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## Not your mother's Latinas : film representations for a new millennium

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**NOT YOUR MOTHER'S LATINAS:  
FILM REPRESENTATIONS FOR A NEW MILLENNIUM**

By

JEANNIE ANN PATRICK

A DISSERTATION

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Rhetoric and Technical Communication

MICHIGAN TECHNOLOGICAL UNIVERSITY

2009

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This dissertation, “Not Your Mother’s Latinas: Film Representations for a New Millennium,” is hereby approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY in the field of Rhetoric and Technical Communication.

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## Dedication

To my husband, for making me believe this journey was possible  
and for all those who have been denied the chance to dream.



## Acknowledgements

I have been blessed by the support of so many people during this journey. Some have provided editorial comments and guidance. Others provided inspiration and motivation when this task seemed overwhelming. All of them have been vitally important to me personally as I worked to complete this study.

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**NOT YOUR MOTHER'S LATINAS:  
FILM REPRESENTATIONS FOR THE NEW MILLENNIUM**

**ABSTRACT**

**Jeannie Ann Patrick, Ph.D.  
Michigan Technological University, 2009**

**Committee Chair: Diane Shoos**

This dissertation seeks to contribute to film, feminist and Latino/a studies by exploring the construction and ideological implications of representations of Latinas in four recent, popular U.S. films: *Girlfight* (Kusama 2000), *Maid in Manhattan* (Wang 2002), *Real Women Have Curves* (Cardoso 2002) and *Spanglish* (Brooks 2004). These films were released following a time of tremendous growth in the population and the political and economic strength of the Latina/o community as well as a rise in popularity and visibility in the 1990s of entertainers like Selena and actresses such as Jennifer Lopez and Salma Hayek. Drawing on the critical concepts of hybridity, *Latinidad*, and Bakhtinian dialogism, I analyze these films from a cultural and historical perspective to consider whether and to what degree, assuming changes in the situation of Latinas/os in the 1990's, representations of Latinas have also changed. Specifically, in this dissertation I consider the ways in which the terrain of the Latina body is articulated in these films in relation to competing societal, cultural and familial conflicts, focusing on the body as a site of struggle where relationships collide, interact and are negotiated.

In this dissertation I argue that *most* of the representations of Latinas in these films defy easy categorization, featuring complex characters grappling with economic issues, intergenerational differences, abuse, mother-daughter relationships, notions of beauty, familial expectations and the very real tensions between Latina/o cultural beliefs and practices and the dominant Anglo culture of the United States. Specifically, I argue that narrative and visual representation of Latina bodies in these films reflects a change in the Latinas offered for consumption to film viewers, presenting us with what some critics have called ‘emergent’ Latinas: conflicted and multilayered representations that in some cases challenge dominant ideologies and offer new demonstrations of Latina agency.

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## I. FINDING OURSELVES IN ‘*IN-BETWEEN*’ SPACES

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“We have been trying to theorize identity as constituted, not outside but within representation; and hence of cinema, not as a second-order mirror held up to reflect what already exists, but as that form of representation which is able to constitute us as new kinds of subjects, and thereby enable us to discover places from which to speak.”  
*Stuart Hall, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora”*

In 2002 Steve Earle released his album entitled *Jerusalem*. It was a post-9-11 album that from the first cut to the last asked hard questions about America, what we have become and what we still have the potential to be. One of the cuts, “Johnny Walker’s Blues,” talks about a young man “raised on MTV,” who has “seen all those kids on the soda pop ads but none of ‘em looked like [him].” Like Johnny Walker, Latinas/os look into the mirror which is representation and see little that is recognizable or that speaks for them. Latinas/os and other minority groups have always been part of society but have not fit within the narrow scope of mainstream society, existing at the bottom of the power structure. Similarly, although Latinas/os have been part of the film industry since the beginning, both in front of and behind the camera (Ramírez Berg 2002), they have seldom been allowed rich, fully developed representations or agency.

Through much of Hollywood's history, representations of Latinas, especially, have been characterized by invisibility and silence (Espinoza 1998; hooks 1992; Stam 2000). Often cast to focus attention on a white male protagonist or in contrast to an idealized white female lead, representations of Latinas, as with other minority populations, have come to sign in for "sexual, class and racial difference and excess" (Valdivia 2007, 131). Classical Hollywood cinema, for instance, relegated Latinas to the fringes—as either narratively invisible or visually excessive and sexualized (e.g., Carmen Miranda).

Recently, scholars have begun to document examples of increased Latina roles and shifts in the power of Latina stars to influence and sometimes control these representations in the market place (Guzman 2007; Guzman and Valdivia 2004; Valdivia 2007). These shifts are evidence that the political and economic strength of the Latina/o community is now starting to be recognized as a major force in American society. This growing economic power is at least in part a result of increases in Latina/o population over the past few decades, a trend that is expected to continue well into the future. The U.S. Census Bureau estimated that the Latina/o<sup>1</sup> population in the U.S. had reached 41.3 million,

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<sup>1</sup> According to the Census Bureau the term 'Hispanics or Latinos' are those people who classified themselves in one of the specific Spanish, Hispanic, or Latino categories listed on the Census 2000 questionnaire -"Mexican, Mexican Am., Chicano," "Puerto Rican", or "Cuban" -as well as those who indicate that they are "other Spanish/Hispanic/Latino." Persons who indicated that they are "other Spanish/Hispanic/Latino" include those whose origins are from Spain, the Spanish-speaking countries of Central or South America, the Dominican Republic or people identifying themselves generally as Spanish, Spanish-American, Hispanic, Hispano, Latino, and so on. Origin can be viewed as the heritage, nationality group, lineage, or country of birth of the person or the person's parents or ancestors before their arrival

about 14% of the population, as of July 1, 2004. (This figure does not include the 3.9 million residents of Puerto Rico.) The Bureau also projects that the Latina/o population will reach 102.6 million or about 24% of the population by July 1, 2050.<sup>2</sup> Over one and a half million businesses were owned by Latinas/os in 2002,<sup>3</sup> an increase of 82% from 1992 figures.<sup>4</sup> Sixty percent of Latinas/os 25 and older had at least a high school education in 2007. The number of Latinas/os 18 and older who had at least a bachelor's degree in 2007 was 3.3 million, up from 1.7 million a decade earlier. There were 811,000 Latinas/os 25 and older with advanced degrees in 2007 (e.g., master's, professional. Doctorate).<sup>5</sup>

The increase in population appears to have translated into increased efforts to market products to Latinas/os. For example, advertisers spent more than \$3.3 billion to sell products to U.S. Latinas/os in 2005, a 6.8 percent increase from 2004.<sup>6</sup> The *U.S. Hispanic Media Market Report* suggests that spending is expected to slow, however, as advertisers determine how to best target their resources. Studies indicate that second- and third-generation Latinas/os are more likely to be English speakers; for example, researchers at the State University of New York at Albany examined data from the 2000 census and found that “72 percent of [Latina/o] children who were third-generation or

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in the United States. People who identify their origin as Spanish, Hispanic, or Latino may be of any race. [http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/meta/long\\_RHI725200.htm](http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/meta/long_RHI725200.htm). Accessed 6 February 2009.

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, CB05-FF. 14-3 (Rev), September 8, 2005.

<sup>3</sup> Source: *Hispanic-owned Firms: 2002*. <http://www.census.gov/csd/sbo/hispanic2002.htm>.

<sup>4</sup> [http://www.census.gov/apsd/www/statbrief/sb96\\_04.pdf](http://www.census.gov/apsd/www/statbrief/sb96_04.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> Source: *Educational Attainment in the United States: 2007*. <http://www.census.gov/Press-Release/www/releases/archives/education/011196/html>.

<sup>6</sup> Source: U.S. Hispanic Media Market: Projections to 2010 Report

later spoke English exclusively.” Considering this data, advertisers must now determine how to best spend their marketing dollars to maximize return by deciding whether to focus on Spanish-speakers, on English-speakers or whether they should divide resources between both groups. These shifts mark a change in what it means to be a Latina in the United States today.

Scholars have noted that the growth in Latina/o population coincided with the ‘Latin Explosion’ of the 1990’s marked by a rise in popularity of singers like Ricky Martin, Christina Aguilera and Shakira, and actors like Jennifer Lopez, Jimmy Smits and Salma Hayek (Baez 2007; Beltran 2002; Guzman and Valdivia 2004; Valdivia 2007). Latino athletes like Alex Rodriguez, Roberto Alomar and Oscar De La Hoya have also been in the public eye. Latina/o authors including Julia Alvarez and Sandra Cisneros have become widely read. There have been Latina/o astronauts (i.e., Ellen Ochoa, Carlos Noriega, Franklin Chang-Diaz) and scientists—Mario Molina, a chemist, received the Nobel Prize in 1995 (along with Sherwood Rowland), for research that led to the banning of chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) in most countries.<sup>7</sup> Latinos have also become more common in politics and government in recent years. Henry Cisneros served as Secretary of Housing and Urban Development in the Clinton administration. Melquiades Rafael Martinez held the same post under George W. Bush who also tapped Roberto Gonzales for the post of U.S. Attorney General. Bill Richardson, New Mexico’s current governor, was a member of the

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<sup>7</sup> Source: “<http://www.factmonster.com/ce6/.html>.” *The Colombia Electronic Encyclopedia*. 1994, 2000-2006, on Fact Monster. 2000-2007 Pearson Education, publishing as Fact Monster. Accessed 24 January 2009. <http://www.factmonster.com/ce6/people/A0806417.html>.

U.S House of Representatives, was named Ambassador to the U.N., served as Energy Secretary under Clinton and most recently ran for President.

Evidence that Latinas/os are becoming a more integral part of U.S. society is everywhere. Along with the growth in Latina/o population and increased participation in professional and governmental roles, we have been treated to a greater number of popular films featuring representations of Latinas as the film industry begins to realize the huge potential market for these depictions. This has not only resulted in Latinas being able to command higher salaries<sup>8</sup> but has also provided opportunities for audiences to see increasingly varied and complex representations (Guzmán 2007, Guzmán and Valdivia, 2004, Valdivia 2007).

This dissertation explores the construction and ideological implications of representations of Latinas in four contemporary U.S. popular films: *Girlfight* (Kusama 2000), *Maid in Manhattan* (Wang 2002), *Real Women Have Curves* (Cardoso 2002) and *Spanglish* (Brooks 2004). These films were all released after the “Latin Explosion” of the 1990s discussed above. For the purpose of this study, ‘popular’ film is defined broadly to include not only Hollywood but also U.S. independent films that, in part because of their increased distribution as movie rentals, have been seen by a larger U.S. audience. All of these films grossed over one million dollars in domestic ticket sales.<sup>9</sup> Two of the films, *Girlfight* (2000) and *Real Women* (2002), received critical acclaim. Karyn

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<sup>8</sup> Jennifer Lopez became the first Latina to be paid \$1 million for a film.

<sup>9</sup> *Girlfight* grossed \$1.56 million, *Real Women* grossed \$5.85 million, *Spanglish* grossed \$42.73 million and *Maid in Manhattan* grossed \$94.01 million. Source: [www.boxofficemojo.com](http://www.boxofficemojo.com).

Kusama received the Best Director Award and the Grand Jury Prize for *Girlfight* at the 2000 Sundance Film Festival as well as the Young Cinema Award at the 2000 Cannes Film Festival.<sup>10</sup> *Real Women* was the winner of the 2002 Sundance Film Festival Dramatic Audience Award. In addition, both America Ferrera (Ana) and Lupe Ontiveros (Carmen) received the Special Dramatic Jury Prizes for Acting at Sundance for their work in the film.<sup>11</sup>

These films were also selected from among other popular independent and Hollywood releases from the same period because, as I will discuss at length in this dissertation, they are particularly rich and complex in terms of the visual and narrative representation of the Latina body, encompassing a range of characters, images, and stories.<sup>12</sup> In addition, although *Girlfight* and *Real Women* have both been the subject of critical study, there have been no extensive analyses to date of either *Spanglish* or *Maid in Manhattan*. By including them in this study I hope to initiate further critical discussion of these recent Hollywood films by major directors featuring Latina characters.

The goal of this project is to analyze these films released in the new millennium from a cultural and historical perspective to consider whether and to what degree, assuming changes for the situation of Latinas/os in the 1990's, representations of Latinas have also changed. Specifically, this dissertation will analyze the politics of representations of the body and ethnicity in these films

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<sup>10</sup> Source: [www.imbd.com](http://www.imbd.com).

<sup>11</sup> Source: [www.imbd.com](http://www.imbd.com).

<sup>12</sup> Other U.S. films featuring Latino/a characters released at this time include *Luminarias* (Valenzuela 1999), *Bread & Roses* (Loach 2000), *Tortilla Soup* (Ripoll 2001), *What's Cooking?* (Chadha 2003), *A Day Without a Mexican* (Arau 2004), *Under the Same Moon* (Riggen 2007).

through the lenses of Latina/o film and media studies, cultural and gender studies, and critical race theory. Scholars in these fields have analyzed the complex power of representation in film and other visual media and detailed the stereotypical representations audiences have come to expect. More recently they have begun to note changing norms of beauty and the body, particularly with respect to representations of Latinas (Baez 2007; Beltran 2002; Gilman 2003; Guzman and Valdivia 2004; Negron-Mutaner 1997; Valdivia 2007). The popularity of Latina stars such as Jennifer Lopez appears to offer support for atypical standards of beauty that counter mainstream constructions of the ideal female as tall, thin, blonde, blue-eyed and white-skinned and have the potential to create a hybrid notion of what it means to be attractive that is more inclusive. This dissertation will continue this work by considering the extent to which the convergence of narrative and image in these recent films creates representations that fall within the confines of historical stereotypes by focusing on the eroticized and exoticized body to mark Latinas as Other or whether they challenge familiar constructions to create resistant alternatives. Further, this dissertation will consider the ways in which the terrain of the Latina body is articulated in these films in relation to competing societal, cultural and familial conflicts; in other words, it will focus on the body as the site of struggle through which relationships collide, interact and are negotiated.

In general in this dissertation I will argue that, *most* of the representations in the films in this study defy easy generalization and categorization and provide opportunities to discuss important and sometimes divisive social issues. They feature complex characters grappling with economic issues, intergenerational differences, abuse, mother-daughter relationships, the Latina body, notions of beauty, familial expectations and the very real tensions between Latina/o cultural beliefs and practices and the mainstream culture of the United States. Specifically, I will argue that these films reflect a change in the Latinas offered for consumption to film viewers, presenting us with what some critics have called ‘emergent’<sup>13</sup> Latinas: conflicted and multilayered representations that often challenge and sometimes upset the status quo. It is in the space created by these complex representations that it is possible to hear previously silenced voices and confront important publicly shared issues such as poverty, lack of education, immigration, sexism and racism that affect all segments of society.

Many scholars of visual representation have argued that images have the power to transmit ideologies (Espinosa 1998; Fregoso 1994; Hall 1981, 1996, 1997; hooks 1990, 1992, 1994; Keller 1994, Lopez 1991; MacDonald 1995; Noriega, 1992, 1996, 2000; Ramirez Berg 2002; Rodriguez 1997; Shohat and Stam 1994). It follows that contemporary representations of Latinas can influence the larger debate in the U.S. about race, ethnicity, gender and

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<sup>13</sup> Jilliam M. Baez (2007) notes that in some recent films (e.g., *Real Women Have Curves* (2002), *Girlfight* (2000)) “more hybrid, complex *Latinidades feministas*[have] emerge[d].”

socioeconomics. Films featuring representations of emergent Latinas have the potential to cast a different light on issues of inclusion (or invisibility) in our society. The recent films included in this study offer an opportunity to see how the Latina body is the site of multiple struggles even as it provides a basis for empowerment. Thus, by extending scholarly work within Latina film studies and by analyzing the narrative and visual representation of Latina bodies in recent films with attention to the broader historical, social and cultural context this study seeks to contribute to the critical discussion about the representation of *Latinidades feministas* in order to consider the ways in which multiple Latina voices have “seeped” into popular cinema, in some cases challenging dominant ideologies and offering new demonstrations of Latina agency (Aparicio 2003; Baez 2007; Bhabha 1994; Stam 2000).

## **CRITICAL THEORIES OF DIFFERENCE AND VISUAL REPRESENTATION**

Cultural theorists have suggested that society functions through the creation of a network of ideologies or socially constructed frames “through which we represent, interpret, understand and ‘make sense’ of some aspect of social existence” (Hall 1981, 31). How a society makes sense of the world is in part determined by its institutions, which work collectively, through ideology, to reinforce beliefs and expectations about different groups, and thus to attempt to maintain hierarchies of power and control. Identity is a function of this process and thereby “reflect[s] structures of power, language, and social

practices” (Flax 97). It is simultaneously created for us and by us and serves to designate our position within a given society.

Theorists and critics such as Stuart Hall, bell hooks, Coco Fusco, Ella Shohat and Robert Stam remind us that as sites of ideological production—and potential transformation—contemporary media participates in this shaping of identity (Hall 1990, 5; Shohat and Stam 1994, 607). Visual media in particular help to frame our understanding of the world around us by producing representations of race, ethnicity, gender and class. These representations of difference impact politics, economics, and relationships between individuals and groups. Hall notes that “representation is a complex business and, especially when dealing with ‘difference,’ it engages feelings, attitudes and emotions and it mobilizes fears and anxieties in the viewer” (1997 226). This fear is often based on stereotypic understandings of non-white groups and limits opportunities for different groups to engage in meaningful dialogue where participants are changed through the continual process of renegotiation, especially at critical sites of struggle like race, gender, and class. Walter Lippman coined the term ‘stereotypes’ in 1922 to explain the use of incomplete and oversimplified codes to interpret our world and the people in it. Stereotypes can be further defined as a socially-constructed way of judging others based on traits such as physical attributes (e.g., skin color, hair type, eye color), cultural practices, language and religion, often taken as ‘unalterable signifiers of inferiority’ (Hall 1981). They work to make all

members of a subordinated group seem the same and ignore differences between groups (e.g., Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Columbian, Brazilian, etc.). Lippman argues that the patterns of stereotypes at the center of our personal codes heavily influence what group of facts we readily, and all too often uncritically, accept. bell hooks describes stereotypes as ‘inaccurate fictions.’ They are, she writes, “created to serve as substitutions . . . to invite and encourage pretense” and make understanding difference between groups impossible (1994 172). This gulf of misunderstanding that exists between groups has been created by repeating stereotypic representations in films, books, news, entertainment and systems of education until they eventually become part of the social landscape. In time, they become so commonplace that they are no longer noticed, but are instead accepted as a sort of unquestioned ‘truth’—so integrated into the fabric of a given society that they become part of the ideology or beliefs of that society until they appear to be natural (Hall 1996; Shohat and Stam 1992).

Latina/o stereotypes have been well documented by film, feminist and cultural theorists, and critics including Chon Noriega (1992, 1996, 2000), Gary D. Keller (1985, 1994), Gloria Anzaldúa (1987, 1990), Ana M. Lopez (1993), Rosa Linda Fregoso (1992, 1994) and Charles Ramirez Berg (2002). Although this entire body of scholarship provides important background for studying contemporary popular film representations of Latinas, the most productive analyses situate stereotypes within a larger framework. In *Latino Images in*

*Film*, Ramirez Berg discusses how colonial policies of the United States historically marginalized Latinas/os. By contextualizing images within historical frames such as Teddy Roosevelt's philosophy of manifest destiny and the Monroe Doctrine, Ramirez Berg documents how and why the United States has systematically limited Latinas/os and other non-whites from full participation in society. An important implication of the work of critics like Ramirez Berg is the understanding that, in contrast to the accepted ahistorical stereotypes we have been force-fed all these years, identity is never fixed and is dependent on relationships with others—relationships that undergo a continuous process of renegotiation, especially at sites of social struggle (e.g., race, ethnicity, gender, class). Thus, identity, ideology and meaning are potentially fluid and are continually changing as they are renegotiated.

Russian literary theorist and philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin's work in *The Dialogic Imagination* (1975/1982) focuses on how meaning is constructed and negotiated as language is used, a process he terms dialogism. Dialogism can be defined as "the necessary relation of any utterance to other utterances" (Stam 13-14). For Bakhtin, utterances continually change as they are influenced by and influence the reception of other utterances. As a result, language is "relentlessly generating new norms and counter norms through the process of dialogism" (Stam 29). Using a Bakhtinian framework calls attention to the multiple voices at play in a text (e.g., or film) including those oppressed, distorted or silenced. The meaning found in these voices is a negotiated one

that is continually being renewed as different voices come and go and the voices are read from alternate perspectives and historical eras. In his article, *Response to a Question from the Novy Mir Editorial Staff*, Bakhtin notes that great works like those of Shakespeare “are enriched with new meanings and new significance: it is as though these works outgrow what they were in the epoch of their creation” (1986 4). Bakhtin writes that the work of Shakespeare, like that of any artist, is in many ways a captive of his own epoch. When an author’s works are read from the perspective of a different era it, in effect, “liberate[s] him from this captivity” (1986 5) and makes possible the identification and articulation of different voices.

Culture is an important site of social difference and contradiction for Bakhtin and that contact between cultures produces different meanings. Bakhtin writes that “meaning only reveals its depths once it has encountered and come into contact with another. . .engaging in a kind of dialogue, which surmounts the closedness and one-sidedness of these particular meanings” (1986 7). In effect, the interactions of utterances within and outside a text challenge the notion of a single, static meaning making atypical readings possible and enabling the voices of marginalized and disenfranchised groups to be finally heard and acknowledged.

A film text is social and though films are constructed with an audience in mind with particular beliefs and fears, they can still be read subversively by viewers. Dialogism has been used as an analytical framework for studying film

because of its potential to uncover multiple voices through not only the image but all dimensions of film (e.g., sound, music, cinematography, etc.) and to describe how those voices interact. It is used in this study as a means to discover the various Latina voices and their relationship to race, class, gender, culture and family. Although Bakhtin did not directly address cinema, critics such as Robert Stam maintain that a Bakhtinian approach to film analysis offers “[t]he possibility of ‘aberrant’ readings that go against the grain of the textual discourse” (*Subversive* 42). In particular, Stam notes that Bakhtin’s theories of dialogism “[promote] the subversive use of language by those who otherwise lack social power....” (*Subversive* 18). In *Unthinking Eurocentrism* Shohat and Stam elaborate on the application of dialogism to the study of cinema and its potential to uncover multiple voices in films. By not only focusing analysis on characters and narrative structure but also including other dimensions of film such as cinematography and music, they suggest that it is possible to call attention to the “figurative social voice” speaking through the image of even those silenced by the image (209).

Film scholar Janice R. Welsch uses Bakhtin’s notion of dialogism to analyze 1960’s feminist documentary films because it can provide “new insights into how languages, including critical and cinematic languages, can be used to counter the dominant languages of patriarchy and validate feminist discourses” (1994 163). Welsch notes that these films provide opportunities for multiple dialogic exchanges because filmmakers, participants and viewers are

encouraged to respond to the films from their own perspective. Welsh points out that feminist documentaries often use interviews and on-screen discussions rather than authoritative voice-over narratives prevalent in traditional documentaries to encourage interaction within the film and between the film and its viewers. She observes that the social and cultural complexities found within the documentary films and among the women participants is evident as the continually changing roles of subjects and listeners “reflect points of difference as well as points of agreement” (167). In this way, notes Welsh, it is the responsibility of individuals who serve as both speakers and listeners to “evaluate the ideas, insights, and viewpoints offered them in light of their own histories and values,” a conclusion Bakhtin would endorse. As a result, viewers (who also take turns as both speakers and listeners) have opportunities to read and react to the films as they listen to others doing the same. Thus these films, she contends, provide “women time and space to speak: to name our oppression, define our concerns . . . and explore our values,” (1994 169). They implicitly counter what Bakhtin identifies as the forces of language that work to “unite and centralize verbal-ideological thought” through the unanimity of “correct language” (1982 270-73). Welsh makes the strong claim that it is the opportunity to hear these multiple and previously silent voices that make it possible to challenge the status quo and create the opportunity for a constructive exchange between patriarchal and feminist discourses.

A Bakhtinian concept closely related to dialogism is that of “polyphony” or multi-voicedness. Polyphony enhances our discussion of race and ethnicity in cinema by “emphasizing . . . the interplay of voices, discourses, [and] perspectives, including those operating within the image itself” (Shohat and Stam 214). Polyphony acknowledges that subjects have their own voices and speak for themselves as do Ana in *Real Women* and Flor in *Spanglish*. Sue Vice agrees noting that a polyphonic construction in film creates opportunities for “characters to speak for themselves and about each other, rather than being inertly described” (142). The concept of polyphony provides a mechanism for discussing the entire text of a film in an effort to seek moments when the voices of groups like Latinas can be heard. In discussing polyphony Stam cautions that “the question is not one of pluralism but one of multivocality, one that would abolish social inequalities while heightening and even cultivating cultural difference” (233). Stam notes that this approach provides opportunities for marginalized groups to find voice, groups who have a legitimate right to speak based on “their own ‘dialogical angle’ on national experience” (233). A filmic polyphony provides protagonists, in this study Latinas, a chance to negotiate their own discourse and resist being defined by others. Some, though not all, of the films in this study are explicitly polyphonic (e.g., incorporate multiple Latina voices with varied perspectives), representing a complex diversity within the Latina community that also confronts mainstream ideologies.

This analysis of representations of Latinas and Latina bodies will make use of Bakhtin's concepts of dialogism and polyphony as applied to films as frameworks for discovering voices—through narrative, cinematography, music, and dialogue—of those traditionally silenced as well as identifying and analyzing complex and hybrid Latina/o representations that challenge mainstream colonial depictions of non-white bodies.

Some scholars have proposed using the framework of *Latinidad* (“Latiness”) to articulate the fluidity and complexity of Latina/o identity. As a part of the revised census categorization under the direction of the Nixon administration in 1973, the federal government divided the U.S. population into five population groups: Native American/Eskimo, Asian/Pacific Islander, White, Black, and Hispanic.<sup>14</sup> As a social construct, the term Hispanic homogenizes Latinas/os into a single group. Since that time the category has become commonly used in society. This construct fails to acknowledge racial, ethnic and historical differences and at the same time continues the process of racialization and gendering that marginalizes Latina/o images by rendering them less powerful and less valuable than white, especially white masculine, images. This occurs because Latino images continue to be read in relation to dominant constructions of whiteness. Latina images are often doubly disadvantaged for they are not only read in relation to whiteness but are also understood in relation to dominant constructions of femininity. As a theoretical

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<sup>14</sup> Rodriguez, Richard. “A Cultural Identity.” *The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer*. June, 18, 1997. [www.pbs.org/newshour/essays/june97/rodriguez\\_6-18.html](http://www.pbs.org/newshour/essays/june97/rodriguez_6-18.html). Accessed 27 January, 2009.

framework, the notion of *Latinidad* and other related terms have been imagined and used in multiple ways by different disciplines. Felix Padilla (1985) studied the intra-group relations of Mexicans and Puerto Ricans in Chicago using the notion of “Latinismo” to describe how groups form a social and political collective. Media scholar Arlene Dávila (2001) conceptualizes *Latinidad* as commodification and uses it to analyze the homogenizing effect that mass marketing has had on Latina/o populations. Her research on advertisements in the 1980s and 1990s and film in the 1990s demonstrates the ways *Latinidad* has been used to market to the Hispanic community. Here Bakhtin’s theory of ‘heteroglossia,’ the concept of many different languages, works to counteract this homogenization. Heteroglossia addresses both social languages that exist within a single national language and different national languages that exist within the same culture (e.g., Spanish in the United States). These languages, states Bakhtin, are hierarchically situated and that interaction between languages has the potential for change. As these different languages come into contact with one another conflicts are bound to arise. It is in these moments of conflict where heteroglossia implies the dialogic interaction as dominant languages attempt to retain and expand control while ‘other’ languages work to negotiate or subvert that control. This act of struggle makes these ‘other’ languages visible where they must be acknowledged with all of their accents and intonations.

Scholar Francis M. Aparicio (2003) argues for a reconceptualization of *Latinidad*. He explores both how *Latinidad* functions in one sense as a homogenizing concept and how it can be used to challenge dominant social constructions. For example, Aparicio uses what he terms '*Latinidad feminista*' to discuss how Jennifer Lopez's role as Selena is an enactment of "resistance to dominant social constructions of Latina bodies" because it challenges dominant Anglocentric notions of beauty (2003 103). In Aparicio's terms *Latinidad* is a conceptual framework "that allows us to explore moments of convergences and divergences in the formation of Latino/a (post)colonial subjectivities and in hybrid cultural expressions among various Latino national groups" (2003 93). In this case, Bakhtinian dialogism and his concept of polyphony provide an important framework for identifying the varied and multiple voices which comprise *Latinidad* and for discussing how the relationship of their utterances to each other, to historical utterances and to dominant culture provide voice to a group traditionally silenced.

Other scholars such as Baez (2007) and Guzmán and Valdivia (2004) have also used the notion of *Latinidad* as a theoretical framework for exploring Latina/o representation. Like Aparicio, Guzmán and Valdivia note that *Latinidad* is informed by a combination of "ethnic-specific" and mainstream discourses and is transmitted to society through media images (208). They point out that Latinas do not fit neatly into the black/white binary conception of race and ethnicity still prevalent in the U.S. today (Bhabha). They explain,

as does Aparicio, that Latina stars like Jennifer Lopez have complex and multiple identities which enable them to “shift between racial and ethnic categories” as needed or as desired (Guzmán and Valdivia, 214). This ability to defy simple categorization, they contend, challenges dominant discourses of race, ethnicity and gender and provides a framework for looking at other representations. Guzmán and Valdivia argue that by conceptualizing *Latinidad* as encompassing all Latinas, a space is created where issues of differentiation can be explored, thus providing room where Latinas can be heard. This conceptualization of *Latinidad* as a place where multiple identities interact works in concert with the notion of hybridity as a space where “bodies and identity resist stable categories, and meaning is ambivalent, contradictory, and historically shifting” (Guzman and Valdivia 213-214). Critical hybridity theory looks at cultural, both national and international, interaction as places where the identities of members of all social, economic, and ethnic backgrounds come together as sites of struggle and are continually renegotiated (Kraidy 2002).

This notion of *Latinidad* as hybridity is useful for interrogating the popular representation of colonized populations. A hybrid representation is the result of various social constructions of populations, in this case Latinas, to create complex images that confront society’s issues. In this way new images are made possible by creating a space where identity and representation are constantly being renegotiated. According to Guzmán and Valdivia, “Latina

identity, as a hybrid form within U.S. culture, remaps dominated hierarchies of identity and challenges popular notions of place and nation” (2004, 214). The representations of Latinas in the films in this study are hybrid and complex in comparison to historical Anglocentric representations. It is this framework of hybrid *Latinidad* that most effectively opens space for exploring alternate notions of the body, beauty, race and ethnicity, and socioeconomic status in the U.S.

As a framework where multiple voices are acknowledged and meaning can be debated and renegotiated, dialogism, polyphony and hybrid *Latinidad* combine to form a productive approach to recent film representations of Latinas. For example, in *Real Women* the two main characters, Ana and her mother Carmen, are in a state of continual conflict. Carmen’s traditional Latina/o expectations for her daughter are at odds with Ana’s American dream of attending college and her desire to be liked for “her thoughts,” not just for her virginity. In addition, Ana does not want to be valued because her body does or does not fit within certain prescribed physical attributes deemed ‘attractive.’ But it is through conflict that issues like culture, tradition and family are renegotiated. Varied articulations of the body play against one another in these films to create complex Latinas that defy easy categorization and begin a long overdue dialogue with more traditional social constructions.

## REPRESENTATIONS OF LATINAS: DIFFERENT IMAGES, NEW VOICES

Cinematic representations of Latinas in the U.S. have existed in popular culture for over a century. Stereotypes of Latinas as both sexually promiscuous and desirable have been common cinematic fare, falling under various recognizable umbrella adjectives: The virgin. The harlot. The cantina girl. The dark lady. Early scholarship devoted to the representation of women in general, and Latinas in particular, focused on identifying these stereotypes, which were labeled either positive or, more likely, negative. This work signaled the beginning of the conversation about the harmful effects repeated negative representations have on marginalized groups. Representations identified as stereotypic were rightly criticized for being one dimensional and, for the first time, issues such as poverty, racism, sexism and ethnicity and their relationship to dominant institutions of power became part of the social dialogue and sites of contestation (Fregoso 1994; Keller 1985, 1994; Lopez 1991, 2000; Noriega 1992, 2000; Ramirez Berg 2002; Valdivia 2000). Many mainstream representations continue to utilize colonial notions of race, gender and sexuality built on traditions of exoticism, racialization and sexualization; a tradition that marginalizes Latinas and other non-white bodies, reinforcing the notion of them as foreigners and a cultural threat.

Scholarship on the history of the representation of the bodies of African American women is an important foundation for understanding similar dynamics in representations of Latinas. “Systems of domination and thus social

hierarchy...were inscribed on and maintained through symbolism of the [minority] body” (Beltran 81). Black women have been historically constructed by U.S. media as the sexualized Other (hooks 1994). In the eighteenth century the black servant’s function in the visual arts was to “sexualize the society in which he or she is found” (Gilman 138). The sexualization of the black body, especially the female body, came to represent deviancy. This deviancy was then linked to biological and physical traits such as skin color, ample breasts and large posteriors.

In his article “*Black Bodies, White Bodies,*” Sander Gilman details the nineteenth century paradigm that placed “both the sexuality and the beauty of the black in an antithetical position to that of the white” (139). The identification of difference between black and white women was at the center of this ‘scientific’ model. There was a fascination with the robust and curvaceous figure of black women that was dramatically contrasted to white women whose bodies were constrained by corsets and associated with purity. This purity of the white body was equated to goodness while the black body—which was not contained—was linked to sexual deviancy and availability. In other words, the contemporary view of the female black body at that time saw their “voluptuousness [as] developed to a degree of lascivity unknown in our climate, for the sexual organs are much more developed than those of whites” (J.J. Virey, qtd. in Gilman 139). Sarje/Sarah Bartmann, a South African dubbed the “Hottentot Venus,” became the epitome of this racial ideology during the

Victorian era. Bartmann was exhibited in a cage as a scientific specimen because, notes Gilman, Victorians associated Bartmann's large buttocks with excessive sexuality and were 'titillated' by the experience of looking at her. Bartmann became the prototype for representations of black female bodies from that point on.

Latina bodies have been similarly represented as voluptuous and overly sexualized (Baez 2007; Beltran 2002; hooks 1992; Ramirez Berg 2002). Though we are not now likely to see a public display like the "Hottentot Venus," colonial constructions of non-white females still influence popular representations, employing standards of beauty that differentiate between desirable and undesirable traits and effect the development of collective and individual identity.

Scholars such as Mary C. Beltran have documented how cultural ideals of the body and beauty have been associated with social status and power. Beltran describes mainstream Hollywood as a "traditionally white space" (2002). The Anglocentric colonial mindset prevalent in Europe and the U.S. created a social hierarchy with whites, especially white protestant males, occupying the highest position (Dyer 1997; Keller 1994). Richard Dyer (*White*) argues that social status, intelligence and personality characteristics like goodness are most often associated with individuals deemed beautiful in dominant Anglocentric representations. In contrast, negative traits such as dark skin and a voluptuous figure are associated with bodies deemed unattractive

yet sexually available. This representation of white as good and non-white as either bad or less good became commonplace in Hollywood films, particularly in the early days. Indeed, historically, the success of a Latina actress in Hollywood can be linked to how closely they embodied Anglocentric notions of beauty. For example, by studying Latina actresses like Dolores del Río from the 1920's to the 1940's, Alicia Rodriguez-Estrada discovered that social class and one's 'look' was a significant indicator of film success (cited in Beltran 2002). Anton Rios-Bustamente also found that Latina/o actors' ethnic appearance determined the kinds of roles they were offered (1992).

Guzman and Valdivia argue that many representations of Latinas in the U.S. have been racialized and genderized in the media, having the effect of Othering and marginalization in relation to dominant constructions of whiteness and femininity. 'Whiteness,' they claim, is related to intellectual traditions that do not relate to the body while 'non-whiteness' refers to nature and the body's needs. Western traditional binary relationships—white/black, civilized/savage, us/them—are thus at the core of this colonial notion of the body. Latinas/os, however, do not fit neatly within either of these binary categories because they are considered neither black nor white. By acknowledging that cultures are complex, interacting and continually transforming, scholar Homi Bhabha conceptualizes *in-between spaces* as places where it is possible to find “the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood—singular and communal—that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites

of collaboration and contestation in the art of defining the idea of society itself” (2004, 1-2). Bakhtin also conceptualizes dialogic places where polyphonic voices collide and negotiate new identities in a continual cycle. We understand that representation in film is a function of “the political, social, cultural, and economic climate at that time” (MacDonald). By looking at representations within this frame it is possible to understand Latina identity as complex, a hybrid of the lived experience and the socially constructed image.

In summary, then, this dissertation seeks to extend the scholarly work within Latina film studies, particularly with respect to gender and class (Jillian Baez 2007; Mary Beltran 2002; Ana M. Lopez 1991; Rosa Linda Fregoso 1994; Molina Guzman and Angharad Valdivia 2004; Ramirez Berg 2002). The objective of this study is a contribution to the discussion about the representation of *Latinidad* in contemporary popular film and strategies for challenging and disrupting dominant ideologies, particularly as they relate to representations of the body, in an effort to create a space for empowering heretofore silent polyphonic Latina voices. Bakhtin challenges us to read dominant ideology and dominant cinema critically and his theories about dialogism and polyphony, the intertextuality and multiplicity of voices implied in text and film provide a framework for contextualizing the images, analyzing cinematic narrative and technique, and comparing the ways in which Latina voices have “seeped” into cinematic representations by looking at the ‘in-between’ or hybrid spaces those images occupy in our society (Aparicio 2003; Baez 2007; Bakhtin 1982,

1986; Bhabha 1994; Stam 2000). Looking at the terrain of the Latina body in these films through these lenses is an opportunity to extend and contribute to scholarly work in Latino/a, film, gender, and cultural studies.

## CHAPTER OVERVIEW

Chapter two will look at the ways the Latina body in Karyn Kusama's *Girlfight* (2000) is contested and renegotiated by looking at its relationship with gender, race, class and culture. In particular, this film disrupts our expectations about gender by presenting us with a Latina, Diana Guzman (Michelle Rodriguez), who is unlike any we have seen in popular American film, detailing her struggle against the after-effects of domestic violence and cultural expectations she finds restrictive, oppressive and dangerous. Refusing to conform to traditional, patriarchal gendered expectations, Diana instead embodies a complex mixture of aggressive behavior, intimidating attitudes and vulnerability that challenge our preconceived notions of how a cinematic Latina should look or act. The hybrid identity Diana eventually negotiates through her submersion into the masculine world of boxing is unsettling for viewers, especially male viewers, and works to subvert both internal (e.g., Latina/o gender expectations) and external (e.g., general society's race, gender and class assumptions) cultural and gender attitudes. This identity is simultaneously refreshingly feminist and troubling for the element of violence prevalent in Diana's character.

Chapter three analyzes the ways in which Mexican and American cultural expectations come into conflict as do relationships among the women in *Real Women Have Curves* (2002). The body of Ana is the site of contestation where a cultural and familial tug-of-war occurs. Ana is a high school student educated in the U.S. whose parents are from Mexico. She wants to attend college but her mother expects her to go to work in her sister's garment factory to help support the family. Her mother also expects Ana to make her body conform to a particular set of physical attributes she deems necessary to find a husband. Ana's independence and refusal to conform to anyone's notion of how she should look or behave is vividly illustrated throughout the film through confrontations with the traditional society her mother represents. The Latinas in this film have multiple and sometimes conflicting identities that are not easily categorized. Through a continual process of negotiation Ana projects a *Latinidad feminista* empowered by her differences and is given a voice so often denied Latinas in classic cinema. She is also able to better understand and find strength through her association with the other Latinas at the factory. In addition, by reclaiming the body *Real Women* not only challenges old stereotypes but also redefines the Latin body as self-confident and beautiful creating more inclusive, diverse and empowered *Latinidades feministas* than previous popular U.S. cinematic representations have allowed.

Chapter four analyzes Wayne Wang's *Maid in Manhattan* (2002) in terms of the visibility of a Latina dependent on her perceived class. Though Wang's

film is basically a remake of the ‘Cinderella’ story, he does provide us with moments when gender, class and beauty intersect to confront mainstream constructions of Latinas as less beautiful, less intelligent, and less motivated and enables us to imagine more complex and hybrid representations. Through the Latina protagonist, Marisa, Wang is able to create instances where we, as viewers, are forced to acknowledge the invisibility of the poor and working class in our society and the privileging of certain groups based on attributes like race, gender and class. Such uncomfortable junctures encourage us to confront our own preconceptions about these categories and the inequalities that structure so-called “democratic” societies. The resulting Latina character evidences moments of resistance but, in the end, is not fundamentally oppositional.

Chapter five looks at James L. Brooks’ film *Spanglish* (2004) to see how competing themes of family, parenting, culture, beauty and class collide in ways that challenge dominant ideologies and offer new demonstrations of Latina agency. Bakhtinian dialogism is particularly noticeable in *Spanglish* as multiple voicings and encounters between various languages and cultural representations interact working to provide viewers of this popular film with complex Latinas. For example, by making the Latina protagonist, Flor, the center of what is considered beautiful, responsible and ethical, Brooks not only provides us with atypical constructions of beauty that counter mainstream representations but also creates moments where multi-voiced (polyphonic)

Latinas are empowered and speak as they confront issues of race and class. *Spanglish* is a film that highlights the difficulties faced by immigrants who must decide how much they are willing to assimilate into the culture of their adopted country. Flor struggles with this issue as she brings up her U.S. educated daughter to value both her Mexican and American cultural roots. Brooks critiques U.S. notions of beauty, family structure, class and success through his stereotypic white female protagonist and her relationship with members of her own family and the family of Flor, who works as her housekeeper. Through a series of expected and unexpected narrative turns, it is possible to see how particular frameworks (e.g., English literacy, employer-employee relations, economics) impact the Latina body and how it is perceived by others. It is also possible to see how power is articulated in the Latina body through this film. In addition, by problematizing the privileged status of a nuclear family as the standard and affluence as the solution to life's problems, Brooks allows us to see difference (e.g., single parents, working class, immigrants, Spanish-speakers) not as aberrations but as normal possibilities.

The final chapter will compare and summarize how the Latina body has been articulated across each of the films discussed in this dissertation. I will discuss how the body functions in each of the films, how its meaning is articulated, contested, and negotiated. In general I will consider whether and to what extent the Latina bodies portrayed in these films mark changes in the representation of Latinas for the new century.

## II. For All Those Who Came Before: Disruptive Representations in Kusama's *Girlfight*

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"I could break your neck if I wanted.  
...Mom begged, did you stop when  
she said please?"  
*Diana to Sandro (Girlfight)*

"You fought me like I was any other guy.  
You threw down and showed me respect.  
Don't you know what that means?"  
*Diana to Adrian (Girlfight)*

*Girlfight* (2000), an independent film written and directed by Asian American Karyn Kusama, is a unique exploration of the Latina body and the possibility of the renegotiation of its traditional relationships to gender, race, class and culture. Latinas living in the U.S., even those who are second- or third-generation, continue to experience racial and gender oppression by the Latina/o and U.S. culture. Within their own culture Latinas often face a patriarchal structure that limits their opportunities to gender-specific roles. These Latinas also face racial oppression by a larger U.S. society whose culture and institutions privilege Anglos. *Girlfight* is a film that disrupts our expectations through the representation of a young Latina who struggles against the residual effects of domestic violence, a less than supportive father, and cultural expectations she finds restrictive, oppressive and dangerous. The Latina body is the predominant site of struggle in this film and the resulting

complex, resistant identity is unlike any other Latina representation in a popular U.S. film to date.

Diana Guzman (Michelle Rodriguez) is an 18-year old Latina who lives and attends high school in Brooklyn, New York. She is situated between two different cultures—one a mixture of Latin cultures in her neighborhood (e.g., Dominican, Puerto Rican), one Anglo-American because, like Ana in *Real Women* and Cristina in *Spanglish*, she lives in a Latina/o community surrounded by that culture but attends public school in New York. A constant source of conflict in the film is the strained and sometimes violent relationship with her father, Sandro (Paul Calderon). In addition, her unconventional behavior is met with surprise and disapproval from everyone she knows. Diana's desire to train for the traditionally male sport of boxing is met with particular derision. Her father, who expects her to be a more traditional Latina who wears dresses and make-up and will eventually find a gender appropriate job (e.g., secretary), is the most vocal when he tells her she looks like a loser in the ring.

Absent from this family is a mother figure and we learn that, following an abusive relationship with Sandro, Diana's mother committed suicide many years ago. This absence of a female influence can be partially linked to Diana's lack of identification with more traditional feminine practices. Latina bodies have often been thought of as vessels that have functioned to pass on traditional patriarchal values from one generation to the next—a concept linked to *Marianismo* (Mendible 2007; Fregoso 1994; Ramirez Berg 2002;

Valdivia 2000). *Marianismo* is a term used in Latin America and U.S. Latina/o cultures to describe the ideal of true femininity. It is thought to have originated from Roman Catholic theology and its veneration of the Virgin Mary as both virgin and Madonna. Within this notion is the ideal of true feminine qualities (e.g., purity, morality, kindness, being unassertive, sexually abstinent until married, being faithful and subordinate to their husbands). In addition, a woman is expected to suffer in silence, putting the needs of her husband and family ahead of her own desires and needs (e.g., Carmen in *Real Women*). Without a mother and no other feminine influence there was no one to nurture and guide Diana toward more traditional behaviors. As a result, Diana has been forced to create her own identity, an identity she believes will protect her from the cruelties of society like the ones that resulted in her mother's suicide. I argue that Diana's lack of traditionally-defined femininity is a deliberate construction and a conscious response to the domestic violence she has witnessed and the absence of parental warmth she has experienced.

Race is not an overtly central theme to *Girlfight* although there are subtle references. Latin music is used periodically throughout the film and there are other visual clues like the visibility of Goya food products and Spanish-speaking Latina/o characters. Diana's father has fairly dark skin but both she and her brother Tiny have a lighter more olive-skinned complexion indicating that their mother may have been another ethnicity. This apparent racial mixture, when combined with her dark eyes and ethnic hair gives Diana

what Baez terms the “Latin Look.” In her work on the construction of Latina/o representations in U.S. media Clara E. Rodriguez notes that the ‘Latin look’ popularized in media has been a homogenization of groups with distinctly different cultures and histories (e.g., Chicanos, Cubanos, Puerto Ricans, Colombians, etc.). As we will see in chapter four, Jennifer Lopez also has the ‘Latin Look’ and uses it to market herself to a diverse audience and to portray a variety of ethnic characters. The creation and propagation of this generic ‘look’ is determined by historical, political and economic contexts and is often signified by characters who are represented as “sexualized, passive, feeble, unintelligent and dependent” (1). Rodriguez also goes on to explain that ‘Latin looks’ also encompass attributes such as darker skin, dark hair and eyes, accented English, working class occupations and a lack of education. While Diana does reflect some of these attributes (e.g., dark hair, olive skin, dark eyes) she also challenges other commonly accepted norms by being aggressive, smart and independent. By constructing such a strong female character, director Kusama challenges us as viewers to acknowledge the restrictions placed on women by traditional practices and the pervasiveness of classic media representations and to consider how those images affect U.S. society as a whole.

This analysis of *Girlfight* will focus on Diana’s relationship to her family, school, other women, her culture and her image of herself. These relationships will be examined by looking at how Diana’s body functions as the site of

struggle through which these interactions are contested. For instance, the idea that a female can box is explicitly discussed in the film. Diana, who represents a younger generation and a hybrid Latina that has been further complicated by her often harsh life experiences, challenges the traditional beliefs held by those around her, especially men, that a woman should be delicate, pretty, demure and subservient. They believe that boxing is the province of men and women have no right to participate, that women cannot match the power of men in the ring. But Diana, who has a mind of her own, rejects these limitations.

Kusama uses Diana's character to challenge traditional racial and gender expectations, thus empowering Diana in new ways. If, as film scholar Janice R. Welsch argues, we interpret Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of dialogism as a means to provide viewers with opportunities to engage members of society in a discussion of difference through a combination of narrative, visual and cinematography strategies, and if filmic representations provide an intermediary location where identities are renegotiated, then *Girlfight* clearly provides the mechanisms to stir such discussions (Stam 1989; Welsch 1994).

## **REVISIONING GENDER**

Diana is a complex mixture of violent and aggressive behavior, intimidating attitudes and vulnerability that work to disrupt and challenge viewer's ideas of how a teenage Latina should look and act based on familiar

cinematic representations. Her resulting hybrid Latina identity is potentially unsettling for viewers and works to subvert both internal and external cultural and gender expectations. In a recent article Jillian Baez notes that Diana is one of the most feminist Latina characters ever represented in film because she rejects traditionally expected heteronormative feminine activities and embraces boxing in an effort to assert her own agency (2007).

Overall this film is visually and narratively dark and foreboding. The gym is barely lit and boxers are shrouded in virtual darkness as they train. Only the ring is lit when they spar focusing all our attention on the match at hand. Diana's apartment is also fairly dark. The contrast between the poorly lit everyday life and training and brightly lit ring suggests that boxing can provide a path toward a more prosperous life—a goal all of the boxers training at the gym share, a desire to turn pro and earn more money. Viewers are never sure what is going to happen next and so are kept in a continual state of unease. *Girlfight* deals with elements of domestic violence, cultural and gendered expectations for both Diana and Tiny Guzman. The nature of Diana's character is established in the opening moments of the film. The first scene is of a school hallway. Diana, dressed in baggy boyish clothes, is leaning against a row of lockers. Her hair is tightly braided and she is looking down at her feet with her eyes closed. The camera cuts to a close-up of her face. She is wearing mascara and her red lips stand out in the shot. The camera holds this close-up for a few seconds before Diana suddenly opens her eyes to look up fiercely at us from

under her brow. She appears powerful and intimidating in this shot and this sudden and unexpected visual is the first indicator that this character is not a traditional Latina. Throughout the film Kusama uses close-ups of Diana's face to convey a fierce, warrior-like persona. What is most striking in these close-ups is the intensity of Diana's eyes and the ability of Michelle Rodriguez to elicit such strong emotion with just a look and body posture.

Diana's tough unforgiving demeanor does not generally lend itself to many close feminine relationships and such a strong personality is often intimidating to young males. She is friends with Marisol (Elisa Bocanegra), a student at school. Marisol is a bit heavy, wears a lot of make-up and is preoccupied with boys. She is clearly constructed to represent traditional Latinas. In an early scene that takes place in the girls' bathroom we see Marisol and Veronica (Shannon Walker Williams) arguing about a boy. Eventually Veronica insults Marisol and tells her that she should look in the mirror and consider a makeover if she wants to attract boys. Diana, who is sitting on the heater by the window ledge and has been listening to the argument, immediately demands that Veronica apologize to Marisol. When Veronica refuses and walks out of the bathroom Diana follows her into the hallway, grabs her and throws her up against the lockers then to the floor and proceeds to beat her. Veronica, being a 'girly girl,' is defenseless against Diana and one of the students watching observes that seeing the fight it is like watching 'American Gladiator' where the women competitors are strong and tough and

are not considered very feminine. A teacher eventually breaks up the fight and takes Diana to the principal's office. We find out that this is her fourth fight of the semester. The principal proceeds to lecture her about needing to learn to talk through her problems and not resort to violence, but violence is something Diana is sadly familiar with.

When Diana gets home that night her father and two of his buddies are sitting at the table playing cards. His friend Edward looks at Diana and says, "You're the living likeness of your mother." Sandro looks at Edward and says, "Hey . . . just play," effectively ending any discussion of Diana's mother. Sandro then sends Diana to the gym to pay Tiny's trainer, Hector Soto (Jaime Tirelli). She wanders through the dark, run-down gym until someone directs her to Hector. Hector is watching a sparring match between Tiny and another boxer. She watches as Tiny backs away from the other boxer, taking a defensive posture otherwise unable to defend himself. When Hector ends the match because he feels Tiny is not ready to continue, the other boxer, Ray (Victor Sierra), sucker punches him, bloodying his nose. As the other boxer gets out of the ring Diana walks up to him and punches him in the face, telling him, "that's my brother you little shit." Tiny is mad at Diana for punching Ray because it makes him look like a sissy to the others. When she gives the money to Hector he asks if she is Sandro's kid too and why he has not heard about her. She shrugs and says sarcastically, "I'm his pride and joy," revealing that her

father has little interest in a daughter, an attitude that reflects and reinforces the traditional privileging of male children, especially in Latina/o culture.

Diana's defense of her friend Marisol and her brother demonstrates her fierce loyalty to those she cares about, though her methods are socially unacceptable within both Latina/o and U.S. culture—especially for a girl. Later in the school year the gym teachers conducts the annual President's Physical Fitness tests. Diana, who by this time has been training and running for some time, shows up all of her female classmates: she does more push-ups, and more pull-ups than the rest of the girls and easily runs a fast mile finishing more than a lap ahead of every one else. Veronica tells Diana that her hormone treatments appear to have done their job, another jab at Diana's physical fitness and perceived lack of femininity.

### **POWER AND THE ALURE OF BOXING**

After visiting the gym Diana begins to think about training there. She never explains why she wants to do this even though Tiny asks her directly. Her only response is, "cause," indicating that she should be allowed to train because she wants to, no other reason is necessary. Shortly thereafter we see Diana standing at her bedroom window one night looking out into the darkness. She is watching a mother who is pushing a baby stroller with a crying toddler in tow and sees the future she is supposed to want, but does not. Diana has felt vulnerable all of her life because of her mother's suicide. For years Diana has

been trying to figure out how to protect herself from the abuse her mother endured at the hands of Sandro. Diana has never forgiven her father and holds him responsible for her mother's death. We are not given enough information as viewers to determine if this interpretation of events is accurate, but Sandro never disputes the accusations of abuse. Part of Diana's almost masculine persona is a response to that feeling of vulnerability embodied by the memory her mother. If she is tough and intimidating people will keep their distance from her. While this may make her feel safer it also isolates Diana and keeps her from developing any kind of support network. This defense mechanism where Diana takes charge and hurts other people before they can hurt her or anyone she cares about has provided her some semblance of security and the film implies that Diana sees boxing as an opportunity to strengthen her body physically and emotionally, to harness her anger and to learn to direct it more productively. To that end Diana returns to the gym and approaches Hector, asking him to train her to fight.

Hector recognizes her as the girl who had punched Tiny's sparring partner and proceeds to tell the other men sitting at the table all about the encounter. The men talk amongst themselves, ignoring Diana who is trying to talk to Hector until she shouts over them, "hey, I'm trying to say something here." Diana is privileged in this scene because she is standing and when the camera cuts to an over-the-shoulder shot of the men sitting at the table it is as though Diana is looking down on them. At first Hector tells her it would be a

good workout, thinking that all she wants is to train in order to tone her body. When she persists that she wants to fight Hector tells her she can train but she cannot fight. One of the other trainers sitting at the table suggests she try aerobics. Diana looks at him and says rudely, “was I talking to you?” Hector finally tells her he charges \$10 a lesson. When she tells him she does not have that kind of money he dismisses her thinking it is over.

That night Diana asks Sandro for an allowance since he pays for Tiny’s boxing lessons and she does not get anything. Sandro tells her that if she wants money she will have to get a job, he is not going to give her anything until she proves to him that she deserves it, although we are not sure what kind of proof he expects. He goes on to tell her that she should “try wearing a dress once in a while” as if this action might be the proof he is seeking. We never see Sandro going to work but a hard hat, water jug and lunch pail can be seen on a shelf in the kitchen indicating he is most likely a construction worker. Tiny is a good student who wants to be an artist, not a boxer. He seems to always be neatly dressed, does not appear to be physically strong and is not at all aggressive. Sandro sees this physique as weak which is why he wants Tiny to train as a boxer. Diana, on the other hand, gets into fights at school, dresses boyishly in baggy clothes and has a visible disdain for girls like Veronica, a popular girl at school, who go around giving their boyfriends “blowjobs.” Diana is determined to train so she steals money from her father to pay for the lessons. Once she proves she will work hard Hector begins to really train her. Over the course of

the film Diana transforms her soft, feminine physique into a hard, uncompromising body that matches her hard, uncompromising and determined personality.

## **GENDER REVERSAL**

Kusama upsets gender roles completely in this film and presents them as conflicted and problematic as Diana seems to reject traditionally female-identified behaviors, sculpts her body through training and chooses to compete against men in the ring. Throughout the film it seems as though she has to fight for everything she gets so her strong and often confrontational personality serves her fairly well. For example, when she shows up at the gym to ask Hector to train her he tells her that “there are a lot of better things she can do with her life than box.” She instantly challenges him with, “Oh ya? Then prove it.” Everything about Diana—except her curvaceous figure—takes on a masculine air.

Tiny, on the other hand, is not portrayed as being very masculine in a traditional sense. He does not exhibit the traits media representations normally associate with being a Latino (e.g., physically strong). As a result, his father sees Tiny as bookish and weak and sends him to train with Hector so that he will learn how to be stronger, tougher and no longer at the mercy of bullies. But Tiny’s heart is not in boxing. He is smart, does well in school and wants to attend art school. Diana protects him, fighting his battles as when she punched

Ray and later in the film when she tells her father he better not touch Tiny or he'd be sorry. In one sense these actions can be seen as a big sister protecting her younger brother. But in Latino culture one is not considered manly when a woman, even an older sister like Diana, fights his battles. Yet, Tiny seems comfortable with his identity. He describes himself as a 'geek' and tells Diana after he gives her money meant for his boxing lessons that he will "find something productive to do with his time." To Tiny, it is a waste of time and effort to deny who he really wants to be. In Tiny, Kusama presents a young Latino who eventually discovers that it is more important to follow his own path than to try to be someone he can never be just to satisfy his father or his culture.

### **LOVE, VULNERABILITY AND INDEPENDENCE**

Adrian is a young boxer at the gym who works with a different trainer in the hope of going pro and finding a way to escape the neighborhood. He is 19 years old and works at his father's auto repair shop. Diana watches him work out and is obviously attracted to him. Unfortunately another young Latina, Corina, also visits the gym regularly to watch Adrian spar. Ray, one of the other boxers, describes Corina as a 'dish.' Diana watches Corina as she interrupts Adrian's workout to talk to him and give him a kiss. She understands that Corina's body is seen as feminine and desirable by the young men at the gym while the muscles of her body are becoming more defined and hard as she

continues her workouts making her seem less feminine and therefore less desirable. For the most part Diana is ignored by others at the gym and she struggles to negotiate between her yearning to be a boxer and her desire to pursue a relationship with Adrian, possibilities that at times seem mutually exclusive.

One night after their workout Adrian offers to give Diana a ride home since they both live in the projects. As they are driving across one of the bridges Diana shows Adrian where, 37 years ago, her mother was born. Another night, after attending a professional boxing match, Adrian and Diana stop to eat on the way home. Diana orders a deluxe burger and fries while Adrian, in a role reversal, orders only a cup of soup and a salad because he is watching his weight to stay in the featherweight division.

The relationship that slowly develops between Diana and Adrian is affectionate but not sexual. It seems as though Diana has found in Adrian a friend in which she can confide. One night after an argument with her father Diana goes to the apartment Adrian shares with his parents. She stays overnight, having no where else to go, and the audience expects to see a romantic interlude between Adrian and Diana. Kusama, however, surprises viewers by having the couple sleep in the same bed but not make love. It appears as though Diana is willing, but in an unusual plot twist, Kusama has Adrian putting a stop to any sexual encounter. At first Diana thinks it is because she is not pretty like Corina. In response Adrian pushes Diana onto the bed,

straddles her and begins kissing and caressing her—but does nothing more. He tells Diana that he cannot do anything that might drain his strength until after he fights Ray. As they lay in bed, side by side, Adrian asks Diana if her parents are still together. She tells him no, that her mother died years ago. Adrian then asks her what happened. We see her pause for moment, look up at the ceiling and tell him that her mother killed herself. Adrian is started by this but is finally able to tell her he is sorry. In this moment we can see Diana's vulnerability as her eyes tear and her voice cracks ever so slightly when she responds, "ya, me too." Adrian puts his arm around her to comfort her, drawing her close to him.

In a subsequent scene Diana is at Hector's birthday party in the kitchen with Ray, the boxer she punched, who told her that he forgave her because she had obviously never learned how to act like a lady. At the party he tries to get her to dance, saying that she is too uptight. He finally tells her mockingly to "be a man," another clear reference to her perceived lack of femininity, a perception that seems to be confirmed when Adrian shows up at the party with Corina. When Diana sees Corina sit on his lap and kiss him she looks surprised and then angry and leaves the party abruptly, but not before Adrian sees her. The camera focuses on Adrian's face and we see that he is instantly uncomfortable.

Adrian goes to Diana's school to talk to her. Diana is on the far left of the frame; Adrian is on the far right. Diana confronts him about his date for

Hector's party by asking him, "Where's your woman when she doesn't have her tongue in your ear?" She wants to know if he feels better now that he can show the other guys he can still snag the pretty girl. Diana tells him to leave but he says maybe he doesn't want to. She asks, "Why? You're off the hook now." Adrian eventually tells Diana that he broke it off with Corina because he has found someone who "does something for me." By the end of the conversation they are standing next to each other and end up kissing. Adrian's confusion about being attracted to Diana is clear when he tells her he does not know what to do with his feelings for her.

#### **DOMESTIC VIOLENCE VS THE VIOLENCE OF BOXING**

Diana's father never once showed her respect. In fact, much of his interaction with her revealed either a healthy disinterest or a level of barely contained contempt. This may have been because Diana refused to let him forget his responsibility for her mother's death. Her masculine dress and behavior, as well as her pursuit of boxing, also contributes to the discord between father and daughter. Their relationship is further complicated by Diana's close physical resemblance to her mother, noted earlier by Sandro's friend Edward; she serves as a constant reminder to Sandro of what happened to Diana's mother. Finally, as a daughter, Diana seems to be less valued by Sandro than her brother.

Eventually Sandro discovers that Diana has been stealing from him; at this point he does not realize she has been stealing to pay for her boxing lessons. He confronts Diana about the money and about the ‘guy’ (Adrian) she has been seeing. When he notices she has a black eye he assumes that Adrian hit her. He angrily asks her “How could you let him do this to you?” Even though Diana tells him Adrian did not hit her—she got the black eye in the ring—he persists and tells her “I’m not gonna let this happen to my daughter,” threatening her by commanding her to stay away from that guy “or else.” Diana, seemingly unafraid, comes back at him with “Or else what? You’ll kill me?” She pushes him away from her and leaves the apartment. During these confrontations Diana pumps herself up and takes on an air of strength and confidence. This defense mechanism works to hide the fear she has always felt as a female but also demonstrates that she is physically and emotionally strong enough to protect herself from her father’s abuse.

Once Diana’s boxing skills have improved Hector enters her in a gender-neutral tournament. Tiny and Marisol come to watch her first bout. When a couple of fighters fail to show up Diana ends up fighting Ray. Although Diana had been fighting well in the first round, she becomes distracted when part way through the fight Sandro shows up expecting to see Tiny fighting and is shocked to see Diana in the ring. Because she is worrying about what her father will say Ray is able to knock her down. Though she gets up and continues to battle, Sandro leaves the gym in disgust.

Through the conflict that unfolds when Diana goes home Kusama creates one of the most disturbing, and in an odd sense liberating, scenes in the film. The anger and hatred that Diana has been harboring toward her father is finally released in this scene. When she comes home after the match Sandro is sitting at the table and appears to be drunk. A beer bottle is lying on its side on the table; his eyes are droopy and his speech seems slightly slurred. He tells Diana that she looked ridiculous in the ring; that she looked like a loser. Standing over him Diana gets in his face and, pointing her finger at him, tells Sandro that everything she learned about losing she learned from him. She continues, “The only thing you had the heart to love you practically beat into the grave.” Sandro has had enough and the verbal confrontation turns physical when he stands up and hits her; Diana responds with an upper cut that stuns him in his drunken state. We see that Diana has her hands around his throat as they struggle in the confined space of the small kitchen, much like a boxing ring. She throws him to the floor and begins kicking him over and over. A close-up shot that follows shows Diana straddling Sandro, choking him and telling him she could easily snap his neck if she wanted. She tells him, “I own you now.”

Sandro is obviously in distress and seems defenseless; he begs her to stop. Diana glares down at him, totally in control. The tight shot shows Diana, nose-to-nose with her father, yelling “Mom begged did you stop when she said please?” Tiny, who has been in his room listening until the fight escalated, yells at Diana to please stop and, after a few tense moments, gets her

attention. Diana crawls off her father and the look on her face is almost one of disbelief about what just transpired. We watch as she scoots away from Sandro until she is sitting on the floor leaning against the far wall in the kitchen. Breathing hard she says, “All these years you just looked right through me.”

This difficult scene can be read as the empowerment of a Latina, and in some respects it is. Diana, as the powerful aggressor, is able to take charge of the situation and to protect herself in a way her mother could not by responding in kind when Sandro hits her then continuing to escalate the fight by grabbing Sandro around the throat and choking him. But Kusama has effectively complicated this reading by positioning Diana as the aggressor and victim. However, we must also realize that Diana’s ability to become the aggressor in this instance is possible because Sandro is drunk and incapable of fully defending himself, otherwise he would have been able to overpower her, regardless of her physical strength. This reversal of roles from Sandro the aggressor to Sandro the victim makes the scene visually striking but provides no solution to the issue of domestic violence other than to meet it with violence. And yet, it is difficult for viewers not to have empathy for Diana who has witnessed violence and understands what can happen when you are powerless, especially feminist viewers. She knows that weakness can result in one’s destruction. We are not sorry that Sandro gets what he deserves but the violence is still troubling. A feminist reading of this moment as a progressive representation is thus possible and many might see it as a celebratory moment

in film that remembers all of the victims of abuse who came before who could not protect themselves.

### DIANA'S WAY: POWER IN THE RING

*Girlfight* is about Diana's struggle to find a path in life that makes her feel safe and respected and will also open up new possibilities. For her, boxing becomes the mechanism through which she renegotiates her identity. In an interview Kusama comments, "In *Girlfight* the sport [boxing] itself is the journey that changes her life" (Baker 23). Both Diana and Adrian look to boxing as their ticket out of the projects to a better life. Diana is powerful and we enjoy watching her train, watching her sweat, but most of all, watching her fight. This voyeuristic tendency satisfies not only our desire to look at Rodriguez performing the role of Diana, but also provides pleasure in watching her body as she exhibits power in the ring imparting a symbolic punch at the gender limitations traditionally imposed on Latinas by their own culture (Mulvey 1997). "Every time she [Diana] unleashes an uppercut in the ring, it's a blow against horizons that have been set too narrowly for her" (Cooper 18). Scholars like B. Ruby Rich and Karen R. Tolchin suggest that Diana's character is revolutionary because while our gaze is still on her body, we are not focused on breasts or hips but on her "eyes, brow, jaw and fists" (Tolchin 188). Rich contends that the boxing in *Girlfight* finally provides "a reason other than sex for looking at women's bodies in the movies, a way for women to show off their

forms free of degradation and powerlessness.”<sup>15</sup> Kusama allows us, through Diana’s powerful portrayal and obvious physical strength, to see what is possible when individuals are afforded their own agency. Kusama enables us to envision Diana not as an objectified body but as a complicated Latina with a fluid identity and a beautiful body that has not been reduced to breasts and hips.

Even though she was disrespected by her father, Diana finds support from both Tiny and Hector and in this film, as in *Real Women*, male characters become the catalysts for Diana to step out of traditional, feminine gender roles (Baez 123). Although initially skeptical of her intentions and will to endure the difficult training regimen, by the end of the film Hector becomes one of her strongest advocates and fills the role of surrogate father. When she wins the championship Hector embraces her and tells her that he has never been so proud. Through their support, Tiny and especially Hector, help Diana embrace values that support Latina empowerment. In spite of the cultural and gender biases she faces, boxing becomes the center of Diana’s universe and the physically demanding training coupled with the need to learn to control her anger and channel her aggressions productively in the ring helps her to renegotiate her identity.

Both Diana and Adrian win their preliminary bouts in the amateur gender-blind tournament. They both reach the finals and, in a prototypical

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<sup>15</sup> “Take It Like A Girl,” *Sight & Sound*. No. 2. 2001. 16-18. Accessed 4/1/09. <<http://www.bfi.org.uk/sightandsound/reature/98/>>.

narrative climax, they must face each for the championship. This situation presents Adrian with a difficult dilemma. On one hand he wants to win to advance his career; on the other hand, he does not want to fight Diana because he cares for her and does not believe it is right to hit her. He finds it difficult to separate his feelings for Diana from the fight itself. Both mainstream and Latina/o culture see a bout between a man and a woman as a mismatch; Adrian is simply embodying the belief that a woman cannot be as strong as a man. Echoing this notion, Adrian's trainer argues that "equality has gone too far" and that "no girl has what it takes to be a boxer," adding, "neither do most men." But boxing is not all about strength; there is also endurance and strategy, waiting for the right opening to deliver the knockout punch, as Hector tells Diana early in her training. The gym walls feature a number of hand-made signs with inspirational sayings such as, "Boxing is brain over brawn," "When you're not training someone else is training to kick your ass," and "It's not the size of the dog in the fight, but the size of the fight in the dog." There is an element of cunning and intelligence needed for victory in the ring and the need to understand how to use your power. Boxing is like a dance and when a fighter is in the right frame of mind there is a distinct rhythm.

Diana follows Adrian out of the gym where he tells her that he does not want to fight her. He says that fighting a 'girl' will look bad on his record and he suggests that he might not make his weight; he might "eat for a change." The idea that Adrian would not want to fight her makes Diana mad. At first she

thinks he is “being all macho” because she is a girl, but then it dawns on her that Adrian is afraid she might win. She challenges his competitive spirit and reminds him that he will not be the only one fighting. Diana knows she can hold her own. She understands his strengths and weaknesses, but most importantly, she understands her own. At the end of the scene she tells him that if he won’t like winning this fight then maybe he shouldn’t be a boxer and that he should think more of himself than to back out of a challenge. In the end, Adrian does fight Diana for the championship.

Before their bout begins Hector talks to Diana, preparing her mentally for the challenge she is about to face. In this scene they are in the foreground of the shot but are in the dark. There is just enough light to make out their silhouette. In the background we can see the brightly lit ring where another bout is taking place. Spectators and other boxers mill around the ring. Hector begins by asking Diana how she feels. “Like I have nothing to lose,” she responds. This is true in the sense that she is not expected to win because of her gender. However, and she has not yet realized this, should she win she is risking her relationship with Adrian. Hector then asks Diana if she understands him, she does. “Do you understand yourself,” he asks. “Yes.” Then, in a calm and reassuring way he tells Diana, “then that’s all you need.”

The championship bout is wonderfully filmed. Viewers see the brutality of the sport and get an up-close sense of how draining the experience can be both physically and emotionally. As Diana and Adrian are announced they come

to the center of the ring and tap each other's gloves, as is tradition. They exchange punches throughout the first rounds and, to the untrained eye, the fight appears even. Just before the start of the final round we see each of them sitting in their respective corners. The first shot is of Diana. Hector is telling her what she needs to do. When he notices she is looking at Adrian across the ring he tells her, "I don't care who this guy is to you, don't be afraid to hurt him." In a shot reminiscent of the film's opening scene, we see a tight close-up of Diana's face. She is looking down toward her feet, her face is sweaty and she is breathing hard. There is a flash of white light then the camera cuts to a shot of Adrian looking across the ring at Diana. He too is sweaty and winded. As the camera cuts back to Diana she looks up at Adrian from under her brow. Unlike the opening scene that reflected her rage, this time we see only steely determination. Adrian lands a hard blow to her head which staggers her, but pounding her gloves together she prepares to respond. When Adrian gives her an opening she lands a right hook that knocks him to the canvas. Kusama has the camera zoom out to give us the opportunity to see Diana standing over her fallen boyfriend as he struggles to get back up. Here Adrian signs in for all of the oppressive traditions Latinas are forced to endure, and many of us are happy to see those practices on their knees. Diana wins the fight by unanimous decision. As the fighters come together for the traditional congratulatory hug following the decision Adrian asks Diana if she is "satisfied" now. Her moment of happiness at having won the bout quickly changes to a

stunned realization that winning the fight might have cost her her relationship with Adrian. She turns around and Hector is there to give her a real hug and to tell her how proud he is of her. The next shot shows Diana sitting on a bench in the locker room—alone. The shot holds steady for a long time giving us plenty of time to see the definition of the muscles in her arms and shoulders, signifying the strength and determination necessary to be a female boxer in a man's world. But for all of her toughness Diana is still vulnerable and we see this exhibited when she cries for a moment as all of her conflicted emotions come crashing down around her. She is happy to have won but is saddened to think she may have lost Adrian in the process.

*Girlfight* is not without its critics. While lauded for turning gender roles on its head, some critics are not yet ready to accept the idea that Diana could defeat Adrian in the ring because of their difference in weight and size. Monica J. Casper notes that the feminists among us enjoy watching Diana because we are allowed to “take pleasure in Diana’s capacity for physical aggression, in her emotional and physical battles with the men in her life, and in her resolute toughness” (109). However, as both Cooper and Tolchin suggest, the match between Adrian (Santiago Douglas) and Diana is difficult to accept as realistic because Douglas is “five inches taller and twenty pounds heavier than Michelle Rodriguez” (Cooper 18). While the struggles in Diana’s life seem real enough and her skill in the ring appears convincing, Tolchin argues that Diana’s “triumphs [over her father and Adrian] seem to belong to another realm, that

of fantasy” (191). While emotionally satisfying, Tolchin thinks the end result is too neat and that Diana’s character does not come across as authentic. She writes, “Diana gets to be a warrior, her brother Tiny gets to be an artist, the brutal father gets his comeuppance and the sensitive hunk gets to prove himself a better kind of man,” providing a tidy, yet unrealistic ending.

In the end though, Diana Guzman is a powerful representation that disrupts our notions about what being a Latina is all about. She is powerful because she understands from the experience of her mother and the girls she knows from school that there is “powerlessness in a life devoted exclusively to heterosexual romantic paradigms” (Tolchin 188). She knows that she is marginalized by her gender, race and class and uses boxing as a way of “pursuing a different sort of passion” by working on her skills and finding her own direction (Tolchin 188). In the film’s final scene we see Diana going into the storage closet she uses as a locker room—there are no facilities for women at her gym. It is dark except for a single bulb that dangles from the ceiling. She starts moving things around, emptying part of a shelving unit to reveal a boarded up window. She taps the plywood covering the window and it slides away from the window letting in a burst of light where before there had been only darkness and despair. Through the window, through boxing, through being an independent Latina Diana created a complex and hybrid *Latinidad feminista*. As she brushes off the dusty window sill Adrian walks in and says, “You have a deadly right hook.” He asks Diana if she has lost respect for him because he did

not win the fight. She tells him, “No.” “Even after last night?” he presses, somehow unable to believe otherwise. Adrian is also affected by traditional, equally stereotypic constructions of the Latino persona as all powerful—especially in relation to women. Diana responds, “You boxed with me like I was any other guy. You threw down and showed me respect. Don’t you see what that means?” To Diana, garnering respect, especially from a man, means more than anything else. He tells Diana that being with her is like war. She says, “Maybe life is just war, period.” They kiss and then embrace. As the film ends we watch as, Diana looks over his shoulder out into the light that is her future—unknown, but hers for the taking.

We have seen that throughout this film Diana wants to meet the future on her own terms. Her independence and refusal to conform to anyone’s notion of how she should look or behave is vividly illustrated throughout the film through confrontations with a patriarchal system that her father and boxing naysayers represent. Diana’s feminist construction serves to challenge restrictive practices that continue to marginalize women in general and Latinas in particular. By highlighting the strength and power and sleek beauty in Diana’s hard body, Kusama successfully creates a Latina representation that disrupts our assumptions about what women’s bodies can or should look like and what they can achieve. Having rejected traditional gender roles, Diana is liberated in a feminist sense by training her body and competing against men in the ring—proving her mettle and gaining respect as a result. The visual and

narrative aspects of this film, as well as how the camera shots are constructed to highlight emotion and the body, combine to provide dialogic opportunities to see Latinas—and gender—in new ways. By reclaiming the body *Girlfight* challenges historical racial and gendered stereotypes and redefines the Latina body as self-confident and powerful creating a complicated *Latinidad feminista* that must be taken seriously and respected.

### III. Real Women, Ordinary Women

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“I cut this especially for your body . . . pretty dresses aren’t just for skinny girls . . . this one’s yours.”  
*Estela (Real Women Have Curves)*

“The structures inherent in beauty ideals are ideological constructions that do not remain abstract but materialize in media images.”  
*Maria P Figueroa*

*Real Women Have Curves* (2002), directed by independent filmmaker Patricia Cardoso, is a film about relationships—with family, with society and most importantly with one self. It is also a film about Latina women that looks closely at their lives and the way Mexican and American cultures, gender, race and class converge to create a new Latina; a complicated and hybrid Latina. Latinas in this country are doubly oppressed by both race and gender. They struggle against patriarchal traditions that result in gender oppression by limiting opportunities outside the confines of the family. In addition, Latinas living in the U.S. are non-white and are therefore racially oppressed by traditions that favor Anglos. Underlying each of the themes in *Real Women* is the Latina body and how it is contested and renegotiated through the exploration of its continually changing relationship with race, class, gender, culture, tradition, family and desire.

Ana (America Ferrera) is an 18-year-old Mexican American who lives in East Los Angeles and attends the very affluent Beverly Hills High School. By

default, she is situated between two different cultures—Mexican and American—and struggles against gender and class biases as well as traditional Mexican familial expectations. A constant undercurrent in the film is the often confrontational relationship Ana has with her mother, Carmen (Lupe Ontiveros). Ana wants to attend college which puts her into immediate and direct conflict with her mother who expects her to follow tradition and get married. Myra Mendible and other scholars have observed that Latina bodies have been thought of as vessels where traditional Mexican patriarchal values (*marianismo*) have been safely locked away and passed on from one generation to the next (Fregoso 1994; Ramirez Berg 2002; Valdivia 2000). Ana is faced with these same expectations even as she struggles to find her own path; beliefs that are central to her mother's traditional Mexican identity, an identity she wants her daughters to embody.

Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of dialogism is a useful frame for looking at these multiple and varied representations because, as a site of negotiation, it enables us to acknowledge new, complicated and hybrid Latina images that challenge mainstream colonial depictions of non-white bodies. It provides voice to those who are traditionally silenced by offering both a means for aberrant readings and opportunities for the exchange of ideas (Stam 1989; Welsch 1994). The differences between each of the women in *Real Women*, not just Ana and her mother, provide opportunities for the filmmaker and viewers alike to engage in meaningful dialogue about those differences. By presenting a

diverse group of Latinas who each represent varied and multiple Latina identities—none of which is authentic<sup>16</sup>—Cardoso creates dialogic spaces where these women must negotiate with each other as well as with the larger U.S. audience.

The Latinas in this film have multiple identities that are not easily categorized. Their continual negotiation creates a *Latinidad feminista* where women are empowered by their differences, come to better understand and find strength in one another and are given a voice so often denied them in classic cinema. For example, the struggle between Carmen's traditional Mexican identity and the hybrid and fluid identity of her daughters, especially Ana, presents itself continually throughout the film. Carmen is strong-willed and hard working and she expects her daughters to work to help support the family, shoulder domestic responsibilities, find a husband and raise a family. Of the two daughters, Estela (Ingrid Oliu), Ana's older sister, most closely reflects Carmen's traditional values. Estela learned to sew as her mother wished, but at 29, has failed to marry. Estela owns a garment factory where Carmen and several other women from the barrio work. Carmen believes it is Ana's duty to help support the family and insists she go to work in Estela's factory after graduation. Ana's father, Raul (Jorge Cervera, Jr.), is a landscaper. He is the head of the household in the traditional sense of being the main breadwinner

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<sup>16</sup> The idea that there can be a singularly authentic Latina representation has been challenged by a number of scholars on the grounds that identity is inherently fluid, continually reconstituting itself as it interacts with diverse and intersecting cultural influences. (Anzaldúa 1987; Baez 2007; Bhabha 1995; Guzman and Valdivia 2003)

and the ultimate authority in the house, and though he makes the final decisions about family he works to mediate Carmen's strong personality, especially her opinions about what is best for her daughters.

This analysis of *Real Women* will focus on Ana's relationship to her family, school, work, other women, her culture, her place within society, her image of herself and her desires for the future. In particular, these relationships will be examined through the prism of the body to see how its meaning is contested. For example, the notion that a woman has thoughts and can control her own body is explicitly argued in the film. Ana, who represents both a younger generation and a hybrid Latina who is both Mexican and American, challenges the traditional beliefs held by the older generation of Mexican women who work at the factory, such as that a husband makes decisions about the wife's body. They believe that a woman should not know about birth control because that would change the balance of power between husband and wife while Ana feels it is important for women to make those decisions for themselves and fights against these traditions that, in her eyes, converge in ways that will permanently limit her opportunities as they slowly kill her dreams. Although race, culture and gender are contested, in part, through the conflicts between Ana and her mother, Cardoso does not vilify Carmen but presents her in a manner that makes it possible for us to understand the sacrifices she has made for her family and cultural values she holds dear (*marianismo*). To Carmen it seems only natural to want to pass

those values and practices on to her children and Cardoso helps us to see Carmen as a parent, not a tyrant.

## NEGOTIATING CULTURE AND FAMILY

At first blush, *Real Women* could be viewed simply as a film about an adolescent rebelling against her mother and the attendant issues of conformity and expectations; but this film is much more complicated than those terms suggest. Throughout this film we are confronted with multiple, and sometimes conflicting, themes of family, loyalty, responsibility, beauty, cultural expectations and personal desire. The themes are powerfully interwoven and play off one another in such a way that the struggles Ana must face to find a balance between self-esteem, responsibility, expectations and desire comes to life in a way viewers seldom see in representations of Latinas.

The film opens with Ana outside washing windows before school. Estela comes to her saying, “Something has happened to *Ama* [Carmen].” Ana reluctantly goes to find out what is wrong with her mother. We see that Carmen is still in bed and that everyone from the family is gathered around her as if she is on her death bed. Carmen tells Ana that she is sick and that Ana will have to make breakfast for the men. Ana eventually sits down on the edge of Carmen’s bed to ask her mother if her legs, her back and her head hurt. Lying on her side with her back to everyone in the room, Carmen replies “*Si* [yes],” to each question. Eventually Ana asks her mother about her hearing. Carmen

replies, “Que? [What?].” Her face in tight close up, Ana defiantly replies, “Today’s my last day of high school, I’m not gonna miss that.” This response gets Carmen’s attention; she rolls over, sits up on her pillow and calls Ana “ungrateful.” As Ana walks out of the room Carmen asks Estela, “what’s wrong with your sister? Come and help me.” The shot cuts to a close up of Estela and we see her sigh, briefly close her eyes in resignation and move to dutifully help her mother. In this exchange Carmen uses her presumably sick body to coerce Ana into behaving more traditionally by accepting her gendered role, enticing her sympathetic and supportive or nurturing instincts, and by getting her to shoulder more of the domestic responsibilities. As such, Carmen’s body becomes an obstacle to Ana’s going to school. In Carmen’s mind attending school at age 18 is an act of disrespect and an illustration of how Ana is shirking her responsibilities to her family—which is not the mark of a traditional, obedient Latina daughter.

This first scene also frames family relationships and power structures. Carmen is the family matriarch and she has strong opinions about how her daughters should behave and what their futures should hold. She believes it is her responsibility to make sure her daughters find husbands and learn how to properly take care of their family and home. Everyone seems to defer to Carmen, everyone except Ana. In the opening scene Raul watches in silence as Carmen and Ana verbally spar, interfering only when Ana tells her mother that she didn’t ask to be born. Estela is positioned as the dutiful daughter while

Ana, the youngest daughter, is the rebellious child. The Garcia household includes extended family members including Ana's grandfather, with whom she has a close and supportive relationship. Referring to a legend of a gold-filled cave somewhere near his hometown in Mexico, her grandfather tells Ana that he has found his gold in her and encourages her to find her own gold. In his own way, grandfather encourages Ana to follow her dreams.

### **THE ELUSIVE AMERICAN DREAM**

The seductive allure of the American dream is a prevalent theme in this movie and director Cardoso presents it as elusive and problematic, complicated by the intersections of culture, race, gender and class. In her analysis of the play *Real Women Have Curves*, Maria Figuero notes that the "myth of the American Dream" is presented in a complex way that encourages discussion between the tensions of resisting that dream while simultaneously desiring to be part of that dream (2003). For example, we see how culturally sexist practices internally limit opportunities afforded Latinas as Ana challenges traditional gendered roles and fights for her chance to go to college. Additionally, we watch Estela struggle to keep her factory open. Positioned at the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder and powerless to change the balance of power, she is forced to provide quality products to corporate America at discount rates. These examples provide aberrant readings of the American dream which challenge the notion that hard work alone leads to socioeconomic

success and that the interaction of culture, race, gender or class play no part in access to its promises.

The film's next scene works to visually set up the economic gap that exists in the U.S. between those who are affluent and those who are not and illustrates how race, class and gender are important factors in maintaining those inequalities. Director Cardoso interrogates those disparities by positioning the Garcia family as a 'normal' family working to make ends meet. Ana's family is not destitute, neither are they affluent: in this family everyone works and contributes economically to the household. The economic difference between where Ana lives and where she goes to school is reflected by her walk to school. As Ana begins her journey to school we see a series of small well kept homes with lovely flowers, local characters like the elderly women singing in her yard, the sound of dogs barking in the background, children playing all around, and cars and trucks parked near the homes. Her Latino neighborhood is neat and tidy; it is not the expected series of filthy and abandoned buildings we are accustomed to seeing in older films that rely on more stereotypic representations of Latinos as drug users, gang members and prostitutes. Cardoso uses this strategy to normalize Latina/o identity and allows us to see Latinas/os in general, and the Garcias in particular, as 'ordinary' rather than as the exception/Other and in so doing provides viewers an opportunity to begin a dialogue about economic policies which oftentimes marginalize groups of people with little or no power to effect changes in their lives.

As she goes to school Ana moves physically, and one senses emotionally, away from the barrio and the security and protection of her family. We see Ana walk out of the house and through the neighborhood, take a bus, walk some more, and take another bus just to get to school and we begin to understand that simply attending school has been difficult. We are visually transported through the barrio as Ana passes stores and restaurants decorated with brightly colored advertisements, murals and images of the Virgin of Guadalupe and other religious, ethnic and political symbols that in some ways evoke stereotypic images of Latinas in brightly colored costumes (e.g., Carmen Miranda). Tall buildings of the city can be seen in the distance through a pale haze that seems to mute out all color. The contrast between the vivid colors of the barrio and the opaqueness of the city makes it seem as though the promises of the bustling city are nothing more than a mirage in the distance, unreachable. In the background, almost as if part of the scene's outline, is a character who appears to be a homeless man—signified by the trash bag containing what looks like a few belongings—sitting at the bus stop; he is, unexpectedly, white. Such a contrast between what is expected and what is seen creates a jarring effect on the observant viewer.

Unlike in the barrio where everyone was Latino—except the man at the bus stop—when Ana gets off the bus viewers see a mix of ethnicities: Latino, Asian, African American, white—signifying to viewers that Ana has left the barrio behind. We are not sure where she is going because it is not apparent

that the city will be the world of opportunity for Ana. Gone are the colorful murals of Aztec, religious and political origin, replaced by signs advertising plays like *The Lion King* and tall white skyscrapers. In this scene there is a visual sameness to the city, a lack of collective color and life that seems to exist in the barrio. This difference signifies a danger that can be associated with the city and the disjointed array of people who live and work there, and the warmth and security of her family and neighborhood.

A second bus takes her from the fringes of the city into the Beverly Hills High School neighborhood surrounded by large brick houses. Once at school it is readily apparent that differences in opportunities are not necessarily based on merit but on racial and economic realities. We learn later that Ana had to apply for the chance to attend Beverly Hills High School and has done well. She appears to be the only Latina/o in her classroom.<sup>17</sup> In this situation Ana's identity is complicated not only by her race but also by her economic status. In this scene Mr. Guzman (George Lopez), a Latino teacher, sits on his desk while students take turns describing what they plan to do after graduation. One Anglo student states she will be at M.I.T for seven years. Another will be going to Stanford for four years. Another student will spend four years at Teachers' College. There is an awkward silence when Ana realizes it is her turn. She hesitantly says, "I'll continue my education . . . I'll backpack through Europe, and . . ." When the bell rings Mr. Guzman asks Ana to remain. He asks, "What's

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<sup>17</sup> This scene is brief. As the camera quickly pans across the class we see only whites except for Ana and her teacher, Mr. Guzman. It is not easily discernable whether anyone else in her classroom would be considered economically disadvantaged. Based on the discussion, it seems unlikely.

happening with the college applications?” She tells him her family cannot afford to send her to college even though he has been telling his students about scholarship opportunities. Mr. Guzman later shows up at Ana’s home to discuss college with her parents. Mr. Guzman automatically assumes that since Ana is Mexican-American that her parents do not speak English, so he introduces himself in Spanish. He apologizes and quickly switches to English when Raul tells him he speaks English. Mr. Guzman also assumes that her parents do not value education so he has come to convince them of its importance. He tells Raul and Carmen that Ana is a good student and that he would like to see her go to college. Raul tells him “of course we want Ana to get educated . . . but we need her to work now, she can go to college later.” During this exchange Carmen looks disapprovingly at Mr. Guzman and when he continues to make a case for Ana she interrupts saying, “I’m sorry Mr. Guzman but tomorrow she goes to the factory to sew with us.” Raul agrees to think about college and talk with Carmen about it later. On one level, the decision that Ana cannot go to college now is an economic one, however, an underlying current is Carmen’s attempt to force Ana to accept the role of a Latina.

Later that night in their bedroom Carmen complains to Raul about how much trouble Ana causes her. Raul tells Carmen “Ana doesn’t give you that much trouble . . . If we make an effort I believe we can help her get into college, to get an education.” Carmen is privileged in this shot as she is standing at the dresser and Raul is already in bed. Carmen tells him she can

teach Ana everything she needs to know: how to sew, how to raise a family and how to take care of a husband—how to be a ‘good’ Latina. As she continues it becomes clear why Carmen is so adamant about Ana going to work at the factory. Carmen has been working since she was 13 years old and feels that Ana has been spoiled by attending school so long and has not been shouldering her share of the domestic responsibilities. Carmen insists that it is Ana’s duty to work now and help support the family, as “a matter of principle.” Although Raul is willing to consider college for Ana he defers to Carmen’s wishes in this scene. Here Cardoso complicates the relationship between Carmen and Raul by showing that each parent has different opinions about college and Ana. Carmen has a strong personality and, as the family matriarch, is primarily responsible for raising the children. This gives the illusion that Carmen has a great deal of power in the relationship when in fact she only has authority over the private space of the home. Carmen ultimately represents the traditional, patriarchal (*marianismo*) view that women belong in or near home as caretakers of family and domestic space. Baez also argues that Carmen is heavily “invested in patriarchal and heteronormative norms” (2007 121). Like Ana, she too is at the mercy of racial and gender-based traditions which confine her power to the private sphere. Carmen expects Ana to conform to these traditions while Raul seems to want his daughter to take advantage of opportunities not afforded Carmen.

Cardoso also highlights race, class, gender and socioeconomic issues by focusing our attention on Estela's factory and its workers. In one scene we see Pancha, a fellow Latina factory worker, lighting a candle to commemorate the anniversary of her father's death. Because she could not pay the bill she pretended he was still alive, put him in a wheelchair and took him home in a taxi. In another scene we learn that Estela has a contract to make dresses for the Glitz Company that supplies stores like Bloomingdales. She is paid \$18 for assembling each dress while Bloomingdales sells those same dresses for \$600. Ana is outraged by the obvious exploitation of Estela and the women who work at the factory and asks, "Does this seem right to you?" Cardoso delivers an example, notes scholar Jillian Baez, of how Latinas continue to be exploited by a global economy as they "perform low-paying, gendered work" (2007 120). Estela has little operating capital because she is paid only when she delivers a completed order. Consequently, she has difficulty covering business overhead and expenses like rent, electric, supplies, and wages. Completing the latest dress order is jeopardized when four of Estela's seamstresses quit. Norma, her two sisters and her mother unexpectedly decide to return to Mexico. Norma is going back to get married and she and her two sisters are bringing her mother back to her village. She tells us that it has always been her mother's dream to return to her village in Mexico.

This is an important moment in the film because it illustrates that not everyone who comes to the United States falls in love with America or plans to

stay, forever demystifying the U.S./American dream. In this case Norma's desire to return to Mexico, and that of her mother, represents underlying struggles immigrants to this country must face. For instance, newcomers must deal with separation from the rest of their family and friends. For Mexican immigrants, whose culture revolves around close family relationships, this is particularly difficult. Immigrants must also learn to navigate between Mexican and U.S. cultural differences that often produce racial, gendered, and class oppression. For example, tough working conditions faced by the women at Estela's factory tarnish the allure of working in America. Although they came to the U.S. in order to make a better living, they often struggle as much as they did when they lived in Mexico, making returning home a plausible option.

Although Norma expresses sadness in leaving the factory because she is proud of the work she has done there, she does not seem disappointed to return to Mexico. As Norma goes to clean out her locker and say goodbye to Estela and the others at the factory the shot cuts back to Estela, focusing on her anguished and desperate expression. As when Ana first entered the factory, we see Estela through a wall of chain-link fencing, partially obscured, visually trapped just as she is stuck in a downward economic spiral no matter how hard she works. Estela cannot pay Norma or any of the others until she gets paid for the completed dress order and has to ask each worker if they will continue working even though she cannot pay them until later. Only Ana is reluctant to wait asking, "if you don't pay me, how am I gonna save up any money?" to

which Carmen replies, “For what?” Betraying her contempt for what she sees as menial labor Ana says, “You expect me to do this dirty work for nothing? This is a sweatshop . . . [we’re] all cheap labor for Bloomingdales!” By her remarks and her attitude, Ana devalues the work of the women at the factory. Offended by Ana’s remarks Estela defends herself and the work of the other women by responding, “How would you know what hard work is? All you’ve done is flip burgers,” referring to the job Ana recently quit because she did not get along with her boss. Estela storms into the bathroom and stays there until Ana reluctantly agrees to work until Estela can pay her. Estela is about ten years older than Ana and she looks upon Ana as the baby in the family who has not yet learned to pull her weight. The two are not particularly close and in this case Estela uses coercion to manipulate her sister. And yet, over the summer they find respect for one another and work to help each other, as we will see.

The exchange between Ana and Estela is further evidence that academic achievement is not valued by her family in the same way as being able to contribute financially to the household. Yet Ana holds on to the belief that she should be able to choose for herself whether or not to go to work or school. She has, in effect, embraced the opportunities allowed by modern notions of a woman’s place in society and rejected, at least in part, traditional culture that is simultaneously restrictive and prescriptive: restrictive in the sense that women are allowed to cook and sew and tend their families and prescriptive in

the dogmatic control exerted over women to remain virgins until marriage and to be obedient to their families' requests.

In an effort to help Estela, Ana offers to accompany her to the Glitz Company to ask for an advance on the dress order. Estela and Ana are seen exiting the elevator at the Glitz Company offices where they hope to meet with Mrs. Glass, the owner. Cardoso uses the body in this scene as the primary means for signaling the very different situations of these women. Estela is dressed casually and Ana is in khakis and a t-shirt. Mrs. Glass, however, is wearing a navy blue business suit and has her hair up in a professional style. This combination makes her look severe and tough and visually sets up Mrs. Glass as economically and professionally superior to Estela and Ana; her masculine (i.e., strong and powerful) to their feminine (i.e., weak and powerless). Estela's trepidation about this meeting is visually signified by her slouched, eyes-to-the-floor posture and hesitation when talking with Mrs. Glass. As a Latina who has 'made it,' Mrs. Glass does nothing to dispel Estela's feeling of inferiority. Mrs. Glass is empowered in this scene because it is shot over her shoulder making it appear as though she is looking down on Estela and Ana. Mrs. Glass tells Estela that she went out on a limb to hire her in the first place but believed that a "women like me should help one like you," suggesting that Estela should be grateful for the chance to make \$600 dresses and get paid \$18 for the privilege. Mrs. Glass shows no compassion or understanding for Estela's precarious financial situation and reminds her that she has ten days to

complete the order if she wants to get paid. Mrs. Glass embodies the notion of masculine toughness and callousness in the work setting, a position some women adopt to become successful in the business world. However, by taking this approach Mrs. Glass is participating in a form of internal racism and sexism by taking economic advantage of other Latinas who have no power and no voice with which to confront her. So, once again, Cardoso has demonstrated that there are many kinds of Latinas and her depictions create dialogic space where these differences can be acknowledged and challenged. These examples illustrate how Latinas are doubly oppressed by race, gender and economics.

#### **WORKPLACE AS FEMININE SPACE**

bell hooks tells us that feminine spaces, like the kitchen, are places where “dignity [and] integrity of being” are experienced through feminine companionship (1990 41). As such, these spaces also serve as sites of contestation, resistance and struggle, places “where we [women] can recover ourselves” (hooks 43). Cardoso uses Estela’s factory to create a feminine space where multiple Latinas exist in a heterogeneous community of women with different life experiences, different opportunities and different perspectives about their place in society. By creating a rich and varied community of Latinas, she has normalized these women without ignoring racism, sexism or class differences that have marginalized them in U.S. society. As the women in

the factory struggle to negotiate their different identities most of them come to understand and respect one another for what they are: real women.

When Ana goes to the factory for the first time we see her standing just outside the building. Even though Ana is shot in total sunshine she is seen through the perspective of a security gate, suggestive of a prison. As she steps into the factory for the first time Ana is immediately in shadows, and her face, barely lit, is tightly framed in the shot. Here the sunshine filtering in from outside the factory suggests opportunity and hope, while the dark shadowy image of Ana as she steps into the factory signifies the despair of a dead end job as Ana's dreams seem more unattainable. Once inside the factory Ana is drawn to a beautiful black dress with a sequined bodice that is being assembled. Through the dress viewers are narratively and visually introduced to another variation of the central theme of the body: the body and definitions of beauty. Ana and the black dress fill the shot. She looks up at the dress on the mannequin, privileging the dress and, I argue, the symbolic body required to wear the dress. She reaches out to gently, almost reverently, touch the sequined bodice, spaghetti straps and satin skirt. The dresses being made at Estela's factory are all small sizes, too small to fit Ana as Carmen indelicately points out, never missing an opportunity to tell Ana she is too fat (*gordita*) and needs to lose weight. Mexican culture has traditionally been more accepting of a curvaceous figure, equating it with fertility and health. However, U.S. media have, since the 1960's, perpetuated the notion that a woman's beauty is

measured by how thin she is, an ideal that has been repeated in advertising, modeling and film. (Heavier actresses are criticized; thinner ones seem to be more popular.) When Carmen assumes that only beautiful women can fit into the small dresses they make she is buying into the same socially constructed image of beauty that is popularized in the U.S. media. In part, Carmen's criticism comes from the fact that she is afraid that if Ana does not lose weight and conform to traditional norms of beauty in the U.S. that she, like Estela, will not be able to attract a husband. The essence of traditional Latina identity, getting married and raising a family is extremely important for traditional Mexicans like Carmen. As a result, Carmen and Ana square off against one another in this scene, the little black dress and the narrow definition of beauty it represents serving as a barrier between them. Equally framed, with neither of them privileged, this shot visually symbolizes the struggle between generations and cultures and frames the renegotiation of *Latinidades feministas* in the film. Baez refers to confrontations like this as a competition between "Old World" and "New World" identities that illustrate generational tensions (2007 121). It is through the struggle between old and new that Ana's hybrid identity is negotiated. While she wants to make her own choices about her body and her future, Ana does have a love for her family that is so important to Carmen and has begun to realize the sacrifices her mother has made for her family. After a summer at the factory Ana also has a new respect for the work of her mother and the other Latinas at the factory.

Another exchange during a break at the factory further illustrates the cultural disconnect within the Latina community between generations regarding feminist issues such as a woman's right to make decisions about her own body. Though some of the differences in attitudes can be attributed to the ways different generations define social norms, many of the problems between Ana and the other women at the factory are due to the fact that Ana is Mexican-American and they are Mexicans living in America. Ana has been raised as a Mexican-American because her family is Mexican and she has lived and has been educated in America. Ana represents a hybrid generation not really fitting comfortably within either culture. Carmen and the other women in the factory were raised in Mexico. Though they now live and work within the barrio communities in the United States, they exist in a 'Little Mexican' community that embraces Mexican cultural expectations and traditions. Cardoso uses Carmen in this scene to represent that generation of beliefs rather than to simply be a mother figure. For example, a discussion about cultural and generational differences between Ana and the women takes place in the factory when Carmen recounts gossip about Norma's fiancé standing her up at the wedding because she agreed to have sex with him the night before. Carmen notes that Norma's mother never approved of the man, stating, "a mother knows the right man for her daughter." The next shot focuses on Ana rolling her eyes in amusement as she responds with a typical, "Mom, you're so old fashioned." Carmen responds that girls nowadays are so arrogant thinking that

they know so much. It is this “know-it-all” stance that Carmen believes is responsible for girls getting pregnant. “[T]he reason they end up pregnant,” responds Ana, “is ‘cause they don’t use contraceptives.” Carmen criticizes Ana for being too smart, telling her that her husband will not like her knowing so much, that he will want a virgin. Illustrating both the cultural and generational disconnect Ana asks, “Why is a women’s virginity the only thing that matters? A woman has thoughts, ideas . . . a mind of her own.” Carmen and the older women at the factory laugh at the idea that a woman might have thoughts of her own and, by extension, be capable of making decisions about her body.

In an act of defiance, Ana refuses to be contained and rejects the conventional restrictions imposed by Carmen as representative of traditional, patriarchal (*marianismo*) Mexican culture. Unbeknownst to Carmen, Ana has been dating Jimmy, a young man from school. The summer romance between Ana and Jimmy provides another mirror through which to see how competing notions of the body—what constitutes beauty and how Mexican cultural expectations converge—are contested. Though Carmen repeatedly tells Ana that no man would ever be attracted to a “fatty” like her, Ana’s boyfriend does find her attractive. Even though Carmen’s derogatory comments about Ana’s weight and figure are hurtful, the love scene between Ana and Jimmy that follows illustrates that the cultural ideals of beauty espoused by Carmen are not shared by everyone and that Ana is free to make choices for herself that are outside Mexican cultural traditions. Ana, in a true modern feminist way,

has taken charge of her own body. For example, she takes the initiative to purchase condoms that will protect her from becoming pregnant. She also makes the decision to make love with Jimmy—but on her terms. She wants Jimmy to really see her so has him turn on the light. We see her looking at herself in the mirror, with Jimmy in the background. He walks up behind her and puts his arms around her, affirming her beauty; beauty that defies her mother’s non-inclusive definition. The next day Carmen figures out that Ana has become sexually active and calls her a *puta* (whore) giving credence to the patriarchal notion that a woman must be a virgin on her wedding day and that her husband will be the one to make decisions about her body. Baez points to this scene as representative of Ana’s “core liberal tendencies . . . [her] right to independence” (2007 120). By resisting the social pressures to conform to Anglo beauty ideals, Figueroa notes that Ana uses her body to reject sexual objectification and to control “her sexual destiny” (2003 279).

Toward the end of the film the women at the factory are still working hard to complete the dress order on time. As the deadline approaches Estela urges everyone to pick up the pace. She tells Ana to iron faster because she is getting behind. Ana says it’s not that she is slow it’s that when she’s done she really looks at the dress and all the work that goes into assembling it. Then, says Ana, she remembers that it is not for her, and she pushes it away, symbolically rejecting the notion that beauty is confined to the body that can wear such a tiny dress. Though Ana is simultaneously desirous of being able to

wear such a beautiful dress she is unwilling to deprive her body of food in an effort to achieve Anglocentric beauty. This act is emblematic of the struggle Ana and other more feminist Latinas face: the desire to be considered beautiful and the wish to be accepted for everything they are: physically, mentally and emotionally. Toward the end of the film Estela designs and makes a dress for Ana. As she did earlier in the film, Ana reaches out to touch the dress and, echoing Carmen, tells Estela she cannot wear such a dress. But, looking over Ana's shoulder, Estela tells her, "I've cut this especially for your body . . . pretty dresses aren't just for skinny girls." Ana's red dress is every bit as beautiful as the black one from the beginning of the movie and the vision of the dress reinforces Estela's words. Ana's unwillingness to accept marginalization based on body size is thus supported by Estela's creation of a beautiful dress for a different body type.

This exchange also represents a renegotiation of Ana and Estela's relationship. For most of the film Ana has been unsympathetic to Estela's problems with the factory. However, over the course of the summer working at the factory, Ana slowly begins to understand how hard it is to keep the factory open and the bills and workers paid. Estela thought of Ana as a 'brat' who did not know what real work was because she had only worked in a "burger joint." As time progressed Estela began to see Ana as an individual with the common desire to be accepted as intelligent and not to be judged by physical appearance. However, Ana and the women at the factory still want to wear

pretty dresses just like the ones they sew every day. In one scene we see Estela sketching a dress for a line of clothes she wants to make for larger women. Showing Pancha the sketch Estela asks her if she would buy that dress. Smiling admiringly Pancha says, “of course I would . . . if it would fit me.” By sharing these experiences the sisters have found respect for one another and for the other women at the factory.

This theme of the body is taken up again in one of the most memorable scenes near the end of the film on an unbearably hot day at the factory. Ana takes off her shirt in an effort to cool down which sparks another tirade from Carmen about how fat and awful she looks. Carman and Ana face off against each other again: Carmen trying to define—and confine—Ana rejecting that definition. But the usual clash between generations and culture takes on a new twist in this scene. Ana does not heed Carmen’s call to remain covered, to endure the heat of the factory, to continue suffering in silence as Latinas have historically done. Ana responds that she likes herself and is supported by Estela and Pancha. She tells her mother “I do want to lose weight . . . and part of me doesn’t because my weight says to everybody, f--- you! How dare anybody tell me what I should look like . . . or what I should be . . . when there’s so much more to me than just my weight! I want to be taken seriously.” Here Cardoso allows us to see the conflict within Ana; the desire to be taken seriously and accepted as intelligent, and the desire to be thought of as pretty. As a result, Cardoso is successful in complicating the binary relationship between Ana and

her mother. On some level Ana wants to be thin like her mother wants so her mother will better accept her. One also senses that Ana would like to be thinner to better fit within the parameters of attractive bodies as defined by U.S. media, but she wants to be seen as more than just a beautiful body. She also wants to be seen as intelligent. U.S. media marketing of beautiful women has often constructed them as ‘dumb blondes,’ incapable of thinking for themselves—thus feeding into stereotypes that privilege Anglo males. Estela voices support for Ana wanting to be taken seriously. Pancha tells Carmen that both Ana and Estela are beautiful as they are. Ana goes to Estela, Pancha and Rosalie in turn to ask them if they wouldn’t be more comfortable without their clothes. The scene continues as the women, one by one, compare stretch marks and cellulite and celebrate their varied and curvaceous figures. The high key lighting of the scene and the framing of the women as they unashamedly critique and revel in their individual bodies—their real bodies with real curves—demonstrate how the Latina body has been renegotiated through feminist, inclusive notions of beauty and women’s empowerment to make their own decisions. Ana turns to her mother and in a gesture meant to be inclusive lifts her shirt revealing a cesarean scar, which represents the sacrifices Carmen has made for her family; sacrifices traditionally personified by the Virgin of Guadalupe in Mexican culture which links notions of motherhood and martyrdom together in an inescapable dance. Carmen tells the women that they should be ashamed of themselves. Ana asks why, since they look just like

she does. “This is who we are, mama; real women.” Carmen storms out of the factory, making it clear that she sees Ana’s independence, opportunities and shamelessness as a personal rejection of the life she devoted to her family.

Most of the exchanges between Carmen and Ana have been confrontational on some level. However, the exception lies in the middle of the film where Ana burns her finger with steam while ironing: we see Carmen get up from her sewing machine to gently stroke Ana’s finger and sing her a song to make her feel better as though Ana was a small child. Though the two have argued earlier in the film and argue after this scene, it reinforces the perception that although a lot of Carmen’s comments seem unkind she does in fact care about Ana and is truly concerned about her future. We see the same struggle in the final scene of the film. Earlier in the film Mr. Guzman had come over to tell Ana and her parents that she had been accepted to Columbia University with a full scholarship. Ana’s initial excitement had been dashed when her father told Mr. Guzman that he did not want her to go to school far away because it would break up the family. Carmen, picking up this theme, asks Ana if she wants to abandon grandfather; of course Ana says no. The matter seems settled until the end of summer when Ana finds the courage to tell her father that she wants to go to college. Raul is privileged as head of the family and, in the end, goes against Carmen’s wishes making the final decision to allow Ana to attend college. Here Cardoso works to complicate the father figure of Raul. In one sense he assumes the power to make the final decision,

overriding the mother figure and functioning within the patriarchal system (*marianismo*) that privileges him. In effect, Raul usurps Carmen's authority in the traditionally feminine space of the home. Yet, at the same time, the decision itself embraces values that support the empowerment of women.

The final sequence of the film begins with Ana getting ready to leave for college. Carmen is torn. On the one hand Carmen wants to say goodbye to the daughter she loves, but on the other hand she believes that Ana is walking away from her family and rejecting traditions that have defined Carmen. This she finds personally hurtful. We see Ana on one side of the door while Carmen remains in her room on the other side of the door, silent. Carmen is once again in bed, her back to the door and the camera. As the camera cuts between Ana and Carmen we see Carmen slowly get up and silently put on her robe. She takes Ana's picture off from her dresser and looks at it, clasping her hand over her mouth as if to stifle a cry. She walks toward the door but the anticipated mother-daughter reconciliation never occurs. Carmen just cannot bring herself to accept this new hybrid Latina that is Ana and, for the first time in the film, having been over ruled by Raul she remains traditionally silent.

Eventually Ana has to leave for the airport with her father and grandfather without being allowed to say a proper good-bye to her mother. In this case it is a door, not the black dress, which symbolizes the gulf that must be breached between these two very different notions of what it means to be a Latina. Ana's strength and support from other family members enable her to go

ahead in spite of her mother's unwillingness to accept her decision. In the film's final scene we see Ana walking around New York. She has obviously changed her hair style and has added makeup and more trendy clothes. The shot follows her as she walks down the sidewalk as if she belongs there—because she does. The audience sees that Ana has become a strong Latina with ideas of her own and an air of confidence that can only come when one is truly comfortable with who they are physically and emotionally.

### **'NEW WORLD' LATINIDADES FEMINISTAS**

The scenes above illustrate how the terrain of the Latina body is contested in this film in a tug-of-war through the interplay of various relationships. Ana's body in *Real Women* represents a Latina that is no longer monochromatic but is hybrid in that her body simultaneously inhabits multiple and complicated positions where race, ethnicity, gender and class overlap and are challenged. These representations challenge dated notions of cinematic Latinas as spitfires, virgins, harlots or clowns (Ramirez Berg 2002). Most prominent in the film is the struggle between cultures and generations primarily as enacted between Ana and Carmen. Cardoso uses these struggles to interrogate racism, sexism and classism. By her overt support of traditional Mexican cultural norms, Carmen is perpetuating a patriarchal structure where a woman's role is to take care of home and family, defer to their husband's wishes, and work in long-established traditionally feminine jobs like sewing.

Carmen never had the same kinds of opportunities as Ana. As a woman brought up in a different world with strict cultural traditions that limited her choices, Carmen has a difficult time reconciling herself with the idea that women like Ana can make decisions about their futures outside those traditions. The character of Carmen invokes a view of the body and beauty that marginalizes not only Ana but many women of all ethnicities. By focusing on Carmen's constant nagging about Ana's appearance, Cardoso deliberately places viewers in an uncomfortable position by pushing to the forefront the ways certain female bodies are privileged in U.S. society, even when most women cannot meet those standards.

Ana's positioning between cultures means that she does not fit neatly within either the traditional Mexican cultural mold of obedient daughter and caregiver nor within the American cultural frame that favors an individual's autonomy. In the U.S. women are commonly allowed to make decisions for themselves, be it in the jobs they choose to do, the food they eat, or a decision about when, how and with whom to become sexually active. Ana's exposure to both cultures has meant that her identity has shifted to combine elements of both cultures in new ways. She values her relationships with family members but also sees her role in society quite differently from Carmen and some of the other women at the factory. Because Ana wants to leave to pursue her education she has, in some respects, rejected some of the more constrictive values and expectations of the older Mexican generation. Ana

wants to be seen as intelligent and taken seriously. She wants to make her own way in society; meeting the future on her own terms. Ana's independence and refusal to conform to anyone's notion of how she should look or behave is vividly illustrated throughout this film through confrontations with the patriarchal system her mother represents, thus confronting both patriarchy and traditional "marianismo." Cardoso poignantly points out how these traditional practices have been unfair and have made Carmen's life difficult thus confronting both patriarch and traditional "marianismo." In this way, Cardoso seems to emphasize that cultural change, while offering new opportunities, also brings feelings of loss and pain for which there is no resolution. Additionally, Cardoso successfully creates dialogic sites in this film where multiple and varied representations are contested. For example, the idea that women are capable and have the right to make decisions about their own body is contested between Carmen, who represents patriarchal traditions, and Ana, whose feminist stance serves to challenge restrictive practices that marginalize women in general and Latinas in particular. The definition of beauty as equated to a woman's thinness is also contested. By highlighting the beauty of Ana's body, and those of the other women at the factory, Cardoso created a more inclusive construction of beauty and provided opportunities for the viewer to acknowledge their own assumptions about others based on physical appearance. By creating space between patriarchal traditions represented by Carmen and different and multiple opportunities offered by U.S. society

signified by Ana, Cardoso complicates and pushes these conversations beyond the typical framework of difference.

The body and its curves are central to this film and represent a struggle between competing notions of beauty that feed into racialized and gendered conceptions of Latinas. In her article *Jennifer's Butt* (1997) Frances Negrón-Mutaner notes that a Latina's body—particularly her curves, are “site[s] of pleasure, produced by intersections of power, but not entirely under its own control” (185). Though Negrón-Mutaner refers here to the ways Latina bodies are spoken about and how their “cultural capital” is consumed in society, her point could also extend to seizing control of one's own body as a form of empowerment. This reading implies that a woman's body can be imbued with power generated by her decision about when and how to exercise its use. Pleasure in one's own body is evident in several scenes in *Real Women*. For example, the morning after she makes love with Jimmy we see Ana standing in the bathroom looking at the beautiful curves of her body. Ana decided when she would become sexually active and by taking control of her own body, became empowered by it. Ana is liberated in a feminist sense by accepting her body and its curves even though, or perhaps because, it does not reflect Anglocentric ideals of beauty. She is empowered as she rejects narrow definition but, on another level, is simultaneously marked as Other—as Latina—because of those curves (Gilman 2003; Negrón-Mutaner 1997). By reclaiming the body *Real Women* not only challenges historical stereotypes but also

redefines the Latina body as self-confident and beautiful creating more inclusive, diverse and empowered *Latinidades feminsitas* than previous cinematic representations have allowed.

## IV. Imagining Other Representations: Making the Invisible Visible

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“These are the golden years . . . we have to prove our mothers wrong. Don’t waste ‘em.”  
*Stephanie (Maid in Manhattan)*

“To serve people takes dignity and intelligence . . .  
Though we serve them, we are not their servants.”  
*Lionel (Maid in Manhattan)*

*Maid in Manhattan* (2002), directed by Wayne Wang (*Last Holiday*, 2006; *Because of Winn-Dixie*, 2005; *The Joy Luck Club*, 1993), is a film about a Latina whose visibility or lack of visibility is dependent on whether she is perceived as working class or upper class. It is the story of Marisa Ventura (Jennifer Lopez), a single mother who grew up in the New York projects. As a maid working in an upscale hotel she happens to meet and fall in love with Chris Marshall (Ralph Fiennes), an Anglo assemblyman with a reputation as a playboy planning to run for the state senate. When they first meet Marisa is on her hands and knees cleaning the bathroom floor and is not noticed by Chris. The second time they meet Marisa is wearing an expensive outfit that belongs to the guest whose room she is cleaning. This time Chris not only notices her but invites her to join him for a walk in the park. In many ways *Maid in Manhattan* is a regurgitation of the tried and true ‘Cinderella’ story. However, through Jennifer Lopez’s character, Marisa Ventura, *Maid* does provide us with opportunities to reflect on how competing themes of beauty, race, gender and socioeconomic class

interact to challenge mainstream ideologies. There are moments in the film when gender and class intersect to create opportunities to confront mainstream constructions of Latinas as less beautiful, less intelligent, and less motivated and imagine more complex and hybrid representations. Wang does rely on some easily recognizable Latina stereotypes (e.g., a single parent, an absent father, working as a maid) and a formulaic narrative to construct the character of Marisa. However, through Maria Wang creates instances where we, as viewers, are forced to acknowledge the invisibility of the poor and working class in our society and how certain groups are privileged based on attributes like race, gender and class. These difficult junctures encourage us to confront our own preconceptions about these categories and the inequalities that structure so-called “democratic” societies.

Cultural expectations are also important underlying topics in *Maid* and play out primarily through Marisa’s interaction with her mother. Latinas in the U.S. are automatically doubly oppressed by race and gender. Gender roles, as demonstrated in *Real Women Have Curves* (2002) and *Spanglish* (2004), continue to define Latinas’ lives. In addition Latinas continue to struggle with internal oppression that, in this film, functions to maintain gender and class barriers. By pressuring Latinas to conform to traditional patriarchally-based roles they are oppressed internally by their own culture. When they are denied opportunities in the larger society they are being doubly oppressed. In *Maid*, Marisa’s mother represents traditional culture and believes that Marisa should

accept her position as a cleaning lady and not waste time dreaming about moving up to management. Marisa struggles against class bias and her mother's cultural expectations as she pursues her dream of a management position in the hotel and a better life for her family.

Issues of class are directly addressed by Wang as his characters demonstrate the various ways people are expected to interact based on their perceived socioeconomic status—which is a reflection of various levels of power associated with different classes—and what happens when class boundaries get crossed. In a sense, Wang has created a world of “masters and servants” where the servants, unless attending to the needs of their ‘masters,’ have to remain invisible as they stay downstairs and out of sight while the masters inhabit the upper floors in suites with views of the city. Every morning all of the maids and butlers get their instructions from management. This is also done in the basement where the clothes are washed and mended. Another scene shows us that although dressed in street clothes when they arrive, maids and butlers enter the hotel from a side door, well away from their more affluent guests; a further indication of class differentiation. By making Marisa visible when she is perceived as upper class/master and invisible when seen as a maid/servant, Wang forces us to acknowledge the inequities this different treatment allows.

Much of the focus of this film revolves around issues of beauty: beauty that centers on Jennifer Lopez's curvaceous figure. Scholars like Magdalena Berrera, Mary Beltran, Tara Lockhart and Frances Negrón-Mutaner, as I will

discuss later, argue that Lopez's curves in general and her butt in particular clearly mark her as Latina. Since the 1990's Jennifer Lopez has skillfully cultivated a representation of herself which promotes her blended American and Puerto Rican identities, enabling her to play a range of ethnicities while simultaneously complicating that image by drawing attention to her curves, especially her butt. When viewed in light of her immense popularity, these ethnically linked representations create a more inclusive notion of the body and beauty that challenges Anglo conceptions of desirable/undesirable bodies. This broader notion forces us to confront assumptions we make about others based on physical attributes and racial, gendered and class markers.

#### **THE JENNIFER LOPEZ FACTOR: MARKETING REBELLIOUS LATINA BODIES**

Scholars have written extensively about Jennifer Lopez, her rise to stardom in the 1990's, her music, her films and her franchising, but most often they have written about her body, its curves and her use of it as a tool to market herself (Barerra 2000; Beltran 2002; Lockhart 2007). Beltran's work has analyzed the significance of Jennifer Lopez's star power as a popular film and television actress, a singer and an entrepreneur. Lopez has her own clothing and fragrance lines and is a frequent paparazzi subject. She has often been featured in magazines in poses that privilege her butt. In 1996, she became the first Latina actress to be paid \$1 million dollars for her role in *Selena* (1997). By the end of 1999, Lopez was earning nearly \$8 million dollars a film; by 2004 it

was \$13 million per film and she had become one of the highest paid Latina actresses (Beltran 2002; Guzman and Valdivia 2004). Lopez is uniquely situated among Latina actresses because she is capable of playing characters from a variety of ethnic and economic backgrounds and therefore, as Barrera argues, is not confined to playing roles traditionally set aside for Latina actresses (2000). Lopez is able to cross over between European and Latina roles because she is light-skinned and, since she was born and raised in the U.S. she speaks English without a Spanish accent. In fact, her selection to play Selena was criticized by many in the Latina/o community because she was of Puerto Rican ancestry and did not speak Spanish. Other Latina actresses such as Rosie Perez, Penelope Cruz and Salma Hayek find it more difficult to play generically European roles because of their close link through physicality and accent to Latina roles (Guzman and Valdivia 2004; Valdivia 2007).

Lopez's dark eyes and curvaceous figure, especially her ethnically-linked butt, are the very attributes that have helped to make her a star. Yet, as critic Negrón-Mutaner points out, they are also the characteristics that are in direct conflict—in rebellion, if you will—with traditionally accepted norms of beauty in America evident in World War II era films and those of the 1950s that include having a light complexion, being blonde, thin and, most important, being curveless (1997). Notions of beauty in the U.S. also came to incorporate extreme thinness (e.g., Twiggy) in the 1960s. Representations of fuller bodies like Jennifer Lopez's are becoming more commonplace but they are often seen

as more sexualized bodies, not necessarily beautiful ones. Negrón-Mutaner tells us that such representations are culturally linked and that a “big Latin rear end is an invitation to pleasures construed as illicit by puritan ideologies [and] heteronormativity.” She also argues that “unlike the functionality of breasts, big bottoms have no morals, no symbolic family function, and no use in reproduction” (189). Scholar Frances Aparicia argues that the body of Jennifer Lopez is the site “through which hegemonic notions of physical beauty and value [are] being contested” (99). Traditional Anglo American definitions of beauty and desirable bodies frequently discard the bodies of Latinas—an ever-increasing percentage of the population in the United States—and have marginalized those non-conforming Latina bodies via media representation throughout history.

Jennifer Lopez has become an iconic figure and continues to be highly marketable. Interviews cited by Beltran (2002), Lockhart (2007) and Negrón-Mutaner (1997) indicate that Lopez does not apologize for the shape of her body, in fact; she herself has often called attention to her figure and ethnic butt. For example, in a *People Magazine* article when asked about her sense of style she responds, “I have a very curvaceous Latin body . . . I like to accentuate that” (1997). In another interview, when asked about whether or not her ‘butt’ was real, Lopez responded, “todo es mío, it’s all mine” (Negrón-Mutaner 1997). Lopez has become powerful because, as Guzman and Valdivia point out, she has successfully used her ethnic features to market herself as

simultaneously glamorous and sexually attractive to both Latina/o and white audiences, yet distinctly different from white bodies. It is Lopez's ability to be thought of as both sexy and glamorous that sets her apart from other Latina stars like Salma Hayek and Rosie Perez. However, her body continues to be sexualized and racialized because whether she is portraying Selena in tight fitting outfits that accentuate her breast and buttocks or is portraying a maid the viewers' gaze is continually drawn through costuming and close-up shots to her eyes and full lips, ample breasts and most especially to her butt.

Race and class are both tied to issues of the body and definitions of beauty (Barrera 2000; Negrón-Mutaner 1997). While Lopez may be able to play characters of other ethnicities, as she has in *The Wedding Planner* (2001), *The Cell* (2001) and *Enough* (2002), the focus on her curvaceous figure, especially her butt, continues to mark her as Latina—as Other. Barrera argues that Lopez's butt, much like Sarah Bartmann's (Hottentot Venus) before, signs in for Otherness; she contends that no other racial marker is needed (2000). Puerto Rican cultural critic and filmmaker Frances Negrón-Muntaner tells us that large posteriors work to “upset hegemonic [white] notions of beauty and good taste, it is a sign for the dark, incomprehensible excess of ‘Latino’.” This Otherness not only refers to particular definitions of beauty, it also signifies racialized sexuality (2000). These various connotations of Otherness are often contradictory. In some cases Otherness serves to challenge Anglo notions of beauty as when representations work to create a more inclusive definition; but

in other cases Otherness is indicated by the objectification of her butt. So, as with Barta, Lopez's curves and the butt function as indicators of race and, when considered in relation to her continued film and music success, also challenge Anglo notions of beauty by presenting a more inclusive definition of beautiful bodies as she promotes a glamorous and sexy representation.

Although Lopez has, since her role as Selena, thinned her body to more closely reflect popular notions of beauty, her curves remain and continue to mark her as a racialized Other.

#### **WORKING CLASS LATINAS: VISIBLY INVISIBLE**

*Maid* opens with a panoramic shot of New York City. The Statue of Liberty is partially visible in the far left third of the frame. Viewers know it is the Statue of Liberty but the full shot of her never appears in the frame. She is there, and yet she is not. She is mostly visible, but not entirely. She once welcomed new immigrants to this country, but now they, like her, seem to be unwelcome. The shot appears to have been taken at dawn and there is just enough light to see the towering buildings of Manhattan beautifully reflecting the morning sun. As the shot moves farther into the city viewers see the tall skyscrapers of New York City, the center of art and finance, a place full of activity and possibilities. The camera suddenly cuts to a close-up shot of buildings covered with graffiti and trash scattered along the sidewalk. A street person can be seen picking through the trash. As the morning dawns we see

shopkeepers opening up their stores and setting out fruit and vegetables for the day's market. It is obvious from these visual clues that this is not the more affluent side of town. Still, the apartment building where Marisa and her son live is tidy, as are the surrounding apartment buildings. Not rich, but neat and clean. As is the case in *Real Women Have Curves* (2002) and *Spanglish* (2004), the neighborhood though working class is nothing like the violent gang-infested barrio representations viewers have come to expect in other Hollywood productions (e.g., *Colors* 1988; *American Me* 1992).

In the scene where the audience first meets Chris Marshall, a politician, they see Marisa on her hands and knees cleaning the bathroom floor in his suite. Her back is to the door. In a humorous exchange, Chris goes to the bathroom to use the toilet and closes the door, not noticing Marisa is there until she says, "oh my God, I'm sorry sir," as she excuses herself and rushes out. In that instant Marisa has fulfilled the Beresford Hotel motto: "Above all, a Beresford maid strives to be invisible." This scene is indicative of Marisa's dual invisibility as a Latina and a working class maid.

Caroline Lane (Natasha Richardson), another Beresford guest, checks into the Park Suite. Wang constructs the character of Caroline stereotypically as the rich, white bitch who is self-centered and self-absorbed, interested only in the fulfillment of her own wishes. Much like Deborah in *Spanglish* (2004), Caroline treats Marisa like her personal servant. She calls her Maria instead of Marisa, is inconsiderate, and expects Marisa to attend to her every need. For

example, Caroline sends Marisa on an errand to pick up stockings for her at a nearby store without any thought that Marisa might have other obligations. By positioning Caroline as the ‘bitch,’ Wang is able to encourage viewer empathy for Marisa’s situation—and perhaps for the working class in general. Wang uses the scene that follows to visually and narratively communicate the social status of a maid. Marisa rushes to the store to pick up the stockings. Seeing that the clerk is on the telephone, Marisa attempts to go behind the counter to see if her friend who usually helps her is working. The clerk stops Marisa telling her to, “Step away! . . . away! . . . away!” Stunned, Marisa walks back around to the front of the counter expecting to be waited on. Instead, the clerk resumes her personal call. Marisa’s social position as a maid allows the clerk to act as if she were invisible, making Marisa powerless once again. The clerk then tells the caller that she “has customers so hurry up” and that it is “just a maid” who is waiting. Finally Marisa boldly takes charge walks behind the counter, grabs the phone and hangs it up startling the clerk. She then proceeds to tell the clerk that if she does not start servicing her ‘low-end’ customers that Marisa is sure the clerk’s manager can. Marisa’s face is shown in a tight close up during this exchange demanding the clerk’s attention—and the audiences’. As with Flor in *Spanglish* (2004), Marisa exhibits confidence, strength and a take-charge persona—an unusual set of characteristics for a Latina maid in most popular films.

Even though Marisa eventually takes charge of the clerk situation she seems to have little influence over the actions of her ex-husband. Marisa wants him to have a good relationship with their son Ty but he never seems to have the time. One day when Ty's dad does not pick him up for the weekend Ty ends up having to go to work with Marisa where he is supposed to stay in the basement with Marisa's co-workers. After playing for a while Ty soon gets bored and goes exploring. He is riding the elevator when Chris Marshall gets on with his dog Rufus. Ever the politician, Chris strikes up a conversation and is surprised to find out that Ty knows he is an assemblyman thinking of running for the senate and is also informed about his voting record. Ty is interested in politics and, because of a school assignment, has studied and read a lot about the presidency of Richard Nixon and members of his cabinet like Henry Kissinger. Ty asks if he can accompany Chris when he walks the dog. They both go up the Park Suite to get Marisa's permission. Marisa steps out of the bedroom expecting only Ty and is surprised to see Chris. A close-up of Marisa fills the frame, her eyes dominating the shot. She is wearing one of Caroline Lane's expensive outfits that her co-worker Stephanie had convinced her to try on. Marisa's hair is up and she is wearing hoop earrings and makeup. She has on a tightly fitting sweater which accentuates her curves and her thin waist. Unlike the first time they met, this time Chris sees Marisa, demonstrating that Marisa's clothes—like Cinderella's ball gown and glass slippers—make her different in the eyes of other people. Predictably, their eyes meet and a

connection is made. Chris assumes she is a hotel guest and invites her to join him in the park. Making the ruse complete, Stephanie calls Marisa 'Caroline' and offers her the white coat as she pushes Marisa out the door.

Chris and Marisa stop to sit on a bench in the park while Ty plays with Rufus. In an effort to keep the white outfit clean Marisa sits on a magazine which happens to have Chris' picture on the cover. The sexual reference to her sitting on his magazine face is brief but crystal clear. When Marisa gets up from the bench the next scene is comically centered on Chris trying to figure out a polite way to remove the magazine that somehow stuck to Marisa's butt. When she finally notices what has happened and takes the magazine off she is frantic about whether the \$5,000 outfit she has borrowed has been ruined. She brushes off her butt, pulling her jacket away so her butt is clearly visible. She says, "Oh my God! Did I get anything on it? Is it okay?" The camera's gaze is fixed tightly on her posterior, as is Chris'. "It's perfect," he replies, smiling. It is impossible to miss the overt focus on and objectification of Lopez's butt in this scene. Of course, the audience is in on this joke because they know that Lopez, as both actress and singer, is famous for her butt. Barrera observes that "race is essential to our understanding of how body parts represent one's sexuality" and that the butt is still a powerful cultural symbol, noting that beauty and sexuality are still defined in ways that equate "normal" with "white" (416). Lopez's butt is at once ethnically round, sexually appealing and presents a body quite different from curveless Anglo actresses; it represents a sexualized

Other who is at once objectified and simultaneously rebels against conventional norms.

Wang uses a confrontation between Marisa and Rachel (Amy Sedaris), one of Caroline's friends, as a way to confront and challenge the validity of stereotypic assumptions about race, gender and socioeconomics. The camera cuts to a shot of Caroline and Rachel working out with a personal trainer in their suite. Rachel unkindly tells Marisa, "We could use some more towels . . . *rapido . . . por favor,*" insinuating both in tone and content that Marisa does not speak English. We know that Marisa speaks perfect English, is intelligent and has aspirations beyond being a maid, which makes the stereotypic assumptions made by Rachel doubly apparent—and doubly appalling. The entire scene is insulting to Marisa and viewers are made to feel uncomfortable by this example of blatant racism and classism. However, in an unusual twist director Wang enables Marisa to seize an opportunity to turn the tables when Caroline asks Marisa's opinion about what she should wear. Chris has invited the real Caroline Lane to lunch though he thought he was inviting Marisa. Rachel's immediate response to Caroline's query is, "she [meaning Marisa] barely speaks English." Rachel suggests selecting a revealing outfit. Marisa suggests a classier combination that is sexy but not obvious. She finishes with a direct insult leveled at Rachel saying, "the whole see-through blouse, colored bra thing is so older girl trying too hard." Though done under the guise of her job, Marisa is

empowered by this exchange because she is able to confront and challenge Rachel.

At lunch Chris is expecting Marisa and is confused when the real Caroline arrives. Lionel (Bob Hoskins), the floor butler, and Marisa are serving the lunch. During lunch Chris keeps asking Lionel to find the 'Mediterranean' woman from the Park Suite, never noticing that Marisa is there. She is doing her best to be inconspicuous but it seems unlikely that he would not recognize her given that he appears to be so interested in finding her. This begs the question of what he finds so attractive in Marisa the socialite that he does not seem to notice in Marisa the maid. His reference to Marisa as 'Mediterranean' reinforces Barrera's argument that Jennifer Lopez is able to play a variety of ethnicities. In addition, it supports the argument made by several scholars (Barrera 2000; Negrón-Mutaner 1997) that all Latinas are homogenized as a group, ignoring the different histories and practices of disparate ethnicities (e.g., Cuban, Puerto Rican, Colombian, etc.). Chris' comment indicates that, like many Anglos, he cannot distinguish between them, since what is important is only that they are Other.

Marisa has self-confidence as well as the drive and ability to be more than a maid. She has talked about wanting to become part of management so she could make changes to improve working conditions with her work partner and friend, Stephanie. When one of the management staff takes another position the hotel decides to fill the management vacancy from within the

ranks of the staff. The staff consists of butlers and maids. Butlers are considered higher ranking than maids so are privileged both by gender and class. In a move that clearly continues to privilege the men, the manager (Mr. Bextrum) initially suggests that interested butlers apply for the position. Only when confronted by Stephanie about whether maids can also apply for the job do we see Mr. Bextrum pause with a look of surprise on his face like he had never considered the possibility that a maid might apply for a management position. After quick consideration he tells the group that “if an employee’s been here for three consecutive years . . . he or, indeed, she, is qualified to apply. So, yes. Sure. Absolutely. Why not? Anything is possible.” While this exchange provides the maids with the opportunity to advance at work it also reveals that, for the most part, they are invisible to upper management. Though the maids provide an important function for the hotel they are not seen as promising enough to fill higher level positions within the organization.

Marisa’s work partner, Stephanie (Marissa Matrone), sees the management opportunity as a way for one of them to break with tradition and rise in the employment ranks. Believing that if one of the maids is selected for the position then it gives hope to the rest, that advancement is possible and allows them to imagine themselves in new ways, Stephanie goes behind Marisa’s back and submits an application for the position on her behalf. When Marisa angrily confronts her Stephanie tells her that they need to dream, they

“have to prove their mother’s wrong;” mothers who subscribed to patriarchal constraints and so did not encourage their daughters to ask more out of life.

### **COMPLEX FAMILIES: MOTHERS AND DAUGHTERS**

Mothers and daughters of all races and classes have complicated relationships especially as daughters get older and work to create an identity that reflects their independent natures. Mothers in general are envisioned as nurturing and warm to their children, and this expectation is no different for Latina mothers. When Latina mothers come to the U.S. and raise children here they face additional difficulties because of the need to work to strike a balance between the old culture of their childhood and the new one their children absorb. As Latina mothers work to achieve a balance between old and new cultures they can, on the surface, seem harsh and uncaring as is the case when we first see Carmen and Ana in *Real Women Have Curves* (2002).

Like Flor and Cristina in *Spanglish* (2004), Marisa has a strong relationship with her nine-year-old son Ty (Tyler Garcia Posey). Because Marisa and Ty’s father have divorced and the father seldom spends time with his son, Ty and Marisa are on their own. We first see Marisa and Ty in their small apartment getting ready to leave for the day—Ty to school and Marisa to work. They leave the apartment together and walk until they catch the bus to Ty’s school. As they walk Marisa asks Ty if he wants to go over the speech he is to give later that day at school. He is nervous so Marisa does her best to reassure

him. In this scene she gives him silly embarrassing kisses as they are riding on the bus getting him to laugh and relax. Dropping him off at school she tries to give him another kiss, but he is too embarrassed to let her. In the end he turns around, gives her a quick kiss and runs off toward school. This little scene illustrates the closeness that exists between mother and son. It is a relationship that is reinforced throughout the film as both Ty and his mother support each other, sharing in both triumphs and disappointments. For example, Ty panics at the assembly and forgets his speech. As the other children begin to giggle the camera zooms in on his face and we can see him sweating nervously. Eventually Ty walks off stage and sits down backstage. Marisa follows him and sits down beside him listening as he tells her what happened. She comforts him verbally by telling him that that happens to a lot of people and that he'll do better next time and physically with a reinforcing hug. This demonstration of empathy and compassion is evident throughout the film and speaks to the strong bond between Ty and his mother. Later in the film Marisa loses her job and in a subsequent scene we see her standing at the stove cooking. Her head is down and she looks sad. Ty notices this and walks up behind her to give her a hug, demonstrating that a strong supportive relationship exists between Ty and his mother. As with Flor and Cristina in *Spanglish* (2004), these examples illustrate the traditionally expected strong and supportive relationship between a mother and her children.

Marisa's relationship with her mother does not seem as supportive as her relationship with her son. Marisa's mother seems to embody many of the patriarchal traditions we saw exhibited by Carmen in *Real Women*. Like Carmen, Marisa's mother subscribes to the assumption that people should accept their lot and be content to remain within their class; she believes that to do otherwise is a misguided waste of time. Marisa and her mother disagree about whether or not Marisa has the right to dream of a different life with different opportunities. We see this first exhibited in an early scene when Marisa's mother finds an application in Marisa's bag for the management position at the hotel. It is apparent through her expression and posture that Marisa's mother does not approve, she says, "management, huh? Que fancy." Marisa shuts her up before she can say more. When her mother later finds out that Marisa has been seeing Chris she tells Marisa she has no right to date a person like him, that she should quit "dreaming dreams that will never happen." This perspective echoes that of Carmen in *Real Women* as she tries to convince Ana to accept traditionally gendered roles. Whereas in *Real Women* we come to understand Carmen's position, Wang does not provide us with the same opportunity to understand Marisa's mother and the reasons behind her actions and beliefs. In fact, Wang does not tell us much about Marisa's mother at all, not even her first name. The only thing we learn about her is that she works in a diner.

Later in the film, when Marisa gets fired from her job at the hotel her mother offers no comfort or sympathy for her predicament. Chiding Marisa that she had no business dating Chris and, in a sense got what she deserved, her mother tries to coerce Marisa into cleaning houses for one of her friends—a dead end job with no hope of advancement—but Marisa rejects this option. In a sense her action is also a rejection of her mother’s way of life, much like Ana’s rejection of Carmen’s traditional beliefs in *Real Women Have Curves* (2002). It is curious to observe that in both *Maid* and *Real Women* it is the mothers who stand in the way of their daughters’ attempts to find a more non-traditional path for their lives. Perhaps this is because both Carmen and Marisa’s mother have adopted patriarchal values and have not been able to renegotiate their identities in a way that is accepting of greater independence. The patriarchal values (*marianismo*) they espouse have limited their own potential so while it is understandable that they would want to pass on values from their culture it is also disconcerting that they seem not to see potential for more in their daughters. Bakhtinian dialogism and his concept of polyphony provide space and acknowledge the multi-voicedness of Latinas where the generational and cultural conflict between Marisa and her mother (and Ana and Carmen in *Real Women*) provide feminist and minority viewers with opportunities to think about how race and class and culture complicate our identities. Though temporarily defeated Marisa is strong enough to stand up to her mother, telling her that she wants more out of her working life than a dead end job like

cleaning houses can offer. Marisa tells her mother that she will get a job at another hotel, work her way up and apply for the manager's training program and when she gets the next opportunity to become a manager she will take it "with no fear, without your [her mother's] voice in her head telling me that I can't." Like Ana, Marisa has decided to make her own decisions about her future, rejecting the traditional patriarchal limitations of her culture.

### ***Baile de Gala de Cenicienta (Cinderella's Ball)***

Near the end of the film as Chris' senatorial campaign gets into full swing his manager, Jerry Seigel (Stanley Tucci), encourages him to attend an important fundraiser. He agrees to attend only if Jerry arranges to have Caroline/Marisa accompany him. Jerry tells Lionel to make the arrangements. Lionel suggests that if Marisa is serious about pursuing a position in management that she should go to the fundraiser and end her relationship with Chris Marshall . . . "until she is a manager." This statement reveals the double standard applied to the working class: it is fine for a manager to pursue a relationship with a rich guest of the hotel but the same is not true for a maid or a butler. Here Wang challenges us to consider how different standards of behavior are applied to people of different genders, races and classes. By allowing us to see the injustice here, Wang creates dialogic opportunities to challenge these standards through Marisa. By permitting us to see how race and class are perceived and enacted through Caroline and Rachel's interaction with

Marisa, we are confronted by the multiple ways in which gender and social status can render an individual powerless to change the dynamics of their situation. This is further complicated by the different ways individuals like Caroline and Chris, who are considered upper class treat Marisa when they believe she is 'one of them.' As we will see, it is Marisa who has everything to lose by her relationship with Chris. Chris is already considered a playboy so one more relationship, while distracting from his senatorial campaign, is not economically devastating.

Marisa reluctantly agrees to go to the fundraiser and break off the relationship because she wants to become a manager and provide a better life for Ty. The next sequence demonstrates a sense of community through the solidarity between the working class staff members at the hotel. Maids, butlers, sales people and hair stylists work together to get Marisa ready for the benefit. The limo pulls up outside the hotel and Marisa rolls down the window which frames her head and shoulders perfectly. She is gorgeous. The lighting in the shot focuses mostly on her eyes, but also emphasizes her full lips and high cheekbones. Her smooth silky skin looks perfect. She asks Stephanie what she is doing, that this—the dress, the makeup, the limo, the jewelry—is all a lie. Stephanie replies that tonight, “it’s more like a dream . . . for one night you’re living it for all of us. The maid is a lie . . . this [Cinderella] is who you really are.” Then Cinderella’s limo pulls away and whisks her off to the ball. In this scene there is a sense of Marisa as the exception, the princess in disguise that

mitigates against the sense that others not as beautiful or talented can also follow their dreams.

Marisa makes her entrance at the benefit alone, walking across an elevated bridge-like walkway overlooking the dance floor—just like a fairytale princess. The camera captures Marisa as she stands above the dance floor scanning it for Chris. She is off to the side of the frame, but very much dominating the shot. Her hips and breasts are accentuated by the design of her strapless peach gown. Her breasts are full and her hips appear large in the dress. Her tanned olive skin glows in the warm lighting of the scene making her ‘look’ more Latina than in other scenes. Eventually Marisa spots Chris. The camera follows her every move as she slowly and gracefully walks down the steps toward Chris who is admiring her. In fact, a camera pan of the dance floor reveals that everyone—including us—is watching Marisa, fascinated by this unrecognizable beautiful Other.

In this way Wang creates a moment where Latina beauty that incorporates non-conforming attributes like a full figure is presented as glamorous and desirable. Though this image is not typical for a Latina it is a classic representation of women in general, as spectacles or objects for the male gaze (Mulvey 2000). Wang stages Marisa’s entrance so that we can fully gaze at her along with Chris, completing the objectification. Chris finds Marisa attractive and personable and pursues a relationship with her when he thinks she is a member of the upper class. We will see that once he finds out Marisa is

a maid he backs away and it is not clear why. Perhaps it is because she is working class and not a blue blood. He could understandably feel betrayed by her misrepresentation. He might also be pressured by family (or his campaign manager) to find a 'suitable' companion—both in looks and breeding. It is probably a combination of all of these things.

When she joins Chris on the dance floor Marisa immediately tells him that their relationship would have to end. Chris responds by telling Marisa that she should not have worn that dress if she wanted to end their relationship that night. Though meant as a compliment his response is unsettling because it seems to reinforce the notion of patriarchal control over women. Marisa smiles slightly and joins him on the dance floor, but the lingering idea that the Anglo male gets to decide when a relationship is over is disconcerting and signifies her second class status as a woman. Chris's character never exhibits aggressive or domineering behavior, but the undercurrent of that exchange is hard to miss. Eventually Caroline, who goes to the benefit in an effort to seduce Chris, sees Marisa but can't quite place her. After all, who remembers a (Latina) maid? Marisa immediately recognizes her, however, and, just like Cinderella, runs from the ball. Predictably, Chris runs after her. It is dark as they leave the benefit, suggesting the midnight departure of Cinderella in the fairy tale. Chris catches up with Marisa just as she reaches the fountain—an obvious romantic setting. As they turn to face each other we see their profiles. The side view and the perfect breeze combine to focus attention on Lopez's curves—curves

that signify fertility and sexual availability (Barerra 2000; Guzman & Valdivia 2004; Negrón-Mutaner 2000; Valdivia 2000). They kiss, than predictably end up spending the night together in Chris' hotel suite. In the morning Marisa literally tiptoes out of bed and out of the suite looking as if she might still be wearing her glass slippers. The camera focuses tightly on her bare legs from the knee down, which takes up the entire shot and we watch as she softly walks through the suite, her calf muscles tight and firm, strong, yet delicate, once again turning the female body into a pleasurable spectacle for our consumption. The character of Marisa falls into traditional and recognizable narrative constructions by sleeping with Chris. Yet she is also complicated by a desire to better herself economically, by the fact that she is intelligent and motivated and by her belief that, even though she is a working class Latina from the boroughs, she will eventually get her chance for a position in management.

Caroline and Rachel see Marisa leaving Chris' suite the next morning and Rachel recognizes Marisa as the maid. Marisa is dressed in Chris' sweats and the only remaining marker of her night at the ball is the diamond necklace she is still wearing. Caroline has Mr. Bextrum run through the security tapes until she spots Marisa wearing her white Dolce outfit. Bextrum calls Marisa to Lane's suite to confront her about the incident and to fire her. In an effort to humiliate Marisa as much as possible and elevate herself, Caroline invites Chris over to tell him that "the person you thought was a guest on this floor is the maid on this floor." The shot cuts to a close-up of Marisa, who is clearly

distressed and near tears. She is looking down at the floor in embarrassment. She admits to Chris that she is indeed the maid. Chris follows Marisa from the hotel asking her if she thought she had to pretend in order to keep him interested. She turns to face him and directly confronts the whole idea of invisibility, asking him “who’s kidding who? Do you think you would have taken a second look at me if you thought I was the maid?” Referring to Rachel’s comments she continues, “Half the time I’m some stereotype that they’re making fun of. The other half of the time I’m just invisible.” She reminds him that he didn’t even see her the first time they met because she was cleaning his bathroom floor. She then turns and walks away.

We next see Marisa riding alone on the bus. She is still in the maid’s uniform, her hair is falling down; she is carrying a plastic bag containing her street clothes and is wearing a long cardigan sweater. There is no remaining evidence that this *Cenicienta* (Cinderella) Latina had ever been to the ball. Later we see her sitting on the swings, in the Bronx. She is physically and emotionally a long way from Manhattan. This park or playground has been neglected, the city can be seen far away in the background and as the sun sets and dusk settles in it mirrors Marisa’s somber mood and lost opportunities both professionally and personally.

## REVISITING/REVISING OLD REPRESENTATIONS

Marisa finds a job at another hotel. At the end of the movie Ty goes to a press conference for Chris Marshall held at the hotel where his mother now works. Ty asks the last question at the press conference. He begins by humorously posing the question about whether or not politicians who make mistakes deserve a second chance even if they have lied to the public. Chris responds that they do. Drawing the parallel between what is considered an acceptable course of action regarding politicians (e.g., upper class) and the different standards applied for working class people like maids, Ty asks Chris why it is not all right to give his mother a second chance. Viewers understand that Chris is still interested in a relationship with Marisa. Yet he, until this scene, has taken no initiative to find Marisa until Ty shows up at the news conference and pressures him to be forgiving. To complete the Cinderella narrative Chris goes to the basement where Marisa is taking a break and asks for a fresh start to their relationship and the film ends with them as a couple.

In *Maid in Manhattan* Wang relies on easily recognizable representations prevalent in classic Hollywood films that often marginalize Latinas. At times Wang uses these strategies to challenge traditional assumptions about working class Latinas by providing space where differences in attitudes and perceptions are acknowledged and subsequently challenged. By privileging Caroline and Rachel in their interactions with Marisa, Wang enables us to see the double standard that is applied to individuals of lower socioeconomic status. By

making Marisa invisible when she is a maid and the center of attention when she is seen as upper class Wang again challenges viewers to confront their own assumptions about others based on physical attributes, ethnicity and socioeconomic class. As a maid Marisa does not work from a position of power and she is often seen as subservient by those she serves. Yet, instances like the scene where Marisa insults Rachel also provide viewers with a more complex representation; one that shows a Latina simultaneously proud of her own intelligence, sense of style and success at work and defiant when confronted with obnoxious stereotypic references and invisibility. As Lionel tells her after she was fired, “to serve people takes dignity and intelligence . . . and although we serve them, we are not their servants. What we do . . . does not define who we are.” Lionel’s statement is interesting to consider. In another part of the scene he tells Marisa that the people they serve are only rich indicating that though their guests have more money, they are no more or no less important than the butlers and maids who take care of them. By serving their guests with ‘dignity and intelligence’ Lionel believes that they earn those attributes for themselves. He believes there is pride and honor in what they do, they are not servants. For Marisa being a maid is just the first step toward achieving her version of the American dream—a better job and hopefully a brighter future for Ty. She is determined to pursue a position in management, albeit elsewhere.

Jennifer Lopez has, over time, created a complex, hybrid American and Puerto Rican /Latina identity. This identity has been further complicated by

the fact that she is a popular Latina who does not speak Spanish fluently and so sometimes faces criticism of authenticity from within the Latino community (Beltran 2002; Lockhart 2007; Valdivia 2007). Guzman and Valdivia argue that by privileging both her “U.S. Americanness and her Puerto Ricanness” that Lopez has challenged the erasure of Latina bodies in popular Hollywood films (2004 218). In addition, she has marketed her body as curvaceous, desirable, beautiful and different from Anglo actresses. With her popularity and obvious power to influence her representation, it is surprising that Lopez would agree to a role that harkens back to so many old stereotypes. Guzman and Valdivia note that, as of 2004, Lopez’s character in *Maid in Manhattan* was the most stereotypic of any of her film roles. However, the character of Marisa can also be read as a hybrid of old and new representations—old in the sense that there are obvious stereotypic elements in her character like being a maid and heading a single-parent household. New in the sense that Marisa fights against traditional expectations represented by her mother that work to confine her to a life of servitude; exhibiting confidence that her intelligence, sense of worth and work ethic will overcome class barriers and will eventually enable her to pursue a position in management that will lead to a better life economically. This confidence is evident even after she is unemployed in the scene where she refuses to take a job as a cleaning lady recommended by her mother, deciding instead to start over at a different hotel and, in time, apply for a management position.

However, the film also plays into commonly held beliefs that minimize the amount of attention paid to social issues in this country. This construct, although empowering for Marisa at the level of perseverance in spite of her mother's pessimism, also reflects the philosophy that an individual who works hard enough can 'bootstrap' themselves up and achieve individual success offered by the notion of the American dream. This is not always the case. The idea that hard work alone can result in personal and economic success works to absolve us of social responsibility for the condition of the poor and working class members of our society. That Marisa's co-workers came together to support her and help her get ready for the fundraiser at the risk of jeopardizing their own jobs is reflective of a solidarity that is uplifting. But at the same time it is only Marisa who gets the opportunity to taste life on the other side. As Stephanie tells her, "you're living it for all of us." The reward seems limited to Marisa. We do find out at the end of the film that Marisa is able to move three of her co-workers into management positions, but in general it is not clear that the collective action of the maids and butlers improved their particular employment opportunities.

The film's ending is troubling in some respects. Marisa was given an opportunity to train for the management position at the Beresford hotel based on her own merits. Even though it did not work out, she had earned that right herself. At the end of the movie we find out that Marisa has been promoted to management and that she has trained Stephanie and two other co-workers

from the Beresford for management positions. In this respect Marisa is sharing her success with other working class people because she knows their value. What is troublesome is that it is not clear whether Marisa had these opportunities because of her own abilities or because she was in a relationship with the state senator. Here *Maid* relies on stereotypical narrative constructions in that a Latina seems to be successful *because* of her relationship with a white man and not necessarily because she has the ability to do the job.

In his book *Latino Images* Charles Ramirez Berg identified five Latina/o counter-stereotypes in films. He described one of them as a conflicted representation that was “partly stereotypical and partly progressive” (78). If he had written about Marisa (he did not) it seems likely that Ramirez Berg would have described her character as a blend of stereotypic and progressive representations because she embodies elements of both kinds of depictions. The resulting new identity seemingly constructed by her attainment of a new position seems diminished by her link to an upper-class politician. In comparison with the Latina protagonists in the other films in this study, Marisa’s character is not as complex. Her representation does not demonstrate its own agency as she seems to be at the mercy of circumstances that happen around her. Consequently, she cannot be read as a fundamentally oppositional representation. However, there are moments of opposition such as when she fights for a chance move into management. Though this film presents a number

of stereotypic representations of gender, race and class, it also provides us with voices from the margins who force us to confront those images and to critically think about the racial, gender and social stratification that exists within society.



## V. Old Cinema Sewn Anew

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When “desire for the comfort of fullness . . .  
is suppressed for style . . . and deprivation allowed to rule . . .  
dieting, exercising American women become afraid of  
everything associated with being curvaceous . . . such as wantonness,  
lustfulness . . . sex, food . . . motherhood. All that is best in life.”  
*Cristina (Spanglish)*

“Is what you want for yourself to  
become someone very different than me?”  
*Flor (Spanglish)*

*Spanglish* is the story about the Morenos and the Claskys and the complicated relationships that inevitably form when two families live under the same roof as master and servant. We see how issues of culture, race, class and family are brought to the foreground and renegotiated through these complex relationships. Of the four films included in this study, *Spanglish* can be considered one of the most *dialogic* in the Bakhtinian sense given the multiple voicings (polyphony), encounters between various languages and cultures, and relationships between the narrative/story and images. The story is narrated as a flash back voice-over by Cristina (Shelbie Bruce), Flor Moreno’s daughter. The film opens as a member of Princeton University’s application review team reads the personal essay written by Cristina, who was asked to write about the most influential person in her life; for Cristina it is her mother and she looks back to the time when Flor (Paz Vega) worked as a housekeeper for the Claskys, an affluent Anglo family. By exploring the multiple, interconnected

and conflicted relationships that exist within and between each family, Cristina confronts the intersecting categories of family, culture, beauty and class to better understand how her Latina identity evolved.

Written, directed and produced by James L. Brooks (*Riding in Cars with Boys* (2001), *As Good as it Gets* (1997), *Jerry Maguire* (1996)) *Spanglish* is also a film about the complications of moving from one culture to another and the decisions that must be made regarding an acceptable level of assimilation into one's new country. Throughout this film we see how difference (e.g., culture, family relationships, family structure, and beauty) is dialogically renegotiated, offering new demonstrations of Latina agency. While Brooks sometimes presents us with expected stereotypical representations (e.g., illegal immigrant, non-English speaker, single parent, housekeeper) he complicates them by bringing them out of the shadows to the forefront where they can be contested and renegotiated. Brooks thereby creates what I call a Bakhtinian dialogic space that calls attention to the interconnected polyphonic voices at play in the film (e.g., Flor, Cristina, Deborah, language, culture).

This analysis of *Spanglish* will focus on Cristina and Flor's relationship to each other, with the Claskys, with traditional Mexican culture and their place within the new Anglo culture of the United States. Key to understanding these relationships is the body and how it is defined and reinterpreted as it is changed by interaction with forces within and without the safety of the barrio. For example, director Brooks challenges our preconceptions about the body by

showing how the notion of Anglo beauty as tall, thin and blonde is used to oppress bodies—white and non-white—that do not conform. This notion of beauty is further complicated when the Latinas in the film come to represent not only physical beauty—curves and all—but also other traits like modesty and morality traditionally reserved for Anglo characters in classic cinema. Brooks critiques U.S. notions of beauty, family structure, class and success through a reverse stereotype of Deborah, the Anglo lead who is wealthy, tall, blonde and thin but, through much of the film, is also self-centered and shallow, exhibiting little or no warmth for her family and interpreting every event from her singular perspective. Not until the end, after she reveals her affair, does Deborah realize how much she loves her husband and family and wants to rebuild their relationship.

## **NEGOTIATING A NEW CULTURE**

Cristina tells us that her story began in Mexico when her father left the family. Her mother, Flor, decides to cross the border into the United States in an effort to provide a better life for her daughter. They end up in the barrio in East L.A. where Flor's cousin, Monica, gives them shelter. As Cristina explains arriving in Los Angeles, it was as if they were “adrift in an alien environment” until they reached the Latina/o community of the barrio and “were right back home.” The Mexican community of the barrio provides a safe and familiar environment for the Morenos and Cristina tells us that for six years they live

and work there without venturing into Anglo America. During that time Flor works two jobs to support them. Cristina tells us that after her first dance, when Flor watched a boy's hand move from Cristina's back to her bottom, her mother decided she needed to find a single day job that would cover the bills so she could keep a close eye on Cristina at night. Part of Flor's decision can be read as Mexican culture working to protect the virginity of daughters, but protecting one's children from outside dangers, real or perceived, is every parents' responsibility, and Flor is extremely protective of Cristina.

So, for the first time, Flor ventures outside the comfort and safety of the barrio to interview for a job as a housekeeper with the Claskys. Although Flor had been in the United States for six years there had been no need to learn English in the barrio. Her cousin Monica, however, speaks English and accompanies Flor to her interview to serve as a translator with Mrs. Clasky. The presentation of Flor as monolingual and Monica as bilingual is an early example of how director Brooks portrays the heterogeneous nature of the Latina/o community as complex and hybrid (Guzman and Valdivia 2004) as members change and adapt to varying degrees to life in the United States. Toward the end of the film Flor decides to learn English but finds that being able to communicate with the Claskys further complicates relationships with both Deborah (Téa Leoni) and John (Adam Sandler). Brooks uses the conflict between languages and the cultural and class struggle enacted through the power of language to affect a dialogic exchange between Flor and Deborah and

between the film and its English-speaking audience. As a result of this struggle Flor's identity becomes more complex and hybrid and she finds new agency as she learns to function in a different culture.

Flor and Monica take a bus to the Clasky's neighborhood of large gated homes. We are directly confronted with class differences as Flor and Monica have to be 'buzzed' into the Clasky residence. Once inside we immediately see one of the Clasky's two Cadillac Escalades parked in the driveway. Flor and Monica walk through the house toward the pool in the backyard where Deborah Clasky is waiting. Monica accidentally walks into the sliding glass door to the backyard and bloodies her nose. In a strange response Deborah tells Monica that she is not mad that she ran into the door, grabs a twenty dollar bill from a money-filled coffee cup on the countertop and gives it to Monica as recompense. In this brief sequence Deborah insults Monica and we see that Deborah is used to getting her own way and believes that anything is fixable with enough money. The cup full of money also signifies the class differences between the Claskys and the Morenos.

#### **DENIAL AND DEPRIVATION: BEAUTY, AMERICAN STYLE**

We are first alerted to Deborah's fixation with physical appearances during the interview when she tells Flor, "you're gorgeous . . . you're gorgeous." By emphasizing Flor's beauty, director Brooks immediately complicates the Anglo notion of beauty as represented by Deborah by allowing

space for fully developed and complex brown bodies. It is unusual for popular films to position Latinas as examples of beauty not also linked to sexual availability or promiscuousness. Flor is fairly thin but she is also curvaceous. She dresses modestly further challenging the classic notion that beautiful Latinas are loud and colorful and oftentimes flaunt their sexuality (Ramirez Berg 2002).

As Flor walks from the bus stop to the Clasky's for her first day of work Deborah runs past. She appears to be an all American beauty: tall, thin, blonde. She dyes her hair, works out and runs daily to maintain her physique thus supporting Cristina's observation about the rituals American women follow to become ever thinner and thus more beautiful. As we listen to Cristina's critique of the rejection of curvaceous bodies by many American women the camera cuts to another shot of Deborah running. She is yelling 'left' as she runs past people walking and jogging along side of the road. We are visually drawn to her long skinny legs, rail-thin curveless frame as she easily runs past a group of male joggers who struggle unsuccessfully to stay ahead of her. This makes Deborah appear strong and powerful, symbolizing that beauty—Anglo beauty—is also powerful. However, Wang continues the poor little rich girl plot and fairy tale myth as Deborah loses control over her life during the course of the film and we see that neither physical beauty nor abundant wealth are enough to make her happy.

Cristina's voice-over reads from her essay, revealing her belief that American women, like Latinas, have a "desire for the comfort of fullness." She observes that things go terribly wrong when those desires are suppressed in the name of style or fashion. Indirectly alluding to historical representations of Latinas as exotic and erotic because their body types are often fuller, Cristina notes that when American women diet and exercise excessively it is as if they are "afraid of everything associated with being curvaceous such as wantonness, lustfulness, sex, food, motherhood...all," she says, "that is best in life." This fear can be linked back to the historical construction of non-whites (e.g., African American, Latina) as sexualized bodies that came to represent deviancy later linked to biological and physical traits such as skin color, ample breasts and large posteriors (Gilman 2003; Negrón-Mutaner 1997). Following colonial constructions, Latinas have been historically represented as voluptuous and overly sexualized in various media including film (Baez 2007; Beltran 2002; Ramirez Berg 2002). Director Brooks' representation of Flor, however, does not follow this classic formula. Brooks chooses to represent Flor as emotionally complicated and morally centered, not as overtly sexualized or promiscuous. The narrative eventually puts Flor and John together but as we will see, it is Flor who is uncharacteristically empowered, takes control and sets the boundaries of their relationship. Over the course of the film she learns how to exert herself in the new context of Anglo society where her authority is threatened. By presenting alternate notions of beauty and power, Brooks

challenges and upsets colonial privileging of white bodies and white authority. In addition, by problematizing the privileged status of a nuclear family as the hallmark and affluence as the solution to life's problems, Brooks allows us to see difference (e.g., single parents, working class, immigrants) not as aberrations but as normal possibilities.

### **MOTHERS AND DAUGHTERS**

There are three sets of mothers and daughters in this film: Flor and Cristina, Deborah and Bernice, and Deborah and Evelyn. Flor and Cristina have the closest relationship. They have depended on one another since Cristina's father left and Flor has worked hard to surround Cristina with Mexican culture by passing on her value system and living within the Mexican community in L.A. where language and cultural practices continue. Many of the early shots in the film show them in close physical proximity to one another, suggesting their strong relationship. For example, in one scene we see Flor and a young Cristina snuggling in bed at night together chatting like sisters. Later, after Flor accepts the job at the Claskys, she takes Cristina to a restaurant to celebrate. They both rush up to the receptionist smiling and giggling and playfully bump into one another as they go to their table. Two Anglo men dressed in business suits sitting at the bar in the restaurant offer to buy Flor a drink, evoking the classic stereotype that Latinas are promiscuous. Because Flor is there with her daughter, we are immediately startled and made uncomfortable by the men's

proposition. Flor furiously declines their invitation thus rejecting the implication that Latinas are sexually 'available.' Flor and Cristina's strong relationship is tested during their stay at the Clasky's summer beach house when the line between the families is blurred and Deborah encroaches on Flor's parental authority to determine what is best for her daughter. This situation puts 12-year-old Cristina in the middle between a mother who loves her and wants what is best but also wants her to embrace her Mexican roots and Deborah who treats Cristina like the daughter she always wanted but cannot see in her own daughter, Bernice. Both Flor's and Cristina's identities will become more complicated as their differences are negotiated. Eventually they find strength in one another and are given voice to explore their ever changing and hybrid natures.

Deborah's relationship with her daughter Bernice (Sarah Steele) is strained at best. Deborah thinks Bernice is too heavy and is obsessed with coercing her to lose weight. There seems to be no particular motivation for this focus other than to get Bernice to fit within the narrow confines of Anglo notions of physical beauty. For example, in an early scene Bernice is in the kitchen passing out samples of an experimental recipe she created. She gives Deborah a taste who says, "My God, this is amazing!" In this tight shot Deborah and Bernice appear to be standing fairly close together though they are on opposite sides of the frame. There is a door between them symbolizing the real barrier—Bernice's inability or unwillingness to lose weight and her mother's

failure to accept her daughter—that exists between the two making a close relationship impossible. Bernice is smiling until her mother adds, “by the way, you [Bernice] could do without this,” as she turns her back on Bernice and reaches into the refrigerator. The camera cuts to a shot taken farther away creating the visual illusion that the gulf between Deborah and Bernice has grown.

Later Deborah bursts into the room carrying several bags of new clothes; ‘gifts’ for Bernice. The camera cuts to a close-up headshot of Bernice who has a look of surprise and excitement. Smiling she asks, “What did I do right?” This remark tells us a lot about interactions between Deborah and Bernice and illustrates the distance between them. As Bernice excitedly begins to try on the clothes the camera cuts to a shot of Deborah sheepishly looking away, as she pretends to rummage through one of the other bags of clothes. Bernice tugs on the jacket but cannot get it on so she looks at the size. All of the clothes Deborah bought are size 8, too small to fit Bernice. Revealing that she knew the clothes were too small Deborah says, “come on Bernice, you’re gonna do it,” She continues, “you’re gonna do it, and you’re *gonna* look beautiful. Honey, I just . . . you are going to lose that weight . . . you’re *gonna* look beautiful.” These statements indicate that Deborah does not think Bernice is beautiful now and, though Deborah does not seem to be aware of it, their relationship is distant and her comments are hurtful.

Flor is upset by what happened to Bernice. She goes home and asks Cristina how to ask Bernice to try on the clothes in English. Flor slowly repeats Cristina's words, "just try it on." Cristina laughs when Flor has trouble pronouncing "just" revealing the difference between Latinas/os who are predominantly Spanish-speakers and those, like Cristina, who learn to speak English without an accent and thereby assimilate more easily (Silva-Corvalán 2006). Flor goes to the Claskys early the next morning and alters the clothes so that they fit will fit Bernice. When she is finished she wakes up Bernice and eventually gets her to try on the clothes. Bernice is happy to have the new clothes and discovers that Flor has resewn them just for her. Although it is meant as an act of kindness, Flor has crossed the line between families by meddling with someone's child and infringing on Deborah's parental authority. We will later see Flor's angry reaction when she feels that the Claskys are interfering with Crisina. Brooks complicates these situations by encouraging us to read Flor's meddling (e.g., altering Bernice's clothes) positively and the Clasky's interference (e.g., taking Cristina without permission, new school, giving her money) negatively, as an appropriation of Flor's parental authority. Both readings are possible but are more complex than a binary right/wrong or positive/negative reading acknowledges. The resulting dialogism encourages us to see multiple and complicated readings of this situation. For example, we can read the alteration of clothes for Bernice as an act of kindness or a willingness to accept her as she is. It is possible to see the meddling Deborah does with

Cristina later in the film as manipulative. Or, Deborah could also be read as kind, offering Cristina opportunities her working class immigrant mother could never afford. These are just a few ways to think about interactions between Flor and Bernice and Deborah and Cristina we observe in the film—but none of them are simple.

Deborah's mother, Evelyn, lives with the Claskys. Evelyn was a famous jazz singer when she was younger but through much of the film appears to be an alcoholic. She has a warm relationship with her grandchildren and is often shown teaching them her old songs or telling them stories about her life. Evelyn also gets along with her son-in-law, John. However, for much of the film Deborah and Evelyn seem to be estranged and Deborah blames Evelyn for all of her problems. Much of this attitude stems from Deborah's belief that her mother had been "wild and promiscuous" during her youth. Deborah criticizes Evelyn for her excessive drinking on several occasions. Whenever Evelyn makes suggestions or tries to criticize Deborah's actions Deborah silences her. Toward the end of the film Evelyn stops drinking when she figures out that Deborah has been having an affair and confronts Deborah telling her she had better stop or she will lose her husband. Evelyn is supportive of her daughter and tries to advise her about how to work through the situation and, for the first time, Deborah seems receptive to her mother and looks to her for comfort. Though Deborah eventually realizes how much she loves her family we are not

convinced she is capable of changing her identity enough to accept her family members with all of their faults.

## **YOUR DAUGHTER IS MY DAUGHTER: THE STRUGGLE FOR CRISTINA'S IDENTITY**

Deborah rents a beach house for the summer and takes for granted that Flor will live in because there is no bus service from the barrio to Carbon Beach. Deborah assumes Flor will provide whatever service she needs whenever she needs it; after all, she is hired help. Because Flor does not yet speak English Deborah goes next door to ask the Latino looking man who is outside working on his car to translate. It is unusual to see a Latino living in an affluent neighborhood in popular films and this representation challenges the idea that only Anglos can afford to live on the beach. Once he sees Flor he readily agrees to translate but, in a comic move, takes the time to make himself more presentable by first putting on his shirt. Flor initially refuses to live at the beach house because she has to take care of Cristina, whom she had never mentioned to the Claskys. After a short deliberation, Deborah tells Flor that her daughter can also live in for the summer and, in a power play, tells Flor she will have to let her go if she does not agree. In the end, Flor reluctantly agrees to this arrangement which begins a cascade of events that will force Flor to face the dilemma between providing for her daughter economically and maintaining parental control over decisions that affect Cristina.

Cristina's excitement mounts as they drive from the barrio to the Clasky's beach house. She notes how clean the beach seems to be. The neighborhood where Flor and Cristina live is clean, but everyone lives in apartments and there are always a lot of people everywhere. Yet the close Mexican community of family and culture offer Cristina a level of comfort and well being that money and big houses cannot provide Bernice. Cristina keeps repeating in the car that they are staying at the beach for three months. The camera cuts to a close-up of Flor who has a concerned look on her face suggesting that she is worried about how exposure to the Clasky's life style might affect Cristina.

From the first moment that Deborah lays eyes on Cristina she starts to fuss over her, telling Flor she could make a fortune on surrogate pregnancies. Deborah immediately works to establish a relationship with Cristina and begins to move in and encroach on Flor's parental decision-making rights. For example, the day after Flor and Cristina arrive at the beach house Deborah takes Cristina shopping for the day—without first asking Flor. We see Deborah and Cristina in her SUV returning from their day together. Both Cristina and Deborah's hair is streaked with color. Cristina has never been on such an outing and is understandably enamored by the experience. She is busy thanking Deborah for taking her when Deborah says, "it was nice to have the company." This comment, when considered in the context of the whole film, indicates that Deborah either does not think Bernice would enjoy spending the day with

her mother getting her hair streaked with pink and blue and just hanging out or Deborah is embarrassed by Bernice and prefers the company of Cristina who she sees as more beautiful.

From inside the house we can hear Deborah and Cristina laughing and chatting as they walk up to the door after spending the day together. Flor meets Cristina at the door, stern faced and angry. Bernice looks at Cristina and Deborah seeing that they have both had color streaks painted in their hair, their arms heavy with the day's packages. The tight close-up of Bernice's face reveals how hurt she feels to have been left out. Flor and Cristina immediately go to their rooms where Flor dictates a note. When Flor tries to give Deborah the note telling her she cannot take Cristina without permission, Deborah thinks she is over reacting. Deborah is disadvantaged in this shot as she is sitting on the floor and Flor is standing over her. Although Deborah stands up she remains subordinate in the shot because she is attempting to avoid taking the note—she is in retreat. In this moment we can see Bakhtin's dialogism at work as Flor and Deborah struggle (symbolized through language and parental status) over Cristina in this scene. In one sense Deborah's refusal to take the note until Flor has calmed down is a power play meant to manipulate Flor into seeing things Deborah's way. In another sense Flor can be seen as powerful because of her determination to tell Deborah she has overstepped the boundary of proper behavior even if it costs her her job. Deborah temporarily seems to win the power struggle as she continues to refuse to take the letter

telling Flor to, “sleep on it.” However, Flor seizes the power in the end by giving Deborah the letter first thing the next morning.

The note fails to change Deborah’s behavior as she continues to intervene. Impressed that although Cristina is two years behind Bernice in school she has already read all of the books on Bernie’s summer reading list, Deborah decides to go behind Flor’s back and conspires to get Cristina accepted to the private school Bernice attends. Deborah takes Bernice and Cristina with her for fall registration where she ‘accidentally’ runs into the school director. We are in on the scheme because we see the ‘wink-wink’ look exchanged between Deborah and the director. Once she has everything set and has arranged for Cristina to receive a \$20,000 scholarship Deborah tells Flor that they just ran into the school director while there with Bernie and that Cristina ‘knocked them out.’ Cristina wants to attend the school because she sees it as a good opportunity. Flor is not so sure it will be a good experience believing that Cristina will either be ‘odd’ and not fit in or will make herself like all the others. The school is far from the barrio so Deborah offers to have them live with the Clasky’s year around. Flor firmly refuses.

Flor and her cousin Monica visit the beautiful campus with its white buildings and large green areas at the end of the day just as students are leaving. A close up shot of both Flor and Monica’s faces reveal the reservations they both have about Cristina attending the private school as they watch waves of students get into their parents’ SUVs and drive away. The private school

represents a very different life from the one they lead in the barrio. The concern for Flor is that Cristina will assimilate too much and become just like all the other students at the school, leaving behind her Mexican roots and, Flor feels, her identity. After a great deal of deliberation Flor decides to allow Cristina to attend the private school. On the first day of school they meet Deborah and Bernice at the bus stop. Deborah immediately starts fussing over Cristina as though she was her daughter. Bernice, standing in the background, is ignored as is Flor. Deborah gives Cristina a new backpack claiming it is one of Bernie's old ones. She also gives Cristina an expensive necklace that her mother could not afford, saying that it is from all of them: her, Bernice and Flor. The shot cuts to Flor who shakes her head emphatically stating that the necklace is not from her. The follow-up shot of Deborah shows her surprise that Flor refuses to go along with the ruse. As the girls get on the school bus steps the camera shot is from inside of the bus looking out. Deborah is privileged in the foreground of the shot and we see Flor behind her moving back and forth behind Deborah trying to get a glimpse of Cristina to wave at her. Cristina turns around on the bus steps to thank Deborah for "this opportunity" and, as an afterthought, waves to her mother. This sequence illustrates that the parental line has been blurred and that Deborah feels she has the right to provide for Cristina, either due to her assumptions about Flor as a single parent, Deborah's socioeconomic superiority, or both. Flor, upset and angry, turns to walk toward the Clasky house ahead of Deborah who is still at the bus stop. Flor looks back

over her shoulder to see Deborah getting ready to start her run home.

Determined to best Deborah this time, Flor begins to run toward the house.

Flor is able to stay ahead of Deborah until the very end when Deborah rushes past her yelling, “I love you for trying,” symbolizing that Flor has fallen short once again; racially, socioeconomically, and now physically.

The trajectories of the two families ultimately collide when Deborah urges Cristina to bring friends over after school—an offer it appears is not extended to Bernice. In this scene we see Cristina and her Anglo friends bound out of the car into the Clasky’s house and notice that Bernice is still sitting in the front passenger seat. After the other girls have gone into the house Bernice slowly gets out of the car and walks into the house—alone. Cristina was expected to attend a party that night to celebrate the arrival of Monica’s mother from Mexico. Deborah calls and tells Flor that the girls are still studying—a lie. Cristina is in the kitchen listening to the conversation and so guiltily becomes part of the lie. Brooks normalizes Cristina in this scene by making her seem like any other child torn between what she wants to do and what she knows she should do. And, like any other child, she ends up staying overnight like she wants. Deborah ends the call by suggesting that Cristina could sleep there and she’d “get her back in the morning.”

Flor realizes what she must do to reclaim her daughter—she must physically and emotionally retrieve her from Deborah’s influence. Flor sets out to walk to the Claskys, get her daughter and quit her job. When she arrives at

the Clasky's, Flor goes upstairs. We see that Flor is conflicted and in turmoil as she stands over the sleeping girls. Flor does not want to make a scene so decides to pick up Cristina in the morning. As Flor is leaving the Clasky's she runs into John, setting up the final segment of the film.

### **THREADS OF OLD CINEMA SEWN ANEW**

In *Spanglish* Brooks incorporates some of the cinematic narrative strategies prevalent in classic Hollywood films that marginalized Latinas but uses them instead to challenge traditional assumptions about Latinas by providing space where different perspectives are articulated and renegotiated. For instance, by the way Deborah has the upper hand and is thusly privileged in her relationship with Flor, Brooks encourages us to empathize with Flor but to also consider the various perspectives of each character. At first it is easy for us to read Deborah's character negatively. She is wealthy, arrogant and self-centered; yet she too has personal and emotional difficulties to solve, as the film reveals. On the other hand, we have no problem sympathizing with Flor who initially appears to be at a disadvantage in every respect. As a housekeeper in the Clasky's household Flor does not work from a position of power. In addition, Flor's inability to speak English effectively silences her for much of the movie. Her reliance on others to translate also makes her appear less powerful in an Anglo environment. Her status as a single parent working for a nuclear, though dysfunctional, family also puts her at a disadvantage. All

of these characteristics combine to make Flor appear weak in relation to Deborah who is physically taller, reflects Anglo notions of beauty and is economically more powerful. This combination of attributes gives Deborah the erroneous notion that she can make better decisions about Cristina's future than can Flor.

However, once Flor decides to learn English she literally and figuratively finds her voice and eventually renegotiates her relationship with the Claskys to take back control. By first positioning Flor as a non-English speaker working in Anglo society, Brooks presents us with an easily recognizable and marginalized character—a Spanish-speaking illegal immigrant. However, his narrative then provides a mechanism to help empower Flor by having her learn to speak English and become more adept at navigating in a new cultural setting. Though this does not change her class status it does enable her to interact differently in an Anglo world because she now has the ability to communicate and to negotiate a new identity.

Classic Hollywood narratives often include a love triangle featuring an Anglo male lead, an Anglo female protagonist and a Latina love interest. Following a romantic relationship with the Anglo male these films generally end in one of two ways; with the Latina dying and leaving the Anglo male with the Anglo female or, with the Latina being rejected by the Anglo male as he comes

to his senses realizing he belongs with the Anglo female.<sup>18</sup> These Latinas were often constructed as promiscuous, exotic, erotic, or otherwise unworthy while the female Anglo representation often reflected more acceptable character traits like purity often associated with whiteness (Ramirez Berg 2000). Though *Spanglish* makes use of this same strategy with the triad of Deborah, John and Flor, in a surprising twist it is Flor, not John, who is empowered and makes the decision about the track their relationship will eventually take. Flor's empowerment toward the end of the film is reflective of a new and hybrid Latina who has learned to navigate in a new culture.

The love triangle is set up by John and Deborah's marital difficulties and Deborah's summer affair. As a consequence, John and Flor are together in the evenings at the beach house. Toward the middle of the film Flor confronts John because he paid Cristina for gathering sea glass on the beach without consulting her first. Cristina serves as the translator between Flor and John. In this scene it is Flor who is privileged because she is standing and John is sitting and she is the aggressor in the confrontation. As she verbally dresses John down she is talking animatedly and as Cristina translates back and forth between the two Flor seems to become more and more intimidating. The scene takes on a comic tone as Flor speaks quickly in Spanish and Cristina

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<sup>18</sup> In his book *Latino Images in Film*, Charles Ramirez Berg discusses the various ways that narrative and cinematography have been used over the years to exclude Latinas/os and other "socially marginalized" groups (e.g., the poor, gays, working class, and women, etc.). He cites *Flying Down to Rio* (1933), *In Caliente* (1935), *Colors* (1988) and *Seven Days and Six Nights* (1998) as some classic and more recent films that use these conventions to privilege Anglos, especially Anglo males.

translates back and forth between English and Spanish. Once Flor has finished venting about all the ways Deborah and John have interfered with Cristina John turns the table reminding her that she also interfered when she altered Bernice's clothes.

Through this exchange Brooks provides us with a dialogic opportunity to evaluate both situations as the perspectives struggle for viewer empathy. Flor's interference appears justified because it made Bernice feel good about herself, especially since her mother had gone out of her way to make Bernice feel bad about her body. Deborah felt that taking Cristina for a day of fun and exploring would make her feel welcome. John had asked his kids to pick sea glass from the beach and he included Cristina to be nice. To Cristina, picking up glass was an opportunity to earn more money than she had ever imagined. Though well-meaning, in each situation the adult did interfere with another person's child.

The camera cuts to a headshot of Flor who is thoughtfully considering John's observation. After further reflection Flor agrees that she has also interfered and apologizes—marking the first time in the film that John's opinion is acknowledged. In the beginning of the film we see John and Deborah having an argument about an incident with their son Georgie. Deborah keeps yelling at John telling him they have to be on the same page, meaning that he has to agree with her. They also argue over the clothes incident with Bernice: Deborah tells John they both have to work to get Bernice to lose weight, though John thinks Bernie i. John is thus surprised when Flor apologizes and he

begins to see her differently after this exchange as something more than their housekeeper, as a reasonable person. Brooks has successfully humanized Flor transforming her from 'hired help' to someone recognized as kind, considerate and fiercely protective of Cristina, the antithesis of Deborah. In this sense Brooks constructs Deborah's character negatively in many respects. This construction highlights the positive characteristics of Flor but also helps to articulate difference. By the film's end, we see Deborah's flaws as human shortcomings as she realizes the importance of her family.

As Flor becomes more fluent in English she and John begin talking and interacting more, eventually becoming attracted to one another. Flor decides to pick up Cristina and to cut all ties with Deborah and John after Cristina stays overnight at the Clasky's instead of coming home. Once at the Clasky's Flor decides to pick up Cristina the next morning. As she is leaving Flor runs into John who is also leaving the house because Deborah just told him she had been having an affair. John insists on taking Flor home. This is a convenient narrative ploy to get John and Flor together for what is expected to be a romantic interlude. When they are in the SUV John asks Flor if she will agree to 'hang out' with him for a while. John, a chef, takes her to his restaurant. The restaurant is closed so only the entry is softly lit creating a romantic atmosphere. Flor stands in the entry and stops before stepping into the sunken dining room. John, who has gone ahead, turns around to look at Flor. Before going any further she takes control of the situation and tells John that nothing

can happen. He reluctantly agrees, empowering Flor. John walks up to Flor and puts his arm around her for a minute then goes to the kitchen to cook for her.

The act of cooking the meal becomes a sensuous experience. Food is especially symbolic of Latina/o culture: it nurtures and sustains the body but can also arouse all the senses; especially smell, taste, touch. Brooks may be drawing from other Latina/o films such as *Like Water for Chocolate* (1992) to create an emotionally rich scene without the physicality generally associated with romance. In *Spanglish*, John's act of cooking represents deep feelings for Flor that cannot be expressed physically. As the camera cuts to shots of Flor eating the meal we see her tasting and touching the food, we hear the crispness of the asparagus as she takes in every sensation.

Brooks challenges our expectations on a number of levels throughout this entire scene. First, in popular films romance often takes the form of sexual encounters. Yet, here Brooks' use of restraint and subtle interaction itself becomes romantic. After the meal Flor and John briefly kiss but stop before it gets out of hand. They sit together on a couch. A close up shows Flor with her arm around John's shoulder. They sit and talk for a long time and just before she hops off the couch and runs out the door she whispers that she loves him. Secondly, Brooks confronts notions of male and female roles and issues of empowerment. While men are widely accepted as chefs, they are seldom seen in films cooking in this way. The preparation of food as a symbol of romance by a man is an unusual and surprising twist on popular narratives.

## FINDING AGENCY IN A NEW CULTURE

The scenes above illustrate how the interplay of relationships in *Spanglish* results in a renegotiation of the representation of *Latinidad feminista*. Flor represents a Latina who has found the strength to leave her home country, venture out to make a living in Anglo society, learn a new language and maintain parental control in a difficult situation. She also represents the dilemma of leaving one's own culture and the loss of family and friends there. Flor thusly inhabits multiple and complicated positions where culture, race, gender, class and family structure converge. Though initially positioned somewhat stereotypically as a non-English speaking housekeeper, Flor's representation challenges classic notions of cinematic Latinas as virgins, harlots or clowns( Ramirez Berg 2002) by embodying characteristics most often associated with Anglos (e.g., morality, conscience). Most prominent in the film is the struggle between cultures and the rights of parents as enacted between Flor and Deborah. Brooks uses these struggles as a means to challenge racist, sexist and class markers traditionally used to marginalize non-white bodies. In the film a kind of Bakhtinian dialogism, in concert with polyphony, brings such issues to our attention, making it is possible to interrogate and reconceptualize these marginalizing markers. For example, Flor fully accepts her responsibility to take care of Cristina and raise her on her own, a departure from traditional constructions of the ideal family as nuclear. In addition, Brooks presents Flor as a dutiful parent, unlike the drug-addicted Latina prostitutes often seen in

popular films. Though Flor wants Cristina to embrace her Mexican roots, she does not seem to force Cristina to fit within tightly prescribed traditional ideals like Carmen in *Real Women Have Curves* (2002). For example, she does not seem to be grooming Cristina for a husband and family. Instead, she is focused on imbuing her with particular beliefs and practices associated with Mexican culture, such as a sense of well-being and confidence and strong sense of the importance of family. Flor does, however, expect Cristina to be obedient and respectful.

In many ways both Flor and Cristina are positioned between cultures. Flor is obviously more entrenched in Mexican culture having lived in Mexico most of her life. However, living and working in the United States has meant that Flor's identity has no alternative but to change as a result of interaction with non-Mexican cultural practices and the resulting internal debate. Cristina, on the other hand, came to the United States as a young girl, has been educated here and so is more influenced by U.S. culture. Some of the influence has been mediated because they live in the barrio but Cristina is exposed to other influences at school and during the summer they live with the Claskys. The framework of our capitalist society sets up indicators of affluence like big houses, SUVs and private education as markers of success, as the Clasky family, especially Deborah, demonstrate. Traditional Mexican culture, which itself is changing to incorporate new possibilities (e.g., single parenthood, Latina self-determination) tends to mark success by one's family and those relationships.

The hybrid identity that is represented by her personal essay indicates that, though Cristina has incorporated many aspects of Anglo America and she intends to go to college, she has also chosen to maintain her ties to Mexican culture, culture represented by her mother.

The body is an important focus of this film. It represents the struggle between competing notions of beauty that support racialized and gendered conceptions of Latinas and simultaneously exclude noncompliant white bodies (e.g., Bernice). Flor works to reclaim the body by accepting Bernice as she is. In this way the definition of beauty becomes more inclusive, much like in *Real Women Have Curves*. Through the dialogic ‘conversation’ that occurs in the film between the multiple voices (e.g., Cristina’s critique of American women’s pre-occupation with being thin, Deborah’s Anglicized notion of the body and Flor’s more inclusive position), *Spanglish* helps viewers to see that narrow notions of acceptable bodies marginalize most of us.

The final scene of the film, where Flor picks up Cristina, quits her job, and she and Cristina walk to the bus stop, is significant because it returns us to the focus of family and culture as a grounding mechanism for the healthy development of children. After they leave the Claskys Flor tells Cristina she will no longer be attending the private school. Accusing her mother of ruining everything, Cristina says that she will never forgive her, “*Nunca*” [never]. This scene provides an excellent narrative and visual contrast to the one between Bernice and Deborah at the beginning of the film. In that scene Deborah and

Bernice begin on opposite sides of the frame with the door in between them, the tight shot giving the illusion that they are not far apart. However, after their exchange in the kitchen the shot widens, signaling their emotional separation. In the last bus stop scene Flor and Cristina are also on opposite sides of the frame. When Cristina says she needs space, Flor instantly gets in her face telling her that there is, “no space between us.” Flor searches for a way to explain to Cristina the primacy of family and the difference she sees between the turbulent relationships the Claskys have and the close bond that exists between her and Cristina. In, as Cristina tells us, a “moment of clarity,” Flor asks her daughter if she really wants to become someone very different from her mother. They get on the bus and do not sit together, but as Cristina thinks about what her mother has asked she goes to sit with her and Flor gives her a reassuring hug. We hear Cristina’s voice-over read again from her application letter, which ends with the firm statement that she does not need Princeton’s acceptance to validate her identity. After all, she reads, “My identity rests firmly and happily on one fact . . . I am my mother’s daughter.”

## VI. A STORY TO TELL: COMPLEX FILM LATINAS FOR THE NEW MILLENIUM

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I put on my masks, my costumes and posed for each occasion. I conducted myself well, I think, but an emptiness grew that no thing could fill. I think...  
I hungered for myself.  
--Alma Villanueva, "Mother May I"

In this dissertation I have focused my analysis on the representation of Latinas in four contemporary popular films released in the post-“Latin Explosion” era of the 1990s—*Girlfight* (Kusama 2000), *Real Women Have Curves* (Cardoso 2002), *Maid in Manhattan* (Wang 2002) and *Spanglish* (Brooks 2004)—in order to examine whether and to what degree film representations of Latinas have changed along with the social, cultural, and economic situation of Latinas/os during this time period. In particular, I have looked at how the Latina body is articulated through the intersection of gender, race, and class and how it functions as a site of struggle through which competing social, cultural and familial relationships collide, interact and are renegotiated.

Popular media images—especially visual media such as film—help to shape identity and so become sites of contestation and potential opportunities for transformation (Hall 1990; Shohat and Stam 1994). Within the context of mainstream film representations, Latina images are often marginalized as they are simultaneously read racially in relation to whiteness and are understood in

relation to dominant constructions of femininity. Applying the Bakhtinian concepts of dialogism and polyphony to the study of cinematic representation as I have sought to do here facilitates consideration of all dimensions of a film (e.g., character, narrative, cinematography and music) to reveal the often muted or silenced “social voices” they incorporate.

The Bakhtinian theories of dialogism and polyphony and the notions of *Latinidad* and hybridity work together to create a means for interrogating the many voices contained in the representations in the films in this study. By calling attention to the multiple voices (polyphony) at play in a film, including those silenced, and the continually shifting power relations between groups within a society as they interact (dialogism), and by using the notions *Latinidad* and hybridity as a method of challenging and resisting dominant constructions of Latina bodies I have explored the ways in which the terrain of the Latina body is articulated in these films in relation to competing societal, cultural and familial conflicts, focusing in particular on the body as a site of struggle where relationships collide, interact and are negotiated.

The complex and diverse representations of Latinas in these films challenge classic uni-dimensional images and provide dialogic space where important and divisive social issues are confronted and hybrid identities are formed and their relationship to gender, race, and class is renegotiated. In general the Latina bodies offered for consumption in these films are conflicted

and multilayered representations that often resist and sometimes disrupt the status quo.

### **DISRUPTIVE LATINA BODIES**

As a group these films assert that women can exercise control over their bodies and that women's bodies can be vehicles of power and agency. For example, Ana (*Real Women*) is liberated in a feminist sense by accepting her body and its curves although, or perhaps because, it does not reflect Anglocentric ideals of beauty. Of the four films, Karyn Kusama's *Girlfight* presents the most disruptive and confrontationally feminist representation of a Latina body in the character of Diana Guzman. Diana turns the ideal of women as soft, fragile and defenseless on its head and her complicated gender construction challenges our most deeply held notions of how a woman, especially a teenage Latina, should look and act. By creating a Latina who literally constructs her own body and is able, in the end, to make her own decisions, Kusama shows us the fallacy in rigid binary definitions such as male or female.

Diana rejects gendered expectations that are part of the patriarchal traditions represented by her father. She is overly aggressive and seems to be angry at the world but is ready at any moment to protect those she cares about like her brother Tiny and friend Marisol. Though it may seem unlikely a high school girl could be emotionally strong enough to consistently go against

cultural and familial expectations for gendered behavior as some critics of the film have suggested (Tolchin), I argue that for Diana it is a necessary survival response to her lived experience and a sign of her own agency. Diana's behavior is in part a manifestation of her anger about her mother's suicide and a defense mechanism meant to protect her from becoming another victim of domestic violence.

Further complicating gender identity in the film is the way in which, Kusama constructs Tiny as the antithesis of Diana. He loves school; she loathes it. He is a good student; she seems not to care if she gets expelled for fighting. He is always dressed neatly and conservatively in t-shirts or polo shirts and well-fitted jeans or khakis dress pants. Diana wears baggy, boyish clothes. Tiny is polite, does not appear to be physically or emotionally strong, avoids confrontations and is not aggressive. Diana, on the other hand, can be crass, is physically strong and powerful, never backs down from a confrontation and is often the aggressor. These disturbing constructions force us to think about gendered stereotypes—both male and female—and how we expect people to act based on their apparent gender identity.

Kusama invites us to participate vicariously as we watch Diana progress through her training regimen, building confidence and self-esteem as her body is challenged physically and emotionally. In some respects Diana seems to have adopted behaviors, like being hostile and antagonistic, most often associated with masculinity but we do not see her as masculine as much as someone who

wants to be a woman on her own terms. It is her desire to train for the traditionally male sport of boxing and her penchant for violence that most upsets comfortable notions of women as caregivers, nurturers and subservient beings. To Diana boxing is a test of her strength, power and courage—all characteristics she needs in order to survive life outside the ring. Proving herself an admirable opponent in the ring also garners Diana the respect of her coach and some, though not all, of the other boxers. This respect, the challenge of competition and the dedicated hard work required of boxers improves Diana's self-confidence and empowers her both in and outside the ring. The result is a *Latinidad feminista* constructed in and through the body, with a complicated identity that is powerful and intimidating yet contradictory, clearly the most hybrid character in this study based on traditional notions of masculinity and femininity. Diana's hard exterior is intact for most of the film, but in two particular instances we see the toughness give way to reveal a vulnerability Diana tries to keep hidden from everyone, including herself. This vulnerability first appears when telling Adrian about her mother's death and then again at the end of the film when, sitting in her locker room, she experiences the bittersweet emotions of winning the championship match: the joy of winning mixed with sorrow as she realizes she may have lost her boyfriend by defeating him. The Latina body that emerges as a result of both internal and external conflicts Diana experiences is a dialogical hybrid of her protective tough exterior and her well-hidden vulnerability.

One of the most difficult scenes to watch in *Girlfight* is the physical confrontation between Diana and her father. The sight of Diana straddling her father as she chokes the life out of him is disturbing, yet inspiring on a symbolic level. The confidence she has built by harnessing her body's strength provided Diana with the emotional strength needed to face and beat Sandro. Though this is an unsettling moment for some members of the audience, for feminist viewers there is power in seeing women exercising violence especially when women's bodies have generally been the recipients of violence, not the aggressor. Through her body Diana is able to gain confidence and a belief in her own agency. Although observant viewers may be confused or perturbed by Diana's atypical representation they are nonetheless challenged to think in broader terms about gender and how women are valued or devalued.

The body is also a focal point of struggle in *Real Women*. By being situated between the Mexican community where she lives and having grown up and been educated in the U.S., Ana has developed a hybrid identity that is a complex mix of both Mexican and American values that prove to be a source of conflict between her and her mother, conflicts that arise over definitions of beauty and focus on Ana's weight. Through these struggles emerge different and conflicting articulations of the body and what constitutes beauty. This ongoing debate between what mainstream society thinks of as beautiful, a definition internalized and promoted by her mother Carmen, and how Ana sees herself encourages viewers to consider how the body can be impacted by a

more inclusive notion of beauty. We come to understand that although Carmen accepts Anglocentric notions of beauty and coerces her daughters to conform to its ideals, she does so out of the traditional belief that her daughters must be attractive enough to find a husband, so they can raise a family and take their place in the Mexican community, beliefs that are central to Carmen's Mexican identity. The difficulty arises when her daughters, especially Ana who is the youngest, reject Anglocentric views of beauty and instead embrace the liberating notion of beauty as inclusive and complex. In the new world that Ana envisions, beauty is not only physical but includes being intelligent and independent. The film suggests that new generation Latinas no longer want to be ruled by patriarchal traditions and Ana enlists the other women working in the factory to look at and appreciate their individual and collective beauty. Their fuller and curvier bodies—and Cardoso's non-objectifying celebration of them on screen—serve as an illustration of how they reject aspects of a culture that do not appreciate their diverse and complex bodies. All of the women participate in this body-liberating experience except for Carmen who rejects their behavior outright and storms out of the factory. Cardoso constructs this dialogic moment to encourage us to hear the polyphonic Latina voices and to understand that they too are complex and beautiful.

In addition to refusing to accept restrictive Anglocentric definitions of beauty, Ana rejects conventional patriarchal gender expectations by taking control of her own body and exercising independent decision-making about

when to become sexually active, whether or not to lose weight and whether to go to work or attend college. By reclaiming the body *Real Women* not only challenges historical stereotypes but also redefines the Latina body as self-confident and beautiful creating more inclusive, diverse and empowered *Latinidades feministas* than previous U.S. cinematic representations have allowed. Cardoso creates dialogic moments throughout the film that present polyphonic Latina voices. The process of negotiation both deconstructs classic readings of Latinas by illustrating patriarchal restrictions on women and subverts them by providing us with Latinas who articulate broader notions of what it means to be beautiful and have agency.

In contrast to the Latinas in *Real Women*, *Maid in Manhattan* fails to offer representations that openly challenge stereotypical conceptions of the Latina body. The representation of Maria in *Maid in Manhattan* is conflicted and different from Latinas in the other films. Maria is the only Latina portrayed by an actress, Jennifer Lopez, who was famous at the time the film was cast. America Ferrera (Ana) made her film debut in *Real Women*; *Girlfight* was Michelle Rodriguez's (Diana) first film. Although Paz Vega (Flor) was already an actress, *Spanglish* was her first American film. As a popular actress, musician and entrepreneur, Jennifer Lopez has worked hard to become successful and scholars note that she has used her curvaceous figure to market herself (Barrera 2000; Beltran 2002; Lockhart 2007). This research indicates that Lopez's light complexion and ability to speak English without a Spanish accent

uniquely positions her in relation to other Latina actresses (e.g., Salma Hayek, Penelope Cruz) enabling her to portray a variety of ethnicities. Lopez's representation is further complicated because she has successfully marketed herself to both Anglo and Latina/o audiences, yet distinctly different from Anglo actresses. Although Lopez has portrayed characters of other ethnicities, the focus on her curvaceous figure, especially her butt, continue to mark her as Latina—as Other (Barrera 2000; Negrón-Mutaner 1997). While Lopez's curves do function as racial markers and often result in objectified representations, as in *Maid*, she also promotes a glamorous and sexy representation which creates a more inclusive notion of beautiful bodies and challenges Anglo definitions of beauty. In *Maid* the complicated representation of Marisa's body is racially objectified even as it works to construct a more inclusive notion of beauty.

Issues of class work in concert with notions of beauty in the film and are both articulated through the body. When Marisa is dressed like Cinderella her full-figured Latina beauty is presented as glamorous and desirable; a spectacle for our objectifying gaze. When Marisa works as a maid she is invisible; when she plays the princess she is objectified and we become voyeurs as the camera focuses in on her face and her curves. We watch her walk across the raised entry to the fundraiser and our gaze, like Chris', cannot stop watching Cinderisa (Cinderella-Marisa). The construction of Marisa's body as beautiful and desirable can be read as broadening the definition of beauty to include the fuller-bodied woman. And yet, Marisa's representation is troubling because she

is objectified and is only visible and beautiful when she is richly adorned and mistaken for upper class. Marisa the maid is never acknowledged. The conflict between visible/non-visible and beautiful/non-beautiful is never satisfactorily resolved and we are troubled by the representation of Marisa the maid as less important, less beautiful and less intelligent than Marisa the socialite. Especially when framed by the romantic comedy Cinderella narrative, Marisa's representation seems regressive and stereotypical in comparison to the other films in this study.

*Spanglish* director James L. Brooks uses Latina and Anglo bodies in an interesting mix of narrative and visual constructions to critique the notion that there is a single definition of beauty based solely on one's physical attributes. Through the voice-over narration and the storyline of the young Latina Cristina, Brooks criticizes the preoccupation of many American women with excessive exercising and food denial in their often futile struggle to become ever thinner. In this sense, Deborah's body symbolizes U.S. cultural expectations about beauty though they are expressed from a personal perspective. The indignities that Bernice endures at the hands of her mother provide us with an illustration of how preoccupation with being physically thin affects not only Latinas but women of all races and socioeconomic ranks. In her mother's eyes Bernice's value seems linked only to her body type and not to her qualities as a person: Deborah looks at her daughter not as someone with a beautiful and caring heart but as a fat girl. These dialogic moments help us to understand the

damaging effect of such assessments. Deborah's rejection of her own daughter is highlighted as Deborah becomes more interested in Cristina, fawning over her looks and scholastic achievements. Deborah does not see how the attention focused on Cristina affects her own daughter and oversteps the invisible boundary that exists between families. Though Flor also violates family boundaries when she alters clothes for Bernice, we are encouraged to see her interference in a positive light because through this act of kindness Flor symbolically accepts Bernice's body even as her mother does not. This dialogic moment makes us uncomfortable enough to think about what beauty is and how it affects women's confidence and self-image.

## **LATINA BODIES AND THE AMERICAN DREAM**

One of the most pervasive ideologies in the U.S., one reflected and reinforced by media representations, is the belief that if a person works hard enough they will be able to transcend their socioeconomic status to achieve success and the "American Dream." So ingrained into the American psyche is this belief that when people, especially minorities and the poor, are not able to bootstrap themselves up it is automatically assumed that they just haven't tried hard enough. By blaming the individual for failure, society as a whole feels no responsibility for their plight and no urgency to find a solution that might help the poor and working class improve their socioeconomic situation. In one way or another, *Real Women*, *Maid in Manhattan* and, to a lesser

extent, *Spanglish* each take a hard look at the American Dream, what it seems to offer, what it costs to pursue and road blocks that make achieving it difficult. Diana (*Girlfight*) does not even consider whether achieving the American dream is possible: initially she is so consumed with self-preservation that she does not even conceive of opportunities that might help her to reach such a dream. However, as Diana trains and eventually successfully competes in the ring she begins to realize that being in control of her own destiny opens up different possibilities, though there are no guarantees. The other films, however, provide a poignant critique and challenge the notion that hard work alone leads to socioeconomic success and that the intersection of culture, race, gender or class play no part in access to its promises. In addition, there is a tension in most of the Latina protagonists in these films between resisting this dream while simultaneously desiring to be part of it (Figueroa 2003). In most of these films in this study the body plays a significant role in engagement with and attainment of this dream.

In *Real Women* Cardoso presents the American dream as elusive and problematic, complicated by the intersections of culture, race, gender and class. By taking control of her own future Ana has embraced the opportunities and has rejected, at least in part, her parent's traditionally restrictive and prescriptive cultural practices that confine women to the domestic sphere or to gendered-appropriate jobs. The lure of the American dream offers Ana an opportunity to escape such patriarchal parameters by empowering her to make

decisions about her own body as described in the previous section. But Cardoso also helps us to understand through the confrontations between Ana and her mother that making such decisions often come at a price. Ana's father finally gives her permission to attend college in New York City, against Carmen's wishes. This decision has several ramifications. First, it confirms Carmen's lower status in relationship to her husband. Further, it erodes Carmen's power to control the domestic sphere of the home and children, which is traditionally feminine space. At the same time, her father's permission supports Ana's desire to become more independent and self-directed than her mother ever could be. The decision is also costly for Ana whose strained relationship with her mother is tested even more because, although they both seem to want reconciliation, Carmen cannot yet bring herself to accept Ana's independence.

Cardoso uses Estela's garment factory to expose another fallacy in the American dream that promises the opportunity for economic advancement at the same time that corporate America continues to hold small immigrant companies hostage, preventing them from growing and prospering in an effort to maximize their own profits. When Estela has to deal with the Glitz Company she does not do so from a position of power. The Glitz Company controls both purse strings and product deadlines and is unconcerned with whether or not Estela has enough capital to finish the job. By constructing the Glitz representative, Mrs. Glass, as callous and tough, Cardoso frames big business negatively for viewers. We see through the interaction between The Glitz

Company and Estela's factory how the big companies operate in order to maintain a cadre of readily available worker bees to perform lower status tasks like being a maid, sewing in a factory or working as a gardener. Again, Cardoso presents viewers with different kinds of Latinas whose bodies reflect a collection of multiple identities.

Even though *Maid* is primarily a feel-good romantic comedy, Wang uses the visibility or lack of visibility of Marisa to interrogate perceptions of socioeconomic status as well as the opportunities and constraints afforded to individuals based on those assessments. Marisa's body is central to this critique of class and is depicted through her. Whenever Marisa appears as a maid she is invisible to upper class hotel patrons like Chris and Caroline. However, she is seen as beautiful when she wears beautiful clothing. Of any of the Latinas in this study, Marisa's body is the least resistant to more recognizable stereotypes. The function of her body is to attract Chris' attention but she is successful only when she masquerades as someone else: someone affluent. This makes the basis of Marisa's relationship with Chris typical of classic portrayals of Latinas of the past. In the end we are not even sure that Marisa changes class. If she does, it can be explained as a result of her association with Chris the state senator, rather than through her own agency, so we are left disappointed by this classically represented Latina. Wang provides an illustration of the double standards applied to members of different social classes when Marisa is told to stop seeing Chris if she wants to keep her job—

until she becomes a manager when she can make her own decisions. Wang then uses the character of Rachel, a friend of one of the hotel guests, who makes disparaging and racist comments to and about Marisa to challenge the validity of classic Latina stereotypes. When combined, these examples encourage us to consider how different standards of behavior are applied to people of different genders, races and classes and how invisible the working class in general, and Latinas in particular, are to the upper class. However, the classic 'Cinderella' narrative construction of the whole film minimizes these challenges by trivializing Marisa's agency to determine her own future.

In *Spanglish* Flor progresses through a number of changes as she makes the dangerous crossing from Mexico to the United States in an effort to provide a better life for her daughter Cristina and begins interacting with U.S. society. Though she lived and worked within the Mexican community in East Los Angeles for several years, Flor eventually ventures out into Anglo America where she finds a better paying job, learns English and discovers through her relationship with the Claskys what one version of the American dream looks like up close. Cristina has been educated in the U.S. and so, like Ana in *Real Women*, is influenced by both the Mexican culture of her mother and the American culture in which she finds herself immersed. The question for Flor, as for all immigrant families, is to decide how much to assimilate and how much to hold on to one's own culture. Flor eventually learns English but prior to that relies on Cristina and others to translate for her. Flor's reliance on her daughter to translate

symbolizes that Cristina has already begun to adapt to her new culture. Each generation becomes more Americanized and research has shown that most second- and third-generation Latinas/os speak English only (Silva-Corvalán 211-213). Since language is linked to culture this is a significant observation. Once Cristina and Flor move in with the Claskys for the summer the dynamics between the two cultures quickly becomes apparent and both families change dramatically as a result of their interaction. We see that the more Cristina is exposed to Anglo America through the Claskys the more she wants to stay there. Cristina wants to attend the private school because she thinks it will eventually get her into a good college. Cristina, like us, sees what material things the Claskys have because they are affluent. What she does not realize, and what director Brooks makes clear to viewers, is that the Claskys lack the close family relationship that Flor and Cristina have. By the end of the film Flor has discovered her own agency and has successfully renegotiated her identity and has become empowered to sever her relationship with the Claskys and regain control over Cristina's future.

The directors in each of these films have complicated the vision of the American dream in ways that make it impossible for viewers to continue to think of its achievement as simply an issue of working hard enough. Brooks (*Spanglish*) provides a conflicted vision of the American dream where achieving financial success does not equate to success in other aspects of life. Cardoso (*Real Women*) demonstrates the unforeseen complications that occur within

families when Latinas go against patriarchal traditions as well as the inherent struggles faced by marginalized Latina/o businesses. Kusama (*Girlfight*) shows us that there is no American dream without agency, determination and self-confidence, and reveals the multiple obstacles to the cultivation of these qualities for women. Wang (*Maid*) illustrates that being beautiful, intelligent and well-qualified does not necessarily mean that one will be given the opportunity to pursue the American dream. The situations faced by each of the films' Latinas make it clear that race, gender and socioeconomic status do play a significant role in determining what, if any, dreams are accessible.

Overall, issues of race, class and gender are fundamentally renegotiated through the Latina bodies in these films. The conflicts that arise as Latinas confront and challenge patriarchal gender limitations that seek to restrict their agency, notions of what constitutes beauty and the intersection of race and class result in rich, polyphonic representations of Latinas. These representations of Latinas help to move the discussion away from unattainable standards of beauty set forth by models in popular magazines and other media toward healthy bodies—physically and emotionally. These representations also challenge us to reconceptualize our notions of gender and the injustice of the continued privileging of affluent Anglo bodies in our society.

By constructing especially strong female characters, both Kusama and Cardoso challenge us as viewers to acknowledge the restrictions placed on women by traditional practices and the purveyance of classic media

representations to consider how those images affect all women, not just Latinas. They, along with Brooks in *Spanglish*, successfully construct Latinas who create their own agency to negotiate more complex and hybrid representations. The contribution to the discussion of Latina representation by these films is the refusal to be silenced or to remain invisible through the use of narrative and visual imagery that powerfully challenges and subverts dominant discourse. In the end, these films represent, on a broad scale, the stories of generations of immigrants who have come to the United States in the pursuit of a better life and have found their own way to integrate into, and in some cases to challenge, society. These Latina stories are no longer exceptional but can be viewed as quintessentially American stories. Perhaps if future films continue to represent Latinas as complicated and hybrid, mainstream notions about Latinas and their place in society may begin to change. The films in the study offer viewers an early installment of what those new millennium *Latinidades feministas* might look like.

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