Reel Latinas? Race, Gender, and Asymmetric Recognition in Contemporary Film*

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Abstract

This paper argues that idealized portrayals of immigrants prevalent in political discourse must be scrutinized for their support of gender and racial nationalism and the effects they have on our understanding of (Latina/o) immigrant inclusion and democracy. Through the examination of three contemporary films with Latina leads—*Real Women Have Curves*, *Spanglish*, and *Quinceañera*, the paper argues that these discourses rely on an asymmetric recognition of Latina/os. This form of recognition involves the denial by dominant groups of their inter-dependency with other groups and the imposition on Latina/os an identity that does not threaten their privileged standing. The films offer views of Latina/o culture as overtly traditional; a "culture" that must either be abandoned or appropriated by anti-feminist (postfeminist) agendas in order to assuage anxieties regarding the transformations of the heteronormative middle-class family. The paper concludes by drawing parallels between the positive portrayals of Latinas in these films and prominent arguments in the immigration debate that rely on constructions of deserving immigrants to push for extensions of membership.

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At the time of writing, immigration reform is hotly debated in the national political arena. For the first time in decades, a bipartisan agreement exists to move ahead with legislation that contains a path to citizenship for the millions of undocumented immigrants currently living in the United States. This debate is strongly filtered by dominant representations of immigrants, from the "criminal alien" that all versions of the legislation vow to exclude to the highly achieving undocumented immigrants arrived that arrived as children, that all versions will treat preferentially (McCarthy 2013; Preston 2013). Arguments based on idealized portrayals of immigrants are prominent in this debate but also in discourses used extensively by pro-immigrant advocates, who are keen on highlighting the benefits that hard working immigrants, foreign entrepreneurs, and/or academically achieving young immigrants bring to the country (for some recent examples see Papademetriou and Sumption 2011; Ewing 2012a, 2012b; Gindling and Mandell 2012). This prominence raises questions about the political consequences of these constructions.

This paper claims that a critical look at positive or idealized representations of immigrants and, in particular, Latina/os, is necessary to ensure that seemingly inclusionary discourses put forward by pro-immigrant forces do not cement conceptions of nationalism that are ultimately exclusionary. In particular, this paper argues that idealized portrayals of Latina immigrants that are prevalent in political discourse legitimize an ideology of gendered and racial nationalism. This ideology involves the appropriation by the United States of progressive discourses of feminism and the gay rights struggle in order to position itself as uniquely tolerant and enlightened, in contrast to minority or immigrant groups. This maneuver involves an asymmetrical process of identity formation, through which dominant

groups erase their dependency on the dominated and impose on them an identity that does not threaten their standing.

While political scientists have developed an extensive literature examining negative stereotypes affecting Latina/os, only recently political theorists have focused on positive representations and their political downsides. Among the later, Cristina Beltrán criticizes the way in which immigrants seek to establish their membership worthiness by highlighting the hard work they perform and emphasizing necessity over freedom (Beltrán 2010, 149-54). Bonnie Honig, on the other hand, identifies how the idealized immigrants behind the myth of "immigrant America" support problematic conceptions of the nation and diminish the resources available for democratic politics (Honig 2001, 72-92).

In this paper I offer a new framework grounded on media and Latino studies and post-colonial theory and rely on new material (film) in order to shed light on the way in which idealized portrayals of Latinas in contemporary film serve exclusionary nationalist ideologies. This examination provides new insight into the way in which film discourse and—with it—the public understands Latina/o culture and difference. Unlike existing treatments in political theory, my framework theorizes explicitly the way in which gender and race are manipulated by film discourse in order to support certain notions of nationalism. The analysis reveals that representations of gender and race can be deployed differently—and even contradictorily—in the service of hierarchical narratives of nationalism. I complement and/or criticize the claims of existing treatments of the films in the media studies literature and tie the emergence of complex and seemingly sympathetic portrayals of Latinas to anxieties that are in evidence in the immigration debate. Ultimately, these films represent Latina/o culture as distinct but rather than recognizing the injustice that comes with the

group's position, it singles out its "culture" as the problem.[1] This finding offers important insights to theorists of democracy and difference by outlining the obstacles that exist for the claims of justice put forward by groups to be understood and considered politically (Young 2000).

Film discourse is a privileged medium for this exploration, because—alongside other regimes of representation—it plays a constitutive role in social and political life (Hall 1996, 444). This paper analyzes three films with Latina leads—*Real Women Have Curves* (*RWHC*), *Spanglish*, and *Quinceañera*—filmed and released between the years 2000 and 2006.[2] Given the hostility that characterized the immigration debate during this period, they offer a privileged source to interrogate dominant understandings of identity and difference. As a contrast to the films, I examine Josefina López's original dramatic script for *RWHC* (1996), which illustrates the limitations that distribution to a broader population (sought by the film medium) imposes on the nuanced treatment of difference, identity, and immigration politics.

In the next section, I introduce the theoretical framework. In section three I introduce the films and—in three sub-sections—examine in detail each of them. In this section I also contrast *RWHC* with its original script. Section four draws connections between the findings of the paper and discourses that prevail in the immigration debate as well as political theoretic treatments of immigration and democracy.

2. Filming Latinas, Immigrants, and the Nation

Films—as "texts of enjoyment"—make and remake relations of power and construct

[1] I enclose "culture" between quotation marks, to note that I refer to the constructions of culture that
[2] Given that the three movies examined in this paper portray exclusively Mexican-American women, men, or families, I use "Latina/o" and "Mexican American" indistinctly.

gender and racial regimes (McRobbie 2004, 264). Films with Latino/a characters provide the "quintessential experience of border crossing" for those who want to look at difference without having to engage "the other" experientially (hooks 1996, 2). As bell hooks notes, films might be the only instance in which white men and women engage with the lives of men and women of color. In this sense, films can become ethnographic discourse that instead of representing ethnics and minorities, creates them and provides its audience with an experience of them (A. M. López 1993, 68; cited in L. S. Kim 1999, 125).

While an extensive literature has engaged with stereotypical portrayals of Latina women, it is only recently that Latina characters have been portrayed with complexity and taken leading roles in popular films (Ramírez Berg 2002, chapter 2). The films analyzed in this paper in particular, offer more nuanced representations of Latinas who are able to independently follow their dreams (M. Beltrán 2009, 74-5; Vargas 2009, 47-52). These roles contrast with the most common racial/sexual stereotype of the spitfire (i.e., a sexually provocative and irrepressible Latina) or the more recent "troubled Latina girl" (M. Beltrán 2009, 74-5; Vargas 2009, 47-52). Instead, "benevolent" narratives have been adopted by Hollywood and independent film-makers and embraced by commercial distributors. However, even within these complex narratives, stories of individual progress and "assimilation" can be found. These stories work to cover up socio-economic structures of inequality and refuse to acknowledge a complex past and a contested present of hostility against Latino/as and immigrants.

It is necessary to scrutinize the way in which positive cultural representations can be used to normalize through the accommodation of groups to help states "organize and manage difference" (Dávila 2000, 2001, 11-2). The films analyzed in this paper echo and transform

but do not overcome old stereotypical constructions of Latinas as "female ethnic subject[s]," othered through their categorization and marginalization vis-à-vis a dominant construction of Whiteness and femininity (Molina Guzmán and Valdivia 2004, 206). They present Latina heroines who become "acceptable ethnics" through personal work ethics, nurturing work, and/or academic success.

Positive depictions of immigrants have been explored by political theory accounts, such as Bonnie Honig's *Democracy and the Foreigner.* She argues that the myth of an immigrant America depicts the foreigner as rescuing the regime from corruption, allowing it to return it to its first principles, which may be capitalist, communal, familial, or liberal (Honig 2001, 74). Her analysis rightfully notes the double-sided character of positive stereotypes and the way in which they serve politically problematic stories of nationalism. However, the focus on the "undecidability" of foreignness (i.e., how the admiration of foreigness can not only reinvigorate the regime but also unsettle it and lead to xenophobic reactions) and on the problems that immigrants "solve" for democratic politics displaces other important questions that are tackled in this paper.

In particular, not enough attention is paid to the role of race and gender in structuring the play between attraction to foreignness (xenophilia) and xenophobia and how these two attitudes are embeded in structural relations of power. This is characteristic of agonistic approaches that highlight the undecidability or indeterminacy of politics (McNay 2008, 17-8). In contrast, I examine how nationalist discourses especially target Latina/os and impose an identity that is filtered by race and gender and is self-serving to the dominant group. As I show in this paper, positive and even complex representations do not overcome racialized constructions of Latinas. In the films under analysis, success is depicted as antithetical to

these women's family, "culture", and romantic engagements within their community. These narratives constitute racialized and gendered nationalist narratives that appropriate feminism and a safe/privatized white gay culture as characteristic of "American" exceptionalism (Duggan 2002, 177-9).[3] A narrative of gender and racial nationalism positions the United States as an exceptionally egalitarian and tolerant society and portrays "successful" Latinas in ways that cement the notion of a superior white (usually male) Anglo culture. This appropriation deprives feminist and gay movements from the more radical and anti-racist dimensions of their critiques and obscures the existence of inter-racial alliances within these movements. The films support these discourses through different narrative paths that either urge the abandonment of traditional Latina/o "culture" or idealize its nurturing dimensions to allay anxieties regarding socio-economic and demographic change.

These representations do not provide critical narratives that let us see through the meritocratic fictions of a society still structured by inequality and white privilege. Latina characters are presented with a choice between two "cultures" depicted as antithetical. Adopting a critical stance that can bring to task both oppressive patriarchal structures within Latina/o communities and patriarchal and racialized dominant Anglo structures is not an option for them.

A critical stance requires an encounter with those aspects of our life and society that are otherwise covered—if imperfectly—by ideology (McGowan 2007, 15). Uncovering ideology can lead to an encounter with difference and plurality, welcoming emancipatory conceptions of agency that incorporate the diverse and conflicted nature of Latinidad.

[3] Unless I am quoting, I enclose "America" and "American" in quotation marks to remind the reader of its "ethnocentric genealogy, which appropriates the whole of the Americas in naming citizens of the United States and often tends to assume a WASP-centered historicity" (Mendible 2007, 22).

Latinidad has been reclaimed as a realm in which to explore "interlatino affinities, desires, and conflicts" where public knowledge about Latina/os can be produced (Aparicio 2003, 93; cited in Mendible 2007, 4). More recently, Cristina Beltrán has conceptualized Latinidad as rhizomatic, that is, as "a practice of becoming that understands itself in terms of circulation rather than arrival or completion" (Beltrán 2010, 167). This definition underlines the capacity of Latinidad to "hold disparate elements" and suggests to approach it "as a site of contested and constitutive political activity" (Beltrán 2010, 164-70). In contrast, the film material under analysis illustrates the risk of even complex representations being filtered by dominant ones that impose on Latinas/os an experience of themselves as "Other" (Hall 1990, 226-7; cited in Vargas 2009, 46-7).

One can think of the process of co-optation of Latinidad in terms of relational identity formation, in which the identity of the privileged depends on an asymmetric recognition of the Other (Roediger 1991; DuBois 2005 [1915]; Lipsitz 2006; Fanon 2008). Recognition is asymmetric when—according to Frantz Fanon—the dependency of the colonizer on the colonized is erased. This is achieved through the erasure of the subjectivity of the colonized, replacing it by an identity that forces a reflection of a positive self for the colonizer (Alcoff 2006, 82). Film discourse, given its mass influence, must be taken to task for narratives of erasure. This asymmetric recognition portrays dominant groups sympathetically and obscures the structures of racial and gender oppression that sustain them. Ultimately, these characterizations fall back on scripts that devalue Latinas and comply with narratives that position "cultural, racial and linguistic difference" as characteristics of an earlier "stage on the path of assimilation" (see also Fregoso 1992; Tapia 2005, 17-8; Paredez 2010). Overall,

they close spaces of political contestation regarding Latina identity and subjectivity, and socio-economic inequality.

Dominant representations do not have to be homogeneous and coherent narratives. Instead, there can be ambivalent and even contradictory discourses that interpellate and constrain subjects. Processes of whitening and racialization of Latina/os may be seen as constitutive of one another, and always operating within racial hierarchies (Dávila 2008, 13). Concomitantly, the process of reclaiming identities born out of resistance will be a work-in-progress that is situated, contingent, and negotiable (Mendible 2007, 5). The three films analyzed in this paper provide a privileged medium in which these complexities can be traced, contrasted, and made sense of.

In the films analyzed, diverse portrayals of Latinas co-exist with an understanding of socio-economic progress as an individualistic pursuit. Liberal ideologies of the "American dream" posit that the hard work of the individual in a context of equality, free choice, and limited government guarantees success according to individual abilities (Molina Guzmán 2010, 120). Dominant groups are legitimated in this narrative because; (a) they have built a *fair* society in which everyone can *make it* through hard work, and (b) their success is pictured—by extension—as a product of hard work rather than privilege. Meritocratic narratives prevent the articulation of a democratic critique of contemporary socio-economic arrangements. As a consequence, constructions of Latina/o identity offered in these films are not conducive to complex and genuine understandings of Latinidad, which becomes a mythic idea based on dominant projections of fear that respond to political and economic agendas (Aparicio and Chávez-Silverman 1997, 8). Oppositional film representations must reclaim

this space and more forcefully contest dominant identity constructions, as the films analyzed do in certain instances.

3. Filming Racialized Gender

Real Women Have Curves is an independent feature released in 2002 adapted from Josefina López's play of the same name and directed by the Colombian Patricia Cardoso. It depicts Ana Garcia's (America Ferrera) summer after high school graduation, spent working with other seamstresses at her sister's workshop. The film depicts the negotiations between Ana and her mother, who is portrayed as the most sizable obstacle to pursuing a more fulfilling life, which includes higher education, sexual freedom, and financial independence.

In *Spanglish*—a Hollywood feature starring the Spanish actress Paz Vega and Adam Sandler—Flor Moreno, an undocumented immigrant, and Cristina (Shelbie Bruce), her daughter, become acquainted with the Claskys, an Anglo family for which Flor works as housekeeper. In this film, Flor's approach to family and motherhood is contrasted with Deborah Clasky's (Téa Leoni) neurotic and critical relationship with her own daughter. Flor's embodiment of a nurturing ("Mexican") femininity is contrasted with white women's lost caregiving abilities, tied to a competitive spirit and the desire for professional success.

Quinceañera (2006)—an independent feature directed by Wash Westmoreland and Richard Glatzer, with Todd Haynes, art film director, as executive producer—is the story of two cousins rejected by their "traditional" Latino families; teenager Magdalena (Emily Rios), who must negotiate her father's rejection after the discovery of her pregnancy and her cousin Carlos, who is expelled by his family after being outed as gay. Both have to face the challenges of an independent life in a gentrifying Echo Park in Los Angeles.

The films analyzed embed genre stories of coming-of-age and/or romantic comedy within "assimilation narratives" (Ramírez Berg 1992, 35). The struggle into adulthood of Ana, Cristina and Flor, and Magdalena (protagonists of *RWHC*, *Spanglish*, and *Quinceañera*, respectively) are multi-faceted. Ana must struggle against her mother's desires for her to find a husband and settle for the low-paying job in the family factory in order to prevail in her plan to move to New York to pursue a college education. Cristina's story, in *Spanglish*, appears in a secondary way to the story of her mother, Flor, which she narrates. Flor's story makes *Spanglish* fall squarely within an assimilation story "gone romantic," given the attraction that develops between her and her boss John Clasky (Sandler). Magdalena and Carlos, in turn, must face the challenges of independent life with the support of a "family of choice" in the face of their families' rejection.

These films offer diverse portrayals of Latina identity. They frame Latina identity as a relational construct, the result of negotiating family conflict and mediating interactions with Anglo culture. Despite this diversity, the portrayals of academically successful Ana, morally good and nurturing Flor, and innocent and struggling Magdalena converge in supporting narratives of gendered and racialized nationalism.

This nationalism positions the Latina body as the site in which the nation is inscribed (Fregoso 2003b, 64). The meaning assigned to this inscription is diverse. In *RWHC*, Ana's ability to find professional success by abandoning her Latina/o roots (personified in her mother) reasserts the myth of meritocracy and openness that sustains "American"

exceptionalism.[4] Flor's nurturing character in *Spanglish* soothes Anglo male anxiety over a double "violation" that the *doméstica* symbolizes: that of immigration law and of norms of middle-class motherhood (L. S. Kim 1999, 109). In *Quinceañera* Magdalena's quest to find a "family of choice" with her great uncle (tío Tomás) and her cousin Carlos (Jesse Garcia) signifies a rejection of the traditional and conservative values that the film singles out as inherently "Latina/o." Similarly, her cousin Carlos can only open up and experience a liberated gay sexuality after meeting his Anglo neighbors, Gary and James.

These films converge in constructing Latinas in contrast to Latino men, who are portrayed as undeserving of them [the women] and of the "'American' dream;" they are aggressive and overtly repressive, or simply absent. These discourses fit ongoing narratives about violent (male) Latino youth involved in gang crime and drug trafficking (Romero 2001; Vázquez 2011). These narratives are not merely due to the privileging of Latina characters. Instead, they work positively and in tandem to discourses of criminalization that result in the disproportionate incarceration of Latinos and the construction of demonized "criminal aliens" that justify increased immigration policing (D. M. Hernández 2008; Morín 2009; Vázquez 2011).[5]

These three films respond to anxieties regarding immigration that characterized the time in which they were filmed and released, and continue at the time of writing. While

[4] I am not implying that Latinas cannot pursue higher education without abandoning their cultural roots, but rather that the film's narrative takes those roots to be the main obstacle to professional success.

[5] It is notable that since 2000, the existing immigration regime provides undocumented migrants who are victims of domestic violence or trafficking the opportunity of attaining legal status when they are helpful in the investigation or prosecution of the crime (National Network to End Domestic Violence 2012). This measure, passed as part of the Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act of 2000, relies and cements the gendered deservingness of migrants and presents the United States as protector of these women, disavowing the occurrence of these acts among U.S. citizens.

RWHC responds with the reassertion of a liberal meritocratic ideology, *Spanglish* offers Latinas the role of nurturing mothers and the duty to make up for the lost caregiving function of white women. Finally, *Quinceañera*'s focus on three family outcasts works to identify—by contrast—Latina/o "culture" as an authoritarian and conservative force in society and politics. This contrast between open and tolerant (even if self-interested) Anglos, and (neo)conservative Latina/os, focuses our attention away from the hostility characteristic of anti-immigrant discourse that has Latina/os as targets, not initiators.

These films coincide in declaring Latino men impossible to assimilate and establish conditions under which Latinas will be incorporated as "acceptable ethnics." These works preserve a hierarchical order in which the white male heroic character is proven through their (platonic or actual) romantic engagement with Latina women that "saves" them from brown men and families (Spivak 2001, 201).

a. Difference and Tradition instead of *Real Women* and *Curves*

RWHC narrates the inter-generational tensions between Ana and her mother regarding Ana's plans for her personal and professional life. Throughout the film, Ana is described as a self-assured young woman who is willing to counter family imperatives in order to pursue higher education and delay marriage and reproduction in order to enjoy a satisfying sexual life.

The story follows her quest from a low-end summer job as a seamstress at her sister Estela's (Ingrid Oliu) sweatshop to an education at Columbia University. At face value, this is a tale of female empowerment through personal ability and hard work. In fact, the very last scene shows Ana going up the stairs from a New York Subway, physically and symbolically

rising to her newly found status as a successful student whose effort has been rewarded with a fully funded elite education.

The identity imposed on Ana ultimately lacks the *curves* that the title announces. In particular, Ana's subjectivity and her success is carefully crafted in opposition to threatening constructs of Latina reproduction and motherhood, to which she represents the exception (Báez 2007, 120-1; Paredez 2010, 145-6). This route is also achieved with the support of white and Latino male allies, something that contains "the possibilities for collective Latina agency" and manages the potentially threatening Latina reproduction (Paredez 2010, 145).

However, I suggest that the construction of a threatening Latina sexuality serves a broader purpose in *RWHC*. In particular, I see the threatening character of Ana's mother Carmen (Lupe Ontiveros), together with other representations of Latina fertility and motherhood in the film, connected to two ways in which women have been historically implicated in nationalism: in their role of "biological reproducers of members of national collectivities," and "active transmitters of national culture" (Yuval-Davis and Anthias 1989, 7; cited in McClintock 1993, 62-3). Carmen's role as a carrier of "Latino culture" is in this case portrayed as threatening to the individualist pursue of a career, which her daughter will embrace by the end of the film.

The anxiety around Latina fertility that orients hostile discourses blaming crowded schools, under-funded welfare services, and overpopulation on immigrants is thematized through the menopause that Carmen mistakes for a pregnancy. Additional markers of this anxiety include the return to "traditional" Mexico of the best seamstress in the workshop who

discovers she is pregnant, and Ana's spirited defense of contraception at the sweatshop and through her own actions (she buys condoms herself in anticipation of a sexual encounter).

Ana's stance toward the rest of the women (all Latinas) appears at times to be one of superiority. Jillian Báez considers this a new kind of "*Latinidad* feminista… that demonstrates the social hierarchy and tensions between different generations" (Báez 2007, 120). However, tensions between different generations can be variously portrayed, and need not always result in hierarchies as Báez suggests. The particular narrative of inter-generational tension "whitens" Ana through the portrayal of progress as erasure of her cultural attachments and by positioning her as an enlightened critic of the women's backward cultural traits. The particular form of inter-generational tension that *RWHC* offers is one in which Latina/o "culture" is upheld and transmitted by women and opposed to "culture-less" white Anglo trajectories of individualism and progress, which Ana is made to embody. With the exception of Ana, Latinas in the film "embody tradition, stasis, and ultimately repression" (Rodríguez y Gibson 2009, 142).

By tying these markers to different generations, *RWHC* securely locates Latina/o "culture" in a traditional past, while Ana's embrace of sexual liberation and education is the overcoming of just such a past through the embrace of "American" ways. In the process, the film erases anti-patriarchal struggles within Latina/o communities, a move further underlined by Ana's exclusive reliance on male support in her journey toward adulthood (Báez 2007, 121; Rodríguez y Gibson 2009, 143; Paredez 2010, 145). While her *abuelito* (Felipe de Alba) covers Ana's dates with school friend Jimmy, her father lends her money to save Estela's workshop and eventually both give their blessing to her choice of moving to New York and attending college. Finally, it is Mr. Guzman, Ana's teacher, who encourages Ana to apply for

college. In contrast, her mother remains staunchly opposed to her college plans, refusing to say good bye on the day that Ana leaves Los Angeles.

Ana's romantic involvement with the only white character in the film, Jimmy, provides an ambivalent message. On the one hand, it solidifies the conservative angles regarding Latina/o "difference." On the other hand, it offers a more complex picture of Ana, allowing the character genuine agency. In principle, the prospect of a romantic engagement with a white male offers little promise. Portrayals of white men/brown women inter-racial relationships provide at best a "superficial multiculturalism" and at worst a colonialist portrayal of "white male access to a brown woman's body as normal and natural" while continuing to exclude other forms of relations (Fregoso 2003a, 63-4).

Ana's engagement could in principle convey the message that sexual liberation—just as economic progress—must be attained by refusing attachments within her community. In the case of Jimmy, the contrast is not established between brown and white men, but between her mother's ideas of proper bodies and relationships and Jimmy's embracing of her curvy body. While Ana's mother is extremely critical of Ana's "fat" and "big" body and describes men as seeking only sexual access to women, Jimmy is attracted to Ana and enthralled by her body.

While this contrast may be seen as generational, the script returns to its own version of Latina/o "culture" as the source of difference. Ana's conflicted relationship with her mother is portrayed in contrast to Jimmy's relationship with his own mother who understands him "most of the time." Inter-generational clashes cannot possibly take place in (thoroughly

modern) white Anglo families, as long as the film sticks with the interpretation of generations as evolutionary cultural trajectories.

This reading should not obscure Ana's agency in making the sexual encounter happen, and her valuing of her non-normative body before the encounter with Jimmy. The narrative of the virginal Latina *señorita* is upset by Ana's willingness to initiate the sexual encounter, asking for the lights to be kept on, laughing at Jimmy's efforts to compliment her in Spanish, and agreeing on the non-committal character of the encounter.[6] Moreover, the director resists succumbing to an objectifying gaze of Ana's body by focusing the camera away from her naked body and on the mirror reflection of her face, which turns to look at Jimmy, who is in turn looking at her body (Rodríguez y Gibson 2009, 144-5). In sum, regarding its take on bodies, *RWHC* evades the narrative of salvation and makes good on the promise of its title by offering an alternative, positive, and complex view of Latina bodily and sexual subjectivity.

This is confirmed in the treatment of the bodies of the female workers. On a hot day at the factory, the workers remove their clothes at Ana's insistence and compare their plump bodies, competing with each other for the fatter, most disgusting body. The nakedness of bodies that do not conform to standards of white and slim beauty, and the dance that ensues, upsets mainstream film narratives, which accept the portrayal of only unrealistically slim bodies. This scene, in which sweaty *maquila* workers stop covering their bodies and mock the impossible standards of beauty, subverts the ideology of beauty and the exclusion of

[6] The stereotype of the "Latina *señorita*" dates to the 1930s, when the Good Neighbor policy made cultural ambassadors of Hollywood studios in a time of isolationism. These characters are noble and chaste and serve as cultural ambassadors for Latino and non-Latino male characters who desire them (M. Beltrán 2009, 83).

racialized working-class women from the valued set of bodies (Figueroa 2003, 265, 79-80). In contrast, Ana's mother's refusal to remove her clothes once again marks her as the enforcer of practices (attires) that constrain non-conforming bodies.

Despite the welcome salience of non-conforming bodies and the rescuing of Ana's agency in her romantic relationship, the fact remains that *RWHC* does not resist a hierarchical narrative of cultural difference. This is because of the portrayal of Ana's family relations and the way in which her career choice is posited as an exception pursued against motherly/cultural standards for Latinas.

Lost in Translation

A contrast between the film and the original play of *RWHC*, written by Josefina López (1996), exposes just how much the transition to the big screen sponsored by commercial distributors may impoverish the subversive potential in the work of Latina/o authors (the original script was adapted for film by López and George LaVoo).

The richness of the theater play hints at the importance of creative control for influencing the types of characters and narratives that are put forward on film and television (M. Beltrán, 2009, 85). While both the playwright and the film director are Latina/Latin American (Los Angeles-raised Josefina López and Colombian-born Patricia Cardoso), the transition to film and to a commercial distributor (HBO Independent Productions) involved a radical transformation of the narrative of *RWHC* (see also Rodríguez y Gibson 2009, 136).

The film follows the play most faithfully in its critique of normative bodies. However, in the original play the critical take on bodies is broader, touching upon the current

hostility toward working and undocumented bodies. The *real* bodies with curves are Latina bodies, non-white, non-thin bodies, non-documented bodies. These bodies are weakened by dieting (the reason why the best seamstress abandons the workshop in the play), but they are also marked by hard work and entrapped because of fear of *la migra* (in the play Ana is about to receive her permanent residency, but Estela is still undocumented and unable to apply for residency) (Rodríguez y Gibson 2009, 138-40). A second contrast is that the play makes both sisters central characters in the story. The portrayal of the relationship of the sisters with their mother is less antagonistic and more playful than the film depicts. Moreover, three features that are prominent in the film are completely absent in the play; the Anglo boyfriend, the male relatives, and the stern opposition of the mother to Ana's education. Importantly, the closing statement from Ana, written several years after working at Estela's factory, puts into question many of the creative decisions that the film takes:

> I was going to be better than them. And I wanted to show them how much smarter and liberated I was. … to teach them about the women's liberation movement, about sexual liberation and all the things a so-called educated American woman knows. But … they taught me about resistance. About a battle no one was fighting for them except themselves. About the loneliness of being women in a country that looks down on us for being mothers and submissive wives. … Perhaps the greatest thing I learned from them is that women are powerful, especially when working together… (López, 1996, 69)

This paragraph criticizes individualistic stories of success and highlights the twin struggles that Latinas collectively must undertake; within their communities and against the devaluing and controlling images of mainstream imaginaries.

The play closes with success stories for both protagonists. Estela is able to open her own boutique with the help of a Latino investor (Señor Vasquez) and produce clothes that fit real women (López, 1996, 68). The play does not idolize these stories of success either, or the magic involved in obtaining legal residence. A repeated scene throughout the play is one in which the other seamstresses "forget" that they have recently become legal and express their fear of *la migra* circling around the factory (López, 1996, 15, 41). In other words, being documented and still Latina nonetheless marks them as *foreign* and potential targets for *la migra* (Figueroa, 2003, 272-274; Holmlund, 2005, 118).

Overall, the play narrates a process in which both Estela and Ana are able to craft themselves in a way that requires the overcoming of hardships and the contestation of dismissive discourses about Latina women. This process is probably best seen in the evolution of Elena's character. Once Elena is able to finish the order and deliver it to Mrs. Glitz, she faces her and calls her a "mean, wicked, bitter, unsympathetic, greedy, rude, awful…" "Capitalist!" completes Ana (López, 1996, 67). The night before, after finishing the dresses' order, Estela makes a dress for herself, bigger than the dresses she is used to sewing (in the film, only Ana gets a dress). Estela makes herself a dress that fits her oversized, Latina, undocumented body and acquires the strength to contact a new investor and overcome her exploitative working conditions. The play shows women who embrace their racialized bodies and selves in order to survive oppression and confront received ideals of femininity.

b. Domesticated Multiculturalism in *Spanglish*

As in *RWHC*, the cultural specificity of Mexican-Americans drives the story in *Spanglish*. However, in contrast to *RWHC*, the carrier of this "culture"—*doméstica* Flor Moreno—is portrayed in praiseful terms. Despite this divergence, the assertion of difference is similarly dedicated to legitimize and even protect Anglo economic and ideological dominance. This is done, first, by positioning the Latina caregiver as a nurturing presence that allays male anxieties regarding changed roles of white middle-class mothers. Second, *Spanglish* relies on a representational trope in which the figure of a mothering person of color caring for "white folks" allays racial anxieties including the fear of erosion of white dominance and the vengeance of those oppressed (Wong 1994, 69).

Critical literature coincides in noting that dominant representations of *domésticas* uphold white privilege by providing a romanticized portrayal of a morally good and non-threatening Latina to erase the unfair labor practices and anti-immigration sentiment that targets Latinas (Padilla 2009, 44; Molina Guzmán 2010, 152-4). Dominant representations of *domésticas* offer "a 'solution' for how to incorporate—in a non-threatening manner—a foreign supply of labor on which the U.S. society depends" (Padilla 2009, 44).

Spanglish emphasizes the distinctiveness of culture at every step. The narrator (Cristina, Flor's daughter who retrospectively tells the story while writing her Princeton application essay) explains that her mother—after being abandoned by her husband—waited several years to migrate from Mexico to the United States so that Cristina could grow up within Mexican "culture." Later, she explains that they settled in Los Angeles because of its density of Latina/o population, in order to feel "right at home." The "encounter" with Anglo society only happens when Flor decides to work as a housekeeper for the Clasky household, a step that is described as "entering a foreign land."

The implied success of Cristina, that will be reinforced through comparisons with the Clasky's daughter, Bernice (Sarah Steele), alerts us to the particular nature of white anxieties that Flor, as the virginal Latina *señorita*, is called to soothe. *Spanglish* explores motherhood through the comparison between Deborah Clasky and Flor, with the latter emerging victorious in the inter-cultural "mommy wars." The Deborah Clasky character is a caricature. It is made clear that she is not staying at home to mother her children by choice, but because she recently lost her job. This reluctant mother is described as obsessed with exercising, unconcerned about her husband's sexual pleasure, and even willing to risk her marriage through an affair.

The contrasts between Deborah and Flor are pointed out tirelessly throughout *Spanglish*, which focuses again on mothers as the site of inscription of national culture. While Deborah pressures her daughter Bernice to lose weight, Flor is supportive and adjusts Bernice's clothes.[7] While Deborah is overtly worried about status, Flor prefers her daughter not to become "someone different" after entering a private school. While Deborah has an extra-marital affair and is depicted as almost hysterical in bed, Flor is chaste and refuses to break a marriage to satisfy her attraction for John Clasky.

What *Spanglish* puts forward is a postfeminist agenda. This agenda posits that feminism has been achieved and, thus, is no longer needed (McRobbie 2004, 255). Indeed, *Spanglish*'s director James L. Brooks observed in an interview that the cultural ambience that gave rise to feminist heroes and the inadequate men that went along with them had vanished, because "men have stepped up as dads" (Griffin 2004). However, feminist scholars point out

[7] The film reverses *RWHC*'s metaphor, it is white women's eagerness to enter the labor market and search for success in "male" terms that constrains bodies.

that postfeminist discourses appropriate feminism while negating its critiques and undermining its role and, ultimately, excluding any feminist presence (Modleski 1991; Hawkesworth 2004, 966, 9). What this film shows is how certain branches of postfeminism articulate their agenda by enlisting racialized women and their "culture" in their quest.

In *Spanglish*, Flor's culture represents not a weight but a much needed rescue from the threat of changing white heteronormative family mores, following what Bonnie Honig identifies as the familial myth of "immigrant America" (Honig 2001, 74). Just as *RWHC*—which abided by patriarchal scripts by grounding Ana's success in a purely male coalition—*Spanglish* offers a patriarchal text in which the morally good Latina *doméstica* embodies a cautionary tale to discipline white women in their roles as mothers. Flor's nurturing character assuages white male anxieties, and in return is granted recognition and a place in the "American" dream. Flor saves the Claskys from themselves: her "unwavering conservative morality reaffirms John's goodness, and her traditional femininity and maternal nature provide a mirror for Deborah to recognize her own faults" (Molina Guzmán 2010, 168).

The portrayal of John Clasky as a sentimental, feminized father complements the postfeminist narrative and is aligned with Adam Sandler's recurring portrayal of "nice guys prone to humiliation by tougher men and women" that nonetheless ultimately find redemption, often in a normative masculinity (Trice and Holland 2001, 200-1; Brook 2006, 242). Clasky's feminization is represented through his profession (a chef), and his nurturing approach to childrearing, which he shares with Flor. The feminization is explicit in Flor's voiceover: "He seemed a good man, but for someone with first-hand knowledge of Mexican machos, he seemed to have the emotions of a Mexican woman."

Ultimately, Flor chooses to exit the Clasky household instead of pursuing her romantic engagement with John, maintaining her moral goodness and preserving the heteronormative middle-class white family. Sandler's role is one often assigned to him and other Jewish actors working in Hollywood today; to work as liminal figures that middle-class men can identify with in their quest from unsettledness to masculinization (Brook 2006, 245). In the case of *Spanglish*, Flor is both the helping hand in the return of John Clasky to his role within the heteronormative family, and the standard that brings Deborah back to hers.

In *Spanglish*, the goal of "saving" the middle-class white heteronormative family extends to a denial of the realities of racialized domestic work. In contrast to sociological studies that note that working as a live-in domestic worker is the lowest rung in the hierarchy of domestic service jobs, and also the lowest paid (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2007, 49), Flor is paid handsomely. She is able to afford her own house in Los Angeles, and—as anticipated by the narration—her daughter is bound for a Princeton education.

The role of the idealized Latina caregiver thus also soothes the feelings of guilt and/or uneasiness regarding the exploitative conditions that domestic workers face in the United States (Chang 2000, 83; cited in Brayton 2008, 467). By presenting Flor as inherently nurturing and good, *Spanglish* also denies the white feminist bargain regarding universalist claims of women's liberation built upon the low paid work of racialized female workers (Tronto 2002).

c. Reconquista/Gentrification in *Quinceañera*

In *Quinceañera*, the story revolves around the preparation of a *quinceañera* party, a celebration of the transition from girlhood to womanhood performed by some Latin

Americans and Latina/os. The film presents us with a Latina/o extended family that must deal with two rebellious members, a pregnant (teenage) daughter and a recently outed gay son. The story is narrated from the perspective of Anglos arriving in Echo Park, until recently a predominantly Latina/o neighborhood.

In contrast to *RWHC* and *Spanglish, Quinceañera* explores issues of racism and economic exploitation in a critical manner, but continues to rely upon the construction of Latina/o "culture" as conservative and intolerant. Particularly problematic is the pairing of salient issues of the religious right with the Latina/o community. Through this pairing, *Quinceañera* misrecognizes these issues as problems of backward and insular Latina/os by obscuring that these issues are heatedly debated in the American political sphere and championed by a resourceful white religious voting bloc that favors Republicans.[8] The identification of a cultural minority with puritanical values and homophobia disavows the role of white religious fundamentalists in activating these issues politically. Instead of a heterogeneous picture of enduring clashes around values in the United States, *Quinceañera* offers a simplified narrative of cultural backwardness in the midst of tolerance.

The Latina/o families at the center of *Quinceañera* are obsessed with girls' virginity

[8] In 2004 eleven States passed constitutional amendments banning gay marriage, tying such proposal to ballots to boost turn-out. In 2006–the year of *Quinceañera*'s release–President Bush publicly supported such an Amendment at the federal level, at that time under consideration in the Senate (Molina Guzmán 2010, 159-61). Finally, in the 2008 elections, Californians passed Proposition 8, constitutionally banning same-sex marriage in the state. Even if more than half of resources for the campaign for this ban reportedly came from the Mormon Church and its passage followed white Evangelicals mobilization, some progressive voices blamed people of color for the defeat (CNN 2006). Studies of that election find that even if Blacks are more likely to support a ban on gay marriage than whites, if both the Latino and Black turnout had remained at 2004 levels, proposition 8 would still have passed (Campbell and Monson 2008, 412; Goldberg 2008; R. Kim 2008). Other studies find that, at the county level, the percentage of Latina/os has a negative (or—if positive—weak) effect on the likelihood that a county majority will favor a same-sex marriage ban (Abrajano 2010).

and are homophobic. Magdalena (and her family) discovers her pregnancy when she cannot fit in her *quinceañera* dress, in yet another deployment of clothes as a metaphor for the asphyxiating character of "culture." Magdalena cannot find an ally in her family or her boyfriend (J.R. Cruz), who follows his mother's wishes and puts academic success ahead of caring for his girlfriend and child.

After the discovery of the pregnancy, Magdalena's father—a Protestant pastor, not the most likely religious affiliation among Mexican-Americans—reprimands her. His words are reminiscent of white fundamentalist Evangelist Christians, a group that has made of this a political agenda for abstinence education and developed a ceremonial celebration of it, purity balls (Banerjee, 2008).[9] The only two people who support Magdalena are her great-uncle tío Tomás (Chalo González) and her cousin Carlos.

Quinceañera also singles out Mexican-Americans for their homophobia. In the story, Carlos is expelled from home by his well-off parents after gay magazines are discovered in his bedroom, and again rejected when he tries to approach his sister at her *quinceañera* party. Identifying the Latino community with homophobia is doubly misleading. In the first place, it misleads by identifying the whole community with such a stance, denying existing heterogeneity and erasing gay Latina/os. Second, it asserts by omission that such an attitude

[9] While a portion of Latina/os are Evangelicals, this a minority denomination compared to Catholicism. Recent surveys find that Latina/os that identify as Catholics are a majority (between sixty and sixty-eight percent) (McVeigh and D. Diaz 2009). Among them, 54% identify as "charismatic Christians, a much higher prevalence than among non-Latina/os (Pew Hispanic Center and Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life 2007). Evangelicals, in contrast, constitute only about 15% of the Latina/o population (Pew Hispanic Center and Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life 2007, 3). Estimations of the evolution of religiosity among Latina/os that assume a fifty percent growth in conversion rates to Evangelism put the rate of Catholic Latina/os at a minimum of fifty-seven percent in 2030 (E. I. Hernández et al. 2007, 3; Pew Hispanic Center and Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life 2007, 64).

is not a problem in Anglo society.[10]

In terms of gendered and racial dynamics, Carlos' encounter with Gary and James (David W. Ross and Jason L. Wood), part of the recent wave of Anglo arrivals to Echo Park, is probably the most fertile. As soon as Gary and James, a British-American couple, buy the front house and the lot where tío Tomás' small house is located, they spot Carlos with unhidden desire. Gary immediately refers to him as a "hot Cholo" as Carlos approaches their house to borrow a tool. Soon, at the house-warming party they organize, he is told—by the only other Latino in attendance at the all-white-male party—that "les encantan los Latinos" ("they love Latin boys").

Carlos becomes involved with Gary and James, gradually getting closer to Gary. In the narrative of this film, Carlos develops his sexual identity by partaking in the modern and open approach to life that Gary and James offer. Gary and James, on the other hand, benefit from the colonialist prerogative that guarantees white males sexual access to natives, or what Anne McClintock calls the "long tradition of male travel as an erotics of ravishment" (McClintock 1995, 22). The context in this case is not literally colonialism, but gentrification. The narrative in the film effectively draws parallels between the two by showing the darkest dimension of gentrification: the racialized hierarchical economic structure that underlies it.

[10] Studies of attitudes of Latina/os toward gay marriage show a small difference between the opinions of this population and that of "non-Hispanic" whites. A recent report finds that Latina/os are somewhat less likely than average to favor gay marriage, but also much less likely to actively oppose it (34 versus 39% and 44 versus 53%, respectively) (Pew Hispanic Center and Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life 2007, 13-4). Among Latina/os registered to vote a majority (52%) would oppose a constitutional ban on gay marriage, while 40% would favor it (Pew Hispanic Center 2009, 66).

Quinceañera does not shy away from depicting the reality of racism and the unequal power that partners in romantic entanglements can wield. Soon after James finds out about Carlos and Gary's secret encounters, James and Gary decide to evict their backyard tenants, who are left without many alternatives in the gentrified Echo Park.

The eviction, and Magdalena and Carlos' search for a new place after tío Tomás passes away, provides the most critical stance toward the contemporary economic role reserved for Latina/os. After a long search, Magdalena strikes a deal with a young Anglo woman (identified in the cast simply as "artsy woman," played by Ingrid Eggersten). This woman has refurbished a small apartment at the back of her own house, and has put it up for rent. She is asking for more money than Magdalena and unemployed Carlos are able to afford. The solution, Magdalena suggests, would be for Magdalena to clean her house ("saving" $400 per month) and Carlos to take care of the garden ("saving" $100 per month).

There is no myth of success earned through hard work for Magdalena and Carlos. The constraints imposed by the gentrification of Echo Park are stronger than the willingness of their tío to shelter them. The utopia of a space in which they can live as a "family of choice" is short-lived. However, despite these struggles, the family formed by Magdalena, her child, and Carlos still offers an alternative family structure that re-imagines popular conceptions of the Latina/o family by establishing distance from patriarchal and heteronormative depictions (Rodríguez 2009; cited in Molina Guzmán 2010, 147).

In sum, *Quinceañera* provides a critical view of the racial division of labor but falls short from offering some critical or even ironic distance in its stereotypical portrayal of Latina/o families. In the process, it obscures the troubling anti-Latina/o and anti-immigrant

hostility that conservative groups exhibit by portraying Latina/os as the most conservative force in a gentrifying/"modernizing" Echo Park.

Ultimately, despite the serious examination of questions of inequality and privilege, the tying of Latina/o traditional "culture" to the current neoconservative agenda, positions Anglos as uniquely embracing of diverse sexual orientations and feminist, following the outlines of gender and homo-nationalist narratives (Duggan 2002; Puar 2007). This maneuver also positions Latina/o's "traditional culture" as inherently hostile and tied to a neoconservative agenda in a way that obscures their current position as targets of just such an agenda.

Anglos, despite being self-interested, are at least a "modern" force vis-à-vis Latina/os. This is made clear in the contrast established between white and Latina/o wealth. Carlos' parents, the most well-off, receive the least sympathetic treatment in the film for being superficial and materialistic and prejudiced and mean toward their son. Latina/o wealth is contrasted with the Anglo arrivals who, while equally or more affluent, are still able to have a more enlightened "artsy" or (commodified) gay lifestyle.

4. Conclusion

In this paper, I argue that novel and complex portrayals of Latinas in contemporary films must be scrutinized for narratives of asymmetric recognition and hierarchical national identity. I tie the discourses embedded in *RWHC* (Cardoso 2002), *Spanglish* (Brooks 2004), and *Quinceañera* (Glatzer and Westmoreland 2006) to gender and racial nationalism that coopts feminist or queer narratives to maintain the claim of U.S. exceptionalism. While the stories told by these films are different, as are their lead characters, they all involve the

imposition of an identity that is not chosen, but rather necessitated to maintain the unequal status quo.

While *RWHC* achieves this through a liberal narrative of individualist progress, *Spanglish* enlists the help of nurturing Latinas in the rescue of the upper middle-class heteronormative family, and *Quinceañera* constructs a neo-conservative Latina/o family in opposition to modern and hip Anglo gentrifiers.

The diverse narratives that these films construct reveal how race and gender are manipulated in dominant narratives. In every case, although less so in *Quinceañera*, privileged Anglos emerge successful in their quest to reaffirm the fairness of United States institutions, the fitness of the heteronormative white family, and/or the modernity of their customs compared to an "Other." The narratives in the films deny the inter-dependency inherent in political communities and offer to Latina/os manufactured identities that maintain such fiction.

These findings speak to existing approaches within political theory that focus on the representations that structure political debates about immigration. With respect to Bonnie Honig's analysis of the "myth of immigrant America," they highlight the way in which gender and race structure these myths and their role in creating and imposing an identity over particular groups. As a consequence, striving toward an agonistic sphere of democratic politics requires grappling with the way in which gender and race are manipulated to solidify identities and prevent their contestability.

My account of positive representations of Latinas complements Cristina Beltrán's discussion of the images of tireless and hard working immigrants that circulated during the

mass immigrant demonstrations of 2006 (C. Beltrán 2009). The problematic dimension of such images can be traced to their lack of political imagination, as Beltrán notes, but also the role of these representations in sustaining privilege through the imposition of identities that erase Latina/o subjectivity in order to legitimize the status quo. As a consequence, not only hard and toilsome work is problematic, but also academically gifted immigrants taken to be particularly deserving of membership, and/or care workers that are called to soothe anxieties.

My framework thus shows the promise of integrating film as a source in political science research and provides a new reading of the idealized portrayals of immigrants that proliferate in today's debate about immigration. An example of these portrayals was at work on the discussion of the ultimately failed DREAM Act that was passed by the U.S. House of Representatives in December 2010. This bill would have provided a conditional path to citizenship to undocumented high school graduates that arrived with their parents as minors and attended a four year college or enlisted in the military for at least two years.

Speaker Nancy Pelosi, celebrating the passage, asserted that "[m]any of these young people serve in the military, and so *they strengthen our national security*" (Pelosi 2010, emphasis mine). The executive director of America's Voice, an organization supporting comprehensive immigration reform declared: **"**[t]his is a huge victory for high-achieving young immigrants who want to go to college and serve in the military, and for the 'American' values of decency, compassion and opportunity" (America's Voice 2010). The 2010 DREAM Act—the first bill with a path to citizenship to be passed by any chamber since 1986—singles out academically achieving and patriotic youth as uniquely deserving of

citizenship and fitted to contribute to the United States' economic competitiveness and military strength.[11]

The DREAM Act singles out the patriotism and academic ability of immigrants who did not *willingly* acquire the status of undocumented. The discourse of innocence and deservingness is antithetical to emancipatory claims that focus on the injustice of the immigration regime and the racially targeted character of contemporary immigration enforcement. The claim to *innocence* contained in the DREAM Act introduces a generational divide and singles out undocumented parents as "outlaws" and unworthy of membership. Finally, claims of immigrants' contributions to "military preparedness" are legitimized through discourses of national security that also support the militarization of domestic spaces through immigration enforcement.

In contrast, the original play of *RWHC* provides a glimpse of what radical Latina politics may have to offer to the on-going conversation on immigration, identity, and Latinidades. While all the women are unified in their racialization and their fear of *la migra*, they are also belong to different generations and have diverse career plans. Despite these differences, they are able to develop alliances that build on their strengths and contest the sources of their oppression. Radical Latina politics require representations of Latina characters that are able to critically contest "both traditional Mexican and mainstream American culture" (Escobedo 2007, 134). In film, this requires an oppositional gaze that

[11] On June 15, 2012, President Obama introduced a policy of deferred action that followed the outlines of the DREAM Act (except for the college requirement). The policy—widely interpreted as a nod to Latino voters—maintains the generational break and the focus on military service and educational attainment problematized in this paper. (Cushman 2012).

constructs Latina/o identities that are complex, diverse, and able to resist hegemonic constructions.

In politics, it involves the construction of coalitions that do not deny the heterogeneity of Latina/os, their diverse identities, and political allegiances. Cristina Beltrán's thoughtful recasting of Latinidad is again pertinent here. When thinking about Latinidad as a form of action, she suggests that it can be proliferating force that emerges from unexpected places and finds value from its capacity to be "decentered, opportunistic, and expansive" (Beltrán 2010, 167)

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