

LOOKING LATINA: CULTURAL PERSPECTIVES ON IMAGES AND  
REPRESENTATIONS OF LATINAS IN FILM, TELEVISION AND POPULAR CULTURE

By

ROSA E. SOTO

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By

Rosa E. Soto

To my mother, Laura Soto-Perez; my grandmother, Ramona Lopez; and all of the women in my family.

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By

Rosa E. Soto

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Chair: Tace Hedrick  
Cochair: Malini Schuller  
Department of English

This work, *Looking Latina: Cultural Perspectives on Images and Representations of Latinas in Film, Television and Popular Culture* examines the ways in which Latinas are framed both by Latinas/os themselves as well as within discourses of whiteness in dominant culture. It serves as an introduction to analyzing disseminating, negotiating with and “enriching our understanding” of the images of Latinas in popular culture as they are presented to us through the media and other cultural texts. I am interested in important ideological questions concerning the ways in which we engage with such images. How do I and other Latinas read the Latina image as problematic in a variety of cultural texts? How does Anglo culture read the Latina? What culturally produced images, as well as readings of those images, help us understand our position as Latinas in a local and global discourse? What resistance or complicity do the images elicit? In thinking about these questions, an important goal of this work is to understand the ambiguity of how and why as Latinas (from a number of different positions of identity) we question what we see, at the same time as we may enjoy it. I want to understand how we may “read” and interpret images of ourselves in film, television and popular culture. Moreover, I am interested in how the

tensions between gender, class and racial identities produce tensions in our interpretations of images of us in popular culture.



CHAPTER 1  
INTRODUCING A LATINA SPECTATOR

**Examining Images of Latinas in Popular Culture**

It is interesting to me that on the occasions when I present, at a conference, my idea that the Latina is all but absent in the discourse of film and television, I inevitably am asked the question, “What do I think of Jennifer Lopez?” It is a question that bothers me. Almost always, it seems to me that the question is asked as a way to trip up my thinking about notions of race, class and ethnicity. The question is always posed in a challenging manner. I feel that implied, but never asked, are the questions, “Why do Latinos believe everything is a stereotype? Why is representation so important to you? What is authentic ethnicity?” I feel that my answer somehow betrays the focus of my project. The truth I so fear, and at the same time revel in, is that I like Jennifer Lopez.

This Jennifer Lopez question—somehow always about her butt, her tan, her films or videos and her men—positions me in complicated narratives and discourses, as a Latina, as a woman, as a spectator, and as an individual representing a certain group of classed, raced, and ethnicized people. I believe it threatens to implicate me in a fixed, static identity. If I like her, then I have no room to suggest her image is problematic, or I have to defend myself against allegations that she is constructed and therefore not capable of authenticity. If I dislike her, then I find myself in a contradictory moment where I, as presumably the only individual capable of speaking for “authentic” Latinaness, threaten to erase Latina discourse, a location I inherently positioned myself against.

In *Yearning: race, gender and cultural politics*, author bell hooks elucidates the difficult position ethnic individuals are in when they engage with images of themselves. As she tells us about the struggle African-American men have while watching Spike Lee's film *Do the Right*

*Thing*, “black male students came to talk with me, bringing their buddies, because they were deeply concerned with the issue of whether negative critique meant they were not supportive of a brother who is trying to make it and be in solidarity with blackness” (6). Additionally, hooks tells us “they feared that disagreement among themselves might disrupt feelings of bonding and solidarity” (6). Hooks’ answer to the tension produced between these perspectives is to tell her students that critiquing a subject (even one produced by someone of one’s own ethnic make-up) does not silence the work itself or its importance in cultural discourse. In fact, hooks argues that fully engaging with the text is significant in terms of the importance of critical exchange. As hooks argues, “in any liberatory pedagogy, students should learn how to distinguish between hostile critique that is about ‘trashing’ and critique that’s about illuminating and enriching our understanding” (7). Moreover, hooks argues that this criticism is especially significant for ethnic individuals, who for too long have been absent from critical discourse. Hooks’ argument is important to our understanding that critically engaging with cultural subjects and texts (like Jennifer Lopez) means that we also engage both our concerns, as well as our emotions--positive, negative or ambivalent--in cultural studies.

This work serves as an introduction to analyzing and “enriching our understanding” of the images of Latinas in popular culture as they are presented to us through the media and other cultural texts. I am interested in a number of important ideological questions concerning the very ways in which we engage with such images. How do I and other Latinas read the Latina as problematic in a variety of cultural texts? What culturally produced images, as well as readings of those images, help us understand our position as Latinas in a local and global discourse? What resistance or complicity do the images elicit? In thinking about these questions, an important goal of this work is to understand the ambiguity of how and why as Latinas (from a number of

different positions of identity) we question what we see, at the same time as we may enjoy it. I want to understand how we may “read” and interpret images of ourselves in film, television and popular culture. Moreover, I am interested in how the tensions between gender, class and racial identities produce tensions in our interpretations of images of us in popular culture.

My goal in taking a closer look at the representation of Latinas is suggested in bell hooks *black looks: race and representation*, where she examines the personal and political consequences of representations of black men and women within white culture. And although hooks discusses matters from an African-American standpoint, I transfer hooks’ arguments to an analysis of the ways in which Latinos/as look at images of themselves. In fact, there are many ties between African-Americans and U.S Chicana/Latina women, especially in regards to our relationships with white women and our relationship with feminism. For example, we have similarly fought to be given agency and subjectivity in discourse, we have fought together for political, economic and social change and we have struggled for representation together. As Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherríe Moraga state in *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*:

as Third World women, we understand the importance, yet limitations of race ideology to describe out total experience. Cultural differences get subsumed when we speak of ‘race’ as an isolated issue: where does the Black Puerto Rican sister stake out her alliance in this country, with the Black community or the Latino? And color alone cannot define her status in society-How do we compare the struggles of the middle class Black woman with those of the light-skinned Latina welfare mother? Further, how each of us perceives our ability to be radical against this oppressive state is largely affected by our economic privilege and our specific history of colonization in the U.S. (105)

This ethnic feminist collection of perspectives strived to make those connections more evident within feminist studies, arguing that women of color needed to work together to break or try to break systems of oppressions they had in common. However, I would never suggest that women of color neglect their differences based on racial, ethnic or economic positioning. However,

limited as I am by the frameworks in the cultural discourse, which allows me to examine these intersections, as well as the tensions, I employ bell hook's framework, because it is the one I feel most strongly elucidates the argument I wish to make about the images and representations offered Latinas in the contemporary cultural discourse. Therefore, I would like to ask, as bell hooks articulates in her book *black looks: race and representation*:

From what critical perspective do we dream, look, create, and take action? For those of us who dare to desire differently, who seek to look away from the conventional ways of seeing blackness and ourselves, the issue of race and representation is not just a question of critiquing the status quo. It is also about transforming the image, creating alternatives, asking ourselves questions about what types of images subvert, pose critical alternatives, and transform our worldviews and move us from dualistic thinking about good and bad. (4)

This work represents a "political struggle to push against the boundaries of the image, to find words that express what I see...when I am seeing things that most folks want to believe simply are not there" (hooks 4). Moreover, even as I struggle with ambiguity of images of U.S Latinas/os, I suggest that such images can be negotiated with, in order to suggest alternate ways to look at Latina identity and subjectivity. To do this project, I will employ a cultural studies framework to analyze and offer my interpretations. As such, in the three chapters which follow, I will offer possibilities of understanding and in engaging with the images of Latinas in cultural texts in broadly historical, political, social and economic ways.

### **Tiger Woods and the Creation of Cablinasianism: Struggling with Identity in the Media Spotlight.**

The question of representation and identity within cultural studies is a difficult one, not always easily explained, analyzed or understood. Even those within the same ethnic, gender, or class group, often find themselves struggling with the intersections between those positions. A clear example of this is how we engage with images of stars in Hollywood, often asking them to posit one identity above the other. As Frank Proschan argues:

despite the malleability of ethnic identity, the permeability of ethnic boundaries, and the fluidity of ethnic group membership, people nevertheless live and act as if distinct ethnic groups really existed, as if other's ethnicity determined behavior (and thereby offered a guide to interpreting and predicting it), as if one could abandon one's 'natural' ethnic identity and assume another and as if one's natal ethnic group and temporarily or permanently become a member of another. (92–93)

This is the case with both popular golf pro Tiger Woods and singer Mariah Carey. Eldrick “Tiger” Woods finds himself having to constantly clarify his identity to and for the world. So important is the question of his identity, that when Woods first began successfully playing golf, he made a public media statement to clarify (or defend) his identity. As he states:

The purpose of this statement is to explain my heritage for the benefit of members of the media who may be seeing me play for the first time. It is the final and only comment I will make regarding this issue. My parents have taught me to be proud of [my] background. Please rest assured, that is, and always will be the case,- past, present and future. The media has portrayed me as African America [n]; sometimes Asian. In fact, I am both. Yes, I am the product of two great cultures, one African American and the other Asian. On my father's side, I am African-American. On my mother's side, I am Thai. Truthfully, I feel very fortunate, and EQUALLY PROUD, to be both African American and Asian! The critical and fundamental point is that ethnic background and/or composition should NOT make a difference. It does NOT make a difference to me. The bottom line is that I am American...and proud of it. That is who I am and what I am. Now, with your cooperation, I hope I can be just a golfer and a human being. Signed, Tiger Woods. (1)

There is so much to consider in examining the statement above. First, that Woods would have to define himself, before symbolically being “allowed” to play is interesting in itself, but that Woods would believe he would have to do so only once, in a world consumed by the clarification of racial, ethnic and gendered determinations, is impossible (otherwise he would not have to continually reaffirm his identity with press releases). Therefore, it comes as no surprise that Woods continues to identify himself over and over again, recently as “Cablinasian” on an Oprah Winfrey show, a name he himself created to explain his multi-ethnic background, which includes African-American, Chinese, Native American, Thai, and Caucasian. Second, it is interesting to note his “escape” into the transcendental identification of American, above his

specific ethnic identities. And, as if that term in itself was not enough, he soon escapes into a more transcendently-based “human” identity.

Audre Lorde argues that this positioning is brought on by the constraints of society. As Lorde states, “as members of such economy, we have all been programmed to respond to the human differences between us with fear and loathing and to handle that difference in one of three ways: ignore it...copy it...or destroy it” (115). Moreover, critics note that Woods’ identity is often framed by his success in the sports field, as well as the ways in which he is marketed. As Andrew Billings notes, “when Woods won, he was not portrayed as Black, but when he was not as successful he was more likely to be characterized using traditional stereotypes of Black athletes” (1). Also, one critic asks us to consider the way in which Vin Diesel has been marketed for mainstream audiences. As Rob Walker notes:

when the action film *XXX* opened this summer, with relative newcomer Diesel as the star, the media — from *People* to *GQ* to Charlie Rose to *Jet* — couldn't get enough of him. Diesel was consistently described as a mysterious figure that, among other things, refused to discuss his ethnicity. He was happy to let his handlers spin this as a marketing plus: Supposedly, Latinos think Diesel is Latino, blacks see him as black, Italians identify him as Italian, and so on. (1)

Similarly, Mariah Carey became the ultimate contestation of identity for me, when I first spotted her on the cover of a Latina magazine I subscribed to. I knew, because her identity has been framed by her multi-ethnicity (by her Irish mother and her African Venezuelan father) that Carey is indeed of mixed race, but when I first saw her on that cover, I began to question why I felt encroached upon. Why did she feel the need to identify as a Latina? I will acknowledge, because I frame my own argument here, the ambiguity of my own feelings about these issues, I would never suggest that Carey had to pick one identity above the other. Nor would I suggest she deny any aspect of the identity she chooses to adhere to. However, I do suggest that we critically engage with our ambivalence about these issues of identity and how the intersections between

race and gender frame our discussions of the images of Latinas in popular culture and why we are so often forced to choose between one or the other or set aside one for the other, dependent on where we are, to whom we are speaking to and what we are trying to accomplish. Therefore, as I suggested above, I find myself defending Jennifer Lopez to Latinas, as often as I do with white Americans.

Stuart Hall argues in *Questions of Cultural Identity*, “identities are never unified and, in late modern times, increasingly fragmented and fractured, never singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourse, practices, and positions” (4). Identities and representations of those identities are always subject to a significant amount of considerations based on ethnic, classed and gendered concerns, if not more (religious considerations, for example.) As Hall further argues:

actual identities are about questions of using the resources of history, language and culture in the process of becoming rather than being: not ‘who we are’ or ‘where we came from’, so much as what we might become, how we have been represented and how that bears on how we might represent ourselves. Identities are therefore constituted within, not outside representation. (4)

Therefore, the analysis of representation becomes the basis of understanding how images are produced, reproduced, disseminated, constructed, created, and understood. I am interested in how and why those representations offer sites of resistance, denial and complicity. This is a project Stuart Hall articulates as an essential space:

which individuals as subjects identify (or do not identify) with the ‘positions’ to which they are summoned; as well as how they fashion, stylize, produce and ‘perform’ these positions, and why they never do so completely, for once and all time, and some never do, or are in constant, agonistic process of struggling with, resisting, negotiating and accommodating the normative or regulative rules with which they confront and regulate themselves. (14)

It is important to explain that the project I am working on is not a film studies or sociological project. It is a cultural studies project interested in the dissemination of images across a number

of interrelated fields and discourses. As such, I will occasionally “draw from whatever fields are necessary to produce the knowledge required for a particular project” (Hall 2). Therefore, there are instances when I will draw upon film studies and the like to fully actualize an argument. Similarly, as necessary, I will draw upon a number of theoretical positions to articulate the significance of the experiences of Latinas in mainstream popular culture texts, including, but not limited to feminist, Marxist, and psychoanalytic studies. Moreover, it is important to acknowledge that this is not an ethnographic studies project; however, I will occasionally draw upon the experiences and responses of individuals (usually Chicana/Latina women), as bell hooks often does in her cultural texts, to articulate the relevance of their experiences in the cultural discourse and the importance of critical engagement that will give Latinas voice in a world which often threatens to silence them.

Additionally, an important aspect of disseminating images of oneself or one’s group in popular culture is a discussion of one’s own gendered, classed and ethnic make-up. Therefore, as the founding fathers of cultural studies often had to do, it is important to identify myself throughout the essay, including my own histories, stories and representations to understand something significant in the readings of the materials used. As the text *Introducing Cultural Studies* states, “one key example is the feminist slogan ‘the personal is political’ which sought to put a range of questions about personal identity, personal lives and personal conduct onto an explicitly political agenda” (224). It is my position, as a Latina, that makes my critical engagement with the cultural texts significant. As bell hooks states in *black looks: race and representation*, “without a way to name our pain, we are also without the words to articulate our pleasure” (2). Therefore, it is important to articulate that I am looking at my analysis through the eyes of a gendered lens (as a female), through an ethnic lens (as a Latina woman), and through a



classed lens (working class background). However, as I do so, I do not wish to privilege any one particular identity above any other. Rather, I would like to look at each position as interconnected and interrelated with the others.

Moreover, what I find significant are the tensions produced by the above delineations. It is true that at times one position is set against the others in struggles for representation and self-identity. For example, in Chapter Three, when I discuss the representations offered by a popular ethnic collectible, my ethnicity becomes strained by my gendered identity and places me in an ambiguous position which may never be fully finalized. As Audre Lorde articulates in *Age, Race, Class and Sex: Women Redefining Difference*:

traditionally, in American society, it is the members of the oppressed, objectified groups who are expected to stretch out and bridge the gap between the actualities of our lives and the consciousness of our oppressor. For in order to survive, those of us for whom oppression is as American as apple pie have always had to be watchers, to become familiar with the language and manners of the oppressor, even sometimes adopting them for some illusion of protection. (114)

Do I accept the ambivalence of the images (from a gendered perspective) or do I negotiate with the images (finding the positive in the ethnic), even if it means denying that position? The oscillation between the two, which produces the tension I speak of above, is part and parcel of the cultural analysis I strive for in this work. Moreover, I am asking that we consider as well the connections between those identities. What are the intersections between the two which produce the ambivalence I speak of? As Teresa McKenna discusses in her discussion of how Cherrie Moraga portrays struggle in her texts, “many Chicana feminists privilege economic, social struggle over gender issues. How to manage the interstices of this conflict is the subject” (33).

One final note, I will not speak for Latinas everywhere. I am not a Latina spokesperson for Latina representation and attempts to position me as such (as the Jennifer Lopez example attests) will ultimately set me up to be excluded as a voice of agency. My analyses are mine alone; but

they are capable of imbuing possibilities for both resistance and collusion with the cultural products offered Latinas. My ambivalence with these cultural products may speak to an ambivalence others feel, but I offer only one possibility of understanding. As Brian Longhurst et al. in *Introducing Cultural Studies* state,

identities, too, then, are relational and contextual...Cultural Studies undertakes the much more difficult project of holding identities in the foreground, acknowledging their necessity and potency, examining their articulation and rearticulating, and seeking a better understanding of their function. For some identities would be seen as fundamentally harmonious and unitary, threatened only by large-scale social schisms; for others, identities entail contagious antagonism at every site of difference. For some, identities are the inevitable product of history; for others, the illusory product of history, or even individual psychic history; for still others, the site of real struggles, real attempts to forge historical unity out of pervasive fragmentation and difference. But none of these perspectives, located within cultural studies, would take any given identity for granted. (18)

Another significant aspect of this project is what texts I chose to analyze and why I chose those texts. According to Stuart Hall, the goal of cultural studies was “to enable people to understand what [was] going on, and especially to provide ways of thinking, strategies for survival, and resources for resistance” (2). What kinds of texts are worthy of analysis is a question which is often discussed a great deal in the field because cultural studies comes from a space where what is being analyzed is not as important as why it needs to be analyzed. Because popular culture frames the way individuals look at and perceive the world around them, understanding representations within that framework is as important. As Longhurst et al. in *Introducing Cultural Studies* states,

cultural Studies is thus committed to the study of the entire range of society’s arts, beliefs, institutions, and communicative practices...Cultural Studies is both an intellectual and a political tradition...is simultaneously the ground on which analysis proceeds, the object of study, and the site of political critique and intervention. (5)

Therefore, I am engaging with cultural texts that are popular, because it is important to examine how those images and belief systems are widely accepted, enforced and regulated.

### **To Be or Not To Be: That Is the Latina Question.**

Latinas are not passive spectators, readers or individuals. It is true however, that often Latinas are left out in the cold when it comes to “authentic” representations of themselves. Often we are in a difficult position of either adhering to a pan-Latina identity (controversial for its effacing of national and historical identities for a more universal identity), accepting the negative images of ourselves (dominant readings) or denying and negating the image through what bell hooks calls an oppositional gaze. Though hooks’ argument is based in black female subjectivity, I would argue that Latinas fall into the same pattern of negating images they feel need to be denied in order to “reject negation” in mainstream cultural images (121). As hooks argues in *black looks, race and representation*,

responding to this assault, many black women spectators shut out the image, looked the other way, and accorded cinema no importance in their lives. Then there were those spectators whose gaze was that of desire and complicity. Assuming a posture of subordination, they submitted to cinema’s capacity to seduce and betray. They were cinematically ‘gas lighted.’ Every black woman I spoke with who was/is an ardent moviegoer, a lover of Hollywood film, testified that to experience fully the pleasure of that cinema they had to close down critique, analysis; they had to forego racism. And mostly they had to forget racism. (120)

However, I feel that this oppositional gaze always positions women outside of the text, in a critical framework that works to protect the psyche from denial and negation. As Latinas from a number of different contexts, I argue that we have to find ways to engage with the images of ourselves in popular culture in more prolific and significant ways. In order to take on this often difficult and tenuous struggle for representation, I will primarily engage with the framework of feminist cultural studies and specifically with the work of Stuart Hall. Specifically, I will work within two of Hall’s concepts. The first begins with a look at representation as a signifying practice, which Hall defines in his seminal text *Representation, Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* as “the production of meaning through language, discourse and image” (10).

The second is found in Stuart Hall's *Popular Culture, Production and Consumption* and examines the terms "encoding/decoding" as useful for determining sites of resistance to the dominant discourse.

### **Signs and Signifiers**

In *Representation, Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, Stuart Hall and others engage with the question of how we construct meaning in cultural discourses. Concerned with the production and exchanges of meaning in cultural texts, Hall asks us to consider how signs, signifiers and the signified become representations which individuals use as symbolic practices to create a sense of subjectivity and agency. As Hall argues, "the more we look into this process of representation, the more complex it becomes to adequately explain...to help us unlock secrets" (10). One of the frameworks I am interested in is the examination of objects and peoples and their meanings or more accurately, their shifting meanings. As Hall asks, "are meanings constantly shifting as we move from one culture to another, one language to another, one historical context, one community, group or subculture, to another?" (7) I would argue that yes, meaning does change and it is dependent on a number of social, political and economic factors, as well as ethnic, classed or racial ties. In other words, as I discussed above, I am interested in the delineations and tensions produced in my (and other Chicanas/Latinas) interrelated identity positions, as classed, raced and gendered subjects. Because representation is always a difficult concept and the task to understand representations are equally as difficult, an important goal of this cultural framework and indeed my project as well, is to understand the complexity of representations and the ambiguity they often offer. As Hall articulates, "representation is neither as simple nor transparent a practice as it first appears and that, in order to unpack the idea, we need to do some work on a range of examples, and bring to bear certain concepts and theories, in order to explore and clarify its complexities" (7).

One such theory includes working from the perspective of those representations as signs in a constructionist approach to understanding and framing representations within discourse. As Hall articulates, “things don’t mean, we construct meaning, using representational systems- concepts and signs” (25). I am interested in how Latinas “make the world meaningful” (25). As such, I will incorporate Hall’s concepts about how signs and the semiotic process work to signify representation within discourse. This will be especially significant when I tackle the representations offered in ethnic collectibles in Chapter 3, *Are You My Homie?, Looking at Ethnic Collectibles in a New Cultural Playground*. Moreover, I am interested in how signs carry multiple meanings within different identity positions. Therefore, what I am looking for is how we use those multiple meanings to articulate difference and how we use difference to articulate signification.

### **Encoding/Decoding Strategies**

A second critical framework for understanding how Latinas can engage with images of themselves in mainstream cultural texts as cultural critics is found in Stuart Hall’s “Encoding/Decoding” article, I argue throughout my work that without any possibility of changing the image by oneself then we are in an ambiguous state, where we struggle with our feelings about the images. I will employ the usage of the theoretical framework of encoding and decoding, which Stuart Hall theorizes is a strategic way in which to strip the negative and often controversial images offered up by mainstream cultural texts and find something positive in their negotiations with those images. As Stuart Hall states in his influential article, if the consumption of information is constructed through the eyes of production, the relationship between meanings and messages is about the delicate relationship between the spectator (the decoder) and image (the encoder) (125).

According to Hall, messages are constructed with specific ideologies in mind. The message itself does not stand alone from the discursiveness of its meanings. As Hall states “it, too, is framed throughout by meanings and ideas: knowledge-in-use concerning the routines of production, historically defined technical skills, professional ideologies, institutional knowledge, definitions and assumptions, assumptions about the audience and so on frame the constitution of the programme through this production structure” (124). However, what informs this knowledge is presumed knowledge of who the spectator is, because “if no ‘meaning’ is taken, there can be no ‘consumption’ (123). Therefore, the spectator is as much a part of meaning as the intended meaning itself. As such, the spectator is a powerful force behind the construction of the images constructed by encoders for decoding.

Following this stance, it is this idea that as decoders, spectators have the ability to encode the messages with their own individualized positions that becomes the focus of this work. I am interested in how Latina spectators choose meanings, based on their own intricately designed encoded beliefs. It is this choice of encoding/decoding where meaning is found and disseminated. It is where power and ideology intermingle for subjectivity. So although there may be a dominant meaning or message encoded in a particular structure or production, the spectator can and will negotiate with it, within limits. It is within these limits that Hall posits three positions from which decoding of discourse may be constructed.<sup>1</sup> In Stuart Hall’s second position, referred to as the “negotiated code” (131), spectators have the power to negotiate with the image and create agency and subjectivity at the same time with the encoded message produced by popular culture. Here Hall argues that audiences understand the way in which a

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<sup>1</sup> See Stuart Hall, “Encoding/Decoding,” Popular Culture: Production and Consumption, eds. C. Lee Harrington and Denise D. Bielby (Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishing, 2001) for further information regarding the Hall’s three hypothetical positions regarding the encoding/decoding of discourse.

message has specifically been encoded by the modes of its production and with that knowledge, the spectator confronts, disseminates and challenges the discourse offered by the produced message. As Hall states, “it acknowledges the legitimacy of the hegemonic definitions to make grand significations (abstract), while, at a more restricted, situational (situated) level, it makes its own ground rules-it operates with exceptions to the rule” (131).

Though I may not specifically use the terms above while disseminating images and cultural products throughout the work, I am constantly and always asking that we engage with images from popular cultural texts as works in progress, which always need to be examined and reexamined, in a decoding process, in order to situate ourselves as political, economic and social critics within a local and global discourse.<sup>2</sup> I believe it is within our decoding of the systems of representation that we allow the possibility of a personal level of representation which may possible lead to political level of resistance and therefore possible power. Am I certain that this ideological process will succeed? No, I am not. But am I certain it is possible? Yes. As the authors of *Introducing Cultural Studies* tell us, “forms of visual culture are intimately connected to changes in society-moreover such shifts are themselves part of the re-ordering of power relations, especially in respect to their gendered dimensions” (364).

### ***Real Women Have Curves: Ambivalence in Pan Latino/a Identity.***

Let me begin explaining the significance of the work above by examining two different, but related moments in the articulation of experience and representation for Latinas (and to some extent Latinos) in mainstream cultural moments. The first begins with a look at a film entitled *Real Women Have Curves*, produced and distributed by HBO in 2002 starring Lupe Ontiveros

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<sup>2</sup> I am engaging with the term as a reference to systems of representation and the production of knowledge. As Hall references, “by ‘discourse’, Foucault meant ‘a group of statements which provide a language for talking about-a way of representing the knowledge about-a particular topic at a particular historical moment...Discourse is the production of knowledge through language (qtd. in Hall et al. 44)

(Lupe will become important in a later analysis about representations of Latinas in film as maids) and America Ferrara. This film, produced by Columbian born director Patricia Cardoso and written by Josefina Lopez (based on her own life) and George LaVoo, is the story of a Mexican American family living in East Los Angeles and follows a young woman named Ana (played by Ferrera) who is soon to graduate from high school and has to decide between staying home with her very traditional Mexican born parents or leaving for Columbia University and exploring a whole new contemporary world in New York City. Additionally, the film is about the lives and experiences of Mexican women as they negotiate their roles as daughters, mothers, friends, and co-workers in a sweatshop factory.

When I first went to see this film with a white female friend, I remember walking out of the film expressing my joy over what I had seen. Their experiences, from an ethnic, gendered and classed perspective seemed real to me. I felt that I had finally seen a movie that articulated my own frustrations as a working class Latina woman. (I come from a long family of factory workers, as my grandmother once worked for a Gordon's Shrimp plant and both my mother and aunt worked in a children's clothing factory in Miami, Florida. I still remember the sweat, smell and dark look of the factory floors and walls.) In the film, this Latina is trying to break out of the oppressive world of the larger assimilating (often white) community, as well as the oppressive nature of the Latina community which often excludes or silences the voices of women, while strengthening the position of the Chicano/Latino man. What I felt was a connection to experience, even as the women in the film were Mexican women in East Los Angeles. I thought to myself, how could any Latina watching the film not understand or feel a connection to the narrative?



For now, it is important to remember, in the articulation of this argument, that there is still a significant gap for representations of Latinas in mainstream film, television, and other popular culture texts. While there have been many strides made throughout the years, we still have to acknowledge that representation is still lacking and that those representations in themselves come with a fair amount of criticism. As an article entitled “*Our open letter to Hollywood*” in an October 2005 issue of *Latina* magazine attests, “what’s the point of pushing roles in new directions when you continue to have Latinos live by the same old clichéd and stereotyped rule book?” (152). Moreover, there are only so many films with Latino/a characters or Latino/a narratives. America Ferrera, the actress for *Real Women Have Curves*, articulates her own frustrations over the images produced in Hollywood of Latinas, as well as expectations for her own acting in a *USA Today* article. She says:

‘There’s a label on you when you’re going out for auditions,’ she says. ‘The part I was always going out for was the gangster girlfriend, all these really negative stereotypes of what a young Latina is. It was really disheartening.’ And she couldn’t exactly look to other Latinas for career guidance. ‘There are not many Latin-American role models in the entertainment business,’ she says. ‘You can count them on one hand. I would never see myself reflected...All I had was Jennifer Lopez and Salma Hayek as role models, but I don’t look anything like them’. (1–2)

It is interesting to note that Ferrara is articulating similar frustrations I have myself, as a spectator watching films that purportedly claim to represent my experience or me. It is also telling that Ferrara points out the lack of images offered in Hollywood representations, which often leave spectators in an ambiguous position of desiring representations of themselves so much, that they are willing to forego the accuracies of those representations, and arguably are forced into adhering to a pan-Latino/a identity instead. As Frances Negrón argues in *Boricua Pop: Puerto Ricans and the Latinization of American Culture*, “given the current political economy of representation for Latinos in mass media, Puerto Ricans, with less institutional clout,

general population, and numbers on Hollywood's home turf, identifying as a 'Latina' expands boricua agency and accrues additional value" (230).

Additionally, as I will mention in later chapters, there is a reality that many Latina actresses have often played Anglo characters or a generic unidentified ethnic individuals, to avoid being stereotyped in negative Latina representational roles. As Negrón states, "in *Out of Sight*, López played the generically named Karen Frisco, a vaguely Latin-sounding name that come from either Italy or Argentina. In fact, Frisco's father was white, touting López's career objective. 'The day I can make a movie and nobody is thinking of me as a Latina person-I'm thought of as just a person-that'll be a big thing'" (245). As an example of this, in Lopez's most successful role to date, as Mary Fiore in *The Wedding Planner* (2001), Lopez is playing an Italian woman. Similarly, we often have Anglo characters hired to play the stereotypical Latino/a roles as well. Moreover, each of the positions above becomes part of my thesis that in order for us to use the images produced in a less ambiguous manner and into a more possible realm of agency and subjectivity; we have to negotiate with the images to produce alternate readings. As we do so, we do have to acknowledge how the images may be negatively disseminated as well. Therefore, to return to my previous question, when a film surfaces that is directed by a Latina, written by Latinos/as and includes Chicana/o and Latina/o actresses (Ontiveros, Ferrara and even George Lopez), I wonder if all Latinas everywhere shouldn't be at least a little happy?<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> I am not naïve about the production aspect of filmmaking. It is significant to the marketing of the film that we understand the directors; stars and writers are Latino/a in order to understand our positions in Hollywood. As Frances Negrón-Muntaner states in Boricua Pop: Puerto Ricans and the Latinization of American Culture, "marketing Selena to Latino audiences required the cast, director, and producers to be available to the Spanish-speaking media, which mostly cater to recent and older immigrants. This inevitably created the context for each key player to show their fluency in Spanish, and hence their 'realness' in relation to their respective national cultures" (233).

However, while researching on the Internet, I found to my surprise and eventual understanding, that there were many Latinas who watched the film *Real Women Have Curves* and felt the exact opposite way.<sup>4</sup> It was interesting to find out that many felt that the film was too encompassing, conflating divisions of Latino identity. As such, many Latinas dismissed the film as amateurish and problematic. On a website entitled *OFF OFF OFF* film, one Latina argued, “if I were to state how I, as a Latina categorize this movie, I would have to say that it was a falsification of a movie that created false assumptions of whoever watched the movie of a ‘Latin’ family or style of living.’ Further, she states “this movie was an offense to the Latin culture”.<sup>5</sup> Self-identified as “a Latina coming from an immigrant family”, what is interesting to me is the tension produced by her opinions. It is a tension that derives from the struggle between wanting a desirable image of oneself in film and having to criticize one of the only representations offered. Similarly, others are torn between these intersections as well. As one Chicano identified male, Jesse, responds, “there is nothing believable--not the characters, story.” In response, Cecilia (whose racial make-up is unidentified) states in defiance, “I am glad for you that you believe the movie or characters are not realistic. This means that you do know "ZERO" about Mexican culture. Otherwise, you would think different. The movie, could not possible (sic) be more realistic.” I would like to point out that the responses I selected were fairly tame responses. The amount of anger elicited by the issue of whether or not the film “accurately” represented images of Latinas was overwhelming and serves to illustrate the significance of identity formation in

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<sup>4</sup> As an important issue, I think it is interesting to explain that the white female friend I saw the movie with, enjoyed the film immensely, articulating that she enjoyed the film from a gendered perspective, arguing that she understood the struggles and issues women had to deal within their familial relationships, as well as their relationships as friends and co-workers. As her project revolved around Marxist analysis of films, she identified with the working class perspective of the narrative.

<sup>5</sup> It is important to note that screenplay is based on the story of Josephina Lopez’s real life.

society. It explains why I am so interested in the how and whys of those formations, as well as their ambiguities. This returns us to the example articulated by bell hooks earlier in this introduction, about the frustrations of African-American students engaging with African-American-produced and directed films. Should they support the endeavor without criticism or can they engage in a healthy criticism that opens the gaps and fissures which allows for a clearer understanding of the workings of race, ethnicity, class, gender and more ideological standpoints? Is the criticism more effective than the appreciation of the images?

I offer my own feeling that the film was about taking pride in the very similarities that make us Latinas struggling for representation and voice in a local (familial) and global discourse. I realize that as such, I may situate myself in a controversial pan-Latino/a stance. Negrón argues in *Boricua Pop: Puerto Ricans and the Latinization of American Culture*, about what she believes is the real reason behind a pan Latino/a identity:

Selena went from being a Tejana (a territorialized “regional” identity) to being a Latina (a national “ethnic minority”) “Latino” here refers less to a cultural identity then to a specifically American national currency for economic and political deal making, a technology to demand and deliver emotions, votes, markets, and resources on the same level-and hopefully at an even steeper price-as other racialized minorities. It is also an appeal to ethno-national valorization, a way for diverse groups who are similarly racialized to pool their resources. (231)

Negrón-Muntaner steeps her analysis in the financial reality of a pan-Latino/a identity, suggesting that universalizing Latino/a experience is done to position products as more marketable to a more generic “Latino” audience. Yet, even as I understand that this is a political hotbed, I argue that without perfected images of ourselves, specifically, that of myself as a Puerto Rican working class woman, I am in that delicate position of either simply denying psychically (metaphorically) that I exist (at least with representations of cultural texts) or I find myself engaging with any text that offers me some possibility of existing. This is the process of negotiation. Therefore, I struggle to find something or perhaps anything that I can in the texts

offered. As such, a pan-Latino/a identity leaves me with a space in which I can actualize my existence.

In *From Bomba to Hip Hop*, Juan Flores articulates a possible way to engage with the concept of the pan-Latino/a identity. As Flores argues:

the pan-ethnic approach...has the distinct advantage for the study of Latinos centering analysis on the dialectic between the parts and the whole, the discrete national groups and the 'Latino' construct. The focus is necessarily on interaction, while the hypostasized social group itself, along with its 'discourse,' is understood as process rather than as a fixed entity or meaning. (150)

In other words, we can negotiate with the term pan-Latino/a, as we do with culturally produced images, to examine our constructs as well as our disseminations of the constructs, without necessarily universalizing experience or negating individualized ethnic nationalities in the process. This does not necessitate a homogenizing of experience. It necessitates finding commonalities. As I will elucidate later, I am negotiating with the cultural texts I have, in order to find some semblance of representation.

Therefore, I acknowledge that even though I am a Puerto Rican woman, I could still relate culturally and even, sociologically, as a Latina woman often oppressed and silenced, to the experiences of Mexican American women in this film. After all, we spoke the same language (even though our dialects may differ), looked somewhat the same (even if our features were somewhat different) and had similar life experiences (even as they lived in East Los Angeles in a nuclear family and I grew up in a broken home in Miami, Florida). I neither wish to negate the differences that make us different individuals, nor will I pretend that there is not some validity in seeing commonalties. I am (even against criticism) articulating a desire to strengthen the bond between Latinas, Chicanas and ethnic others through our experiences.

Similarly, there were other women online who articulated their joy that the film was strong in its complicated notions of identity for Latina women, issues they had been struggling with for

decades. For example, Erin G. states, “I am Mexican-American who knows several people who live life exactly like Ana’s. This movie was so true to life culturally for many Mexican-American women, so much that it could have been the basis for an ethnographic documentary”. Jerry Weinstein on *CultureVulture.net* states, “few American filmmakers have explored Latino lives with authenticity and intimacy” (2). The term authenticity is certainly questionable, as the responses above indicate, but what I would find interesting here, is how the critics are using the term to conflate Latino/a experience. Ultimately, the examples above explain how truly complicated viewing experiences are for all women, specifically women of color. What I understand now, is that all our positions came from our different positions as historical, social and economic subjects. We were not all ideologically the same; therefore, our understanding of the ideology of the film was not similar. As Jacqueline Bobo argues in *The Color Purple: Black Women as Cultural Readers*, “when a person comes to view a film, she/he does not leave her/his histories, whether social, cultural, economic, racial or sexual at the door” (281). This is why identification and audience studies are such tricky analyses.

And as I suggest above, even more interesting is the discussion of the film among national newspaper and magazine critics, who themselves seem determined to unify the experiences of ethnic others watching the film. In doing so, they often examine the film through the lens of the American Dream, and presumably everyone’s (I myself taught a course on the deconstruction of the American Dream) universal desire for it. Additionally, they sidestep issues of ethnicity in order to universalize the experience, as one about families that everyone in the society can relate to. I wonder if the engagement with such a strategy is to make the film less ethnic and more palatable to a traditionally white audience. As Roger Ebert of the *Chicago Sun-Times* states in his review, “Ana is a Mexican American, played by America Ferrera, an 18-year-old in her first

movie role....Her battle with her mother is convincing in the movie because the director, Patricia Cardoso, doesn't force it into a shrill melodrama but keeps it within the boundaries of a plausible family fight" (1). As James Berardinelli states in his review, "for Ana's part, living with her mother is stifling her....She sees college education as the way to broaden her horizons...One of the reasons the film resonates is that the final break of independence is something every individual must face, regardless of the family relationship" (2).

As I struggle with their reviews and the universalizing appeal in them, I fall back into the ambiguous position I have throughout this work. I do not wish to perpetuate this film as only capable of imbuing ethnic identification, nor do I wish to fall back on the precept that all Latinas should identify with the film, but I need to be able to say something significant about the film, something which needs to be identified, and I refuse to give credence to film reviewers who wish to deny the specific ethnic relevance of the film. As Jeremy Heilman on *moviemartyr.com* suggests, "Cardoso's direction isn't particularly distinguished, and like most movies that cater to minorities, there seems to be a bit too much underlining of the specific details that distinguish the minority portrayed" (2). Ultimately, I feel as if I am being positioned, as a Latina, to re-think or re-consider the relevance of this film, both in my own life and to others in their lives. I still maintain however, that there is much to be gained in the representations offered by this film, especially as we consider it one of only a few films that delve into issues that U.S Latino/a Americans are in the process of engaging with.

### **Dame Edna Pisses off the Masses and Salma Hayek Too: Examining the Use of Satire in Popular Culture.**

The second example I offer, as an analysis of how we negotiate with culturally produced Latino/a images, is a *Vanity Fair* "Dame Edna" column in February 2003. In the column, Dame Edna responds to this question: "I would very much like to learn a foreign language, preferably

French or Italian, but every time I mention this, people tell me to learn Spanish instead. They say, 'Everyone is going to be speaking Spanish in 10 years. George W. Bush speaks Spanish.'

Could this be true? Are we all going to have to speak Spanish?" Her response was as follows:

Forget Spanish. There's nothing in that language worth reading except Don Quixote, and a quick listen to the CD of Man of La Mancha will take care of that. There was a poet named García Lorca, but I'd leave him on the intellectual back burner if I were you. As for everyone's speaking it, what twaddle! Who speaks it that you are really desperate to talk to? The help? Your leaf blower? Study German or French, where there are at least a few books worth reading, or if you're American, try English. (116)

Attached to her response is a photograph of an (I can only presume) Anglo individual in a Mexican hat speaking to an armadillo. When I first read the question and response, even though I knew it was a satire, I was incredulous and my first response was negative. I began to articulate my frustrations by arguing to myself that her dismissal of both Spanish literature and music is problematic because it excluded the wonderful contributions that Hispanics, Latinos and Latin Americans had made to the world. I argued that her dismissal of the language as being only significant to talking to the help is what succeeds in marginalizing Latinas/os as part of a society. It threatened to exclude Latina/o discourse and make invisible the harsh realities of a system of class and ethnic oppression.

However, as I was thinking about the response, I thought about the column itself and its purported purpose in *Vanity Fair*, which is to satire worldviews and belief systems.<sup>6</sup> *Vanity Fair* is a high-end magazine which caters to individuals who are often educated, wealthy and white. Again, I will acknowledge that Dame Edna's column is a satire and its goal is often to shed light

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<sup>6</sup> Dame Edna is a character in drag played by Australian comedian Barry Humphries. It is important to acknowledge how Humphries articulates his persona. As [Wikipedia.com](http://Wikipedia.com) online informs us, "while Humphries freely states that Dame Edna is a character he plays, Dame Edna consistently denies being a fictional character or drag performer, and refers to Humphries as her 'entrepreneur' or manager. Indeed, Dame Edna has frequently said that the thought of a man dressing up as a woman for entertainment purposes is repulsive" (1).



on bourgeois, upper-middle-class society's hypocrisies.<sup>7</sup> As the Editors of *Vanity Fair* argued (after the Salma Hayek debacle) on *Whiteprivilege.com*, "Edna is a caricature of a certain type of small-minded, socially ambitious, vaguely upper-class person. Those familiar with Dame Edna's performances understand that her politically incorrect and often insulting utterances are meant as a parody of backward attitudes Humphries finds irritating or offensive" (1). Similarly, Myriam Marquez states in *Hey, Amigos: Chill about Dame Edna*, "seldom is satire respectful. It can be hurtful. But, ideally, it exposes the underbelly of human nature" (1). Satire can be painful, but it can be argued that it is especially painful for the disenfranchised that have no voice.

However, I argue that the Dame Edna's response is unfortunately conflated with the reality of a society which necessitates the use of Latino/a servants as conducive to maintaining its image of upward mobility. As Mary Romero in *Maid in the U.S.A* states, "the cheap domestic labor of women of color is one means by which white middle-class women escape oppressive aspects of their domestic roles. Their liberation is achieved at considerable cost to poor and working class women of color" (29). Therefore, I struggle with what Dame Edna said, because although it is satirical in notion, it is reality as well and we still have to understand the realities of our positioning as ethnic others in society and the daily discrimination we often face in light of the work we do.<sup>8</sup> As Adriana Lopez points out, "although Edna's xenophobic jab was intended as a

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<sup>7</sup> Thousands of Latinos/as responded in full force to the comments made by Dame Edna. For weeks after the magazine came out, a number of articles about the controversy appeared in major newspapers, internet sites and Latino/Hispanic based magazines. It is a significant aspect of spectator studies that so many Latinas/os, whites, and other ethnicities responded to the *Vanity Fair* article. The controversy has spanned a number of Discussion groups online and on one individual search on *Yahoo.com* over 1400, replies were found about the Dame Edna controversy. Many were angry about her comments, however, just as many found the controversy itself problematic as they argued in defense of Dame Edna's articles which they stated were a satire of upper middle class values.

<sup>8</sup> Many of these immigrants come to the United States daily for work in farms, private households and factories. According to Mary Romero in *Maid in the U.S.A*. "only the vaguest statistical data on Chicana private household workers are available, for the most part these workers remain a doubly hidden

joke, it was hard for Latinos to muster a laugh. There is little positive representation of Latinos in the media to begin with, despite the recognition of the growing Hispanic population” (1).

I want to make distinctly clear here that Latinas/os are not ignorant of satire or its workings in society. As such, I am more offended and frustrated by Marquez’s need to teach us the true meaning of satire. However, I can see using the fervor surrounding this column (especially that created by Latinos/as who responded to Dame Edna’s column with a bombardment of letters) as a way to further perpetuate negative images of Latinos/as as constantly confrontational, and ignorant of real Latino/a issues and concerns with more significance and relevance to our community, being unable to detect satire when they see it. As one anonymous reader of *Hispanic* magazine states:

what boggles my mind is not Dame Edna and her foul attitude—it’s us. For years and years we’ve been ignored and maligned...and we, the Latinos of the U.S.A., have, for the most part, acted as if we could have cared less. Instead of speaking out, too, many of us chose to stand by undisturbed, uninformed, apathetic, and always ready to seek excuses for not fully engaging. (1)

Furthermore, the reader continues by saying, “now, all of a sudden, one tired drag queen gibbers on about God-knows-what and surprise, we’ve got ourselves a revo-freakin’-lution” (1).

Forget for a moment that the individual negates the political activism of Latinos/as in society for the past sixty years (if not more). Forget for a moment the slap in our attempt to articulate our frustration with yet another moment of political punning. What is significant is the articulation of anger for Latinos/as everywhere. Everywhere I looked it was Latinos/as who were policing Latino/a responses. Richard Rodríguez comments on “Ask ‘Dame Edna’ - What happened to Humor?” in the *Pacific News Service*, “it’s truer today that humor is having a hard

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population” (10). It is important to note as well that In May 2006, the US Senate approved the building of a wall between Mexico and the United States to keep illegal immigrants out of the country.

time of it in America these days when we can't tell the difference between a joke and the deadly serious" (2).

What I found interesting as I looked over the varied responses to the *Vanity Fair* issue is that it was mostly Latinos/as who were attacking other Latinos/as, about their frustrations over the comments. As José Ruiz states, "you've done well, *Vanity Fair*, in unleashing one immigrant against other immigrants and their descendants" (2). Many online used the controversy to do exactly that. Marquez goes so far as to tell Latino/a audiences to calm down and not take the comments seriously. As she chastises, "learn to let hurtful comments slide. Pick your battles and know when to laugh...[Latinos] seem to miss what satire is supposed to be about...let's not go overboard, mis amigos, because we squander our energies and look like hypersensitive crybabies" (1-2). That this response comes from a Latina woman comes as no surprise. That she does not understand the controversy does. What positions have we been placed in when articulating our frustrations over the column? Why are the very individuals we hope understand our angst and anxiety about the relevant issues silencing us?

In the end, I believe that Dame Edna's article, although satirical, ends up failing in its goal to satirize upper-middle-class value systems; instead, it becomes a validation for those who are searching for a way to negate or efface Latina/o cultural discourse.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, it is telling that although this article is arguably a satire, even Salma Hayek herself, the featured cover that month, responded to the letter with her own "disappointed with *Vanity Fair*" response, "Not-so-

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<sup>9</sup> As an important side note framing the context of this discussion, Salma Hayek was dating fellow actor Edward Norton when the Dame Edna column came out in February 2003. Norton's past romantic relationship was with singer Courtney Love. Who was once quoted as saying that Norton would "never marry Hayek-for one he can barely understand half of what she's saying". The context of what Love stated (even in joking) frames the analysis above about the role of Latinas, language, and class within societal discourse.

dear Damn Edna (oops! My English is not so good) I'm sure you think that you're funny-maybe sometimes you are, but I wouldn't know... However, your humor in the February edition of *Vanity Fair* brings me to the conclusion that you are only funny looking".<sup>10</sup> *Vanity Fair* itself apologized to its audience in their April 2003 issue (although a quicker apology came on February 15, 2003 of that year), perhaps elucidating the fact that satire is only as significant as how it is understood in the realm of real issues of immigration and identity politics (which we should admit to ourselves, *may not be* what all readers of *Vanity Fair* are struggling with). An overwhelming amount of responses by Latinas/os acknowledges what defenders of Dame Edna's neglected to politicize. In a society where white middle-class value systems require the necessity of Latina/o workers, her column serves to reinforce the belief that white superiority is a given. However, whereas there is arguably room to make fun of white stereotypes and politics, the fact that Latinas/os are dealing with the reality of being servants and maids, the satire reinforces stereotypes where it should instead bring light to such. There is simply not enough satirical difference.

### **What Is in a Name? Defining Terms in Culture.**

The question of identity and naming is the most elucidated by the previous example of Tiger Woods in this introduction. Frustrated by society making claims on who he is and how should or could identify himself, Woods hoped he could disseminate that anxiety by creating a new word "Cablinasian" to identify himself within all of the racial, ethnic, social histories of his

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<sup>10</sup> The April 2003 issue of *Vanity Fair* included a letter of response from Salma Hayek, which states: "as for your statement that there is nothing in our language worth reading except 'Don Quixote,' and that Garcia Lorca should be left on the intellectual back-burner, you could not be more sadly mistaken... What belongs on the backburner are your ridiculous fake eyelashes, which are clearly keeping you from reading Nobel-prize winners such as Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Octavio Paz and Camilo Josi Cela".

family name. As Suzanne Oberler tells us in *The Politics of Labeling Latino/a Cultural Identities of Self and Others*, “characterizations of the self necessarily evoke those of the other, and there are many ‘others’ to be portrayed, recreated and redefined in the process” (19). Although I argue that Woods is naïve in hoping that discovery of this new word would silence society’s claims on his identity, I understand the difficult position in which Woods frames himself in this particular discourse. One’s identity frames a particular political, social and economic discourse as well. As Jose Calderon argues in *“Hispanic” and “Latino”: The Visibility of Categories for Panethnic Unity*, “Latinos interviewed at the city council and administrative levels owned property and had a stake in the local economy, and they were unwilling to affiliate with a political identity that might jeopardize their positions...Those at this level who preferred to use the term Hispanic submitted that it was politically safer and more acceptable to the mainstream than others” (41). Therefore, as the above example makes clear, individuals who position themselves as “Hispanic” frame themselves behind a particular classed identification marker. At the same time, there are others who deliberately do not use the term “Hispanic” because it threatens to position them in those classed identities which they resist, along with situating themselves against a generically devised term created by a government, which they feel is trying to pan-identity all Latinos within a similar rubric which simplifies matters for them. As Oberler tells us, “informants rejected the term Hispanic as a self-identifier, but this rejection took many forms and was particularly differentiated in terms of social class” (22). As Oberler furthermore informs us, the threat felt by Latinos was the fear that the term “Hispanic” was a “homogenizing label” (24).

Similarly, imbuing the term “Chicano” or “Latino” positions oneself with a more political framework. The term, Chicano, is historically a term associated with the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s and is specifically used to frame one’s identity (generally Mexican-American

identity) from a political, social and occasionally economic standpoint. As Eduardo Del Rio states, “Mexican-American is the preferred term for many people of Mexican origin who do not like the political implications associated with the term Chicano” (4). The term Latino, generated in the last 20 years is a term accepted in a more academic environment, associated with defining oneself outside of a connection to Spain and more defined within Latin America, including the Caribbean. Therefore, many Puerto Ricans often employ the term as a way to define oneself under colonial oppression and as a term which was created by themselves and not a government agency which threatens homogenization.

Whether employing the term “Hispanic”, or “Latino” or “Chicano”, many feel that to use any of the terms positions them within the political, social and economic framework of that word; as such, the danger is accepting one term above another is the danger of losing a particular Americanized identity (along with national and class distinctions) which threatens to exclude them from an American discourse. As Antonio Darder and Rodolfo D. Torres tells us in *Latinos and Society: Culture, Politics and Class*, “this is particularly the case with US Latino populations whose different national, class, gender, and sexual identities have been homogenized in terms of public policy under the all-encompassing categorical label of ‘Hispanic’ which, not surprisingly, is divided in terms of ‘white’ and ‘non-white’ subcategories” (10). Additionally, the term by which to accurately define oneself becomes more complicated by factors which include nationalistic principles, divisions in color, country and language to name just a few. Ultimately, because this project is grounded within politically gendered, classed and ethnic intersections and divisions, it is important for me to employ what I believe are more political terms. Therefore, I use the terms Latino and Chicano to examine images in popular culture.

### **Bringing down the House: Examining Images of Latinas in Mainstream Cultural Texts.**

Ultimately, this work is about representation and identity. My goal in looking at the images of Latinas in popular cultural texts is about how those images are used to position Latinas in the cultural discourse. Additionally, it is about how we can and should negotiate with the images in order to position ourselves within that discourse as critical agents with voice and subjectivity. I am interested in the ways in which Latinas are framed by both Latinos/as in themselves as well as within the discourse of dominant white culture. For the reference of this work, I will use the term discourse as the conversations, discussions, and arguments and such which often determine the political, social and economic positioning of individuals within society. Additionally, I use the term ideology to discuss collections of ideas in society.

The first chapter of my work entitled “*Made to be a Maid?: An examination of the Latina as maid in mainstream television and film*” focuses on the Latina maid as a necessary component of American films in the last twenty years and examines how the Latina as maid is often used to complicate, problematize or situate white middle-class or upper-middle-class value systems. I argue that the Latina maid or servant functions in very specific ways for white audience members; from clarifying for the audience the class status of the often Anglo protagonist of a film, to showing the protagonist as a good and earnest individual who is worthy of the respect and admiration given to them by their servants, to showing them as revamped spitfires, which threaten the security of white familial and economic ideals, and finally to showing the protagonist as conscientious of culture and ethnicity in the changing world around them. Why have images of Latinas, as maids, servants or workers, offer white culture the fact that they have become a staple of that culture? Additionally, through our position as critical agents capable of negotiation, are there ways to engage with the images in positive ways; for example, looking for the ambiguity in these images in order to find a way to re-appropriate the images?

The second chapter entitled “*The mammy mythology: Mammyhood revamped for the Latina servant*” examines the mammy figure in television and film as this figure is connected with, yet distinct from, that of the Latina maid. The analysis of the Latina maid or servant, as a new mammy figure of comfort for the Anglo protagonist, needed its own dialogue because it was in and of itself a complicated concept which also includes the discourse and relationship between Anglo women and women of color throughout the last two hundred years. Because white culture is predisposed historically to imagine a mutual relationship between black women mother figures, I argue that white women today need the discourse of a relationship between them and their servants (most often women of color), which is mutually beneficial and important for the white woman to feel good about her own identity. Moreover, I argue that it is the desire to be mothered by women of color that makes white women create a fantasy of friendship about that relationship. I argue that the Latina maid, as reconfigured mammy figure, works in a number of ways, which include the Latina maid as a figure of comfort, as a surrogate parent, as a body or site of difference, and as an individual who helps to accentuate privilege.

The third chapter entitled “*Are you my homie?: Examining ethnic toys and collectibles in a new financial playground*” examines a relatively new cultural product on the market—Homies and Mijos—in relationship to how and why they are consumed by the general population. Homies and Mijos are small 2-inch plastic Latino/a dolls sold in vending machines across the country. I examine why they were created and how they serve to represent Latino/a or Chicano/a ideals and values. It proves an interesting analysis which further complicates notions of Latino/a identity in United States consumer society. I argue that these collectibles offer Latinos/as nationality, a bonding community, a history, an ethnicity, a sense of identity and an affirmation of their significance in the multi cultural world around us. Additionally, I examine homies



through the lenses of ethnic collecting, making ties to the historical collecting of black memorabilia. Why are Latino/a collectors collecting versions of themselves? What ethnographic desires are embedded in this collecting? What is to be said about the controversy surrounding the collection, of what some argue, may be problematic images? From a gendered framework, I am interested in the tensions between my gender and racial identity, in my desire to engage with these cultural products. What intersections are created? Which ones are become more divided? As always, it is the ambiguities of these tensions which engage with in the chapter.

I hope in the articulation of my experience, as well as the experience of other Chicanas/Latinas, we are able to understand that Chicanas/Latinas are engaging with cultural texts and becoming a part of the critical process, instrumental in finding voice and subjectivity in a society which often excludes ethnic women in the cultural discourse. As bell hooks says in

*Yearning: race, gender and cultural politics:*

cultural critique is particularly relevant to black artist and/or intellectuals who see ourselves as committed to an ongoing black liberation struggle with a central emphasis on decolonization. Education for critical consciousness is the most important task before us. Working in the academy, as many of us do, it is through a liberatory pedagogy that we make useful critical intervention. (5–6)

CHAPTER 2  
MADE TO BE A MAID? AN EXAMINATION OF THE LATINA AS MAID IN  
MAINSTREAM FILM AND TELEVISION.

I was watching films one day when I noticed something similar throughout them that I had never noticed before. I wondered how this similarity spoke to the way in which narratives are complicit in perpetuating a negative image of the Latina experience. Each of the films I was watching had a Latina maid. A few of these films, in just the last twenty years, include *Goonies* (1985), *Down and Out in Beverly Hills* (1986) and *Maid in Manhattan* (2002).<sup>1</sup> A few television shows include *Designing Women* (1986–1993), *Veronica's Closet* (1997–2000), and *Will & Grace* (1998–present). Many Latina maids appear in guest roles in different shows like *Who's the Boss*, *Sex and the City*, *CSI: Miami*, *Seinfeld*, *Bones*, and a plethora of other television shows and film. This trend is so prevalent that Mexican maids even crop up in Mexican films like 2002's *Y Tu Mamá También* and Latino films like 2003's *Chasing Papi*.

Like a computer background setting, which individuals often use to express some creativity on their part (their own photography, family photos, various graphics) and which often affirms something about their identity (fun-loving, adventurous, bold), these background Latina maids often serve to say something ideologically about the family or individual they work for in the film. Since I maintain that these Latina maids in film are not there simply by chance, it is

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<sup>1</sup> A more inclusive list of Latina maids in films is as follows: *The Incredible Shrinking Woman* (1981), *El Norte* (1983), *Troop Beverly Hills* (1989), *Regarding Henry* (1991), *Cape Fear* (1991), *Leap of Faith* (1992), *Universal Solider* (1992), *Clueless* (1995), *Ransom* (1996), *First Wives Club* (1996), *As Good As it Gets* (1997), *Liar, Liar* (1997), *Enemy of the State* (1998), *Dr. T and the Women* (2000), *Don't Say a Word* (2001), *Storytelling* (2001), *Two Weeks Notice* (2002), *Big Trouble* (2002), *Mr. Deeds* (2002), *Big Fat Liar* (2002), *Mr. St. Nick* (2002), *Hollywood Homicide* (2003), *The Last Shot* (2004), *Win a Date with Tad Hamilton* (2004), *Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* (2005), *Spanglish* (2004) and *Crash* (2005). Just a few television shows include *Charlie's Angels* (1976-1981), *I Married Dora* (1987-1988), *21 Jump Street* (1987-1991), *Designing Women* (1986-1993), *Dudley* (1993), *Veronica's Closet* (1997-2000), *Pasadena* (2001), *Will & Grace* (2003-Present), *Curb your Enthusiasm* (2000-present), *Ed* (2000-2004), *Reba* (2001-2006), *24* (2001-2006), *O.C* (2003-2006), *Whoopi* (2003-2004) and *Arrested Development* (2003-2006), shows (both parodies), as well as a new television shows on HBO and Showtime called *Entourage* (2004-present) and *Weeds* (2005-present).

essential to discuss the many ways in which the Latina maid or servant functions for the mainstream white—and sometimes Latino—audiences.<sup>2</sup> Understanding how the Latina maid functions leads to an understanding of the politics of racial relationships and the politics of Hollywood discourses. My goal in taking a closer look at the representation of Latina representation is suggested in Krin Gabbard's *Black Magic: White Hollywood and African American Culture*, an academic text which examines the complicated politics of African-Americans in films. Gabbard's book sheds light on the ways in which whiteness or white people remain in "unquestioned centrality" in American films (7). As Richard Dyer argues in *White*, "research-into books, museums, the press, advertising, films, television...shows that in Western representation whites are overwhelmingly and disproportionately predominant, have the central and elaborated roles and above all else are placed as the norm, the ordinary, the standard" (3).

It is in recognizing how whiteness is presented as a standard and in analyzing it which allows us to understand how racial others are constructed. As Gabbard further argues, "there is no better way of looking at how whiteness is constructed in movies than by examining how blackness makes these constructions work" (8). Looking at the image of the Latina maid allows us to understand how the role of the marginalized Latina continue to play in Hollywood and the racial myths that continue to perpetuate themselves in American racial mythology about the nature of the Latina. And although it may seem a mere coincidence that there are a number of Latina maids in film and television, it is the overwhelming number of them which is suggestive of an ideological need of mainstream white audiences. It is a racial invisibility which needs to become a visible reality.

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<sup>2</sup> For purposes of this essay, I will employ the use of the term Anglo--which means white--when defining individual actors or actresses, to define their ethnic make-up in a film. However, for the audience I speak of, I will employ the use of the term white as a general make up of audience spectators.

The image of the Latina servant or maid in film and television, from the beginning of the 1980's to today, performs a number of different narrative purposes, some of which have been fulfilled by different groups of people throughout the years. Each, however, speaks to the way in which the Latina maid is a necessary character for the Anglo characters. First, the Latina maid or servant often clarifies the generally Anglo protagonist as a classed individual. She often clarifies the progress that the Anglo protagonist has achieved, through obvious hard work and determination. For example, in the 2002 film, *The Banger Sisters*, the Latina maid serves to illustrate just how much Susan Sarandon's character Lavinia Kingsley has come up in the world. In *Veronica's Closet*, she serves as an indicator of the wealth Veronica has achieved throughout her modeling years.

Second, the Latina maid serves the function of allowing white protagonists and characters to see themselves as good and altruistic individuals, who are worthy of care and devotion from their servants. This shows the true nature of the protagonist, even in light of obvious character flaws. In *First Wives Club*, Teresa, the Latina maid is rewarded for good and loyal service by Cynthia (an upper class woman played by Stockard Channing) who gives the maid an expensive pearl necklace as thanks for loyalty throughout the years, right before Cynthia jumps out of a window. This indicates that Cynthia indeed cares for the servant, even as she is preserved as a martyr for first wives everywhere. In *Maid in Manhattan*, the Latina maid serves to foreground in the male Anglo character Chris Marshall (played by Ralph Fiennes) his true dedication to the cause of the working class, his worthiness as an individual as he struggles against a political system which threatens to abuse individuals like Jennifer Lopez's character Marisa Ventura. It is Marisa's ideas about class oppression that makes Fienne's character the hero of the story, willing to fight for the underdog, represented by Marisa. In this way, not only does the Anglo

protagonist gain the loyalty of his constituents, specifically those minority constituents in the working class neighborhood he visits, but he is also able to do so by employing her value system, without acknowledging her contribution.

Additionally, the function of the Latina maid serves to allow the Anglo protagonists a sense of altruism in a larger global and philosophical world, as they help Latinas/os gain employment and provide for their own families, thereby solidifying their care of humankind and their neighbors. In *Down and Out in Beverly Hills*, the Anglo protagonists often posit themselves as “good people” who have helped the underclass minority to achieve greatness, both as maids and gardeners for their homes, but also as factory workers in Mr. Whiteman’s hanger factory. On *Will & Grace*, Karen Walker often forces Rosario, the Latina maid, to acknowledge all that she has done for her, from giving her a job to getting her a green card. Although I must acknowledge that *Will & Grace* is a comedy television show. As such, we often have characters who, through satire and parody, reflect our misconceptions of the stereotypes we have about certain individuals. Therefore, Rosario is often cheeky and Karen often looks the fool for the harshness of her outlandish behavior, which is also reflective of the parody being offered.

Third, the Latina maid serves as ethnic flavor for the Anglo protagonists. Ethnic “flavor” is how we understand that the main characters are hip to the world, understanding culture and ethnicity in an ever-changing society. As such, having a Latina maid helps them gain a global sense of perspective. In *Down and Out in Beverly Hills*, for example, Carmen provides Spanish language lessons and food lessons to Mrs. Whiteman, the mother of the family. In this example, the Whiteman’s prove that they care about the social welfare of Latinos/as; at the same time that an exclusive relationship can exist, which is mutually beneficial for both the employee and the

employer. Mrs. Whiteman helps Carmen with a job and Carmen, in her gratitude, helps Mrs. Whiteman prove her dedication to a global sense of “culture”.

Finally, Latina maids are often sexy servants (a throwback to the 1930’s Latina “spitfires”) who threaten the status quo of the white upper middle class and middle class. Their exuberant sexuality is both an ethnic threat to the assumed purity of sexuality within the Anglo household (specifically that of the white woman), and also a threat if she uses that sexuality to break up the marriage, and hence the value systems of the Anglo household and, further, white society. In both *Big Trouble* and *Down and Out in Beverly Hills*, the Latina maid threatens that seemingly secure and untouchable status. These Latina maids are used by Anglo male protagonists of the films as sexual relief, from the hum drum reality of their suburban lifestyles. Additionally, they are used by the Anglo female protagonists, as the reason their marriages fail within the same suburban life. These maids serve as a displacing option for the white middle class, who would rather blame the Latina maid for their descent from privilege than blame the political, economic and social realities of a particular time.

It is important, however, to explain that these roles are often conflated with one another. Therefore, a Latina maid like Carmen in *Down and Out in Beverly Hills* provides cultural lessons, provides us with a visual marker of the class status of the Anglo family, at the same time that she serves as the sexy Latina temptress who threatens the Whiteman’s marriage. The Latina maid Marisa in *Maid in Manhattan* reaffirms for a white audience and the Anglo protagonists the position of the ethnic other, at the same time that the Latina maid offers resistance and upward mobility for the ethnic spectator. All of this happens within a universal love story which tries to appeal to all in a racially charged world where our differences could melt away.

Ultimately, my analysis strives to explain and understand how these individualized classifications of the Latina maid are used to complicate, problematize or situate white middle class or upper middle class value systems, as well as their own identity politics and individualized experiences. As I tackle this examination, I will also connect the historical and traditional employment of ethnic help, in both film and in modern society. Beginning with an analysis of the film *The Banger Sisters*, which addresses the ideological process of denial that under grids a classed sense of “whiteness” in these films, I will work my way through *Down and Out in Beverly Hills*, in order to show how one character in one film embodies all of the classifications of the Latina maid; finally I move on to an analysis of *Maid in Manhattan*, which purports to escape the traditional placement of the Latina maid, but which merely serves to reinforce traditional stereotypes and finally to the television show *Monk*, in which Latina maids are unusually placed to challenge some assumptions and reaffirm others.

### ***The Banger Sisters: The Most Visible of Maids.***

Let me begin by explaining a moment in a recent 2002 film starring well-known actresses Goldie Hawn and Susan Sarandon. *The Banger Sisters* has a scene in which Hawn plays Suzette (no last name given); a woman whose real life has never met up with the expectations of her experiences in the 1960’s when she “banged” well known rockers for a living. She seeks out her left-it-all-behind friend Lavinia Kingsley (played by Susan Sarandon) an upper middle class conservative, who neither acknowledges her old life nor the reality that her life today is monotonous and suburban. As Suzette becomes frustrated by what she imagines is Lavinia’s pretend existence, she questions Lavinia’s abuse of history, her entrapment as a woman and her views on class oppression. One crucial scene serves to explain both Suzette’s superiority as a working-class woman who understands “true oppression” and explains the taken-for-granted system of the upper middle class whose work is built on the backs of invisible servants. Suzette

lectures Lavinia's spoiled children Hannah and Ginger about dishes they do not want to clean. As they argue about the dishes, the young girls point out to Suzette that it is Rosa who normally does them. Suzette then asks the girls if they know Rosa's last name, to which they reply no. Suzette then says, "you have people wiping your ass and you don't even know their names." After the confrontation, she calls them spoiled brats and they begin to clean the dishes.

Implicit in the scene is the moral of the film that privileges are not deserved, but rather earned, and without hard work, one is destined to become the irrelevant (as designated by her daughters, husband and friend), oppressed mother Lavinia, who lives in a daze and mechanically goes through life everyday doing what is needed, but not what she desires. This scene examines how radically Lavinia's life has changed and how complicit she and her daughters are in a world that oppresses "workers." In other words, the philosophical question of the film becomes, "When did I become the person who oppresses? When did I turn my back on real work?" Lavinia's realization and self discovery are the discourse of the film. Rosa, the maid, spoken of, but never seen, explains much about the invisible presence of a narrative that excludes Latinos/as from the daily discourse of life. The narrative had made her, her history and her subjectivity invisible. The maid could have been anyone; however, we assume, without having to see her that Rosa is probably an immigrant and she takes care of this family out of loyalty or love.

It is easy to understand that the purpose of the film *The Banger Sisters* is not to explain or individualize the experience of this Latina maid. However, the film chooses *her subjectivity* to emphasize an abusive white upper middle class reality. It is her abuse, by the daughters, that frames the discourse of the film. Therefore, her subjectivity is significant, especially as we consider its momentary purpose to clarify a white upper middle class whose achievements take for granted the hard work of ethnic others. However, her subjectivity and her abuse are quickly



displaced onto Suzette. We are to understand, through the physical invisibility of the Latina maid, that she is no longer the focus of the discourse; that focus is shifted to Suzette and her hard work as a bartender, which has been taken for granted throughout the years by people like Sarandon's middle class character. Therefore, the invisible Latina here was never significant to the narrative, so why is she Latina? Simply put, the Latina maid is necessary in order for the white spectator audience (and sometimes ethnic audience as well) to understand the Anglo family in the film as classed individuals and at the same time to understand the family as good and altruistic individuals who have helped employ others in need.

*The Banger Sisters* is not different from other typical films, which produce the same narrative. Another such film which includes remarkably similar dialogue and narrative purpose is the film *Clueless*, with Alicia Silverstone in the role of a clueless young girl named Cher Horowitz whose discussion with the Latina maid serves to foreground her discovery of her taken-for-granted system of oppression. In this film, Cher asks Lucy (played by Aida Linares) to parley to Jose the gardener that they got a second notice to fix the bushes. Lucy tells Cher to tell him herself and Cher replies that she does not speak Mexican. Lucy replies, "I no a Mexican," and Cher is then admonished by her stepbrother, who clarifies for her that Lucy is from El Salvador. Implicit in the scene, like in the film *The Banger Sisters* is the fact that Silverstone's character Cher comes to the realization that she is part of a system of oppression; and as with *The Banger Sisters*, this realization paradoxically displaces the servants' oppression onto the white female protagonist. Therefore, it is Cher's growth in the film which is significant and not the Latina maid's ethnicity, politics, or heritage. It does not escape my notice either that Jose the Gardener is probably Latino as well. Most of these narratives, which include a moment with a background Latina maid, usually foreground the subtle politics of the film that the Anglo

protagonist is either simplistic in nature or capable of great change, using the politics of the Latina maid as a superficial discourse for the growth of a white consciousness. It is also interesting to note that of a variety of movie critics who analyzed this film in the popular press, none discussed the moment of the Latina maid either, even though it is at a critical juncture of the film which foregrounds its politics.

Whether subconscious or not, the choice to position these maids, as Latina, becomes an ideological one which reinforces the image of Latinas/os as “background” to certain social questions. Clearly, they are such a necessary prop in films that Mary Romero, in *Maid in the U.S.A.*, states these are “shadow figures, walk on props in films and TV programs celebrating family life among Texas oil barons or Wall Street executives” (2). In addition, this concept of the Latino/a worker continues to efface the Latina in Hollywood, where the assumption, for the most part, is that the Latina can only be seen in the role of the maid, not in the role of the lead. It is therefore telling that Latinas in films often do not play Latinas at all, as they might not want to be caught up in these typecast roles. This is why the film *Maid in Manhattan*, starring popular actress Jennifer Lopez, is an interesting film to analyze, because her subjectivity is clearly framed within the concept of upward mobility, a new trend for the Latina maid in contemporary film. It is this sense of an arguably false agency that positions the Latina spectator in an interesting dichotomy between the image they want to disenfranchise and the only image that allows them any agency or possibility of upward mobility

### **Fictional Servants: How Necessary Are Latina Maids?**

As Mary Romero in *Maid in the U.S.A* states:

While shadowy figures of Latina maids and nannies serving in homes being groomed by Latino gardeners are still common media images and fixtures in urban and suburban landscapes across the country, real life has intruded into the American consciousness as well. The importance of the role that the Latina domestics play in the lives of the well-to-do has become unmistakable. (2)

Additionally, Romero argues that actual Latinas are necessary because she fulfills a specific economic need in the white upper middle class. She argues that, “the intersection of statuses constitute Latina immigrant women as ideal candidates to fulfill the needs of the American families. Not only are they less expensive than employees hired by agencies who pay benefits, but they are easily exploited for additional work” (6). Furthermore, Romero argues that this is more than simply hiring a domestic worker for inside the home; it also includes a variety of other positions. She states, “citizenship, race, ethnicity, class and gender continue to mark the boundaries of domestic service-an occupation that extends from the rare household staff that includes butler, driver, cook, maid, and nanny to the day worker who cleans four to nine hours for a different employer each day...” (3).

However, the financial necessity of hiring the Latina maid is often constituted as an unselfish act for that white upper middle class necessity, as whites situate the act of hiring as an altruistic one, in which they help the underclass minority, while helping their own financial bottom line. Because white employers understand both the financial need of their Latina/o employees and the “hard work” value systems presumably inherent in ethnic identity (as a necessity of being allowed to stay in the country and prove one’s ability to achieve the American Dream), they use this to their advantage in hiring ethnic employees. Romero’s argument acknowledges a changing culture that threatens white security. Without servants, there is the threat of being positioned as part of the underclass themselves (a subtle ideology which plays out in the film *Down and Out in Beverly Hills*). Without servants, they have to fulfill the obligations of childcare and housing duties themselves.

Therefore, in hiring ethnic help, white people are subtly able to assuage their liberal guilt over their exclusion of Latinas/os as part of the culture around them, as they create a myth

around the concept of hiring ethnic labor and re-creating the hiring as an altruistic act. As a real-life example of this mythmaking, Mary Romero tells us in her book of Linda Chavez, who was the former nominee for Secretary of Labor under George W. Bush. Chavez claimed “the two years she provided shelter and cash to Marta Mercado, an undocumented Guatemalan, was not an employment arrangement, but rather an act of charity and compassion” (14). Thus, Chavez (a conservative Latina) solidifies the relationship as a personal one (regulated by kindness and altruism) and not a public one which should be regulated under the law.

The background Latina maid in real life and in film is no new pattern. For years, servants, field hands, caretakers and *others* have fulfilled the purpose of clarifying quickly the classed position of an Anglo character in the narrative and indeed in real life. Furthermore, they serve to clarify and reaffirm hierarchal societal realities that are necessary for the upper middle class to feel good about their wealth and success. They also allow individuals to feel good about helping the ethnic, who needs the altruism of the employer in order to be a successful part of society. This is true for both mainstream film and television productions and social reality. The wealthy individual today needs the ethnic servant. And I believe that the ethnic individual may feel she/he needs the Anglo patron for real life economic realities, as well as her/his upward mobility growth, which may not happen without the altruism of the Anglo majority in the world today. Additionally, there is a vital connection necessary between the white characters (white spectators looking for positions of relation) and the servants (played historically by black characters and not Latinas/os) which speaks to the legacy of the relations between whites and people of color in the United States, one that is occasionally built on the ideology of friendship and mutual co-dependence, but which often forgets a legacy of racism and gender inequalities.

## The Historical Legacy of the Ethnic Maid in Film

It is necessary to situate the representation of the Latina maid in context with other ethnic maids throughout films of the twentieth century, so as to elucidate the connection between the past and the present and the ways it seems the maid is necessary (or at least a preferable trope) for the structuring of a white classed identity. In the early decades of film (1910–1930), the visible servant was often an Irish immigrant. According to Faye E. Dudden in *Serving Women: Household Service in Nineteenth-Century America*, “when the famine immigration poured into the United States from Ireland in the late 1840s and early 1850s, it began to look as though every servant was Irish, at least in the major seaboard cities” (60). This trend of hiring Irish women continued throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century and found its way into the twentieth century. Hiring Irish women was often convenient for white women who found the fact that the Irish spoke the same language, unlike Russian, German or Scandinavian workers, a helpful necessity to the household. As Dudden states, “facing no language barrier, they could find ready acceptance as servants, and entering service solved the problem of finding housing...” (60). The trend then to hire Irish servants makes its way into early cinema, because of what is commonly seen in individual households. Therefore, the stereotype of the Irish servant also makes its way into early cinema. However, it was the early concept of the “Irish Biddy”, which saw Irish immigrant women as helpless and problematic, that becomes more significant to the way in which the servant is structured for the white spectator audience on the cinematic screen:

The Irish domestic, stereotypically referred to as ‘biddy,’ which dominated the labor market at mid-century and therefore drew the blame for servant problems, tended to make an unsatisfactory servant. She carried to extremes what were, in the eyes of the employers, the characteristic faults of domestics. Among ‘faithless strangers’ the immigrant woman was most faithless, not just personally but culturally. (Dudden 65)

This reinforced for upper middle class women, both in reality and in film, their altruistic sense that they were helping (or rescuing?) immigrant women with their inability to take care of

themselves. At the same time, they were able to reinforce that they were continuing their individual responsibilities to their families, therefore not feeling the guilt of not maintaining their roles of motherhood. Therefore, the domestic servant allowed the white upper middle class woman to “welcome the prospect of more elevated activities than constant domestic drudgery” (Dudden 47). Nevertheless, because of immigrant and economic realities, the Irish biddy is the visual servant of early cinematic films. However, Irish immigrant women became increasingly unwilling to work for low wages, in addition to religious differences and often saw domestic service as a temporary working condition before marriage. This is a fact we can contribute to an assimilation of white cultural values. According to David M. Katzman in *Seven Days a Week:*

*Women and Domestic Service in Industrializing America:*

whatever effects the cultural matrix had on the Irish-born womans propensity for domestic service, the next generation-the first to be born in the United States-had adapted sufficiently to the American experience to avoid household labor . . . . Clearly, for Irish immigrants service had provided the vehicle for entry into American society and for upward mobility. (70)

Therefore, as Irish woman began marrying and moving into middle class circles, black servants, who have always been commonplace in the south due to slavery, became commonplace further north and indeed in television and film. David Katzman explains, as the number of white women servants, including Irish women decreased, the number of African-American servants began to increase. Katzman states, “at the same time black women were migrating from the South into Northern cities, they began replacing whites in the nation’s largest cities, where they formed an urban servant population. Soon black women comprised nearly a majority of servants and laundresses nationally” (72). Additionally Katzman argues, “unlike white women, for whom household labor provided a bridge between leaving their parents home and getting married, many urban black women could expect to be wage earners most of their lives, regardless of whether or not they married” (72). Therefore, in the 1930’s and throughout the 1950’s, the servant in film

was more often than not African-American. Mary Romero argues in *Maid in the U.S.A.*, “it is not surprising to find that the pre-civil rights movement image of the African American woman toiling in the kitchen, cleaning the house, and caring for white people’s children has largely been replaced by images of immigrant women speaking Spanish and living as undocumented workers in the U.S” (2). Implicit always in the trends is the concept that the hired hand will be ethnic. Only in rare exceptions is the servant not Latina. For example, the hiring of au pairs and cooks tends to lean toward whiter servants, suggesting a division between work and ethnicity.

The 1930’s servant is most typified by actress Hattie McDaniel who was the first black woman to win a Best Supporting Actress Oscar for her role as Mammy, Scarlett O’Hara’s servant and friend in the 1939 film *Gone with the Wind*. In fact, Mc Daniel was widely successful in portraying the mammy figure in over 82 films. According to Carlton Jackson in *Hattie: the Life of Hattie McDaniel*, at the end of her career, during the 1950’s, McDaniel refused to play the mammy roles; for this she was boycotted (or blacklisted) by producers and left, ironically, to become a real maid in order to support herself. It is interesting here to note the conflation between the real Hattie McDaniel and the roles she played all her life. I am almost certain that most spectators felt McDaniel was “naturally” inclined for her role as a maid.

The changes in the ethnic makeup of help on film and television, from African-American to ethnic others, came from a changing economic structure in African-American families. As Carlton Jackson states in *Hattie: The Life of Hattie McDaniel*:

by the mid-point of Hattie’s career, the late thirties, things were changing. Black newspapers had grown in quantity, and many of their reporters were young, sophisticated, and educated, and would not follow what they considered to be the meek, fawning ways of their ancestors. The liberalism engendered by World War II furthered this feeling of black independence. Anything that smacks of ‘Uncle Tomism,’ or ‘Mammyism,’ came under attack by the black activists. (95)

Similarly, Patricia A. Turner tells us in *Ceramic Uncles & Celluloid Mammies: Black Images and Their Influence of Culture*:

starting in the late 1950s and through the 1960s and 1970s, a window was broken in the kitchen to which African-American women had been confined. Suddenly they had increased opportunities to seek work outside their own and other people's homes. Educational opportunity grants afforded access to higher education, and employers were eager to display their liberal credentials by hiring African-American employees. (56)

As African-American families began their upward mobility into the middle class, new immigrants again filled the opening for domestic servants in the home. As Mary Romero states:

the occupation in the United States not only involved class differences between employer and employee but racial and ethnic differences as well. In South Carolina, employers typically expect to hire African American women as domestics; in New York, employers may expect their domestics to be Caribbean immigrants; however, in Los Angeles and Chicago they can expect to hire undocumented Latin American immigrants. (101)

Therefore, as soon as new immigrants arrived, they were displaced as working class or poverty class individuals. Because of a lack of education, language barriers, and ethnic discrimination, they often found themselves working as servants in white households. According to *Women Immigrants in the United States*:

the U.S immigration peaked in the first decade. . .picking up speed again immediately after World War II and accelerating exponentially after the 1970s... the figures indicate that immigration in the first half of the century was dominated by immigrants from Europe (more than 80 percent) while the contemporary era is dominated by those from Latin America and Asia. (Zhou 23)

Thus, it is important to note that this system of hiring has also been grounded in geographic realities. What often helps to frame the discourse of the Latina maid is the geographic setting of the film or the television show. For example, films like *Forrest Gump*, *Clara's Heart*, and *Corrina, Corrina* more often feature African-American servants, as those films are set in the South. Whereas films or shows set in eastern New York City such as *Will & Grace* or Miami such as *Big Trouble*, often feature Latina or South-American workers, films set in California, like *Hollywood Homicide* or *Big Fat Liar* often feature Mexican maids. Also, it is important to



note that the film's decade or century may also necessitate a certain background as well. Films situated historically during the Civil Rights movement more often feature African-American servants. Implicit always, no matter what the decade or geographic setting, is the concept that the hired hand will always be ethnic. However, as I suggested previously, au pairs and cooks tend to be whiter, more educated and of unidentified European lineage, suggesting a division of labor according to ethnicity. The darker one is, the more inclined that individual is to being the gardener, the maid or the chauffeur. As in the times of slavery, the lighter one's skin, the more likely she/he were to be found inside the house as opposed to outside toiling the fields.

Nevertheless, today, in a politically correct world, the servant is no longer African-American. Although it is important to acknowledge the non-descript background of most servants in films, I argue, as always, that this phenomenon has not entirely been replaced, as evident in the film *Maid in Manhattan* in which most of the maids working with Jennifer Lopez's character Marisa Ventura are African-American and Latina. In fact, the background of the film often shows a majority of ethnic maids. A white maid here would be problematic, because it would threaten the safe status quo of an Anglo world confident in its knowledge as the ones capable of upwardly mobility; therefore, the only white maid who appears is one who is grossly overweight and who lacks subjectivity. She is silent and insignificant, especially in the politics of the film *Maid in Manhattan*, which specifically tries to politicize the ethnic maids as part of an upward trend of mobility.

### **The Sexy Latina Maid and the New Latina Spitfire**

The sexy Latina maid is a segue from the Latina spitfire roles of the 1930's through the 1950's. These roles, best exemplified by actresses Lupe Velez, Dolores Del Rio, and Rita Hayworth, are often dominated by sensuality and frivolous behavior. The spitfire has a specific role in early Western films. She functions as a temptress who tempts the Anglo male protagonist

from his life of conformity and rigidity or his threat to leave behind their (read=white western) moral value systems. She often threatens the basic moral values of the Anglo male, which include honesty, hard work, and a valiant need to help the helpless and to save their towns and communities. In the story, the temptress is set in direct contrast to the white female heroine who will redeem the white male protagonist by re-directing his value system to the correct path. These spitfires are often superficial characters, generally not developed beyond their basic sexual desires and needs, whereas Anglo characters, set in direct contrast in the film, are often fully fleshed out with clear moral ideals and an honest and obviously correct ideology. The function of the spitfire was obvious; for the Anglo male protagonist, resisting those treacherous “spitfire” women often redeemed him, indicating to the audience that his moral virtue was beyond reproach and that he stood for the honest values of hard work, compassion and upholding good white moral values of justice, honesty and fidelity.

Today, the Latina spitfire has been transformed, but is nonetheless still evident in many films, within the role of the Latina maid, including 1986's *Down and Out in Beverly Hills* starring Richard Dreyfuss, Bette Midler and Nick Nolte and 2002's *Big Trouble* starring Tim Allen and Rene Russo with Sofía Vergara as the Latina maid Nina. In fact, in a recent television show *Bones* titled “*The Woman in the Garden*” the Latina maid is killed by the manager of the household (a Latino man) who feels that she had tempted the young Anglo man of the house with her sexuality. Upset that she has overstepped her bounds, he argues that he has killed her to maintain the status quo in the relationship between employees (the Latino men and Latina women evident everywhere in the garden and inside the house) and the Anglo employers. Implicit in the television show is that the Latina maid has somehow corrupted the innocence of the young Anglo male and that she threatened to redirect the correct path of this family. As such,

the Latino manager was simply saving the white upper middle class family from their dissent in upward mobility and therefore, preserving their virtue and their place.

Elizabeth Peña plays the Latina maid Carmen in *Down and Out in Beverly Hills* and provides the most memorable role of a revamped spitfire in contemporary films. Set up (by producers, screenwriters or directors) as a temptress who threatens to break down the protagonist Anglo family and their upper middle class value system, Carmen is a reconfigured Latina spitfire, re-producing the ideology that a white male protagonist who falls does not fall alone. *Down and Out in Beverly Hills* sets itself up as a satire of upper middle class and bourgeois value systems. It is a comedy of reaction, to the attempt of one Anglo lower class male to achieve those prized values. We are supposed to understand the characters as satires of themselves, exaggerated figures who represent ideals which are set up to fail as unreasonable value systems. Therefore, some critics of my argument may argue that the Latina maid in this film is not worthy of recognition, as she is simply set up here as an attempt to perpetuate the inherent silliness of the Anglo protagonists in the film, who clearly do not believe their own ideological rhetoric or are set up as hypocrites of that rhetoric.

In truth, most critics do not understand the role of the Latina maid in this film at all. Rather, most casually read the visibility of the maid, as I have suggested above, as simply clarifying the wealth of the Anglo protagonists, as they have enough money to afford a maid. Additionally, as I also suggested, they may read the hiring of an ethnic maid as the altruism of Anglo protagonists who are generous enough to help an underprivileged minority. These arguments reaffirm my analysis, but critics may dismiss them because of the satire suggested by the film. This negation of the importance of her character continues with the fact that most critics seem obsessed with her representation as a sexy Latina maid. For example, Pauline Kael from

the *New Yorker* calls Carmen “the Whiteman’s hot live-in maid” (105). Later, she further negates the character by talking up the maid’s physical attributes, rather than any social significance she may have to the politics of the film. She states, “Elizabeth Peña plays Carmen as tantalizing and sulky; she has a bedroom mouth, and when it says no to Dave the rejection is brutal, because that mouth looks as if it were made to say nothing but yes” (106). None of the critics which I have looked at, however, spoke to the maid as a significant character worthy of our analysis.

*Down and Out in Beverly Hills*, directed by Paul Mazursky is actually a re-make of a 1932 French film by famed director Jean Renoir, *Boudu sauvé des eaux* translated in English as *Boudu Saved from Drowning*. Renoir was a well-known humanist, realist and naturalist filmmaker who wished to understand what motivates people, especially those separated by class politics. He had an intricate way of examining the problems and absurdities of bourgeois class structures. Though not necessarily didactic, Renoir’s films explore the ways in which individuals cope with trying economic times. The Renoir film *Boudu sauvé des eaux* (1932) follows the story of Boudu, a tramp, who jumps into the Seine River and is rescued by Mr. Lestingois, a bookseller who gives him shelter and hopes to redeem the man who the tramp once was. In the film, the goal (both by Mr. Lestingois and the individuals making the film) is to reinstate the depressed French man into an economically stable livelihood. The maid in the film (played by Sévérine Lerczinska) is clearly positioned as the lower class and is also pressured by the head of the household, Mr. Lestingois, into sleeping with him. What is important is that she only sleeps with him in exchange for the possibility of upward mobility. In fact, she makes it clear that she will not sleep with him if he does not provide her with a way to escape her lower class existence. Later, she sleeps with the Tramp, situating her struggles as easily forgotten in the presence of the real struggle: the Lestingois family’s goal to make the Tramp part of society and of the middle class

again. In fact, in some ways she allies herself with the Lestingois family in their attempt to make the Tramp a respectable member of the community. The fact that the Tramp ultimately decides to forego the acceptance of the family's ideologies, as he throws his bourgeois given hat in the Seine River and swims, both literally and metaphorically, away from the Lestingois and all they believe, is important to understanding this film as a class criticism. The tramp ultimately wants nothing to do with the compromise associated with living for and up to society's expectation of the upper middle class.

The 1986 re-make of Renoir's film is a re-make which fails to stay with the class critique of its predecessor. Whereas the maid in the original attempts to change her class status by seducing Lestingois in *Boudu Saved from Drowning*, the re-make has the Latina maid in a position of less power, as she is not so much seducing her employer as much as she is being seduced for his pleasure. What has changed in this updated version is that the maid is now dependent on her employers for her green card, suggesting an interesting analysis of the fears of international immigration in the 1980's; an unstable economic environment where the country felt its first recession in years. Struggling with the real possibility of downward mobility, films made a point of reassuring individuals struggling financially by promoting a facial uplift (a visible uplift) to the situation, often showing middle class or upper middle class families as secure, while also reaffirming the idea that the ethnic immigrant was not out to get their jobs. This is a technique common to film. In the early 1940's, films directors, screenwriters and actors felt the need to reassure audiences of a tumultuous time at war. Therefore, films often promoted uplifting images of individuals eager to defend their country; such is the case with the film *Yankee Doodle Dandy*.

Being a Hollywood film, *Down and Out in Beverly Hills* falls into this trap and backs down from any attempt to explore or negotiate complicated class politics, even though it sets itself up to do so. As Jerry the bum (the tramp of this film) ends up successfully entering the prized value system of the film in a heartfelt ending sequence (in complete negation of the original's ending), in which he and the family are reunited, both on the screen and in the metaphorical world of the Whiteman's ideological bourgeois reality; thus any satire of the prevailing middle-class values which might have been suggested is eliminated. As Janice Morgan argues in *From Clochards to Cappuccinos: Renoir's Boudu is 'Down and Out' in Beverly Hills*, "though at first the rebel had promised liberation from the relentless cycle 'work produce consume work produce consume' we are lead to the cynical conclusion that he has, in fact, only eliminated the first two terms of the above three "(8-9). Morgan continues by arguing, "properly defused, stripped of any revitalizing potential to change or to challenge the social order...the Outside is more than welcome to be co-opted into the system. Whatever promise, threat, or possibility Jerry's presumed otherness might have represented has, for the price of a cappuccino, been overruled" (11). What Morgan argues is that the film, in true Hollywood style, never follows through on its promise to satirically understand that Jerry's opposition to the Whiteman's is an opposition of greed. When he joins the fold, he joins their ideology. As Andrew Kopkind of *The Nation* states, "Mazursky exploits the myth but never exposes it" (252). Essentially, the film never follows through on its promise satirize and therefore expose problems inherent in class systems. Therefore, it is the analysis of the Latina maid Carmen (played by Elizabeth Peña) which will prove fruitful towards an understanding of class and racialized politics that ultimately makes this film worth watching.

Initially, I must explain how it is that we know Carmen is Latina. First, she speaks Spanish and has a clear accent throughout the film. Second, she is often in her room watching Hispanic television shows and news. Third, she is often positioned as ethnic by the Whiteman's throughout the film, as Mrs. Whiteman constantly asks Carmen to correct her Spanish and Mr. Whiteman prophesizes often about his helping of the poor minority. Carmen is first seen in the background of the film, cleaning and cooking for the Whiteman's. The name of the family does not escape my analysis either. (Is this a pun about how truly white their value systems are or a mere coincidence?) As she cooks, she helps Mrs. Whiteman with her Spanish and they talk about the upcoming Thanksgiving dinner. The fact that Carmen is invited to share the dinner with the family serves to situate the family as a kind and generously liberal family because they allow the servants to dine with them.

However, here is where the narrative becomes more complicated. As she dines with the Whiteman family, her function as the maid is never forgotten, as she continually serves them food throughout the dining experience. Moreover, as she serves them, there is a moment when one of the diners asks, in a familiar tone, how her family is doing. Although it may seem that the interest is genuine and seemingly purports the idea that the white upper middle class is concerned about the real problems of the Latina servant, what occurs when she responds (that her family is not doing well and that her brother, a sugar cane worker, is out of work) is that others at the table laugh at the misfortune of a brother who cannot be a productive worker in their societal framework. It is clear by the response offered, that "there's not much of a call for that in Los Angeles" is a way of re-affirming the concept that the Latino does not want to work. What is perpetuated is that Latinos/as do not really want to be successful, and as a result, they are displaced from acceptable society.

The function here is complicated. At the same time that the character is clearly seen as one of the family, allowing the middle class audience (which is the target of this film) to assuage their guilt as employers, as they see themselves as generously helping out, they can also see themselves above the very obvious stereotypically abusive character who neglects and mocks the real life subjectivity of the Latino. As Bonnie Thornton Dill states in *Notes from Our Mothers' Grief: Racial Ethnic Women and the Maintenance of Families*, "racial ethnics were brought to this country to meet the need for a cheap and exploitable labor force. Little attention was given to their family and community life except as it related to their economic productivity" (15). Therefore, the moment in the film is quickly glossed over and we forget that Carmen and her family have difficult financial constraints.

What is important in the narrative of *Down and Out in Beverly Hills* is the problem of the family dynamics, and it is clear that the Latina maid, Carmen, (like the spitfire of the 1930s) is one of those problems. As I have initially argued, often the stories of these films are about the breakdown of upper middle class value systems, and in the film that breakdown is quickly seen in the initial scene in which the couple is positioned far from each other in bed. Following that moment are allusions to a sexually ambiguous son, an anorexic daughter, an obsessed with the unnecessary (a middle class attribute of shopping addiction) wife and a confused male protagonist feeling occasional guilt about his success. This capitulates in a moment early in the film when Dreyfess's character Mr. David Whiteman asks his wife, in the privacy of their bedroom, whether she is happy and she responds, "I'm content."

As clear as the allusions are of the breakdown of this family, the reasons for the breakdown are more elusive. Are they in a middle class rut, like Lavinia in *The Banger Sisters*? Are they tired of marinating in the American Dream? Or, as I might suggest, does the film deliberately set



up a destructive pattern of their ideology at the beginning, because the recompense of that pattern at the end of the film is what builds up the spectator in the 1980's to believe that everything (upper middle class traditional value systems) will regain its normality? What is clear is that the breakdown is not helped by the Latina maid, who is then positioned as sleeping with Mr. Whiteman (Dreyfess), who again functions as a character ambivalent about his role in this upper middle class "oppressive" system, in which he constantly feels guilty about having made so much money. His acknowledgement of the guilt, an upper middle class preoccupation, is used in such a way as to convince others that if he could change it, he would, and he does by helping the underprivileged minority. One wonders, therefore, if sleeping with the maid assuages his guilt because it allows him to feel he has saved her from a life of drudgery as a maid and if he feels his saving her, and by extension the Mexican workers in his plant, is necessary to viewing himself as altruistic and a guiding force in their presumed upward mobility.

This sets up the plot of the story that has Richard Dreyfess's character Mr. Whiteman helping Nick Nolte's (Jerry) troubled homeless character. The narrative again situates itself within the dynamics of white America, especially the problem of a white America which does not value the very system created for their benefit. Jerry, and his placement in direct contrast to the upward mobility of Mr. Whiteman, is seen as the more prominent problem of the film. Although the film is a comedy, the serious implication of a white man who is unsuccessful is seen as further perpetuating the downward fear of the particular class dynamic. It is clear in the film that what scares the family more is the possibility that they can become this bum that they can and still have the possibility of one day being in the same position, as Mr. Whiteman states, "there by the grace of god go you and I". Therefore, Carmen and her brother's obviously similar situation (seen earlier in the film) is negated by the more serious situation of the white man out

of work, who threatens their status quo, while reaffirming the fact that Latinos are in the place they should be and are because of their own lack of motivation. In fact, throughout the film Mr. Whiteman is obsessed with finding out how this has happened to Jerry in order to reinforce his superior position in society.

Nevertheless, remember that as this family becomes obsessed with correcting a system that neglects the Anglo man's struggle, again represented by both Jerry and Mr. Whiteman, it has again sacrificed the real problems of the maid and her family. Moreover, the film carefully positions Carmen as part of the oppressing system (which the Whiteman's know they are a part of, as indicated when Mr. Whiteman expresses his anxiety and guilt about how much he has) when she refuses to clean up after Jerry the bum. It is clear that she feels comfortable cleaning for the upwardly mobile but has the same disregard for Jerry's situation as Mrs. Whiteman has, therefore subtly placing herself in the same subjectivity as the white woman of the house, later reaffirmed by both of them sleeping with Jimmy the bum.

As the role of the past spitfire indicates, part of that role was about positioning the Latina temptress in direct contrast to the morally upstanding white female character that the male protagonist has to choose between.<sup>3</sup> Here, more than 50 years later, that function is still evident in a multitude of films which feature a Latina maid. Furthermore, the Latina, set up as the sexy maid, reinforces the idea of the immorality of Latinos today, who neither understand nor help middle class oppression by staying out of those problems. Their sexiness, their individuality (set off by her often biting comments) is inconceivable and therefore problematic. As such, she must be and is punished for her indiscretion. Therefore, she is the maid and the maid is there for the

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<sup>3</sup> See Gary D. Keller, Chicano Cinema: Research, Reviews, and Resources, (New York: Bilingual Review/Press, 1985) for a further examination of early spitfire roles and their function within historical films.

use of her patrons. Second, she has no individual identity. Rather, she serves the narrative function to examine white family suburban crisis today, which is occasionally displaced onto the Latina maid. That crisis involves a realization that the domestic bliss of the family is not blissful after all.

In the film *Down and Out in Beverly Hills*, Mr. and Mrs. Whiteman have become dysfunctional in their relationship. This is due to Mrs. Whiteman's preoccupation with maintaining the image of wealth. Mr. Whiteman, however, is imbued with a sense of superiority that perpetuates itself in the idea that he can and will take whatever is his (body ownership of the Latina body). Again, the primary function of the Anglo protagonists as generous and inherently altruistic replays itself with Jerry being the foundation that serves to facilitate the maid's journey to bettering herself and becoming more politically powerful. What is made evident in the film is that the Latina maid is incapable of coming into this agency on her own. She needs the guidance and direction of the Anglo world in order to gain any subjectivity.

Similarly, in the past, Anglo employers were often able to see themselves as altruistically generous individuals when they gave maids time off, clothes, even support in order to facilitate their growth or individuality. However, Carmen's agency within the film *Down and Out in Beverly Hills* continues to be irrelevant, as the real goal of the film is to reinforce the goodness and honesty of the Anglo characters in the film. This is also reinforced by Mrs. Whiteman often reaffirming to her and others, including the maid Carmen, that she is a generous and giving individual who understands the difficulties of the impoverished and the ethnic others she constantly hires to maintain the façade of her generosity. Additionally, the fact that we find out that Jerry is a scam artist and that he has lied about all that he has done in the past, and tells Carmen that he picked up the Marxist books at a bargain store, negates any agency she creates

from the texts. And we are to understand that his lies, which are accepted at the end of the film by both Carmen and the family, were not as important as the allegiances they have created amongst themselves and the fact that they have saved Jerry from an Anglo man's world of possible drudgery.

Therefore, the maid's subjectivity is never relevant and is displaced onto the subjectivity of the Anglo protagonist, who struggles to make the imperfect world a little better for ethnic others. Not only is her subjectivity displaced, but so is the subjectivity of the Mexican immigrants working for Dreyfess, who only further situate his goodness and kindness at the expense of the real economic, social problems of ethnic others. In fact, a subtler dangerous element in the film is the fact that Carmen is an immigrant who is dependent on Mr. Whiteman for a green card. Therefore, she is positioned in the film as a prostitute, by the fact that she is selling her body to Mr. Whiteman for the possibility of staying in the country. Subtly, the film postulates the good morality of the white woman and degrades the morality of the Latina woman, which is again a characteristic of past spitfire roles. Furthermore, we can argue that Carmen sleeps with Mr. Whiteman in order to reaffirm her loyalty to the Whiteman's, which is brought into question later when she sleeps with Jerry the bum and Mr. Whiteman feels betrayed.

It is important to analyze the situating of Mr. Whiteman as a good moral person who is constantly seen as bettering the lives of Mexican immigrants in the film, by hiring them to work in his clothes hangar factories, and by reminding them of his generosity in giving them yearly bonuses. Lest one should forget, we must remember that this generosity is often overlapped by his concern for the welfare of the white male character, Jerry, as it is the breakdown of the white male that most threatens his upward mobility. He is only showing Jerry the Mexican workers in order to get Jerry to understand that his success can somehow be transferred onto to Jerry. In

fact, there is another moment in the film when a black homeless man, who is a friend of Jerry's, approaches them while they are dining. Mr. Whiteman is clearly upset by the man's inclusion into his private discussion with Jerry. Again, his concern is not with the struggles of the black man whom he dismisses with a statement that he seems crazy; it is Jerry, as the white man, who is the most significant because of the possibility of white downward mobility. It is interesting then that Jerry, who sleeps with Mrs. Whiteman, is actually regarded as the savior of the film, unlike Carmen who sleeps with Mr. Whiteman, who is seen as the moral breakdown of the film. She is vilified by the film's structure while he is idolized. Her lack of morals, again re-affirming the moral ambiguity of ethnic workers, is then situated in the moment when she sleeps with Jerry, further making her problematic because she has now become responsible for the moral degradation of two white males.

In the end, we are left with the negated subjectivity of the Latina maid in *Down and Out in Beverly Hills*. It is the subjectivity of whiteness that is significant for the film. What is ultimately important is how the Latina maid functions for whiteness and not how she may function for herself. Her problems are never truly resolved. Carmen is offered no upward mobility to escape her position and she continues in her world of oppression. If in fact she is allowed to escape her role (suggested but never fully realized), it is because the white protagonist allows her to. In fact, Carmen becomes part of the white upper middle class struggling to save one of its own, as the last scene shows Carmen, together with the family, asking Jerry to stay and help them out of the fallible upper middle class world that they have become a part of. The white homeless man is saved, which is really the narratives true intention from the beginning.

### ***Maid in Manhattan: A Revitalization of the Latina Maid***

The Latina maid in film which leaves itself open to one of the most significant analysis is Jennifer Lopez's maid Marisa Ventura in *Maid in Manhattan*. Following the tradition of many

actresses, including famous black actresses like Dorothy Dandridge who played African-American stereotypes in the 1950s, Lopez takes on the challenge of reversing and subverting stereotypes in a film in which she plays a maid. *Maid in Manhattan* is a film about a Latina maid who struggles between her fears of upward mobility and her desire for it. Playing a single mother in charge of a rambunctious ten-year-old, Lopez's character Marisa meets a single Anglo politician named Chris Marshall (played by Ralph Fiennes).

This pairing also parallels many earlier 1930s films in which Latinas played for an Anglo love interest. Additionally, it also lays out the possibility of the Latina temptress, who can represent the potential downfall of the Anglo male. This is situated by the fact that his second in command continually tells him to leave her alone and to think about the repercussions of his decision to get involved with a Latina maid. Furthermore, she is even set up, as temptresses of the past, as part of a triangle love interest with another Anglo woman in the film *Caroline Lane* (played by Natasha Richardson), who his second in command feels is more suited to his position. The film follows Marisa Ventura's struggle to free herself from the fears of her position in order to take over a management role in the hotel. It follows her struggle to stave off a romantic interest in the politician she met while pretending to be a rich socialite, in a moment when she wears one of the wealthy patron's outfits to try on the mask of wealth.

I have no doubt that Lopez was initially intrigued by the idea of playing the Latina Cinderella, one who is able to have all wishes come true after a life of abject poverty and disillusionment. I have no doubt that Lopez felt that she would imbue the character with a new sense of Latina pride that says *I can make something of myself if I really try hard enough*. Lopez, no doubt, felt that she was capable of subverting any ideological possibilities of the Latina maid

that I argue have played out in a number of different roles throughout the years. Indeed, the film is touted as reversing the idea of the invisibility for the maid. Even the trailer for the film states:

At Manhattan's Barrister Hotel, where the rich and famous can always be seen . . . it was Marisa Ventura's job to go unnoticed . . . but when you least expect it, fate can open the door. . . the girl that was invisible. . . is all that he can see. . . if only he could figure out who she is. . .no matter who you are, destiny will find you. (trailer)

It is important to acknowledge the statement "no matter who you are" which implies a necessity for the minority to work that much harder to be noticed. Additionally, let us not forget gender construction in fairy tales. We have to be conscience of what fairy tales reinforce in society. As

Katherine E. Bartnett states in *Destructive and Constructive Characterizations of Women in Disney's Mulan*:

fairy tales originated as stories passed down by word of mouth. They were a way of providing meaning to the experiences of a community...They continue to send messages that reinforce ideology that textual critics refer to as patriarchal oppression-in other words, a society in which men dominate women. In fairy tales, typically, a woman is neglected, isolated, silenced, or generally treated with disdain by some male figure or group of people, until another male comes along and saves her from desperate circumstance. (185)

So, in fact, there is a double edged sword here, wherein the Latina maid is both constrained by the gendered fairy tale aspect which negates her and her ethnic perspective, which does the same.

The truth is that in some small part, Lopez does exactly what she sets out to do, challenge the stereotypical belief of society of the difficulties Latinos have in becoming upwardly mobile, as the character does manage to escape her life of poverty and become a manager of maids.

However, her mobility does stop there; while her love interest (played by Fiennes) goes on to become a Senator.

As a spectator, however, I am torn by the realization of her visual marker of success and the price she pays for that success. It does not escape my notice either that Jennifer Lopez has been darkened for the role. Considering that Hollywood has made quite an effort to lighten her up in films like *The Wedding Planner* and commercials for her Glow perfume, it is interesting to

see how visibly darkened she is for this role.<sup>4</sup> However, it is her pseudo success in the film which presents a more interesting problem. Clearly, this film wishes to play for all audiences. For Latinas, she is the possibility of success, and for white women, she is the reaffirmation of maintaining her place. Therefore, the film strives to not alienate any possible audience, and in doing so, threatens to reaffirm certain stereotypes.

The problems begin with her success in the film, which comes only after her absolute humiliation by the hotel employers, the press and the main love interest, Fiennes' character. It is only after she has been stripped of all self-confidence that Chris Marshall comes in to rescue her at the end of the film, therefore reinstating her into the possibility of upward mobility. Like *Down and Out in Beverly Hills*, the white man of the film allows for the Latina's upward mobility. In this way, he is seen as a good and moral figure that truly cares about the problems of the ethnic help. In addition, it seems that the way in which Marisa is seen as good and moral herself, in comparison to the white character (played by Natasha Richardson) manages to validate the white audience member, who can manipulate the images by letting themselves seem virtuous by comparison to the white woman.

It is important to acknowledge Marisa Ventura's resistance, throughout the film, to the idea of applying for a manager's position in the hotel. We see her yelling about her frustration with

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<sup>4</sup> Although it may seem coincidental and some may argue she may have spent a little time out in the sun, what should be understood is that Hollywood is visual. For film, overt stereotypes of ethnicity are often subsumed under the color of one's skin. One merely has to examine the controversy surrounding an earlier Latin film entitled *The Perez Family* (1995) and the hiring of Italian Marisa Tomei to play the role of a Cuban woman who travels to the United States to experience freedom. After an exhaustive search of 2000 women in Miami, Florida, where many Cuban Americans live, director Mira Nair defended her choice (against criticism from Hispanic/Latino organizations threatening to boycott the film) by arguing that she couldn't quite find someone in Miami who embodied the specific traits, characteristics and talent which Tomei offered. However, after hiring Tomei, Nair proceeded to have her tanned daily and asked the actress to gain 20 pounds in order to look more authentically native. As such, Nair emphasizes the necessity here to have Tomei attain a visual marker of ethnicity.



her co-employer Stephanie, who secretly turns in an application for Marisa. Later, in a conversation between her mother and herself, Marisa reaffirms that she is not stepping out of her place by wanting to apply for this position. Her mother worries that she will be a threat to the status quo by becoming uppity enough to want more. Their fight is indicative of the struggle of Latina upward mobility in the light of a society who would have her maintain her place. Therefore, it is only after Chris Marshall “saves” her, by charging in on his mythical white horse, that she is able to achieve any success in the film. It is his prompting, and not her mother’s that makes her desire the managerial position. Moreover, when she is fired for having appropriated a wealthy patron’s identity and she begins to work at yet another hotel as a maid, it is Marshall who tells her to value what she has to offer. It is his prompting that gives her subjectivity and makes her attempt to better herself. Likewise, the son Ty in the film, who has a problem with speaking in front of his school, is able to speak out *only* after Marshall shows him how to, even though his mother gives him advice as well.

The subjectivity of the Latina maid here is also displaced onto the white man in the film, for it is his realization that there are individuals in the world who are oppressed that frames part of the discourse of the film. However, I must acknowledge that she is able to re-direct his passions in the false direction of the charity dinner he is going to; from it being beneficial to his campaign to his understanding that it is beneficial to the hundreds they will be helping with the money. Furthermore, she also re-directs him from a speech in the projects, where he suggests he is about to shed light on the problems of the ghetto and she makes him realize that in order to shed real light onto the situation, he has to understand the real problems of the people who live there. Moreover, she does make him change his belief in what is the right thing to do. The film threatens, however, to displace all the good that she has done by reaffirming again that it is more

important that he realize his faults than she realize hers. It is more important that he save her than she save herself. It is ultimately more important that we wrap up the real differences between them in a happily ever after—no race, gender or class hindering—ending for the movie. It is complete with pictures of their gaiety in magazines and it ends with the political success of Chris Marshall and the financial and seemingly ethnic American Dream success by Marisa Ventura.

### **Maids on *Monk*: Making Their Way in the World.**

It is on the show *Monk* that we have the most interesting possibility for the subjectivity of the Latina maid. In the show *Mr. Monk Takes a Vacation*, Monk, who is an obsessive-compulsive out-of-work detective, goes on vacation somewhere near the coastline of California. While there, his assistant's son witnesses a potential murder. As he searches for who might have killed someone, he begins, through his own superior knowledge of cleanliness (think the literal whiteness of Mr. Clean) to suspect the maids who are the only ones capable of cleaning up a murder scene so perfectly. Inherently problematic is the assertion here that the duties of cleaning up are an essential part of the make up of women of color or of any woman for that matter. The maids, of course, are Mexican or of some non-descript Latin American background.

There are a number of issues of importance in this show. The maids on this show, who, by the way, are guilty of murdering one of their own, are espionage aficionados as well. Using the cover of the maid, and manipulating the system, which often makes them invisible, and of little concern, these maids have been stealing information from the briefcases of businessmen who stay in the hotel. They have been taking digital pictures of papers about corporate takeovers, high-end investments and stock market options and investing in stocks, bonds and mutual funds, therefore reversing their positions by working their way up the class mobility ladder, without the direct help of an Anglo individual prompting them to better themselves.

This juxtaposition of the maids as criminal, the maids as capable of murder and the maids as capable of corporate espionage is a fascinating subject for analysis. Because it threatens to reaffirm the stereotype of Latinas/os as criminal, it nonetheless portrays them as reversing the tables of oppression, and manipulating their invisibility in the hotel and in society, to support the very families that make them oppressed individuals in the first place. In fact, in one crucial moment during the show, Monk directly questions the maids about their criminal activities, and in a moment which appears to crystallize the ethnic politics of the moment, the Latina maids respond in affront, asking Monk if he believes that being “white” (a significant and underlying idea here is his encoding as a white individual when Monk, played by Tony Shaloub, is clearly ethnic or “other”) allows him to believe that Latinos are criminals, or allows him to assume that the ethnic help will always be the criminals. The humor and irony of the moment is significant to the politics of representation, as we know that these maids are indeed criminals. The Latina maids here reverse the politics of the moment, subvert the ideology of white superiority and then reverse all of that potential by making sure that the Latina maids are caught.

As a spectator, I find myself intrinsically placed in the position of liking the Latina maid image as represented in this segment of the show. After all, these are powerful women who are actively conning and manipulating the very system which positions them “invisible” in discourse. Thus at the same time, as a complicated individual subject defined through many possibilities (ethnic, gendered, religious etc.), I find myself upset by the essentialism that allows women to be seen as inherently cleaner than me; after all, it is implied, an essential part of a woman’s programming is that she be able to clean better than a man. This is important here because Monk is obsessive about cleaning.

One of the more noteworthy aspects of the show is that it takes Monk a significant amount of time to figure out how the women have committed the crime. It usually takes Monk only five to ten minutes of every show to figure out who has committed the crime. The rest of the time is spent on Monk trying to figure out how the crime has been committed and it is usually his obsessive-compulsive behavior that allows him to figure it all out. So, at the same time as we are presented with Latina figures who outsmart Monk for a full 35 minutes before he figures out who has committed the crime, we pay the price of confirming the essentialism of the Latina maid as able to clean better than Monk himself, the obsessive compulsive cleaner. He is only outsmarted by a woman's (an ethnic woman's) inherent ability to clean. Therefore, as a spectator here, I am pulled two different directions: I am given a false sense of comfort about the ability of Latinas to outwit a criminal investigation while having confirmed for me my inherent ability to commit a crime. It is an interesting dichotomy and one that speaks to the ways in which we must position ourselves as extracting what is empowering in the moment, and decoding the intricacies of ideological representations.

In the end, when Monk finally discovers how the women were able to dispose of the body, by hiding them in a suitcase in the front lobby, I find myself actually hoping that this is the one crime that Monk will not solve. Because the Latina maids here were positioned as using their invisibility to become upwardly mobile, I want them to succeed because I want to see the possibility of agency in their characters. Unfortunately, Monk solves the crime as its necessary to understand that no one, not even those oppressed, get away with murder. Nevertheless, for a moment these maids made me as happy as I ever was with the representation and the possible agency they offer.

What we ultimately have to acknowledge about the Latina maid is that she is a necessary character in film and television today and not simply because she positions the family that she works for as classed. In addition, her figure is necessary because she is intrinsic to structuring the economic and class privilege of “whiteness” in multiple ways. She is important as a signifier for white privilege, wealth and superiority. It is important that she exist in order for their ideologies to exist in a number of ways, including seeing themselves as altruistic, as good moral individuals, as caring of their communities, as individuals worthy of all the privileges they are entitled to. My purpose here then was to visualize the un-visualized in film. As Richard Dyer states, “in a visual culture—that is, a culture which gives a primacy to the visible as a source of knowledge...social groups must be visibly recognizable and representable, since this is a major currency of communication and power” (44). As such, I hope I have given us the power to look more closely at what certain representations offer people of color, even if those images were not intended. My purpose here was to make ideology visible for the unseen and unheard, the maids and servants who are not allowed to speak, but whose representations in media say something for both people of color and white America.

I leave this analysis with two examples of how the Latina as a maid continues to be circulated and widely considered as normalized. The first is a Call for Papers I saw for a conference on racial constructions and considerations. The call asked that we examine the *Whoopi* show and the nature of her character and her Persian valet/handyman, and the questions which rose about racial constructions that abound in our society. However, there is no mention of the equally problematic nature of the relationship between her and the Latina maid who cleans the hotel. The truth is that her role may be seen as natural, while his appears stereotypical. It is

the subtle difference between what is necessary to maintain the status quo and what needs to be problematized or subverted.

The second is an advice column letter sent to *Latina* magazine in March 2006:

Dear Dolores: I was wondering if you could help me. About two years ago, when I stayed at the Homewood Suites in Lewisville, Texas, I met a nice maid by the name of Gabriela. I never caught her last name. She didn't speak much English, so she might have been an immigrant or a guest worker. We both had fun talking in broken English/Spanish. She had a real pleasant disposition. I would like to track her down, and I thought that maybe you know her? (48)

Dolores's response:

Dear Traveler: You must be kidding... This may come as a surprise to you in Nebraska but all Latinos don't know each other. We don't even look alike or eat exactly the same food. For all I know, Gabriela could be the CEO of Homewood Suites by now. I don't keep track of hotel maids or facilitate dating services, but if I were you, I'd contact the Hollywood producers association. Judging by the abundance of Latina maids in movies, I'd say they are true experts on the subject. Just tell them what your dream maid looks like: Paz Vega in *Spanglish*? Jennifer Lopez in *Maid in Manhattan*? Elizabeth Peña in *Down and Out in Beverly Hills*? Lupe Ontiveros in...oh, God! You have some nerve! D'. (48)

There is simply much to discuss with the above statement to delve into fully and truthfully, I wonder if the person who initially wrote the letter was not being slightly facetious (although my argument to this point is that I believe people are not). Ultimately, it is important to examine the conflation of Latino identity, the language question and the reality of a society or world that mandates or desires Latinos/as as servants in order to maintain its position of privilege. As Mary Romero states in *Maid in the U.S.A.*, "in the U.S., it [maid's work] remains women of color's work, and it is never done" (22).

CHAPTER 3  
“THE MAMMY MYTH”:MAMMYHOOD RECONFIGURED FOR THE LATINA  
SERVANT.

The racial history of the United States is a complicated one, embroiled as it is in slavery, oppression and hardship. Within this history, the relationship between women of color and white women in the United States is deeply complex. As Talmadge Anderson argues in *Comparative Factors Among Blacks, Asian, and Hispanic Americans: Coalition or Conflicts?*, “race, ethnicity, and color are catalytic social factors in the United States, causing class antagonism, controversy, and conflict among its diverse population” (27). This divisiveness is one embedded in centuries of inequality, witnessed in history’s literary and popular culture images of black women as mummies, jezebels and Aunt Jemima’s, and to depictions of Latina women as spitfires, harlots, female clowns, and Dark Ladies. This inequality is seen today as women of women of color continue to make less than white women and continue to suffer from stereotypical representations.

This relationship between white women and women of color is complicated by notions of race, ethnicity and gender and this is more evident in the relationship between white women and African-American woman throughout history. As Adrienne Rich states in *On Lies, Secrets and Silence Selected Prose 1966–1978*:

the mutual history of black and white women in this country is a realm so painful, resonant, and forbidden that it has barely been touched by writers either of political ‘science’ or of imaginative literature. Yet until that history is known, that silence broken, we all go on struggling in a state of deprivation and ignorance. (281)

However, the relationship between white and Black women is almost always perpetuated and represented in film and television as one of bonding and friendship. In these representations, the relationship between white women and women of color is often presented as helping each other to break through doors of inequality together.

For example, one interesting film which illustrates this perpetuation is the Universal Pictures 1934 classic *Imitation of Life* starring Claudette Colbert and Louise Beavers, and which was re-made by Universal again in a 1959 version starring Sandra Dee and Mahalia Jackson. These films tell the story of two women (one white and one black) who bond together over family, life, womanhood and business. The promotion of the original 1934 films states, “two women with young daughters who build a life and a fortune together”. Imagined in the film is the way in which these two women bond in ways which negate color or ethnicity as a factor, both understanding each other’s oppression (as the white woman’s husband dies and she is left without financial support and the black woman is abandoned by her husband and left to raise her young daughter by herself) as women in a society where female economic survival is most often contingent upon the presence of a male.

This film, along with others in the same vein, perpetuates an understanding and bonding over mutual oppression by men or, more generally, by a patriarchal society. What the film forgets or conveniently neglects to explore in detail is the inequitable relationship between the two, although it hints at that inequality within the context of the film itself. When, for example, in the 1934 version we see Aunt Delilah and Beatrice “Bea” Pullman in the physical interior of the house, Aunt Delilah lives downstairs in the basement and Bea lives in the upstairs portion of a grand mansion. The size difference is a visual and subtle message of the film. It allows spectators to believe in the relationship based on their close proximity to each other (they decide to live and raise their children together) and yet it firmly maintains the status quo in the physical division of the household. Yet, those subtleties did not change the reception of the film in 1934. As such, the film and its desired ideology were re-made in 1959, 25 years later.



In *Ceramic Uncles and Celluloid Mammies: Black Images and Their Influence on Culture*, Patricia A. Turner discusses the film *Imitation of Life* as it is ingrained in the white imagination, arguing, “movie audiences cried when a rare urban auntie proved unequal to the challenges her own child heaps upon her...A good-humored, stocky, asexual, dark-skinned black woman, Auth Delilah unselfishly helps make her white employer rich with her secret pancake recipe” (52). Turner tells us that audiences loved the representation of the “unselfish” black woman who loves her white employer above all else, that she is willing to let her use her pancake recipe to achieve a level of financial success. Moreover, throughout the film, she clarifies that it is not necessary to “pay her back” for that recipe and its eventual success. Ultimately, what is solidified in the imaginations of white audiences is the reciprocity of that relationship as one of a “true” friendship that transcends racial and economic issues; however, it does not overtly acknowledge the inequality of that relationship, nor the white woman’s subconscious desire for that necessary mammy figure whose central focus is her white charge, which is evident in the depiction and actions of Aunt Delilah.

In an earlier chapter, I discussed the varied ways in which Latinas as maids played into the imaginary of white middle or upper middle class value systems in both film and television. I argued that the Latina maid or servant functioned in very specific ways for Anglo audience members: clarifying for the audience the class status of the white protagonist of a film, showing the white protagonist as a good and earnest individual who was worthy of the respect and admiration given to them by their servants, and finally, portraying the protagonist as conscious of culture and ethnicity in a changing world. However, it seems to me, in viewing many films which depend on a Latina maid or servant, that we also need an analysis of the Latina servant as a new mammy figure of comfort for the Anglo protagonist needs its own analysis.

Therefore, this chapter analyzes the Latina maid as another component necessary in the imaginations of whiteness--that of the Latina maid as a new “mammy” figure. Historically, white women have often, consciously or subconsciously, imagined a mutual relationship between themselves and their imaginings of black women mammy figures. Many white women today need the fantasy of a relationship between themselves and their maids (most often women of color); one which is mutually beneficial and important for the white woman in creating her own identity. In other words, it is the white woman’s ability to define herself in contrast to the black woman (or women of color) in order to more firmly situate her political and social reality and her image as a desired one. In addition to the way in which producers of film and television continue to imagine black women as traditional mammy figures, I argue the Latina maid is now being imagined within the same framework and in some ways has become a new, reconfigured mammy.

I engage with the images of Latinas in contemporary popular culture in order to understand how racial myths continue to be perpetuated about the place of Latinas in cultural discourse, as well as in order to understand how those representations serve the desires of white middle or upper middle class individuals to maintain the status quo. In examining how films and television have come to depict Latinas as the new mammy figures, I will consider what specific physical, social and emotional characteristics are maintained from the original belief systems about mummies and the white women (and children) they cared for, as well as consider what specific characteristics have been erased, effaced or reconfigured.

It is useful to begin with a discussion of the relationships between black and white women in film today. I will first examine how they often play out as equitable; yet do not take into consideration the power plays within that relationship. (For the record, I acknowledge that I am

not talking about every relationship between black women or other women of color and white women in film. Rather, I speak to the generalizations and imaginings we see most often.) Next, I put forth my engagement within the critical frameworks of theorist Hortense J. Spillers in *Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Handbook* and writer Toni Morrison's *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. These women's work both explore the idea that whiteness cannot exist without blackness both in the historical past and in the contemporary imaginations. Using their framework, I will examine the ways in which, I argue, whiteness cannot exist without otherness. Moreover, I will examine how those historically determined representations have become reconfigured, yet continue to be perpetuated and represented in more subtle ways in two contemporary films *Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood* (2002) and *Monster-In-Law* (2005). From there, I will turn to my analysis of the ways in which Latina women have to some extent replaced (although not entirely, as suggested by the above examples) African-American women as contemporary mammy figures. I will examine how the necessity of the mammy figure becomes reconfigured and transposed onto women of color, most specifically Latina women, and how this relationship plays out in the contemporary imagination. For this analysis, I offer two other contemporary films (both of which self-present as ideologically progressive) *Spanglish* (2005) and *Crash* (2005). Finally, I will examine and analyze how ideas of slavery and this re-imagination of the relationship is relevant in the show *Will & Grace* (1998–2006) in the satirical relationship between Karen Walker, a rich white woman and her Latina maid, Rosario, upon whom she subconsciously transposes ideas of slavery, mammyhood and the and a subconscious desire for mothering.

Here in particular, as I examine the show between Season 1 through Season 5, I will analyze how Rosario's role, like that of mammies in the past, is primarily to take care of,

comfort, and support Karen's life. I will explain how the relationship is imagined as a co-dependent one, necessary for the survival of both. As Manhaz Kousha notes that "being closer in class and culture, operating within a clearly defined system of social and racial inequality...Southern black and white women developed a kind of mistress/servant relationship that was psychologically satisfying, to some degree, to both groups of women" (77); to a strikingly similar degree, Karen needs Rosario's care-taking, mothering and otherness and Rosario needs Karen for some of the same, including the reality of her financial welfare. The ways in which the reciprocity in the relationship between white women and women of color is built and foregrounded through years of slavery, civil rights and identity politic movements, I argue, is imagined and reconfigured through eight seasons of *Will & Grace* as a loving and an emotionally necessary friendship built on years of loyalty and devotion.

I acknowledge here, and will do so in that particular section, that the show plays out as a satire. However, I will argue that although the show is imagined as ironic, and we, as Latina spectators, recognize that on one level, we as spectators are also invited to believe that on another level this relationship is truly one of love and caring, especially when the show turns to its serious moments in its imagining of the relationship between the two women. Moreover, there is a conflation between the fictional and the reality that white women most often hire women of color to work for them; this means that I am as ambiguous in my feelings about the representation Rosario offers, as I am about Dame Edna and her unwittingly upsetting column. Therefore, I will argue that the satire of that relationship has to be grounded in more realistic examinations. I am always interested and invested, as a Latina spectator, on the ambiguity presented by our understanding of the satire and our understanding of the reality of our positions as Latinas in societal discourse.

## **“We Need Our Comfort”: The Legacy of the Mammy Lives on in the Imaginations of Whiteness.**

The mammy has a clear historical and economic reality in United States history. They were servants and caretakers of the white family. They took care of the house, the children and most importantly their white employers. In the historical imaginations of whiteness (specifically in the South) the mammy is reconfigured as a woman of great importance to white womanhood and to the structure of the white family. As Trudier Harris states in *From Mammies to Militants:*

*Domestics in Black American Literature:*

she was considered self-respecting, independent, loyal, forward, gentle, captious, affectionate, true, strong, just, warm-hearted, compassionate-hearted, fearless, popular, brave, good, pious, quick-witted, capable, thrifty, produced, regal, courageous, superior, skillful, tender, queenly, dignified, neat, quick, tender, competent, possessed with a temper, trustworthy, faithful, patient, tyrannical, sensible, discreet, efficient, careful, harsh, devoted, truthful, neither apish nor servile. (35–36)

Reconfigured in their historical imaginations as women who loved their roles in lives, the mammy was often seen as wholeheartedly devoted to her white family, even leaving her own family behind in order to maintain the structure of the white family. As Harris states, “these women usually compromise everything of themselves and of their connections to the black community in order to exist in the white world” (23). It is an important reconfiguration about the mammy that she lived her life for the white family she served. She needs to be seen as a willing individual who *chooses* the white family above her own, rather than the reality that she is forced into choosing one above the other. The mammy of the historical past was also imagined as the ideal servant who never complained, who maintained her place in society and who functioned to maintain the white family as successful. As Harris continues, “she was a woman completely dedicated to the white family, especially to the children of that family...She served also as a friend and advisor. She was, in short, surrogate mistress and mother” (49).

In fact, so embedded in historical imaginations is the relationship of care between white women and their mammies that in 1923, the Daughters of the Confederacy asked the United States congress to allow them to create a monument to honor generations of, what they felt, were their caring and devoted mammies. As Cheryl Thurber states in the *Development of the Mammy Image and Mythology*:

in celebrating the mammy, the increasingly middle-and upper class United Daughters of the Confederacy were reclaiming and reinterpreting the past in conformity with their own middle-class, progressive values and shifting the focus away from the veterans and the war. Having a mammy became a badge of having been 'raised right' as a proper southerner. In the mythology, the white folks were firmly left in control of the subservient and dependent mammy who knew her place, and because of the mammy could be seen as having power with the household. (99–100)

Only because of strong protest by African-Americans, was the plan abandoned. But this example is indicative of what the mammy image represents and necessitates for white individuals and specifically for white women. As Thurber continues, "the glorification of the mammy was intimately connected with nostalgia and the longing to return to childhood days and a simpler, peaceful life" (104). It is this glorification, desire and necessity of the mammy (as reconfigured) in the historical imaginations of whiteness that is an avenue for analysis. So, why do white women continue to imagine a need for the mammy figure in their servants?

Whether acknowledged or not, this mammy figure reverberates still in social expectations of the relationships between white women and their mammies. White women often recall nostalgically their relationships with mammies as one based on a mutual sense of friendship, one that worked cohesively between two halves. As Cheryl Thurber argues, "white society still has a secret and perverted need for a nurturing Mammy figure, and a desire to keep black womanhood reined in and relegated to antiquated stereotypes. This is evident in the sustained presence of these stereotypes, renovated for modern use, but fundamentally unchanged" (5). Melinda Price agrees, arguing in "*I Ain'tch Yo Mamma: The Mammy Myth Unveiled*" that she sees the

contemporary mammy figure continually incorporated in lauded images of black women in society. She argues that in Oprah Winfrey, one of the most popular and powerful African-American women of the last twenty years:

we see the embodiment, literally and figuratively, of the evolution of the Mammy figure... Truly, Oprah wishes to be a great loving mother, a new mammy with a spiritual take of life. That is not to say Oprah embraces the mammy myth and accepts it as her personal archetype; she differs sharply from the representations of her enslaved ancestors. She has chosen to be a caregiver. (8)

Moreover, Price is hardly the only individual who has made the connection between Oprah as care-giver for primarily white audiences and their need for a reconfigured mammy figure they cannot live without.<sup>1</sup> Esther Iverem, Editor of *SeeingBlack.com* states:

decades of "Oprah" and years of Lewis on MTV certainly have shown that a Black host does not equal a "Black" show. Rather, these women become vehicles for conveying a staid brand of women's programming aimed at White Middle America... So, more and more, the Black woman sitting in the host seat begins to look a lot like mammy... it is not outrageous for the conscious Black viewer to be rattled by the TV mammy's new calling to heal White people and, perhaps, give them some soul. (1)

In fact, Oprah may not be the success she is if white audiences (specifically white middle and upper middle class women) did not approve of her and need her to guide them into living better and more productive lives.<sup>2</sup> And although the Oprah concept may disturb some, the reality that white audiences subconsciously desire a mammy figure is evident in any number of other contemporary films with women of color who are mother-like or mammy-like figures, For example, in The Warner Brothers 1988 film *Clara's Heart*, which stars Whoopi Goldberg as a

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<sup>1</sup> See Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender and the New Racism*, (New York & London: Routledge, 2005) for a further examination of Oprah Winfrey and other African-American female representations, in contemporary film, television and popular culture.

<sup>2</sup> See Janice Peck, "Talk About Racism: Framing a popular discourse of race on Oprah Winfrey". *Cultural Critique*, (Spring 1994):89-126 for a discussion of the popularity of Oprah Winfrey and its racial context.

housekeeper hired to take care of the young white son of a white couple whose marriage is deteriorating. She, the young son and the mother end up bonding together to make it work out for all of them. Moreover, this mother-like or mammy-like figure plays out in a number of other Goldberg films, including the 1994 film *Corrina, Corrina*.<sup>3</sup> It is her mothering that allows the girl to open up after the death of her mother. The film, which is set in 1959, allows for an interesting twist, in that Corrina ends up marrying the white father against the disapproval of the society of the time. However, it is only *after* she has proven her worth as a *mother* that she becomes allowed to be part of the family<sup>4</sup>. Additionally we see this same figure in Universal Pictures 1995 hit *Billy Madison*, who has a black housekeeper Juanita who takes care of him, in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox's 2000 hit *Big Momma's House*, and in Warner Brothers 1999's *The Matrix*, starring Keanu Reeves as a character named Neo, who is guided to his future as the "One" by the black mother figure of the Oracle, played by Gloria Foster. Moreover, we see this image in past television shows including *Gimme a Break!* (1981–1987), which stars Nell Carter as a black housekeeper who takes care of three white children after the death of their mother.<sup>5</sup> All of these

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<sup>3</sup> See Krin Gabbard, *Black Magic: White Hollywood and African American Culture*, (New Brunswick, New Jersey & London: Rutgers University Press, 2004) for an analysis of the Black magical friend in Hollywood films and how that friend or figure serves to "radically transform the lives of white characters, usually providing them with romance and gravitas...African Americans often appear in films for no other reason than to help white people reaffirm their own superiority" (6).

<sup>4</sup> I acknowledge the films progressive possibilities.

<sup>5</sup> See Patricia A. Turner in *Ceramic Uncles & Celluloid Mammies: Black Images and their influence on Culture*, (New York: Anchor Books, 1994) for an analysis of the reconfigured mammy figure in the show *Gimme a Break!*.



examples serve to show that the mammy image (and its characteristics) has not disappeared in modern mainstream imaginations of the black woman.<sup>6</sup>

### **Am I Imagining Things? The Theory behind the Reality of White Imaginations of Darkness.**

In *Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Handbook*, Hortense J. Spillers articulates an analysis of the African-American woman's development of the psychic self. Arguing that the gendered self is always fractured by a historical imagination of blackness as other, Spillers contends that the African-American woman has had to suffer as an object of white racial imagining and never the subject of her own reality. As such, the African-American female figure has become irreducible to white knowledge only. It is only when whiteness imagines her that she exists. Moreover, in her analysis is an argument that the white imagination is unable to exist without blackness as a factor of its own ideological or idealized reality. As Spillers tells us "my country needs me, and if I were not here, I would have to be invented" (65). Spillers' argument comes from the critical framework of examining slavery's implications on the fractures of the African identity in a contemporary imagination, from an inability to name oneself metaphorically or historically to fractures of a historical imagination of their own. At the same time, Spillers' argument entails examining the un-gendered captive body (read slave) as it is negotiated by whiteness, as a way in which to imagine the gendered freedom of their own bodies. African-Americans' "otherness" in a variety of ways allows whiteness to be articulated as normalized. Spillers' seems interested in understanding the way in which whiteness needs and

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<sup>6</sup> See Lorraine Fuller, "Are We Seeing Things? The Pinesol Lady and the Ghost of Aunt Jemima" *Journal of Black Studies*, 32 (Sept. 2001):120-131 for an analysis of television advertising and the stereotypical images of black females presented by those advertisers.

desires blackness as a symbolic and physical reality in order to create its own psychical sense. As

Spillers' states:

the captive body, then, brings into focus a gathering of social realities as well as a metaphor for value so thoroughly interwoven in their literal and figurative emphases that distinctions between them are virtually useless. Even though the captive flesh/body has been "liberated", and no one need pretend that even the quotation makes do not matter, dominant symbolic activity, the ruling episteme that releases the dynamics of naming and valuation, remains grounded in the originating metaphors of captivity and mutilation so that it is as if neither time nor history, nor historiography and its topics, shows movement, as the human subject is 'murdered' over and over again by the passions of a bloodless and anonymous archaism, showing itself in endless disguise. (68)

The "ruling episteme" that Spillers discusses above is the white historical and contemporary imagination that continues to perpetuate, consciously or subconsciously, a desire to "devalue" the presence of African-American gendered identity in the framework of a global discourse. Therefore, the white historical imagination always imagines an African other in "disguise." I will argue that the disguise comes in the form of the relationship between white women and women of color (primarily African-American, but now including Latina Americans) in film and television. That relationship occurs many times over, and is fore grounded on whiteness as a superior position of normalcy and the ethnic female other as negated or always framed around the discourse of white woman's identity. As Spillers argues, "we cannot unravel one female's narrative from the other's, cannot decipher one without tripping over the other" (77).

Similarly, in *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, Toni Morrison also articulates an argument that whiteness cannot exist without blackness. Using American literature as the basis for her analysis, Morrison examines how images of Africanism or Africanist identity are deeply embedded, whether consciously or subconsciously, in the framework for American literature. As Morrison argues, "through significant and understood omissions, startling contradictions, heavily nuanced conflicts, through the way writers people their work with the signs and bodies of this presence-one can see that a real and fabricated

Africanist presence was crucial to their sense of Americanness” (6). Therefore, Morrison articulates this Africanist presence in literature, and indeed in other cultural texts, as one that allows for the possibility of disseminating the discourse of whiteness in a cultural context.<sup>7</sup> As Morrison suggests, “what Africanism became for, and how it functioned in, the literary imagination is of paramount interest because it may be possible to discover, through a close look at literary ‘blackness,’ the nature-even the cause-of literary ‘whiteness.’” (9). Therefore, I am interested in applying Morrison’s foundational argument and her rubric for the way in which whiteness imagines blackness to the relationship between white women and Latina women in film and television. I am interested in how those imaginations of the ethnic female other (here imagined as Latinaness) continue to be maintained or reconfigured in ways that allow white women to keep the necessary imaginations of mammies in the framework of their relationship with women of color.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> See further Gabbard for an analysis of how the necessity of an Africanist presence is re-imagined in films as the black magical friend who always helps an Anglo protagonist achieve greatness, either physically, symbolically or metaphorically.

<sup>8</sup> In a number of ways, theorists have explained that their imaginings of the mammy is a way to alleviate guilt over the historical reality of slavery. As Patricia A. Turner states in *Ceramic Uncles & Celluloid Mammies: Black Images and their influence on Culture*, “by suggesting that antebellum households had been run by smiling, self-assured, overweight, born-to-nurture black women, fiction writers and journalists began to perpetuate a mythological Southern past removed from all of the heinous dimensions of slavery” (47). Additionally, such images or such reaffirmations (as argued in a previous chapter) allow whiteness (specifically white women) to re-imagine themselves as altruistic figures helping out those who are unable to help themselves. As Cheryl Thurber states in *The Development of the Mammy Image and Mythology*, “with the expression of pious devotion and support for mammy, proper southerners could convince themselves and others of their own goodness. In a sense they were attempting to redeem themselves for the other wrongs they had done to blacks because of course, ‘I loved my old mammy’” (98).

## Case Studies

### White Women and Women of Color Bond in Film.

Let me explain the subconscious or conscious necessity for whiteness to maintain women of color as mammy figures with examples from the recent films *Monster-In-Law* (2005), starring Jane Fonda and Wanda Sykes and *Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood* (2002), starring Ashley Judd, Ellen Burstyn and Leslie Silva. For the first film, let me briefly note that both actresses of the film, Fonda and Sykes, are well known for their often-controversial takes on politics, race, and gender. As *www.imdb.com*, the Internet film database informs us:

Jane Fonda's professional success contrasted with her personal life, often laden with scandal and controversy. Her appearance in several risqué movies (including *Barbarella* (1968) by then husband Roger Vadim) was followed by what was to become Jane Fonda's most debated and controversial period: her espousal of anti-Establishment causes and especially her anti-War activities during the Vietnam War.

Similarly, Wanda Sykes<sup>9</sup> often complicates notions of race, gender and ethnicity in her stand-up work, often satirizing or turning the tables on black/white relationships. Her current book entitled, "Yeah, I said it," is a collection of personal essays and jokes about American life and politics. As the *New York Times* states, "Wanda Sykes' unique blend of stinging humor and outspoken honesty has found her moving beyond a career in standup thanks to notable success in film and television" (1).<sup>10</sup>

The reason I mention part of the history of these two women is because of the relationship that plays out between them in the film *Monster-In-Law*. Though they are both willing to

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<sup>9</sup> Wanda Sykes is the only black woman to make Comedy Central's Top 100 List of The Greatest Standups of All Time and has been cited by Entertainment Weekly as one of the 25 funniest people in America.

<sup>10</sup> Her controversial jokes have even found their way into criticism of President Bush. As Wanda jokes on the *Jay Leno Show* "I don't think the President should have taken responsibility.... I don't blame the President. I blame the American people. Y'all knew the man was slow when you voted him in. You can't blame the blind man for wrecking your car when you're the one who gave him the keys."

elucidate serious questions personal lives, they nonetheless reaffirm those inequitable positions in the roles they choose and concerns about the oppression of women within society in the negotiation of their se to take in film, whereby the African-American woman effectively becomes, like the mammy once was, the reconfigured African-American caretaker of the white woman in film. And as I argue previously, the inequitable relationship between the two women in this film is perpetuated as a bonding relationship. In *Monster-In-Law*, Ruby (Sykes) and Viola's (Fonda) relationship is imagined as a friendship; yet, Ruby plays servant and caretaker (in effect a contemporary mammy) for Viola's self-aggrandizing character, who over mommies her own son. Similarly, the film *Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood* (2002) depicts a self-aggrandizing character, played by Ellen Burstyn, as the matriarch of an old southern family and a black woman caretaker Willetta, played by Leslie Silva<sup>11</sup>. Unlike *Monster-In-Law*, the black woman here appears as a servant (at least in the historical past).<sup>12</sup>

It is important to examine the way in which these relationships are imagined as friendships instead of working based or servitude based relationships. In *Monster-In-Law*, the film often shows Viola and Ruby shopping together, hanging out together and eating together in restaurants. Viola often talks about the number of years they have been together and we often see them discussing the life-altering moments of their lives and the tough times they have lived through *together*. In fact, when Viola is fired from her career as a Barbara Walters-type newscaster and replaced by a younger and hipper version of her, it is Ruby who is there to

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<sup>11</sup> Actress Sarallen plays the older Willetta character in the film and Leslie Silva plays the younger version.

<sup>12</sup> This film covers a number of historical decades, as the characters are often thrown into the historical past to examine Vivian Walker's (played by Ellen Burstyn) life from childhood to life as an adult. The younger version of Vivian is played by Ashley Judd.

protect and console Viola and it is Ruby who stands by her side against the television station.

The inclination here, like that of the traditional mammy, is to protect her mistress from her own oppression (symbolically suggested by her replacement by a younger woman) by men and the patriarchal system.

Similarly, in *Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood*, the characters of Vivian Walker (Burstyn) and Willetta (Silva) also appear as a relationship based on friendship, loyalty and trust. We often see Vivian frame Willetta as a confidant, often talking to her about her fears (in raising her children) and her hopes (that she will develop a friendship with one of the daughters later in life). In fact, we see Vivian stand up for Willetta when others wish to dismiss her and we often see Vivian and Willetta, later in life (the film moves between the past, where Willetta is more clearly configured as the servant, to the present where Willetta is configured more as the friend) sitting together and discussing, as in *Monster-In-Law*, the life altering moments of their lives, as well as their tough times *together*.

However, neither of the films acknowledges the *working* relationship between the two characters. To do so would be to acknowledge the class and racial factors which determine their relationship. It would mean that the Anglo women of the film would have to acknowledge their privilege in society and societal discourse. As Adrienne Rich argues, “the nascent antiracist, class-transcending feminism...would always be under pressure from the patriarchal strategy of divide and conquer. This strategy has repeatedly fed on the capacity of privileged women to delude themselves as to where their privilege originates, and what they are having to pay for it” (287). As such, in order to maintain some semblance of their own psychological position of power in society, white women have to maintain the status quo in their relationships with African-American women (at least subconsciously on film). Therefore, there are moments in both films

where the Anglo mistresses often reaffirm that their friends are in fact their servants, assistants or caretakers and reaffirm the African-American women as secondary to their own needs.

In *Monster-In-Law*, Viola often puts Ruby in her place by telling her to stay out of her business. She also reaffirms Ruby's position as her assistant by telling her to retrieve certain items, serve her drinks, or more importantly do the dirty work of investigating the daughter-in-law to be by finding out everything negative about her. Only in the private space between her and Ruby, does she situate the relationship as a friendship and calls Ruby her confidant. In the public space, however, she negates their friendship by reaffirming to Charlie (the prospective daughter-in-law played by Jennifer Lopez) that Ruby is indeed her assistant. Similarly, in *Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood*, Vivian never acknowledges that Willetta is her servant, often positioning their relationship as friendship to anyone who will hear. In fact, there is a pivotal moment in this film, where Vivian (as a younger self) defends Willetta against a cousin of her friend at a dinner in the rich cousin's nouveau riche home. This young boy wishes to situate the servants "place", as well as his own, by saying "who told you, you could walk your Black Louisiana ass into our dining room?" A few moments later, he calls her "nigger." In defense of her friend Willetta (even though Willetta is older than her) Vivian throws a plate of food in the young boy's face.

When this happens, a second important aspect of the framing of the relationship between African-American women and Anglo women in films is elucidated. The relationship becomes reconstituted as a way for the white women to perform altruistic acts. In other words, if there is a moment when they acknowledge the fact that Anglo women and African-American women are mistress and servant, it only serves to frame the Anglo women in the film as understanding that she does not adhere to those demarcations and in effect will stand against all others who wish to

perpetuate that inequality, making her seem aware of the political and social restraints that often interfere in their relationships with other women of color (as evident in the scene above). In this way, they alleviate any guilt over that positioning, suggesting they are not at fault and effectively transfers any fault to another system of power (classed, racial, or patriarchal based) instead. For example, in *Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood*, prior to the scene in the dining room, Vivian finds Willetta crying in her bed at night. She asks her why she is crying, and Willetta replies, “I miss my children.” Immediately after that moment, in what I can only presume is an attempt to compensate the servant for the loss of her family, Vivian takes on the role of the adopted daughter and asks her adopted mother to make her a glass of hot chocolate. After Willetta denies her, the preceding scene in the dining room takes place. There after, we see Willetta bring Vivian her hot chocolate, telling her how much she cares for her. Ultimately, the scene clarifies the character of Vivian Walker as strong, courageous, caring, devoted, and one willing to stand up against those who would oppress her dear friend Willetta. In contrast, Willetta is seen as somewhat selfish in her denying Vivian her hot chocolate, which becomes a metaphor for denying Vivian her place and moreover denying Vivian her metaphorical mammy.

In *Monster-In-Law*, however, no scene like the above takes place because the above example is set in the historical past, when Vivian is young and Willetta is the hired caretaker for the southern family. Nonetheless, a metaphorical mammy (reconfigured of course) still exists within the relationship between Viola and Ruby. After all, Ruby’s primary concern throughout the film is Viola in every possible way. She takes care of Viola when she is fired. She also most poignantly protects Viola from herself, stopping Viola from drinking herself into oblivion and preventing Viola from poisoning the prospective daughter-in-law. She even helps Viola hide the evidence, suggesting a willingness to sacrifice herself along side her friend. Likewise, in *Divine*



*Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood*, we see Willetta take care of Vivian throughout her life, and even protect Vivian from herself, stopping her from abusing drugs and preventing Vivian from beating her children. Ultimately, in both *Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood* and *Monster-In-Law*, we see imagined are friendships that stand the test of time. In the end, an older Vivian is feeding an even older Willetta in her bed when Willetta has become incapacitated by old age, visually cementing for the audience, the relationship between the two women as friends and more importantly as real family. Similarly, in the end of *Monster-In-Law*, when the newlywed couple departs of their journey, the camera frames Viola and Ruby in the last shot of the film, visually cementing them together forever as real family in the minds of the audience. In fact, there is another interesting final possibility for reading the above scene in *Monster-In-Law*. At the end of romantic films, we usually see parents framed together saying goodbye to their children; here we see Viola and Ruby. Therefore, is it possible to suggest that Ruby is a substitute parent or metaphorical mother for Charlie (who earlier in the film is classified as alone in the world) and Kevin (the son played by Michael Vartan)?<sup>13</sup>

Ultimately, we never forget, either through the visual (when Willetta baths the young Vivian or when Ruby brings Viola a drink) or the verbal (when either Vivian or Viola call Willetta and Ruby friends) that these women are there as their assistants, their servants, their caretakers and more importantly their reconfigured mammies. The African-American women in the film are never part of the discourse of the film unless it serves the purpose of framing the altruism and good nature of the Anglo female protagonists. We find out relatively little about their desires, hopes and fears. Those are always situated around the Anglo women they serve and

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<sup>13</sup> I would like to thank fellow colleague, Sarah Brusky, for suggesting this possibility.

work for. In other words, they live for them, in the very ways in which the mammies of the past were framed as living for their white families. We never know who they truly are or indeed how they might feel about the racial, social and class factors which determine their place as the servants for Anglo women.

Therefore, this subconscious desire to perpetuate African-American women as caretakers, and indeed replacement mother-like figures as reconfigured mammies, survives throughout the centuries and is continually imagined over and over again in contemporary films and television today. As Adrienne Rich states, “this personal history is not unique; many white women have been mothered by black women, a connection we sentimentalize at our peril” (280).

Consequently, as Rich argues, the relationship between white women and women of color is always framed with a more desirable format for the white woman, one where she sentimentally and nostalgically, looks upon the relationship without any conscious recognition of the inequality which privileges one above the other. White women need the gendered black figure and therefore, as Spillers argues, it must exist. Because there is no way to publicly acknowledge the truth of those relationships or the way in which those relationships play out, white women subsume those desires and reconfigure them into more acceptable frameworks in film. This now included reconfiguring the mammy as a Latina. I would argue that this move makes it easier, ideologically speaking, to bypass the history of that racial pain which determines the relationships between black women and white women in society. Adrienne Rich notes this difference when she says, “throughout this text I say ‘black’ and not ‘First (or Third) World,’ because although separation by skin color and class is by no means confined to that between black women and white women, black women and white women in this country have a special history of polarization” (280).

## **Making the Connection: A Shared History of Oppression for Black and Latina Women.**

In the argument above, I discuss the historical connections, as well as the ways in which those historical connections become reconfigured in the present, in the relationships between white women as employer or mistress and women of color as servants or maids in film. I am concerned with asking, what common characteristics does the mammy figure of the past have in common with reconfigured maids as mammies in film and television today? Do the mammies of the past function in the same way that the Latina maids function today? And although I do argue that many of the same characteristics of the mammy and mistress configuration still exist in the relationships between white women and Latina women in films, I acknowledge that there are elemental differences as well, one of which is in acknowledging that the historical racial pain (which I mentioned above) that exists between black women and white women is not the same in the relationship between white women and Latinas; after all, Latina women were not specifically slaves or traditionally mammy figures for white women (at least not typically within the United States historical framework). As Talmadge Anderson states:

even the dominant White society's paradigm of ethnicity acknowledges Black uniqueness in relation to the other non-Anglo-racial-ethnic groups (Omi and Winant, 1986). Indeed, perhaps because of their forced immigration, experience of slavery, and blackness of color, Blacks see themselves as unique and incomparable with the other two racial-ethnic populations. (28)

It is important to acknowledge that the historical pain which foregrounds the relationship between black women and white women in society is not the same for white women and Latina women. However, I argue that there are still fundamental connections which can be made between the social, economic and political oppressions of Latinas by white women both within social causes and in the feminist struggle, from which women of color have often felt excluded from in the last fifty years. As Alma A. Garcia states, "Chicana feminists shared a common experience with other women of color whose life histories were shaped by the multiple sources

of oppression generated by race, gender, and social class” (4). Moreover, many of the oppressive factors which determine the representations of Latina women are the same factors which determine the representation of African-American women in society and in film. As Bonnie Thornton Dill states, “commonalities of class or gender may cut across racial lines providing the conditions for shared understanding” (138).

However, ultimately, I am not arguing that the Latina maid is a contemporary slave, with all the historical connections which determine that reality. I am arguing that historical *memory* of the mammy and how she functions for whites still exists in the relationship between white women and Latinas, in film and television, within the character of the Latina maid and her employers.<sup>14</sup> Though reconfigured and unacknowledged, that mammy image has transferred a number of ideological frameworks for the way in which the image of the Latina maid is used today. Specifically, the Latina woman as maid, becomes the new figure of comfort for white women. She is the source of their strength, where they allay their fears, hopes and desires. Moreover, as in the traditional usage of the mammy, by comparison to the dark body, the white female body becomes a desirable, wanted figure. Additionally, as mammies of the past were, these new Latina mammy figures become replacement mother figures and mothering figures to white women and their children.

Nevertheless, there are differences as well which must be acknowledged. One of those differences is in the issue of silence. These reconfigured Latina maids, much of time, are not

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<sup>14</sup> See Lorraine Fuller. “Are We Seeing Things? The Pinesol Lady and the Ghost of Aunt Jemima” *Journal of Black Studies*, 32 (Sept. 2001):120-131 and Patricia Hill Collins *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans; Gender and the New Racism* (New York: Routledge, 2001) for an analysis of the ways in which the image of the mammy or the Jemima figure continue to circulate in contemporary television and films portrayals of African-American women.

silent figures. They, unlike Mammy in *Gone with the Wind*,<sup>15</sup> talk back, criticize their mistresses or employers, and often mock (though maintain) their positions as servants. Furthermore, I would argue that the fact that Latina women were not traditionally slaves in the historical sense, perhaps allows for a silence to exist in the ways in which they are being oppressed by white woman in the global discourse. In this way, white women can acknowledge the pain of the black woman (and therefore react to them in more positive ways) and not acknowledge the pain of the Latina woman. Therefore, I believe it is possible to argue that the perceived lack of historical oppression may, in today's world where such behavior might not be stood for by African-American women, allow them to act even more monstrously toward Latina maids. As Mary Romero argues, in terms of the reality of the Latina maid:

I was shocked at my colleague's treatment of the sixteen-year old domestic...every attempt Juanita made to converse was met with teasing so that the conversation could never evolve into a serious discussion. Her employer's sexist, paternalistic behavior effectively silenced the domestic, kept her constantly on guard, and made it impossible for her to feel comfortable at work. (2)

In fact, as Romero narrates the experiences of Latina maids in the United States, she often tells us of the physical and mental abuse they often suffer at the hands of their employers, including being often subjected to racial slurs and sexist remarks.

The question of how this racial pain is denied and plays out in cultural imaginings of mammies as Latina maids can be seen, for example, in the film *Storytelling*, which stars Lupe Ontiveros,<sup>16</sup> as the Latina maid Consuelo, for a white upper class family. In one important scene

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<sup>15</sup> More often than not, Mammy reacts to Scarlett in visual ways. The camera often pans to her for a reaction shot to the absurdities of Scarlett's decisions in the film *Gone with the Wind*. When she does verbally react, it is often in an aside and not directly to Scarlett. Unlike Scarlett, the character of Rosario in *Will & Grace* directly confronts Karen on the absurdities of Karen's decisions.

<sup>16</sup> I would like to note that Mexican actress Lupe Ontiveros has played over 150 maids in film to date.

the young boy in the story attacks Consuelo about her social and working class positioning, mocking her dedication to him above her own family, criticizing her inability to get a better job and become a better (in this context a class positioning) human being and even dismisses the hardship of her life. As he tells her, “this isn’t real work. This is just babysitting...Your jobs really not bad if you think about it. You should smile more.” Later, the young child deliberately messes up the kitchen and calls Consuelo out to clean it in the middle of the night.<sup>17</sup> At the end of the film, Consuelo can take no more and she ends up physically burning down the home of the young boy and symbolically trying to destroy his ideological belief system. As always, I feel ambiguous about her representation. It is true that Ontiveros’ house burning maid offers Latina spectator’s moments of resistance, and on a more complicated level, subversive possibilities. However, the audience is reaffirmed with the threat that hiring a Latina maid offers and more importantly, that the threat of the other exists. However, I merely point out the above example to ask that we consider that just because a sense of historical pain does not exist between white women and Latina women does not mean that there are not ways in which the relationship between them is executed and maintained as inequitable. And the concept and structure of the Latina maid works to maintain that inequality.

There are other ways in which to examine the commonalities between representations of African-American and Latina women in film. Many contemporary African-American scholars are ambivalent about any connection between Latina and black women’s images or realities. For the most part, the argument against commonalities between the two stem from the fact that there

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<sup>17</sup> It is important to acknowledge that director Todd Solondz, who also directed the critically praised *Welcome to the Dollhouse*, focuses on the dark side of human behavior, often reflecting and deconstructing the highly praised American Dream individuals in society seek. Therefore, his film is probably used to shed light on the destructiveness of an upper middle class family who takes for granted the hard work of the servants who work for them.

is a historical legacy of slavery between white and black women that Latinas have not experience. However, in *Sapphires, Spitfires, Sluts, and Superbitches: Aframericans and Latinas in Contemporary American Films*, Elizabeth Freyberg argues that the connection is found in the commonality of the images and representations allotted both women throughout film history. Freyberg connects the two both historically and politically, stating that “images of Aframericans and latinas have a long history of deformation and distortion because of racism-a by product of colonialism and sexism...Although Latina women were not brought to American for breeding, they were perceived as members of a ‘conquered’ people” (222–223). Therefore, although Latinas did not have to face the historical reality of slavery, does not preclude them from being viewed, as African-American women often have, with some of the same imaginations of slavery and the way in which its slavery is imbued onto blackness or the black body. Moreover she argues that, “the attitude of whites, toward Hispanics was infused with biological and militaristic superiority based upon the dame pseudo-scientific rationalization that had natured the most sophist defense of slavery” (224). In other words, the same ideas about the sexually promiscuous and muddled headed black woman have led to a same ideological belief for Latinas.

Freyberg segues from the earlier representations to engaging with the specifics of those oppressive beliefs and representations which have transferred themselves into contemporary images of African-American and Latina women. She argues that African-American women today face similar representations (an example would be Halle Berry’s award winning performance in 2002’s *Monster’s Ball*) and some of those beliefs have been transferred onto the body and the image of the Latina woman as well (Rosie Perez’s Latina portrayals in 1989’s *Do the Right Thing* and 1992’s *White Men Can’t Jump*). Some of the same stereotypes exist for Latinas that black women have been facing for many years. Latinas also face a lack of honest

representation in real life. As K. Sue Jewell states in *From Mammy to Miss American and Beyond: Cultural images and the shaping of US social policy*, “because race, class and gender serve as important criteria for determining power and wealth, African-American women and other women of color occupy the lowest social and economic position in the United States” (27). As she elucidates further, this means black women and women of color continue to be subjugated in the popular imagination as that which reaffirms whiteness as superior by affirming otherness as inferior. Grace Chang in *Disposable Domestic: Immigrant Women Workers in the Global Economy* states:

the US media, acting on behalf of and through the support of the capital and the State, have disseminated these myths as assaults on black women is perhaps not news. What is of greater concern is that such imagery has been extended to other racial and ethnic groups, such as Latinas, and that these images are even infiltrating the very communities against which these attacks are being leveled. (47)

### **The Latina Mammy: Two Progressive Films Fail To Be Progressive.**

It seems evident that the mammy figure is no longer “politically correct,” in the U.S cultural imagination (at least in film and television shows) but the image has not disappeared. As I have previously argued, it has been reconfigured in a more desirable format in order to retain an important dichotomy between white Americans and others, specifically women of color. Toni Morrison argues in *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*:

I want to suggest that these concerns--autonomy, authority, newness and difference, absolute power--not only become the major themes and presumptions of American literature, but that each one is made possible by, shaped by, activated by a complex awareness and employment of a constitutes Africanism. It was this Africanism, deployed as rawness and savagery, that provided the staging ground and arena for the elaboration of the quintessential American identity. (44)

And although Morrison is making an argument for the way in which an African-American presence continues to be embodied in literature in order to situate white identity both in an American ideology as well as within the white imagination, I similarly ask if there are ways to



engage with her theoretical framework in order to look at the Latina maid, as reconfigured mammy, in order to see what she embodies to situate or concretize white American identity. Using the 2005 films *Spanglish* and *Crash*, I elucidate how the image of the Latina maid as reconfigured mammy is necessary for the ways in which it allows white women in film to configure their own essentialized identities.

Morrison argues that there are significant ideologies which are embodied in this articulation of desire that whiteness has to depend on Africanism (and I argue otherness) for its situating of identity politics. As Morrison argues, “as a metaphor for transacting the whole process of Americanization, while burying its particular racial ingredients, this Africanist presence may be something the United States cannot do without” (47). One of the frameworks Morrison puts forth in her text is the concept of Africanism seen as Surrogate and Enabler. Morrison asks, “in what ways does an imaginative encounter with Africanism enable white writers to think about themselves?” (51) As she articulates, the Surrogate and Enabler allow white writers to articulate their identities in relation to the identities of others. As she puts forth, the question is how whiteness imagines itself in comparison to darkness or to the other. I ask in what ways does an imaginative or concretized encounter with the Latina maid enables white audience members of Anglo individuals of the film to think about themselves? Moreover, I ask, how I, as a Latina spectator, negotiate with the images in order to see a more positive possibility for representation in the images being offered in these two “progressive” films.

In the film *Spanglish*, the white mother Deborah Clasky (played by Téa Leoni) tries to situate herself as a stronger and more capable individual, by comparison to the otherness, seen through the Latina maid Flor Moreno (played by actress Paz Vega). Although she does not always succeed in doing so, there is much she seems to gain in situating herself against the

Latina maid. For example, in one elemental scene, having felt she was losing the moral ground to the Latina maid, she outruns the Latina maid in the street in front of her house. This scene may serve a dual purpose. In one regard, Deborah is able to prove for herself, her physical superiority over the maid. In another regard, the scene allows for the audience to frame Deborah as a selfish mother who races her maid, who clearly cannot compete, because she to work all day. Moreover, in two other elemental scenes, the white mother tries to prove herself financially and perhaps intelligently more capable of taking care of the Latina maid's daughter (as she proves wholly unsuccessful in mothering her own child). In one scene, she takes the daughter on a shopping trip without Flor's permission. At the end of the trip, her subconscious desire to be the better of the two is solidified by the daughter's claim that she is "the most amazing white woman I've ever met." In yet another scene, the white mother drops the daughter of the Latina maid off to a new school, which she successfully manipulates both the Latina mother and daughter into going to, and while there gives the Latina daughter (and not her own) a beautiful necklace. Again, her attempt to position herself (although I argue it is not a subconscious desire here) as the better mother is solidified by the Latina daughter once again claiming, "thank you so much for the opportunity." Again, an underlying motivation of the scene is to solidify for the audience what a selfish character the mother truly is. Here, we understand the opportunity as being more than attending a private school, but in opening up possibilities for a successful future which her own mother cannot provide.

However, I find myself feeling ambiguous about the narratives intent.<sup>18</sup> It is true that at the end of the narrative, the white mother becomes completely vilified, as she has an affair and alienates both daughter and husband with her pettiness and nastiness. It is true, as well, that we may see some positive aspects of the Latina maid, as she fights against assimilation (although she does learn English in the film, in the end, she reverts back to Spanish), stands firm against threats to her family and hopefully guides the white family into living better lives. Nonetheless, the Latina mother seems framed by a number of complicated discourses. First, she appears to fall in love with the white father of the family, subconsciously proving what I argued in chapter one that a Latina spitfire (i.e, maid) threatens the white upper middle class family. She is the conflation of the mammy and the spitfire: beautiful and seductive to the male head of the household, and therefore a threat to the white wife. She is talking back to her employers and standing up for herself and what she sees as her daughter's welfare, but self-sacrificing enough to not follow through with a seduction. At the same time, she provide the love, comfort and support, all subsumed under her desire to subconsciously save this family from itself, thereby proving herself a reconfigured (though desired) mammy.

A second complicated discourse is seen when she is portrayed in the final scenes as a bit ungrateful for all that has happened. In that last scene, she and her daughter are fighting about the fact that she has pulled the daughter away from a good home (living with the white family), pulled her away from a good school (she withdraws her) and pulls her away from a good life. As the young daughter exclaims, "you ruined everything." And although we do here the voice over

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<sup>18</sup> It is interesting to note that once again, the Latina maid appears to be overlooked by most film critics. Most prefer to transcendentalize the story into one of universalized human experience. As Roger Ebert notes in his December 14, 2004 review, "'*Spanglish*' isn't really about being a maid, it's more about being a life-force, as Flor heals this family with a sunny disposition and an anchor of normality".

of the daughter saying (later in life) that she learned a great deal from the tough choices her mother had to make, it seems somewhat negated by the lack of any visual confirmation of their success. And yet again, I ask myself whether the film's true goal is to use otherness (as a metaphor for Morrison's Africanist) as a presence to more clearly situate concerns with the white family structure. In other words, is the film more subconsciously concerned with what happens to the white family? However, this film is more interesting than most in the depiction of the Latina maid. For although she is definitely the Latina caregiver and "spiritual guide" for the white family, there is some subjectivity in her position throughout the film, including the daughter's claiming at the end of the film that she is indeed, "her mother's daughter."

The argument above ties into another of the frameworks of Morrison's argument, one which asks us to examine how the strategic use of black characters (in the argument I use Latina characters) serves to "define the goals and enhance the qualities of the white characters" (52-53). In the above examples, one of the purposes of the Latina maid is to frame how the white father (played by Adam Sandler) grows as a better man because of her presence in his life. And indeed, the white father does grow, as he learns to communicate better with his own daughter in the story. Without a doubt, one of the more subtle narratives of the film is that he not quite the best parent he can be yet and meeting Flor will facilitate this growth and allow him to be the best parent he can, which may mean standing up to his wife to the detriment of their marriage. He also grows as a better man in his ability to handle the world around him, and he even learns to speak up for himself throughout the narrative. In other words, Flor as the caregiver lets him articulate his voice. Moreover, I argue that Flor's self-sacrifice (in her own sacrifice of the good job she holds with the family, in her sacrifice of a good "opportunity," for her daughter and finally her sacrificing her feelings for the white husband) allows the grandmother of the narrative

(played by Cloris Leachman) to become a better mother to her daughter, Deb. Flor is even able to help the grandmother quit drinking. She also guides the daughter of the white family into accepting herself when her mother is unable to do so. In the end, we see the white daughter hug Flor for all that Flor has done for her.

Similarly, in the film *Crash*, the Latina maid is not as significant to the film as what happens in her white family because of her. In this film, we first see the white mother, Jean (played by Sandra Bullock), framed as a white upper class bourgeois individual who gets robbed early in the film. The narrative frames her as angry about the encounter and believes that this has happened to her unjustly because she is a white woman and is easily taken advantage of. As the perpetrators of the car jacking are both black men, she becomes suspicious of anyone who is the ethnic other. And later in the film, when a Latino man is sent to change the locks of her house, she proclaims to her husband (loud enough for the Latino male to hear) that she wants the locks changed again, because she fears that the Latino man (whom she believes to be a gang member because he has tattoos on his body) will sell the keys to his gang friends and they will be robbed again.

In a later scene, she proclaims to a friend that she is angry at the world. For her, that world is represented by the threat of the ethnic other, as she tells her friend Carol that she is angry with the Latina maid, the dry cleaner who destroyed a shirt of hers and the gardener who keeps over-watering the lawn. In fact, the film sets itself up as ideologically progressive in its attempt to counter negative stereotypes. Its transcendent message (for audience members and characters alike) seems to be that we can all learn from each other if we take the time, and we should not believe the built-in stereotypes we all have. Unfortunately, I believe the film unwittingly negates

its own message, as the ethnic others seemed framed once again to help the white individuals<sup>19</sup> (and in a more subtle narrative themselves) learn and grow from their ignorance. Jean's growth in the film is what becomes important. After all, when she falls down the stairs at the end of the film and is helped up and put to bed by her Latina maid, and the camera frames her face in the moment between her and the Latina maid, she *learns* that it is the maid who has always been her best friend and she *learns* a valuable life lesson that she cannot frame everyone (i.e., Latinos/as) with the same stereotypes.<sup>20</sup>

Furthermore, to return to my initial argument, it is also clear that the Latina maid functions as the reconfigured mammy figure in both films. For example, the idea that the Latina maid is used as a surrogate mother, for both of the white women in the films and their children is evident in both *Spanglish* and *Crash*. In *Spanglish*, the Latina maid, Flor, is set up as the mother figure for the young children early in the film. The white mother, Deb, is portrayed as a woman of high expectations, who seems preoccupied by her place class position, often positing her anxiety about her expectations as a mother and a wife and often asking Flor and her own mother for understanding under a transcendent feminist ideology. In the beginning of the film, we hear Deb

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<sup>19</sup> It is possible to understand Flor within the framework of Krin Gabbard's argument about the black magical friend.

<sup>20</sup> Jean's lesson isn't the only time when an Anglo character learns and grows from their ignorance in the film. In another example, a white police officer (played by Matt Dillon) molests a light-skinned African-American woman (played by Thandie Newton) in front of her husband during an unnecessary traffic stop. Later in the film, when the same woman *Crashes* her car, it is Dillon's character that saves her life by pulling her from the car before it explodes. He learns, by the look of fear on Newton's face when he pulls her from the car, that he has done wrong and a disturbing aspect of this growth is solidified when we see the Newton character smile at him in gratitude for saving her life. It feels as if the initial molestation sequence is negated by their silent, yet poignant communication in this final encounter, which allows us to understand the "growth" of the Anglo man and forget the abuse of the African-American woman. These moments repeat themselves over and over in the film through the experiences of Anglo characters that learn from their encounters with ethnic others.

articulate her angst at having lost her business, thereby positioning the possibility that she will go back to work soon and that she is in fact looking for someone to take care of her children while she is not there.<sup>21</sup> And as the film plays on, we do see Flor taking care of the children. In an important scene of the film, Flor is seen fixing the mistake of the white mother, who has purposely purchased a size too small for her daughter in order to force her into losing weight. Flor spends the entire night re-sewing the clothes for the young daughter and then presents them to her the next morning. The touching scene that follows Flor and the young daughter solidifies Flor's purpose as the surrogate mother, when the mother is unable to do her own mothering.

Similarly, in *Crash*, it is the Latina maid Maria who is responsible for the caretaking of the white mother and children. However, in *Crash*, we do not visually see a similar relationship play out between Maria and the white mother's children. Here, the Latina maid becomes the surrogate mother of the white woman. For it is the Latina maid who becomes the only one that Jean claims she can count on. This is specifically foregrounded by an incident at the end of the film, when Jean falls down the stairs of her home.<sup>22</sup> Later, we see Jean wrapped up in the comfort of her bed, put there by her maid Maria. Maria is then seen sitting Jean up in the bed, bringing her a cup of Tea and fluffing her pillows for her. Then, Jean hugs Maria hard and says, "you're the best friend I've got." Here again, we see the Latina maid as the surrogate mother figure. It is

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<sup>21</sup> It is important to note that Flor does not visually appear as the traditional mammy figure in terms of her looks, after all, she is quite attractive. More likely, as I indicated in Chapter One, she more likely appears here, at least physically, as a revamped spitfire, as her sexiness is a point of contention between her and the white mother. In fact, like the spitfire, she is most definitively a threat to their upper middle class value systems, as there is a real possibility that she will sleep with the white male father here and destroy their "perfect" family. However, what frames the film and her character more often is her relationship with the young daughter.

<sup>22</sup> Jean claims in a conversation with her husband that she asked a friend of ten years to help her; however, the friend could not help because she was getting a massage.

important to acknowledge the disparaging remarks that Jean says about Maria throughout the film, including the fact that Maria never takes the dishes out of the dishwasher and that she always takes longer than she should when she is running errands on the outside.

*Crash*, like *Spanglish* and other films alike, never fully articulates the experience of its ethnic others in ways in which they fully articulate the experiences of its Anglo characters. Moreover, the desire to universalize human experience negates individualized ethnic, racial and gendered experiences of oppression in societal discourse.<sup>23</sup> Ultimately, both films unfortunately reaffirm (though never fully acknowledges) the Latina maid as an prop necessary for situating or clarifying white middle class or upper middle value systems. Incorporating Toni Morrison's arguments with ideals of the mammy figure of comfort allows us to understand the subtle or obvious ways in which white identity formation (in films and perhaps for white spectators) is necessitated by the ethnic other, in this case the Latina maids in both films.

**“And Never the Two Shall Meet?” A Comparison of the Black Historical Mammy in *Gone with the Wind* and the New Reconfigured Latina Mammy in *Will & Grace***

As I indicated previously, the show *Will & Grace* which ran on NBC from 1998–2006 is argued to be a satire, at least a satire within the portrayal of Karen Walker (played by Megan Mullally). I point this out because I so often hear people fall back on that logic to defend the portrayal of the Latina maid Rosario (played by Shelley Morrison) and the relationship she has

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<sup>23</sup> Critic Roger Ebert states in his May 5, 2005 review of the film: not many films have the possibility of making their audiences better people. I don't expect "*Crash*" to work any miracles, but I believe anyone seeing it is likely to be moved to have a little more sympathy for people not like themselves. The movie contains hurt, coldness and cruelty, but is it without hope? Not at all. Stand back and consider. All of these people, superficially so different, share the city and learn that they share similar fears and hopes. . . You may have to look hard to see it, but "*Crash*" is a film about progress. It shows the way we all leap to conclusions based on race -- yes, all of us, of all races, and however fair-minded we may try to be -- and we pay a price for that. If there is hope in the story, it comes because as the characters *Crash* into one another, they learn things, mostly about themselves. Almost all of them are still alive at the end, and are better people because of what has happened to them. Not happier, not calmer, not even wiser, but better.



with employer, Karen. Presumably, the representations of the individuals on the show are mere reflections of exaggerated stereotypes and are there to mock their ridiculous belief systems. As satire works, it is important for the subject to expose its own inherent contradictions in order to provoke change. However, satire is only effective if change occurs or if people understand what is being questioned or ridiculed.

As I argued previously, with my example of Dame Edna in the Introduction, the fact that the satire of the Latina maid on this show is conflated with the reality of a society that depends on Latino/a servants to solidify their level of success is what purports to negate the satirical element of the show. As Mireya Navarro states, “Hispanic actors and media watchdogs argue that stereotypical roles loom disproportionately large because there are not enough alternatives to counteract something like the Hispanic maid in hit comedies like ‘*Will and Grace*’” (4). In other words, although it is true that Rosario, along with Karen, are recognized (at least by the majority of individuals who watch the show) as satirical figures, the fact that there are not enough (other than maid) representations of Latinas in Hollywood means people may subconsciously believe these are the only representations. Therefore it is possible (if not probable) that *this* image will be a representation that affirms negative ideas about Latinas which leaves them absent or negated in the cultural discourse.

This does not mean that as an individual Latina spectator, I do not understand that Rosario and Karen are indeed satirical figures. In fact, when I first saw the show *Will & Grace*, it was on a popular Thursday night line-up on NBC, which featured an array of Latina characters.<sup>24</sup> I called them my Thursday night Latinas. On the show *Scrubs*, we had nurse Carla (played by

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<sup>24</sup> I will note that the only exception to the line-up is the all Anglo character show *Friends*.

American Born-Puerto Rican Judy Reyes), on the show *Will & Grace*, we had maid Rosario (played by Spanish-Jewish actress Shelley Morrison), on the show *Good Morning, Miami*, we had weather person Lucia Rojas-Klein (played by Cuban actress Tessie Santiago) and finally on the show *ER* we had nurse Chuni Marquez<sup>25</sup> (played by Mexican actress Laura Cerón). I argued then, as I do now with one exception (I believe that the character Carla on *Scrubs* has become a strong avenue of Latina representation) that the character of Rosario seemed to be the one that I felt best allowed for the possibility of agency to be created for Latina spectators because of the satirical edge of the show. After all, Rosario talked back and she talked back often. She asserted her individuality and declared her subjectivity in ways that most Latina maids in television and film never do. In fact, she often parodies and questions Karen's position, wealth, success, independence and subjectivity, often restructuring the politics of servant and employer.

If we examine the image of Lucia in *Good Morning Miami* by comparison, Rosario appears to be the better representation. Lucia initially appears to be the better situated Latina; after all, she offers the possibility of upward mobility as a weather person for a morning television show in Miami, Florida. However, deconstructing her character elucidates the reality that she is more stereotypical and less resistant than the character Rosario on *Will & Grace*. Lucia is portrayed as a ditsy and whiny newscaster whose success is partly attributed to her sexuality. In fact, the show within the show appears to be failing and part of that failure is attributed to the fact that Lucia talks with a heavy accent that no one (whites) can understand.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> As a curious note of reference, it was only when I searched for her character online that I discovered she has a last name.

<sup>26</sup> I will note that actress Tessie Santiago did not apparently fit the stereotypical profile producers of the show were looking for. As such, she had to darken her hair and appropriate a heavily accentuated voice to appear more authentic according to the producers. This is significant because actress Judy Reyes (who plays Nurse Carla on *Scrubs*) once articulated her excitement that the character was not stereotypical. As she states: "Carla is 'a highly skilled, very confident nurse with a bit of an edge and a

Her only purpose of the show was to offer the occasional off-color joke and by comparison, clarify the Anglo characters as more hardworking and dedicated. Ultimately, her character leaves Latinas signified but not represented. On the other hand, the fact that Rosario continues to be perpetuated as active and vocal may leave room for negotiating the gaps and fissures which allows Latina spectators the possibility of representation.<sup>27</sup>

However, this assertiveness (and satirical defense) and possible subjectivity may be a strategic ploy to avert any questions of the stereotypical perpetuations of the character. The Latina maid who asserts herself is a way to not alienate a growing Latino/a audience. It embeds possibilities of resistance; however, one can argue that hegemony often structures itself around possibilities of resistance without possibilities of change. As the authors of the text *Introducing Cultural Studies* notes, “at the back of repressive state power lay hegemony, ‘a special kind of power--the power to frame alternatives and contain opportunities, to win and shape consent, so that the granting of legitimacy to the dominant classes appears not only ‘spontaneous’ but natural and normal” (105). In other words, there is a built in structure of the underrepresented--trying to achieve approval from the dominant regulates and normalizes their oppression in the oppressive system in control. As a result, built into hegemony is resistance, but the resistance, which

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really great heart,’ says Reyes, who praises the show's writing. ‘It's a terrific job.’ Executive producer Bill Lawrence (*Spin City*) planned for the character to be a Latina, Reyes says, but not a stereotyped one. Reyes incorporates elements of her experience in the character. ‘There's an urban reality that comes with the person I am,’ the actress says. ‘You get to see different colors, different splashes of it.’ And Carla doesn't have a Spanish accent, the bilingual Reyes says, which is a refreshing change after so often seeing accents automatically tied to Latino roles” (Keveney 1).

<sup>27</sup> I will note that a fellow Latina friend recently articulated that she also enjoyed Rosario's character and by comparison, hated what happened with the Dame Edna column I noted in the Introduction.

appears to situate itself as ideologically progressive, merely reaffirms the institutions of power structures already in place.

Therefore, although Rosario may talk back to Karen and make Karen's belief systems look foolish, I, as a Latina spectator, always understand that she will never truly have the upper hand in the relationship. The employer/employee dichotomy which exists will continue to affirm itself, and Latina maids, both in film and real life, will continue to be the norm and I will have to continue to look for the gaps and fissures in those images which allow me to have a representation, subjectivity and agency. Moreover, I will note that this fake politicizing comes with a more insidious possibility, which I suggested in Chapter one that the Latina maid serves to assuage white guilt about their avenues of oppression, which necessitates the structure between maid and employer as cohesive and emblematic of the goodness they need to feel about their wealth. Rather, "for some film viewers, if a character conforms in any way to negative stereotypes, that is what they will notice and remember, they will disregard any non-stereotypical qualities the same character demonstrates" (Berg 201).

Furthermore, when actress Shelley Morrison, who plays Rosario, was arrested in real life for shoplifting, I noticed something interesting. People online jokingly made references to the reality of Morrison as a real maid, stating, "she had a note from her Director, she was researching a role. Hee Hee Hee" (Yahoo News 1). The clear conflation of Morrison with the role she plays (as Hattie McDaniel was often conflated with her role of Mammy in *Gone With the Wind*) is suggestive of the reality that many people (though not all) are not seeing Latina identity as different from the roles they play as maids or contemporary mammies figures of comfort for their white audience. Even those who understand the satire of the characters acknowledge that

the fallacies of such characters exist in the real imaginations of those often-white spectators watching the show. As one individual online on *www.imdb.com* notes:

at the same time, paradoxically, the characters are so completely monstrous-Karen being the clear example-that they seem unrealistic. In fact, they are ostensibly awful, they are merely gross exaggerations of every human being, replete with the same fears, prejudice and pettiness of which we are all guilty and which are brought to fore in comedic form.

Ultimately, I believe that a comparison between Mammy's character in *Gone with the Wind* and Rosario's character in *Will & Grace* and the way in which both function as a necessities for Scarlett O'Hara and Karen Walker shed light on the continual perpetuation of the Latina figure as underrepresented in discourse. Making the connection is necessary in order to elucidate the ways in which the Latina maid is configured and reconfigured as a new mammy of comfort in the imaginations of whiteness (whether a subconscious desire or not) and which *needs* to be there as a signifier for white audience spectators. This clarity may allow us to understand why Latinas are not normally framed within other discursive representations. Additionally, as I struggle with the ambiguity of the images offered by Rosario's representation, I will try to search for the gaps and fissures which may allow the Latina spectator to frame the discourse of Rosario in more positive ways. As I make this comparison, I will individually examine the specific characteristics of the mammy figures of the past and consider the ways in which those characteristics can be found in contemporary image of the Latina maid Rosario on *Will & Grace*.

### **Mammy as Caretaker for mistress**

In the past, from the early 1930's until the 1960's civil rights movement, the mammy figure in film and television functioned to take care of the white upper middle class or upper class family. She was their caretaker, their protector and as seen in the most famous of "mammy" roles, Hattie McDaniel as mammy in *Gone with the Wind* functions to take care of Scarlett. We see her through *three* generations of O'Hara's' and we see her poverty-stricken along with them

during the years of the war. In one moment in the film, Scarlett asks Mammy and Ossie (a male black servant of the family who has also been with them throughout the years) where the other servants are; Mammy replies that some have involuntarily become part of the war and yet others have abandoned the plantation and the family. We are to understand that because Mammy stayed, that her loyalty is without question. We understand that even though war has ravaged the home and the family, Mammy will not leave. Similarly, we understand that Mammy will go as hungry as Scarlett in order to stand by her family.

What we see play out in *Will & Grace* then, is a similar function for the relationship between Rosario and Karen. Like Mammy in *Gone with the Wind*, Rosario is also determined to stand by her mistress through tough times, for when Karen is divorcing her husband and does not have any money to pay Rosario; Rosario decides to stay with her, implying that they are in the struggle against Stan (Karen's husband) together. In fact, most of the dialogue revolves around the "we" that is fighting against Stan. In one of the shows, Karen has taken to living in her limousine because Stan has thrown her out of the house and it is Rosario who we see in the limousine with Karen, never leaving her side even though she is now without a home as well. Rosario will not leave Karen when Karen needs her most and whenever Karen is sick or ill, Rosario stands by her side.<sup>28</sup> In fact, when other rich individuals want Rosario as their maid and mammy, Karen does all she can to fight for Rosario. However, such "fighting" for Rosario is taken into the realm of the ridiculous when she plays the prospective new owner over a game of pool for "ownership" of Rosario.

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<sup>28</sup> In a similar film *Fun with Dick and Jane* (2005) starring Téa Leoni and Jim Carrey, the upper middle class family loses their ability to pay the Latina maid (paying her with appliances instead). We see her work with them throughout the film, staying by their side during the tough times. And like *Will & Grace*, the film is considered to be a satire of the workings of society. As such, we are not supposed to believe the characters or their situations are real in anyway.

### **Mammy as Mother Figure for Mistress**

Within this context as caretaker, the mammy also serves as a mother figure for their white owners or employers. It is mammy who would make sure you ate, dressed appropriately and acted the right way in front of people, and in *Gone with the Wind*, mammy takes on the replacement mother role by being there for Scarlett when Scarlett's mother dies during the Civil War. Similarly, in *Will & Grace*, Rosario is there as mother figure, making sure that Karen is well taken care of throughout, including making sure to put Karen to bed, making sure that she eats, occasionally helping her dress, and saving Karen from herself (like Ruby's protection of Viola in *Monster-In-Law*). In fact, in Season Four, we find out that Karen is estranged from her mother's life, leaving the role of replacement mother open for Rosario. The fact that Karen cannot live without Rosario is continually reaffirmed throughout the eight years the show ran.

### **Mammy as Caretaker for the Mistress's Children**

The mammy, as caretaker of the children, functions as a replacement mother figure for the white woman who is unable or unwilling to take care of the children. Often, this function allows the white woman to continue with her extracurricular activities while maintaining the physical presence that was also necessary to maintaining a level of status as a white woman of that society. Important in this concept, is that the black woman give up her right to take care of her own family to take care of the white family. As Robert M. Entman and Andrew Rojecki note, "the mammy figure convey the notion that genuine fulfillment for black women comes not from raising their own children or feeding their own man...but from serving in a white family's kitchen" (25).

In *Gone with the Wind*, Scarlett is obsessed with gaining back her 18-inch waist after she gives birth to her daughter. It is Mammy who tells her that she will never gain back that figure;

after all, she reminds Scarlett, she is now a woman who has had a child. Frustrated, Scarlett states that she will never have another child again. Later, we know that both Mammy and Rhett often reproach Scarlett with the fact that she is not a good mother. We also know that Mammy does not have children of her own; rather, Scarlett and her child become the children Mammy is not allowed or chooses not to have. Moreover, we know that the story makes a point of positioning Mammy as having taken care of the O'Hara family through three generations of daughters. It is not a stretch to imagine that Scarlett did not feed her daughter, as breastfeeding would also disfigure her. Therefore, it is left to Mammy to feed Scarlett's daughter.

Although we do not see Rosario metaphorically breastfeeding Karen's "stepchildren" on *Will & Grace*, she is definitely the "replacement" mother figure, for it is Rosario who maintains their health, makes sure they eat, goes to their school projects, plays, and teacher meetings and puts them to sleep at night. In many episodes, we see Karen directing Rosario to do these things for the children, who throughout many shows are seen as a burden for Karen, who only accepts them as her stepchildren because she wants Stan's money. She often refers to the mothering of Stan's children as "maternal crap" (Episode 2.3 "I Never Promised You an Olive Garden") and often refers derogatorily to the children themselves and the trouble they cause her. In one of the early shows of season one, on *Will & Grace*, Karen calls Rosario and asks Rosario to put the children to sleep, explaining that she does not know what that requires. Rosario, like Mammy in *Gone with the Wind*, also reproaches Karen for her lack of mothering. In an episode entitled "Swimming Pools" Rosario states, "in my country, parents take care of their own kids." We also know that Rosario, like Mammy, does not have any children or family of her own. In this way, Karen and Karen's family clearly become Rosario's own family. In many episodes, each refers to the other as family, often connoting concepts of motherhood, as when Rosario calls Karen,



after a fight and reconciliation, “oh, mommy”. In fact, on many holiday episodes, we see Karen spending her time with Will, Grace or Jack, which leaves one wondering who may be at home with kids and husband. It is no leap then to imagine, as replacement mother figure, that Rosario is at home with the kids, possibly cooking and bonding with them over turkey.

### **Mammy as Loyal Friend for Mistress**

Mammy figures of the past were also often seen as the only true friends of their masters or their employers. As Deborah White states in *Ar'n't I a woman?: Female slaves in the plantation South*, “so respected was Mammy that she often served as friend and advisor to master and mistress” (10). It is clear, that because a concept of friendship is evoked amongst them, the white woman allows herself to feel as if her mammy is her friend, while she strictly maintains guidelines about that friendship as inferiors and superiors. As Mahnaz Kousha argues in *“Neither Separate nor Equal” Women, Race, and Class in the South*:

the employer’s willingness to disclose private information is not only a function of the domestic’s familiarity but also her inferior position. Allowing friends, neighbors or relatives access to information about family dynamics or personal feelings could be harmful to one’s ego and self-esteem, or even dangerous to one’s social position, but sharing it with a domestic is not considered a threat. (81)

Also, the friendship is clearly delineated one way (for the white woman) and there is no mutually exclusive sharing by the mammy. We know nothing about Mammy’s concerns in *Gone with the Wind* and similarly, we know very little about Rosario in *Will & Grace*. As Kousha states, “they did not share their life stories or experiences in part because they knew their status did not provide them with relationships based on equality and mutual respect; not sharing information was a means of demonstrating their insight and power” (84). This structure definitely plays itself out in *Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood*, *Crash* and *Monster-In Law* wherein we know nothing about Ruby, Maria or Willetta.

Indeed it is Mammy in *Gone with the Wind* who tends to know all of Scarlett's secrets, often making clear to Scarlett that she does. It is Mammy that stands by Scarlett's side when she is dismissed by so many of society. It is Mammy who keeps Scarlett's desire for Ashley a secret and it is Mammy who first recognizes that desire has changed to Rhett Butler, even though Scarlett herself will not acknowledge the attraction. As Mahnaz Kousha states:

in some cases, elite white women became emotionally dependent on their domestics, making them into personal confidantes who were exposed to the most intimate details of their employers' lives. As a result, domestic service in the South has not been limited to cleaning, cooking, or child care but has included a hidden 'emotional labor' wherein workers were compelled to respond to their employers' emotional needs...African American household workers in the South were involved in enhancing the status and psychological well-being of their white employers while suppressing their own feelings. (78-79)

Scarlett needs mammy to maintain that role of friendship even though the Civil War has passed through the South and servants are no longer indebted to be tied legally to their white families. Like Rosario is to Karen, Mammy is infinitely loyal to Scarlett and even though she is now free, will never leave Scarlett.

Karen depends on Rosario like Scarlett does Mammy. On *Will & Grace*, Rosario plays out as one of Karen's only true friends. In, "The Third Wheel Gets the Grace" Rosario wants to go shopping as part of a fifteen-year anniversary of having worked for Karen. Again, I will note here, that it is these "serious" moments which foreground the show as more serious than the satire it proclaims to be. Karen forgets the important shopping trip (showing once again her disregard of the how important the friendship really is to her) and Rosario is distraught. Once Karen realizes her error (and in fearing Rosario will leave, even though she would never consider doing so), she goes through the effort of reaffirming their friendship by not only taking Rosario shopping, but buying her a most expensive gift, which Rosario explains is unnecessary. This reaffirms that what is more important is that she and Karen go shopping because of the time they

can spend together. Similarly, in another episode entitled “Object of My Rejection,” Karen proclaims that she cannot live without Rosario. This continues through many episodes throughout the years, including Season One’s “At the Wedding,” Season Two’s “Whose Man is it Anyway?” and “He’s Come Undone,” Season Three’s “My Uncle, The Car” and many more. Just as often, Rosario proclaims that she loves Ms. Karen and will never leave her. Rosario declares to Karen in Season Two’s episode “He’s Come Undone”, “oh, don’t ever leave me, cupcake.” This relationship always plays out as a mutual one, one necessary for both of their survival, even when it is clear there is a division between them as mistress and servant. After all, the show also builds itself up as trying to achieve a real friendship between Karen and Grace.

What we understand is that mammies and reconfigured mammies, like Rosario, are the only ones who truly know what their mistresses are like. It is Rosario in “Husbands and Trophy Wives” that gives insight to Grace about Karen’s emotional issues and concerns and when Grace oversteps her bounds by asking Rosario how old Karen is (definitely a secret), Rosario twists Grace’s ear and tells her that she better never ask that question of her again. Additionally, it is evident in many *Will & Grace* episodes that Rosario is aware of all of Karen’s well kept secrets. It is also clear that Mammy, in *Gone with the Wind* knows all of Scarlett’s secrets, including her desire for her friends’ husband, Ashley. Rosario will never let anyone find about Karen’s secrets, such as her insecurities about her unfaithful husband. She makes it clear that she will take these secrets with her to her grave. Again, these serious moments foreground a friendship more than delineation between employer (mistress) and employee (maid). Moreover, it brings us back to the concept that whites (specifically white women) desire and need mammy figures in their lives for the comfort and unconditional love they provide their charges. As Thurber states,

“this idolized Mammy, a symbol of unconditional love and devotion, at whose breast one could find warmth...She had become a universal earth mother for American society” (5).

A final important aspect attached to the above argument is that Mammy in *Gone with the Wind* is willing to die alongside the O’Hara’s in poverty or through the war. Most definitively cheeky, on the final episode of Season Five’s “24,” Karen is thrown overboard by her husband’s mistress, and it is Rosario who dives in to save her at the end, showing too that she is willing to (I will argue metaphorically go down with the ship) and die trying to save her mistress, so that their friendship is preserved. I will again acknowledge that this is satire and I do not for one minute believe that Rosario would actually jump in to save Karen. That is not the argument. My argument is that the comedic joke here is used to structure a more universal belief system about the relationships between white woman and women of color as an equitable one, without a real understanding of the social, economic and political realities which exist, as well as an understanding of the realities of the way in which whiteness necessitates the other as a way of framing their own complicated discourse. If Latina maids were not a reality and if they were not so overtly displayed and used as part of the rhetoric of television and film, this may not have become an issue.

### **Mammy as Contrast for Whiteness**

The mammy figure, in film and television also serves as a contrast point for white women. White women maintain their superiority and their desirable looks, in direct contrast to how the black woman image is formed or regulated. As Toni Morrison states:

if it were not for the reliance the white world had on black bodies to carry the burdens of shame and “otherness,” the need for their presences would be greatly diminished. Safeguarding white womanhood’s “purity,” untouched by the tainting effects of housework or sexuality, allowed white woman to function as a symbol of their husband’s wealth and Christian property... Thus, maintaining the limiting myths and stereotypes of black

womanhood, whether it be seductive temptress or complaisant mammy, was necessary for white society's stability. (qtd. in Price 2)

In other words, it is mammy as different that makes white woman the norm. It is Mammy's inability to be anything else than servant and caretaker, that allows the white women to be whatever she may choose to be: feminist, scholar, worker etc. In *Gone with the Wind*, as Mammy is taking care of the plantation, Scarlett is metaphorically rebuilding the South and financially rebuilding the plantation, Tara. Similarly, in *Will & Grace*, Karen can play pretend at work, while her reconfigured mammy Rosario is taking care of her home and her children. Both Scarlett and Karen maintain a level of privilege in direct contrast to their mammies.

Moreover, it is important to the mammy figure that she maintains a certain weight. In doing so, the white woman, by comparison, would be seen as having maintained the delicateness that was necessary as a white woman. As Alice Walker states in *Anything We Love Can be Saved*, about the Aunt Jemima figure, so closely and historically attached to the mammy figure, "I would see her in films about the antebellum ('before the war') South, playing a truly described 'supporting role' to skinny white stars like Bette Davis, her huge bulk, demonstrating what would happen if white women didn't limit their appetites and submit to having their stays pulled tight" (138). Similarly, K. Sue Jewell in *From Mammy to Miss America and Beyond* states, "when the physical and emotional makeup of mammy is examined it is clear that she is the antithesis of the American conception of womanhood. She is portrayed as an obese African American woman, of dark complexion, with extremely large breasts and buttocks and shining white teeth visibly displayed in a grin" (39). Ultimately, the mammy was a sexless figure, tied more to the concept of motherhood and mothering (as noted above) than in sexuality and love, thereby reaffirming that it was white women who were allowed sexually desirable privileges and rights.

Scarlett maintains her beauty in direct contrast to Mammy. The way the camera highlights Scarlett's outfits and her physicality within those outfits, often posits her whiteness as glorified, while Mammy, in overly abundant clothing and indulgent weight, is seen as an impediment and is often shadowed by the camera or highlighted in contrast to Scarlett's physical appearance. Similarly, in *Will & Grace*, Karen maintains her beauty and desirability in direct contrast to Rosario. It is Karen who is in beautiful, expensive clothes and Karen (and her breasts) whom the camera highlights. In fact, we never see Rosario out of her uniform, even when they are friends shopping together<sup>29</sup>. Rosario helps to maintain level of beauty by dressing Karen and making sure she is perfect.

Finally, it is important that Karen remain sexually desirable in comparison to Rosario. As such, Karen wants to stop any romantic attachments that Rosario may want. In fact, in order to keep Rosario in the United States for her pleasure, Karen marries Rosario off to Jack, an obviously gay character. Although Karen would like to position the act as an altruistic one that helps Rosario, we understand that Karen needs Rosario to subjugate all relationships with others in order to position Rosario as sexually undesirable, which frames her as the opposite. It is important to the narrative that Karen is constantly seen as a sexual and provocative figure in contrast to the obese undesirable figure of Rosario. However, when Karen manages to manipulate Rosario's position as a sexless figure on the show, occasionally what happens is a reversal of the normal dichotomy; instead Karen begins to look sexually loose and without morals and Rosario is seen as an upstanding good individual. As such, this is one of those ambiguous moments where we can frame Rosario's character as creating a sense of agency in

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<sup>29</sup> This serves the dual purpose of maintaining the dichotomy between servant and mistress.

rejecting Karen's perpetuation of herself as superior. However, even as that initially seems possible, we know that Rosario and Jack will not have sex, because Jack is gay, therefore Karen has controlled Rosario's sexuality while maintaining her own.

### **A Latina Spectator's Comments.**

Ultimately, Karen's way of relating to Rosario is an over-the-top version of how rich white women are imagined to relate to their Latina maids. She is both completely racist and classist in ways that the audience is to understand that she is being portrayed as blatantly absurd and that the show is treating the relationship as a satire of the ways in which those relationships play out in real life. As such, Rosario herself plays the long-suffering, but ultimately loyal maid to the hilt. Nevertheless, it is the way in which we both recognize this relationship and at some level believe in it which makes this show interesting to analyze. When push comes to shove, the show will turn to a "serious" moment to show the "genuine" feeling between the two. And in reality, those who employ Latina maids will also foreground their relationships with their Latina maids as helpful, altruistic or friendship based. Mary Romero in *Maid in the U.S.A* tells us of a colleague who clarified his relationship with his Latina maids this way:

he began by providing me with chapter and verse about how he aided Mexican women from Juarez by helping them cross the border and employing them in his home. He took further credit for introducing them to the appliances found in an American middle class home. He shared several funny accounts about teaching country women from Mexico to use the vacuum cleaner, electric mixer, and microwave. . .For this "on-the-job training" and introduction to American culture, he complained, his generosity and goodwill had been rewarded by a high turnover rate. (3)

Additionally, the fact that so many people on *www.imdb.com* acknowledge the representations of the show as accurate or foregrounding (there are those of course who dislike the show immensely for the exaggerations offered, although they are not as prevalent as those who love the show) suggests that people conflate the fictional and the reality as occasionally take the content of the show as serious and real. It distresses me to know that many online claim to

admire Karen's character as being honest and forthright and some seem to love the relationship between Karen and Rosario: "There will always be Rosario. Like the Toto to Karen's Princess Centimillia, Rosario is the funniest prop in recent TV memory. Whatever is going on in the scene just wheel in Rosario, let Karen demean her and it's almost a free laugh from me every time" (imdb.com).<sup>30</sup> Ultimately, Rosario is a necessity for Karen so that she can lead the lifestyle she has become accustomed to. She needs and desires Rosario as a site of difference to exist in order to solidify her own existence as a successful, desirable and a worthy woman. As Hortense Spillers ultimately reminds us, "my country needs me, and if I were not here, I would have to be invented" (65).

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<sup>30</sup> As a note of reference, as I poured over individual comments, I also tried to search out reviewer comments or critic's comments; however, none spoke to the delicate relationship and racial subtext between Rosario and Karen and many did not acknowledge the satire of the show either.



CHAPTER 4  
“ARE YOU MY HOMIE?”: LOOKING AT ETHNIC TOYS AND A NEW FINANCIAL  
PLAYGROUND.

There is a woman named Nena, who lives in the barrio and raises her three children. For years, young Nena was in love with a kid named Tonto, who was always in some trouble or another. He stole cars, sold drugs and was always involved in a fight. He would go to juvenile hall for a few weeks; promise to straighten out and then he would repeat the cycle again. When he turned 18, no longer a juvenile, he went into the court system, but this time as an adult, and soon found himself spending time in a real County Jail. Nena waited for him for five years. As her biography tells us, she was raising their three kids while on welfare, staying true and faithful to Tonto the entire time. However, whenever she would visit him in jail, he would verbally abuse her and call her a lousy mother. When he eventually left jail, he missed a special homecoming party Nena threw for him, because he felt the need to party that night with his more felonious friends. When he returned home that evening, Tonto began hitting and slapping Nena around. The next day, he returned to jail for committing yet another crime. This time, things changed. Nena enrolled in a government-funded nursing program and with many years of hard work and determination, and the help of her family and her fellow Homies, she was able to overcome the system and cycle of abuse which had always haunted her in the barrio. She divorced Tonto, moved out of his parent's home and into her own apartment. She is now off of welfare, her children are doing better in school than ever before and she has the self-esteem and the independence she craved for years. As a Latina, Nena is a symbol of courage, dignity and determination and a success story for Latinas everywhere. There is only one problem. She is not real.

Nena is a Homies figurine. Homies are 4.5 cm (about an inch in height) rubber figures sold in 50-cent gumball machines and Nena ideologically represents many things to an ethnic

consumer culture. Understanding how and why people collect Homies means understanding how belief systems are structured by race, gender, class and more in the cultural discourse. Initially a slang term for a “homeboy” (someone from one’s neighborhood) or a friend, the term “Homie” has come to be associated (at least in the media) with gang culture and describes a member of one’s gang or group.<sup>1</sup> Historically, the term is thought to have generated in African-American urban culture; when it migrates into urban U.S. Latino neighborhoods, it speaks to the racial and class ties between African-American, Chicanos and Latinos.

The tiny Homie figurines are found from urban cities to suburban towns (both large and small) from Miami to California, from Illinois to New York. Their popularity has grown to such proportions, that one can find them sold online everywhere, including Mexico, Australia, Europe, and Japan and their prices now range from \$1.00 to \$25.00, depending on the number of Homies purchased, as well as their collectibles factor.<sup>2</sup> Homies are currently the No. 1 vending machine figure in Canada and the Homie Shop Company is an estimated multi million-dollar industry, which has sold over 130 million figurines since their creation in 1998. The Homies industry no longer makes just figurines, but has expanded into lunch boxes, posters, t-shirts, action figures, bobble heads, remote control cars, nightlights, model kits, stickers, books, video series, alarm clocks, bedding and even underwear.

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<sup>1</sup> Creator David Gonzales defines the term as “a popular street term that refers to someone from your hometown or, in a broader sense, anyone that you would acknowledge as your friend”.

<sup>2</sup> One highly prized figurine is the character of Willie G. who is bound to a wheelchair after, according to his biography online, participating in gang violence. He now promotes a healthy lifestyle through education and volunteer work in the local neighborhood.

Homies began as the creation of graphic artist and designer David Gonzales<sup>3</sup>, who originally focused on Homies as part of a comic strip serialized in California lowrider magazines in the late 1970s and early 1980s. In itself, both the time period and the placement of the initial cartoon (in these particular magazines<sup>4</sup>, which celebrate the lifestyle and culture of Chicanos since 1977) become significant in terms of Chicanos' political and representational power. Beginning in the 1960's, Chicanos (through civil rights protests and grassroots movements, art, plays, street performances, poetry and more) began the articulation and visualization process necessary to both identify themselves as Chicanos, and thus to politicize Mexican-Americans. Creating organizations like the Brown Berets and modeling the resistant stance of "I am Joaquin" by Rudolfo Gonzales, Chicanos began pushing against the reality of an assimilation driven world by embracing their differences and suggesting a loving Chicano/Latino identity. As Rosa Linda Fregoso tells us:

during the 1960s, within artistic practices such as poetry, mural paintings, and film, Chicano and Chicana cultural workers experimented with alternative Chicano subject-identities. Within the Chicano movement, cultural nationalism produced new Chicano subjects, reversing their previously negative position in dominant discourse. (662)

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<sup>3</sup> In a recent interview on his online Homies website, Gonzales tells us: the Homies first started as a little underground strip called the 'Adventures of Chico Loco'. I drew it as a senior in High School when I was supposed to be taking notes. Everyone told me Chico Loco looked like me so I changed his name to Hollywood, my given placaso. The strip became 'Adventures of Hollywood'. It was first published in 'Lowriders are happening' and eventually became a regular feature in 'Lowrider Magazine'. In the strip I began introducing Hollywood's Homies, and the name again changed, this time to 'Homeboys'. I changed the name one final time to Homies. Eventually it became a regular feature in 'Lowrider Magazine'. Although the successful comic strip and collection began in Los Angeles, California, the Homies have become a global collectible.

<sup>4</sup> [Brownpride.com](http://Brownpride.com) tells us that: the lowrider culture's humble beginnings originated in the barrio streets of East Los Angeles. East L.A. became home to the world's most famous cruising spot, Whittier Blvd, made famous by movies like *Boulevard Nights* (1979). The low rider movement became a form of urban expression between man and machine. Using cars to uniquely express the owner's personality through airbrushed murals, custom wheels, hydraulics, and lowered suspensions. The art of building customized cars in the lowrider style spread from barrio to barrio and soon crossed one international border after another.

It is important to note however, that while Chicano nationalism proudly proclaimed difference and rewrote Chicano history through Chicano eyes; such nationalism was viewed by many feminist scholars as effacing or objectifying a gendered perspective.<sup>5</sup> As Angie Chabram-Dernersesian states, “without the possibility of inscribing viable Mexicana/Chicana female subjects with which to identify at the center of Chicana/o practices of resistance, Chicanas were denied cultural authenticity and independent self-affirmation” (83). The absence, negation or silence of the Chicana woman (and by extension Latinas) will be significant to the ways in which we imagine the Homies as cultural products worthy of analysis.

With his Homies, Gonzales tapped into an unrealized market<sup>6</sup>, one which caters specifically to Chicanos/Latinos (even if the by-product is that other ethnicities, white or black, are purchasing these figurines as well).<sup>7</sup> According to David Gonzales, his initial intent was to

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<sup>5</sup> I cannot help but articulate that these re-written and re-inscribed Chicana narratives often neglect to mention the history or reality of other Latina women, including Puerto Rican women. Instead they offer a universalized Hispanic/Latina/Chicana/Mestiza subject which aspires to (though may never fully actualize) the different experiences and histories of all those women, including the threat of essentializing all Chicana subjects themselves. Therefore, I believe these women subconsciously adhere to or hope for (in the same ways that Chicano men did when creating Chicano manifestos) a Pan-Latino/gendered identity. Though I would not go as far as suggesting they use or agree with such a term while doing so. As Angie Chabram-Dernersesian states in *I Throw Punches for My Race, but I Don't Want to Be a Man: Writing Us-Chica-nos (Girl, Us) / Chicanas-into the Movement Script* about one of these such re-inscribed poems: “this poem also establishes a distance from universal feminism, for the speaker goes on to elaborate that she is not just any woman-not a generic woman-but a woman ‘of the’ movement” (88).

<sup>6</sup> According to *Hispanic Business.com*, “U.S. Hispanic purchasing power has surged to nearly \$700 billion and is projected to reach as much as \$1 trillion by 2010, according to new estimates by HispanTelligence®.” This means that Latinos are a viable market of old and new consumers which have more disposable income. *What* they choose to buy, even at 50 cents, is as important as *why* they choose to buy these things. It is especially significant when we realize how sophisticated David Gonzales’s Homie business and enterprise has become in the last six years.

<sup>7</sup> A debate about ethnic products can begin with a discussion about the difference between urban dolls (Bratz) and ethnic dolls. Although Bratz are sold as multi-ethnic, each of the dolls appears to be replicated using the same facial mold, and although each appears to be multi ethnic in terms of name and look (some are darker than others) they do not include narratives which signify them to be ethnic in other ways.

write about the people he knew growing up, giving them both a visual and verbal reality in a world he felt placed an emphasis on assimilation. Placing them in lowrider magazines, which are popular magazines in California, Texas and Florida urban neighborhoods, Gonzales states, “I liked drawing and cartooning and found my fellow Lowriders to be good subjects. . .you could say all of the Homies are a part of me, since I create each and everyone of them by myself” (Loudenback 2). For Gonzales, the move from comic strip to figurine may reflect a natural process which signifies the popularity of his characters and a money marketing possibility.<sup>8</sup> Regardless of the encoded reality that Gonzales is making a fortune by selling this creation, it is still significant to our decoding of this product that we understand the Homies as more than market driven, in a marketplace where so often there seems to be nothing created by them or for them.

Where success goes however, criticism often follows, and many, including Los Angeles police officers, criticized the figurines and went as far as to protest their inclusion in gumball machines in California neighborhoods. In fact, one police officer, P.J Morris, was influential enough to have a grocery chain in Los Angeles stop the sale of them altogether. However, over the years Homies have expanded to include Mijos, Pallermos, Hood Rats, Dogpound and more (all created by David Gonzales),. Today, even in the relatively small town of Canton, New York (94% white according to City-data.com) with a population of just over 10,000 people, Homies are found in gumball machines in the CVS market and the local grocery store.

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<sup>8</sup> I will note that Gonzales often feels a bit defensive when Interviewers ask him about the financial reality of his creation. Gonzales maintains a class-based sense of community: “I started drawing Homies for the love of my culture, not because I smelled big dollars” (Loudenbeck 2). However, I feel ambiguous about the claim when he argues in a recent interview, after being asked about Homie freebies, “This is a business, not a soup kitchen, quit beggin. This ain`t the way our society works. You young Homies, stay in school, get a job and you will have money to get things in life. You veteranos that are poor, my heart goes out to you, this means you have to work even harder to get ahead. Just remember, our Jefitos did it” (Homies.com).

As a Latina spectator, as well as an individual whose Homies collection now monopolizes three shelves of my office, the question of who Homies are and what they represent to the cultural discourse, proves an interesting examination of heritage, identity, and the location of culture. Why are Homies so popular? Why do they provoke such controversy? What is to be said about the discussion and articulation of desire surrounding the Homies? What is the cultural phenomenon, which envelops the purchase, collection, and distribution of these figurines? Is this about play or about collection? In this chapter, I will be examining why Homies were created and how they serve to “represent” Latina and Chicana ideals. This analysis strives to examine that representation through a feminist and race studies analysis of play and ethnic collecting. I begin by discussing Homies as collectibles. Exploring the idea that collecting grants a certain amount of agency, I will discuss the collecting of Homies as a social and political engagement with cultural products. Briefly discussing black memorabilia and African-Americans who collect these historical items, I will analyze how Homies form a location, where the collector engages with questions of identity. I then briefly discuss the significance of children at play with the figures, and then move from play to an analysis of identity inherent in that play. From there, I will transition into an analysis of how these figurines function as signs and signifiers of national pride for Chicano/Latino communities. I will also discuss the inherent male privileging in the construction of the Homie narratives. For although these figurines are progressive in many ethnic and nationalistic ways, ambiguities still exist in their representations, especially of women (even Nena would agree with this).

Ultimately, I will argue that for Latinos/as and Chicanos/as, these figurines represent more than a fascination with what is popular. Rather, these toys or collectibles offer a possible sense of nationality, a bonding community activity, a recollected and redefined history, a sense of

alternate or authentic ethnicity, and an affirmation of their significance of Latinas/Chicanas in a presumably multi-cultural world. And although I would rather have the perfect ethnic or gendered toy or collectible (if even one could exist), I will maintain, as I have done in previous chapters, that some representation, problematic and ambiguous as it is, is better than no representation at all. I would like to suggest, as Stuart Hall does in *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, that the study of cultural artifacts is the study of the *usage* of things. As Hall argues:

even something as obvious as a stone can be a stone, a boundary marker or a piece of sculpture, depending on *what it means*-that is, within a certain context of use...It is by our use of things, and what we say, think and feel about them-how we represent them-that we give them meaning. In part, we give objects...meaning by the frameworks of interpretation we bring to them. (3)

Therefore, I argue that Latinos, in an act of articulation, incorporate the *usage* of Homies as part of a rhetoric of representation, signification, subjectivity and agency.

Stuart Hall argues in this seminal text that the use of these signs and symbols helps us determine a great deal about the fluidity of our identities. In a world visualized, for many, by others, and where representations are often the stereotypical, Hall argues that it is our ability to code and re-code 'things' that allows for their signification as a positive re-articulation. Anything in the visual (from art to collectible) has the ability to transfigure itself into more than a mere item, to a signifier for identity formation. In other words, we have the power to bring into play meaning (positive or not) into imagery and imagery into a sense of identity. In doing so, we can project ethnic, national and even personal pride and personality onto objects. We can further situate them within political, racial or gendered discourse. As Marilyn Halter states:

whereas at one time the relationship between human beings and material objects resulted in identities that were acquired with the possessions one inherited, in modern times, people most often construct their own identities and define others through the commodities they purchase. With the rise of individualism and the evolution of mass consumerism objects became an extension of the self, and this has come to include one's ethnic identification as

well, a new brand of cultural baggage. Through the consumption of ethnic goods and services, immigrants and their descendants modify and signal ethnic identities in social settings no longer sharply organized around ethnic group boundaries and the migration experience. (7)

And as I have argued previously in my analysis of Latina maids, the invisible can become the visible by articulating and re-appropriating stereotypical images of Latinos/as in popular culture, as I suggested with Latina maids and subjectivity in Chapter One. Therefore, although some of the images and representations may appear to be negative, it is our ability to code them differently which allows for the possibility of a more positive representation.<sup>9</sup>

How this happens is a complicated process and has to do with the spectators' ability to negotiate with the images offered. As Stuart Hall states in *Encoding/Decoding*, the process by which individuals engage with images encoded to reflect certain "structures of understanding" (125) may be disrupted by "'distortions' or 'misunderstandings' [which] arise precisely from the *lack of equivalence* between the two sides in the communicative exchange" (126). In other words, the spectator's ability to negotiate with the "structures"—by understanding that there meanings are not "fixed" but are themselves fluid and often lack universalized subjects or experiences—is what allows for the possibility of resistance. Hall argues, "it is always possible to order, classify, assign and decode an event within more than one 'mapping'" (129). This process requires that the spectator, as subject, engage with and negotiate with the dominant (though not fixed) discourses in place. To do so, the spectator has to find the "contradictions"

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<sup>9</sup> See Randall Kennedy, *Nigger: The Strange Career of a Troublesome Word*, (New York: Vintage Books, 2002) and Alice Walker, "Notes on Giving the Party" *Anything We Love Can Be Saved: A Writer's Activism* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1997) and Angie Chabram-Dernersesian, "*I Throw Punches for My Race, but I Don't Want to Be a Man: Writing Us-Chica-nos (Girl, Us) / Chicanas-into the Movement Script.*" These texts examine the usage and re-appropriation of certain words and images in the general culture. Kennedy examines the re-appropriation of the term nigger by African-American Culture, Walker examines the re-appropriation of the mammy figure in the same culture and Chabram-Dernersesian examines the re-appropriation of the Chicana figure in Chicano History.



and miscommunications which occur within those representations and find ways to engage with or disseminated cultural objects and posit more positive possibilities for representation, which in turn may articulate further into political or social resistance.

Engaging and negotiating with images of Latino/Chicano Homies (in both personal and political ways) becomes a statement of the reality of our existence in an active cultural discourse.

As Mary Romero and Michelle Habell-Pallán argue in *Latino/a Popular Culture*:

those who have limited access to the production and distribution of the dominant modes of representation-television, commercial film, popular music, and so forth-can find more accessible formats...to gain voice in discussions about everyday life in the United States and to represent themselves and their concerns, fears, and hopes for the future. (7)

It is our dialogue with these representations, and our articulation of them as a site of difference from mainstream (read dominant) society, that can be used as a significant position of a political and social location of power. What may allow for at least a partial agency in our resistance to assimilation lies in part in affirming and reconstituting our difference as positive rather than negative.

As I articulate this analysis, I am constantly aware of the ambiguity offered me via the figures of Homies, as well as the ambiguity of my responses to those images. I understand that Homies work to both identify and to deny the multiple realities of Latino/Chicano communities, specifically Chicana/Latina women within those communities. It is possible to suggest that a great deal of whom we are determines the way we may look at these Homies. The realities of our class status, our ethnic determinations, our gendered perspectives, our childhoods and more will determine whether we feel these little Latino or Chicano people define us or may determine how we define them. It is within these ambiguities however, that we find a space for engaging with both the personal and the political and where we can: “constitute social territories where it is possible to engage in cultural politics” (Habell-Pallán and Romero 7).

### **Displaying Ethnicity: My Puerto Rican Aunt and Her Collection of Mexican Figurines.**

My upper-middle-class Puerto Rican aunt lives in Davie, Florida in a four-bedroom house in the heart of a suburban neighborhood. In her half-a-million dollar home is a variety of collectibles and colorful displays, from baskets, to photos of the family, to horse statues. What I find the most interesting when I visit my aunt are the collectibles of paper Mache figurines which are prominently displayed on a shelf in a corner of her living room. These figurines appear to be ethnic (most likely Mexican). They are a foot tall in length each, are dark-skinned (which appears to be darkened by the sun, a sort of leathery appearance I attribute to my uncle who works in the sun daily), and are in the process of working. Each seems to be wearing cut-off pants and long-sleeve shirts and each is carrying an item indicative of work in progress. They appear to be ethnic and though there is no specific historical attachment, my aunt believes them to be figures of the past and she sees them as figures of Spanish descent. Of these figurines, one woman carries a basket of corn, another carries two small pigs, one carries clay, another plates and yet another carries a sack of something on his back (one even carries a Corona beer).

As a Latina scholar of cultural artifacts and their significations, I was very curious as to why my aunt decided to purchase these items and furthermore, just exactly what my aunt felt she was “getting out of this” and so I called to ask her. Strangely enough, it was not as hard as I believed it would be for her to articulate her desires on this matter. My aunt regaled me with stories about the past and her own time as a hardworking seamstress for a child’s clothing sweatshop in Miami. She explained to me that she was “drawn in” by the figures, because she felt she knew them somehow and because they felt like part of an extended, metaphoric family of

people she had known all her life.<sup>10</sup> She felt that she understood their faces, their culture, and their hard work. She liked what she believed were individuals representing a sound work ethic and she was determined to use them as a visual for the hard work which allows someone (specifically a Latino someone) to achieve the American Dream.

When I asked her where she had acquired the figurines, my aunt explained that she often found them in local cultural Honduran and Puerto Rican fairs that she attended. Further curious about her attendance at these fairs, I asked her what had prompted her to attend them. She articulated a desire to attend fairs which honored her people, both in terms of her own nation and a more pan-Latino sensibility through food, music and culture. As Marilyn Halter states in *Shopping for Identity*, “ethnic festivals, commemorative events, museum and popular culture offerings, retreats, and courses of study have provided a temporary sense of community that, in an intensive and optional way, gratifies such longings for meaningful interpersonal contact” (13). Additionally, she articulated a desire to financially help her own people by purchasing the artifacts they created. For my aunt, these figures represented a part of a historical past, a link with ethnicity and a clear class positioning.

As I thought about the way in which my aunt articulated her *usage* of these figurines (which I remind everyone were prominently displayed in her home, even as she often changed what curiosities and collectibles she placed on her entertainment center), I asked myself whether the *use* of the Homies, which I was collecting, could be seen in the same light. I examined my own feelings about the Homies, along with my families and further with individuals online who articulated positive desires about them. For myself, I recognized friends from the past, their

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<sup>10</sup> As an additional note, I will mention that while presenting this paper to a friend, she indicated she collected similar figurines and like my aunt, also articulated her desire to connect to history and ethnicity through the purchase of such items.

histories and their stories. More importantly however, I recognized something different and unique in them. These were not bronze statues, with unrecognizable features. They were not toys or collectibles which claimed to be ethnic, but in reality were pseudo-ethnic, like the Bratz dolls which I footnoted in the beginning of the chapter, which are classified as urban and conflated with an ethnic identity. These were my communities' faces in the neighborhood I grew up in Miami, Florida. They were a visual representation in a world almost always un-visualized in dominant culture. Similarly, most of my family, who all grew up in Miami as well, found the same. We recognized the local barber and the local hip hop artists of our past and perhaps present neighborhoods. We recognized the clothing with its distinctive styles and the hair styles which were and are reminiscent of our past and our present. And in the narratives, we recognized our own different, yet similar stories. As one online chat participant, Lady Joker states, "I would like to thank you for putting out the Homies cause they represent the Hispanic culture and make me proud to be one. I also like that you put there [sic] biography and what they are really about, some describe me" (29).

Even though we were Puerto Ricans, we found similarities within the representations of Chicanos in mainstream cultural discourse. For example, when we saw a brown face in film and television, we responded to it in ways in which we could not respond to the white faces. Though never fully actualized, it was at least a possible part of us. There were familial issues, religious backgrounds and social customs that we had in common. Therefore, when we heard about Lowriders<sup>11</sup>, or when we saw artists like Cuban singer Celia Cruz becomes successes, as I argue

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<sup>11</sup> Lowriders were historically linked to early African-American and Chicano culture. Today, Latinos from a number of ethnic backgrounds (Puerto-Ricans, Cubans, Anglos and more) participate in Lowrider festivals and culture.

in my Introduction, we saw a part of ourselves. Frances Negrón-Muntaner argues in *Boricua pop: Puerto Ricans and the Latinization of American culture* that this conflation of an ethnic perspective is dangerous because it threatens to efface specific political and social realities. As she argues:

Selena went from being a Tejana (a territorialized 'regional' identity) to being a Latina (a national 'ethnic minority'): 'Latino' here refers less to a cultural identity than to a specifically American national currency for economic and political deal making, a technology to demand and deliver emotions, votes, markets and resources on the same level-and hopefully at an even steeper price-as other racialized minorities. It is also an appeal for ethno-valorization, a way for diverse groups who are similarly racialized to pool their resources. (231)

I argue that this pan-Latino universalizing may be controversial, but it is one of the only ways to see ourselves as positively represented, in a space where specific ethnic representation (i.e., Puerto Rican and such) were and are so often invisible or stereotypical. After all, the one time Jennifer Lopez played a Puerto Rican character, she was a maid. And as I have argued previously, it is better to have some viable representation (even if we have to negotiate with it in terms of ethnicity, class and gender) than to have no representation at all. Searching the Internet online, I found many who felt the same way and who argued that the Homies represented a similar connection to pan-Latino rhetoric and to a sense of the past and a sense of ethnicity that they did not want to lose. Homies were not simply things, in their usage; they became embodied as signifiers of an ethnic pride, even if that ethnicity was another's'.

### **Black Memorabilia: A Possible Connection?**

Perhaps an answer to the question of the ambiguous representation that Homies offers and our ambivalence to them are to be found in comparing the collection of Homies with those who collect and still collect black memorabilia. It is through this connection that we can see that the act of collecting Homies, as well as our critical discourse of them, is important as a cultural endeavor that is integral to the understanding of Latino/Chicano racial and class positioning. For

in collecting Homies, individuals are consciously or subconsciously saying something about their identities and their choices. In comparing the collecting of Homies with the collecting of black memorabilia, we can understand that collecting these figurines is not simply a matter of collecting a *thing*; it is about collecting a historical past, about class distinctions, and more importantly, about collecting ethnicity, authenticity and identity.

Black memorabilia are often stereotypical depictions of African-Americans; for example, showing African-Americans eating watermelon, or blacks with dark skin and big red lips and mouths.<sup>12</sup> Such objects usually represented blacks as ignorant, sloppy, comical, obese, shucking and jiving to satisfy whites. When whites of the past purchased these items, it was a way in which whites were able to imagine and maintain the status quo. As Kenneth W. Goings states in *Mammy and Uncle Mose: Black Collectibles and American Stereotyping*, “when the collectibles began appearing, they reinforced the stereotypical notions already held about African Americans, and for this reason they were readily accepted” (vx). However, for African-Americans, the collecting of these items became an important way to reconstruct the past and reconstitute the negative images represented. When African-Americans began collecting these items in the mid twentieth century, they saw themselves as collecting a painful and yet important aspect of the past. As Carol M. Motley et al. states in *Exploring Collective Memories Associated with African American Advertising Memorabilia: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*:

from the 1950s to the 1970s, during and following the civil rights movement, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People sponsored an effort to remove these stereotypic images from the public domain (Morrison 1974). Affluent African Americans purchased and destroyed many of the artifacts, and the remainder were collected and/or

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<sup>12</sup> See Elvin Montgomery, *Collecting African American History*, (New York: Stewart, Tabori and Change, 2001) for an examination of the difference between collecting black memorabilia and collecting African-American History.

hidden in the back offices of antique and second-hand shops. It seems that the sentiment was 'out of sight, out of mind.' And if these degrading images were no longer visible, then they would no longer be a part of autobiographical, historical, or collective memories. Morrison (1974) characterizes these actions and ideas as 'early hysteria' [which] has abated, because collectors, many of whom are African Americans, have amassed significant collections of historical artifacts and include both beautiful and beastly depictions of blacks. (5)

In one very important way, collecting black memorabilia was a way to set themselves in opposition to the images offered by such items. It is when we learn about racial history and historical pain, that we have the power to remember it and change it. As Motley et al. notes, "black memorabilia helped the black respondents remember the challenges their forbearers were able to overcome" (6). Collectors of black memorabilia also believe that by collecting the memorabilia, they will be able to protect themselves by making certain they have control over these *things* and hopefully control over their *usage*. As one analyst of black memorabilia notes "if we don't portray it, people won't know how far we've come," continuing, 'Precisely by possessing these objects, black people rob them of their power. Silly and crude these things may have been, but...generations of black people lived in their shadows...Now at last they are being set free.'" (qtd. in Goings xxiv) Not only do they construct a more positive "decoding" when they examine memorabilia to see how far they have come (or as an articulation of difference), theorists argue that African-Americans, who collect black memorabilia, hope that the negative images can be re-appropriated in the same way in ways in which other things, words and histories have been. For example, Alice Walker argues that the image of the fat and happy mammy, so often used to negate black female subjectivity, can be re-appropriated by African-American culture. As she argues:

what I was seeing, as if for the first time, was a very ancient image which the modern world, quite without knowing why, had found impossible to do without...I smiled, as if for I felt something sweet coming over me. A sureness. A peace. It was, in fact, the belated recognition that I was in the presence of the Goddess. She who nurtures all, and that no matter how disguised, abused, ridiculed, she may be, even white supremacists have been

unable to throw her away. And She is with us still. Furthermore, I realized I loved her.  
(139)

For Walker, re-assigning a different set of values onto the figure was a way to see her in a more positive light. Similar arguments have been posited for the use of the N-Word in the vernacular. According to Randall Kennedy in *Nigger: The Strange Career of a Troublesome Word*, appropriating the object or word for oneself and one's culture was an important aspect for reconstituting and exploring the racial pain attached to the items. As Kennedy argues:

many blacks also do with nigger what other members of marginalized groups have done with slurs aimed at shaming the. They have thrown the slur right back in their oppressors' faces. They have added a positive meaning to nigger, just as women, gays, lesbians, poor whites, and children born out of wedlock have defiantly appropriated and revalued such words as bitch, cunt, queer, dyke, redneck, cracker, and bastard. (38)

It is important to acknowledge that although some critics have argued that Homies perpetuate negative stereotypes of Latino/Chicano culture, in the collecting of black memorabilia we can see that there is a way in which such things might be collected through reconstituting them with more positive possibilities for representation. We have the ability to decode these *things* and imbue them with positive racial, ethnic and gendered perspectives in ways which alter the negative perpetuation of stereotypes.

It is possible therefore to argue that collecting Homies is also about collecting more than an item itself. In fact, we can understand Homies as part of a U.S Latino popular culture, as well as a way to memorialize and remember Latinos as part of an American cultural system (the collection of history) which often negates Latino and Chicano identity or pushes for assimilation. Therefore, I wonder if years from now, we will be asking questions about these Homies, who are they? Where did they come from? What do they represent? What would these Homies say about where they lived and who they lived with? What would these Homies say about the historical



time period and the Chicano/Latino struggle for representation and identity? What would be the cultural discourse surrounding these *things*?

One important point of difference to remember is that unlike items of black memorabilia, Homies were created specifically for Chicanos/Latinos. Although the collections have branched out significantly to others from a variety of ethnic groups (including Anglos), David Gonzales himself is a Chicano and his initial audience was Chicanos and Latinos from a California base. And there are spectators who feel tied into a cultural product which they feel may be made just for them. As one online chat room member lil"e states, "they make Homies for the Homies!!!" (22). As yet another member, Smiley states, "finally we have a Mexican to represent the brown" (27). What has now become black memorabilia were in fact once items sold to whites and African-Americans had to deal with the fact that the initial intent of such objects was to de-humanize African-Americans. However, Gonzales and his collection of Homies do not have the same intent. Here, Gonzales argues on the main website that Homies are about "overcoming the negativity" and a "binding cultural support system," although it is important to note the universalized American subject that Gonzales embodies in his argument about what the Homies represent. As he states, "from Kindergarten age to grandma and grandpa. Guys, girls, gays, brown, black yellow, red, white, hip, Straight, cholo, goth, rocker, rapper... That's the beauty of this thing-it's part of American culture" (3) Needless to say, I feel ambiguous about this universalizing, at the same time that I appreciate the pan-ethnic/class/racial/gender etc. perspective he embodies. After all, he does not threaten to escape into a transcendental American perspective (as I argue in the Introduction Tiger Woods does) and negate the fact that these Homies were initially created to represent a Chicano subject. Rather, as he says, "we want viewers to get to know us as we know ourselves, laugh with us, cruise with us, party with us and

share our culture. Maybe then they will not be so intimidated by our appearances and growing numbers. Hopefully they will learn to like us and accept our lifestyle. Maybe then we can call them Homies” (qtd. in Seyfer 3).

### **A Deal with the Devil: Financial Assistance?**

Let me briefly explain an important factor related to the collection of these Homies, one which articulates the way in which Latinos/as attempt to articulate a bonding across national, global and economic barriers. Many online, who purchased the Homies, felt they were helping a fellow Latino out financially (not unlike my aunt and her collection of field workers). They articulated a desire to support Latino-owned businesses and ventures, often asking if we do not support them, who will. Juan Gonzales, 36, says in an online chat room, “it’s good seeing a Mexican being successful, something for kids to look up to [.] [I]f he can do it I can do it. Keep up the Good Work David!!!” (17). Paula states, “I absolutely love the Homies. David, always know I am another person here who loves what you created and appreciates you for making your dreams come true. You inspire so many Latinos all over to achieve their own goals. We all love you and stand being you 100%. Viva La Raza!” (5). As I am always interested in the ambiguity of positions in relation to these Latino/Chicano cultural products and discourse, I must note here that there is a real danger—because Gonzales’ project is situated here as a rags to riches narrative—that the narrative threatens to perpetuate an assimilationist American Dream (anyone can achieve personal success if they work hard enough) perspective. It ignores possibilities of oppression in the ways in which gender, race, ethnicity and class may affect individual success or non-successful realities.

Moreover, such narrativizing, especially on the part of Chicano/Latino consumers, does not take into consideration the idea, as Frances-Negrón-Muntaner argues, that not everyone is interested in a pan-Latino identity. Many Latinos/Chicanos are invested in more historically

individual ethnic (i.e., Puerto Rican, Mexican, Chicano etc.) realities and political concerns.

However, there are some invested in the possibility that a pan-Latino identity can translate into a bonding reality for Latinos and Chicanos. Another individual online Faros calls out to all razas to support raza ventures. As he writes, “hey raza, we must support our raza products que no? White man. [Don’t] Buy white man stuff...black man does the same...raza buy from the raza” (34).

Others articulate similar arguments; in fact, one individual clarifies that although the Homies may not represent all Latinos, they symbolize at least a portion of that identity and therefore a viable possibility for representation. As Highway City, Fresno Dog (a moniker for one individual online) states:

first of all I would like to thank MR. David G. for representing the Chicano race in a positive way instead of all the \*\*\*\*ed shit they show about us on the news. And also for letting people know that there are different routes to take when you grow up in the hood instead of selling dope and gang banging and use the hood to your advantage and not let it DRAG you down. So you let me [know] that the ideas in our heads our worth million\$, and inspired me to start working on my own projects...For all the haters who criticize make your own shit then say something. (53)

Others use David Gonzales as a platform for their own projects and possibilities. As Giovanni aka B-boy states, “I think no one can beat me with what I have but [since] I’m really into it an all I started drawing them and [since] I had after school art class I try to make it the same style as you so I crated [sic] about 200 of them” Giovanni further states that he has named his own creations and created another viable community of Latinos and Chicanos that others could bond with. These, in honor of street names and codes, he named “Mono, Peches, Chucho, Ese, Mamacita” and more. Statements like these indicate that individuals are not always in opposition to pan-Latino rhetoric or the representations offered to them in the cultural discourse. Although much of this is couched in the language of the marketplace, Chicanos and Latinos are using Gonzales and his Homies as a platform to articulate a sense of bonding and community.

### **Toy or Collectible: To Play or Not To Play?**

When I was growing up, I played with the same dolls that most girls played with. I had dolls that peed and dolls that cried. I had pretty dolls and dolls with long hair. I had Barbie Dolls (Sun Bathing Barbie, Princess Barbie etc.) and Cabbage Patch dolls. (To my ever-lasting shame, I even had a Donny and Marie Osmond dolls). These dolls say much about what was available for purchase, as well as accumulation (in regards to ethnic toys and perhaps ethnic identity) in the 1970s and 1980s. Those dolls and many like them embodied many of the traits that young girls were to learn throughout their lives and their development from girls to women. They were pretty, well-groomed, polite, small and feminine. However, underneath were more subtle lessons to learn. As many theoretical scholars have argued, these dolls taught girls about being women, dressing pretty, being submissive and always looking ones best. Jonathan Bignell's "Where is Action Man's Penis?" notes that the Barbie doll "would restrict play activity to the framing of display postures, collecting, nurturing or crafting, for instance, reflecting a subdivision of roles for adult men and women" (44). Toys teach and what they teach is the "natural" development of national and gendered space.<sup>13</sup>

Many feminist and cultural critics point to the fact that toys are not innocent of the social constructions which are embodied in them. Toys are play, but they are play that often constructs the way children look at the world and themselves in that world. As Stephen Kline states in *Out of the Garden*, "toys are objects that acquire unique symbolic content and meaning in a particular

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<sup>13</sup> Toys and dolls made for girls were not the only to fall under such incarnations, but dolls or toys made for boys as well. According to Jeannie Banks Thomas in *Naked Barbies, Warrior Joes & Other Forms of Visible Gender*, "many boys' toys were technologically oriented miniatures. They helped train boys to imitate the adult world of work and technology" (131). In fact, advertisements for cars often came with a tagline suggesting they were "Building Men As well As Motors", suggesting the societal implications and usage of mere 'things'.

social content...Designed as miniatures of ideas, people, animals and things, or working indirectly through the structures they impose upon the play activity, toys and games are signs of the social world and the way it is organized” (143–144). Moreover, toys teach us about the constructions of power relationships (specifically within ethnic and gendered discourse) in society. As Pamela B. Nelson states in *‘Toys as History’: Ethnic images and Cultural Change*:

toys, like other artifacts of material culture, can tell us a great deal about changing cultural attitudes and values, and about the exercise of power in society. Mass produced toys are especially revealing because their designers, concerned with marketability, intentionally try to appeal to dominant attitudes and values. Since the toys reflect the attitudes of the dominant group, they have helped legitimate the ideas, values and experiences of that group while discrediting the ideas, values and experience of others, helping the favored group define itself as superior and justify its dominance. (2)

I would posit the notion that within the dominant attitudes and values of society (i.e., white society) not only do toys create part of experience for girls and boys; they also threaten to displace ethnicity and culture as invisible. At the same time, I propose that the significant *difference* offered by ethnic toy representations allows us to understand the Homies as part of an ethnic reconstruction of subjected identities which children can use as part of a growing ethnic national consciousness for Chicano/Latino identity.

Throughout the years, I have heard many tales of horror about girls of color and their hatred of the dolls they grew up with. Toni Morrison herself, in *The Bluest Eye*, tells us the tale of a young African-American girl who is given a white doll for Christmas. Claudia narrates her experience with these dolls as she was growing up: “it had begun with Christmas and the gift of dolls. The big, the special, the loving gift was always a big, blue-eyed Baby Doll” (20). Claudia understands, “from the clucking sounds of adults I knew that the doll represented what they thought was my fondest wish” (20). Claudia tells us that instead, she hated the doll and could think of nothing more than destroying her, to the utter dismay of her family. As Claudia tells us:

what was I supposed to do with it? I had no interest in babies or the concept of motherhood. I was interested only in humans my own age and size, and could not generate any enthusiasm at the prospect of being a mother...The other dolls, which were supposed to bring me great pleasure, succeeded in doing quite the opposite. When I took it to bed, its hard unyielding limbs resisted my flesh-the tapered fingertips on those dimpled hands scratched...To hold it was no more rewarding...I had only one desire: to dismember it. To see what it was made of, to discover the dearness, to find the beauty, the desirability that had escaped me, but apparently only me. Adults, older girls, shops, magazines, newspapers, window signs-all the world had agreed that a blue-eyed, yellow haired, pink-skinned doll was what every girl child treasured...I could not love it. But I could examine it to see what it was that all the world said was lovable. (20-21)

Claudia dismembers the doll in order to get to the root of its desired ability for adults. But for her family Claudia seems to be disregarding the hard work which allowed them to buy this doll. As the adults of the novel say, “you-don’t-know-how-to-take-care-of-nothing. I-never-had-a-baby-doll-in-my-whole-life-and-used-to-cry-my-eyes-out-for-them. Now-you-got-one-a-beautiful-one-and-you-tear-it-up-what’s-the-matter-with-you?” (21). For Claudia, however, that doll represents what she is in a study of contrasts and what she feels she cannot ever be. As she states, “to discover what eluded me: the secret of the magic they weaved on others. What made people look at them and say, ‘Awwwww,’ but *not for me?*” (22). It is important to notice that Claudia understood that the doll represented more than a simple toy. She understands that she is supposed to imbue it with certain ideological constructions of her own identity, from a gendered, classed and racial perspective.

An important consideration is what the doll represents for Claudia’s family, that is, a sense of worth and acceptance into the dominant culture. As a symbol of status, the purchasing of the doll is subconsciously an acceptance and assimilation into a white society. And as for Claudia, we soon learn that to not disturb or further complicate the already strained “color” relationships, she will hide her shame and, “thus the conversion from pristine sadism to fabricated hatred, to fraudulent love. It was a small step to Shirley Temple. I learned much later to worship her...knowing, even as I learned, that the change was adjustment without improvement” (23).

But, even as Claudia comes to an understanding of the struggle between identity and acceptance in her community, it is her friend Pecola Breedlove however who ends up insane at the end of the novel through her inability to achieve those blue eyes (an inherent signifier of the dolls) which signify, for her, approval.

Similarly, a Native American friend I met years ago told me the story of how, when growing up, she would hang her Barbies from the banister of her home. She would cut and mangle their hair, mark up and destroy their features.<sup>14</sup> At the time, she did not know or understand why she did this. She simply knew she hated them. Years later, after spending much time and research on ethnic perspectives and the constructions of ethnic identities, as well as discovering more of who she was, she clued into the idea that it was her hatred of what the dolls embodied (whiteness, pureness, and beauty) that made her feel her imperfections and therefore made her feel out of place in a world where white traits and value systems are often appreciated above all else. Ultimately, as girls, we internalized racism and rage because of the kinds of dolls that we were made to play with.

It is important to note that while I was growing up during the 1970's and 1980's, there were very few ethnic toys choices for ethnic children. Choices for toys often came at a heavy price of identity negation or stereotype. As Ann duCille asks about her own experiences with ethnic toys: "what does it mean, then, when little girls are given dolls to play with that in no way resemble them? What did it mean for me that I was nowhere in the toys I played with?" (1). For example, Barbie's first African-American friend was "colored" Francie, and controversy was

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<sup>14</sup> See Ann duCille, "Dyes and dolls: multicultural Barbie and the merchandising of difference", *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, (Spring 2004): 46-69 for examples of other ethnic women and their experiences with Barbie dolls.

severe enough that the experiment to produce Francie failed. As Marilyn Halter tells us, “[In 1967], they came up with a clone named Colored Francie...[she] bombed completely. The name, of course, a throwback to an earlier era, demonstrates that the rhetoric of the black pride movement had not yet reached the corporate sector” (182). Similarly, when the Mattel Corporation tried again with their ethnic and “foreign” collection of Barbies, which came out in the early 1980’s, they received criticism about the representations being offered. Some feminist, cultural and ethnic scholars began claiming that the historical narratives (as well as the promotion of certain desired ethnic nationalistic belief systems) introduced (on back covers) were stereotypical narratives and beliefs of different countries and the people who lived there.

Similarly, there was a fair amount of criticism attached to Puerto Rican Barbie when she was introduced to the public. “‘I was insulted,’ said Gina Rosario, a 46-year-old school art director of Puerto Rican descent who lives in Alexandria, Va. ‘She looks very, very Anglo, and what was written on the package was very condescending – ‘The U.S. government lets us govern ourselves.’ If you’re going to represent a culture, do it properly -- be politically honest,’ she said” (qtd. In Navarro 1). Among other things, critics argued that the clothes introduced as ‘native clothes’ were problematic and stereotypical and did not take into consideration the wealth of difference of different people from the same nation, arguing a conflation of identity which threatened specific histories of individuals. As Navarro argues, “for many in Puerto Rico the doll is a welcome, if belated, recognition of the island’s culture. But on the mainland there is a heightened sensitivity to the image among Puerto Ricans who must grapple with stereotypes while trying to fit into an ethnically diverse society” (1). From a gendered perspective, it is important to consider the looks of the dolls as well. Much controversy has spun from the idea that the Barbie doll and her figure are unachievable. As Ann duCille states, “unrealistic” or not,



Barbie's weight and measurements (which if proportionate to those of a woman 5'6" tall would be something like 110 pounds and a top-heavy 39-18-33)".

However, in defense of the Barbie, other scholars, critics and theorists argue that Barbie is not (and can not be held accountable) for the ideology surrounding the dolls (although they were ultimately responsible for the information produced with the dolls) and whether an accurate representation of a country is offered. Rather, critics retort, Barbie is about what is economically viable. According to Wendy Varney in *Barbie Australis: The Commercial reinvention of National Culture*, "the design of such commodities is driven by commercial interests and stereotypes, with a view to what is attractive, marketable and fits prevailing perceptions, misguided or otherwise" (1).

Yet, as ambiguous as desire is, the Puerto Rican Barbie and equally as successful ethnic counterparts are highly successful products. And despite all the criticism for the P.R Barbie, she sold off the shelves in Puerto Rico within days of her Introduction. Negrón-Muntaner in her article *Barbie's Hair: Selling Out Puerto Rican Identity in the Global Market* argues however, that the fact that Puerto Rican Barbie sold off the shelves does not take into consideration who and why people bought the doll. She notes that there was divisiveness between island Puerto Ricans and U.S Puerto Ricans and their reception of this controversial doll. As she states:

many U.S.-based boricuas, who already live in a state of the Union but still consider themselves Puerto Ricans, feared Barbie as a Trojan horse of identity destruction; in contrast, Island nationalist intellectuals and consumers, who often denounce the eroding effects of Americanization on Puerto Rican culture, gleefully embraced the doll and their right to enjoy it. Evidently, both communities wrapped a different narrative around the plastic and made the Barbie a desirable playmate to engage in the increasingly high-stakes game called Puerto Rican 'identity'. (207)

In the articulation of this argument, it is important to note the complexity of ethnicities and genders even within a self-identified Puerto Rican identity.

This complexity, as always, is at the heart of my analysis. After all, although colored Francie was unsuccessful in her launch in the late 1960s, today the ethnic and global Barbies (including African-American dolls Christie and Shani) are a multi-million dollar venture for the Mattel Corporation. As Negrón-Muntaner states, “the company had already manufactured dozens of dolls representing countries from the world without any complaints” (38). Again, the questions become one of the way in which identity and representation play out for differences in ethnic and gendered realities. Ann duCille notes that, “someone asked me the other day if a black doll that looks like a white doll isn’t better than no black doll at all. I must admit that I have no ready answer for this” (29). I myself have no answer to this complex question. I can however, argue that the discourse surrounding such discussions is an interesting space to think about. I am interested in those ambiguities between our desire to be represented and our acceptance of impossible or fractured representations.

Unfortunately, for many ethnic children (like Claudia from *The Bluest Eye*), toys (like Barbie) subconsciously or not taught ethnic children what it was to be white and accepted. Jonathan Bignell states, “while it would be mistaken to simply decry Barbie’s whiteness (since this assumes that identification with the child’s like is simply based on mimesis and imitation) it is important to consider the globalization of normative representations of the white gendered body across diverse cultures and markets” (43). What we understand is that Barbie’s are perceived as an important way in which children cultivate a sense of identity; and as ethnic children have little variety in their selection of ethnic toys, Puerto Rican Barbie and the like have become dolls we cling to. At least, this Barbie meant I and my heritage existed in someway. With this Barbie, I would be able to recognize possibilities of myself, even if those possibilities were fractured by other intersections of identity-for example, where do Puerto Rican Africans

become represented? This struggle becomes a site of contestation that must be worked out on an individual level. Without the possibility of producing and manufacturing dolls ourselves (and this would lead to duCille's questions about what may or may not be authentic) it becomes a decoding game to articulate the ethnic Barbie as products which represents us in some way, than to have no representation at all. As Ann duCille tells us,

I do vividly recall, however, the day when, looking for a gift, I stopped along the Barbie aisle in a Miami toy store, and could not believe my wondering eyes, hurt in so many battles for dignity. The big, corny white and pink letters spelling PUERTO RICAN BARBIE drew me in, for they seemed to conform what as a child I always knew, but as a migrant adult, had been denied: Barbie has always been Puerto Rican. (227)

My Puerto Rican Barbie is sharing her bookshelf space with University of Florida Barbie!

It is the very *difference* which the Homies as possible toys (and I note here that I have seen them at play with many young children, including my nieces and nephews) represent that signifies and accepts identity in multiple forms. As bell hooks articulates in her essay about African-American culture "Loving Blackness as Political Resistance", "the importance of acknowledging the way positive recognition and acceptances of difference is a necessary starting point as we work to eradicate white supremacy" (13). In essence, hooks articulates a necessity to promote difference in order to accept articulate a sense of power in societal discourse. As Alicia Gaspar de Alba states:

'I would be careful about attaching any sort of value judgment to those images,' she said...They represent life as it really is, with all the diversity of professions that we engage in as a community.' For Mexican American children, she said, they are a favorable alternative to blond-haired, blue-eyed Barbies. 'If they play with an image in which they see themselves, there is a sense of mirroring and empowerment'. (qtd. in Manners 3-4)

As always, I have to consider the ambiguity in the representation of the Homies. For although we can argue for the possibility that Homies, as play, can allow for the possibility of representation, I wonder if there is enough accurate or strong representation of Homie girl characters, which

young girls like Claudia in *The Bluest Eye*, can use to articulate a positive loving Chicano/Latino self.

I wish to briefly acknowledge here that often-ethnic and gendered identity is positioned as complementary to Anglo or patriarchal identity. In other words, we are positioned to associate with whiteness or patriarchy and not against it. As bell hooks argues in “Loving Blackness as Political Representation” about the ways in which African-Americans posit themselves with whiteness:

those black folks who are more willing to pretend that ‘difference’ does not exist – even as they self-consciously labor to be as much like their peers as possible, will receive greater material rewards in white supremacist society. White supremacist logic is thus advanced. Rather than using coercive tactics of domination to colonize, it seduces black folks with the promise of mainstream success if only we are willing to negate the value of blackness. (17)

Similarly in Angie Chabram-Dernersesian’s essay “*I Throw Punches for My Race, but I Don’t Want to Be a Man: Writing Us-Chican-nos (Girl, Us)/Chicanas-into the Movement Script*” she argues that often Chicanas have to often subsume themselves under the Chicano identity in order to find representation; therefore Chicanas often posit themselves with Chicano identity and not against it. It is easy to understand that there is an appeal to simply aligning oneself with the dominant culture and traditions. Whiteness is positioned as the norm throughout society and ethnicity is often positioned outside of the norm and escaping into the dominant paradigm often allows for psychological sense of relief from the fractured selves which are often identified by dominant culture.

### **Collecting “Things”: Signifying Potential**

When I saw my first Homie, she was delivered to me in the mail by a good friend I knew (ironically the friend who destroyed her Barbie’s so many years ago). I remember thinking, what did I just get? Was this supposed to be me or some version of me? It was the oddest thing I had

ever seen, a little Latina girl. (It is important to my analysis to understand that I recognized her as such.) She was brown and curvy and had a Lady Pompadour hairstyle and white rimmed cat-eye sunglasses. She looked like a character from a 1930s/1940's inspired era and could have been a Zoot Suit girl, hanging out on the corner and flirting with the boys. She came with another male figure who was also wearing a Zoot Suit, low rider pants which were tightly pressed, a white starched shirt, suspenders, with a chain running from the suspenders to the bottom of his stylish pants. Topping off his immaculate style was his stylized mustache and his fashionable fedora hat.

But who were they and where did they come from? What I found out about what they were and what they became and what they soon signified was something uniquely interesting and important to understand. Because Chuca, short for "Pachuca"<sup>15</sup>, was a part of me, a part of old histories and new histories, a part of old neighborhoods and new cultural playgrounds. She and her counterpart became a community away from home. They were my homeland, my friends, my history and I in many ways that I both knew and did not know. She began the collection which has grown into the hundreds and which holds a special place on three shelves of my office. So, why after years of collecting nothing, did I choose to collect them?

An important factor of consideration about my collection is why I, as a Puerto Rican woman from Miami, Florida, chose to collect figurines which initially seemed more aligned with Chicano/Mexican American culture. First, I collect these particular figurines because they offer to bring Chicanos and Latinos together in a cross-cultural and community bonding ritual; one that promotes a pan-Latino identity, which forges allegiances across socio-economic and

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<sup>15</sup> The term Pachuca, a feminized version of Pachuco is defined as youth of the 1930's and 1940's who wore distinctive clothes (Zoot Suits) and spoke their own dialect (a street version of the blending of English and Spanish). Due to their double-marginalization stemming from their youth and ethnicity, there has always been a close association and cultural cross-pollination between the Pachuco subculture and the American subculture. For this reason, many members of the dominant culture assumed that anyone dresses in Pachuco style was a gang member.

political barriers to promote a more unified Chicano/Latino identity. And although I understand the term pan-Latino is a controversial one<sup>16</sup>, I believe it necessary to use the term, as I argued in my Introduction, as a way to actualize my experience when often there are no other avenues left for me to do so. Moreover, it is important to use the term in ways that promote healthy alliances between different, yet similar, Latino/Chicano cultures. I believe it is only when we do so, that we have the possibility of engaging more strongly in political discourses. As I believe that disagreements amongst us threaten to keep us fighting each other and not against the oppressive structures of dominant power in place.<sup>17</sup> And although I am not naïve enough to believe that such thinking is all that is necessary to translate lack of representation into political representation, I am hoping that our bonding together under pan-Latino rhetoric may allow for more representation in a cultural discourse. This does not mean that one has to conflate the complexity of ethnic identity; rather, I will suggest it merely allows us to work together (within our similarities) to fight the structures of power which would already threaten to erase us with our differences.

Second, I noticed that these figurines did not simply cater to Mexican American culture, but included a mixing of cultural (Latino) perspectives that I myself have experienced in the urban/ethnic neighborhood I grew up. Their narratives (whether about Chicanos in California or Puerto Ricans in New York) are about the working class, about struggling with an ethnic

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<sup>16</sup> See Suzanne Oberler *The Politics of Labeling: Latino/a Cultural Identities of Self and Others* and Frances Negrón-Muntaner, *Boricua pop: Puerto Ricans and the Latinization of American culture*, (New York: New York University Press, 2004) for an examination of the controversy surrounding the Pan-Latino term and its applications for Latinos/Chicanos in the cultural discourse.

<sup>17</sup> See Juan Flores, Juan, *From Bomba to Hip-Hop: Puerto Rican Culture and Latino Identity*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000) for an examination of the divisiveness of terms used to discuss ethnic variations within Latino/Chicano etc. identities.

identity, about familial relationships which are commonalities I feel many Chicanos/Latinos experience. These seem like my narratives. There are racial and class similarities. I bond with these toys on a social and political level, as I know and understand that there are similarities in oppression that both Mexican Americans and Puerto Rican Americans face. It makes me feel part of a larger community of individuals, fighting together, to articulate a visual and therefore ideological representation in a larger discourse. Collecting them makes me feel closer to other Chicanos/Latinos struggling with the same desires of representation that I struggle with daily. As Stuart Hall articulates in *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*:

turning up at football matches with banners and slogans, with faces and bodies painted in certain colours or inscribed with certain symbols, can also be thought of as 'like a language'-in so far as it is a symbolic practice which gives meaning or expression to the idea of belonging to a national culture, or identification with one's local community. It is part of the language of national identity, a discourse of national belongingness. (5)

Although the metaphor Hall uses is the bonding spectatorship of football, the same metaphor can apply to people in the process of collecting. Collecting Homies can make one feel part of a larger community of people and therefore can become a symbolic practice of articulating a desire to belong to a national culture of Chicano/Latino identification.

Collecting is both a public and private endeavor, both a question of class and a lack thereof, sometimes historical and at other times new, sometimes about the memory of something and its authentic value, at others times about collecting the unusual, the kitschy. In *How to do things with things* Bill Brown tells us, "the questions of things, even the question of whether they are, is inseparable from a question about what they do, or what can be done with them" (935). Therefore, collecting, although often private and personal, does often reflect a public possibility to be more in uniting collectors and their collective endeavors. In other words, what is significant is the way in which collecting may hold a universal appeal of bonding. As one collects, one can share that collection with others who feel the same, sharing stories, collections, and more. I am

interested in what collecting may say about a community at large and how that community might use the metaphor of collecting in the actualizing of a political and social identity in a cultural discourse. I am interested in how collecting is structured as a part of the construction of ethnicity, race, and gender. Like my aunt who collected her ethnic paper Mache figures, I am interested in how she bonds with their ideals about work, class, and more to articulate commonalties with other Latino/Chicano cultures.

Therefore, what does it say of those who collect two inch Latino people? An important consideration is why the actual act of collecting is significant for Chicanos/Latinos, who traditionally lack the means necessary to collect inherently valuable objects. As such, it is important to analyze David Gonzales and his marketing team's choice to sell this particular product in vending machines across the nation. Perhaps I am positioning the choice as more sophisticated than it was, but I believe it is important that Gonzales's aim is to market to the working class man or woman. The vending machine product is about class separation, as one can imagine that wealthy or even middle-class people are not likely to buy products or collectibles from vending machines.

Vending machine purchases could be seen as articulating a desire to collect something specifically opposite from objects of inherent value. This is not a highly valuable African mask selling for a thousand dollars at a gallery. This is a specifically tailored collectible created for the purpose of making it possible for anyone who wants to collect who wants to collect. Homies are unique and the ability to collect them without breaking the bank is an important factor for Chicanos/Latinos who are looking for something personal (and visual) to collect. By strategically placing them in 50 cent gumball machine across the nation, Gonzales appeals to a working class



culture and both a youth culture and an adult culture, seeking things which allow for more self-representation and self-identity.<sup>18</sup>

Another aspect important to the significance of these Homies as collectibles is the appeal they offer Chicanos/Latinos actively looking for and desiring images of themselves in mainstream popular culture. Their appeal lies in the self-representation they offer, even if, as I argue, the images they offer are ambiguous. These Homies have become extremely successful (over 130 millions sold) precisely because they offer something inherently different in their representations than mainstream culture allots possibility for. There are many ways in which the Homies offers an alternate (I do not mean to suggest something outside of the norm) sense of identity for Chicanos/Latinos which allows them to maintain strong cultural and social ties. The alternate sense of identity, I argue, comes from the situating of the Homies in specific-to-nationalistic and racialized identities. This happens primarily through the use of the narratives and histories attached to the Homies on an online database David Gonzales has created. There in the narratives, as Stuart Hall argues in *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, is where the engagement of meaning can take place. As Hall has said, “meaning is produced whenever we express ourselves in, makes use of, consume or appropriate cultural ‘things’; that is, when we incorporate them in different ways into everyday rituals and practices of daily life and in this way we give them value or significance. Or when we weave narratives, stories-and fantasies-around them” (4). For Hall, our *usage* of narratives is a way to counter traditional mainstream culture, specifically if we choose to challenge assumptions about the norms of society or alter them in significant ethnic and therefore political ways.

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<sup>18</sup> I believe a similar class perspective can be introduced here in terms of the ways in which individuals collect poster prints of fine art. It is about making culture consumerable.

### **Homie Stories: What They Offer a Looking Culture.**

It is important, while examining the narratives Gonzales has created to go with each character, to consider the significance of the text itself in the production of meaning. In examining the significance of the text, we can discover that the Homies present a sort of language which communicates to Chicanos and Latinos in the world at large. These Homies narratives offer a distinctly Chicano/Latino visual and linguistic based (although there is some appeal in their universal themes as well) discourse which is important for self-representation in a political and social context.

### **Fashion and the Counterculture**

The Homies figurines are dressed in styles which have been traditionally viewed as an ethnic “counterculture”.<sup>19</sup> In the early 1930’s and 1940’s, Chicanos and African-Americans<sup>20</sup> wore Zoot Suits to set themselves apart from a mainstream—often white society—which often negated difference. Made from an excess of material during war rationing times, this excess was transferred into an excess of immorality and an unpatriotic discourse during a time where presumably we were “all” bonding against enemies. As Douglas Henry Daniels tells us in *Los Angeles Zoot: Race ‘Riot,’ the Pachuco, and Black Music Culture*:

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<sup>19</sup> According to *Wikipedia.com*, the counterculture is defined as a: **cultural group** whose values and norms of behavior run counter to those of the **social mainstream** of the day, the cultural equivalent of **political opposition**. Although distinct countercultural undercurrents exist in all societies, here the term counterculture refers to a more significant, visible phenomenon that reaches critical mass and persists for a period of time. A counterculture movement thus expresses the ethos, aspirations and dreams of a specific population during a certain period of time.

<sup>20</sup> According to *PBS.com*, Zoot Suits were “initially an African American youth fashion, closely connected to jazz culture, the Zoot suit was co-opted by a generation of Mexican American kids, who made it their own. The oversized suit was both an outrageous style and a statement of defiance. Zoot suitors asserted themselves, at a time when fabric was being rationed for the war effort, and in the face of widespread discrimination. Zoot suits were reserved for special occasions -- a dance or a birthday party. The amount of material and tailoring required made them luxury items. Many kids wore a toned-down version of the "draped" pants or styled their hair in the signature "ducktail."

in a Time magazine letter, a soldier stationed in Kearney, Nebraska explained his hostility and that of many Americans to the zoot-suited youth: "To a soldier who has been taken from his home and put in the Army, the sight of young loafers of any race, color, creed, religion or color of hair loafing around in ridiculous clothes that cost \$75 to \$85 per suit is enough to make them see red. (102)

Therefore, the Zoot Suits were used by young Chicanos and African-Americans as a way to create themselves as radical subjects in a hegemonic discourse and they were used by dominant culture to reign in this radicalism. As Rosa Linda Fregoso notes, Zoot Suits "were a rebellion against accepted dress and musical styles, and, moreover, they sometimes went beyond fashion and entertainments statements, embodying an intellectualized political position" (99). In fact, the Zoot Suits were so often conflated with the un-American that they were often banned in many places and those who wore those suits were sometimes beaten.<sup>21</sup> As Daniels tell us, "whites not only attacked and beat Mexican Americans and blacks, but stripped from them their fashionable zoot suits" (98). However, although the outfits were often deemed street or hood and often conflated Mexican and African-Americans with violence<sup>22</sup>, it was and is the difference they articulated which is what Chicanos/African-Americans clung to in the past and clings to in the present. As Bruce Tyler notes, Zoot Suits "projected racial pride and criticized white racism" (qtd. in Fregoso 104). Zoot Suits and those who wore them imbued in their ideologies a way of spurning white culture, in the articulation of pride in the difference of Chicano culture.

Many of the hundreds of Homies figurines I collect are dressed in historical clothes indicative of earlier periods in Chicano History. I argue that this suggests, for the collectors, a

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<sup>21</sup> See Douglas Henry Daniels, "Los Angeles Zoot: Race 'Riot,' the Pachuco, and Black Music Culture", *The Journal of African American History*, (Winter 2002): 98-118. Daniels informs us that in 1942, the Los Angeles City Council passed a resolution outlawing the Zoot-suit.

<sup>22</sup> See further Daniels for an examination of the history of the Zoot Suit Riots and the Sleepy Lagoon Trial in the 1940's and their conflation with wearing Zoot Suits.

correlation between collecting things and collecting historically significant things. As I articulate previously, about the ways in which African-Americans collect black memorabilia, the collection of these Homies represented the possibility of collecting a part of the historical reality of Chicanos. As such, it is possible that people are collecting Homies as a way to collect and remember something significant historically to their culture. Other Homies are dressed in street gear, with low-riding pants (which deliberately show the underwear of the individuals wearing them), long (and often sizes larger than the people wearing them) t-shirts, and bandanas and caps (usually designated as Chicano/Latino based on specific colors or country flags). I argue that this particularly wear also indicates a desire (though somewhat controversial) to be different from a mainstream culture. As Chris Macias states, “Mijos (a collection of young Homies) enjoy a street credibility, you can’t find on Sesame Street, and in a toy market that thrives on fantasy, the scrappy mijos live in a bittersweet world, working toward a better life” (1).

Hall, in *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* argues that, “clothes themselves are the signifiers. The fashion code in western consumer cultures like ours correlates particular kinds of combinations of clothing with certain concepts (‘elegance’, ‘formality’, ‘casual-ness, ‘romance’). These are the signifieds...certain items go together” (37). What Hall articulates is that society is often about the construction of these signs of acceptance and approval. Wearing the style of the day is a great deal about adhering to society’s approval of oneself. Not only are much of the Homie clothes a direct affront to mainstream culture, but much of the way they look is as well, including the way they style their hair. What Zoot Suits and the like did, were to challenge the status quo of acceptability. In their very difference, they articulated a desire to not assimilate. As Hall further states, “some signs actually create meaning by exploiting difference” (38). Douglas Henry Daniels tells us; this is exactly what historical

young Mexican and African-Americans symbolized with their clothing choices and styles. As Daniels states, “black and brown American youth found highly charged emotional and symbolic meaning in dress” (100). And the signs being created are a sense of difference which people were and are embodying. As one individual, Montoya, claims, “I think these do a good job of capturing our cholitos<sup>23</sup> (little cholos)...Everybody needs an identity, and sometimes the way we dress becomes our placaso, our tag” (qtd. in Macias 2). Therefore, Gonzales is strategic in his conflation of these present Homies with significant political struggles of the past. In this way, he is able to market his Homies to an older collector looking to collect the memories of a past radical Chicano reality at the same time that he can market to a new youth collector looking for attachments to the past. As one online chat room individual, Anj, states, “my son collects Homies & I tell him how they remind me of me & my friends when I was growing up. Thanks for the memories” (48). Yet another chat room participant, Westsider on the Eastside, states, “Homies bring back a part of the culture I grew up in Southern California” (56).

Not only is Gonzales imbuing the historical past of the 1930’s and 1940’s, but also the 1960’s and 1970’s, when Chicano protestors themselves re-appropriated the earlier Chicano styles (Zoot Suits and the such) to reclaim a historical reality to re-inscribe their current Chicano movement with ideological and political beliefs. At the same time, they could remember the struggles and oppression of a historical pain to validate current oppressive struggles. They used a pachuco identity to re-imagine a Chicano political discourse. Therefore, many of Gonzales’s

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<sup>23</sup> Cholos are defined by *urbandictionary.com* as a “term implying a Hispanic male that typically dresses in chinos (khaki pants), a sleeveless white tee-shirt or a flannel shirt with only the top buttoned, a hairnet, or with a bandana around the forehead, usually halfway down over the eyes. Cholos often have black ink tattoos, commonly involving Catholic imagery, or calligraphy messages or family names.

Homie men are imbuing that resistant stance by “fighting the good fight”, spreading the word of resistance and struggle to younger Homie men.

However, it is important to note here that those Chicano/Latino movements occasionally tended to negate the participation of Chicanas/Latinas in the movements. As Alma A. Garcia states “although the Chicano movement-an insurgent uprising among a new political generation of Mexican-Americans-challenged persistent patterns of societal inequality in the United States, it ignited a political debate between Chicanas and Chicanos based on the internal gender contradictions prevalent within El Movimiento” (1). Most of the movements were about valorizing male identity and making it more viable in the face of a public affront to their masculinity by dominant discourses. To do so, Chicanos often patriarchally subjugated women in the process of their own struggle for self-representation or self-identity. As Rosa Linda Fregoso states, “yet, the ambivalence of the cultural project of nationalism centered on its systematic elision of women as subjects of cultural discourse” (663). Therefore, although the Homie men seem posed to imbue some possible positive ethnic politicizing in their incorporation of these Homies, left by the wayside are the Chicanas/Latinas who fight by their side.

### **Naming and Recognition**

The very names attached to the Homies are indicative of the difference of Chicano/Latino peoples. There is Gata (Cat), Baby Doll, Big Loco (Big Crazy), Bruja (Witch), Mr. Raza (Mr. Race), Veterano (Veteran), Chula (Sweetheart), P-Rico, Conejos (Rabbit), Gordo (Fat), Fly Girl, Borriqua (Island Puerto Rican), Mamasota (Big Mama), Culebra (Snake), Cochino (Dirty), Diablo (Devil) and so many more. The naming of oneself articulates a particular position of power in society. (quote here from Spillers?) It also represents a way in which to re-appropriate formally derogatory terms and names used by dominant culture to efface ethnic identity, as

Randall Kennedy suggest with the term nigger and Alice Walker suggests about the mammy image. Moreover, it was a way of belonging and achieving acceptance from within one's own ethnic group. As Joseph E. Holloway states in *African-American Names*:

A more direct survivor of African naming-practices is the use of nicknames. Almost every black person in slavery was known by two names: a given name and a name used only within the family circle...In African-American naming practices, every child receives a given name at birth and a nickname that generally follows the individual throughout life. Some examples of these nicknames are Jo Jo, June, Tiny Baby, O.K., John-John, Mercy-Mercy, Baby Sister, Sister, "T," Sunny Main, Bo, Boo, Bad Boy, Playboy, and Fats. Among enslaved Africans, this practice was also evident in names used by slaves, such as Pie Ya, Puddin'-tame, Frog, Tennie C., Monkey, Mush, Cooter, John De Baptist, Fat-Man, Preacher, Jack Rabbit, Sixty, Pop Corn, Old Gold, Dootes, Angle-eye, Bad Luck, Sky-up-de Greek, Cracker, Jabbo, Cat-Fish, Bear, Tip, Odessa, Pig-Lasses, Rattler, Pearly, Luck, Buffalo, Old Blue, Red Fox, Coon, and Jewsharp...found that Gullah-speaking people preserved their language and nicknames using what they called basket names or day names. Their children always had two distinct names, an English one for public use and an authentic African name for private use by the extended family alone...In the Sea Islands, children sometimes have not only their given names and basket names but also community names. The community gives the child a name that characterizes or is characteristic of the individual, such as Smart Child or Shanty (1).

And although the above is specifically referencing slave culture (although as I have argued previously there are many connections between African-American and Latino cultures) an argument can be made that Chicano/Latino culture also imbue themselves with a re-naming process, which articulates a desire to define themselves in directly different ways than mainstream culture.

### **Aztlán: The Mythical Mexican Homeland**

Homie narratives offer a sense of culture and ethnicity for Chicanos/Latinos looking for a culture to belong to. Not only are the names indicative of such, but also the ways in which the narratives speak to the community of people around them. Who they hang around with, where they hang around and what their interests are, all ally them with a sense of ethnic identity and pride. Many sing Mariachi (there is even a little Mariachi figurine) and boast or brag about Chicanos/Latinos who have made it big; there is a sense of community pride being imbued by in

those who have made it. Yet others discuss the mythical presence of Aztlán in their lives.<sup>24</sup> The Aztlán of Chicano historical imagination is a place where self-affirmation and determination are the ways to gain a political voice (Pèrez-Torres).

Therefore, in instilling a sense of the Aztlán, Gonzales imbues his Homies with a sense of the spiritual and religious which is important to Chicano culture and identity. Moreover, he inspires his Homies (and by extension their collectors) to fight the good fight by reclaiming a sense of the historical past (as he strategically does with the usage of the Zoot Suits as his main clothing style). Additionally, these Homies often talk about mystical presences in their lives, and witch doctors in their neighborhoods. One such character, Culebra (Snake), says that the spirit of the snake went into her during a construction accident one day. As the narrative tells us, “it was at that moment that the spirit of the snake entered Culebras soul and became a part of her...She now has visions and she is able to see into the future and read dreams”. It is important to note that the mythical Aztlán is configured and claimed by Gonzales’s Homie men, while Gonzales’s Homie women are configured by the mythical and perhaps the more dangerous element of believing in a mythical homeland. Another figurine, El Padrecito (also known as the Priest) performs Catholic sacraments on the Homies and is influential in the Homies daily lives. Incorporated within the narratives is an understanding and acceptance of the variety of religious beliefs that are a part of Chicano and Latino culture. Therefore, while some pray to the Virgin Mary, others pray to the Virgin de Guadalupe. However, even though we have a strong male presence in El Padrecito, in Sister Mary Maria (a nun), we have a religious woman deemed a bit

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<sup>24</sup> The idea of Aztlán was introduced in a Chicano Youth Conference held in Denver, Colorado in March of 1969 and launched the idea of a spiritual/mythical homeland which Chicanos dream is a place where Chicanos will bond together and create a nation of great power.



more negatively. She is the one who is configured as using force, in order to get students to believe in God. She is called a “strict disciplinarian” who often swats the knuckles of young Homies when they act up. It may seem too subtle a distinction, but when added up to the rhetoric of a positive ethnic representation for Chicanos/Latinos, we have to consider the way it is predicated on a negative female subjectivity.

Gonzales also seems to imbue a deep sense of cultural pride in his Homies figurines, one which can transfer itself into those who collect these things. An important aspect of David Gonzales’s Homies and the narratives he has created for them online is a connection to the historical and the political. Gonzales’s narratives often come with Internet links to outside Chicano/Latino political, cultural, social and economic websites which evoke a sense of understanding more about one’s ethnicity and identity. In fact, one of his characters, not an individual, but a symbol is El Chilote (the Chili) who evokes a status as a sign and signifier of ethnic, national and cultural pride. As his moniker states, “he rode with legendary icons in Chicano history like Joaquin Murieta, Gregorio Cortez, and Tiburcio Vasquez. If you young Homies don’t know about these characters, their stories are in your local libraries...look them up. They are heroes in our history and you should know about them to preserve their legends”. However, no similar connection with equally as strong female historical figures is imbued in his collection.

Online chat rooms and the individuals participating in them seem to suggest that Gonzales’s work Homies are finding an audience of individuals engaging with them as cultural, political, and social texts (and not all of are understanding the fine distinctions between gender, race and class which complicate these images). On an online website, Norma Year states, “note\* to Mr. Gonzales, have you ever thought about making a Llorana doll, or Aztec versions of the

dolls. Keep up the great work” (9). Looney online states, ”I just wanna say the Homies are the best out there that represent La Raza” (8). Fernando says they represent “Brown Pride” (9). Baby Doll states, “hey, whats I love the Homies representing mi Raza”. Almita\_510 articulates a desire for representation, which they feel is lacking in mainstream American culture. They state, “I’m sick of all this white man tv. We need to represent La Raza!!!” (20). Ultimately, what we have online is a convergence of ethnic individuals sharing their experiences and socializing on a level which may purport to enhance relationships among Chicano/Latino individuals.

### **Cross-Cultural Realities**

What is also significant about Culebra, who I mentioned previously, is the cross cultural reality of her identity. Culebra is a mixed individual, with Native American blood as part of her ethnic make up. Therefore, an important element in Gonzales’s work is the conflation of society today, the reality of White-Americans, African-Americans, Native Americans, Latino-Americans and more inter marrying each other and having bi-racial children. In fact, many of his other Homies are also products of bi-racial relationships. Additionally, Gonzales makes an important point in his articulation of the Homies as different in terms of skin color; in itself a powerful ethnic positioning that reflects the significance of the variety which is Chicano/Latino culture. In other words, Gonzales may be imbuing a real sense of a pan-Latino audience. As Gonzales states, “from Kindergarten age to grandma and grandpa. Guys, girls, gays, brown, black, yellow, red, white, hip, Straight, cholo, goth, rocker, rapper, redneck, white collar, blue collar and no collar, lowrider, hot-rod, skateboarder. That’s the beauty of this thing-it’s part of American culture” (qtd. In Loudenbeck 3).

Yet, it is important to acknowledge that this pan-Latino identity does not stand alone. Gonzales is also reflecting on a pan-American identity and in doing so, broadening his audience

and market-base to reflect an understanding and awareness (both culturally and financially) that Chicanos/Latinos come from different historical and ethnic pasts which include African, Caribbean and Aztec cultural backgrounds. For example, La Negra is a dark-skinned Latina who is a dancer and choreographer. La Morena is a dark skinned woman from the Dominican Republic. Poca Ana is part Navaho, Indian. Moreover, Gonzales includes other ethnicities in his Homies collectibles, including Home Lee (the local Korean store owner), Japon (from Tokyo, Japan), China Doll (China) and Indio (a full blooded Blackfoot Indian), who is himself significant because he is trying to cross boundaries between Native Americans and Chicanos. Specifically, he asks Chicanos in his community to reflect more upon the past and the commonalities they have with Aztec culture, by invoking the relationship each has to Aztec history and blood. However, as always there is an ambiguity in his determination to reflect a pan-Latino or pan-American identity, as doing so possibly negates any resistance or unique-to-Chicano/Latino identity in a subconscious subsumed American cultural identity or dare I say an assimilationist perspective.

As a way to frame the above argument, let us examine two different figurines. The first is the highly prized figurine Mr. Raza (Mr. Race) who is deeply proud of his cultural heritage and has degrees in Chicano Studies and Latin American and Pre-Columbian History. This figurine is politically aware and encourages young Chicanos/Latinos to work to change the system of oppressions (i.e., dominant culture) which threatens to harm their culture. In this figurine, Gonzales encourages a Chicano/Latino Brown Pride mentality. Another important and popular figurine is that of Soljaboy. Soljaboy is in the military and fights to save the homeland represented here, not as the mythical Aztlán, but as the United States. As Gonzales narrates, “while I realize some of you Homies may have issues with our government and it’s treatment of

the Raza...this is still our homeland and Homeboys and Homegirls have to help defend it from anyone who would harm our way of life...But freedom comes with a price...and someone has to be ready to pay it. Thank you Soljaboy” It is important to consider who is paying the price to ensure the freedom and belief system of a United States so embroiled in controversial racial, ethnic and classed realities.

With this narrative and this figurine<sup>25</sup>, Gonzales hopes to cross cultural boundaries that go far beyond Chicano/Latino culture. Here he invokes a sense of pride in the United States were Chicanos/Latinos make their lives.<sup>26</sup> However, I will go beyond the argument of pride in a United States homeland here to argue that I believe Gonzales posits a complicated discourse. For consciously or not, he is suggesting that one of the ways they can prove their allegiance to this homeland is to pursue a military career and defend the country against common enemies. In other words, he uses the desire to become part of an imagined nation to prove their allegiances. This subconsciously promotes a more conservative ideological nature which may efface his counter cultural product.

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<sup>25</sup> Playing the Devil’s Advocate, I wonder where our little female Homie Soldier is.

<sup>26</sup> As a significant part of my analysis, it is important to think about Soljaboy in terms of the time period in which he arrives. I could not find any information about the specific dates of his arrival in gumball machines, but I can estimate that his arrival, anywhere between 2004 and 2006, comes at a very important time period in the current political and social climate. In March 20, 2003, almost 18 months after one of the worst acts of terrorism to happen on U.S soil on September 11, 2001, George W. Bush declared war on terrorism and began an attack on Iraqi soil, which is still in effect now three years later. Without delving into a political battle about whether going to war was right or wrong, what is significant is thinking about who is fighting the war. It is estimated that over 10% of the United States military is Hispanic and it is further estimated that the number of Hispanics in the military will double in the next decade alone. Moreover, it’s important to note that over 25% of the Hispanics are involved in combat or hazardous duty occupations (Berkowitz 1-2).

## **Community Bonding**

There is also a sense of community imbued in these Homie figurines. Many of them are related to one another and are friends with each other. They help each other out with getting jobs, meeting new friends, becoming part of the community and whenever they are in need. Gonzales himself articulates on his website a desire to create a support system in one's community which can help individuals feel a sense of belonging. As Gonzales states in his website, "in an inner-city world plagued by poverty, oppression, violence, and drugs, the Homies have formed a strong binding and cultural support system that enables them to overcome the surrounding negativity and allows for laughter and good times as an anecdote for reality". One such figurine, Big Foot, is in charge of the local Junk Yard and will often help others in the community find the necessary transmissions and such to fix their cars ,when other big companies often cannot or will charge a fortune in a community where people do not have a lot of money. Another significant aspect here is the fact that there is also a desire to see cultural support systems grow beyond the barrios of East Los Angeles and into the cities and communities in New York and Miami. Although I will note here that one female Homie character, Sly Girl, is configured as a smart individual who wants to be a personal injury lawyer; yet, she is characterized as someone who "doesn't really want to change her community to help the other Homies...she just want's to get paid".

Tied into this concept is the idea that Homies represent role models of hope for younger Chicanos/Latinos, who find themselves, getting into trouble in their own communities, with gang violence and more. Here, Gonzales instills a moral message to his Homies figurines. It is true that many of Gonzales's figurines find themselves with troubled pasts, but many of them have fought their way through troubled times to make successes of themselves and more importantly come and give back to their communities by sharing their experiences and promoting a better

understanding of the opportunities which Chicanos/Latinos should avail themselves. For example, Nena (from the beginning of the analysis) became a nurse. Big Loco left his gang after spending time in prison, received a degree in social work and started a government funded program called "Homey Outreach" to promote a healthier lifestyle and prevent troubled youth from falling through the system. And Gonzales does offer many positive representations; Gonzales's Homies are professionals from lawyers to police officers and Highway Patrolmen to business owners. Borriqua, a Puerto Rican home girl, has an eye for fashion and works as a designer for a clothing line called Chula Wear and evens gets small dancing parts in music videos. Boxer owns the local gym and use to be a professional boxer who held two world championship belts. Gordo is a chef who owns a local restaurant named "El Chilote" (The Big Chile) and has his own Mexican cuisine television show. Mr. Lurch owns his own antique car parts business on the Internet. Yet others are skateboard champions, painters, basketball players, models, dancers, mechanics, barbers, postmen, and more. And although it is true that there are not as many lawyers as there are aspirations for greatness (Booby Loco wants to become a professional wrestler in the Latino World Other), what is significant is that Gonzales understands that Chicano/Latino youth is in a tricky situation, struggling to outgrow their poverty stricken or working class neighborhoods and make something of themselves. According to *High School Drop Out Rates for Latino Youth* by Richard Fry, "in 2000, about 530,000 Hispanic 16-to-19-year-olds were high school dropouts, yielding a dropout rate of 21.1 percent for all Hispanic 16-to-19-year-olds (U.S. Census Bureau 2003). The Latino youth dropout rate was more than three times greater than the 2000 non-Hispanic "white alone" dropout rate of 6.9 percent". Equally as significant to the narratives is how many do articulate a desire to get out of the barrio life. Even Gonzales as a representation himself is being used to articulate an (American?) success story.

### **Is This a Negative Reality?: The Controversial Aspect of Homies**

Not all of the Homies offer positive representations of Chicano/Latino identity and it is important that I acknowledge them. Mosca (the fly) is a cat burglar of expensive art, chips, and even industrial espionage. Oso (bear) is head of the local gang and his members include Angel, Mosca and Veterano. Q-Ball is a blind pool hustler. Some of the Homies just hang out on a daily basis, with no aspirations for bettering themselves. And there are many individuals who express their anxiety about the ambiguity of the images offered. Some argue that Gonzales is merely trying to impart a reality in how young Chicanos/Latinos live, especially in the barrio. However, in order to posit these Homies in a netter light, Gonzales has most of his Homies realizing the error of their ways, even as they try to move on to better lives. It is true that many of the Homies use to be a part of gang culture, which in itself many represent a negative stereotype of Chicano/Latino culture; however, Gonzales states that what is important is to not deny a part of the cultural reality of the world we live in. As Gonzales defends, “not all the characters are role models, but it is a reflection of real life...There is always another story to someone’s life, what makes them do what they do” (qtd. in *Reveries* 1) As Gonzales further articulates, Mexican Americans “do not need cultural guardians to tell them what is acceptable” (1).

Gonzales seems especially embittered by the consumable images of Jennifer Lopez<sup>27</sup> and Ricky Martin, which are white-washed and circulated through Chicano/Latino communities as representational of what it takes to achieve a certain amount of success in society. If we examine the ways in which Jennifer Lopez markets herself, dependent on the product she is selling—herself, her perfume, her movie career or her music career—we note distinctions, which

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<sup>27</sup> See further Frances Negrón-Muntaner for a discussion of conflated ethnicities and the re-working of Jennifer Lopez into Pan-Latino rhetoric.

themselves depend on who she is selling to. Therefore, it is telling that Jennifer Lopez is considerably lighter in skin color when she sells her perfume Glow in such magazines as *Cosmopolitan* and *Elle* and considerably darker when playing a maid in *Maid in Manhattan*. Priscilla Nordyke Roden tells us in *Toys from the 'Hood*, “another renowned mainstream American artist who comes up in Gonzales’s conversations is Norman Rockwell but he has a different take on his own work. ‘I characterize people. I draw Americana, but not his Americana.’ Instead of drawing a boy and girl sharing a milkshake, he might depict them at a car show” (3). Therefore, Gonzales argues that his Homies are not about acceptability by a mainstream culture or about acceptability for those he feels have sold out their culture. He does articulate a desire to capture and capitalize on a sense of the American culture he believes Chicanos and Latinos are growing up a part of; however, we have to recognize the complicated nature of the representation of Homies and the complicated nature of the responses to his cultural product.

What Gonzales makes an effort to impart in his figurines, which are ambiguously articulated through difference, are words of wisdom in his description of these characters. As he argues on his website:

the goal is to make the public understand that gangs are only a small part of the barrio and not the essence of it. Through the storylines we want to educate the public about the difference between hardcore gangsters and the Homies overall. It would be an opportunity to use these characters that do exist in our communities in situations where we can get an anti-gang message across to our young viewers.

I am uncertain as to whether Gonzales ever really fully actualizes or achieves his goal, especially if his presumed audience are not reading these narratives, but simply collecting the figurines. Additionally, Gonzales never seems to explain the difference between Homie gang members and real gang members (which he articulates a difference for). Therefore, the distinction and its promise of change may never be fully articulated.



**Women in Trouble: Abused, Used and Cruised in a Patriarchal World of Homies.**

Para Un Revolucionario (1975)  
[For a Revolutionay]

You speak of art  
And your soul is like snow,  
A soft powder raining from your  
Mouth,  
Covering my breasts and hair.  
You speak of your love of mountains,  
Freedom,  
And your love for a sun  
Whose warmth is like *una liberación*  
Pouring down upon brown bodies.  
Your books are of the souls of men,  
Carnales with a spirit  
That no army, pig or *cuidad*  
Could ever conquer.  
You speak of a new way,  
A new life.

When you speak like this  
I could listen forever.

*Pero* your choice is lost to me, *carnal*,

In the wail of *tus hijos*,  
In the clatter of dishes  
And the pucker of beans upon the stove.  
Your conversations come to me  
*De la sala* where you sit,  
Spreading your dreams to brothers  
Where you spread that dream like damp clover  
For them to trod upon.  
When I stand here teaching  
*Para ti con manos bronces* that spring  
From *mi espiritu*  
(for I too am raza)

*Pero*, it seems I can only touch you  
With my body,  
You lie with me  
And my body es la hamaca  
That sans the void between us.

*Hermano raza,*  
I am afraid that you will lie with me  
And awaken too late  
To find that you have fallen

And my hands will be left groping  
For you and your dream  
In the midst of la *revolución*.

- Lorna Dee Cervantes (1975)<sup>28</sup>

This Lorna Dee Cervantes poem I cite above, written slightly after the height of the Chicano movement when radicalized Latinas were beginning to come into their own, illustrates an important concern for Chicanas, who felt denied and negated by a movement that promised social, political and economic prosperity for Chicanos/as everywhere. For Cervantes, her frustration stems from the expectations Chicanos had for Chicanas. As she tells us, Chicanos sat in their living rooms, planning revolutions, while the Chicanas worked in the kitchen, cooking and cleaning. For Cervantes, Chicanos appear to sweat everyday, protesting for their rights and at night they come for comfort in the arms of their Chicanas, whose bodies become a metaphorical space for conquering the battleground they are struggling with outside. The Chicanas place becomes a symbolic one, where her purpose is to create and build up her Chicano man in the private world so that he can exist in the public world. However, even as Cervantes forgotten woman cooks, cleans and serves up her body for the Chicano man, she hopes and desires that he will include her in the public struggle for representation. She fears however, that the “*raza*” which now becomes code for the male patriarchal system, will fail to give her voice.

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<sup>28</sup> A translation of the terms within the poem are as follows: “*una liberación*” (one liberation), “*cuidad*” (city), “*Pero*” (however), “*carnal*” (sexual), “*tus hijos*” (your children), “*De la sala*” (from the living room), “*Para ti con manos bronce*” (For you with bronze hands), “*mi espiritu*” (my spirit), “*Hermano raza*” (brother race), “*revolución*” (revolution).

The struggle which Cervantes explains in her poem, is one felt by many Chicanas, both in days past and in the present. According to Alma M. Garcia in *Chicana Feminist Thought: The Basic Historical Writings*, “although the Chicano movement--an insurgent uprising among a new political generation of Mexican-Americans--challenged persistent patterns of societal inequality in the United States, it ignited a political debate between Chicanas and Chicanos based on the internal gender contradictions prevalent within El Movimiento” (1). What Garcia explains is how Chicanas felt oppressed and confined by a movement which was willing to struggle for Chicano independence, but who felt woman’s place was in the home. In fact, according to Garcia, there was an ideal woman created in the ideological minds of Chicano men. For them, the ideal woman was Inspired by a cultural nationalism that indiscriminately equated Chicano cultural survival with the glorification of traditional gender roles for Chicanas. Thus, Chicano cultural nationalist praised the ‘Ideal Woman’ of El Movimiento for representing strong, long-suffering women who endured social injustice, maintained the family as a safe ‘haven in a heartless world’ for their families, and, as a result, assured the survival of Chicano culture. (6)

It is in David Gonzales’s miniature world of Homies that we still see the significance of Cervantes poem and Garcia’s comments. Even though I argue that Gonzales gives us the possibility of engaging with the Homies in positive racial/ethnic/cultural ways, his ways are still embedded within a patriarchal discourse, which often silences women or makes them objects of male discourse and struggle. The role of the Chicana/Latina, in his world, is the same Latina struggling in the real world for an active discourse of her own. In his world, women are highly sexualized (Bouncy, Gata, Lola, Mamasota, Sly Girl, Shorty, and Right Eye are all described in their narratives by their physical features), women are strong mammy or mother figures (Baby Mama, Nurse Nena, and Abuelita) and/or are long-suffering women waiting for their men to do

something or anything (Baby Mama and Nurse are both framed by this discourse and the discourse above). Anna Nieto Gomez states in *La Chicana-Legacy of Suffering and Self-Denial*, in Chicano history Chicanas were:

three basic images of women as virgin, woman as wife and woman as mother, all of which reinforce social, psychological and economic dependency for women...independence became synonymous with being out of control. For a woman to act out 'su libertad' [her freedom] her independence was believed to lead to whoredom, the negative alternative. (49)

Therefore, in Gonzales's world, woman seem passive, while men seem active and while some of the women of his world do work and actively engage in struggle, many Homie women are constantly framed by the discourse of men and their expectations and desires. They are always objects of male desire and therefore never subjects of their own discourse. After all, it is Nurse Nena who spent years taking care of her man and her children and it is Baby Mama who has been left alone with a set of twins to raise.

Gonzales positions most of his Homie female figurines as always there when they are needed to provide support, love and care for their Chicano/Latino men, but never as subjects of their own emotional needs or desires. Most are described as perfect girlfriends or perfect friends who are wrapped emotionally around the desires of men. For example, Baby Doll is defined simply as the perfect girlfriend in her narrative, staying true to her lover Paz. Gata is defined as only having eyes for Hollywood and is constantly buying him gifts and talking about him. (She is additionally framed within the narrative as naïve about his true intentions and therefore naïve about the world). In her case, her family has repeatedly warned her of his playboy tendencies; yet, she constantly returns to him.

Additionally, Gonzales frames many of his Homie girls as capable of breaking a man down emotionally and spiritually. Borriqua is P-Rico's love and yet, Gonzales tells us she flirts with a lot of Homeboys behind his back. Bouncy, Gonzales tells us is desired by Pelon, "never gives

him any play. She just uses him.” As such, Gonzales frames her as a “bad girl” who loves being bad. Bruja seems to ensnare men through witchcraft. Gonzales never really frames his Homie women as independent, strong, and capable of standing alone or with their female counterparts in an active social and political discourse necessary for a strong necessary representation. When he does articulate possibility for his female Homie characters, he does so in such a way that negates or effaces their struggle by framing it around their emotional abuse by men. In other words, it is only after they have been abused by men and their desires that they manage to break free from their abuse and achieve some notion of success, for example, in Nurse Nena’s case.

In fact, even those female characters that seem to have a level of success outside of being framed as abuse victims seem to be negated by their physicality or their complicated narratives. Gonzales frames their success through the discourse of sexuality, suggesting a positioning which negates their intelligence or determination. As Elizabeth Martinez tells us in “*La Chicana*”, “femininity is turned into capitalist consumerism. Her womanhood is channeled into buying clothes and make-up” (33). At the same time, his positioning them as sexualized, allows for the male privileged gaze to construct and negate them ideologically as “bad” women who threaten to bring down the good Chicano man. As Bernice Rincon states:

the image of the ‘mala mujer’-the ‘bad woman’- is almost always accompanied by the ideal of aggressive activity. She is not passive like the ‘self-denying mother,’; the ‘waiting sweetheart,’ the ‘hermetic idol;’ she comes and goes, she looks for men and then leaves them...The mala is hard and impious and independent like the macho. (33)

These figures become part of a visualized discourse and not linguistic one. Their bodies, as overtly promiscuous or overtly displayed, are positioned as a way to control them in a more political discourse. In fact, Gonzales has even created a pin-up calendar for his female Homie figurines, that display them in far greater sexualized positions than the narratives (and pictures which are attached to such narratives) themselves. This pin-up calendar merely serves to further

negate any agency on the part of Chicanas/Latinas in Homies patriarchal designed society. And if we further examine the narratives attached to these Chicana/Latina Homies, we find that Gonzalez' women are silenced by his perpetuation of them as sexual and not political.

For example, one female Homie named Bubbles, who is shown, wearing a tight, short red dress with red heels, is apparently a successful marketing manager for a rapidly growing toy company and yet, her outfit leans more toward a suggestion of success on the streets. Another such character is Mija is presented as smart enough to attend college, but is dressed in a short, tight, leather skirt and a tight turtleneck. Sly Girl, who is initially presented as smart, as she attends community college and plans to be a personal injury lawyer, is negated by being identified as manipulative and selfish, only concerned with herself and not the community. As Gonzales tells us, "she finds it easy to get what she wants. She manipulates her friends to get it for her. You see...she doesn't want to change her community or help the other Homies...she just wants to get paid. For now she uses her sly skills to get gifts, clothes, jewelry, boyfriends, even a car". Ultimately, their successes seem overshadowed by their sexuality or their framing as selfish "bad" women. By contrast, the Chicano/Latino Homie figure is seen through his virility and strength. There is a valorization of manhood in his Homies which seems tied into the Chicano rhetoric of the Zoot Suit movement of the 1930s and 1940s and the Chicano movements of the 1960s and 1970s.

One way in which to mystify the female figure is by imbuing that figure with a highly sexualized personality and for Gonzales, the highly sexualized woman is almost every woman we come across in the narratives. With the exception of the mother or the nun, almost the entire

collection of women (no matter what their level of success) falls into this sexualized persona<sup>29</sup>. However, most of the women are dressed in revealing outfits, which emphasize curvy figures and accentuate the figure. Most are positioned, by the narratives, as being hot, sexy, beautiful, and bad. Bouncy is “sexy in a nasty kind of way”. Shorty is described as “a hot little club babe...she sports a brick house body. While not too bright upstairs, she knows how to dress. Shorty sleeps around a lot, but only because she falls deeply in love with every cute guy she meets”. Yet another female Homie, identified as Right Eye, is described as a party girl who comes from an abusive background and has a negative view of men in her life. She is further represented as a “bad” mother who neglects her kid and leaves parties with different men each time. There is no mention of the father in her narrative and no connection between her abuse and the possibility that the abuse is the reason for her promiscuity. What is significant is how she is framed as a woman of infinite and uncontrollable desire and as such, needs to be reined in or controlled. Finally, Lola is our most definitively sexualized Homie, as she is the most skimpily dressed and is considered to be the tramp of the town, sleeping with a number of Homies, despite the fact that they may be attached to one of her friends. Ultimately, Gonzales frames his Homie females within the gaze as a male object of desire and never subjects within their own right.

Finally, Homie female characters are often represented as fighting against each other, sacrificing a significant aspect of female bonding, over the men in their lives. In Gonzales’s world, they are positioned in ways to let the Homie men in their lives take advantage of them, even going as far as being positioned as abused and used for the satisfaction of male privilege.

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<sup>29</sup> Those not overtly sexualized (Nena or Baby Mama) are almost inevitably framed by their abuse at the hands of their men. And those who are not particularly sexualized are further framed negatively by his referring to them as prudish or “into girls.”

As Anna Nieto Gomez argues, “male supremacy dictates that women depend on men. Therefore women must compete with other women towards developing their economic futures for Finally, Gonzales’s female characters are better jobs, rich husbands, or poor husbands” (98). Again, this privileges male discourse above anything else.

Ultimately, these gendered ethnic figures are problematic for Chicanas and Latinas who are actively searching for ways to create and participate in Chicano/Latino discourse. I will admit a certain amount of ambiguity in my desire to like these representations, because in a very important way, these dolls do look like me. However, in the Homie world, even though the women are pretty and desirable, they lack a certain level of substance; they are girlfriends, mothers and desired objects whereas men are strong and capable, fighters and lovers. And this is a discourse I resist. So although I argue that Homies represent a possible ethnic/racial/class perspective, there is an ambiguity in the representations they offered a gendered perspective.

### **Positive or Negative: Homies Live On.**

Look up Homies online and you will see hundreds of websites and chat rooms dedicated to their discussion. Picking a random website, I found the number of responses which seemed overwhelmingly in favor of the Homies, as either toys or collectibles; a real reason for the appreciation of those toys fell on the idea that the toys were just like them in ethnicity, looks, desires, backgrounds and history. “La lazy”, who says she is 15, states:

I LOVE THE HOMIES, THEY ARE THYE BOMB. THEY REPRESENT MY RAZA, BROWN PRIDE...I HAVE MY OWN LITTLE HOMIE SECTION IN MY ROOM WHERE I PUT ALL THE POSTERS, AND STICKERS UP IN THE WALLS AND THE LITTLE FIGURES. MUCH LOVE TO DAVE GONZALES. I LOVE YOU AND THE HOMIES. KEEP DOING YOUR THING!. . .SHOUT OUT TO ALL MY GENTE (THE BROWN). (6)

At the same time however, I saw a few who criticized these figurines. As one online chat room participant, “HomieHater!” States, “I just want to say that homies are a disgrace to the Mexican



culture! For crying out loud, Mr. Gonzales, u r a racist. That is the reason everyone hates Mexicans” (1). The rest of HomieHater’s diatribe is a bit angry to say the least and allows us to understand that not everyone is examining the Homies and finding positive representations in their images.

What is ultimately significant about the articulation and usage of Homies is the personal, cultural and political stakes involved. Homies are both resistant to dominant culture in their possibilities of engaging with a pan-Latinidad imagination, but they also complicate dominant narratives by subsuming them under an “American Dream”. Moreover, Homies may promote a positive male discourse, but often leaves female subjectivity negated or effaced. And with the advent of more and more transcendent or conflated (like Bratz or ethnic Barbie’s slightly less ethnic then perpetuated) based toys and collectibles with universal appeal, is it important to examine Homies as part of a “loving Latinos” product?

I remember long ago a controversy surrounding two network television shows running at the same time. One of the shows, *The Cosby Show*, was controversial because people felt that the representation offered by the show (a black middle-class family) was unrealistic. What critics and spectators argued was that the show was merely a more palatable and easy to swallow version of African-American identity, one whereby the family was trying its best to achieve the American Dream by becoming “white” middle class blacks. At the same time, in 1999, a new show executive produced by Eddie Murphy was introduced to network television on the WB, a traditionally white network station which specializes in marketing to young, hip, white kids. The *P.J.’s*, which focused on the story of chief superintendent of a housing project in the ghetto, became equally, if not more, controversial. African-Americans felt torn between two representations which never fully articulated their individual ethnic realities.

So, where does the middle ground lie between the two representations? Can any one representation offer enough agency and subjectivity for people always articulated by difference? The answer may simply be no. But the ambiguity between those who find representation and those who do not needs to be examined. Ultimately, David Gonzales and his *Homies* offer possibility and in that possibility, an articulation of possible representation. *Homies* should not be (as neither of the shows above should either) about homogenizing experience. As Rosa Linda Fregoso says, “there is no Chicano core-essence, awaiting that inward journey of discovery, without a language or codes” (671). Therefore, I argue not everyone has to think the *Homies* represent Chicano/Latino realities to understand they may represent some.

CHAPTER 5  
CONCLUSION: THE BEST LATINO FILM EVER MADE IS *SPY KIDS*.

Feminist and cultural studies theory have pointed out that the personal is political. As Stuart Hall states, “one key example is the feminist slogan ‘the personal is political’ which sought to put a range of questions about personal identity, personal lives and personal conduct onto an explicitly political agenda” (224). And in this work, I have made it a point to make the personal the political, for it is in that space that I and we, as Latinas, articulate our desires and gain a sense of agency and subjectivity which may lead to political and social representation. A voice which is active is a voice that is heard. Too many times, as Latinas, we are silenced by the dominant discourse that surrounds us, as is evident in my discussion of the invisibility of Chicanas/Latinas as maids, as reconfigured mummies and as underrepresented in the Homies world. Therefore, in writing this work and in speaking to others, I hope to put a face to the images which threaten to erase us. I hope that by examining my responses and the responses of other Chicanas/os and Latinas/os, I can articulate that we are indeed part of the global discourse and that we are indeed talking back and taking back. Though we may not have the power to change things in the production aspect of images of ourselves (and I do hope that we slowly gain this power) I hope that this project shows that we are critically engaging with the images and representations of ourselves in popular culture; and arguing that those images do not define us, we must define them.

At the beginning of this work, I quoted bell hooks in her text *black looks: race and representation*:

From what critical perspective do we dream, look, create, and take action? For those of us who dare to desire differently, who seek to look away from the conventional ways of seeing blackness and ourselves, the issue of race and representation is not just a question of critiquing the status quo. It is also about transforming the image, creating alternatives, asking ourselves questions about what types of images subvert, pose critical alternatives,

and transform our worldviews and move us from dualistic thinking about good and bad.  
(4)

And this project serves to ask those questions and posit answers to them. Although I do not proclaim to speak for all Chicanas or Latinas when I engage with these answers, I hope that the examinations of the ways in which Chicanas/Latinas continue to be effaced, allows us to think about ourselves as part of the cultural context. I hope that there is a possibility that we will learn to “create alternatives” or “subvert” the ways in which we “look” at the images. I hope then, that it will be possible to go to a conference and ask the person who asks me about Jennifer Lopez and her butt, her tan, her films and her men, “Why do you want me to look at Jennifer Lopez?” or more importantly “What do you have to gain by my response?”. I hope that “their” answers betray what they might fear more, those Latinos/Chicanos/Puerto Ricans or Mexicans/Hispanics/Cubans and more are here, both visually and more importantly socially and politically represented.

After all is said and done, I wondered what “I” thought was a show, a film; an image that best represented Latinos today. I thought about the many images I have seen throughout the years and the conversations I have had with family, friends, and colleagues about what I considered negative representations. And the truth is, there are many things I like. I may have a problem with the way in which Jennifer Lopez represents Latinas in *Maid in Manhattan*, but I love her representation of a Latina (there is no specific ethnic-Puerto Rican etc.-reference for her in the film, but she does speak Spanish) FBI agent in *Out of Sight*. I may not like Rosario as a maid in *Will & Grace*, but I love the way she makes Karen look a bit foolish and the way she talks back. The film *Girlfight*, directed by Karen Kusama, which follows the story of a Latina girl who lives in the ghetto and struggles to escape the ghetto with a career in boxing. The film does some interesting camera work which engages with Laura Mulvey’s “gaze” in some

interesting ways which allow for some fascinating representation and agency for Latinas. And as I mentioned before, I like new images which have begun to crop up in television shows; for example, Nurse Carla in *Scrubs* is indicative of a strong representational character. She is hard-working, dedicated, funny, and capable. I even like the *George Lopez* show on television. However, considering the amount of television I watch (I am a Cultural Studies theorist) I am surprised there is not more and this attests to the reality that there are not many Latino based programs, nor visual representations of Latinos themselves in nighttime television.

From 2002–2004, briefly on CBS and then relocated to PBS, there was a television show named *American Family*, starring one of my favorite Latino actors, Edward James Olmos and directed by one of very few Mexican directors, Gregory Nava, who had also directed such films as *El Norte* and *Selena*. *American Family* was the story of a man named Jess Gonzalez, who is described as the “average father, who is forced to fight everyday troubles,” after the death of his wife. I remembered that I was initially excited by the show; after all, there were not many shows which actively spoke to the experiences of Chicanos/Latinos in television. Most shows had one ethnic character, sometimes a Chicano or Latino who was part of an ensemble.

I remembered that when I finally saw the show, I hated it. And the reasons why were complicated indeed. One of the main reasons I so disliked the show was that I felt the show was *all* about being Latino. Let me explain. I did not want the show to tell me everyday that these were Latinos who were living in the United States. It made me feel like we were always on the outside of the normal discourse. I wanted to be inside of it. Therefore, I was bothered by the daily lessons about Mexicans trying to achieve the American Dream. The concept of the American Dream itself was problematic, because as I mentioned with David Gonzales and his Homies, did the narrative threaten to become part of an assimilation driven discourse?

Additionally, I was somewhat bothered by the daily Mexican history lessons the show made a point of providing for me. I felt that the lessons were more about teaching white spectators about who Mexicans were then simply telling a story about a family and their problems. After all, Anglo shows and films did not have to teach us about being white? This is where the ambiguity of representation becomes complicated.

I argued previously, that as a Puerto Rican Latina woman, I could use the rhetoric of commonality, between myself and Mexicans, in order to find social and political representation, but I was unable to do so when I saw this show. Why not? The truth is that ultimately my history is not their history. My life is not their life. My story is not their story. Does this mean that I cannot find some common middle ground? No. It simply means that I have to ferret out what I like or dislike about the representations of Latinos/as in the cultural discourse. Therefore, I am almost always in the process of dividing myself between the gendered, the ethnic, and the classed position. I have to position myself in such a way as to constantly negotiate my positions of identity and find the gaps and fissures which allow me to have representation. It is not a simple process, but it is the purpose of this project. I did not like *American Family* and therefore I did not continue to watch it. Maybe one day, I will take the time to watch both seasons (I ask myself whether the fact that it did not last a long time indicates a problem for either Latinos/Chicanos or mainstream dominant culture) and engage more with the images, narratives and possible representations.

So, what do “I” think is a good representation? People may think it is a bit odd that I say this, but the one popular culture image I like the best is a family film called *Spy Kids*, directed by Robert Rodríguez, who also directed *El Mariachi* and *Desperado*. Because I feel like *Spy Kids* did one thing that other films, television shows, music and more do not often do. They made

Latino the norm. The story was not framed as a Latino family trying to achieve the American Dream and it was not about trying to escape the barrio and it was not about Latinos who move into the middle class and the struggles to become a part of that lifestyle. This film was about international spies, who just *happen to be Latino*. And there were subtle references to that ethnicity that did not teach white spectators who and what Latinos are and were; they simply were who they were. But there was enough in the film that Latinos felt they were represented. This film makes them a part of the society and therefore a part of the discourse.

In *Latino Images in Film: Stereotypes, Subversion and Resistance*, Charles Ramírez Berg argues that there are ways in which Hollywood can portray Latinos without stereotype. Additionally, he makes the case that there are ways in which Latinos can portray themselves through acting, directing, or writing-in more positive ways. As he argues, there are five categories of films that feature Latino counter-stereotypes;

- those that were conflicted, partly stereotypical and partly progressive
- those that departed from the dominant filmmaking paradigm, sometimes simply by casting Latino actors to play Latinos
- those that were ideologically oppositional
- those in which Latino actors subverted stereotypes; and, finally and most recently
- those made by Latino filmmakers whose project was overtly, or in the case of filmmakers like Cheech Marin and Robert Rodríguez in *El Mariachi*, covertly, to counter Hollywood pattern of Latino imagery (78)

Therefore, I would like to briefly talk about some of the above, in connection with the film *Spy Kids* and my argument that it is the best Latino film ever made. First, this film which purports to be about spies, who happen to be Latino, includes a partially Latino cast. (The story is about a man on one side of the international spy world who is Latino who marries an Anglo woman from the other side of the international spy world; therefore, their kids are intermixed.) For the

character of the father, we have Antonio Banderas, who is from Spain and Alexis Vega as the daughter, who is half Columbian in real life. Additionally, we have Mexican actor Cheech Marin who plays a friend of the family and Mexican actor Danny Trejo (a cousin of Robert Rodríguez) who plays the fathers brother in the film. There are other characters in the background which are also Latino, from the cross walk lady to the Priest which marries them and further to the kids we see both in the school and when they are on the run. Moreover, it is interesting to note that the enemies of the film happen to be Anglos. Second, this film does seem to be progressive. After all, this is about a successful family of spies who manage to bring down the bad guys and they do so by their smarts and their ability to strengthen the family bonds, including bringing the brother back into the fold after a disagreement which initially separated them.

At the same time, I believe that Rodríguez as the director subtly includes Latino products, language and culture in the film, without overtly situating it as a lesson to be learned about Latino culture. As he tells us about the film in *Latino Images in Film: Stereotypes, Subversion and Resistance*, “it could easily be an Anglocized, Home Alone-type movie, but anyone who has watched it so far really notices the colors and the flavor and the feel” (qtd. in Berg 245). And I find this to be true. For example, when the daughter Carmen Cortez has to get in a secret doorway, the door asks for her name, when she does so by saying “Carmen Cortez,” the door asks her for her “full name,” in which she replies, “Carmen Elizabeth Juanita Cost-Brava Cortez.” This indicates a desire on Rodríguez’s part to incorporate the importance and significance of naming in historical Chicano and Latino cultures to include the fathers family, as well as the mothers family. Additionally, in the background of the film—although always in the periphery of spectator’s vision— are billboards and advertisements in Spanish. And there is so much more, from Day of the Dead statues which line the top of the wedding cake, to



Chicano/Spanish/Latino murals, paintings and sculptures which fill their Spanish-themed hacienda and further to the Spanish-themed music always playing in the background. And the film never directly shows us where they live; therefore, I feel there is no conflicted ideal here about an ethnic family living in a white-suburban neighborhood, who throws off the normalized structure of the suburbs with their difference. It simply makes the difference a reality. Moreover, there are ladies at the crosswalk who say “Pare, Pare,” instead of “Stop, Stop” and Spanish themed dinners. Ultimately, I will say this; this film and the representations within are what I consider ones that not only make Chicanos/Latinos part of the discourse; they make it seem as if we were always there to begin with.

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## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Rosa Esther Soto is of Puerto Rican heritage born in Miami, Florida whose interest in English and reading began at an early age. She attended Florida State University for her undergraduate degree in English Literature with a minor in Communications. There she studied abroad in London, England, where she traveled to Italy, Wales, and Ireland as part of her program and then attended the University of Toledo for her master's degree. From there, she attended the University of Florida, where she received her doctoral degree in English Literature with specialties in Gender and Cultural Studies. While at the University of Florida, Rosa won a number of scholarships, including the Grinter Doctoral Fellowship, the Ruth O McQuown Scholarship in Gender Studies and the Irene Thompson Scholarship. After attending the University of Florida for the first few years of her Doctoral program, Rosa applied for and won a Dissertation Fellowship at St. Lawrence University where she stayed for two years. Currently, she is an Assistant Professor of Literature at William Paterson University in Wayne, New Jersey.