection due to homophobia after an unexpected outing. The traumatic scene, however, takes place in the past and in Puerto Rico. In the film’s present, Claudia resides in Philadelphia where she moved to in pursuit of personal growth and professional development. Although the US might represent new possibilities for her, Claudia faces new challenges stemming from her positionality as a Puerto Rican lesbian. She is forced to deal with questions related to a newly found racial identity as well as the impact that the legacies of centuries of colonialism—both from Spain and the US—might have had in the formation of her desire and sexual identity.

*Carmelita Tropicana: Your Kunst Is Your Waffen* also made its debut in 1994, and won the Teddy Award for best short film that year. Cuban American filmmaker Ela Troyano directed the film, and co-wrote it with her sister, Alina Troyano, who is an openly lesbian performance artist whose artistic persona is Carmelita Tropicana. The short provides a fictionalized version of Carmelita’s life in New York City’s Lower East Side, specifically of a day when Carmelita’s activism lands her in jail along with her best friend Orchidia (Livia Daza-Paris), and her sister Sophia (Sophia Ramos). The film reconfigures the Latina family in two different ways. First, Carmelita’s family involves three siblings from different racial categories. Younger brother Pepito is Chinese, and Sophia is “a dark-skinned Latina yuppie wanna-be” (Troyano 145). At one point, a store cashier mistakes Sophia for African American. In response, Sophia asserts: “Latinas come in all different colors!” (Troyano 148). The other reconfiguration is through the character of Dee (Anne Iobst), an HIV+ white woman who is in the same cell with Carmelita, Orchidia and Sophia. At one point, Dee speaks in Spanish, a language she learned in prison after becoming a member of the *Sandungueras*, a Puerto Rican prison gang who adopted her after defending one of their members against another gang. Dee explains that “In prison, your family picks you. I was one of the six hermanas. María was mom. Josefa papá. She taught me salsa and merengue. Leticia was abuela, the peacemaker. You get adopted, you do better. It’s good” (Troyano 161). It is important to notice how in prison the structure of the nuclear family is adapted to create protective and affective relationships that subvert who could be step into a particular role—i.e., a woman is the father. Dee’s insistence through the statement “I am a Sandunguera” asserts not only her pride in belonging to the Puerto Rican gang/family that adopted her, but also that a sense of Puerto Ricanness informs the way in which she understands herself.

By the end of the 1990s, the New Queer Cinema had lost its original momentum. Studios recognized the profitability of LGBTQ moviegoers as a niche audience, and started producing more mainstream films like *In and Out* (Dir. Frank Oz, 1997) and *Chasing Amy* (Dir. Kevin Smith, 1997). During this period, network TV in sitcoms like *Will & Grace* (NBC, 1998 – 2006; 2017 – 2020), and *The Ellen Show* (CBS, 2001 – 2002) started to feature LGBTQ individuals as leading characters. The centrality of LGBTQ characters in these shows became possible after Ellen DeGeneres came out as a lesbian 1994, both in real life and in her sitcom *Ellen* (ABC, 1994 – 1998).

*Network TV*

US network television (currently represented by ABC, NBC, CBS, Fox, and the CW) followed radio’s economic organization as an advertiser-supported system. Nick Browne claims, “Advertising regulates the exchange between general processes of production and consumption of TV shows. In fact, any TV show must provide a suitable ‘environment’ for the commercial message” (72). The idea of TV shows as “suitable environments for ads” explains why network TV’s representations of sexuality in general and queer sexuality in particular are tamer than those in film, cable TV (particularly premium channels), and streaming services that produce their own original programming. For the purposes of this section, we should also notice that Latina/o queerness has been explored through secondary characters.

In 2006 *Ugly Betty* premiered on ABC and ran for four seasons. Silvio Horta, an openly gay Cuban American screenwriter and TV producer, adapted the wildly successful Colombian *telenovela* entitled *Yo soy Betty, la fea* into an hour-long dramedy set in New York during the new millennium. The series focuses on Betty Suárez (America Ferrera), and her family— her father Ignacio (Tony Plana), her sister Hilda (Ana Ortiz), and her teenage nephew Justin (Mark Indelicato). Betty is a smart Mexican American woman who, despite not being a fashionista, gets a job at a well-known fashion magazine. The series has several LGBTQ characters, including Justin. For the first seasons, *Ugly Betty* codifies Justin’s gayness through cultural markers that have stereotypically been associated with gay men. Justin is gentle mannered, is obsessed with impeccable grooming, has vast knowledge of fashion, and loves musical theater. The character, however, is never a stereotype. Importantly, his immediate family always shows love and support for him, including when they find out he is gay.

The series’ final season explores Justin’s sexual identity by providing him with a romantic interest, Austin (Ryan McGinnis). In the series’ penultimate episode, “The Past Presents the Future,” Justin comes out. He mostly does it because his mother’s fiancé, Bobby (Adam Rodriguez), sees him and Austin kissing. However, Justin chooses to confide in Mark (Michael Urie), Betty’s openly gay co-worker, instead of his family. Mark reassures Justin that his family will not turn its back on him. When the Suárez find out, they are ready to throw Justin a surprise Coming Out party, but Mark convinces them to let Justin do things on his own terms. Justin finally comes out to his family at the party celebrating his mother’s wedding. During the newly wed couple’s first dance, Justin asks Austin to dance with him in front of everyone.

<Fig. 8.2 here>*Justin (Mark Indelicato) comes out by dancing with his boyfriend Austin (Ryan McGinnis) in* Ugly Betty*.*

While the teenagers dance, we see the facial expressions of every single family member. They are all tenderly smiling in support of Justin and his decision to come out. Afterwards, while Justin dances with his mom, Hilda seeks complicity with her son and declares, “That Austin is a cutie!” Justin ignores the comment and coyly replies, “Mom!”

Fox’s *Glee* featured a Latina character, Santana Lopez (Naya Rivera), who explores her sexual identity until deciding that women are the objects of her love and desire. Santana is originally presented as a mean girl mostly through her sarcasm and quick wit. These attributes could have made the character into a stereotypical Latina spitfire. However, Naya Rivera’s immense talent imbues Santana with depth, and made the character a fan favorite, especially with LGBTQ audiences. In season 3’s “I Kissed a Girl,” Santana suffers a painful outing, as well as her grandmother Alma’s rejection on the grounds that lesbianism is a sin. By the sixth and final season, Alma (Ivonne Coll) comes around and attends Santana’s wedding to the love of her life, Brittney (Heather Morris). The episode entitled “A Wedding” also includes Santana’s mother, Maribel (Gloria Estefan), who never had a problem with her daughter’s love for women.

For 11 seasons, Dr. Callie Torres (Sara Ramírez), a successful orthopedic surgeon, was one of ABC’s *Grey’s Anatomy*’s regular characters. Between seasons 2 and 12, this Latina character had romantic and sexual relations with both men and women. From season 5 until the character’s departure, all of Callie’s love interests were women, including Dr. Arizona Robbins (Jessica Capshaw) who she married in season 7. After Callie decided she was a lesbian, she encountered some resistance from her father Carlos (Hector Elizondo). Yet, contrary to teenage characters like Justin and Santana, Callie dealt with the situation in a different way. Sara Ramírez, the Mexican American actress who played Callie, came out as bisexual in 2016, and as non-binary in 2020.

*TV’s Post-Network Era*

For decades now, television in the US has dramatically changed from the domination of a few networks. What is known as the (current) **post-network era** was ushered in. among other things, through the expansion of cable channels, the development of new technologies that allow watching shows outside of traditional scheduled airings (e.g., DVRs), and the rise of streaming services that gather all sorts of content, from old TV shows to new original programming. TV audiences have become further fragmented, which has allowed for more niche programming to emerge, be it in the form of shows or even entire channels for specific/intended audiences (e.g., Logo TV, El Rey Network). Well-established producers like Shonda Rhimes (*Grey’s Anatomy*) and Ryan Murphy (*Glee*) have been lured away from network TV and basic cable through lucrative deals like Netflix and other streaming services to create new series where they have even more control over their projects than they ever did before.

The constant need for new and specialized content has led up to the creation of shows that were previously deemed unsuitable and unprofitable for network television. Consequently, the televisual landscape now counts with a more expansive—if albeit still incomplete—representation of the social groups that comprise our nation. Steven Canals, co-creator of FX’s *Pose*, is one of the creative talents that has expanded new voices to the post-network arena. Canals, who identifies as a queer Afro-Puerto Rican man, wrote the show’s first draft while studying screenwriting at UCLA. Canals explains that “exhausted by the erasure of my experience, *Pose*was conceived as way to fill a gap that has long existed. A love letter to New York City and the miraculous queer and trans, black and brown souls who managed to create community in the face of a plague, violence, and familial rejection.” With the backing of established TV writers-producers Ryan Murphy and Brad Falchuk, Canals was able to get *Pose* on the air in 2018.

Taking partial inspiration in the subjects of Jenny Livingston’s *Paris Is Burning*, *Pose* provides a fictionalized version of the lives of black and brown queer characters in New York City between the late 1980s and the mid-1990s. The series gives highlights these queer characters’ relationship to ball culture, i.e., the underground drag competitions that include posing, dancing, and voguing, and where participants battle in different categories that require performing as specific types/personas/identities such as Butch Queen, Femme Queen, Successful Businessman, Rich Woman, etc. Ball participants often belong to a “House” or drag family (e.g., House of Labeija, House of Xtravaganza) that provides support inside and outside competitions. One of the series’ two main characters is Blanca Evangelista (AJ Rodriguez), an HIV+ Trans Afro-Latina woman who becomes the show’s emotional center. Upon being diagnosed HIV+, Blanca creates and becomes the leader of her own drag family under the name of House of Evangelista. As the Mother, she looks after three children: Angel (Indya Moore), Damon Richard (Ryan Jamaal Swain), and Lil Papi (Angel Bismark Curiel), and helps them succeed in the ball scene as well as everyday life. In the final season, Blanca transforms her gift to help others into a career. She becomes a nurse who specializes in patients with HIV and AIDS. She also turns into an Act Up activist once she realizes that patients of color were not being included into HIV experimental treatments. In 2021 MJ Rodriguez, who plays Blanca, became the first transgender performer to be nominated for an Emmy in the lead drama actress category.

Tanya Saracho, a Mexican-born artist who identifies as queer and Latinx, created Starz’s *Vida*. The show focuses on two sister, Emma (Mishel Prada) and Lyn (Melissa Barrera), who return to their childhood home in Boyle Heights, CA upon their mother’s sudden death. Once there, they discover that their mother Vidalia, a.k.a. Vida (Rose Portillo), had been married for two years to a woman, Eddy (Ser Anzoategui). News of the marriage are particularly shocking to Emma since Vida had sent Emma away to live with her grandmother in Texas when she was 11 as punishment for having been found expressing her desire for other girls. *Vida* exposes how Mexican American/Chicanx/Latinx women are relentlessly at odds with patriarchy, whiteness, and normative (hetero)sexuality in the US. For example, Mari Sanchez (Chelsea Rendon) is a fierce community activist who fights against her neighborhood’s gentrification with gusto. Yet, when she’s at home, she must abide by her father’s rules without complaining. Eddy’s gay bashing at a neighborhood bar where she is called a ***marimacha*** (a pejorative colloquial term for lesbian) exemplifies the perils that butch women and non-binary people encounter in this country for not following normative gender standards of self-presentation. Emma’s decision to take over her mother’s bar at the end of season 1 partly arises from realizing the importance of having a secure gathering space for queer people like Eddy and her in Boyle Heights. As Cruz (Maira-Elena Laas) says to Emma in the episode 6, Vida’s bar “is the only place in the neighborhood where *mujeres* (women)like me, girls like us, can go …. I know when I walk into your mom’s bar, I feel safe.”

All the examples that I have provided come from fiction films and TV shows. It is also important to consider how entertainment genres like reality television have also help to enhance the representation of LGBTQ Latinas/os in US popular culture. One of the most prominent examples comes from *The Real World: San Francisco*. In 1994 the MTV reality show introduced the whole nation to Pedro Zamora, an openly gay, HIV+ Cuban American activist and educator. He became the televisual face for many queer Latino/a youth in the US. The heartfelt candidness with which Pedro spoke about his gayness and HIV+ status broke ground in the depiction of Latinos and gay men in general. Since 2009, *RuPaul’s Drag Race* has become the preeminent TV series to showcase queer Latinos/as, as well as African Americans, Asian Americans, and other racial and ethnic minority groups extant in our nation. Contestants like Nina Flowers, Adore Delano, Alexis Mateo, Vanessa Vanjie Mateo, Olivia Lux, and Kandy Muse have discussed serious issues such as homophobia, poverty, sexism, racism, and domestic violence in the Latino community, as well as in US society at large. They have also highlighted the significant contributions of Latina and Latin American artists such as Selena, Frida Kahlo, and Walter Mercado, among others, to contemporary world culture.

The examples in this chapter have mostly emphasized issues related to the representation and narrative function of Latina/o LGBTQ characters in films and TV shows. Rather than thinking about if these representations were “fair,” “authentic,” or “positive,” we should pay attention to how these texts create versions of race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality, among other axes of identity, to apprehend the stories US media privileges when it comes to Latina/o LGBTQ communities. More work could be done in terms of the production of these texts (e.g., is it important who the makers of these film/TV shows are? What kind of imprint do different artistic talent—i.e., an actor vs. a writer, a director vs. a producer—leave that in these representations) as well as their reception (e.g., do Latina/o audiences enjoy these films/TV shows? Is their response different if they identify as LGBTQ?).

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