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Multimediated Latinos in the Twenty-First Century: An Introduction

Frederick Luis Aldama

The multitude of media forms created by and that feature Latinos in the twenty-first century is a radically different landscape to earlier epochs. This proliferation of diverse media formats by and about Latinos extends into film, television, animated cartoons, comic books, and Internet, among many others. This is the century of multiply mediated or *multimediated* Latinos where we find ourselves increasingly mediated in varying degrees of complexity in all varieties of media formats. It is the century when we might most forcefully ask, how are the multiple media formats being used to represent the many ways of being Latino today?

I’m not the first to ask this. Such questions have been posed by scholars such as Angharad N. Valdivia (*Latina/os and the Media*), Frances Negrón-Muntaner (*Boricua Pop*), Arlene Dávila (*Latinos, Inc.*), and Charles Ramírez Berg (*Latino Images in Film*) as well as by the many scholars presented in Myra Mendible’s edited *From Bananas to Buttocks*, in Frances Aparicio’s and Susana Chávez-Silverman’s coedited *Tropicalizations*, and in Chon Noriega’s and Ana M. López’s *The Ethnic Eye*—and this is just to name a handful. However, this volume seeks to extend the conversation and the interpretive terrain by spinning the question in and around *narrative media* that Latinos participate in and are portrayed in increasing numbers in the twenty-first century.

Relative to earlier epochs, Latinos are everywhere in the media—mainstream and cottage industry produced. Of course, this did not rise ex nihilo. Latino participants in the shaping of the culture at large have been present, but not as seemingly omnipresent as today. There was the moment in the 1980s when *Time* magazine announced “The Hispanic Decade.” There seemed to be an outpouring of films by and about Latinos during this decade. I think readily of the excitement surrounding Luis Valdez’s films *Zoot Suit* (1981) and *La Bamba* (1987), Gregory Nava’s *El Norte*...

Latinos have appeared in television in years past, but not to the same degree that we see today—and not to the same, say, naturalized degree; by this I mean that today one might have a Latina cheerleader or an aspiring singer on a television show without much ado about the character’s ethnic background. The character simply is Latina just as another simply is Anglo. When the few Latinos did appear, they were made visible in shows like the 1970s *Chico and the Man* or worse the 1950s *I Love Lucy* where they wore heavy badges of ethnic identification: truncated, heavily accented English, cultural expressions and manners, for instance.

It doesn’t take a volume such as this to point out the obvious: Latinos today are everywhere in entertainment media: television, film, music, literature, web blogs, comic books, video games, and much more. Animated bilingual figures such as Dora now teach all sorts of American kids their numbers, shapes, and letters—in English with sprinkles of Spanish. Latino actors play outer-galactic saviors of migrating *alien* populations (*Battlestar Galactica*, 2004–2009). Latinas play central characters in primetime television shows such as *Ugly Betty* (2006–2010), *Desperate Housewives* (2004–2012), and *Modern Family* (2009–). They appear in shows set in the city and the suburbs (*Ugly Betty* and *Desperate Housewives* respectively) as well as rural America (Daniella Alonso in *Friday Night Lights* (2004–2011), for instance). And the representation of a new generation of Latinas/os isn’t confined to any one role. Latinas such as Eden (played by Michelle Rodriguez) are surfing tubes in *Blue Crush* (2002) and boxing in rings such as Diana Guzman (Michelle Rodriguez) in *Girlfight* (2000); Rodriguez also deftly pilots various kinds of high-speed terrain- and air-based vehicles: as Leticia “Letty” Ortiz in *Fast and Furious* (2009) and as Captain Trudy Chacon in *Avatar* (2009). Latinos are skateboarding half-pipes in *Wassup Rockers* (2005) and they are going off to music camps in *Camp Rock* (2008). We even have an Afro-Latino for a US president (*The Event*, 2010–2011). We now have an
Afro-Latino Spider-Man, “Hispanic” Batman, Ms. América Chavez as well as a Latino Nova, a rebooted Vibe, and Captain Marvel’s (Shazam) foster parents as *la familia* Vasquez. Today, these Latino superheroes are more than the janitorial help of yesteryear’s comics. They are fleshed out, central protagonists of their respective comic-book universes. We have moved from ethnic urban scenery to playable protagonists in video games such as *Papo y Yo* (2012) and *Gears of War* (2006).

That the twenty-first century has witnessed the growing of this *multimediated Latino* landscape should come as no surprise. Some might consider this a by-product of what has been identified by scholars and media pundits as, the “Browning of America.” There has been a massive growth in the demographic presence of Latinos in the United States in the first decade of the twenty-first century. Today, Latinos are the largest minority in the United States, numbering upward of 51 million on the 2010 US census plus 12 million undocumented. For every four Americans, one is Latino. In contrast, in 1980, Latinos numbered 14.6 million. With the increase in births among Latinos (and the fewer births among Anglos—and African Americans) we are seeing this trend toward the Browning of America before our very eyes: playgrounds across the country have more and more Latino children. (In fact, without the increased birth rates of Latinos, the United States would experience a negative population growth.)

This massive demographic presence has led to a greater existence of Latinos (and Latino culture writ large) in the mainstream—a mainstream itself that has changed by the very presence of Latinos and Latino culture. Dora and Miguel teach children the alphabet and counting, and not Sally and Mike. In *Glee* (2009– ), Santana Lopez (Naya Rivera) is on the Cheerio cheerleading squad, along with Brittany, and all other shades of brown and white on the squad. (I’ll leave it to Isabel Molina-Guzmán to talk more at length herein about the Latina representation with characters such as Santana Lopez and others on primetime TV.)

The building blocks of reality in the United States look, smell, sound, and feel different as a result of the Latino presence. Creators of shows, comics, films, blogs, and any other media format pull the building blocks from this reality in the making of their stories. The shows themselves reflect a Latino-transformed reality just as they contribute constantly to this transformation. Otherwise stated, today we see much more visibly a two-way flow of influence between the Latino and mainstream culture. The more the presence of Latinos grows and the visibility of its culture with it, the more it impacts the mainstream cultural setting materially, intellectually, and sensorally.

While this volume focuses on this two-way flow between Latino and the mainstream—a process that is changing this “mainstream” constantly—
we see this also in the areas of food. Non-Latinos and Latinos across the country know the smell and taste of tacos, chili, salsa, and tequila, for instance. Whether of the fast-food variety or home-cooked style (restaurant or otherwise), Latino cuisine has become as much a part of the growing of average US American taste buds as hamburgers and fries. And in this two-way flow, Latino cuisine itself has been transformed. The tortilla becomes a golden fried taco and its ingredients look more like a variant of the hamburger: iceberg lettuce, beef, tomato, and cheese, just shredded, diced and ground. Today, Latino cuisine has infiltrated other cuisines—just as they have influenced that of the mainstream. We see menus with Asian-Latino mash-ups such as Tapatio hot sauce on short-grain rice, teriyaki meat, and scallions or the Korean taco, stuffed with bulgogi and kimchi. (See Gustavo Arellano’s *Taco USA: How Mexican Food Conquered the World* and other of his scholarly work on the history of Latino cuisine.) All of this and more educate the taste buds of Americans across the country.

Just as the tastes of the average US American have changed, so too have those of Latinos—and not just when it comes to cuisine. Our massive demographic presence brings with it a wide array of Latino consumer tastes. We are as likely to hunger for the clear-cut worlds presented in *telenovelas* such as *Eva Luna* (2010–2011) as those presented on shows such as *Lost* (2004–2010) or *Mad Men* (2007– ). We are just as likely to be interested in American Girl Dolls such as the Latina Marisol as the Anglo Mckenna. We are just as likely to be interested in American Girl Dolls such as the Latina Marisol as the Anglo Mckenna. We are just as likely to crave the complexity and fun of a Junot Díaz fiction as we are to want to read a straightforward sentimental chick-lit (or *chica lit*) novel by an Alisa Valdes (formerly known as Alisa Valdes-Rodriguez). We are just as likely to pick up a Marvel high-gloss superhero comic book such as *Ultimate Spider-Man* with the Afro-Latino Miles Morales as Spidey as we are a Fantagraphics produced, innovative and daring stand-alone noir graphic novel by Gilbert Hernandez. We are just as likely to play a shooter game such as *Gears of War* as we are the magical-realist puzzle-game, *Papo y Yo*.

One way or another (with greater or lesser degrees of willfulness), as creators (authors, directors, bloggers, software developers, for instance) and participants (actors, athletes, musicians, for instance) Latinos exist as a vital presence in all layers of today’s US mainstream cultural tissue. *Latinos and Narrative Media* aims to shed light on how Latinos are at once shaped by mainstream culture as well as *active shapers* of this mainstream culture.

* * *

Before continuing, let me take pause and offer a few caveats. Demographic numbers alone don’t tell the full story; nor should we rest on them as the
solution for the social ills that continue to plague Latinos in this country. Latinos still face huge obstacles. While many more of us are in the professional classes, our high school graduation rates are dismal. We have the demographic weight, but have yet to see a landscape where all of us have the possibility of becoming a professor, doctor, artist, comic book author, quarterback, pro-skateboarder, biologist, and more. While it is not the purpose of this book to do so, it would be important to consider how these numbers have grown as a result of social, historical, economic, institutional, and political conditions in the United States as well as in the Hispanophone Caribbean, Central and South America. And, the large demographic presence of Latinos in this country is still not fully represented in our entertainment media. I’ll speak more about this later, but suffice it to say that while Latinos are now in outer space, cheerleaders, and the president, relative to the abundance of Anglo characters, Latinos are still a mediated minority.

I’m all about opening doors and making widely available any and all kinds of cultural phenomena to satisfy the huge range of tastes out there. However, not all cultural products are made alike. Some products evince a greater degree of willfulness in their representation of Latinos than others, for instance. That is, some multiply mediated Latino cultural products can be downright lazy and offensive, aiming for the bottom line: to increase corporate profit margins.

For corporate America, the Latino demographic represents a one trillion dollar buying potential. Viewed with somewhat cynical and skeptical eyes, the increased representation of Latinos in the entertainment industry and in toys is a result of this push to capture the Latino consumer market. The US Latino market ranks as the twelfth largest economy in the world. I should mention, too, that this one trillion dollar buying power should be considered more as credit–debt figure. For every dollar of wealth owned by Anglo families, Latinos only own 10 cents on the dollar; and where there is wealth in a small percentage of the Latino population, this wealth is only half the worth of wealthy Anglo families. (For more on the economic situation of Latinos in the United States, see Galina Espinoza’s “Better to bring Latinos into TV’s mainstream.”)

The diverse presence of mediated Latinos is certainly tied to corporate decisions to increase profits. Many a scholar and media commentator wondered if Marvel’s introduction of the Afro-Latino Spidey was a move to enrich the superhero landscape for the sake of good storytelling, or if it was to take advantage of the purchase power of the two largest minority populations in the United States: blacks and Latinos. We might wonder the same of the announcement Rolling Stone magazine to include more Latino-focused content—and to feature Spanish advertisements in
a special section. The issue of *Rolling Stone* released on November 22, 2012, included a double-cover page: Daniel Craig (as James Bond) appears on the front and Pitbull (the rap-artist) appears on the back cover that also features the Rolling Stone nameplate but with cover lines entirely in Spanish. *Rolling Stone* includes a 15-page section that features artists and performers including the Puerto Rican rap group, Calle 13, and the fiction author, Junot Díaz. The articles are written in English with interview sidebars written in Spanish.

The presence of Latinos in other material phenomena such as toys also follows the typical pattern in capitalism: diversify to find new markets and once these are found, then homogenize to push for greater profits. Mattel’s various iterations of Latina Barbie are a case in point. Barbie today is not the blue-eyed, blonde-haired one of yesteryear. We have all sorts of Latina Barbies, including Teresa (Hispanic City Barbie), Kayla (whose dark phenotype might suggest her to be an Afro-Latino Barbie), Puerto Rican Barbie, and Amazonia Barbie.

Mattel at once diversified its Barbie range and homogenized this diversification: The Latina Barbie dolls might have different personas, and have brown eyes and dark hair, but they are all cut from the same Barbie mold. They have Euro-Anglo features (thin noses and high cheekbones, for instance) and are typically light-skinned. The one Latina Barbie that looks a little different is Amazonia Barbie. While she comes with the typical light-skinned, straight-dark-hair look, her eyes have a more indigenous almond shape. The creators also decided to give her geometric tribal tattoos on her thighs and to include along with her native necklace wear, patterned loincloth, yellow-red-green feathered headgear—and the requisite skimpy tube top. Her box includes the following description: “A South American Stunner: Amazonia Barbie Doll. Emerging from the Amazon and ready to capture your heart!” (For an interesting discussion of the controversy of the Puerto Rican Barbie, see Frances Negrón-Muntaner’s essay “Barbie Hair: Selling Out to Puerto Rican Identity in the Global Market.” Among other issues, she talks about the national uproar over the introduction of a light-skinned, straight-haired Latina Barbie that made dominant the European ancestry over the indigenous and African biological roots of Puerto Ricans.)

The toy industry does have its sights set on Latino boys, too. For the young ones, there’s the Diego doll and for the slightly older boys, there are action heroes—usually tied to popular sports figures or characters from movie or TV show blockbusters: Antonio Banderas as Zorro, Danny Trejo as Machete (*Machete*), and Edward James Olmos as William Adama (*Battlestar Galactica*) all had action heroes, for instance. The athletes who seem especially present hail from baseball and the WWF.
For instance, wrestlers such as Eddie Guerrero are typical Target mainstays; he comes complete with arm pads, a painted on purple leotard, strapped up boots, flexed abs, bulging muscles, and a goatee. The back of the box includes some details of his wrestler persona: as the “Latino Heat” he will do anything to win a match: “I Lie! I Cheat! I Steal!”

In response to the undeniable presence of Latinos sprung from this massive demographic growth spurt, the networks have been jumping on the bandwagon. The joint Fox and Colombian RCN Television production of MundoFox aims to capture a portion of this 51-plus million demographic by introducing American-style programming to Spanish-speaking audiences. Its tagline: “Americano Como Tú” (or, American Like You); MundoFox wants to move into an area missed entirely by American broadcast networks. This adds to the telenovela, sports, and reality programming already offered by networks located across the US–Mexico border such as Univision and Telemundo. In 2014, director Robert Rodriguez will launch his Austin-based, El Rey Network (Comcast) that will target second- and third-generation Latinos who are often bilingual but speak English as their primary language. He aims to deliver action-packed, general entertainment programs in English for Latino and general audiences. They will include a mix of reality, scripted and animated series, movies, documentaries, news, music, comedy, and sports programming.

This phenomenon of Spanish-language and Latino-oriented television programming should come as no surprise. At any given time, there are 48 million Latinos in the United States watching television, according to the Nielsen ratings. And, while this is certainly attractive to advertising executives, there has been another element pushing the envelope on Latino television programming. Media watchdog entities such as the National Council of La Raza (NCLR), American Entertainment Marketing (AEM), and the National Hispanic Media Coalition (NHMC) have been leaning on the industry. In 1999, NCLR participated in a “brownout”—a one-week boycott of programming to strong-arm the networks to increase the frequency and quality of Latino representations. Not only has there been pressure to include Latinos in the media, but also to include a more diverse range of Latinos—not just the typical gangbanger, hot-tempered, or buffoon types. For instance, NHMC’s website sums up the issues well: “Media bias goes beyond negative stereotypes to the lack of Latino presence in the mainstream media. Although American Latinos comprise over 16% of the U.S. population and are resolutely the largest minority group in the country, this important community is still largely invisible in primetime media. NHMC believes that in order for the media to present a fair and sufficient portrayal of the American Latino community, Latinos
must be employed at all levels of the media industry with special emphasis on programming and policy making positions.” NHMC and others draw on TV viewing data that has determined a correlation between self-esteem and positive or negative mainstream media portrayals of respective ethnic groups. The negative characterizations of Latinos are seen to be damaging to the viewer’s sense of self-worth. (See Rocío Rivadeneyra, L. Monique Ward, Maya Gordon’s “Distorted Reflections: Media Exposure and Latino Adolescents’ Conceptions of Self.”) In many ways, Rodriguez’s El Rey Network is a result of this kind of pressure to diversify Comcast’s programming. One of the agreements signed when Comcast acquired an interest in NBCUniversal Corporation was that it be committed to carry several minority-owned channels, including El Rey.

**Generation Urban Latino**

By virtue of a trickle-through effect—and not the sudden collapse of glass ceilings and disappearance of racial and class prejudice—the large demographic numbers have led to the increased presence of Latinos in areas beyond that of the entertainment industry. In the world of sports, Latinos have traditionally been well represented in soccer, boxing, and baseball. Today, they are also appearing in football, surfing, skateboarding, and wrestling. In the world of the academy, Latinos are working in all disciplines of the sciences and humanities. In the world of politics, Latinos are represented at the highest juridical and executive branches. Latinos are now found at all levels of health care, from administrators to doctors and surgeons. In the past, the Latino demographic was smaller and didn’t hold weight over the general population; this restricted the intellectual and material presence of Latinos in the mainstream. The more Latinos have grown, the more the intellectual and material participation has grown. And as I state earlier, the more it grows, the more it impacts the mainstream.

There is another important part of the puzzle that needs to be accounted for if we are to understand the mediated Latinos of today. The increased number of urban-dwelling, English-speaking (and secondarily Spanish) Latinos follows alongside the upward spike in numbers. This is the group that is driving the population growth in the United States. (The population of recent émigrés also increases the demographic size, but to a much smaller degree.) Today’s Latino makers of culture, interpreters of culture (scholars such as those included in this book), and participants in all variety of cultural phenomena such as sports and media generally, embody this demographic shift and growth.

For a long time, Latinos lived and worked in the countryside, with little time, energy, and inclination to create in any considerable dimension
works of art (literature, plastic and other arts, music, film) and/or engage in them. For instance, art that one could produce without much cost—literature, artisan-crafted art, and the like—was done by a handful of Latinos and their viewers/audience/readers was scarce. When towns and cities started to grow at an accelerated pace in America toward the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, the cultural environment of the country changed. People in the entertainment industry became more abundant. After the Second World War, the Latino population increased ever more and settled mainly in large towns and cities, where their economic life shifted from agriculture to factory production and consumer industries. This shift brought about new lifestyles and new worldviews, with more time for leisure and entertainment and a will to overcome the alienation and anonymity associated with urban life. Urbanization also meant, then, cultural renewal, and the rapid development of the taste for all sorts of entertainment—and the time required to exercise one’s will to participate and shape in this world of entertainment.

Latinos working today in all the areas of cultural production, and participation share an urban worldview. Take, for instance, Robert Rodriguez. He is a third-generation English-speaking Latino who could hone his craft as a filmmaker with resources available to him living in a middle-class Latino family in San Antonio. The education of Rodriguez’s varied film tastes started early. He learned to play the guitar and the saxophone. And, living in an urban environment offered the possibility of the mother taking the children to the movies at the local barrio (or neighborhood) revival house, The Olmos Theatre. Rodriguez would watch double and sometimes triple features, including the films of the Marx Brothers to those of Hitchcock. Moreover, as a teenager, he had access to a VHS camcorder and player, allowing him to make films and to study how others made them. Once enrolled at the University of Texas, Austin, he could continue to sharpen his filmmaking training with the 16-mm cameras and other filmmaking tools that he had access to. The movies that would begin to make up his œuvre put Latinos center stage, but did so in ways that didn’t freeze them in time and place; there was no impulse to anchor his Latinos in a bygone, mythological world. Rather, he sought to situate them very much in a present and infuse their characterizations with an urban worldview. (For more on this, see Aldama’s Robert Rodriguez and the Cinema of Possibilities.)

This urban worldview also informs the making of other significant Latino figures. I think of another director, Alex Rivera, discussed in this volume. Born in New York City and raised in New Jersey to a Peruvian émigré father and an Anglo-American mother, he went to Hampshire
College where he studied political science and media theory; the interest in media and politics grew into a career as a sociopolitically minded filmmaker. There is the rise to fame of Mark (Travis John) Sanchez as quarterback for the New York Jets. Sanchez is also a third-generation Latino who came of age as a football player during a time when it seemed possible for a Latino to be a quarterback. Recall those early periods in the twentieth century when Latinos weren’t even considered viable athletes in this sport, many of whom had to join the Canadian leagues to prove themselves, then enter the professional leagues in the United States. In one generation, Sanchez moved from blue-collar roots (his father was a fire captain for the Orange County Fire Authority) into the professional classes. He attended USC and chose to become a pro-football player. And while Sanchez affirms his cultural heritage—he would wear a custom-made mouth-guard with the colors of the Mexican flag to games when he played for USC and studied Spanish in college to reclaim his Hispanophone identity—he is very much the product of an urban existence. He became a quarterback in the NFL and not, say, a farmer in the California Central Valley.

In other areas where Latinos fear to tread such as acting and entertainment, we also see the way an urban worldview informs the shaping of Latino identity and experience in the twenty-first century. I think readily of the Cuban-American actor and erstwhile model, William Levy. While he was born Cojimar, Cuba, his formative teen years were spent in Miami. It’s this urban experience and growth of an urban worldview that propelled him to consider university and as a viable option as a Latino; later he would also see professional acting as a possibility for earning a living. After studying acting in Miami and Mexico City, he began his career in Spanish-language telenovelas for Telemundo and later in films such as Viviana Cordero’s Retazos de Vida. Born and raised in Los Angeles, America Ferrera, whose working-class parents were émigrés from Tegucigalpa, Honduras, also grew up to consider acting as a career possibility. Graduating valedictorian of her high school, she went on to attend USC on a presidential scholarship, double majoring in theater and international relations. Her breakout role came with her casting as the protagonist of Ugly Betty. Sara Ramirez (known for her role as Dr. Callie Torres in Grey’s Anatomy, 2005– ) migrated with her family at an early age from Mazatlán, Sinaloa, to San Diego. Growing up in San Diego with her Mexican father and Mexican/Irish-American mother, she set her sights on and gained entrance to the San Diego School of Creative and Performing Arts in San Diego and later the Juilliard School. And, with Zoe Saldana we see how growing up with an urban worldview (in Queens to a Dominican father and Puerto Rican mother, with a spell spent in
the Dominican Republic itself) led to her discovery of dance and acting. As a teenager, she began performing with a theater group in Brooklyn as well as with the New York Youth Theater. Her breakthrough film role arrived in 2000 with *Center Stage* (2000) where she plays a ballet dancer. And there is Demi Lovato who was raised in Dallas where she grew up learning to play piano and guitar as well as taking acting and dancing classes. With another figure discussed in this volume, Kat Von D, we see also how this urban worldview influenced decisions made. It was her exposure to the Ramones, Misfits, and other punk bands while growing up in Los Angeles that inspired her to become a tattoo artist. In the case of journalism, there’s the case of María de la Soledad Teresa O’Brien, otherwise known as Soledad O’Brien whose urban worldview (raised by an Afro-Cuban mother who was a teacher and an Irish-Australian father who was a professor in Long Island) led her to attend Harvard (along with her other siblings) and eventually see broadcast journalism as a possibility for a profession: first working for NBC (*Nightly News* and *Today*) then CNN (*American Morning* and recently *Starting Point*); she also worked on CNN’s *Latino in America* (2009) documentaries.

These are but a few figures who represent this Latino demographic—a demographic with *an urban worldview* that propelled them into areas otherwise considered not within the realm of the possible: from the creating works of art (literature, plastic and other arts, music, film) to engaging in these and other disciplines (sports included) professionally. These mediated Latinos represent this shift we’ve seen of late that brought about the possibility of imaging oneself in new ways to those that anchored our proximate and distant lineage.

What I’ve sketched with these brief biographies of Latino figures (many discussed herein) is a picture of the trend among Latinos to live and work in cities. These urban-dwelling Latinos cultivated a range of behaviors and tastes, as well as values and cognitive development that were more and more heavily marked by an urban environment, at both the individual and collective levels. Their new reality became infinitely complex. In this new environment, more and more Latinos aspired to become filmmakers, comic book makers, musicians, actors, performers, and the like. It opened doors for Latinos to become quarterbacks, journalists, doctors, and the like.

This brief sketch of the urbanization of Latinos and the consequent shaping of an urban worldview remind us that cultural products and Latino participants in the making of culture do not happen in a socio-cultural, economic, or historical void. Those like Rodriguez, Saldana, Ferrara, Lovato, among the others mentioned here and many others not mentioned, came of age the moment certain social and economic
conditions were met and Latino artists and their products emerged in a continuous and varied way. Hence, we have Rodriguez’s films, Ferrara’s roles (Ugly Betty and Dangerous Women Have Curves), and Lovato’s TV shows that fall into any and all categories of, say, lowbrow, middlebrow, and highbrow entertainment and touch on any and all subjects: Latino spy kids to socially conscious activists to teen musicians.

**The Rise of the Urban Latino Will Be Multimediatized**

The mediatiation of Latinos in the media is everywhere, relatively speaking. As I mention earlier, however, not all cultural products are the same. Some have a greater degree of willfulness in the shaping of forms to convey interesting Latino content. Elsewhere, I identify this as the degrees of presence of a “will to style.” This is a concept picked up by Saldivar in his essay herein, but suffice it to know for now that this is the creator (or creators) degree of presence of a willful reframing (using one’s imagination and tools of the given trade) of real Latino subjects and experiences by stripping it down to its bare bones and then using different formal devices and structures to reconstruct (or reconstitute) this object in ways that redirect audience’s perspectives on that object—and therefore on reality as lived by Latinos—in new ways. The presence of this will to style can be strong or weak in any given mediated product. Here are few examples that come readily to mind.

Latina teens appear in TV (and their spin-off films) formats. This seems especially the case with those coupled to dolls and other consumable product lines. For instance, *Bratz: the Movie* (2007) spins out of a doll-line and cartoon. The film follows the story of a multicultural group of friends in high school, including the Latina character (Mexican and Jewish), Yasmin; in the film, the Spanish and Australian actress Manuela Nathalia Ramos plays her character. Yasmin’s ethnic identity is present, but in rather odd ways. It takes for granted that she is a teen living in a Latino household. For instance, on one occasion when she’s waiting to use the bathroom, her brother Manny code-switches Spanish/English, telling her on one occasion not to get her “bragas in a twist.” Code switching is just as normal in the household as, well, getting ready for school. (We see this Spanish/English code switching without much ado also with the Latina character Chanel “Chuchie” Simmons (played by Puerto Rican/Ecuadorian American Adrienne Bailon) in the three *Cheetah Girls* films.) However, there’s the odd moment when the film makes too visible her Latinidad. When she enters the kitchen to greet her abuelita there’s an entire Mariachi band sitting around—we know not
why. In the end, the film’s teen-drama formula subordinates the presence of a Latinidad to issues that face teen girls generally: the dangers of cliques and affirmation of true friendship.

The film *Camp Rock* (2008) is cut from the same mold: subordinating Latinidad (in whatever shape this appears) to the teen-drama formula. Here, however, there’s even less of a sense of the main character’s Latinidad. While the filmmaker Mathew Diamond cast the Latina actress Demi Lovato to play the lead role, Mitchie Torres, there is not much more that lends the story any sense of a Latinidad. There is the family name, “Torres,” and the mother Connie’s Spanish-accented English (she’s played by the Cuban-American María Canals Barrera). She’s also a cook—a possible marker in the mainstream imagination of Latinidad. Again, there is a Latinidad, but its presence is even more subordinated to the teen-drama formula story than seen in *The Bratz*. Finally, it’s more about Mitchie’s overcoming of obstacles—bullies, cheats, and liars—as she comes into her own as a pop musician.

The TV show and then its spin-off film, *Wizards of Waverly Place* (2009), also hints at a Latinidad, but in ways yet again that are not integrated into the story. It makes clear that the family of wizards at the center of the story is Italian-Mexican. And, in the way that the mother Connie’s Latinidad is anchored in her occupation as a cook, so too is this the case for this mixed Latino/Italian family: The Russo family run a restaurant, the gravitational center for all the action that takes place in the film and TV show. While the casting of Latina actress Selena Gomez to play Alex and the Cuban-American María Canals Barrera as the mother Theresa gives it a tinge of Latinidad, the storylines have little (if anything) to do with life as Latinos—or Italo-Latinos.

Importantly, while the will to style in these shows seeks to subordinate a Latinidad to a teen-drama storylines, they do represent one fork in the road in today’s mediated Latinos. We have Latina teens as the protagonists of these shows whose central concerns and issues are not ones anchored in a Latino identity, but rather those of teen-girls generally. We might ask, then, are the shows representing an assimilated Latina, or a Latina who *is Latina* in a United States where Latinidad (smells, sights, touch, sounds) is so interwoven into a mainstream culture that it now passes us by in these stories as indistinguishable?

The presence of a Latinidad in twenty-first-century television shows takes other turns, too. As Samuel Saldívar discusses at length in this volume, Latinidad becomes a palimpsest of sorts laid over characterizations of other galactic minority populations the SyFy show, *Caprica* (2009–2010). In the show, the Adama family represents the minority and émigré- (from another planet, no less) identified population living...
in the Caprica City. The well-known Chicano actor, Esai Morales (*La Bamba*, *Zoot Suit*, *Mi Familia*, the voice of Papi in *Dora*, among many other films) plays the head of the family, Yosef Adama. The Adama family code-switch (English/Spanish/Hebrew) and live in an older, crowded part of the city (“Little Tauron”) that the show’s camera lens washes in a gold-hued sepia light; they are a family close to their cultural roots (performing various rituals) and nostalgic for the loss of their homelands. The three generations that live under one roof reveal a close-knit family, even though each has their own respective patterns of behavior and worldview. For instance, along with the upwardly mobile Yosef, there’s the gay uncle, Sam (played by the Israeli/Canadian actor, Sasha Roiz), who is a politicized hit man. The abuelita holds strong to their cultural values, imparting these to the third generation of Tauron such as Yosef’s son, William (played the Middle Eastern actors, Sina Najafi). All members of the family have a varied phenotype; some are darker and others lighter skinned. In many ways, the Adama family is a snapshot of today’s Latino family. Identifiably, Anglo actors such as Eric Stoltz as Daniel Graystone play the Capricans. The Capricans have no identifiable culture (ethnic or otherwise) and refer to the Taurons as “dirt eaters,” among other more racist epithets. In the most unsuspecting genre—science fiction—the show places at center stage the presence of a Latinidad. I’ll leave it to Saldívar herein to complicate this picture.

Keep in mind, too, that while NBC’s *Heroes* (2006–2010) is not a sci-fi show, it does ask that we accept (suspend disbelief?) a contemporary United States filled with superheroes that see the future, regenerate, and the jump space/time continuum. Several such superheroes are Latinos, including the twins Maya (played by Dominican American Dania Ramirez) and Alejandro Herrera (played by Puerto Rican American Shalim Ortiz). In their escape from their native Dominican Republic, the show depicts them crossing borders (Guatemala–Mexico and Mexico–United States) and along the way learning how to control their superheroic powers: Maya’s stress-induced lethal poisoning of others when stressed and her brother’s ability to deactivate her power. Before being killed off, the twins appear in Chapters 1–11 (2007–2008).

I mentioned earlier our diversification of tastes as a Latino population. This includes a taste for those well-polished, prime-time shows such as *Heroes*, as well as the less polished. I think here of Terry Ingam’s directing of *Chupacabra vs. The Alamo* (2013) for Syfy. While I will let Jesse Alemán discuss the intricacies of the blood-sucking Chupacabra myth in United States and Latino pop culture, it is worth mentioning briefly some of the details of Ingam’s made-for-Syfy iteration. First, Latinos are mediated in multiple ways here. The setting is San Antonio—with
the final battle against the border-crossing, marauding Chupacabras taking place at the Alamo—but it is actually filmed in British Columbia. With the exception of Agent Carlos Seguin, his estranged son Tommy (Jorge Vargas) and daughter Sienna (Nicole Muñoz), the other Latino (and Anglo) characters are played by Canadians. Last, whatever Latino content there is from the Southwest look to the Chupacabras themselves is created through CGI special effects. The show was universally panned, but for the wrong reason. That it was corny. However, the show doesn’t aspire to more than to be tongue-in-cheek, corn-ball fodder. When we first see Erik Estrada as Agent Seguin he doesn’t roll up in a squad car, but a motorbike á la 1970s ChiPs; the camera rests on Seguin for just a tad too long to show him too carefully pulling his black leather gloves for the audience to take the story too seriously. And when Seguin code-switches, the Spanish is just a little too gringo-fied and clichéd for audiences today to take with a straightface: “You’re like a bad cucaracha that just won’t stay away!” or “What are your little friends gonna say when this gramps here beats you like a piñata?” It is this same tongue-in-cheek sensibility that the made-for-TV film brings to the now tired concept of the invading Brown multitude from South of the Border. The Chupacabras, after all, use the drug-smuggling tunnels to cross the border illegally and bring death and destruction to all, except the rag-tag band of rebels led by Agent Seguin—the self-declared scion of the revolutionary Tejano, Juan Seguin, who fought an invading force of an earlier epoch: Santa Ana’s armies.

The usual format to satisfy our taste for less-polished Latino-featured entertainment usually comes in the form of the soap opera (telenovela) in its various mainstream production guises. There’s the suburban, upper-middle-class Solis family in Desperate Housewives and the urban, working-class Suarez family in Ugly Betty. Taken on their own terms and as whole, the shows code differently a Latino identity and experience. The upper-middle-class Solis family deal with issues typical of those living on Wisteria Lane such as deceit and infidelity. But the show also distinguishes them from the other families as hot-tempered, oversexed, and, finally, downwardly mobile. They are the family that slips into a noncountry club-going group when Carlos (Ricardo Antonio Chavira) goes blind, loses his job, and takes up massage therapy. Rather than pass through the front doors of the country club, they find themselves welcome only by way of the servant’s entrance—an indication generally of their lower status in the community once they are not members of the professional, bourgeois class. In Ugly Betty, the show focuses on the upward mobility of Betty (America Ferrera) whose smarts (street and book) and much coincidence lead to her arrival in the upper-middle, professional class—and London
romancing the Anglo boss. While there’s much importance placed on food (Mexican), dance, and code-switching (especially during heightened emotional moments and by the older generation represented by the father who peppers his English with “Dios mio!” and “mija,” and so on) as expressions of their Latinidad, the show subordinates this to its fairytale vision of the Latino family: that hard work and the pursuit of one’s passion will lead to a Cinderella-like, socioeconomic transformation. With their blessing, Betty leaves behind her unemployed (single mother) sister Hilda (Ana Ortiz), her gay nephew Justin Suarez (played by the Italian/Puerto Rican actor, Mark Indelicato), and the father, Ignacio (played by Cuban-American actor, Tony Plana). Certainly, one could read the show and even further exaggeration of the *telecomedia* mode with its flamboyant mood and over-the-top, slapstick-like characterizations as a self-reflexive move to foreground its up-from-the-bootstrap ideological worldview. Perhaps, however, it simply is a fairytale centered on a Latino family. (See also Guillermo Avila-Saavedra’s “A Fish Out of Water: New Articulations of U.S.–Latino Identity on Ugly Betty” as well as the work of Molina-Guzmán and Mary Beltrán.)

Notably, Justin Suarez from *Ugly Betty* is widely considered to be primetime’s youngest out gay character (Latino or otherwise). As far as representation of Latinos goes, primetime shows tend to include some sense of our gay and lesbian presence. There is, for instance, Naya Rivera as the out lesbian Santana Lopez on *Glee* (2009– ). Of course, there are other gay Latino characters, but they are older. The character Dr. Callie Torres (Sara Ramirez) is a lesbian orthopedic surgeon in *Grey’s Anatomy*. There is the Latino accountant, Óscar Martínez, on NBC’s *The Office* (2005–2012), who is outted by his boss, Michael. Before his outing, he’s teased by coworkers as being a gangbanger, baseball player, or boxer—the voice of the Taco Bell Chihuahua; then after his outing becomes the object of gay jokes; everybody assumes he likes *Will & Grace* (1998–2006) memorabilia, stuff he clearly shows no interest in when he tries to sell it at a garage sale. And not all representations of gay Latinos are of the passive (Óscar) or of the flamboyant (Justin) kind. The HBO show, *True Blood* (2008– ) included the character, Jesus Velasquez (Kevin Alejandro), who plays a gay shamanic bad boy.

Other primetime shows play their comedy in a more straightforward manner; by this I mean, not cloaked in the garish reds, blues, and greens that make up the sartorial landscape of *Ugly Betty* nor in the extreme, Fellini-esque caricatures it portrays. While not the representation of a family unit, we do have the whisper of a Latinidad in *Scrubs* (2001–2010). This is given shape in the interaction between the nurse Carla Espinosa (played by Judy Reyes) and her significant other, the African
American character Christopher Turk (played by Donald Faison). It’s not so much the show’s depiction of her as hot tempered, gossipy, and sassy that is innovative, but rather in the way the show uses Reyes’s mixed, Afro-Latino features to disrupt stereotypes. While the television viewers learn over the eight seasons that she’s of Dominican origin, migrating to Chicago as a child, others including Turk constantly try to pigeonhole her as something else: Mexican, Puerto Rican, you name it, but not Afro-Latino—or Blatino, as Nama formulates. In so doing, the show also calls into question the very construction of Latino as a category: who is included and who is not.

In ABC’s *Modern Family* there is the focus on the family unit as such, but one that looks nothing like the Suarez or Solis family in the other shows mentioned earlier. The Latino family unit is made up of the Columbian émigré character Gloria (played by Sofia Vergara) and her son Manny (played by Rico Rodriguez); Gloria reconstitutes the traditional family structure with her marriage to Jay (Ed O’Neill), effectively tying herself and Manny to a larger, upper-middle-class Anglo American family unit. The show plays Gloria as a hyperbolic embodiment of all stereotypes of Latinas. She speaks English with a very heavy Spanish accent (unlike any other Latina character on primetime today) and she relishes in her body and sexuality. We can read this, as some have, as offensive or as self-reflexive parody. I leave this for others to decide. However, what is clear is that the show seeks to counterbalance Gloria’s histrionics with the staid, careful, smart, and wise presence of her son, Manny.

Finally, there’s the Latino family unit that appears, *The George Lopez Show* (2001–2007). The show focuses on the everyday ins and outs of a working-class Mexican/Cuban family living in Los Angeles. Most of the comedy revolves around different cultural and generational tensions between these two Latino groups: George (George Lopez) as the Mexican and his wife Angie (Constance Marie) and especially her father, Vic, as the Cuban. Here, too, while Vic speaks English with a pronounced Spanish accent (not quite that of Gloria in *Modern Family*, but close), Spanish itself is not spoken. This is a generation of Latino who self-identify as Mexican American or Cuban American, constantly using their own cultural traditions and histories as punch lines to jokes, but who communicate via the common language of English. (See also John Markert’s “The George Lopez Show: The Same Old Hispano?” and Guillermo Avila-Saavedra’s “Ethnic Otherness Versus Cultural Assimilation: U.S. Latino Comedians and the Politics of Identity three prominent Latino.”)

Let me end this brief reflection on the representation of Latinos in audiovisual media with a brief mention of several non-Latino-made
feature films that complicate (mostly) audience’s sense of today’s rich and diverse identities and experiences of Latinos. Karyn Kusama’s *Girlfight* (2000) portrays a Latina who is not like many of those just mentioned that are one way or another (with the exception of Naya Rivera’s character Santana) identified with the domestic. In *Girlfight* we meet the character Diana Guzman (played by Michelle Rodriguez) who literally boxes her way out of a troubled family life (an aggressive and violent father). She decides to grow her skill in an otherwise highly gendered (male) sport as a form of empowerment and way out of an otherwise suffocating Latino domestic space. While Larry Clark’s *Wassup Rockers* (2005) focuses on Latino and not Latina teens, his story brings to the fore the richness and variety that make up today’s Latinos. We are not just of Mexico, Cuban, Puerto Rican, or Dominican origin. Latinos are also made up of second-generation Central Americans (Guatemalan and Salvadoran). Moreover, he reminds audiences that Latino teens today don’t necessarily conform to a hip-hop and gang culture branding. His ragtag group of Latinos wear skin-tight pants, listen to punk rock, play video games, and ride skateboards.

* * *

Just as Clark’s silver-screen Latinos play video games, so too do real everyday Latino teens. In fact, they make up the largest demographic of video game player; African Americans come in a close second. (For details on the statistics, see the Pew Internet & American Life Project as well as The Kaiser Family Foundation.) Yet, in this relatively new media format, Latinos are not that well represented. When they are, it is either as part of the background landscape (to give a feel for the game’s context) or as gangbangers and/or hyper-sexualized figures in the foreground. And, within this limited range of character type, only rarely do we see the creation of Latinos as playable characters.

While I discuss this in more detail in my essay in this volume suffice it to know that there’s not much innovation in video games when it comes to the representation of Latinos. To give a sketch of the video game land, I think of the following figures: the flamboyant (possibly gay), nonplayable character Al-Cid Margrac in *Final Fantasy XII*. Men; the playable character Billy Candle who is beaten by his Mexican father, the ruthless druglord, Juan Mendoza, in Ubisoft’s *Call of Juarez: The Cartel* (2011). Notably, with the object of the game to mow down street gangs (the Araña and Vatos Locos), the Chihuahua State (Mexico) legislature asked that federal government ban the sales of game in Mexico. There is also the mercenary, Tyson Rios, in *Army of Two*, whose physical largess is
counterbalanced with tactical smarts. Of all the playable characters that appear in *Gears of War*, the game provides the most interesting backstory to Dominic Santiago, who destroys all who come in the way of his rescuing his kidnapped wife. With the cut-scenes of his wife and his own emotional breakdown, the game generates its most empathic connection with the player through Dominic—and his quest to find his wife. More often than not, Latinos are the bad guy, and some more interesting than others. For instance, in the video game *Resident Evil: Darkside Chronicles* (2009), the game provides a backstory to Javier Hidalgo. He is a drug-lord, but his misdeeds are not driven by ambition alone. He gets into the business of underworld crime to try to save his little girl, Manuela, who has contracted the same disease that killed her mother. Finally, the few Latinas that are incorporated into video game worlds usually have thick Spanish accents and appear as undocumented workers (maids, for instance) or as sex objects. I think of Isabela Keyes in *Dead Rising* whose scientific inclination (to release the *Ampulex Compressa Giganteus* to enact revenge against those who destroyed her hometown, Santa Cabeza) is subordinate to her portrayal as a hyper-sexualized Latina. In *Grand Theft Auto III* (2001) the Latina character Catalina appears as a *malinche*, betraying then leaving for dead her boyfriend, Claude, during a bank robbery. (Notably, Malintzin is known for better or worse as la *malinche*—the woman who betrayed the indigenous peoples of Mexico at the time of Cortéz’s conquest and colonization.)

Not all is awry in the land of video games, however. With web-based platforms, along with the forming of noncorporate-based development teams is transforming this otherwise rather bleak landscape when it comes to Latinos in video games. For instance, the web-based game *ICED* (2008) allows the player to take on the persona of an undocumented Latino trying to overcome obstacles of being in the United States illegally. And, member of Minority Media, Vander Cabellero, created the innovative and wildly imaginative, *Papo y Yo*. It’s essentially a puzzle game whereby the player takes on the role of the Afro-Latino identified, Quico, whose adventure includes the taming of an orange monster and befriending of a girl whose white-chalk drawings on walls can become portals to other spaces. And, there have been universities like the University of Southern California who have outreach programs to the Latino community. For instance, the Learning Games Initiative at USC had Latino teens redesign the game *Pac Man* in ways that represented their neighborhoods; they were also able to invent characters (some invented undocumented characters modeled after their parents, for instance) to navigate this newly invented labyrinthine territory. They then asked the students to think about and discuss the significance of the geography and characters that
they developed. As Katynka Z. Martínez’s writes, “While working with the Los Angeles animation classes, I watched students transform the ambiguous ghosts of Pac-Man into vigilante Minutemen, neighborhood drunks, and demonic ducks” (“Pac-Man Meets the Minutemen Video Games by Los Angeles Latino Youth” 57).

* * *

I have focused thus far on a discussion of mostly television, film, and video games as mediated means of representing this twenty-first-century, urban Latino identity and experience. Because of cost prohibitions (the exorbitant cost of making a film, a TV show, or a video game) as well as certain gate-keeping habits that have locked out the presence of Latinos in the making of scripts for TV and programs for video games, Latinos who choose to create cultural products tend to gravitate toward cheaper modes of production such as the arts—visual and plastic art, music, and literature, including comic books. One can make art and music—and get this out to audiences—with much less capital than is required of a film, for instance. The same can be said of comic books, an area where we have seen intense and constant productivity among Latinos in the first decade of the twenty-first century.

The comic book storytelling medium is especially attractive to Latino/a makers of narrative fiction. It offers all variety of tensions and harmonies between its visual and verbal ingredients. It costs little to make. It offers the possibility of a grassroots-style distribution—web and word of mouth, for instance. It appeals to all variety of readers/viewers: young and old, Latino/a and otherwise, females and males. Its consumption can take place in short bursts and on the fly.

Today, we see a number of author/artists creating comic books that run the full range of storytelling genre. We have those such as Frank Espinosa (Rocketo) and Los Bros Hernandez (Citizen Rex) who zip readers into the future with their sci-fi epic-dimensioned storyworlds. We have those who choose noir as their storytelling envelope such as Rafael Navarro (Sonambulo) and Gilbert Hernandez (stand-alones such as Troublemakers). We have those who write youth-oriented, coming-of-age (and coming out) stories such as Ivan Velez Jr. (Tales of the Closet) and Graciela Rodriguez’s Lunatic Fringe (2010); we also have those who choose the life-education journey (or Bildung) story such as Rhode Montijo (Pablo’s Inferno) and Wilfred Santiago (In My Darkest Hour). Then there are those who choose the superheroic mode such as Fernando Rodriguez (Aztec of the City), Richard Dominguez (El Gato Negro), Laura Molina (Cihualyaomiquiz, the Jaguar), Carlos Saldaña (Burrito),
Anthony Oropeza (Amigoman), and Joe Quesada (Santerians), among many others. (For a detailed discussion of how these and other author/artists of Latino/a superheroes strike back see my book, Your Brain on Latino Comics.) We have those author/artists who choose the autobiographical mode such as Iverna Lockpez’s Cuba My Revolution (2010) and Ilan Stavan’s El Iluminado (2012). We also have those who choose the biographical form, such as Wilfred (his masterful 21: The Story of Roberto Clemente), and those who choose the historical form such as Ilan Stavans (writer) and Lalo Alcaraz (artist) in the making of Latinos U.S.A: A Cartoon History. We also have those who choose the grotesque, such as Erik Rodriguez (Hispanic Batman), the satiric and parodic such as Ilan Stavans and Robert Weil (Mr. Spic Goes to Washington), and the erotic such as Gilbert Hernandez (Birdland). And within all these genres, we have various generic crossings and mash-ups, infusions of history (from the pre-Columbian to the contemporary) and myth as well as tragic, comic, and epic-dimensioned protagonists.

One Step Back . . . Two Steps Forward

As I’ve begun to show, with the shape, texture, and color of the building blocks of reality themselves appearing more and more Latino, it is not surprising that the mediated Latino landscape is also very varied. Whether there is present a willfulness (will to style) that innovates and makes new our apprehension of Latinos—and Latinidad generally—or not, we can say that today it is a markedly more populated, and arguably more complex landscape than yesterday.

There remain, of course, those public conservative figures such as Lou Dobbs and Glenn Beck who leveled a whirlwind of invectives at the appearance of Miles Morales as the Afro-Latino Spidey Miles Morales—his appearance apparently marked the end of (white, male) civilization—but whatever our final evaluation of this Afro-Latino Spidey, today we have a Spider-Man who is Afro-Latino. And, yes, we can and probably should take offense at the lack of willfulness on the part of Disney when it recently introduced its first fully identified Latina animated character, Princess Sofia, with light skin, blue eyes, and reddish-brown hair; perhaps they considered the casting of Sara Ramirez as Sofia’s voice as enough of a marker of her Latinidad. (Afro-Latina-identified Tiana and indigenous-identified Pocahontas might come in as close seconds.) But let’s also consider briefly where we’ve been as Latinos in pop cultural media: maids, comic-relief sidekicks, simple-minded buffoons, and empathetic crutches. While Will & Grace made headlines for its depictions of gay characters, its Latino presence came in the brief appearance of a
maid; we had the arrival of a Latino investigator with Cheech Marín as Joe Domínguez (*Nash Bridges*, 1996–2001) but who finally did all the work and cleanup only so that the Anglo protagonist (Don Johnson) could reap all the glory; ABCs *Gideon’s Crossing* (2000–2001) featured the Latino character Max Cabrenas, but his sole purpose seemed to be to offer empathic support to emotionally overwrought Anglos; *The 70s Show* (1998–2006) introduces the oversexed, buffoon “Fez” (played by Miami-born Colombian/Venezuelan, Wilmer Valderama) who constantly trips on his own malapropistic bumbles; in *King of Queens* (1998–2007) there was the thick Spanish-accented Rico whose existence seemed only to serve as sounding board to all varieties of racialized and sexualized jokes; on *Felicity* (1998–2002) the Latina character Natalie played the *malinche* figure, betraying all in her way to *get her way*. (For more details on the stereotypes of Latinos on primetime TV, see Dana E. Mastro and Elizabeth Behm-Morawitz “Latino Representation on Primetime Television.”) As this brief overview indicates, while Latinos have a long way to go before we have arrived in all our complexity and full glory, the media landscape today seems to be going places it didn’t before.

* * *

I have described certain contemporary mediated Latino cultural phenomena. I have also briefly interpreted, assigned meaning, and evaluated a certain number of these mediated cultural products. Some of the products are undeniably bad—and in bad taste. However, I end this part of the introduction to the volume reminding us that human beings (Latino or otherwise) are complex, socially and biologically grown entities. That the culture we make or that we participate in shaping (this deeply Latino transformed or refried mainstream culture) does not transform us in simple-minded ways.

Let me make this more concrete by returning briefly to the example mentioned at the beginning of this introduction: Latina Barbie doll. We might be worried that the Latina Barbie is too Caucasian looking; we might also worry that the way she’s portrayed is as an exotic object; we might worry more generally that her morphology might cause in a one-to-one correlative fashion, bodily self-image issues in little girls. (By the way, we might also consider the same body self-image issues with boys playing with a super-muscled Eddie Guerrero action figure.)

Common sense (and the recent advances in the cognitive and neurosciences) might indicate otherwise, however. It more than suggests that there is not a one-to-one correspondence between what children see and play with and how they self-identify. The imagination—and especially the child’s
imagination—isn’t a tabula rasa to be etched upon indelibly. Indeed, it is
the opposite. The child’s exercising of his or her causal, counterfactual, and
probabilistic mechanisms allow them to not only map their present social
and natural worlds, but also imagine new possible ways of existing in the
world in the future. Put otherwise, a Barbie doll (Latina, or otherwise) has
a fixed function; without breaking it, she can move her head, arms, legs,
torso a certain way; and the description on the box about her background
can direct a children’s imagination in a certain way: Amazonia Barbie is
from the Amazon, etc. But neither of these preset functions are fixed in
the hand and imagination of a child. The child can and does transform the
Barbie into all variety of things—rocket ships, bridges, and transportation
vehicles—even headless monsters. Of course, if the child is locked away in
a lab with only one Barbie to play with (Latina or otherwise) or is fed only
a constant stream of television (Dora or otherwise) where the content is
predetermined and leaves little room for a child’s imagination and creativ-
ity to grow, then yes, we might have a problem.

As it is, whether we deem a Latina Barbie well done or not—and this
meaning-making and evaluating is an important part of cultural produc-
tion—will not change this fact: Children (and us adults) are extraordi-
narily creative and re-creative in what they do with products that enter
the world with more or less set or delimited functionalities. This could
be a Barbie, but it could also be a TV show, comic book, or video game.
While the latter rely less on determining a physical functionality, they do
establish storylines and characters that direct (more or less) our gap-filling
capacities; but where we go in our gap filling—our imagination—is not
predetermined. Rather, it is ultimately limitless. So we can and do evalu-
ate and interpret mediated Latino cultural products, keeping in mind
that in spite of the delimitations built into these objects (from Barbie to
Dora to Desperate Housewives) when we couple them with our limitless
capacity to imagine, they become unlimited in their function.

Latinos and Narrative Media seeks to make visible a range of mate-
rial objects and intellectual products out there that capture to different
degrees the myriad and infinite experiences of Latinos. It aims to capture
a contemporary scene whereby our massive presence is actively shaping
the culture we all breathe today.

* * *

To the Essays

The essays that make up the volume intend to turn rocks, open doors,
lift rugs, and whatever other metaphor might be used to describe the fact
that taken as a whole they are at once incisive and particular as well as extensive and general in their aim: to break new ground. To this end, the essays are many, but succinct. To bring together under one cover, essays that cover a wide range of topics concerning multimediated Latinos it was important for each to not extend beyond prescribed word-length borders.

The seven essays that appear under the first rubric “Border Genres… Borderlands” focus on specifics of genre such as Western, horror, sci-fi, lucha (wrestler), and narco (drug). They also variously consider specific formats: from films and animation to pulp novels, tattoos, and blogs. In each of the contributions the scholars consider how matters of form shape content, and vice versa, within larger historical, legal, political, and socio-economic contexts that Latinos experience today.

Camilla Fojas’s essay, “Border Media and New Spaces of Latinidad,” opens the door to this first section of essays. Fojas considers how a range of borderland visual media formats—documentary, television, and film, and comedies—at once speak to the issues that gravitate around the US–Mexico border such as immigration, drug trafficking, violence—as well as complicate mainstream images and storylines. She puts under her analytical microscope the comedy Born in East L.A. (1987), the activist film Bread and Roses (2000), the mockumentary Day Without a Mexican (2004), the television reality series Homeland Security USA (ABC 2009), the neo-Western The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada (2005), and the critical cross-genre popular border film, Machete (2010). In each we see how Latinas/os are center-staging their presence either as creators of a cross-pollinating or hybrid visual border media or as complex agents at the center of the stories. For Fojas, such borderland cultural phenomena remake the border region as a place of creativity and a space for the critical contestation of the meanings of Latinidad in the United States.

Jesse Alemán follows with an essay that considers the rise of Chicano/a horror genre in and around the space of the US–Mexico borderlands. In “Days of the (Un)Dead: Vampires, Zombies, Demons and Other Forms of Chicano/a Horror in Film,” Alemán shows how figures of Chicano pop culture (and folk mythology) such as La Llorona (child-stealing weeping woman) and El Cucuy (boogeyman) become repurposed as transmogrifying vamps and zombies in B-flicks such as From Dusk till Dawn, 1996 (and the others that form its trilogy), and All Souls Day (2005). As Alemán demonstrates, there is a willfulness to anchor the stories within a proximate and distant history: the history of the Aztecs, the Spanish conquest, and today’s tourism and its exploitation of Mexican labor. In pop cultural formats, these films at once entertain and critique the “blood-sucking history of US-Mexico economic relations.” In
sharp contrast, Alemán considers how the mainstream blockbuster film *Constantine* (2005) simplifies matters, functioning as an allegory of current (and past) legislation and sentiment that seeks to keep the half-breed Latino other, *out* of the United States.

Just as we learn that popular storytelling forms such as the B-flick horror can open our eyes to the harsh realities that fill up the underbelly of society, so too can other popular media forms such as children’s cartoons. In “Postmodern Guacamole: Lifting the Lid on *El Tigre: The Adventures of Manny River*,” Phillip Serrato considers how Nickelodean’s *El Tigre* ((2007 to 2008) complicates the typical cartoon that depicts Latinos. For Serrato, cartoons such as *Maya and Miguel, Dragon Tales, Dora the Explorer,* and *Go, Diego, Go!* do counteract a long tradition of negative portrayals of Latinos in popular media, but do so by presenting Latinos as nonthreatening. In contrast, Serrato considers how *El Tigre* uses postmodern storytelling structures (that are self-reflexive and that relish in the pastiche) to frame the coming-of-age story of the 13-year-old “El Tigre” within a context that affirms all of Latino culture (past and present); that the show refuses to explain the presence of Latino culture and its artifacts at once naturalizes (considers normal) for Latino viewers their presence in the world and insist that the show not function as a tourist view of Latino culture for non-Latino audiences.

In “Latino Media in a Digital Age,” Randy Ontiveros considers the different uses of the Internet by and about Latinos within a historical and material context. While few Latinos used the Internet in the 1990s, by the 2000s this had changed rather markedly. As Ontiveros notes, today Latinos spend more time at a computer than their Anglo peers. The 2000s also witnessed the development of Latino-based websites that were mostly generated by corporate, with a few that were cottage-style, independently grown. Several of the latter still exist, including Cindy Mosqueda’s *Lotería Chicana,* Daniel Hernandez’s *Intersections,* and Daniel Olivas, Manual Ramos, Michael Sedano, and Melinda Palacios’s *La Bloga.* In each we see variously the interpretation of cultural phenomena, politics, history, education, sports, and the like. Ontiveros is careful to remind that while the Latino presence in the Internet is an important cultural and social tool—and can in some instances even help bring Latinos together to enact social change—it cannot and should not be considered as a replacement for actual work and solidarity between actual Latinos in the everyday, material world.

William Anthony Nericcio picks up on the thread of Latinos and digital media in his reflection on the evolution and life of a Latino blog. In “Tex[t]-Mex, Seductive Hallucinations of the ‘Mexican’ in America, 2.0: A Diary Chronicling the Transmogrifying Metamorphosis of a Neurosis
from Book to Museum and on to the Internet” Nericcio points us in the direction of how Latinos can use technologies of the twenty-first century to at once give shape to, and disseminate on a massive scale, ideas and interpretations by and about Latinos in popular culture. He points us to a future where the mortal life of the printed page will give way to that of the immortality of web-blogs such as the “Tex[t]-Mex Gallerblog.” Nericcio doesn’t so much mourn the fragile existence of book pages that in time become brittle to the touch as much as he relishes in the act of creating a post-analog Latino blog that is recompositing itself continually “regardless of platform” (blog, Twitter, Facebook, and the like); it exists out in the world as an immortal monster turning upside down all variety of misconceptions of Latinos. Rather than set sights on the past, Nericcio is a Latino who looks forward to the electronic shape-shifting terrain—books 2.0, MOOCs (Massive open online courses), Kindles, and iPads—in the present and future dissemination of knowledge and cultural products. In this meditation, we witness a Latino scholar who chooses to inject all things Latino into a global mainstream.

The study of multimediated Latinos is serious business. However, it also involves a certain acknowledgment of the fun to be had in some of its cultural manifestations. In “Nacho Libre: or, The Inauthenticity of Rasquachismo,” Ilan Stavans continues this thread of playful and yet poignant meditation seen in Nerricio, but directs his attention to film media. Stavans reflects on his experience as (potential) cultural consultant and (actual) viewer of Jarred Hess’s film, Nacho Libre (2006) to tease out the nuances of Latinidad represented in the film. At first blush, Stavans discusses the film’s stereotypical representation of Latinos as bumbling, macho—offensive, even. However, upon a second, more careful examination, he reveals how it participates more in the Mexican than Chicano aesthetic of rasquachismo. The key to unlocking its humor and worldview is not to be found with interpreting it as kitsch, but rather in its rasquachism sensibility: the representation of what might appear to be inauthentic as an authentic portrayal of “bad taste in popular Mexican artifacts that are infused with subversive power.” For Stavans, then, in form and content, Nacho Libre, coopts, subverts, and entertains: “The movie is excellent at being bad,” he concludes. Wrapping up this first section, Theresa Rojas also seeks to expand our sense of where and how Latinos are doing the work of interpretation and cultural production. In “Illuminated Bodies: Kat Von D and the Borderlands of Tattoo Culture” Rojas focuses on how Latina tattoo art at once speaks to particular cultural identity as well as how this in turn shapes mainstream culture. Rojas’s analysis gravitates around the Latina tattoo artist Kat Von D—and star of the TLC reality-based the show LA Ink (2007–2011). For Rojas, Kat Von D’s tattoo practice and her own tattooed body affirm a complex Latinidad, challenge
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