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The Oversexualization of Latinas in US Contemporary Film

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THE OVERSEXUALIZATION OF LATINAS IN US CONTEMPORARY FILM

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ABSTRACT

Diversity has always been an issue for women and people of color in media. Likewise, a lack of representation has also been a consistent issue, with this misrepresentation occurring more frequently to certain groups. In this thesis, I look at the role of the Latina by employing a content analysis of Latinas' roles in both contemporary US indie and blockbuster films, while utilizing an intersectional feminist framework. The main goal of this research was to recognize if indie films offer greater representation for Latinas over blockbusters. Four films were analyzed to draw conclusions about how Latinas in US contemporary films are represented and sexualized. It was concluded that a lack of representation is perpetuated in both indie and blockbuster films, with blockbusters proving to carry the tradition of misrepresentation with greater frequency than indies.

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INTRODUCTION

The film industry has depicted Latina women as “other,” and has treated its Latina actors as lesser than their actor peers. This discrimination continues to this day. While Latinas have been visible on screen, they have not been justly represented; they have largely taken on one-dimensional, stereotypical, and oftentimes degrading roles. I am interested in exploring why this is, and why, in a time of change and empowerment in the film industry, so little has been done to work towards true representation. Representation is how people, groups, communities, experiences etc. are portrayed on screen, while true and just representation would also involve how closely those portrayals are to the truth.

I will specifically be looking at the film industry through an intersectional feminist lens, as the complete Latina experience cannot be generalized with notions of just gender, just class, just race etc. Moreover, I will focus on the oversexualization of the Latina in US contemporary films and utilize examples from both indie films, as well as major blockbusters. In the pages that follow, I offer further understanding and analysis of the hypersexualized Latina in film through an intersectional feminist framework that describes the binary categories of self and other to address how different bodies are used as signifiers of “otherness.”

LITERATURE REVIEW

What is intersectional feminism? Using Claire Snyder’s essay on third-wave feminism, “third-wave [i.e. intersectional] feminism rejects grand narratives for a feminism that operates as hermeneutics of critique within a wide array of discursive locations, and replaces attempts at

unity with a dynamic and welcoming politics of coalition” (176). Thus, intersectional feminism rejects the idea that all women are equal in society and are therefore grouped together under men as one group in society’s hierarchy, but offers that women have different experiences and are not all equal in society based on class, race, sexuality, etc. *in addition to* gender. While grouping all Latinas together does not fully reflect the notion of third wave feminism, it helps to categorize women in general into a smaller subgroup.

The idea of categorization is a peculiar one, especially when it is in relation to humans. Categorizing brings about the idea that people can be identified and wholly represented by either being one thing or another. This means that if someone does not “check all of the boxes” in one area, they will be cast out as Other. This phenomenon is both ridiculous and commonplace in American media. bell hooks, American author, feminist, and social activist of color theorized about this idea and coined the phrase dualistic thinking. hooks defined dualistic thinking to be a way of thought in which things, and people, are believed to be dual in nature. In this, people are not able to be complex beings, but rather one thing or another: good or bad. When people are thought of as only being ‘good or bad,’ rather than on a spectrum, it causes for misconceptions, bigotry, and racism to occur. She argued that:

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).

Images and ideas created by media are extremely influential to society. Specifically, contemporary US films create representations of the world we live in that audiences are to understand and accept at face value, even though they often implement dualistic thinking. hooks’ ideology reinforces the idea that when film does not represent all people then audiences, creators,

and actors are limited to be one thing or another, good or bad, black or white. The issue of dualistic thinking marginalizes minority groups and affects how others may view these minorities, and how these minority groups may view themselves.

Two other authors, Margaret L. Andersen and Howard F. Taylor, bring up the sociological idea of the reflection hypothesis. They claim that it:

contends that the mass media reflect the values of the general population and that the media tries to appeal to the most broad-based audience, so they aim for middle-ground in depicting images and ideas... Characters are created with whom people will identify. Interestingly, the images in the media with which we identify are distorted versions of reality... part of the appeal is... how they build upon, but then mystify, the actual experiences of people (49).

They argue that there is a current crisis in which people are internalizing the images media creates, even though the images created do not truly represent the experiences of people. When images of a certain group of people are repeated, positively or negatively, this image is defined as a stereotype and becomes part of the viewers' understanding of that identity, which is internalized. Andersen and Taylor go on to explain the concept of stereotype threat. They explain that, "stereotypes about stereotyped individuals become internalized by those individuals and thus affect their actual behavior" (234). This can be extremely harmful, especially if the stereotype is degrading. Oftentimes, these individuals truly believe they are not able to amount to anything more than their prescribed stereotype which then causes anxiety, thus limiting their working memory, (the cognitive system used to store and process information), and are not able to perform to their greatest potential (Andersen 234).

Similar to hooks' theory of dualistic thinking and Andersen and Taylors' explanation of internalization, author Myra Mendible discusses in her book that identification and differentiation are utilized to centralize people. She states:

Culturally... politics that are based on and function by bifurcation must also create borders - and then social and cultural limit-situations- through identification and differentiation. The results... resist internal differences within the categories and similarities between two polar positions (208).

Mendible argues that the rigid structure of American politics and culture have shaped how society has evolved to consist of groups that either accept the parts of them that are represented, and reject the parts of them that are ignored or diverge from what is represented in culture.

Again, this issue is harmful. When certain traits of a certain group of people are identified as wrong, then the person who identifies as both part of the group as well as someone who has the “wrong” characteristics will internalize this as an issue. However, Mendible also discusses how this rigid binary is becoming less popular in media. She discusses how over time, audiences have recognized how they cannot identify with characters, specifically in film, and claims there is “an ideological shift” in regards to the Latina character. She argues:

the commercial strength of Latina bodies reflects an ideological shift in the cultural and economic marketplace, a marketplace driven by less rigid identity binaries than hybridized narratives of identity (126).

Mendible goes on to give examples of how the Latina body is utilized to tell varying stories of different types of women, but also includes the following figures as case examples: Lupe Vélez, Carmen Miranda, Salma Hayek, Penelope Cruz, Jennifer Lopez, and Shakira. Mendible notes that the success of these women largely has to do with the Latina body. Their bodies have propelled these women to stardom, but to what extent have binaries truly been broken? Mendible argues that the Latina body that is seen on screen has been utilized to reclaim the idea that the curvy Latina body is not inferior, but in fact desired by society. She claims the reproduction of the Latina bombshell “rescu[es] this body from its abject state and transforming it into a body that matters” (265). While Mendible offers that the role of Latinas in film is being seen

positively, it still degrades these women to be just a body. Moreover, this body that is repeated on screens is not representative of all Latina women. Mendible does not address the question of why overweight Latina women are not being featured in films, while overweight white women are? Moreover, this book focuses more so on the images perpetuated in films with Latinas rather than the situation or dialogue presented.

When researching minority groups in US contemporary film, the proportion of research and material on black actors was vastly greater than that of Latinx actors. There were virtually no studies or essays on race that explicitly broke out the roles of those races in indie films from blockbusters. Additionally, there were very few studies done that broke out actors based on race and gender with reliable methodology. However, there was information on the history of Latinas in film. The documentary, *The Bronze Screen: 100 Years of the Latino Image in Hollywood*, offers a timeline of Latinas in film with interviews from prominent Latinx actors. The documentary states:

in the early 1900s simple motion pictures told stories of good guys and bad guys... and the bad girls of these films were oftentimes Mexican women portrayed with a violent nature and loose moral.

Like the hooksian theory of dualistic thinking, films began with the idea that good and bad had to be definitive in their representations. This encouraged the use of stereotypes in film. Latina women were sexualized from the start, playing the forbidden love interest. These films were a double edged sword for Latinx actors, as they both stereotyped them and lead these actors to stardom. However, even as stars, they were subjected to the same old roles, not branching out to other types of roles. Following the traditional “bad guy” trope came the 1920s Latin Lover. This archetype was played by both men and women, with Lupe Vélez and Dolores del Río rising to be

the most prominent Latina actors of this time period. Yet these roles relied heavily on a Europeanization of the Latinx body, (covering up curves, acting as an aristocrat), while still tapping into the stereotypical traits of mystery and sensuality.

However, the introduction to sound in the 1930s became an issue for many actors with accents. During this time men with accents' careers were ruined, while there was a double-standard that aided women with accents in regards to getting work. According to the film, "the American male establishment was threatened by the foreign man. While Latino males faded from the silver screen, the Spitfire trope was created, depicting Latina women funny in their lack of English skills, over dramatization of situations, and sex appeal." According to Medible, the Spitfire is categorized by her lack of perfect English skills and the, "negative extreme of Mexican femininity: hot-blooded, volatile, [and] sexually promiscuous" (51).

During the Great Depression, the fear of Mexicans taking American jobs became rampant. Because of this, Latinx stars disappeared from films. If they were in films, they portrayed aristocrats from "far-away" countries, like Brazil or made up lands, rather than their Spanish-speaking home countries. Oftentimes, these actors would change their appearance in order to look more European and play characters from Europe (*The Bronze Screen*).

During WWII, America felt the need to protect its borders and create better relations with the countries to its south. Productions were made to be pro-America and Pro-Latin American countries. However, representations of Latinos were used for comedic relief rather than telling representative Latino stories. This is when the Latino Clown trope was created, Carmen Miranda being a notable example with her signature over-the-top fruit hat. Mendible suggests that these women were simply, "pure objects... a spectacle and... self parodies" (12, 13). She offers that

these women were used as entertaining distractions and were nowhere near developed characters. Behind the scenes, Latino men finally began to work as producers and directors (*The Bronze Screen*).

In the 1950s, there was a resurgence of the Latin Lover, but there were little new or notable changes to the Latin Lover of the 20s. This showcases how over thirty years, little had changed for Latinx actors. It is to no surprise that progressive change to these stereotypes would not come for a very long time.

In the 1960s, Latinos were cast as gang members. Rita Moreno was the most notable Latina actress of the time, known for her role of the supporting character, Anita in *West Side Story*. Gang movies began to get increasingly popular in the 70s, 80s, and 90s as well. The portrayal of gang members became more violent as the years went on.

In the 1970s Latinos began making films from their own perspectives. These stories were about Latino families, often focusing on the issue of immigration or *Latinidad*, the attributes that make up a Latino person that does not reduce them to a single trait. While these films were loved by Latinos they were often indie films and not seen as part of the mainstream film community. Every so often these films would set box office records, proving Latinos' roles in film mattered. At the same time, the trope of the overprotective matriarch was developed. This trope is the one archetype that does not play into the cinematic fantasy that all Latinas are toned and curvy while also being sexually carefree.

In the 80s and 90s and leading into the 2000s came movies about class. Movies focused on stardom, like *Selena*, that focused on the Latina that "made it," and overcame some adversity that Latinos face. This bombshell trope was often noted for her talent, as well as her beauty and

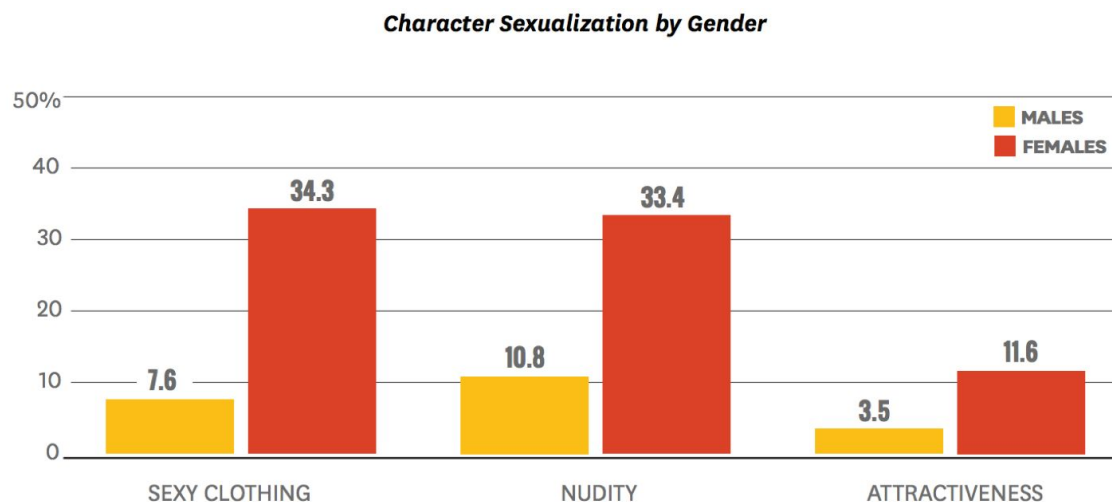
curvaceous body. On the other hand, the maid trope was created which demonstrated how Latinas were often at the bottom of the social hierarchy. For example, Lupe Ontiveros was a very active actor during these years playing her signature role: the maid. She played Rosalita in *The Goonies* (1985), Camilla in *Dolly Dearest* (1991), and Nora in *As Good As It Gets* (1997) who were all maids/housekeepers that had little to do with the plot of the film, besides showcasing that the families in these films were wealthy.

At the same time, films were coming out that showed a more authentic Latinx experience, that were often written/produced by Latinos themselves. However, it was clear that these films were difficult to get a green light on. A notable movie from this 1990s era of Latino film was *My Family/Mi Familia*. Main actor Jimmy Smits told The Los Angeles Times that,

Most of the people on *My Family* are working for less than they usually get paid because they feel it's important that movies like this get made... This is a film that presents Latinos in a positive light, and there aren't too many of those around (1995).

Today, the Latin Lover, the Spitfire, the Clown, the Overbearing Matriarch, the Gang Member, the Bombshell, and the Maid are all still stereotypical archetypes that are used in US contemporary film today. Since then, not many new stereotypes have come about. All of these stereotypes focus strongly on the misrepresentational idea that Latinas are always thinking about sex and/or are used for their bodies to attract viewers. The only trope that does not fit this narrative is the Matriarch, who is, not coincidentally, their foil. The Matriarch warns the other types of girls to not have sex, to provide and care for men and children, and to protect their reputations. Both of these archetypes focus on sex and representation of the body, but on two ends of the spectrum: they are extremely overprotective or extremely oversexualized.

Finally, looking at the numbers that showcase the lack of diversity and representation in US films was important. I specifically drew from two major reports on the *Diversity in Entertainment* and diversity from the *Director's Chair*. When looking at gender between 2007 and 2016, only 3.4 percent of directors were female and 83.3 percent of those only made one film. Moreover, across this 10-year time frame, only 5.1% of directors (men and women) were Black and 3% were Asian. The rest were white. Hispanics were too miniscule of a number to consider (Smith Inclusion in 2). Similarly, “female characters fill only 28.7% of all speaking roles in film” and are 4.5x more likely to appear in sexy clothing compared to a man, are 3.1x more likely to appear nude compared to a man, and are 3.3x more likely to be called out for physical attractiveness compared to a man (Smith Inclusion or 1). This is demonstrated in the chart below:



In regard to being degraded on screen sexually, Latinas are subject to this the most frequently. Latinas are 10% more likely to appear in sexualized attire compared to Black women, and 4.7% more likely compared to White women, and 10.6% more likely compared to Asian women. Likewise, Latinas are 6.9% more likely to appear in a film with some nudity compared to Black women and 15.3% more likely compared to Asian women (Smith *Inclusion or 3-9*). This trend is

expressed in the following chart:

Female Character Sexualization by Race/Ethnicity

SEXUALIZATION MEASURES	White	Latina	Black	Asian
% in sexualized attire	34.8%	39.5%	29.5%	28.9%
% with some nudity	34.2%	35.5%	28.6%	27.7%
% referenced attractive	12.6%	11.4%	7.9%	7.7%

Numbers show that Latinas, and women in general, are mistreated in the film industry. Latina actor Salma Hayek offers a reason as to why:

I think it is because we, as women, have been devalued artistically to an indecent state, to the point where the film industry stopped making an effort to find out what female audiences wanted to see and what stories we wanted to tell...our voices are not welcome (Hayek 1).

With this being the general tone of the industry, I was upset with the lack of studies done on inclusion and diversity in the industry as it pertains to gender and race. In a time of so much progress, where film is valued as not just as a form of entertainment, but also an art form, why there is so little scholarly quantitative information on these subjects.

METHOD

In order to properly collect and conduct my research, defining a method was crucial. I examined and analysed 4 different films that were created by US producers after 2000 and featured Latina leads, who were playing Latinas. I watched two indies, *Real Women Have Curves* (2002) and *Beatriz at Dinner* (2017), as well as two blockbusters, *Frida* (2002) and *Hot Pursuit* (2015). These films were chosen based on time - all produced after the year 2000 and released at least 10 years apart per category to show difference in these categories over time.

While these movies are not exact yardsticks for change, as they are not remakes of the same film, these movies were used holistically and noted for changes in overall tone, representation, and

dimensionality. Because these changes cannot be placed on a scale, exact timing of these films is not of utmost importance.

Latina actors were classified based on how they identified in the acting community- as Latinx or not. Latina characters in the films were a bit more difficult to categorize, but were ultimately identified as a character with a last name that has Latin/Hispanic roots (e.g. García, Guzman, Martinez) or someone who verbally identified as being Latinx (e.g. saying their family was from Mexico, expressing their love for Hispanic traditions such as Day of the Dead or making their abuela's empanadas, etc.). A Latina actor who has "traditional" Latinx physical attribute (e.g. dark hair, dark eyes) was not automatically characterized as Latina in this study, as doing so would make biased assumptions about the film and likely be reductive.

With these parameters in place, it was very difficult to find films that worked in this study. Oftentimes, Latinas in major films were secondary or tertiary characters or played roles that did not explicitly identify as Latina. For example, a 2015 blockbuster, *The Boy Next Door*, featured Jennifer Lopez as the star, yet her character's name was Claire Peterson. Likewise the 2012 film *Spring Breakers* features Selena Gomez playing Faith, a main character, but never identifies as Latina. This alone proves how there is not enough diversity and representation in US contemporary films.

When I watched these films, I asked the question "is the Latina in this film sexualized in any way? And does her body serve as a signifier of otherness?" I also took note of other characters in the film, noting their race, class, gender, and relation to the Latina character. In doing this, it aided me in defining who the Latina is, or isn't, "other" to, and why.

On a more granular level, aspects of the films I paid keen attention to were dialogue, body language, lighting, tone, changes to the script or narrative, and actions of the characters. Moreover, I compared these characteristics with the characteristics that were described as stereotypical in the documentary, *The Bronze Screen: 100 Years of the Latino Image in Hollywood*.

Since I am questioning if Latinas are represented in US contemporary film, it is logical to look at this representation through an intersectional feminist lens. This would allow me to differentiate the Latinas in these films from other characters, and see their experiences as singular instances of the greater Latina experience.

MISREPRESENTATION AND THE LATINA IN BLOCKBUSTERS

A blockbuster film typically has an extensive budget, extensive income, and is considered a main film of the year. It would be produced in Hollywood and has big names both in front of and behind the camera. Blockbuster films generally try to appeal to the masses and follow Hollywood's status quo, which would limit unconventional changes in both role types and cast. Considering these traits to be commonplace, these films reinforce the traditional Latina stereotypes and oversexualize the Latina character, and provide insufficient opportunity for Latina actors. Even when strong Latina women play main characters, they are belittled on the basis of sexuality.

Frida (2002)

For example, the blockbuster, *Frida (2002)*, tells the story of artist Frida Kahlo's life. Frida, played by Salma Hayek, fits the traditional Latina trope, mirroring the Latina spitfires of

1930's Hollywood. Throughout the film, sex is seen as Frida's most important quality. Her artwork and political beliefs, the things she is historically known for, come second to her sex appeal, which ultimately acts as the root to all of her problems in the film.

To demonstrate the significance of the stereotypical Latina figure, Frida's body is sexually exposed throughout the film at the major turning points of her life, as if exposure is the pinnacle of what it means to face change when one is Latina. When Frida gets into a cable car accident, her blouse and skirt somehow get undone and she lies chest to the sky, with gold glitter and blood covering her body. One hand is on her hip, the other by her head almost as if she is posing. This scene is rather ethereal, shot from overhead to look down on Frida. Here, the exposed, curvy Latina body is used to show change. In the following scene, Frida's body is shown in a full body cast to juxtapose the previous shot. She once had everything, (freedom, a boyfriend, education), when her physical, sexy body was intact, but then she loses it all when she can no longer be the sexy Latina that patriarchal society desires. However, Frida's cast quickly turns into just a back brace, which appears like a corset. Her breasts are pushed up from it, creating a bombshell look, despite how improbable and uncomfortable this would actually be. She mentions to her father, "right now, I'm a burden, but I hope to be a self-sufficient cripple someday," as if she is useless without the power of her body. When she can finally remove the brace, her breasts are completely exposed to the camera. The nudity here can be seen as liberation from physical restraints, but also as how the Latina is unworthy unless she is able-bodied and can expose and utilize her stereotypical Latina figure. These two moments signify a before and after; before the body is covered and after that, when it can be exposed

again. These scenes idealize and memorialize the Latina figure, as if the Latina character is nothing without her sexy body.

Furthermore, the hypersexualization of the character that is Frida does not mean less because she is covered in many scenes and has a unibrow. In fact, these are signifiers that allow American audiences to recognize she is different and exotic than the typical US norm, (which celebrates white, prepubescent, hairless bodies). This idea of exoticness is a key feature to the oversexualization of Latinas in film. The traditional dresses and infamous unibrow which Frida is known for in popular culture come, “together, [being] cinematically contextual clues contribute to the general implicit message of exoticness through the sexualized commodification of ethnic otherness” (Mendible 125).

Moreover, I argue that Frida is oversexualized to please men’s desires more so than her own. Frida’s character is strong-willed. She sticks up for herself and is, in many instances, *macho*, (proud in a sense of masculinity). However, despite being a feminist icon, Frida is still subject to man’s desire and power, and she always allows them to win (note: as mentioned above, this does not discredit the true Frida Kahlo’s feminism. Feminism is experienced differently by every individual, so to undermine her beliefs here because she does “give in” to men’s desires would be irresponsible and general. However, it is important to mention that this is problematic for the character Frida Kahlo, and her general goals as a Latina character in film.)

While tough women in films are refreshing and powerful, they may also be problematic:

Tough women can offer women new role models, but their toughness may also bind women more tightly to traditional feminine roles – especially when the tough woman is portrayed as a pretender to male power and authority, and someone who is not tough enough to escape being punished for her gender-bending behavior (Inness 5).

Frida's hypersexualization in the film can be seen as the characteristic that makes her "not tough enough to escape being punished for her gender-bending behavior." She is consistently going out of her way to please her husband, as he has the power in the relationship. When the two first meet, Frida says, "listen if you think I'm going to sleep with you just because you've taken me under your wing, you're wrong," but then immediately makes the first move to have sex with him. She stands her ground, but goes back on her word because of temptation, showing how easily swayed she is when it comes to sex. This instance is repeated throughout the film, as Diego has countless affairs with other women, yet Frida continuously goes back to him, even after he has sex with Frida's own sister. Frida's greatest power is her sexuality, but it is not great enough to tame her husband, thus showing the power imbalance between man and woman, specifically Latino men and women, cannot be broken. This also demonstrates how when a woman's sexuality is her main trait in a film, she is easy to reject and be cast out as Other.

Frida also comments on how she is viewed when she is visiting Paris to expand her knowledge of art. She says, "Mexican artists are nothing but an exotic curiosity here," which is played over a full-frontal sex scene with a black Parisian woman. This scene further plays on the idea that the Latina and her sexuality are tied to ideas of exoticness and sex more so than their thoughts. This acts in continuing the history of the Latin Lover, but this is not shocking:

Given Hollywood's longstanding narratives of Latina hypersexuality and the demand for commodification of gendered ethnic bodies within global popular culture, it is not surprising that Kahlo's sexuality is privileged over Kahlo's leftist politics in the movie *Frida*. Kahlo's politics become the cinematic background to the spectacle of her sexuality and Hayek's physicality" (Mendible 125).

In fact, Hayek reports that halfway through shooting, the production/distribution company had complained about Frida's unibrow and insisted Hayek stop limping as "the only

thing [Hayek] had going for [her] was [her] sex appeal and that there was none of that in this movie. So... [Weinstein] was going to shut down the film because no one would want to see [her] in that role.” The obvious ties to Latinas in film and sex are not only present, but alarming and hides the true stories that should be told. Unfortunately, because this film focuses around a Latina, her sexuality allows her to be “nothing but an exotic curiosity,” thus, without sex, she would have been simplified from a curiosity, to nothing.

While Frida, the character, was simplified to her sex appeal, so was Selma Hayek, the actress, during filming. Harvey Weinstein was the owner of the production and distribution company, Miramax, that *Frida* was under. Hayek was assaulted by Weinstein over the course of the film. Hayek was eager to work with him, as “The Weinstein empire... had become synonymous with quality, sophistication and risk taking — a haven for artists who were complex and defiant. It was everything that Frida was to me and everything I aspired to be.” However, she goes on to claim, “In his eyes, I was not an artist. I wasn’t even a person. I was a thing: not a nobody, but a body” (Hayek 1). Like the Latinas seen on the silver screen, Latina actors are subject to sexual abuse and oversexualization constantly. Weinstein went even further than belittling Hayek. Weinstein’s requests were nearly impossible saying Hayek had to “rewrite the script with no additional payment, raise \$10 million to finance the film, attach an A-list director, and cast four of the smaller roles with prominent actors,” because she wasn’t a big enough name on her own. When Hayek miraculously completed his to-do list, she claims Weinstein’s, “range of his persuasion tactics went from sweet-talking to...an attack of fury, [saying] the terrifying words, ‘I will kill you, don’t think I can’t.’” Despite fulfilling his requests, Weinstein still abused Hayek, saying he would agree to her finishing the film if she did a full-frontal, lesbian sex scene. Hayek agreed because she didn’t want all of the work she, and others, had put into the movie to go unseen. Yet, even after all of this abuse, Hayek says:

When Harvey saw the cut film, he said it was not good enough for a theatrical release and that he would send it straight to video... [He] agree[d] to release the film in one movie theater in New York if...tested to an audience and... scored at least an 80. Less than 10 percent of films achieve that score on a first screening...film scored 85 (1).

The images of Latinas in film are dictated by these people (once more, typically cis white men) in power, like Weinstein, who believe these stereotypes and assumptions about Latinas to be true. They abuse their power onto those they see as lesser than, both in real life and in film.

However, even though there have been appalling actions taken against both Frida in the film and Selma Hayek, this film demonstrates that there is *some* hope in the blockbuster film industry. While Kahlo was extremely sexualized due to politics in the film industry in Hayek's portrayal, (significantly more than Kahlo sexualizes herself in her paintings and history), does not diminish the fact that a woman who complicated the notions of gender, politics, authenticity, honesty, sexuality, nationality, and culture was represented. Kahlo was a bisexual, communist artist who stood her ground, despite her gender or physical restrictions. She had the courage to create little intimate paintings while everyone else was reveling in the golden age of murals. She is a feminist icon, and even though her sexuality was at the forefront of this film, the fact that she was represented at all shows a forward-moving change in the industry.

Hot Pursuit (2015)

In the film *Hot Pursuit*, an uptight, white female cop, Officer Rose Cooper (played by Reese Witherspoon) must escort Daniella Riva, the Latina wife of a drug lord, (played by Sofía Vergara) from San Antonio to Dallas. Daniella must stand trial with her husband to testify against a different drug lord. While complete foils to one another, the two women come together as they are being pursued by corrupt cops and gunmen. The title alone explicitly sexualises the film. It entails that there is a hot, (or attractive, sexual, etc.) something to be desired. We soon find out that something is main character, Daniella Riva.

This film very clearly illustrates the good guy, bad guy scenario. The film opens with Elle King's *American Girl* playing over a quintessential Texan scene. A timeline of Officer Cooper's childhood is presented before us and it is clear that she is a driven, hard-working girl

who finally achieves her dream of becoming a police officer, like her father. By giving Cooper a background, she is relatable and seen as a good girl. On the other hand, when Daniella is first presented in the film, she is frantically screaming in Spanish about her no-good husband and how it is such a burden to have to pack her many belongings. Daniella is talked about in a negative light by her husband, Cooper, and Cooper's partner before she is even shown on screen. Before the audience even sees who Daniella is, it is understood that she is presented as a Spitfire (*The Bronze Screen*). With the good guy, bad guy scenario comes the issue of dualistic thinking. This juxtaposition marginalizes the minority group and affects how others are to view these minorities. In this case, Mrs. Riva is marginalized to simply be the dramatic and selfish Spitfire that is presented next to the good girl.

A main source of comedy in the film was created by poking fun at these characters' bodies and appearances. In the first cut where the audience can see Daniella, she is in a tight white dress and stilettos. This is juxtaposed with Cooper's traditional cop uniform. In the first exchange between Cooper and Daniella, the women judge how the other presents themselves:

C: I can assure you you aren't gonna need all these shoes, these are clumsy and impractical.

D: Yours are men shoes, my husband has the same kind. Congratulations Officer Lesbian you wear the shoes of a coward that I hate.

C: I realize this may be difficult for someone like you.

D: What does that mean?

C: Just someone who likes a lot of stuff.

D: *puts on tiarra*

C: For example, that is something you could leave at home.

D: *This?* I was Miss Plantain 2004. My cousin Rosa lost 2 fingers trying to snatch this from my head.

In addition to the stark contrast in how their bodies are presented and clothed, it is notable to recognize that in this conversation, Daniella is presented as vain (packing a suitcase

full of high heels and a tiara), feisty (calling Cooper a lesbian and comparing Cooper to Mr. Riva), and violent (claiming her cousin lost two fingers in a fight they had). All of these qualities trace back to the original Spitfire, showing how virtually nothing has changed regarding Latina stereotypes from the 1930s to 2015.

Furthermore, Cooper's line, "I realize this may be difficult for someone like you" should not go unnoticed. This line further separates the two women. Cooper speaks to Daniella in a demeaning and judgemental tone. "Someone like you" implies that Daniella is *not* what Cooper represents, and is in a societal class that is lesser than the one Cooper is in. Because Cooper is presented as a kind girl, this microaggression goes by relatively unnoticed, especially compared to Daniella's ridiculous story about her cousin that is said next.

To demonstrate the significance of the stereotypical Latina figure in this film, Daniella utilizes her body to get Cooper and herself out of messy situations. The two women are falsely accused of a crime, so they are attempting to go unnoticed from San Antonio to Dallas. Daniella and Cooper need to pay for the clothes they had purchased to disguise them, but Cooper fears being recognized by the teenage boy working the register. Daniella places the money between her breasts, and hands it to the boy, leaning over the counter. As expected, the boy does not look up from her breasts. In this instance, the Latina body is used to distract and become objectified. It is subjected to voyeurism, and it is inferred that Daniella had experienced this often enough where she was able to perform this act with confidence.

Likewise, the two women are later attempting to steal a truck. The owner of the truck comes around the corner and catches Cooper taking his keys. He points a gun at Cooper, and Daniella begins to grope Cooper. Daniella explains that she and Cooper are lovers that got into a

fight, and Cooper was just acting irrationally. Daniella then thrusts against an uncomfortable Cooper, pushes up her breasts, and begins to kiss her. The owner accidentally shoots himself in the hand, which demonstrates how Daniella was able to use her body and sexuality to distract. Daniella then faints at the sight of the dismembered finger. At the same time, Cooper makes the next move, and negotiates with the owner of the truck to let them go quietly and he can get his finger back. This proves that Daniella is only used for her body and as a source of entertainment, while Cooper proves to be the brains of the situation. Both of these instances tap into the idea that the Latina body is meant to be looked at and exploited. While it is presented as Daniella's strength, it is also harmful, as she is not presented as more than a body in these situations.

This point is explicitly illustrated when Daniella reads Cooper's notes on her:

D: "Mrs. Riva's constant use of her physical assets rather than her somewhat limited mental capacity suggests that she might not know as much as the prosecution would hope."

C: What I was saying that you are not a criminal!

D: No! You were saying that I am too dumb to be a criminal.

Cooper takes note that Daniella uses her body in order to take control of situations, and does not use her intelligence. Once again, Cooper tries to make up for an uncalled for critique by spinning it positively. Yet, she has said what she meant. Cooper again puts Daniella into a box where her only asset is her body and appearance.

The Latina body in media is a double edged sword. It is the thing that saves Daniella, but it is also the reason Daniella finds herself in these situations in the first place. For example, Cooper and Daniella need to jump out of a window to escape the two crooked cops that are trying to kill them. Cooper is small and gets flung out of the window with ease. However, Daniella is having difficulties, and almost does not make it out alive. She screams, "I have the body of a woman!" as she wiggles out. Daniella addresses her body as a shortcoming here,

explaining that she is different than the typical US norm, which celebrates white, youthful bodies: the body that Cooper has.

Later on in the film, it is revealed that Cooper and Daniella are being chased because Daniella has ties to a cartel (which stereotypes Daniella as the Gang Member, as well). She is secretly hiding four million dollars worth of shoes from Cooper. Cooper asks:

C: What is this [the shoe] made of... platinum?

D: No, white gold and diamonds. That's how my husband smuggled money into this country. As presents for his vain, dumb trophy wife.

Daniella is being chased because her husband took advantage of how others would perceive her. Others believed she was just a "trophy wife," someone who only cares about wealth and their appearance. Mr. Riva exploited the bigotry surrounding this stereotype as reductive and dumb, thus reinforcing the idea that Latina women will be stereotyped. According to New York Times' Film Critic, A.O. Scott:

Ms. Vergara has for a while seemed more than ready to leap beyond her narrow, frequently hilarious, occasionally offensive role on "Modern Family." But [the premise of the film] doesn't give [Witherspoon and Vergara] anything especially fresh or interesting to do together. We are in the midst of a comedy boom, and within it an explosion of feminist and woman-driven humor, but the news has apparently not reached Warner Bros. headquarters (Scott 1).

This critic, along with many others who reviewed *Hot Pursuit*, felt as though it was uninteresting and demeaning for women- and specifically Latina women. The industry has made clear that Latina women will continue to play the stereotypes they have been playing for decades, and audiences are no longer surprised at these portrayals. *Hot Pursuit* did not do as well in the box office as expected, likely because there is nothing fresh or exciting or empowering in the stereotypes Latina actors are playing- and audiences are taking notice.

MISREPRESENTATION AND THE LATINA IN INDIE FILMS

An indie film, short for independent film, has an average to low budget, and its income varies based on variables like production, execution, and advertising. They often include lesser known actors, but can include some more well-known actors. Indie films oftentimes appeal to more niche audiences, thus allowing for more unique and creative approaches in the writing and filming process. Due to budget restrictions, many indies go straight to DVD or streaming sites, rather than theatres. The Latina character in indies can defy typical sexual stereotypes much more than blockbusters can, but their bodies still used as a symbol to prove they are Other in society.

Real Women Have Curves (2002)

The 2002 indie film, *Real Women Have Curves*, stars Latinas, America Ferrara and Lupe Ontiveros. *Real Women Have Curves* was produced under an IATSE (The International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees union) low-budget feature film agreement and won the Dramatic Audience Award at the Sundance Film Festival in 2002. The film was a triumph for Latinas both in front of and behind the camera, as the film was written by Josefina Lopez, based off of her own life, and produced by Columbian director Patricia Cardoso. The film follows a Mexican family living in East Los Angeles and centers around Ana, played by Ferrara, who is the youngest of the family and is about to graduate high school. She has to decide between staying home with her traditional Mexican parents, or going to Columbia University in New York City.

In the film, Ana defies traditional Latina stereotypes by drawing attention to her body which does not fit the bombshell mold. Generally, Latinas, regardless of age, are played by curvy, yet fit, actresses. In this film Ana's body is positioned to be the opposite of what conventional Latina beauty standards are. In fact, Ana and her mother, Carmen, played by Ontiveros, are in constant conflict over how Ana should look. For instance, Ana begins to work with her mother and sister in their dress factory. Ana admires one of the dresses and looks at its delicate straps. Ana doesn't say anything about the dress, yet Carmen feels the need to comment on how Ana will never fit into it. She says:

C: Don't even think about it. You'll never fit into that one, it's a size 7.

A: Why do you always have to be like this?

C: I only tell you for your own good. *Lifts Ana's breasts*. Look at you. Enormous! They must be 10 kilos each!

A: Mom, what do you think you're doing?

C: You're so dramatic.

In this scene, Carmen claims, "I only tell you for your own good," but doesn't say this scene with compassion or intent to actually help Ana. Carmen is malicious and continuously puts her daughter down for her weight.

On another occasion, Ana gets upset with Carmen because Carmen tells Ana that she could be pretty, if only she lost weight. Ana takes Carmen's flan, and Carmen warns her to not eat it. Ana aggressively eats the flan to prove to her mother that she doesn't care about her opinion on her body. Here, Ana's body is used to cause tension in the film, and be stern with her mother. I argue that while this point in the film was comical and showed Ana's strong will, this microcosm of the Latina experience could have been represented through dialogue, rather than utilizing the body. The Latina body here is being used to show that Ana does not represent any ideal body type, let alone the ideal Latina body type. By utilizing the body to send this message,

rather than dialogue to discuss how Ana does not care about her mother's opinion bell hooks' concept of "dualistic thinking" is being used again to describe Ana. The film focuses so much on Ana's body and how society views it as "bad," she is in turn, characterized the same way. Ana is an intelligent and brave character, but she is not fully categorized this way because her body does not prescribe to the norm, the "good."

Additionally, Ana has gotten into the high school she attended on academic scholarship. Most of her peers are white and privileged. In both her looks and amount of privilege, she is seen as Other in her class. She tries to fit in, but can only do so by pretending to be more privileged than she actually is. She lies to her class about taking a gap year to travel through Europe and then apply to colleges, even though her plan is to work in her family's dress factory. The only one who sees Ana for who she really is is Mr. Guzman, Ana's English teacher, (played by George Lopez). Because he sees her potential, he encourages her to apply to colleges. Ana tells Mr. Guzman that she filled out the applications, and Mr. Guzman looks over the application and asks, "Is it true?" Ana responds, "Of course it is. I don't lie on applications, except about my weight." Mr. Guzman doesn't answer to Ana's self-deprecating comment, but rather moves on to ask her more about what her personal statement will be in the application. In this scene, Mr. Guzman sees Ana for her intelligence, yet Ana has been told by her mother, her classmates, and society that her weight comes before her intelligence. Through this small comment, Ana shows just how influential others are when they tell her the body she inhabits is not good enough. Here, Margaret L. Andersen and Howard F. Taylor's explanation of stereotype threat emerges through Ana (234). She recognizes the ideal that her mother and society tell her to be (which is a thinner Latina), and when she cannot fit that mold, she takes it out negatively onto herself. As a result,

Ana's confidence is not as high as it should be for someone as smart as she is. She limits her potential because of her internalized perception of herself.

While having the film revolve around a Latina character with an unconventional body type allows more room for opportunity in the industry, I argue that the film could have focused less on the Latina body itself, and more on who Ana is as a character. Ana claims, "there's so much more to me than just my weight," yet the film argues society weighs her intelligence and body as equal. The constant mentioning of the Latina body still allows audiences to have this voyeuristic view of her, proving while the Latina indie film star does have more opportunity for nontraditional roles, she is still utilized as a symbol for "other" in society.

Moreover, Carmen reinforces the idea that the "good" Latina woman has to be sexy and attractive in order to marry a good man. This enforces that the Latina's purpose is to have a good body for man, and not herself. While Ana does not fit this stereotype, Carmen does uphold the qualities that make up the Latin Lover trope. In a fight Ana and Carmen are in, Carmen questions Ana's confidence in relation to her body type:

C: Aren't you embarrassed?

A: Mom, I like myself.

C: Aren't you ashamed?

A: Mama, you look just like us.

C: Yes, but I'm married.

A: Oh, so that's it; make myself attractive so I can catch a man. Mama, I do want to lose weight. And part of me doesn't because because my weight to everybody says, fuck you! How dare anyone tell me what I look like, or who I should be when there's so much more to me than just my weight?

This exchange furthers the notion that, while the body type of Ana and the women in her family is not the societal ideal, Latinas should reinforce the ideas of and strive to be conventionally

attractive. Obviously not all Latinas feel this way, as Ana shows, yet because the matriarch of the family is emphasizing its importance, viewers are to believe it as a truth about Latina culture. In conclusion, even when the Latina body is not oversexualized, it is still utilized and manipulated for the viewer to categorize her as “other.”

Beatriz at Dinner (2017)

The 2017 indie, *Beatriz at Dinner*, is the story of Beatriz, (played by Salma Hayek), a holistic therapist from Mexico. After helping the mother of a chemotherapy patient, Kathy, (played by Connie Britton), Beatriz’s car breaks down. She is invited to stay for a dinner that is being held to commemorate an important business deal. Doug, a dinner guest and leading business developer, (played by John Lithgow), has morals that clash with that of Beatriz. While Beatriz is a healer who believes in compassion, he is a destroyer who is greedy to the core, profiting off of others’ loss. This film’s dark humor pokes at the divided state American politics are in, while also using discrimination to prove a point. While other Latina stereotypes are employed and Beatriz is subject to discrimination and racism, the sexualization of Beatriz is used sparingly.

While the film does not sexualize Beatriz, she is still stereotyped. In the 80s the maid trope was created to demonstrate how Latinas were often lower class. While Beatriz is not an actual maid, she still works for a wealthy white family and dresses in much more casual wear that signifies she is a servant to the family, thus qualifying to fill this archetype (*The Bronze Screen*). It is degrading to be stereotyped as a simple servant, especially because Beatriz is a strong, caring and intelligent character. However, the stereotype itself is used self-reflexively.

The audience is able to recognize the Latina maid trope and then understand that it is being used satirically to bring light to the discomfort many Americans have with race relations. In the years before this film was released, it was widely believed that we lived in a post-racial America. However, with the election of President Trump and injustices that were occurring that this was not true. *Beatriz at Dinner* targets these ideas and does so by showcasing the classic Latina maid trope which sets up a dualistic thinking scenario - showing how Beatriz is of a lower, (and therefore worse) class than everyone else in the film.

One of the two times that Beatriz is referred to as a sexual figure is when Beatriz and Doug meet. Doug mistakes Beatriz for one of the maids, and asks her for another glass of whiskey. Beatriz says she thinks she knows Doug, and Doug asks her if she, “had ever danced in Vegas?” This implies that Doug joked Beatriz could have been an exotic dancer; an exotic spectacle on display, utilizing her body for other people’s pleasure. While a flippant comment, it is important because microaggressions lead to larger issues. In this scene, this microaggression from Doug both stereotyped Beatriz as the maid and then the bombshell. These two stereotypes could not be more different from one another, yet Doug could only fathom that Beatriz was one or the other. In turn, this shows how Latinas are often seen as one-dimensional and stereotypical beings.

The second time that Beatriz is referred to as a sexual figure is exactly one hour into the film. Beatriz shouts at Doug claiming that the destruction Doug is causing others will eventually “touch him.” Beatriz is guided into another room when Alex, a male member of the dinner party (played by Jay Duplass), mimics Beatriz’s Mexican accent and says, “I hope it touches me in my

private parts.” While short lived and almost overlooked, this scene is still important because it nods to the expectation that Latinas are to be sexual, even in moments of shame and stress.

Beatriz’s character is strong, sticks up for her beliefs, and brushes off acts of discrimination. While stereotypically fiery at times, she is successful and, in general, not sexualized. The film is actually rather careful to *not* oversexualize her; her simple and shapeless outfit, her low ponytail and bangs, and general demeanour almost deny her any overt sexuality or even femininity. This choice is an interesting one, as it completely rejects the notion that women leads, and especially Latina women leads, have to be sexual at all. While completely rejecting sexuality may not be an answer to the issue of the oversexualization of Latina women, it does offer these women a different, non-degrading role to play.

However, for this exact reason, the role of Beatriz was a hard one to fill. Miguel Arteta, director of the film, claims:

The feedback [of *Beatriz at Dinner* in development] was, like, the writing is amazing. This is very interesting, but we would need a very major star in the role of Doug Strutt for this to happen, maybe. And we would give you no money to make it. Because we don’t believe that this movie would be marketable. Nobody said openly, ‘we don’t believe that movies about Latina women are going to have an audience,’ [especially one who is not sexualized] but people were not willing to take the leap... Making a movie about a female Latina is definitely hard, and there were no investors. In fact, nobody would – I spent more than a year looking for the money, and nobody would give me the money (Rico 1).

It is important to recognize that the film industry did not think a Latina could play a role where she was not sexualized and did have a main role. Moreover, actresses were reluctant to take on the role of Beatriz, which is why it did not get picked up until Hayek, who by now has a big name in Hollywood, would take it on. The sexualization of Latinas in film is so ingrained into the industry to be seen as unimportant that films are seldom picked up, unless something

miraculous happens. Because of this, Latina stories are rarely told from their perspectives. Being fortunate enough to be able to produce the film, Arteta voices:

I believe that independent movies are about the courage to respect the truth and honesty. In spite of consumer society wanting corporations to take over everything, including Hollywood, humans still have a yearning to be told a message that's being told in an authentic and honest way. Not with [the interests] of a corporation. And that's the brilliance and the reason that people yearn for independent movies is because they are not made at the beck and call of a corporation. We have a yearning for an honest and authentic story, and no matter what's happening in the society, you cannot squelch that, you know? (Rico 1).

Arteta truly believes that it is possible to create films that allow unheard voices to be told, yet the industry needs to give a little, or directors need to find ways to make them happen. While easier said than done, he offers hope for the Latina actress and character to stop being oversexualized and portrayed as whoever she wants to be.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Latinas are being unjustly misrepresented in America. This phenomenon is something that is deeply rooted in American culture. All societal indicators, (such as language, politics, art, and so on), point to the notion that the Latina is a person who can be both put in a box and belittled on the basis of sexuality.

Moreover, there are still industries, especially in the fine arts, where just representation is overlooked based on the notion of this tradition. The film industry, as progressive as it may appear in today's media, continues this tradition. This phenomenon is perpetuated in both indie and blockbuster films, with blockbusters proving to carry this tradition with more weight than indies. However, change is happening. Indie films are slowly beginning to change this status quo

and build Latina characters with dimension, despite the *many* obstacles that are making the fight for representation possible. Latina characters in indie films are beginning to have stories in which they grow, have conflicting emotions, and are complex beings. As seen in *Beatriz at Dinner*, Latina characters are utilizing their prescribed stereotypes and flipping them on their heads. However, it is important to recognize that this change is not happening on a large scale.

By not representing Latinas as three-dimensional characters who defy sexual stereotypes, film makers are doing a disservice to not just Latinas, but also their work. Film should tell a story, and if authenticity is a benchmark for great storytelling, then they have missed it by far. While discrimination exists in representation through film, it is part of the larger issue of discrimination against marginalized people in America. It is difficult to offer solutions to this issue, as the scope of it is so large. So much needs to be done in American politics and society to work towards a more equal culture. However, because life imitates art, starting with progress through film could aid a greater societal change. Assessing the roles of Latinas in film to check for changing levels of discrimination, or progress, would hold filmmakers accountable for their decisions.

Some ways to further assess the role of Latinas in US contemporary film would be conducting more quantitative studies on Latinas in film. To offer statistics on topics like speaking percentages, wages earned, time on camera, outfits worn, language utilized, role casted in or budget of the film would be logical parameters for more studies. To gather greater sets of data on a more regimented basis, rather than generally over several years, (like the studies I used in this thesis), would pinpoint more specific rates of change.

Moreover, encouraging Latina actors to speak out on their experiences would allow for more qualitative information on the issue. To make the issue known to society is the first step.

As Barack Obama said in 2008:

One voice can change a room, and if one voice can change a room, then it can change a city, and if it can change a city, it can change a state, and if it changes a state, it can change a nation, and if it can change a nation, it can change the world. Your voice can change the world (Obama 1).

Like Obama stressed in 2008, one voice can change the world. Similarly, I believe one voice can change the film industry. As seen in the recent Time's Up movement, one woman's experience caused a ripple effect in the industry to aid those who have been victims of sexual harassment, assault, or abuse in the workplace and prevent it from happening again. This is just one part of the overarching discrimination Latinas in the industry face, but it is a step towards greater equality. If Latinas continue to speak out about their experiences on and off the screen, their voices could change the industry even more than it already has.

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