

CONTEMPORARY DISCOURSES OF LATINIDAD: THE MARKETING AND
REPRESENTATION OF 'OTHER' LATINAS/OS IN THE U.S. IMAGINATION

By

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To those who feel excluded, out of place, out of time, out of the dialogue, and generally out of touch in an unimaginative world—especially those residing in the ungraspable and ineffable cultural mélange that is Miami

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Abstract of Thesis Presented to the Graduate School
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This study looks at recent examples of literary and visual representations of Latinas/os and traces a shift that has also taken place in the marketing of Latin American subjectivity from a racially diverse yet nationally homogenous group to a seemingly more complex representation of the cultural and racial miscegenation embodied by distinct peoples of Latin American descent. This shift, however, does not necessarily indicate a progressive move, and my aim in exploring this complication of identity is neither a mere exercise in identitarian politics nor an appeal for authentic representation. Rather, this thesis situates Shakira Mebarak's musical performances, Rosie Pérez's filmic career, and Junot Díaz's fiction as examples of cultural texts in a contemporary cultural imaginary of Latinidad that attempt to tease out the specific historical, national, gender, and racial subjectivities of people of Latin American descent.

These three examples are not meant to elaborate a grand theory or an overhaul of Latinidad as a theoretical term; rather, I treat them as case studies on how racially and ethnically mixed Latinas/os might negotiate the specificity of their cultural identity through performance and representation in Latina/o popular culture. Further, though

these creative artists represent distinct national, racial, and ethnic backgrounds as well as distinct arenas of cultural performance and representation, I argue that their subsumption into Latina/o popular culture can be read as more than just another homogenization of Spanish speaking peoples into Latinidad. Each artist emphasizes their respective mixed ethno-racial identities in their work, and each makes an effort to express constituent cultural influences. Yet these emphases and intentions are not necessarily transgressive, and might in fact do nothing more than present a way for reconfiguring Latinidad as a repository for cultural difference geographically situated in the United States but not necessarily part of U.S. culture. In other words, the problems I engage are thus: Do these cultural texts take part in a reverse discourse against the homogenizing penchant of Latinidad? Or, in attempting to articulate their heterogeneity, do they situate Latinidad and all the racial, ethnic, and national groups represented through Latinidad, as something separate from U.S. culture, to be performed for a U.S. audience without being recognized as part of that audience?

CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION: FRAMING LATINIDAD AND THE ENTRANCE OF “OTHER”
LATINAS/OS

The notion of Latinidad can be a slippery, even evasive subject for intellectual inquiry, and one of the central assumptions grounding this my work is that there is no way to pin down Latinidad definitively as a conceptual category. Latinidad is, simply put, a term that speaks for all and no one at once, as Nancy Raquel Mirabal notes: “While Latinidad invokes process, fluidity, and evolution in naming, it is...limited in its capacity to fully define complexity of self and experience—especially in regards to sexuality, gender, desire, and the body (*Technofuturos* 3-4). Though the term is imprecise, this is not in itself good or bad—it is laden with potential (both hegemonic and counterhegemonic) for whoever deploys or configures the term to speak to a unity of “Latin” identities without actually speaking to the specificities of experience. In *The Idea of Latin America*, Walter D. Mignolo observes that hegemonic discourses depend to a great extent on the “locus of enunciation” and the “geo-politics of knowledge” (8-10). That is, one must take into account contingencies such as the historical moment, whether the speaker is in a dominant position or a subaltern, and most importantly, whether or not someone belongs to the position of assigning “the standards of classification” and has the right to classify (Mignolo 8).

Mignolo’s observations are important to bring up here because in exploring a concept as manipulable as Latinidad—that is, a concept that can be used to classify, define, and fix Latinas/os from a particular framework of knowledge as easily as it can be used by Latinas/os to claim political power in day-to-day life—can easily be read as an exercise of symbolic power. Nonetheless, a second assumption in this thesis is that, though I do not try to “pin down” Latinidad, I do try to map out the deployments of

Latinidad in the U.S. cultural imaginary and investigate the configurations and reconfigurations of an easily appropriable idea. This project, to put it briefly, serves as an archive of the ways in which certain Latinas/os crop up in the symbolic realm in the contemporary historical moment of Latinidad. I focus, in particular, on how racially mixed and ethnically mixed Latina/o subjects are shaped into, and sometimes out of, the discursive and representational paradigm of “Latinoness” in the United States. As I have noted, there is no intent to comprehensively define or classify Latinidad from my locus of enunciation, nor am I interested in claiming who does or does not belong to the classificatory system of Latinas/os. Rather, I assemble this archive to show how other Latinas/os—the Latina/o distinctly marked by racial and ethnic mixture—are marketed as they emerge in the U.S. cultural imaginary in film, music, and literature and the extent to which they are mediated in their respective mediums. The archive I put together in this thesis, then, draws from disparate cultural forms and is intended to serve as a prolegomenon on the study of these other Latinas/os.

Subjects of Latin-American origin are always taken to be mixed-race, but the implications of overtly marketing and representing *mestizo* and *mulatto* Latinas/os has unexplored implications for what Latinidad can mean in the U.S. imaginary. The question is: Are we witnessing a transgression and complication of Latinidad, or a re-articulation that further pigeonholes the idea of other Latinas/os in stereotypical constructions? Near the end of this introduction I return to the notion of Latinidad and discuss its historical trajectory as an idea, but first I need to lay some groundwork for understanding the tangled histories of racial and ethnic mixture informing Latina/o subjects in the United States.

As a working definition for this thesis, I use the designation “Latina/o” to refer to people of Latin American descent who are “Americanized” in the United States imaginary. This, of course, is a very broad conceptual definition, but as of yet there has not been a consensus as to what exactly defines a Latina/o.¹ Three high-profile Latinas/os form this archive: Junot Díaz, an Afro-Dominican writer, Shakira Mebarak, a musical artist of Colombian and Lebanese descent, and Rosie Pérez, an Afro-Puerto Rican actress and community activist. Comparative cultural studies and mixed race studies will be the predominant disciplinary approaches that inform my analyses of these three, but, as needed, I will look through different lenses—postcolonial studies, film and media studies, and ethnography, to name a few. In one sense, I am exploring the shared terrain of culture and ideology, “the main difference being,” writes John Storey, “that ideology brings a political dimension to the shared terrain” (6).

It is debatable whether this archive looks at “popular culture” per se, but there is no question that the focus is on three figures who produce cultural artifacts which, along with their own self-identification, complicate the idea of Latinidad by introducing something new to the idea of Latinas/os: a Latina/o as something other than just a darker shade of white, something more complicated. De la Campa observes that “America’s hold on the universal imaginary” as a hemispheric marker and as a powerful

¹ Román de la Campa notes that “the term ‘Latino’ often generates unending and unsatisfying debates” that stray away from “the ontological plurality that comes from deriving an identity from more than one American imaginary, an aspect that has specific importance for all Latino groups, regardless of national, racial, or ethnic origin (35-36). His essay “Latin, Latino, American” in *Technofuturos*(2007) traces the term Latino from the 18th century to “post-melting-pot America, when we see the “cultural complications of racial types, since black, white, and Asian Latinos don’t necessarily define their cultural identity primarily according to racial or even ethnic characteristics” (41). In addition, he points out the continued influx of Latin Americans into the U.S. and raises the most salient complication: “one isn’t altogether sure when a resident Latin American in the United States becomes a Latino, or when a Latino re-energizes his or her Latin American provenance” (45). See also Suzane Oboler’s *Ethnic Labels, Latino Lives*.

modern nation with a natural claim to some unique transcendental dimensions is only disturbed “when the concept is asked to suit a plurality that rests beyond these ritualized references, when America’s fate as a field of differences comes into full view” (31).

In this regard, my focus on these artifacts fleshes out the political dimension inherent in the production and marketing of Latinas/os for consumption while disturbing the United States’ hold on the universal imaginary of the “Americas” (and I would add the normative expectations of Latina/o representation) by exploring the ineluctable relations of power and politics in Latinidad as a discourse that both includes a large and disparate group of national, racial, and ethnic affiliations and, paradoxically and necessarily, excludes whatever does not seem to fit into hegemonic notions of American citizenship, race, sexuality, and gender. In another sense, Partha Chatterjee’s distinction between the problematic and the thematic in social ideology is an apt one for framing this project:

The thematic, in other words, refers to an epistemological as well as ethical system which provides a framework of elements and rules for establishing relations between elements; the problematic, on the other hand, consists of concrete statements about possibilities justified by reference to the thematic. (38)

Chatterjee’s distinction between the problematic and the thematic draws from other prominent postcolonial theorists; namely, Edward Said and Anouar Abdel-Malek, who use the term problematic to delimit a certain time period and certain texts as objects of study that indicate the assertions, historical possibilities, and practical realizations of nationalist discourse.

Looking at the level of the problematic allows one to fix the “specifically historical and specifically political character of nationalist discourse” and trace these back to a thematic that justifies the claims of nationalist political-ideological discourses (41).

Indeed, this study looks at the discourse of Latinidad (taken as a nationalist unity of Latinas/os in the U.S., however improper a designation this might be) by analyzing ideological content at the level of the problematic in order to bear out that thematic which makes possible and justifies certain representations and articulations of Latinas/os. In particular, when a Latina/o figure creates a cultural text that does not accord with structures of justification and epistemological frameworks of contemporary U.S. Latinidad, then we see how the relations of power and politics shape either the artifact, or the marketing and categorization of such an artifact, to better fit the thematic.

With this in mind, it is important to touch on the historical context that produces these other Latina/o subjectivities, and in this regard I attend to how Arab and African diasporas to Spain and Latin America have shaped the racial, cultural, and ideological landscape both of Latin Americans as well as United States Latinas/os. By no means do I intend to be comprehensive. I simply offer a few broad brush strokes, a brief historicization that serves as a backdrop for understanding the Latina/o experience—particularly the other Latina/o, the ethnically and racially mixed product of a long and vexed history of miscegenation, diaspora, and neocolonialism.

The historical presence of Arabs and Africans in Latin America has had a major effect on the racial and ethnic ideologies informing the subject-positions of Latin Americans, which in turn has complicated what has already been an inadequate understanding of a United States Latina/o identity. I am not interested in simply detailing difference, but in showing how difference is ideologically disarticulated and re-articulated in the United States vis-à-vis the marketing and representation of Latinas/os as cultural artifacts. In a broad sense, Arabs have been a part of Latin American history

since the first Spaniards arrived and had a profound influence on the geocultural imagination of Latin America. Carol Fadda-Conrey writes that

the Muslim presence in Spain spans over nine centuries, beginning in 711 with the Muslim invasion of the Iberian Peninsula. However, with the conquest of Granada by the Christians in 1492, the Moors faced extreme persecution and were forced to convert to Christianity if they wished to remain in Spain. Referred to as Moriscos, meaning “little Moor,” which pertains to their Arab or Berber ancestry, this minority for the most part succumbed to the forced Christian conversions imposed by Spanish Inquisition..., adopting new Christian names and abandoning their Arabic language and Muslim religion. (20)

In spite of what the Spanish in 1492 called the *Reconquista*, nine centuries of “Moorish” presence clearly had a large influence on Spanish culture and certainly entailed a great deal of miscegenation. Thus, Spaniards were often perceived as “Moorish” Europeans in Latin America. Fadda-Conrey later claims that there is some evidence that Moriscos were able to migrate to the Americas during the Spanish Conquest of the New World, but there was certainly a great deal of anti-Arab (often conflated with anti-Muslim and anti-Moorish) sentiment in the New World as well, during and after the conquest.

Restrictions on Arab emigrants were in place until 1900, following the expulsion of Moriscos from Spain in 1607, in order to maintain religious orthodoxy and *limpieza de sangre* (purity of blood) of Spanish subjects. Yet especially in the nineteenth century, an Orientalism—both breathlessly “exotic” and deeply negative—took solid hold in many of Latin America’s nationalist projects. A famous example of the Orientalist nature of nineteenth century nationalist projects can be found in Domingo Sarmiento’s well-known *Facundo*, written in 1845 while Sarmiento, an Argentine, was in exile in Chile (he would eventually return to Argentina and serve as president from 1868 to 1874). In *Facundo*,

he decries the 'moorish' influence of Spain and argues for civilizing projects that cite France and Britain as exemplars of civilization.²

After restrictions on Arab immigration were lifted in the late 19th and early 20th century, the first wave of Lebanese immigrants began to arrive, mostly in Argentina and Brazil, but the anti-Moorish conflation and resentment did not simply disappear. Many of the Arab immigrants during this initial wave were Christians fleeing from the oppression of Ottoman rulers:

Between 1870 and 1947, around 80,000 Syrian-Lebanese arrived in Brazil, with the numbers of Middle-Eastern settlers being even higher in Argentina. These immigrants were referred to alternately as Syro-Lebanese or Turks because up till the end of World War I, Syria and Lebanon fell under the mandate of the Ottoman Empire. Even after the defeat of the Ottomans and the establishment of Lebanon and Syria as separate states, immigrants arriving in Latin America from these regions were referred to as 'turcos' (Fadda-Conrey 24).

Primary sources, notes Darcy Zabel in a quote from Theresa Alfaro Velcamp, are still sparse on Middle Eastern immigration to Latin America, and interest in the subject has only recently surfaced (4).

For this project, I simply want to establish the Arab presence during the Spanish Conquest, its effects on Latin American post-independence nationalist projects in the 19th century, and the physical presence of Arabs during the diasporas from the Middle East of the late 19th and early 20th century. To this day, there are large numbers of Arabs and Arab-descendant peoples throughout Latin America. As Fadda-Conrey observes: "The transnational movements of Arab populations across the globe have been going on for centuries, deeply affecting the communal and individual Arab

² Christina Civantos recent work on Argentine Orientalism and Anti-Arab sentiment during the late 19th and early 20th century has been instructive here. Her book, *Between Argentines and Arabs: Argentine Orientalism, Arab Immigrants, and the Writing of Identity*, is a much needed beginning to the study of Arab presence in Latin America.

character, and resulting in a medley of national affiliations and complex, frequently hyphenated identities” (19). My thesis adds a twist to Fadda-Conrey’s remarks on the transnational movement of Arab populations by looking at how those mixed lineages which have resulted from the Arab diaspora to Latin America have in turn affected the ways in which the Latina/o ethos is imagined in a United States entertainment figure such as Shakira.

African slave trade, meanwhile, plays a central role in Latin American history, especially in the Caribbean. Cuba, for instance, relied heavily on African slave trade to maintain “the most successful sugar plantation economy in the Western Hemisphere” (Helg 124), even long after Haitian revolution 1804. This heavy reliance meant that in the nineteenth century “enslaved and free people of African descent comprised between 33 and 58% of the [Cuba’s] population” (Helg 124). Helg notes throughout her article “To Be Black and to Be Cuban” the “myth” of racial equality in Cuba founded on propaganda (especially Jose Martí’s writings) which presented Afro-Cuban overrepresentation in war as fraternity between whites and blacks in the army, and attributed the marginalization of blacks to lack of merit and innate inferiority rather than a result of slave exploitation—any attempt to assert otherwise was taken as a “racist threat to national unity” (130).

Unlike Arabs in the Americas, the African slave trade to the Americas has been covered extensively (though work continues to be done), but both diasporic groups have had an immeasurable impact on racial and cultural attitudes in the New World. Africans, of course, were also a part of the racial and cultural hodgepodge of the Iberian Peninsula, notes Darién Davis in *Beyond Slavery: The Multilayered Legacy of Africans*

in Latin America and the Caribbean: “Africans contributed to the diversity of Iberian cities such as Seville and Lisbon, both of which were already inhabited by Jews, Arabs, and Christians. Small communities of Afro-Iberians thus emerged” (4). Later, Davis writes that

the initial conquest relied upon Africans residing on the peninsula to supplement the limited number of Europeans in their effort to subdue the native population of the New World to the new economic and political order. The Spanish respected and rewarded their contributions. Thus, Juan Valiente, a fugitive slave who fought along the conquistadors in Chile, received an encomienda in the 1550s for his bravery...Miguel León Portilla, a prominent Mexican historian, reports that Aztecs referred to the Afro-Iberians who arrived with the Spaniards to Mexico as “soiled gods.” (4)

However, many Spaniards and Portuguese colonists soon realized that native populations would not be efficient laborers (and likely wiped out most of the aboriginal inhabitants), and soon began to rely on African slavery.

As I have noted, the nationalist rhetoric of 19th century post-independence Latin American nations often emphasized purity of blood as a key element of moving away from barbarism and towards civilization. Some intellectuals—José Martí most notably—“took nationalist rhetoric one step further by negating racial difference and conflict so as to focus on what united blacks, whites, and mulattoes,” but this was often the exception rather than the rule (*Beyond Slavery* 10). It was not until the 1920s when Latin American nationalist writers began to celebrate racial mixture as part of national identity—most notably, Mexican philosopher and minister of education José Vasconcelos in his 1924 work *La Raza Cósmica* (*The Cosmic Race*). To this day, however, a major problem with the valorization of mestizaje in the 20th century is that extant racism and class disparities that intersect with race were not recognized as systemic. Rather, the invocation of *mestizaje* allowed one to claim a transcendence of

race—where “problem” races would disappear into the “lighter” *mestizo* “race,” and we thus see the emergence of racism seemingly without racists.

The point, quite simply, is to show that the Arab and African diaspora are pivotal to the history of Latin America, and this historical context is important to keep in mind when discussing the ideological content of contemporary notions of *Latinidad* in the United States. The past half century of flows and counterflows, permanent diasporas, and people crossing borders and borders crossing people has created a complex network of Latina/o communities that spans an immense spectrum of national, ethnic, and racial affiliations. The past two decades have marked the emergence of an imaging of these distinctly other Latinas/os, the racially and ethnically ambiguous Latinas/os, as part of the idea of *Latinidad*, though these images are mediated by marketing strategies, performance, and representational practices. This emergence is, in a sense, more reflective of the material realities of Latina/o communities, but their inclusion remains problematic if not attended to with a scrutinizing eye.

A number of complications arise when looking at cultural texts by people of Latin American descent who identify as racially and ethnically mixed and are expressly interested in representing their racially and culturally mixed origins in the United States: What are the parameters for defining such texts as Latina/o? Is the artist a Latina/o by virtue of performing for a U.S. audience of Latin American descent? When are cultural expressions of *Latinidad* strategically provisional (and for whom do these expressions claim a provisional totalization?), suggestive of cultural hybridity (and does this hybrid tension and mutual influence hold in the U.S. marketplace?), or subsumed by a discourse of multi-cultural inclusion (and what does this inclusion require its participants

to forego?). I address these kinds of complications in an attempt to understand the multiple, interrelated and interpenetrating expressions of being a mixed-race Latina/o in a paradigm of Latinidad that tries to fix and make comprehensible the racially and ethnically ambiguous other.

Thus, this work explores the relationship between a dominant U.S. (that is, white, patriarchal, and capitalist) hegemony and its expressions of Latin American/Latino/a subjectivity, how that relationship shapes and regulates the idea of United States Latinos/as, and the complications multi-racial/multi-ethnic creative artists of Latin American descent must negotiate in self-identifying and (re)presenting a complex and mixed identity.³ The relative ubiquity of racial mixture in Latin America has made a multi-ethnic and multi-racial population quite common.⁴ More than simply cataloguing these discrete occurrences, I argue that they are part of a system of relations that emphasizes cultural difference and makes this difference palpable as a commoditized image for U.S. cultural consumption. In the end, this system of relations reinforces an asymmetrical and essentialist conception of other cultures.

I return here to the historical trajectory of Latinidad. In its most recent iterations it has become an ethno-racial marker for identity that homogenizes the wide array of Latin American-origin nationalities and cultures. It can be mobilized simultaneously as a politically efficacious display of the Latina/o presence as the “largest minority” and, in a rhetorical counter-maneuver, can be used to signify the overwhelming threat of

³ Much of my own musings on culture are indebted to work by bell hooks, Renato Rosaldo, Juan Flores, Stuart Hall and Raymond Williams.

⁴ It is important to note that the proclivity for racial mixture was not necessarily a utopian sentiment. “Whitening” the race was often still the ultimate goal, and issues of class certainly played a factor in many unions.

immigrants from the South. The history of this notion does not begin with the United States, of course. It has undergone conceptual permutations during its journey from Southern Europe to the Americas. In Southern Europe, it was initially deployed as a transnational identity unifying groups who considered themselves “direct heirs of the Roman Empire, with a ‘Latin’ ethos embedded in the Latin language and its vernacular offspring (French, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese)” (Mignolo 72). In Latin America, this Latin ethos begins to take on an ethno-racial dimension, and in the United States we see Latino becomes the fifth side of the ethno-racial pentagon: African-American, Asian-American, European-American, Native-American and Latino (corresponding to black, yellow, white, red, and brown). This shifting shows at least two things: the conceptual malleability of *Latinidad* as a multivalent signifier used to name peoples loosely connected by their ‘Latin’ origins and, in turn, its use as an exclusionary United States discourse naming precisely who fits the paradigm.

To put it more concretely, regardless of how one theorizes and describes these expressions of cultural difference in the U.S. today, the focus is always on how these differences are shaped into acceptable forms of U.S. Latina/o culture. What I show, however, is how this homogenization is not consistent across different racial and ethnic groups embodied by multi-racial and ethnically ambiguous figures, and I use these three specific examples of how recent expressions of Latina/o “popular” culture—or at the very least “prominent” culture, in so far as all three of these figures are well-known and successful—in the United States show the seams of Latin American racial and ethnic fusion. In a sense, Latin American history speaks through these three figures and the

work they produce. One can tease out how these histories are mediated, and at times transformed, for a U.S. audience.

Further, I argue that recent cultural production can be and often is used to reinforce essentialist structures of feeling encompassed by identifying with Latinidad, and, in so doing, mimic the nationalist projects of nineteenth century Latin America and twentieth century Latino groups (the cultural nationalist movements by Puerto Ricans and Chicanos in the 1970's come to mind). Latinos often become part of a nation within a nation, an "imagined community," to borrow Benedict Anderson's phrase. Pérez, Díaz, and Shakira do not all necessarily follow any uniform nationalist project with regard to the U.S. or a nation of Latinidad, but there is a social dynamic, notes Mary Beltrán, between "the evolution of Latina/o and national identities in the American imagination (or "U.S." eyes)" (3).

What makes these three particularly pivotal is that, in their respective industries, they have achieved a certain level of fame or "stardom" during a time when mixed-race and ethnic ambiguity was not standard. For Pérez, it is the late 1980s and early 1990s when she breaks into "Hollywood Latinidad," as Beltrán terms it. For Shakira, at the turn of the 21st century when she "becomes Latina" in her crossover from the Latin American market to the U.S. market after a distinct 1990s "Latin Boom" in the music industry. Finally, Díaz enters the literary scene in the late 1990s with his distinctly Afro-Latino voice, writing in a style inflected by Dominicanisms and African-American slang and a poignant understanding of the racial politics in the U.S. with his collection of short stories, *Drown*. It is in 2007, though, with the release of *The Brief Wondrous Life of*

Oscar Wao where we begin to see how his stardom is actually bifurcated according to Latino-black binary in the marketing of his work.

To outline the work very roughly, the following chapter will center on Pérez's recent documentary, *¡Yo Soy Boricua, Pa'Que Tu Lo Sepas!* (2006), as well as her career as an actress in the U.S. film industry. Throughout her career Pérez has been cast as the angry, "colored" girlfriend to white male counterparts. There are at times redeeming qualities to the characters she plays, but these qualities rarely surface on the screen. I argue that it is precisely because Pérez is not so easily cast as a white Latina that she ends up being type-casted as an angry "colored" Latina. To put it more directly, Pérez's "color" often relegates her to the role of an angry, colored woman sapped of any complexity, though, interestingly enough, her blackness is actually what allows her entry in Hollywood film as a "colored" Latina, as I show in Chapter 2. Meanwhile, Pérez's documentary demonstrates a complexity to her cultural self-identification that often does not come through in her scripted roles in Hollywood films, and I would suggest that this lack of complexity is not a coincidence. Nonetheless, though the documentary does bring to light the tragic history between the U.S. and Puerto Rico, the discussion of racial and cultural identity remains reductive and positional—that is, she embraces a particular history and lineage rather than the complexity of her mixed-race background.

In Chapter 3, I turn my attention to Shakira and how her ethnic ambiguity has become part of a U.S. nationalist discourse. Her own identification with an Arab heritage and a Colombian national identity is shaped to fit a racially and ethnically ambiguous image of *Latinidad* when she crosses over from a Colombian rockera to a U.S. Latina

pop star. This image allows her to express to be Arabic and Latina in ways that uphold a multicultural and exceptionalist image of U.S. nationalism.

Finally, I end my archive with a look at Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, which narrates a transnational and racially aware history of Dominicans and Dominican Americans in diaspora. Literary fiction offers some clear advantages to popular culture in the narration and imagining of complex subjects like Afro-Dominicans and other mixed-race Latinas/os, but there is still the problem of how Díaz's work is categorized as both African-American and Latino. *The Brief Wondrous Life* is remarkable for historicizing the experience and affect of Afro-Dominicans in the U.S. and black Dominicans on the island during the Trujillo regime, but the way Díaz as a mixed-race Latino author gets labeled is telling of the difficulties of labeling Afro-Latinos/as.

I should note here that there are a great deal of complications with regard to any discussion of "race," and I follow the same tracks as other scholars in my understanding of notions of "whiteness" and "blackness" as socially constructed categories rather than biological constructs. I will at times discuss physical features or racialized characteristics during my analysis as they pertain to the social construction of a particular figures race or ethnicity (Rosie Pérez as "black" or "Latina," for instance) in order to elucidate the ways in which an ambiguous otherness is mobilized for particular purposes.

Put simply, the label Latina/o has become the catch-all repository for signifiers of cultural identity that are shaped by both the material history of Latin American development, the complex and intertwined relationship between the U.S. and Latin

America, and the foundational myths by which specific countries in Latin America have defined themselves as nations. Part of what this thesis does, then, is look at how specific writers and performers of Latin American descent self-identify in work they produce for audiences in the United States. I am interested in the embodiment, enactment, and writing of distinct forms of *mestizaje*⁵ as a process of racial mixture and cultural syncretism and how mixed-race Latinas/os exemplify what I consider the back routes of *Latinidad*, whereby distinctly Arab and African histories and heritage are subsumed and commodified in diluted measures as part of Latina/o identity in the United States' cultural imaginary.

Of course, openly self-identifying as being racially and ethnically mixed does not necessarily suggest any resistance to notions of a homogenous Latino community, and, in turn, the final product is not necessarily congruent with the creative artist's intentions. Thus, I look at how the final product reifies, subverts, or manipulates stereotypical cultural representations. Hence the other part of my thesis is to flesh out the latent racial and cultural politics that come through in Shakira's musical production, Pérez's casting in Hollywood films and self-directed documentary, and Díaz's fiction. Finally, this thesis will argue for a more nuanced understanding of the historical and racial exigencies of Latina/o cultural production in the United States, which is a result of political obfuscation and regional homogenization caused by the designation of a Latino community, historical amnesia with regard to how Latinos come to live here (and, in some cases,

⁵ Miscegenation does not quite capture the sense of racial and cultural syncretism being invoked here. The concept of *mestizaje* articulated by Gloria Anzaldúa would be a more appropriate: "[A] racial, ideological, cultural and biological cross-pollinization, an "alien" consciousness" (Anzaldúa 99). I appropriate this term from its specific use for "*una conciencia de mujer*" and also use it for racial mixtures outside of the specific instance of Anglo-Indian relations Anzaldúa alludes to. Thus, in this thesis *mestizaje* will speak to the "constant state of nepantlism" any person of mixed racial and cultural identities faces.

historical amnesia about the Latinos who have been here long before U.S. expansion), and the diverse attitudes toward racial miscegenation and mestizaje throughout the hemisphere.

The genres and sites of cultural production explored in this essay are diffuse, and the histories are complex. These different sites of cultural production and routes of cultural migration are nonetheless necessary problematic for understanding whether we are witnessing a Latinization of U.S. culture, an Anglicization of Latinos, or, as I see it, the function of Latinidad as a receptacle for cultural differences separate from a U.S. cultural identity. All three of the figures I explore here are unique because their racially and ethnically ambiguous identities do not get swept aside in their separate fields of production. Rather, they negotiate their identities as multi-racial Latinas to achieve different ends in their respective mediums, and I choose these three mediums for their particularly powerful influence in the ideological shaping of culture. Ultimately, these three introduce otherness to the notion of Latinidad in the U.S. film, music, and literary arenas, and have the potential to affect the imagining of Latinas/os in U.S. culture. As Beltrán writes, “A greater understanding of the construction and marketing of stars from nondominant ethnic and racial groups, such as Latina/os within the context of the United States, . . . can reveal a great deal about the prevailing racial attitudes and social relations of a time and place” (6).

CHAPTER 2:

“FROM HOMELESS TO HOLLYWOOD? THEY DO THAT TO US COLORED FOLKS”

Chon Noriega offers a rather provocative analogy in his review of *Mixed Race Hollywood*, an edited collection of essays by Mary Beltrán and Camilla Fojas on the history and cultural significance of mixed race representation in cinema: “Mixed Race Hollywood does to race what queer has done to sexuality—it *challenges binary thinking and the normative categories it creates*” (emphasis mine). This analogy serves as an apt starting point for my own discussion and begs the more fundamental question: Does the study of mixed race do to race what the study of queer has done to sexuality? More importantly, does being mixed race—or being queer, for that matter—necessarily make one transgressive? I am not suggesting that Noriega is making this claim. It seems obvious enough that his contention is that mixed race studies and queer studies, rather than mixed race and queer individuals, have challenged binary thinking. What I do suggest, however, is that this straight-across analogy can be misconstrued in such a way as to confer on queerness and being mixed race a transcendent quality outside of social dynamics and power relations. The idea that queerness “challenges binary thinking and the normative categories it creates” implies an inherent transgressiveness embodied in queer thought and performance, which then gets grafted onto mixed-race persons when straight-across analogies are made. This notion of an inherent transgressiveness is one I try to dispel in favor of a more vigilant and nuanced understanding of mixed-race Latinas/os in the United States as a group that does not fit neatly in the discourse of *Latinidad*.

In this chapter, then, I want to start my archive of these other Latinas/os with Rosie Pérez. As a case study, she is relevant to this project because she demonstrates the

ways in which a mixed-race Latina look can be used to claim provisional identities in order to gain entry into major Hollywood films. Pérez is distinct from other Latina actresses in that she can actually pass for black as well as Latina due to her physiognomy, skin color and mannerisms (she does in fact call herself “colored,” which I will return to later in this chapter). My contention is that her ability to pass as a woman of color and as a Latina allows her to be one of the first Latinas to star as a Latina in Hollywood film because she can play opposite both white and black male leads without entirely violating any notions of racial mixture (this appears to set the precedent for later actresses, particularly Jennifer Lopez in movies like *Money Train*). That is to say, Pérez is black enough to have a black partner without being too black to have a white partner. But the racial politics are more complicated than this, since class certainly determines with whom Pérez can have a successful relationship.

In fact, Pérez’s “look” might racialize her, but it is her signature accent as a Nuyorican from Brooklyn, an accent she appears to have no interest in “losing,” which identifies her regionally and racially, as well as indicating her class origin. Further, Pérez often serves as a connection between white and black protagonists. In addition, Pérez has directed her own documentary, starring herself, on Puerto Rico, Nuyoricans, and the experience of being “Boricua.” What I look to make clear is how mixed-race Latinas/os, rather than breaking the mold, can be made to fit the mold by scraping off the signs of miscegenation. In the case of Pérez, this could be read as a significant gain for Latinas/os and an early precursor to the “Latin Boom” of the 1990s in the entertainment industry, but it also marks the beginning of disclaiming and effacing “other” Latinas/os.

Angharad Valdivia has noted, quite eloquently, that “to understand the phenomenon of Rosie Pérez, we must examine the theoretical traditions whose disparate roots meet in Rosie’s body, as it were” (394). Valdivia further elaborates:

To begin with, from within a traditional, mainstream feminist scholarship we get the notion of symbolic annihilation (Tuchman, Daniels, and Benet 1978) whose two components are that women and minorities are underrepresented in media content, and when represented, they are marginalized, trivialized, or victimized. Though this finding was originally applied to white, middle-class women, from a women of color perspective we gain additional insight. First, findings suggest that women of color are less represented than white women—that is, they appear in a less proportionate manner. Second, when people of color appear, they are generally men. Furthermore, we find that when women of color appear they are more likely to be African American, with Latina, Native American, and Asian women appearing less often than the hegemonically dominant women of color group. (394 emphasis mine)

Valdivia’s remarks clearly suggest that in the entertainment industry, a hierarchy of representation exists according to which women and minorities are underrepresented, but she complicates this symbolic annihilation by adding that African American women are more likely to appear than other women of color. This observation can help shed light on how it is that Pérez can actually land a role in Hollywood when there are a number of obstacles in against Latinas during that time. Among these obstacles, enumerated by Valdivia, are the trend of casting white brunettes to play Latinas (Marisa Tomei and Natalie Wood, for instance) and the “peculiar tendency to cast a particular type of actress”—Brazilians (395). Thus, during that time in which Pérez is entering the Hollywood scene, there are a limited number of roles for Latinas.

What is significant in Valdivia’s article, though, is that she shortly thereafter adds the crucial note that the images of Latinas often overlap and, since the mid-20th

century, edge out African American females as the maid and the welfare mother (395).¹ As noted above, there is a hierarchy of representation according to which African American females are more visible in Hollywood films than Latinas, but their shared stereotypical roles and the possibility of an Afro looking Latina can help “ease in” the likes of a Rosie Pérez, who often plays the “spitfire” character. It is also possible to read her relative success as an effect of her racial ambiguity and liminality as a go-between being used to cast her opposite either black or white male characters in a way that does not violate any black-white binary interracial love interests.²

To put Pérez’s career in perspective very briefly, one can see her ascendance from the 1980s as a dancer and choreographer in “Soul Train” to “Hollywood stardom” in 1989 when she landed her first role in Spike Lee’s *Do The Right Thing* as Mookie’s girlfriend (Mookie is played by Spike Lee and is also the father of their child in the film). During the early 1990s she stars in a handful of major films as the love interest for a number of prominent actors—Wesley Snipes and Woody Harrelson in *White Men Can’t Jump* (1992), Jeff Bridges in *Fearless* (1993) and Nicholas Cage in *It Could Happen to You* (1994), to name a few. This is not intended to be a comprehensive or encyclopedic look at Pérez’s career, but a reading of Pérez’s position in specific films—namely, *Do the Right Thing* and *White Men Can’t Jump*—and her self-positioning in a documentary

¹ Again, even these limited roles are not actually plays by “Latinas” so much as by Anglo women in brown face or, oddly enough, by Brazilians (Carmen Miranda comes to mind). This change from African American women to Latina women as the maid character indicates a historical, socioeconomic and cultural change.

² This is a point Valdivia does not explore in her article. Though she does bring tactful consideration to the subject of underrepresentation and the burden of representation for Latinas and African Americans in Hollywood film, her analysis never investigates the possibility that Pérez could actually stand in for n/either.

she directed and performed in on Puerto Rico. These films demonstrate the malleability of Pérez's look in a multiculturalist context.

The opening credit sequence to *Do the Right Thing* is probably the most illustrative of Pérez's ability to occupy more than one subject position as a Latina of color: she dances, or to put it more precisely, writhes to the rhythm of Public Enemy's "Fight the Power" for about the first four minutes while the setting, lighting and her wardrobe change periodically. Her expression is for the most part defiant, and her movements exhibit a powerful sexual animus. In addition, the different outfits she wears throughout this sequence are highly sexualized as well. She is dressed as a boxer with midriff showing, dressed in a leotard with a leather jacket, and in tight red dress with a thick black belt at different times throughout this sequence. At times she is shadow boxing, at other times she is gyrating and gesticulating wildly. Throughout, however, she maintains an expression that fluctuates between grimace and glare, her nostrils are flared and her lips pursed; she is both animalistic and sexualized. Pérez is depicted in the familiar tropes of representing women of color here.

What interests me about this opening is that the song playing while Pérez's character, Tina, dances: "Fight the Power" is the same song Radio Raheem plays on his boombox throughout the film, and it is the song that really sparks the major conflict in the neighborhood at Sal's pizzeria. It is a song explicitly about black pride in the vein of black cultural nationalism, and linking Pérez to this song rather than one of the many African American actors in the film—for instance, Mookie's sister—suggests something about her ability to stand in as a black woman. In a film where racial tensions are high, Pérez bridges the racialized and cultural divide between the blacks and Puerto Ricans

in this scene because she is aligned with this particular song and because she is stereotyped in the same way as an oversexualized and animalistic woman. This extends beyond the opening credits, of course. Her performance throughout the film is a stream of obscenity riddled lines, with her (and Mookie's) son always in her arm or by her side. She could easily pass for a number of stereotypes commonly associated with black women, with the only exception being her occasional code switching to Spanish.

In the larger context of this chapter and the thesis as a whole, Pérez is able to attain this particular role to play a Latina because she is able to bridge the divide between blacks and Latinas/os as an Afro-Latina. She transgresses the color divide by having a relationship and a child with Mookie and she is able to perform according to the same stereotypes of black women, with the qualifier of being a black Latina.

Where Rosie is able to gain the rare role as a Latina in a Hollywood film because of her ability to bridge Puerto Ricans and blacks in *Do the Right Thing*, she is also able to serve as a connection between the black and white binary in *White Men Can't Jump*, a film one need not look into too deeply for an array of racial stereotypes. Billy Hoyle, played by Woody Harrelson, and Sidney Deane, played by Wesley Snipes, forge a tumultuous partnership as hustlers on the basketball court in L.A. Much of the flick plays on a laundry list of essentialist notions: White men can't jump; black men would rather look pretty and lose where as white men would rather look ugly and win; white men can't 'hear' Jimi Hendrix; and so on (*White Men Can't Jump*).

Pérez plays the part of Gloria Clemente, Billy Hoyle's girlfriend obsessed with preparing for her destiny: to be on "Jeopardy." Similar to *Do the Right Thing*, Pérez's character is in relationship with a lower class male, though this time it is a white male

from Louisiana. And, once again, she performs in the same liminal space as the bridge between black and white, as an Afro-Latina who is not quite either. Through most of the film she is at a motel, waiting for Billy to come home after hustling and, often enough, losing the money he has hustled.

However, when Billy is conned by Sidney, who has been playing with Billy while duplicitously scheming against him, Gloria decides to take action into her own hands and go directly to Sidney's apartment in Crenshaw. Billy tags along, urging Gloria to change her mind and reminding her that Crenshaw is a predominantly black area. Gloria is unfazed, and she makes her way into Sidney's home. There, she talks to Sidney's wife, Rhonda, and demands the money back, but Rhonda wife is only willing to concede that a deal can be worked out where Billy and Sidney can once again be partners in hustling.

Two things allow Gloria to be unperturbed by the idea of storming into an predominantly African American neighborhood: she is able to serve as a go-between race because she is a black Puerto Rican, and she commands a certain degree of authority in this setting because of how her voice racializes her and indicates certain class origins. In other words, she not only looks black but her vernacular can be characterized as a high-pitched "ghetto" Brooklyn slang. In fact, when Rhonda and Gloria come to an agreement on how Billy can earn his money back without Sidney having to give back any money, they enter the living room where all the men Sidney, Billy, and Sidney's friends are absorbed by the basketball game on TV. One of Sidney's friends tells Sidney to tell Rhonda and Gloria to move, and Sidney replies: "They're black women. You think I'm crazy" (*White Men Can't Jump*)?

These two films are a small sample, but they demonstrate Pérez's ability to stand at the center of Latina, black and white, and this position proved advantageous in her career as an actress. The roles Pérez takes on could not be played by a Marisa Tomei or another actress performing brown-face. These roles required an Afro-Latina. Of course, this is not necessarily a transgressive move. Pérez is still performing characters bound to classic Hollywood stereotypes of minorities, and her characters are never able to move up in class and have a successful relationship.³ She is often part of an urban setting, in L.A. or New York, and in relationships with men who have no social mobility and no desire to do well—in fact, Pérez is often little more than an angry sex object, despite her ability to fit into different ethnic settings and connect characters across racial borders.

Valdivia's own readings of Pérez show the ways in which

Rosie functions as a bridge (Moraga and Anzaldúa 1983) between white and African American people (*Do the Right Thing*); as a facilitator in the eventual happiness of white men with white women (*It Could Happen to You*, *Untamed Heart*, and *Fearless*); or as a link between two male buddies (*White Men*). (401)

In her "textual musings" and "audience analyses" of the encoding/decoding framework, Valdivia places a lot of emphasis on the Latina qualities of Pérez. Rosie is always encoded according to the U.S. mainstream stereotype of the spitfire and in a supporting role (398). What I show is how a lot of Valdivia's analysis misses precisely what allows

³ Not to say that it is impossible, but when Pérez wins in "Jeopardy" her relationship with the character Billy fails. In *Fearless*, she and the character played by Jeff Bridges have a very close extra-marital relationship following the plane crash they survived (though it is unclear that they did anything more than kiss), but Pérez ends up leaving her husband while Bridges, who appears to be a well-off architect, finally "recovers" his ability to live in the world and stays with his wife. It is important to note that Pérez does not leave her husband for Bridges, but Bridges enables her to realize her husband, played by Benicio del Toro, is a terrible person. Pérez, meanwhile, realizes she is in the way of Bridges' "recovery" so long as she allows him to be her "guardian angel."

Pérez to function as a bridge; what allows Pérez's body to be the site where working-class women and women of color collapse into a simultaneously stereotypical and transgressive role. One might say that Pérez disidentifies, to use José Esteban Muñoz's term from his 1999 text *Disidentifications*. Though Valdivia offers a thorough analysis of Pérez as she is encoded, as she negotiates her own image (for instance, in *Fearless* her role was initially slated for a white actress, and Rosie made sure to add Café Bustelo and a Catholic shrine to the home of her character), and how audiences and reviewers decode Pérez, the politics and burden of representing for the underrepresented is further complicated by Pérez's blackness. Rather than attribute any special designation to Pérez for being the Latina actress who "comes to the fore just as Latinas/Latinos are beginning to be acknowledged as the rising minority, not in terms of power, of course, but in terms of sheer numbers and as a proportion of the U.S. population and, consequently, as a set of pressing social problems" (Valdivia 405), I would argue that Pérez is the bridge for a representational shift from the Marisa Tomeis in the world to Latina vis-à-vis her Afro looking and sounding Latinidad. Valdivia's own analyses of how one can read Pérez from a negotiated, preferred hegemonic, or oppositional standpoint as well as the ways Pérez has some degree of agency in taking these roles for women of color and making them more "Latina" serves as starting point, but one has to recognize the extent to which Pérez's miscegenated look might further "thicken, complicate, and deconstruct her own stereotypical representation" (406).

A final film I would like to address is Rosie's documentary, *¡Yo Soy Boricua, Pa'que Tu Lo Sepas!*, which offers a rare opportunity to read further the politics of representation beyond the "Hollywood machinery" (Valdivia 405). Pérez has been an

engaged community activist in New York and Puerto Rico (Vieques) over the past decade, and her documentary is an attempt to retrace her roots as a Nuyorican—as a “Boricua.” She explores the cultural richness and influence of Nuyoricans by documenting the “Puerto Rican Day Parade” and the Nuyorican Poets Cafe while recapping the history of U.S. imperialism and neocolonialism in Puerto Rico, which in large part stimulated the Puerto Rican diaspora to New York. For Pérez, it is also a deeply personal reflection on her own identity and upbringing, and this reflection is a rare glimpse at how a Latina constructs her on-screen image as both actress and director in her own community. It is worth emphasizing that this is in fact a construction rather than a privy glimpse at some true depiction of Pérez, but this construction clues us into how Pérez wants to be seen rather than how she is cast in films.

Interestingly, Pérez often privileges her Taíno roots in her discussions of Boricua pride, and the documentary as a whole is less a historicization of Puerto Rico than it is celebratory tribute to Pedro Albizu Campos, the Taíno lineage and culture shared by all Boricuas (at least that is Pérez’s contention), and the Young Lords. One can hardly fault Pérez for rendering a reductive re-telling of history, but Pérez tells a history of Puerto Rico that privileges the Taíno and Spanish cultural influence over the African. In a scene with her cousin Sixto Ramos and sister Carmen Serrano, she notes the Taíno features they share, while later on she is at the Nuyorican Poets Cafe discussing Spanglish neologisms peculiar to the Nuyoricans like “bushitiando” and “barbacoa” (which Piedro Pietri, one of the musicians, points out is actually a Taíno word from which barbecue is derived). Ultimately, the historical narrative seems to trace the continuance of a Taíno legacy through colonization and diaspora from Puerto Rico to

the New York without fully acknowledging the place of Africans in Puerto Rico, but it seems Pérez was more concerned with establishing that innate “sense of pride” Boricuas feel as a diasporic community beginning to gain some clout in the United States.

Pérez is charming and funny throughout the documentary, especially when she relates moments when her difference led to awkward moments. For instance, Pérez tells of how her classmates would ask her where Puerto Rico is, and she would reply, “Where is Puerto Rico? Are you a moron” (*Yo Soy Boricua*)? Or in another scene, when Pérez is on her way to deliver a lecture at a Freshman orientation at Nassau Community College, she reads the title the college has chosen for her lecture: “They’ve named it ‘Homeless to Hollywood’. I’ve never been homeless. I have no idea where they got that. They do that to us colored folks, y’know. I bet you no one has called Brad Pitt homeless” (*Yo Soy Boricua*). It is clear that Pérez aligns herself with underrepresented minorities and is aware of her being perceived as “colored folk,” and her community activism and attempts to tell the story of Puerto Rico-U.S. relations is laudable. Whatever its shortcomings as a history, it is a transgressive move by an Afro looking Latina to partake in making documentaries and community activism after being part of the Hollywood machine. Much like her film career, Pérez identifies more with her Latina and Nuyorican culture and heritage, but clearly aligns herself to a broader array of “colored folks” who either experience effacement or misunderstanding in the United States. Pérez, for her part, appears to have benefited from her looks by being cast into the stereotypical roles for colored folks and functioning as a bridge for race, but the way she constructs her own image in *Yo Soy Boricua* suggests that this alliance between

her blackness and Latinidad in the minds of U.S. audiences is not foreign to her. As I have tried to show in this chapter, her mediated blackness is the vehicle for her integration in Hollywood films during the early 1990s. Her subsequent community activism and documentary show that she also has a complex self-identification according to which she is proud of an ethno-national⁴ identity—Boricua, Nuyoricán—rather than a racial identity, yet is still aware of how her appearance is racialized in the United States.

⁴To be sure, this ethno-national identity is made up of a (fictional) national Puerto Rican identity, an ethnic United States identity as a Latina, and a mediated blackness that racializes her as an Afro-Latina in the U.S.

CHAPTER 3: SOMETHING QUEER ABOUT SHAKIRA: BECOMING LATINA AND THE POLITICS OF PERFORMING LATINIDAD

In this chapter, I look at the ways in which Shakira Isabel Mebarak Ripoll has, over the course of her musical career from Barranquilla, Colombia to the United States cultural imaginary, become a Latina. My analysis focuses on the trajectory of Shakira's career as her image and performance becomes a cultural product of Latinidad. This analysis fleshes out the collusion between Latinidad and U.S. nationalist discourse, and the ways certain cultural gestures—belly dancing as a gesture of Arabic culture, for instance—in Shakira's performance complicate and reveal the intricacies of this collision.

What piques my interest about Shakira is her ethnically mixed background as a Colombian-Lebanese person who has openly attested to the influence Arabic culture has had on her as a performer. I argue that her ethnic mixture and cultural syncretism have been folded into the discourse of Latinidad as she becomes a transnational Latina performer—a discourse that functions as a paradigm through which her otherness can be properly encoded for a U.S. audience. Shakira, then, exemplifies what I consider the back routes of Latinidad, whereby her distinctly *mestizo* background is subsumed and commodified in diluted measures as part of Latina identity in the United States' cultural imaginary. In other words, that which might be unpleasant about Shakira—that is, her Arabic background—is reconfigured in an Orientalist fashion and hierarchized in a way that makes her first (white) Latina, then a mixed ethnicity person of both Latin American and Arabic descent (and even then, Colombian first, Arabic second). Ultimately, I show that this reconfiguration of a (mixed) ethnicity identity allows Latinidad to function as a repository for cultural difference, which, though geographically and symbolically situated

in the United States,¹ is not necessarily a politically integral part of U.S. culture. That is, Shakira can be represented as a belly dancing Latina in the service of a nationalist U.S. discourse without ever being representative of either Arabs or Latinas/os as a group, which becomes all the more possible due to the malleability of her physical appearance. Shakira becomes a belly dancing fantasy, a part of the U.S. cultural imaginary for how a Latina looks and performs. She is a white, blond, and emaciated aberration of an exoticized and eroticized other, which is a stark contrast to the reality of ethnically mixed and mixed race Latinas/os (Afro-Latinas/os, for instance) and her earlier career as a Colombian rock sensation.²

Shakira's transformation from Latin American-Arab to Latina-with a twist offers a valuable and highly visible case study in the way representations of Latina who can be identified, or self-identify, as mixed (since most Latin Americans already *are* mixed) can be co-opted and commodified in the discourse of *Latinidad* as a signifying practice. However, for my analysis, I argue that Shakira has been transformed into a Latina, according to my provisional definition, for cultural consumption, and my working definition relies on the changes her visage has undergone as she has crossed over into performance for a U.S. audience. Moreover, in becoming a Latina, Shakira is racialized according to an ethnoracial category of *Latinidad* that signifies something neither black nor white. Thus, though her *mestizaje* is clearly ethnic more than racial—cultural more

¹ Many Latina/o musical artists passed through “the Miami sound machine” during the 1990’s Latin wave: Ricky Martin, Gloria Estefan, and Jennifer Lopez, to name a few. Silvio Torres-Saillant, María Elena Cepeda, Arlene Dávila, Jennifer Aparicio and countless other scholars of Latina/o studies, Afro-Latina/o studies, and mixed race studies have noted how *Latinidad* has proven successful in the symbolic realm (the entertainment industry, sports, and advertisement) without necessarily having achieved political enfranchisement in the United States.

² Ed Morales writes of Shakira “[she] is a walking, living, breathing, singing contradiction. Born and raised in Colombia, she lived for bands like Led Zeppelin, The Cure, The Police, the Beatles, and Nirvana. Rock was her first musical love, but her Arabic culture was her life.”

than physical—my focus is on how these ethnic traits are racialized and reified in her looks and performance. This is what links her to the idea of “other” Latinas/os who do not quite fit the paradigm of Latinidad.

As I mentioned early on in the second chapter, a link does exist between popular representations of mixed race peoples and queers, but the link is not to be found in an ostensible transgression of essentialist visions of race and sexuality. In this chapter, I extend the link to ethnically mixed Latinas/os, and show how the imagining and shaping of this ethnically ambiguous Latina/o can be co-opted by discourses of neoliberalism and multiculturalism, particularly in post 9/11 U.S. nationalism. Jasbir Puar’s *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* helps illuminate the ways in which liberal discourses of multicultural inclusion have enabled the emergence of “a pernicious binary[...]in the post-civil rights era in legislative, activist, and scholarly realms: the homosexual other is white, the racial other is straight” (32). Moreover, these discourses are often deployed in “the temporality of exception” and in the name of the exceptional. Puar’s own observations are with regard to the nation-state and the attempt to evoke national identification from queer subjects by espousing tolerance of nonnormativity in order to indicate a teleological progressiveness. In other words, the white homosexual and the straight racial other become tolerable in a state of exception in order to demonstrate U.S. tolerance. This tolerance becomes an indicator of ‘our’ modernness in relation to ‘their’ backwardness. This narrative of ‘exceptionalism’ bears the appearance of transgressiveness, but is in fact nothing more than a way to ‘un-nationalize’ colored homosexuals and racialized others who are represented as sexually deviant (Puar 1-36).

Thus, Puar's notion of homonationalism and analysis of how it helps reanimate a "pernicious binary" of acceptable and unacceptable homosexuals in U.S. nationalist discourse is an analytic that can help in understanding how Latinidad reanimates certain racialized binaries vis-à-vis a neoliberal discourse and multicultural inclusion. Likewise, Inderpal Grewal's analysis of race and gender in the technologies for the production of American nationalism constructed through various representations within transnationality after 9/11 provides a much needed optic:

In the dominant media representations after 9/11, we can see clearly the articulation of this nationalism as defined by hegemonic state power, the investments of many inside and outside the United States in the idea of "American" as a liberal state, and the productions and circulations of a transnational media and consumer culture[...]As superpower and policeman, a multicultural nation as well as a site of hierarchical racial and gendered formations, America the nation-state, along with American nationalism, produces identities within many connectivities in a transnational world Thus 9/11 does not mark a break, but a fulfillment of some of the directions taken by a neoliberal American nationalism, in particular the articulation of consumer nationalism, the link between geopolitics and biopolitics, and the changing and uneven gendered, racial, and multicultural subjects produced within transnational connectivities. (196-197)

Two lines of thought are clear at this point: the deployment of a multicultural and transnational discourse in contemporary modes of U.S. nationalism which reinforce the notion of the American imaginary as a liberal and tolerant nation-state and the complicity of consumer culture and marketing strategies in propping up this strain of nationalism. Multicultural subjects like Shakira, marked by a finely-grained racial ambiguity and produced within a transnational connectivity of becoming "Latina" rather than Latin American (that is, an incorporated U.S. subject who is racialized but not foreign), can be made to articulate the proper Latina in the discourse of Latinidad while showcasing the United States' exceptionality as a tolerant nation. Moreover, by

retaining her Arabic heritage through the performance of belly dancing Shakira reinvigorates a cultural product first made popular in the United States during the 1960s and 1970s as a paradoxical signification of perverse Arab sexuality and emergent feminist resistance in a putatively repressed Arab culture (Munaira 333-334). In this case, there are two simultaneous foldings of Shakira's imaging and performance into her "Latina" look as she is transformed for a new market. First, Shakira transforms from a Colombian-Lebanese singer to a "Latina" through a process of "whitening" her image. Secondly, her attempts to retain her "Arab cultural heritage" have become a way of folding Orientalist fantasies into a palatable and commodifiable cultural product that is tolerably Arab, and allows for the appearance of a tolerant U.S. multiculturalism.

What I trace is how Shakira's becoming a Latina is a transmogrification that works little by little, shaving off undesirable elements, shaping what remains into an object that is not entirely different, but different enough. She attains an ambiguous look and performs a multicultural identity in a strategic act of parading and marketing her racial identity rather than passing into U.S. culture. Parading, I suggest, is the modality through which Shakira can provisionally totalize a particular identity in a gesture—the thrust of her hips as she belly dances, for instance—without necessarily claiming that identity as definitive. I use this term as something distinct from strategies of passing and covering, as I show during the course of my analysis.³

I have been suggesting thus far, as others have, that there is a significant shift in the way Shakira, who has throughout her career self-identified as both Colombian and

³ Lisa Nakamura offers a succinct way of fleshing out the differences between passing and covering, which can serve as definitional here: "If passing was the strategy of individuals who could not be assimilated to white privilege because of their colored bodies, and who thus chose to rewrite them as white, covering is the recourse of those who live in a 'multicultural' world that values the exotic and does allow people of color to gain positions of power but requires them to cover in order to get it" (69)

of Arabic descent, looks when her music is tailored to a U.S. audience, which does not necessarily mean she disavows her Arabic background. Rather, her appearance is Americanized and “whitened,” while her performance of Arabness is accentuated and hypostatized. It is this particular aspect of Shakira’s transformation that has gone overlooked. Her excessive performance of Arabness—evidenced by the Oriental sets in her music videos and frequent belly dancing—is characteristic of and consistent with what Sunaina Maira has called “Arab-face.” I quote her description of this phenomenon at length:

The paradox is that belly dancing in the United States is used to evoke a culture that is simultaneously oppressive and liberating for women, socially and sexually, and the figure of the Arab woman is one that is both envied and patronized by American belly dancers. Yet Arab American women are often missing from these performances, and it is generally white American women who ultimately stage this contradictory view of Middle Eastern culture through the performance of what I call *Arab-face*. Belly dance performances detach Orientalized femininity from the bodies of Arab women themselves so that it becomes a form of racial masquerade, complete with Arabic names. Some belly dancers even have Arabic words tattooed on their body that are visible in performance, literally imprinting their bodies as the vehicle for Arab-face. (“Arab-Face” 333-334)

Maira describes the popularity of this phenomenon among white American women as Arab-Face, but for women of color she argues that belly dancing is part of an overarching process of cross-ethnic *relational* or *peripheral Orientalism* (“Arab-Face” 329, emphasis in original). In other words, a Latina woman (who may or may not be a woman of color in Latin America, but in U.S. racial taxonomy is certainly considered ‘colored’) perform this simultaneously self-Orientalizing and Orientalist dance as a sign of cultural similarity rather than cultural difference.

At one point in the article this phenomenon is referred to as “the Shakira factor,” which suggests the kind of influence Shakira has had on U.S. culture and the encoding

of Arab-ness in her performances. What complicates the analysis for Shakira is that she has transformed from a woman of color to a foreign white woman by U.S. standards. She has thus increasingly gone from performing relational Orientalism in her Latin American career to performing Arab-Face as she becomes a whiter, blonder version of herself. Shakira is thus, I suggest, parading her Arabness when she belly dances, which is something Maira comes close to articulating when she describes the performance of belly dancing as a form of “racial masquerade.”

To describe her performance of belly dancing as an act of parading is important because it takes into account the simultaneous whitening of her image with the overemphasis on racialized performance, which allows her to play out her ethnic and racial ambiguity in the service of a whitewashed Latinidad. This is distinct from passing because the attempt to assimilate to whiteness is merely ocular, and it is distinct from covering because the performance does not cover her difference as recourse for gaining power in an ostensibly multicultural world. Parading, as I define it, is a strategy that incorporates signifiers of difference in the performance as mere adornment or trimming to the image of whiteness. A subject who is parading, then, never truly threatens white privilege, but is instead able to occupy multiple subject positions that are assimilable to whiteness symbolically, and only symbolically. For Shakira, parading bears the semblance of a transgressive act, but is merely a collection of gestures added on to a visage of whiteness in service of a multicultural American nationalism.

María Elena Cepeda, in her chapter “Shakira as the Idealized Transnational Citizen,” has already described the changes Shakira undergoes from her debut album as a musical artist, *Magia* (1991), up to her first English Language album, *Laundry*

Service (2001) (*Musical ImagiNation* 61-86). Cepeda notes how the transnational media writes Shakira as an apolitical and Anglicized sellout and argues that Shakira has, in fact, written herself in albums like *Pies Descalzos* (1996) and *¿Dónde Están Los Ladrones?* (1998) as a political artist. The lyrical content certainly becomes more political, but one begins to notice the Anglicization of Shakira during this stage as well. As a simple exercise, one can look through Shakira's discography over the course of her career and see her skin is visibly whiter with each album in the 1990's.⁴ As she becomes more politicized, she begins to dress more like a *rockera* (female rocker) than a pop star and wear her hair in dreads. In general, Cepeda notes that Shakira's transition from making mostly pop ballads rooted in Colombian Caribbean genres like *cumbia*, *salsa*, and *vallenato* to a *rockera* style is a dangerous move for Shakira, since the traditional genres are more likely to sell in a Latin American market (68-69).⁵ However, this politicized image of Shakira is also the whitest image of Shakira, which suggests an attempt to begin transitioning to the U.S. market. Indeed, Shakira actually began to attract notice in the United States during this time: "With the success of *Pies Descalzos*, Shakira caught the attention of Miami-based Sony Discos. Shortly afterward, she relocated to Miami to begin working with Emilio Estefan and his wife, the singer Gloria Estefan" (69). Rather than suggest that whiteness is the sole factor in Shakira's

⁴ Shakira's discography can be viewed in reverse chronological order at her website: <http://www.shakira.com/music/>.

⁵ In her essay "*Florecita rockera: Gender and Representation in Latin(o) American Rock and Mainstream Media*," Cepeda delineates the influence of Anglo rock stylings and forms on *rock en español* have appeared in Colombia since as early as the late 1950s and continued to remain a popular underground activity for Colombian *rockeros* through the 1970s and 1990s. During the 1970s and 1990s a great deal of transformations occurred, especially a move from "mere translation and mimicry of U.S. and European pop and rock standards" to a period of "nascent Latin American musical groups" like the Colombian rock group *Aterciopelados* (90).

crossover to the U.S. market, I suggest that whiteness allows Shakira to perform her mixed race heritage without being threatening to a U.S. audience.

However, Cepeda counters critics who have suggested that Shakira's choice to become more *rockera* is necessarily a move that makes her less "Latin" and more Anglo, and, though the counter is well taken, there is more to the matter. Shakira, as I have suggested, is beginning to parade her otherness as she becomes whiter, which allows her to become a subject who belly dances on stage and sings politicized songs while still being an incredibly marketable cultural product. In fact, she becomes more marketable precisely because she is now a more acceptable "Latina" subject whose image appeals to a Latin American audience, a Latina audience, and a non-Latina U.S. audience. Her whiteness allows her to flaunt difference and racial ambiguity in a way that makes her acceptable to a U.S. audience in particular by making her acceptable as a "white" other in the United States. Her performances become an instance of "Arab-Face" rather than relational Orientalism because she is no longer performing as a dark-skinned, curly haired Colombian. That is not to suggest any intent by Shakira to attach a negative connotation to her performances. Whether or not unwitting, though, Shakira's performance becomes an act of parading that allows her to perform a multicultural fantasy in white skin—a performance that becomes popular in the U.S. and assimilated as part of the "Shakira factor" phenomenon. Shakira's transition to the U.S. in 2001 with her first English language album, *Laundry Service*, comes at a pivotal moment in U.S. nationalist discourse, and her parading of Middle Eastern dance and setting is assimilable during this time because it is shrouded in a homogenous Latinidad. Her Arabness finds a back route through Latinidad, and her performance of Arab-Face as a

'sexy' belly dancer reinvigorates the 1960's and 1970's U.S.-centric feminist discourse of saving Third World women from a culture that is at once sexually perverse and sexually repressed. In fact, Shakira's Arab-Face in this form of U.S. nationalism reads as a relational phenomenon rather than a watered down and Orientalist vision of Middle Eastern dance because she is in a position as an ethnically ambiguous subject to be aligned with Third World women—a sweeping and weak alignment, but one made possible by her ambiguity. It is both a stereotype of Arab culture and a relational phenomenon of cross ethnic similarity, both of which are used to prop up U.S. nationalism as an exceptional multicultural society of tolerance and a rescuer of the Middle East.

It is not my opinion that Shakira's whiteness is what allows her to be successful in the United States. Rather, similar to the ways in which Rosie Pérez's body and voice serve as sites of convergence for racial and class difference and allow her to function as a bridge, Shakira's ethnic ambiguity bridges cultures in the U.S. imaginary. She clearly becomes slightly darker—brown, perhaps—from *Laundry Service* on. What her whiteness allows her to do, as it were, is perform her mestiza heritage as a *white looking* ethnically mixed Latina. Thus, she is able to continue incorporating belly dancing as part of her performance. In fact, Shakira's belly dancing is merely a part of the performance early on in her career,⁶ whereas later on as she gains popularity in the

⁶Two points in this video are made very clear: Shakira's initially dark-skinned and curly-haired look, first off, and, secondly, her initial use of belly dance is merely a part of the performance rather than the focal point (she mentions "bailando Arabe" as a part of her performance in her post-performance interview): <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GxHJ1T9qxOo>>.

U.S. it becomes center stage.⁷ In the years following 9/11, Shakira's performances have become more "multicultural"—that is, her initial parading was focused on belly dancing, but her most recent videos show a variety of dances and elements of dance incorporated from other cultures.⁸ This would suggest a move away from the focus on Arabic culture as the events of 9/11 become less current and more historical. Her look, moreover, shifts from a pale white hue to a brown "one-color-fits-all" hue—a process we see happen during the course of Jennifer Lopez's career as well.

In a way, the argument I am making is also taking a concrete stance against Cepeda's own assertion that Shakira has some degree of agency as a subject of *Latinidad*:

Shakira's public persona operates as a quasi-oppositional rendering of the (trans)national body politic that is of significant import, given her multiple subject positioning While highly visible and, indeed, universally marketable, transnational figures like Shakira are certainly free to embrace *Latinidad* and a concomitant U.S. Latina identity, by the same token, *Latinidad* may be just as easily be [sic] imposed upon them from the outside. (86, emphasis original)

Cepeda writes an incisive trajectory of Shakira's transition from Colombiana to Latina, and makes good points about Shakira's potential as a female with agency in a globalized and gendered rock scene. Though I do not agree with Cepeda's suggestion that Shakira is as free as she appears to be in the construction of her image, Cepeda makes excellent points and provides nuanced readings of Shakira's work over the

⁷ "Shakira's most visible live performance in support of the 'Ojos Así' single, the most popular song from *¿Dónde Están Los Ladrones?*, took place at the September 2000 Latin Grammys. The performance was choreographed around a display of traditional Middle Eastern dance movements" (Cepeda 70).

⁸ Indeed, two videos in particular demonstrate the 'multicultural' parading of Shakira's more recent work: "Hips Don't Lie" <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DUT5rEU6pqM&NR=1>> and, aptly enough, "Waka Waka" (This Time for Africa) (The Official 2010 FIFA World Cup Song) <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pRpeEdMmmQ0>>.

course of her musical career. What Cepeda does not acknowledge is the extent to which Shakira's image, along with many other Latinas in the entertainment industry, is a product of the entertainment machine which produces the looks and movements appropriate for a U.S. market. My own contention is that Shakira is working in a narrow paradigm of Latinidad that limits her agency and funnels her performance in certain ways. That is, Shakira is parading her difference through the discourse of Latinidad, performing a form of Arab-Face that is only possible because of her interpellation as a Latina.

Though Shakira's late 1990's music and performance bore a trace of difference that, for the mixed race person, might very well transgress normative binaries, Cepeda's readings of Shakira's political consciousness do not take into account temporality—quite simply, Shakira's performance, lyrical content, and image change over the course of time. Shakira's performances and image during the late 1990s might be read as a gestural disidentification, to borrow from José Esteban Muñoz's work on queerness and the potential for transgressing normativity. Muñoz locates potentiality in the gesture that signals a queer utopia in the then and there during his analyses of performers like Kevin Aviance, whose explicitly femme gestures in a male-coded atmosphere and whose visage of blackness in a predominantly white atmosphere can be taken as an ephemeral articulation of racialized and queer self-enactment (*Cruising Utopia* 65-81).

However, such a reading of Shakira's performance would be too simple, though, and in fact only reifies a binary that privileges *mestiza* performance as naturally more vital in relation to Anglo culture. Muñoz writes, "queer theory has made one lesson explicitly clear: the set of behaviors and codes of conduct that we refer to as feminine or

masculine are not slaves to the biological” (76). Likewise, I would suggest that critical race theory and its offshoots, especially mixed race studies, have made the same lesson clear about race. Yet reading queer and mixed race as inherently transgressive does nothing more than reinforce a binarized way of thinking, however much one wants to take an oppositional stance against a hegemonic culture. Cepeda’s own work is in many ways trying to undo the stereotypical image of Colombians as drug dealers by showing the complexity of Colombian identity and the influence Colombian music has had in U.S. popular culture through “the Miami-driven Latin(o) ‘boom’ of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries” (13). However, Shakira, by virtue of being mixed race and performing her otherness, does not necessarily represent an alternative and oppositional space for imagining Latinas—or Colombians, for that matter.

As I have shown, she is shaped in a discourse of *Latinidad* that privileges *mestiza* identity in ways that actually reify binaries by parading racial ambiguity and multiculturalism in a new “American” nationalism: binaries of Anglo/Latino, Anglo/Arab, and, ultimately, the United States and the world. Her gestures of difference—belly dancing in particular—lose their potentiality as a product of U.S. *Latinidad* because they are being performed by a transmogrified Shakira in performances that are clearly an attempt at multicultural inclusion (see footnote 8 for videos). Through parading, Shakira can provisionally totalize identity in a gesture without being essentialized in that moment.⁹ It is an ephemeral moment in the performance among many other moments

⁹ Judith Butler’s insights are relevant here: “In avowing the sign’s strategic provisionality (rather than its strategic essentialism), that identity can become a site of contest and revision, indeed, take on a future set of significations that those of us who use it now may not be able to foresee” (“Imitation and Gender Insubordination” 19). Butler writes on the problem posed by identifying with the sign lesbian/gay as an identity: It is at once a political imperative and a foreclosure of future uses of the sign. In Shakira’s case, I suggest that her gestural identification, her parading of identity, is a provisional totalization in the discourse of *Latinidad* that has been used to foreclose possibilities for mixed race Latinas and for

that allows her to occupy that identificatory space and time, but that moment loses its potentiality because it is performed by a tinged representation of Shakira. Moreover, the context in which the gesture happens has also lost its potentiality by being shaped to the end of neoliberalism and multiculturalism for a U.S. audience by depicting a painfully manufactured phenotypically multifarious crowd, as shown in her recent videos.

Shakira, as a mixed race Latina, could break the binaries, so to speak, and demonstrate the complexity of Latin American subjectivity embodied by the Latina/o, but the (marketing) discourse of Latinidad has limited the potential for such a transgression.

In effect, though resignifying through the performance of identity has the potential to be “a site of contest and revision,” as Butler has argued in the case of queerness and gender insubordination, in Shakira’s case it is still bound by the already positioned hierarchy of hybridity in Latinidad (“Imitation and Gender Insubordination” 19). In becoming Latina, Shakira enters a discursive site that relegates her gestures to a normative parading of racial identity that privileges the white Latina over the other racial and cultural identities she embodies and performs. The notion of a hierarchized hybridity comes from Cristina Beltran’s critique of Anzaldúa’s uncritical valorization of *mestizaje*, which, to Beltran, recapitulates the same problematic trope used by a patriarchal Chicano movement reliant on cultural nationalism (“Patrolling Borders”).

understanding Arabic culture beyond Orientalist fantasy. See also “Critically Queer” on the discursive site of performativity and the need to pay attention to the historicity and temporal contingency of terms—in my own argument, this applies to the discursive production of belly dancing and Latinidad in general as historical processes that have had a history of resignification and will continue to signify: “The effects of performatives, understood as discursive productions, do not conclude at the terminus of a given statement or utterance, the passing of legislation, the announcement of a birth. *The reach of their signifiability cannot be controlled by the one who utters or writes [or dances], since such productions are not owned by the one who utters them. They continue to signify in spite of their authors, and sometimes against their authors’ most precious intentions*” (“Critically Queer” 241, emphasis mine).

Anzaldúa, along with other Chicana lesbian writers like Cherríe Moraga, has been instrumental for queer studies, feminism, and women of color, but her use of *mestizaje* and cultural hybridity (Beltran uses the two interchangeably) relies on a hierarchy according to which the indigenous ancestry is a site of collectivity and unity (599-600). The term *mestizaje*, however, is loaded with a history of resignification, and Beltran historicizes the use of the term to better understand the problematic aspects of its current usage—namely, it privileges *mestiza* consciousness as the only consciousness capable of building bridges between cultures, thereby assigning epistemic privilege to hybrid identities. Beltran, conscious of Anzaldúa’s positive impact and even necessity in her time, points out the need to map out “the exclusions and possibilities of Anzaldúa’s ‘*mestiza* consciousness,’” which relies on “nationalist narratives [that] are problematic not because they reflect some abstract philosophical gap, but, rather, because they serve to limit the emancipatory potential of *mestizaje* as a political concept” (606). Shakira’s own performances as a Latina rather than a Latin American enact a similar hierarchy of hybridity that reinforces binaries and forecloses possibilities for mixed race Latinas/os. In line with Beltran’s critique, and as my initial response to the idea of mixed race doing to race what queer did to sexuality indicates, I call for a more critical understanding of the ways representations of mixed race Latinas are encoded and used. What looks like potential can often be nothing more than a parading of multiculturalism, and this performative representation does nothing more than provide symbolic visibility for mixed race Latinas while upholding a ‘transnational’ strand of American nationalism. Latinidad as a discourse of Latina/o unity can privilege the white Latino in favor of the Afro- or Arab-Latino, and Shakira’s particular case shows

the simultaneous whitening of the Latin American subject and parading of her racial and ethnic ambiguities for the purpose of privileging whiteness and demonstrating American exceptionalism. The point here is not to lambast Shakira or treat symbolic representation as wholly ineffective. Rather, the point is to look more critically at the contingency of signification and the temporal processes that go into the making of a Latina in the U.S. entertainment industry. It is both an ethical and a political imperative to understand and historicize, because even that which seems most transgressive might be co-opted. Representations of queer, mixed-race, and ethnically ambiguous subjects have a great deal of potential for changing the discourse, but they are also manipulable enough to be used in service of a hegemonic discourse.

CHAPTER 4: HISTORICAL MARGINALIA, MARGINAL HISTORIES

They say it came first from Africa, carried in the screams of the enslaved; that it was the death bane of the Tainos, uttered just as one world perished and another began; that it was a demon drawn open in the Antilles. Fukú Americanus, or more colloquially, fukú—generally a curse or a doom of some kind; specifically the Curse and the Doom of the New World. —Junot Díaz, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (1).

My argument thus far has shown the ways in which mixed-Latinas/os can have their ambiguity manipulated to serve the ends of a hegemonic discourse by reifying national and racial categories (not to mention gender) in the neoliberal and late capitalist sphere of representation. Shakira and Pérez are rendered consumable—in other words, safe to be viewed and sold as artifacts—and serve the interest of power in their separate functions as bridge between races in the U.S. and bridge between the U.S. and the rest of the world. Rather than invoking repressed histories of neocolonialism, imperialism, and diaspora, the representation of Shakira and Pérez as commodities shows how racially and ethnically ambiguous Latinas can be produced in ways that erase histories and reify or blur over racial and ethnic mixture: Pérez as bridge, Shakira as a seductive parade of multiculturalism. Díaz in his most recent novel, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007), calls the reader back to these histories by starting the novel with the figure of the fukú, described in the epigraph to this chapter. The curse of history, which, though we might ignore it or erase it, will always threaten to resurface: “It’s perfectly fine if you don’t believe in these ‘superstitions.’ In fact, it’s better than fine—it’s perfect. Because no matter what you believe, fukú believes in you” (5). However, as I point out in this chapter, Díaz is also part of a marketing apparatus as an Afro-Latino writer, and though he works in a medium that allows him to

recall histories of neocolonialism, imperialism, and diaspora, his work is anthologized in an either/or construction of racialized identity (either African-American or Latino writer).

The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao is a raucous, funny, and layered text. It is a story about Oscar de León, an overweight Afro-Dominican living in Paterson, New Jersey who is more likely to stay up all night writing post-apocalyptic stories than dance bachata with a dominicana, but it is also a re-telling of his family's startling and horrific past under the dictatorship of Rafael Trujillo in the Dominican Republic. There is a certain, almost flagrant, discontinuity invoked by describing the novel as funny and horrific, but this kind of discontinuity functions as a disruptive device that allows Díaz to do more than simply tell a story. Díaz blurs certain boundaries in the process of telling Oscar de León's story—namely, the disciplinary boundaries that separate ethnography and storytelling, the boundaries that distinguish historiography from fiction, and the socio-historical construction of racial boundaries. I argue that Díaz's novel shores up the limits of any attempt to write an objective account about Latinos without attending to the specificities of national difference among Latinos (Dominicans, Puerto Ricans, Colombians, and so on)—specificities which, especially for Afro-Latinos and other mixed race Latinos, get swept away by a homogenizing discourse of *Latinidad*. The point is not to establish historical objectivity or ethnographic accuracy, but to show how any claim to a "Latino" history or ethnography is complicated by the African diasporas and U.S. neocolonialism.

This marks a departure from recent attempts to write a Latino history that historicize the personal experiences of Latino groups and attending to the constituent national histories by referencing primary texts and reinforcing a sense of objectivity

(Harvest of Empire, published in 2000; Translation Nation, published in 2005, among others). Though these are excellent and tactful texts, what I suggest is that this departure is necessary for attempting to write about Dominicans in the 20th century, because a positivistic account can only be factually true; it cannot capture the affective dimensions of dictatorship, genocide, and diaspora. Likewise, any attempt to write ethnography beside history will still be marred by interpersonal boundaries: one can only transcribe interviews, research histories, and document migrations. *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, however, imagines a Dominican family through the Trujillo regime and the family's life in the U.S. as Afro-Latinos.

The key to this imagining is the voice Díaz employs through the narrator, Yunior, whose storytelling is a blend of African-American vernacular and Dominican Spanglish. Throughout, Yunior accompanies the narrative with paratextual histories—footnotes and parentheticals that relay the national history as well as the folk tales and rumors. Thus Yunior, as the ostensible historiographer through most of the text, assembles a narrative that is part history, part ethnography, and all around laced with a distinctly Afro-Dominican and New Jersey, urban African American vernacular. It is worth noting voice here, because, first off, an analysis of Yunior's way of writing unveils what I would call, to borrow and complicate Ana Celia Zentella's word from its linguistic context, an "anthropolitical" form of fiction (13).¹ Second, the distinct "voice" of the narrator brings

¹ Put briefly, an anthropolitical linguistics joins qualitative ethnographic methods of linguistic anthropology with the quantitative methods of sociolinguistics in order to "understand and facilitate a stigmatized group's attempts to construct a positive self within an economic and political context that relegates its members to static and disparaged ethnic, racial, and class identities, and that identifies them with static and disparaged linguistic codes" (13). For my own purposes, I appropriate the term for its emphasis on the political and ethical imperative of a stigmatized group trying to represent itself and construct a representative self. I would argue that Díaz's fictional ethnographic accounts, told through Yunior, constitute an attempt to write anthropolitical fiction based on Díaz's experiences as an Afro-Dominican and his particularly strong identification with the narrator, Yunior. See also the interview with Edwidge

to mind Rosie Pérez's distinct Nuyorican from Brooklyn accent, which, as I noted in the second chapter, locates Pérez in a certain class, race, and region. More importantly, both Pérez's voice and Yunior's voice bring to mind the contact points of diaspora, circulatory migration, and neocolonialism inflected in the way these two speak. Yunior's way of narrating the character's mock histories in the novel are racialized by the moments when he writes in "spanglish" and African-American vernacular together, clearly marking him as "other" both in terms of academic parlance and a monolingual U.S. culture. Yunior's voice centers the relationship between race and history for the Afro-Dominican in the United States.

The main thread undergirding this chapter is a reading of the relationship between race and history for Afro-Dominicans in the novel, which often comes through in the storytelling as Yunior switches registers and voices between Spanglish and African-American vernacular. Two characters in particular—Oscar and his mother, Hypatía Belicia Cabral-de León (referred to as "Beli" heretofore)—are especially burdened by the construction of race. For Oscar, growing up as a first-generation Afro-Dominican in New Jersey during the 1970's and 1980's puts him in a precarious position of having to identify as African-American or Dominican.² Although he is described as phenotypically "black," his position is complicated by the incommensurable racial ideologies of the

Danticat for BOMB, especially the last question, where Díaz and Danticat discuss Yunior as an extension of Díaz.

² See Peggy Levitt's "Transnational Ties and Incorporation: The Case of Dominicans in the United States" in *The Columbia History of Latinos in the United States since 1960* for details on the imperialistic relationship of the U.S. in the Dominican Republic, the Trujillo regime, and the diaspora: "Prior to the 1960s, few people migrated from the Dominican Republic. Trujillo severely restricted movement out of the country, fearing his opponents would organize against him from abroad[...]Dominican migration began in earnest in the late 1960s [following Trujillo's assassination], increased steadily in the 1970s and 1980s, and begin to decline in the mid-1990s" (234-237).

Dominican community and the African American community—incommensurable insofar as their histories and self-identifications are shaped by different ideas about race. Beli, on the other hand, is a dark-skinned Dominican girl living in the Dominican Republic in the late 1950's. It is a period of intense anti-Haitianism, which has always existed as a remnant ideology of coloniality and was finally spurred into action by Trujillo in the 1930's, culminating in the 1937 Haitian genocide. Beli's "blackness" thus marks her as potentially Haitian when she is living in the Dominican Republic.

What my analysis shows is that marginalia becomes central to understanding the narrative by complementing the story with historical background and inaccessible details—for instance, comments Oscar's mother has made about him in the past or Yuniór's own insights on the matter. Díaz, in effect, offers a mock history while mocking any attempt to write a Latino history that does not take an interdisciplinary and transnational turn, especially for recent diasporic Latino communities (as opposed to Chicanos and other Latino/a groups whose presence dates back centuries).³

Racial mixture has had an entirely different valence in Latin America than it has in the U.S., and, moreover, each nation in Latin America has treated racial mixture differently. This has had a major effect on Latino communities in the United States. For instance, the Chicano movement is indebted to intellectuals and politicians like Mexican philosopher José Vasconcelos for valorizing racial mixture, *mestizaje*, in his 1925 book, *The Cosmic Race*. The Dominican Republic, on the other hand, has been marked by a

³ Indeed, Levitt also theorizes the Dominican as a transnational actor (ibid): "When the magnitude, duration, and impact of migration is sufficiently strong, transnational social fields or public spheres spanning the sending and receiving countries emerge[...]. The Dominican case also brings to light the ways in which cultural production has become transnational and the ways in which developments in the home and host country mutually influence one another."

particularly vexed history of racial indeterminacy, due to a colonial legacy of racial ideologies that mark blackness as a social rather than biological characteristic.⁴ What is important to note, as I mentioned in the last two chapters, there is a certain hierarchy to hybridity that emphasizes a particular heritage more than others: for instance, Pérez's focus on Taíno roots as the unifying signifier for Borícuas. The case is the same in the Dominican Republic, where blackness is deliberately erased by "Indianness" by invoking racial classifications revolving around "Indio," "Indio claro," and "Indio oscuro" (Indian, light-skinned Indian, and dark-skinned Indian). However, when Afro-Dominicans begin to migrate to the U.S. in large numbers following the Trujillo regime, they are entering a nation that has had a historically bipolar racial ideology: biologically black or white. Afro-Dominicans are not perceived as different from Haitians, African-Americans, or Afro-Puerto Ricans in the U.S.—they are all equally black in the U.S., though these groups are ethnically different. Racial tensions and alliances are thus incredibly complex during this period, which is why Díaz provides a historical and ethnographic perspective. That is not to say Díaz is only trying to educate the reader, though it could be argued that there is a pedagogical element to the text. The point, ultimately, is to mock the assumed U.S. reader for his or her ignorance, the idea of official histories, and ethnography that feigns objectivity. One has to understand the sociohistorical development of race as a construct in Dominican history as well as in U.S. history in order to grasp the historical moment Oscar de León and his family are living through.

It is clear that the narrator is mainly concerned with telling Oscar's story, and that story is necessarily entangled in the messiness of the Dominican diaspora and the

⁴ See Silvio Torres-Saillant, "The Tribulations of Blackness: Stages in Dominican Racial Identity"

legacy leading to it. This need to tell the story does not in any way preclude the narrator from interjecting with moments of irony and humor, which is why Efraín Barradas employs the term “realismo cómico”⁵ to describe the kind of genre this novel would most fit. According to Barradas’ reading, the first seven pages of the novel serve as a manifesto for a new genre in fiction, a genre that is capable of discussing absolutely horrific historical events ironically and comically without eliding the human tragedy or history, which is partly what distinguishes *realismo cómico* from magical realism. It is also different from magical realism in that the fantastical is certainly crucial to the plot, but nothing ‘fantastic’ ever actually occurs in the novel.

This notion of a “comical realism” opens up an interesting way of looking at what *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* does as a text by an Afro-Latino about Afro-Latinos. It offers a realistic account of the tragedies in Dominican history, albeit without pretending to be a historical text. The comical tone offsets authority while allowing one to relay the one discernible truth of the matter: many lives were affected by Trujillo, and the atrocities can never be fully articulated in words. An unspeakable and unrepresentable structure of feeling can be communicated through this genre. Díaz cannot reenact the lived experience of racial tension during the diaspora, but we get glimpses of this tension and the lasting effects of the Trujillo regime in often humorous ways.

Unlike Pérez and Shakira, Díaz works in a genre that allows him more freedom in terms of the ability to shape his text. Shakira is an entirely consumable and manipulable figure, easily appropriated and run through the Latin(o) sound machine, to put it crassly.

⁵ “Si Carpentier proponía lo real maravilloso o un realismo mágico, Díaz propone un realismo cómico” (7)

Pérez has shown a degree of agency in her activism and documentary, though she has never been as successful as other actresses who have assimilated wholly (Jennifer Lopez again comes to mind). Díaz, ultimately, works in a genre where the cultural artifacts he produces are the least consumable, but he does achieve a great deal of success because of the humor and skill in his storytelling. These work enough to keep the specter of “real” racial histories, ideologies, diasporas, and imperialism at bay—both literally as a footnote to the text and figuratively. It is only after the laughter subsides that the full affective weight of the story and the history it tells can settle on the reader’s consciousness.

Barradas’ distinction helps demonstrate one of the ways in which conventional boundaries are being troubled by the text. In my own analysis, I would like to stick more closely to the relationship between race, history, and the reception of the book itself in U.S. culture. Some of the recent scholarship written on *The Brief Wondrous Life* explores how the text functions as an historical account, but there is little consideration as to how racial ideologies motivate the history being recounted and the stories being told. Interestingly, as I show throughout this paper, the perception of blackness for Dominicans is not as attached to biological or even phenotypical difference as it is in the U.S., which is a subtle yet pivotal point that needs to be teased out in a discussion of Afro-Dominican identity, since, to this day, Afro-Latinos are classified as “black” or Latino in the U.S. Díaz’s own status as an Afro-Dominican writer demonstrates this point, as he is simultaneously part of an anthology of African American fiction, *Best African American Fiction 2009*, listed as one of the *Bogotá 39* (the 39 best Latin American writers under the age of 39), and included in *The Norton Anthology of Latino*

Literature (2010). None of these, of course, could be an accurate or adequate classification for the Afro-Dominican writer. In a way, *The Brief Wondrous Life* might be treated as an innovative and insightful response to what Torres-Saillant called for in 1998: “We are asking Dominican historians, in effect, to embrace a narrative that privileges the many rather than the few” (“Tribulations of Blackness” 140). I want to be careful to point out that, though Díaz appears to have embraced this call, he has done so in order to show how colonial racial ideologies in the Dominican Republic and U.S. racism play out for Afro-Dominicans living in the U.S. It is certainly dangerous to claim a fictional narrative as being ethnographic, but what is qualitative ethnography if not a narrative account of “real” people? In *The Brief Wondrous Life*, a fictional ethnography can speak to the experience of the many through the story of a single family.

The stories Yunió tells, then, unfold the history—a history overdetermined by race, diaspora, conquest, colonialism, and imperialism⁶—of the many through observations of the few. Two stories in particular are relevant to this point: Oscar de León’s upbringing in Paterson, New Jersey, and his mother, Hypatía Belicia Cabral-de León’s childhood in the Dominican Republic. These stories deal with interracial attractions in the Dominican Republic during the Trujillo regime and in New Jersey during the Dominican diaspora following Trujillo’s death. By describing interracial attraction in these two contexts, Díaz allows the reader to see how racial ideologies play out in the descriptions of attractiveness according to racial qualities. One can see how attraction can either complicate or reify specific socio-historical racial ideologies. For

⁶ Indeed, the second epigraph Díaz includes is an excerpt from Derek Walcott’s poem “The Schooner ‘Flight’.” The poem, especially the last two lines excerpted in the epigraph, speak to the general theme of both the book and the complex Latina/o histories that rarely crop up in the U.S. imagination: “I have Dutch, nigger, and English in me,/and either I’m nobody, or I’m a nation.”

Beli, Oscar's mother, attraction is shaped by a colonial legacy of racial ideology, whereas in Oscar's case we see a clash of Afro-Dominican, pan-ethnic blackness and Latino self-identification according to whom Oscar is attracted.

The first description of Oscar during "The Golden Age" of his youth clues us into the way in which Dominicaness is socialized at an early age. The narrator begins by describing Oscar as an oddity for Dominicans.⁷ According to the narrator, he was

not one of those Dominican cats everybody's always going on about—he wasn't no home-run hitter or a fly bachatero, not a playboy with a million hots on his jock . . . dude never had much luck with the females (how very un-Dominican of him). (11, emphasis original)

We can note here the use of a parenthetical and italics to emphasize Oscar's lack of a "Dominican" essence, an essence which he has apparently lost ever since the "blessed days of his youth" when he was something of a Casanova (11). More than just emphasis, however, the narrator is actually mocking the notion of a "Dominican" quality essential to Dominicans. We see further evidence of this on the same page, when the narrator describes Oscar during those days when "he was (still) a 'normal' Dominican boy raised in a 'typical' Dominican family, his nascent pimp-liness was encouraged by blood and friends alike" (11). It is clear again that the use of a parenthetical and quotation marks to indicate that Oscar was still, in fact, a normal Dominican serves as a way of mocking the very idea of a normal Dominican or a typical Dominican family. As a young boy, Oscar behaves in this machista, misogynistic way because it is how he is socialized in a Dominican community during the late 1970's and early 1980's, when "some drunk relative inevitably pushed Oscar onto some little girl and then everyone

⁷ Dominicans share a national background rather than a single race, but upon becoming part of the U.S., one must choose a race. Thus an Afro-Dominican is in the hazy position in this historical moment of being black and Latino. This leads to intra-Latino tensions and tensions with the African-American community—either way, Afro-Dominicans are doubly racialized as linguistically and phenotypically not white.

would howl as boy and girl approximated the hip-motism of the adults” (12). Oscar’s socialization as a young boy thus functions as an ethnographic description of how Dominicanos are made. Oscar later changes, though, because of his contact with U.S. cultural products like comic books and graphic novels, which mark him as un-Dominican. Oscar eventually becomes a nerd, for lack of a better word, rendering him unacceptable in either white or “colored” communities, as shown during his time in Rutgers:

There was the initial euphoria of finding himself alone at college, free of everything, completely on his fucking own, and with it an optimism that here among these thousands of young people he would find someone like him. That, alas, didn’t happen. The white kids looked at his black skin and his afro and treated him with inhuman cheeriness. The kids of color, hearing him speak and seeing him move his body, shook their heads. You’re not Dominican. And he said, over and over again, But I am. Soy Dominicano. Dominicano soy. (49)

Oscar’s precocious Dominicaness never materializes in his adult life, and this becomes the central focus for the rest of the narrative—Oscar’s failure to become a typical Dominican.

What needs to be fleshed out a bit further, though, is how the “nascent pimp-iness” Oscar demonstrated early on in his life is spurred on by adults in the community and shaped into attractions that follow a racial logic specific to the historical moment. With that in mind, a key storyline for understanding the connection between race and history in Oscar’s childhood is when he must choose between his “two little girlfriends,” Maritza Chacón and Olgano Polanco, during the apotheosis of his “Golden Age” (13). It is one of the marginal stories in the text insofar as the main narrative is concerned, seeming to have little effect on the un-Dominican teenage Oscar, yet it illuminates racial tensions and historicizes the community in which Oscar is raised. Maritza, an Afro-

Peruvian, is a girl with “chocolate skin and narrow eyes,” who is “already expressing the Ogún energy that she would chop at everybody with for the rest of her life” (13).

Maritza’s blackness and association with the Yoruba god Ogún mark her as more “African” than Latina, and, though it is never made clear whether Maritza is Dominican, the reference to Ogún suggests a connection to Santería. In his article “The Tribulations of Blackness: Stages in Dominican Racial Identity,” Silvio Torres-Saillant remarks that, despite a history of anti-Haitianism, “it soon becomes obvious to Dominican immigrants that the larger U.S. society does not care to distinguish between them and Haitians as the offspring of the two nations of Quisqueya” (141). Torres-Saillant asserts that “in the diaspora, necessity allies Dominicans with Haitians; anti-Haitianism is rendered impractical” (141). This alliance is made necessary because of the historically biological basis of U.S. racism, which differs from the more complex pairing of biological and social blackness in the Dominican Republic.⁸ Thus, despite a history of negrophobia on the island of Hispaniola, Maritza is not necessarily written off as a potential ‘little girlfriend’ for Oscar. Though Maritza is not a Haitian, this reading is possible because her blackness is much more apparent than her Peruvian background. In the context of a diasporic community, the fact that Oscar’s is not troubled by Oscar’s crush on Maritza indicates the possibility of a positive effect of diaspora—the development of “a black awareness with a Dominican difference” (Torres-Saillant 143).

This alliance vis-à-vis phenotypical similarity, only possible during Oscar’s youth while he still behaves “Dominican,” belies another problem for Latino communities—

⁸ Torres-Saillant details how race becomes of a social classification rather than a biological classification, and how this complex separation comes to render Haitians as always more ‘black’ in a negrophobic Dominican culture.

intra-Latino racism. Oscar appears to choose to stay with Maritza and dump Olga based on “logic as close to the yes/no math of insects as a nigger could get” (15). That is, Maritza is beautiful, does not smell like pee, and is allowed over to Oscar’s house (15). The last point is most important because it shows how Oscar’s mother, Beli, is prejudiced against Puerto Ricans. In a parenthetical directly after Oscar outlines his yes/no logic, Beli’s response disrupts the narrative momentarily and solidifies Beli’s bigotry: “(A puertorican over here? his mother scoffed. Jamás!) (15). Earlier in the text, Beli is also quoted for her racist remarks about Puerto Ricans, describing them as drunk and lazy. In particular, she describes Olga’s mother as “una maldita borracha” (a damn drunk), which is why Olga “smelled on some days of ass” (13). Beli’s attitude towards Olga and her Puerto Rican family exposes the vitriol between the Puerto Rican and Dominican community during this time, which was often a result of their concurrent diasporas to the New Jersey and New York community. This caused a great deal of competition between the two groups, though both were often lumped together as “blacks” at the time. For Beli, a particularly “black” looking woman, the choice was either to identify with other blacks or Latinos.

In an ethnographic account, one would have to rely on Beli’s own story of her experiences in the Dominican Republic in order to construct an idea of the racial ideology she was raised in, but *The Brief Wondrous Life* imagines Beli’s childhood in order to explore the emotional fissures—not to mention the literal scars—of her experience on the island as it happened. Admittedly, the account is fictional, but the point is that there is very little to separate an ethnographic narrative based on interviews with someone who is trying to re-member growing up on the island from a fictional

narrative other than the claim to objectivity and supplementing ethnography with historical evidence to corroborate the story. It is still a story, and Díaz tells the story with all its intimate details, showing the trauma and “re-assembling the fragments,” as Monica Hanna puts it while quoting Derek Walcott on the subject of Caribbean art. If anything, the fictional narrative can speak for the masses in ways ethnography cannot. I do not mean to privilege one form of writing over another, but I do want to make clear that this distinction has had an undue hierarchical structure in accounting for the experience of Latinos.

One can therefore look at Beli’s childhood as a commentary on the historical experience of race in the Dominican Republic from 1955-1962. She is described as “a girl so tall your leg bones ached just looking at her / so dark it was as if the Creatrix had, in her making, blinked,” whose presence in “lovely Baní” is something of an aberration: “[Baní is a] city famed for its resistance to blackness, and it was here, alas, that the darkest character in our story resided” (77-78). As a boisterous young black girl in a time of intense negrophobia and anti-Haitianism, Beli can be read by others as “Haitian.” However, La Inca, Beli’s adoptive mother and cousin to Beli’s father, has “as the central goal the planting of Belicia in the provincial soil of Baní and in the inescapable fact of her Family’s Glorious Golden Past” (81). The biological fact of Beli’s blackness might be transcended by enhancing her social status, and La Inca makes an effort to restore the family’s position as an important family by putting Beli in one of the best—more accurately, whitest and most upper-class—schools. It is there that Beli really becomes ostracized, but her boisterous defensiveness allows her to “walk down the hall without fear that anyone would crack on her” (83).

Though ostracized, Beli develops—becomes “fully, ahem, endowed”—and begins to pursue Jack Pujols, the boy with whom she has been infatuated ever since enrolling at the school (95). Jack Pujols is a white boy with cerulean eyes and is coveted by all the females. He is also a future supporter of Balaguer, which the narrator throws in as a footnote as a fact that is “not essential to our tale, per se, [but] Balaguer is essential to the Dominican one” (90). The tales aside, Pujols is pivotal because his relationship with Beli can be read for the ways in which black Dominicans are treated: before her secondary sexual characteristics develop, so to speak, Pujols is merely polite to her. After she develops, though, he has sex with Beli, which is a mild way to put it. Beli herself recalls: “Since she had nothing to compare it to at the time she assumed fucking was supposed to feel like she was being run through with a cutlass Afterward she tried to embrace him, to touch his silken hair, but he shook off her caresses. Hurry up and get dressed. If we get caught my ass will be in the fire” (100). Sure enough, they do get caught, and the scandal, of course, is not that they were caught in a broom closet. The real scandal is that Pujols, “the number-one son of the blessed B—í clan, one of the most venerable (and filthy rich) families,” is caught with one who is not “of his own class...but with the scholarship girl, una prieta to boot” (100).

Two things are really striking about this passage in particular and, in general, the chapter in which these events take place. First, footnotes abound, all of which are presented as tangential to the story of Pujols and Beli, but this marginalia informs these stories that are “essential to the Dominican [story.]” These footnotes, asserts Monica Hanna, appear to be Yuniór’s attempt to fill in the blank pages of Dominican history by writing about all the figures in Dominican history who tried to resist the Trujillo regime

(“Battling Historiographies”). Second, though the relationship is clearly scandalous because of Beli’s blackness, two parentheticals punctuate the description of the scandal: “Factor in that he’d been caught not with one of his own class (though that might have also been a problem) but with a scholarship girl, una prieta to boot. (The fucking of poor prietas [black or dark-skinned people] was considered standard operating procedure for elites just as long as it was kept on the do-lo...)” (100). It might be standard operating procedure, but clearly it is more of a problem than these asides let on. In the paragraph following these parentheticals, the narrator writes “you better believe Jack getting caught in a closet with una prieta kebabbed any future of matrimony” (101). In light of that remark, one could consider the parentheticals as simply another instance of the narrator mocking “historical” knowledge of the standard operating procedure—that is, the relationship between class power and sexuality. Race is the overriding factor in this scandal.

Ultimately, in a short phase of Oscar’s life as a seven year old boy, Díaz is able to show the complexity of racial ideology for Afro-Dominicans in the United States. Being a Latino has proven useful only in the symbolic realm, but this has not translated into political enfranchisement.⁹ *The Brief Wondrous Life*, though a fictional account, speaks to the lived experience of being an Afro-Dominican in the U.S. and the complex negotiations that cannot be swept away by invoking Dominicanness. By extension, Oscar’s story speaks to Afro-Latinos as a whole trying to negotiate an existence that does not fit neatly into Latinidad. Beli’s own experiences as a young girl on the island show the historical roots of Afro-Dominican racial and political ideology arriving into the

⁹ This observation has been made by Arlene Dávila in her book, *Latinos, Inc.*, and by Silvio Torres-Saillant in his article “Inventing the Race: Latinos and the Ethnoracial Pentagon,” among others.

U.S. in the 1970s and 1980s. Along with the lived experience of these fictional characters, scathing footnotes on Dominican history complement the text in order to develop a more robust and affectively appropriate account of Afro-Dominicans as transnational subjects of a post-Trujillo diaspora. What I hope to have made clear throughout is that this novel, though unique and funny, also tells an incredibly tragic story about Oscar's brief life, and in blurring the boundaries between fact and fiction, finds new ways to achieve an affective register in imagining the atrocities of the Trujillo regime and showing how the legacy affects Dominicans after they leave the island. It is a transnational imagining and a humorous, comical realism that escapes the bounds of official history and the naïve realism of both ethnography and fiction. As a cultural artifact circulating in the United States, however, it is also part of the marketing apparatus that positions the text as "Latino" or "African-American," and the comicality of the text might be what makes it a consumable product despite its invocation of the repressed or little acknowledged histories—again, no matter what you believe, fukú believes in you.

CHAPTER 5 CONCLUSION

This study does not define the idea of Latinidad in a universalist sense, nor does it offer anything more than a provisional categorization of what Latinas/os stand for in the U.S. imaginary. My readings are not intended to support an argument for cultural nationalism in the face U.S. cultural hegemony, and I do not suggest assimilation or resistance as the only routes. As I noted early on, this piece is intended as a prolegomenon rather than a series of readings offering closure on the issue. In turn, my goal throughout this project is to critique and offer some oppositional readings of the way mixed Latinas/os are shaped, marketed, and ultimately imagined in the politics of signification that make up the discursive imagination of what constitutes “Latinoness” in the United States.¹

What I point out is how distinctively mixed Latinas/os, racially or ethnically, though not at all uncharacteristic in the experiential nature of peoples’ everyday lives, begin to crop in film, music, and literature and how these *other* Latinas/os—other in so far as the traditional representation of Latinas/os as marginal, stereotyped, or white-washed—are marketed or positioned as racial and ethnic bridges tolerable in the U.S. so long as the history of diaspora and neocolonialism do not show. I am interested in the terrain of ideology, the moment of the text, precisely because of its impact on the imagining of Latinas/os, and the ways in which the more clearly mixed Latinas/os are shaped through the marketing and production apparatus for their artifacts to represent a number of different “suitable” commodities: the Afro-Latina as bridge between races, the Latin

¹ Here I am borrowing Stuart Hall’s language from his article “Encoding/Decoding” for describing televisual and mass communications discourse to describe the discursive production of Latinas/os in a more general sense including the marketing apparatus, film, music videos, and literature.

American-Arab as a Latina commodity representing a transcendent plurality possible in the U.S., and the Afro-Latino writer whose work and identity is still being billed as African-American or Latino. This phenomenon shows the ways in which historical specificity is effaced and suggests that Latinas/os are still imagined and represented reductively in the United States.

This is not a lament for restoring a more proper vision of Latinidad—it has always been an inadequate category. Rather, this is a call for an awareness of these shapings and contours and a reading of their functions and purposes. As the idea of Latinidad continues to shift and unfold, the political impact these discourses have on a heterogenous collectivity and their imagining in the United States is tremendous.

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