Interrogating the Look of the Gaze: Theorizing a Latina Cine-subjectivity

Deborah Elizabeth Whaley


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Abstract: This article concerns sexual object choice, transgender subjectivities and emancipatory heterosexuality as imaged in three films: The House of the Spirits (1993), I Like It Like That (1994) and Mi Vida Loca (1994). The author argues, through her examination of the three films, for cinematic ways to refocus and interrogate the look and gender of the gaze, thereby envisioning what the author theorizes as a Latina cinematic subjectivity. The idea of a Latina cinematic subject is presented in order to articulate how at particular moments in the films an autonomous Latina subjectivity is created through narrative and mise-en-scène. It is at these narrative and aesthetic moments that the characters look back at the objectifying gaze, thereby creating a cinematic sexual subjectivity for the characters and a model of agency for the culturally resistant spectator who is doing the looking. The House of the Spirits points to the contradiction of sexual object choice and female desire; I Like It Like That reveals the performative and fluid possibilities of gender, as well as the hybridity of black and Latino cultures; and Mi Vida Loca reflects the struggle for agency in Chicana heterosexual relationships and in their material lives. The author argues that the three portrayals begin important cultural work in the rethinking of sexualities, as they unthink the rigidity of monosexuality, destabilize normative conceptions of gender and reinvigorate agency and egalitarianism in heterosexual relations.

Keywords: Latina, Chicana, film, sexuality, gaze, subjectivity, spectatorship

The work of this essay is to think through the representative and aesthetic grounds of Latinas in mid-1990s popular films by focusing on images of sexuality(ies). In particular, I examine anti-mimesexuality, transgender subjectivities and emancipatory heterosexuality as imaged in The House of...
the Spirits (1993), I Like It Like That (1994) and Mi Vida Loca (1994). My arguments draw attention to moments of cinematic resistance to add to the critical analyses that argue for meaningful representations of Latinas in film and talks back to the pathology of the presentations which continue to saturate Hollywood and the cinema (on these pathological presentations see Berg, 2002). To this end, I concentrate on the representative urgency of their release—that is, the mid 1990s, when the commodification of a Latina identity was increasingly marketable—to evaluate the emergence of a sexual subjectivity for Latinas. A focus on Latinas and sexuality in film is a strategic intervention, given their dearth of filmic representation and the growing pool of literature on Latinas in popular culture that seeks to broaden scholarship on the topic.

Feminist and cultural critic bell hooks (1993) argues that in the mid 1970s to late 1980s, analyses of women and film had a disproportionate focus on whiteness. No doubt well intentioned, some white feminist film scholars sought to address the error in equating women with whiteness by making a gesture to other historically marginalized groups in a footnote, while highlighting the following proverbial list of terms—race, class, gender and sexuality—in lieu of a full and broad discussion of women and difference. In so doing, this list (i.e. race, class, gender and sexuality) would, in effect, provide a way to talk around, as opposed to talking about, the various modalities and assemblages of difference. Feminist critic Judith Butler provides a caution about this elision in scholarship—that is, the positing of a laundry list of terms to replace the interrogation and mapping of the critical meanings that those differences mark (Butler 1997). Butler reminds us that:

There are quite pressing and significant historical reasons for asking how and where we might read not only the convergence [of gender, race, class and sexual difference], but name these sites at which the one cannot be constituted save through the other.

She thus supports that we must ‘think [through] the relations we wish to mark’ (ibid.: 267).

In other words, while some scholars may affirm that these distinctions are important and that different subject positions create divergent meanings in texts and everyday life, the mere listing of these identity formations too often acts as a way to elide any critical engagement with the differences named, and further obfuscates the power relations that are maintained through those distinctions. Scholarship on difference must continue to press beyond a singular focus on one or two aspects of identity in order to think through the limits and expansions of each
category under examination. I seek, then, to answer the following questions with regard to sexuality and the Latina subject in film: Can an interrogation of monosexuality reveal the stale binaries of sexual distinction of heterosexuality, homosexuality and bisexuality? How does a language shift from transgender to ‘she’ help to unmark gender reassignment within an always-already assumed category of gender essentialism and sexual artifice? In what ways might scholarship locate heterosexuality as an emancipatory subject position that does not predicate itself on heteronormativity? What follows, then, is a contextual framework in which to situate depictions of Latinas in the 1990s, a comparative discussion of the stalling and fulfillment of Latina sexual subjectivity in film, and an assessment of why attention to questions of gaze and representation in relation to the looking relations of Latina cine-subjectivity remains a worthy, affective avenue of investigation.

The New Pleasure Principal: Theorizing a Latina Cine-subjectivity

Recent work of film and media scholars Myra Mendible, Isabel Molina Guzman and Mary Beltrán attends to the previous omission of scholarship on Latinas and film with a focus on visual culture (Beltrán 2009; Mendible 2007; Molina Guzman 2010). Mendible expresses the necessary work of delegitimizing anecdotal media depictions of Miami Cubans as political caricatures. She situates the politics of exile within cubanita identity and argues for a realization that heterogeneity within a demographic is not mutually exclusive from forming alliances of familiarity (Mendible 2001). In her situating of popular visual images of the Latina body, Mendible argues for racial and gender embodiment. Latina bodies exist in visual culture as a ‘doubly inscribed fantasy—a multiply inflected and variably experienced category’, Mendible writes, ‘where several forces converge in producing acculturated, gendered bodies [that] have very real consequences for Latinas in the United States and abroad’ (Mendible 2007: 1).

Such consequences hold variant meanings and possibilities, as Beltrán’s case study on singer and actress of Puerto Rican descent Jennifer Lopez shows, and cultural critic María Elena Cepeda argues of the Colombian singer Shakira (Cepeda 2008b). Cepeda and Beltrán maintain that the Latina body is a loaded symbol that serves to organize society (Beltrán, 2002; Cepeda 2003, 2008a, 2008b). In particular, Beltrán asserts that ascension and long-term visibility in Hollywood for figures such as Lopez predicates itself not on a Latino/a spectatorship alone, but, rather, on a wider and predominantly white audience, because non-white star
images must resonate with white notions of ethnicity in order to cross over and gain acceptance. The film *Selena* (1997) notwithstanding, Lopez’s deracialized and ethnically ambiguous film roles (*The Back-Up Plan* [2010], *An Unfinished Life* [2005], *Maid in Manhattan* [2002], *Angel Eyes* [2001] and *The Wedding Planner* [2001]) serve as a significant part of her career success. Even popular visual depictions of Latinas on television, such as the now cancelled ABC (American Broadcasting Company) series *Ugly Betty*, which was based on the Colombian telenovela *Yo Soy Betty, La Fea*, draw on ethnicity as irrational fetish only to, as Isabel Molina Guzman emphasizes, deeply sublimate such ethnic identities within vexed discourses of belonging and estranged citizenship (Molina Guzman 2010; see also Beltrán 2006). Characters such as Betty Suarez (played by the Honduran American actress America Georgina Ferrera), who appear unfamiliar with gender, sexual and American cultural codes, purport to question their marginal status and the dependent relationship between women’s bodies and a white standard of rigid femininity, but ultimately reify the power relationships that their presence seeks to question. Cultural critic Jennifer Esposito argues similarly of *Ugly Betty* that writers used Suarez’s Latina ‘difference’ to posit post-racial discourses of inclusion (Esposito 2009). As a collective, then, these scholars create a shift in the field of cultural and visual studies by coupling Latina studies with body theory and politics, with particular attention to the sexualization of the body and ethnic heterogeneity, and they provide a reminder of the minimal guarantees in meaningful representations of Latinas in film, print media and television.

In 1993–5, there was a deployment of a set of discourses in the public sphere pertaining to bilingual education, immigration and transatlantic ties between the United States and Mexico, Puerto Rico and Latin and South America. The film industry seemed to capitalize on this moment, and created films that were a part of and response to the discourses and material conditions that emerged as a result. Cultural critic Arlene Dávila refers to this moment and shortly thereafter as ‘Latinos, Inc.’, noting that visibility in mass culture did not translate into Latino rights in the public sphere (Dávila 2001; see also Natale, 1997). At the same time, Latino culture and Latinos became profitable selling markets. Anti-Mexican migrant legislation such as California’s Proposition 187 pushed the issues of bilingual education, immigration and transatlantic ties to the foreground, brought attention to ‘border’ states in the south-west, south and on the east coasts, and regenerated the subject of Latin American, Chicano and Latino cultural citizenship (Flores and Benmayor 1997).

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1 Proposition 187 was proposed and passed in the 1995 California state election. The proposition’s goal was to regulate mostly Mexican immigration to California by limiting the rights of undocumented workers in California and to discourage the crossing of the Mexico–California border outside of ‘legal’ channels. Lisa Lowe’s *Immigrant Acts* provides a fine example of the use, deployment and ramifications of the cultural discourses that gave birth to and materialized the proposition (Lowe 1996: 174, 187).
and consider film as a cinematic and gendered refraction of Latina cultural-sexual subjectivity and citizenship in the mid 1990s. A concentration on the historical moment of the release of the films does not seek to overdetermine this timeline, but, rather, seeks to argue for their contribution to the spatio-temporal moment of the 1990s, which gave birth to the commodity franchise of Latinos, Inc. For the purposes of this claim, spatio-temporal refers to the placement of an object of analysis within the parameters of a particular historical moment and within a context—historical, social or geographical—to explain how space and time shape interpretive meaning.

I argue, through my examination of the three films, for cinematic ways to refocus and interrogate the look and gender of the gaze, thereby envisioning what I am theorizing as a Latina cinematic subjectivity. In interrogating the ‘look’ of the gaze, I am advocating abandoning the methodological approach in film studies that insists on the origin of the male gaze as a primary site of analysis. Previous feminist film scholars made the argument that the camera’s situating of the gaze would place women as the object of, or subjected to, the masculinist (and, one might add, phallocentric, heterosexist and imperialist) gaze. By contrast, the idea of a Latina cinematic subject is presented in order to articulate how at particular moments in the films, an autonomous Latina subjectivity is created through written narrative and its visual composition or coherence—that is, its mise-en-scène. It is at these narrative and aesthetic moments that the characters look back at the objectifying gaze, thereby creating a cinematic subjectivity for the characters and a model of agency for the culturally resistant spectator who is doing the looking. As Richard Pope’s work on sexuality and the body in film asserts, although feminist film analysis of the gaze and looking relations constitutes a common focus in the field, there is more work to do on this topic, especially in relation to multiple aspects of difference (Pope 2010).

A distinction between the ‘look’ and the ‘gaze’, as feminist film theorist Ann Kaplan underscores, distinguishes the ‘look’ as a critical feminist analytic to offer a way to think a new space of ‘looking relations’ irrespective of the male gaze (Kaplan 1997: xviii–xxi). Contrary to early feminist film scholarship, I discuss the complex and contradictory meanings and sexual subjectivities produced in popular cinema without placing ‘the male gaze as adversary’. Rather, I theorize the spaces where Latinas acquire subjectivity in the films discussed, while accounting for and placing parameters upon a new and different set of looking relations located on various axes of identification. Although the sole subject of this essay is Latinas, an articulation of Latina cine-subjectivity encourages future theorization of new ways of seeing sexuality and women in film...
without excluding other types of difference. Latina cine-subjectivity therefore refers to three variables—Latina, the cinema and subjectivity—which may, at specific historical, cultural and filmic moments, converge to create a new visual social process that has the possibility of creating divergent meanings and libidary representations for the characters in the film and for the spectator.

Latina cine-subjectivity as a critical analytic draws and departs from the seminal works on Chicano film (Fregoso 1996; Noriega 1993, 1995, 2000; Pérez 2009; Woll 1980). In *The Bronze Screen*, Fregoso calls attention to the Chicano-male-dominated cinema that accounts for neither a progressive nor a transgressive Chicana narrative (Fregoso 1996). While Fregoso considers Chicano/a film culture, this essay, in contradistinction, discusses representations of Latinas in order to situate the heterogeneity of Latino ethnicities—for example, Latin American, Puerto Rican and Mexican American—within a gender-specified, sexually diverse and cultural formation. Latina refers to Mexican American, Puerto Rican and Chilean women, acknowledging the ethnic difference between these women, and hence a variety of cultural practices, while at the same time accounting for a historicized subject who often shares in common a language and a differentiated history of oppression, colonization and discrimination. As a cinematic and historical group, these three films begin the work of representing the diversity of Latino cultures, recognizing Latinas as being located on different class strata, ethnically hybrid, indigenous and marked by culture, gender and sexual differences. Indeed, many of the characters discussed do not fit into precise categories either ethnically, sexually or culturally, which invites inquiry into ways to theorize not just multiple subject positions, but an integrated *multiple subject*.

While multiple subject positions name the diverse ways that subjects identify, the idea of a multiple subject presents a way of thinking through identity formations as not just a set of ideological and expanding concentric circles, but as a heterogeneous identity that is at the same time whole. Put another way, a multiple subject is one who occupies multiple subject positions simultaneously. As the often-cited intervention of feminist Gloria Anzaldúa illustrates in her theorizing of ‘the new mestiza’, the cross-pollination of identities marks the idea of a multiple subject fraught by the social relations in history and a racially mixed or hybrid ethnic ancestry, and is located across several borders of distinction, either real or imagined (Anzaldúa 1987). This intellectual task is mindful of and takes seriously the problem that arises when invoking ‘Hispanic’ as an identity descriptor, because it prioritizes Spanish origins occluding any historicization of Spanish colonialism. Mendible, for example, cautions...
that umbrella terms, including the term ‘Latino’, may also unintentionally mask differences in ‘migration history, English-language skills, socioeconomic status, and other determinants’ (Mendible 2003: 4). Nevertheless, William Flores and Rina Benmayor and, more recently, Bernadette Marie Calafell and Shane Moreman argue that while Latino may carry a variety of ethnic signifiers in the popular imagination, as a strategic term it continues to hold political efficacy (Calafell and Moreman 2009; Flores and Benmayor 1997). The following films not only represent the heterogeneity of Latinas, then, but they also collide and critically engage with the multifarious nature of difference. In fact, the films discussed here refuse the tendency to essentialize a Latina subject. *The House of the Spirits* depicts a wealthy Latin American family in Chile, *I Like It Like That* a working-class Puerto Rican family in the Bronx area of New York City and *Mi Vida Loca* a family of Chicano/a ‘gang’ members in Echo Park, Los Angeles.

**Interrogating the ‘Look’ of the Gaze: The House of the Spirits**

*The House of the Spirits* is a film based on Chilean-born writer Isabel Allende’s 1982 international best-selling novel of the same title. Allende’s novel merges innovative narrative techniques of magical realism—i.e. tropes of fantasy and magic as social critique—with an attempt to reclaim political agency for Chilean women. The novel focuses on the trials, tribulations, political effect and aspirations of the wealthy Trueba family. Although the novel presents an invigorating narrative about the lives of Chilean women at the turn of the twentieth century, the film version of *The House of the Spirits*, written and directed by the white film-maker Bill August, is a romantic saga that fails to replicate Allende’s narrative magic. Ethnic and cultural forms in *The House of the Spirits* are scarce and constitute a hodgepodge of setting and sound. The film was shot mostly in Denmark, with a few scenes being shot in Lisbon and Alentejo, Portugal, and the score is by the German composer Hans Zimmer. There is one song by popular Chilean singer Rosita Serrano that appears in the film, ‘La Paloma’ (a song with Spanish, Cuban and Mexican origins), and a Uruguayan tango instrumental, ‘La Cumparsita’, by the German bandleader Adalbert Lutter. There is, thus, little visual sign in the film of Chilean ethnicity in the music, language, style or casting: white actors play all of the female lead roles. However, the political strife in Chile at the turn of the century as imaged by the film seems to run across colour and class divisions, thereby offering a visual critique of the dependent
relationship between class, social ascension and white skin colour. *The House of the Spirits* envisages this colour/power matrix through its depiction of poor indigenous ‘peasants’, who are visibly dark in complexion and who hold an unequal relationship with the white-skinned, wealthy characters. A key antagonism in the film in relation to feminine sexuality and subjectivity is the imaging of the relationship between the two main characters, Ferula Trueba (Glenn Close) and her sister-in-law Clara Trueba (Meryl Streep).

Ferula and Clara’s relationship begins the work of unthinking the rigid binaries of monosexuality, as it challenges the binaries of heterosexual and homosexual desire. Its progressive visual depiction notwithstanding, by the film’s end, the narrative rearticulates this visual unthinking back within the confines of heteronormativity. Clara, the protagonist in the film, is married to Ferula’s brother, Esteban. Although the character of the relationship between Ferula and Clara is that of a friendship, there are moments in the film that suggest complex forms of fantasy and desire. For example, midway through the film, Ferula, consumed with guilt and ambivalence about her feelings for Clara, goes to a Catholic confessional. ‘I used to think she was an annoying child’, says Ferula to her priest, ‘but now I know she is of a different world’. Ferula continues:

*Ferula:* [In an anxious tone] Sometimes at night, when I can’t sleep, I go to their room [i.e. Esteban and Clara’s].

*Priest:* [Inquisitively] What is it that you see? You used to be a gifted narrator.

*Ferula:* [In a dream sequence, we see Ferula as she glides down a hallway; the camera closes in on her face once she reaches the bedroom of Clara and Esteban. She looks through the bedroom door, which is slightly ajar.] I hear sounds…there are sweet smells…He wishes to consume her, but he is eternally damned!

*Priest:* Only God can judge damnation… but what were they doing?

The way the camera images this scene—i.e. a flashback of Ferula watching Clara and Esteban making love—envisions the cinematic creation of her desire through camera movement. As Ferula reaches the door of the couple’s room, the camera close-up of her face reveals a bewildered, yet intrigued glare. In a shot/reverse, the camera moves from Ferula’s face to Clara and Esteban making love—Ferula’s look replaces that of the camera. The camera angle positions the spectator within Ferula’s desire; there is no positioning of Clara or Ferula as objects, the spectator simply sees Ferula ‘looking’. While the shot/reverse technique in film generally places the spectator within the scene, thereby making the camera seem
absent, in this scene, something more complicated occurs. The spectator is placed into a position to watch Ferula, while the gaze is controlled by her ‘looking’. The imaging of the pleasure exists in Ferula’s fantasy and her narration of the event to the priest mediates the pleasure of the scene for the spectator. Although the priest asks for a description of what Clara and Esteban were doing, Ferula refuses to elaborate, and states only that Esteban is ‘eternally damned’. *The House of the Spirits* as a visual text thereby provides an aesthetic intervention through the combination of moving image and a mediated narrative that is not possible in Allende’s novel.

Although Ferula and Clara do not overtly articulate to each other the sexual desire that the filmic portrayal alludes to, both women share affectionate looks and sensual caresses throughout the film. Further, Ferula’s confession to the priest offers a new way of seeing sexual object choice and desire that complicates and blurs (hetero) and (homo)sexual identities. *The House of the Spirits* thus presents the possibility of same-sex desire between the two women, suggesting Clara’s bisexuality and Ferula’s transgression of monosexuality. Unfortunately, the film elides this sexually transgressive suggestion through its narrative treatment of the two women’s desire after Ferula’s confession. In tandem with Allende’s novel, *The House of the Spirits* cinematically circumvents Clara and Ferula’s mutual desire by Ferula’s suddenly and inexplicably dying of a mystery illness. In the end, then, Ferula is relegated to the role of asexual spinster. *The House of the Spirits* is thus a precursor to the re-envisioning of the complexity of sexual object choice. The film could have been cinematically and culturally transformative had it resisted the heteronormative convention of defusing same-sex desire through Ferula’s death and represented, as Allende’s novel does, the rich and expressive forms of Chilean ethnicity and culture. Film and cultural critic Julia Lesage reminds us that Latin American film, in order to be transformative, ‘should articulate . . . race, gender, and nation and how these representations are denied or deployed internationally . . . dealing with Latin American issues . . . [and allowing for a discussion of] how subjectivity is constructed’ (Lesage 1994: 492–494). *The House of the Spirits* ultimately fails, then, in its inability to sustain the sexual, ethnic and political cinematic subjectivity which it only begins to imagine.

**Imagining a Latina Cine-subjectivity: I Like It Like That**

While *The House of the Spirits* is a filmic recursor because of its lack of attention to cultural or ethnic style and its further unresolved sexual politics, the film *I Like It Like That* is a thoughtful cinematic text where a

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6 Judith Mayne argues that one way to disrupt the positioning of women as the object through the keyhole is to have women, both literally and figuratively, on both sides of that keyhole (Mayne 1990: 9).
Latina cine-subjectivity begins to take form. *I Like It Like That*, a film about a Puerto Rican family in New York City, was written and directed by Darnell Martin, who describes her racial identity as African American. The purpose of the film, claims Martin, was to create a film reflective of real life. She based her characters on, in her words, ‘Latin relatives’. As Martin claims:

there are a lot of filmmakers who have a political agenda and worry about being politically correct... I would like to see a person [in a film], not a political statement... I wrote an autobiographical story and where it isn’t, it is ridiculously idealistic.\(^7\)

Martin seems to place emphasis on the cultural importance of creating realistic images, while denying that these images may, regardless of the director’s intent, carry and produce political meanings. In counter-juxtaposition to Martin’s avowed intent, *I Like It Like That* is a critical filmic text where there is a creation and negotiation of oppositional interpretations of gender identification. These images challenge the typical image of Latinas in film.

*I Like It Like That* begins with a camera shot panning a Bronx street in New York City. Singer Tito Nieves’ version of the 1970s song ‘I Like It Like That’ plays in the background, which mixes the polyrhythmic sounds of jazz, salsa and rock ‘n’ roll. The opening music creates a sound perspective that guides the camera through the chaotic happenings on an urban street. As the camera pans closer to the scene of its visual focus, the music rises in volume as if to draw emphasis to the camera’s eventual destination, which is the bedroom of two of the film’s main players, Lissette (Lauren Vélez) and Chino Linares (Jon Seda). In this scene, we see Lissette, seemingly frustrated and bored by her husband’s love-making, turn from underneath him and shout: ‘Come, come, motherfucker!’ The next scene we see with Lissette displays frustrated and ambivalent feelings towards motherhood, as she balances the discipline of several of her children at once. At first glance, *I Like It Like That* appears to be a 1990s version of the Puerto Rican woman’s ‘problem that has no name’, as described by writer Betty Friedan regarding the unfulfilled lives of white middle-class women in the latter part of the mid-twentieth century (Friedan 1963).

Although the film appears to offer no more than a narrative of a young, misguided and sexually frustrated married couple, the (hetero)sexual narrative about Lissette and the competing subnarrative which emanates—that of her ‘preoperative’ transsexual brother/sister Alexis (played by Jesse Borrego)—invite further narrative and cinematic

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\(^7\) ‘Herstory in the Making’
The distinction made between the two narratives—hetero and homo—implies the vexed positionality of Lissette’s culturally normative sexual subjectivity and the struggle for the transgender-identified Alexis to complete her transfer across gender boundaries and to become a ‘woman’. There is, therefore, a subtext in the film that begins the work of questioning heteroideology, which creates a Latina cinematic subjectivity for the character Alexis. This narrative is more than the competing and unstable poles of hetero/homosexual distinctions; it constitutes a ‘tribrid’ mix of ethnic, sexual and gender identities that are in constant rearticulation.

The tension between Alexis and Lissette in I Like It Like That surfaces at a critical moment at the end of the film. Lissette, who has left Chino, seeks refuge at Alexis’s apartment. When Alexis attempts to give Lissette advice about her marriage and how to discipline her son, who has been selling drugs, she responds:

**Lissette:** What do you know about being a teenage boy?

**Alexis:** I know what it feels like for a boy’s father to tell him he is not a man.

**Lissette:** Yah, well my son is not dressing up in dresses... All the silicone in the world won’t make you a mother, Alex!

After the dialogue, Alexis turns off the Latin music playing on the cassette player. ‘I was listening to that’, says Lissette, and Alexis replies: ‘This is my house!’ Alexis then inserts the melancholy audiocassette ‘Try a Little Tenderness’, by Otis Redding. The music playing—Alexis’s ‘Try a Little Tenderness’ and Lissette’s Latin music—acts as an iconographic musical text, signifying the hybridity of the characters (black/Latino) and emphasizes through *mise-en-scène* the split antagonism between the two competing narratives (i.e. hetero and homo). As the two argue, the camera then focuses on a painting on the wall, which depicts a Madonna image holding a young infant boy. As the Redding track continues to play, Alexis walks over to a dressing table with a mirror and the camera splits her image. In a montage shot, the camera again images the painting, yet this time in the left-hand corner of the dressing-table mirror (a partial view of the painting on the wall behind the focus). An image of Alexis’s face appears in a second hand mirror on the dressing table and her breast prosthesis refracts in the full-length mirror, which she directly faces. Photographs of her black and Latino family adorn the larger mirror with small magnets, and a round porcelain plate that is a smaller depiction of the Madonna painting strategically sits atop the table. Through this camera imaging, we see Alexis as a split subject, where a cinematic

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8 I place the ‘hetero’ part in parentheses to bring attention to the fact that I do not wish to place or privilege this identity as normative, thereby not being critical of its construction and institutional subjugation of same-sex sexual relationships. However, it remains an important critical project to theorize, envision heterosexual relationships and desire that produces subjectivity for spectators. I have borrowed the concepts of homo- and heteronarrative from cultural critic Judith Root. Root describes heteronarrative as the workings of narrative that convert difference into a narrative of sexual sameness (Root 1996: 159–61).
statement on the multiplicity of Alexis’s identity refracts against Lissette’s words that Alexis will never be a mother/woman.

The three-way shot also draws attention to Alexis’s desire to integrate the fragmented image of that which she sees in her reflection by fusing the three reflected parts into one, thereby metaphorically making her ‘a complete woman’. In the scene that follows Alexis’s visual identity suture, the spectator sees Alexis at her parents’ doorstep, which is the first time they have seen her as a woman. Alexis demands recognition as a woman and tells her mother: ‘I want to be a woman just like you, Mommy. I am getting the operation’. As the mother dismisses Alexis in repulsion, the camera switches to a long-focus shot where Alexis’s father is standing in bewilderment at the end of a narrow hallway. The father walks towards Alexis and shouts: ‘Get out of here!’ Through a quick scene transition, there is a cinematic avoidance of the confrontation, and imaged next is Alexis stumbling into her own apartment bruised and bleeding. The shot transition leads the spectator to assume via cinematic framing that the father has beaten Alexis. After this denial of recognition, or misrecognition as a man and therefore not as a woman by her family, Alexis resolves: ‘It’s their problem, not mine’. Alexis’s statement thus results in a personal transformation for the character and a cinematic transgression for the transgender-identified ‘pre-op’ transsexual, who gains a rightful identity as ‘she’.

The cinematic transgression in the film largely emerges out of its resistance to the imaging of transsexuals and transgenders of colour in film as a comical, ‘minstrel-type’ figure (on minstrelsy, see Lott 1995; Roediger 1991; on the resistance to stereotypes of transgender identity, see Garber 1991). Indeed, society’s uneasiness with the transgender-identified transsexual is dealt with, on the movie screen, more often than not, by displacing and releasing the anxiety about her through caricature and humor. Cinema and feminist theorist Chris Holmlund locates this dilemma within the idea of ‘impossible bodies’ that fall outside of normative acceptance. ‘Impossible bodies’, she writes, ‘exist in most Hollywood films’ to fix gender within rigid confines and to ‘mask racial divisions [in order to]…reroute sexual dilemmas’ (Holmlund 2002: 10). Moreover, if that body is marked racially as being a member of a historically marginalized group, it becomes a way for the dominant culture to displace racial and sexual anxieties onto bodies of colour. This caricaturization of the transsexual is also used by people of colour who wish to mark an intra-group Other. Relegating transsexual and transgender bodies to a humorous space is to not take her seriously, therefore dismissing her as not real—i.e. not a real woman. In contrast to this type of cinematic and cultural displacement, I Like It Like That images Alexis as a subject who through the seriousness of the narrative and
complicated camera positioning, challenges the spectator not to look past, but, rather, to face the seriousness of her difference. What delineates Alexis’s narrative as transgressive is the ways it helps one see her as a tribrid, multiple subject—ethnically, gender-wise and sexually—as opposed to a cinematic caricature, therefore interrogating both the stereotypical and heterotypical gaze.

Although there is an opening of a transgender space in *I Like It Like That* and Alexis appears to arrive at a cinematic subjectivity produced through narrative and camera imaging, to suggest that this is therefore an example of a ‘Latina cine-subjectivity’ raises a crucial contradiction and potential representative problems. However, remembering that gender is performative (Butler 1990)—which is not to deny its materiality—Alexis’s transformation to the gender of her choice, despite the societal ramifications of this choice, is cinematically and politically progressive. What remains absent from *I Like It Like That* is the imaging of a heterosubjectivity for the character Lissette.

Theorizing and imaging egalitarian heterosex for heterosexual women of colour remains an urgent task in film, especially images that represent us as agents in heterosexual relationships. As cultural critic Wendy Hollway argues, the theorization of egalitarian heterosexual relationships for women must remain a goal for sexual political change along with other sexual identities and sites that are critical of heterosexism (Hollway 1995). Hollway writes that:

> the meanings of sex, notwithstanding their location within patriarchy, can reflect the themes which result from two adults who have achieved a reasonably successful differentiation, which minimizes the psychic investment in establishing control—engaging in domination—and whose desire can therefore be structured around the pleasures of being recognized and loved as an autonomous being. (ibid.: 97)

In the cinema, the filmic reproduction of a heterosexual agency would have exciting possibilities and allow for a cinematic shift away from the sexual objectification of Latinas, which saturates Hollywood films and the cinema.

**Stereo-imperialism and Heterosexual Subjectivities: Mi Vida Loca**

As in the case of *I Like It Like That*, a woman film-maker, Allison Anders, wrote and directed *Mi Vida Loca*. The film begins with the imaging of still
frames in pink and blue adorned with tattoo imagery of religion, love and violence—for example, crosses, hands praying, hearts, roses and guns. Rock en español is the background music of the opening credits, wherein the names of the actors who portray the film’s characters appear as an overlay on the screen. The beginning imagery sets the stage for the film’s narrative, one that aims to document the struggles and friendships between Chicana gang members in Echo Park, Los Angeles. *Mi Vida Loca* acts as a cinematic companion to Luis J. Rodriguez’s *Always Running: La Vida Loca*, written in 1993, which is also about gang participation. Rodriguez’s book, however, is primarily about Chicano men and the ramifications of living la vida loca. In juxtaposition, the influence of Anders’ film is her experience of having lived in a predominately Chicano neighborhood in Los Angeles for nearly 10 years, basing her characters, like Darnell Martin, on people she knew in the area. The organization of the film takes place in three cinematic sketches, which map the experiences of the main characters: Sad Girl, Mousie, Ernesto, La Blue Eyes, Whisper (played by an actual gang member) and Giggles. The opening dialogue in the film is didactic, as the character Sad Girl (played by Angel Aviles) suggests in a voice-over while the camera pans the streets of Echo Park: ‘This is Echo Park where our stories take place. We take pride in telling our stories, ’cause when white people tell them, they leave a lot of things out’. This is an ironic line, perhaps, as it is precisely a white woman (i.e. Anders) who has written their story.

*Mi Vida Loca*’s first vignette begins with the story of Sad Girl and Mousie (Seidy Lopez), two young Latinas who, in Mousie’s words, ‘get their asses kicked in to a gang to prove they are down’. The music transitions from rock en español to a muted murmur to accommodate each character’s monologue. The first part of the film asserts a polyvocal strategy, as each character narrates their story and speaks directly to the spectator about their vida loca and its emotional and physical ramifications for their spirit and on their body. In a particularly striking cinematic moment, the camera provides a close-up of Sad Girl’s eyes as the focus shifts from left to right; the camera then focuses on her right eye that has two tears tattooed underneath, then the knuckles of her hands and her fingers, each of which have the letters of her name tattooed in black script writing. The camera then pans out and closes in on a frame of the teenage Sad Girl holding her young infant while she stares into the eye of the camera with a defiant, intense, yet distant gaze. As the camera documents the engraving of her name on her physical body with a tattoo needle, Sad Girl shares the history behind the etymology of her name:
My name is Mona, but that’s not what they call me. When Mousie and I joined a gang, all the names were taken except Mousie and Sad Girl. Everyone said Mirabelle should be Mousie because she was so little. My homeboy Sleepy said: ‘No, stupid, because then we are going to have to name Mona Sad Girl, and she’s not sad at all’. Roscoe said: ‘Stupid, it don’t matter’. But Sleepy kept saying: ‘She’s too happy to be Sad Girl’. But they don’t say that no more.

This narrative and cinematic technique—that is, the multiple narration—adds complexity to the characters, naming them as subjects who represent themselves and question the Anglo-imperialist and pathological Chicano gang youth stereotypes which seek to generally dehumanize them in filmic portrayals. Yet, the story of Sad Girl and Mousie is more than a reversal of the stereo-imperialist, masculinist gang genre; it is about the close bonds that female friendships can yield and the journey to assert agency in heterosexual relationships. Mi Vida Loca shows how Sad Girl and Mousie came to be friends, concentrating on the importance of their bond, and later cites a conflict over a man, Ernesto (Jacob Vargas), as the rupture that presents challenges to their friendship. The two women fall in love with Ernesto and have children by him, but after Ernesto dies in a drug-related shooting, the women rekindle their friendship. The character Giggles (Marlo Marron) explains the meaning of the first vignette well as she tells the other Chicanas:

Girls, you don’t ever throw down with one of your homegirls over a guy. Guys aren’t worth it... we need new skills... by the time our men are 21 they’re either dead, in jail, or disabled... we have to take control.

Here, Giggles’ remarks begin the work of narrative subjectivity for the young Chicanas in the film by stressing independence within a heterosexual context and in view of their socio-economic displacement.

The third vignette images the relationship between La Blue Eyes (Magali Alvarado) and El Duran (Jesse Borrego). La Blue Eyes is Sad Girl’s sister, a Latina who attends college and pines after a womanizing neighborhood Latino male, El Duran. The camera envisages the relationship between the two through slow movement and soft music, and there is an imaging of La Blue Eyes in romantic, girlish clothing. El Duran and La Blue Eyes exchange letters while he is in prison, but when he is released, she learns that the man who presents himself as a heart-warming suitor, for whom only steel bars hinder the purity of his love, is, in reality, a drug trafficker and heartless Casanova. As Fregoso argues in her interpretation of the film, the iconography of La Blue Eyes’ clothes and the mise-en-scène...
created by the camera and music suggest that the one Latina who is not in
the gang, not a young single mother and not financially dependent is naive
about the reality of barrio life, and foolish at heart (Fregoso 1995). I argue,
in distinction, that La Blue Eyes’ portrayal and her interest in El Duran is a
contradictory cinematic statement that suggests both the fool’s errand of
romantic love as well as the alternative life choice enabled through
obtaining a degree in higher education.

The second vignette juxtaposes the characters of Whisper and Giggles.
Whisper sells drugs and is anxious for the release of her deceased brother’s
girlfriend, Giggles, from prison. ‘I bet she’ll have a lot to tell us homegirls
about how to run the neighborhood’, says Whisper. Instead of ‘schooling’
the women on how to run the neighborhood, Giggles conveys to Sad
Girl, Mousie, Whisper and the other women that education is the answer
to their problems, not gang life. Giggles’ character is also the most
representative of a Latina cine-subjectivity—for example, when a male
lover, Big Sleepy (Julian Reyes), offers to take care of Giggles and her
daughter, Giggles refuses, asserting that she will support and be
responsible for herself and her daughter. Giggles does, however, enjoy
the relationship of mutual respect and good sex that she and Big Sleepy
share. One night, after Giggles and Big Sleepy have mutually satisfying
sexual relations, she asserts her autonomous identity:

Big Sleepy: You can come here—you and Gracie [Giggles’ daughter].
Lay your troubles to rest. I don’t have much but whatever I got it’s
yours . . . I’ll be good to you. I’ll take care of you.

Giggles: The last man who said that to me is dead. No, I don’t want you
to take care of me. I don’t want to ever depend on nobody—never again.

Giggles is far from the image of the lovesick La Blue Eyes, and emerges as
the cinematic subject who displays sexual agency and self-reflexivity
about the material conditions of her life and the other Chicanas’ lives.

Mi Vida Loca reverses the topos of gang life not only by placing
women as its subject, but also by concentrating on the narratives of the
women’s lives without romanticizing romantic love, gang life and
poverty. In Mi Vida Loca’s final scene, Sad Girl, in an attempt to justify
the women’s new operation (seemingly, they have decided to engage in
some type of illegal activity to support themselves), exclaims:

Us homegirls have our own operation now. A lot of things have
changed in the neighborhood. Most of us carry guns now . . . we are
practical . . . Besides, when women use guns, we don’t use them to
prove a point, we use them for love.
Following Sad Girls’ words, the camera images a vintage car with Latina passengers. In slow motion, the car pulls up to a sidewalk as a woman holding a gun targets Ernesto’s brother in retaliation for his killing a rival gang member (El Duran). ‘This is for El Duran!’, shouts one of the Latina passengers as successive gunfire explodes onto an urban street. Ironically, the gunfire misses Ernesto’s brother, killing a young Latina.

Trenchant critiques of the film by cultural critics Rosa-Linda Fregoso, Domino Renée Pérez, Teresa L. Jillson and José J. Barrera, Linda López McAlister, and Thea Pitman are instructive concerning the film’s relevance, but they do not engage with the full spectrum of the film’s sexual politics (Fregoso 1995; Jillson and Barrera 1998; López McAlister 1994; Pérez 2002; Pitman 2010). Giggles’ sexual autonomy and Mousie’s sexual candor (for example, when Mousie narrates her first sexual experience, she tells Sad Girl: ‘I told the truth—you know, how it hurt and shit, and how I was embarrassed’) reveal a more honest and mature politics of sexuality. Further, the film lays bare rather than condones the immature sexual decisions that are a product of young, irresponsible sexual life, as seen when Sad Girl and Mousie end up pregnant by the same man. Sexuality notwithstanding, Mi Vida Loca is not a romanticization of Latina gang life. The portrayal of their participation in violence is as threatening to the survival of the Latino community as that of their male counterparts. Far from positive portrayals in a traditional sense, all three sketches that Anders draws for the viewer by use of narrative and aesthetic techniques illustrate the multidimensionality of the characters, represent moments of sexual agency in egalitarian heterosexual relations and interrogate the ‘look’ of the stereo-imperialist gaze. Anders refocuses the look of Chicana youth in film, allowing the characters to ‘look back’ at the imperialist gaze through aesthetics and her polyvocal narrative. Perhaps the next cinematic step is to imagine multiple representations and sexual agency for Latinas outside of the gang genre—a Latina cine-subjectivity beyond the barriers of the limited scope of la vida loca. Yet, as cultural critic Catherine S. Ramírez writes in her groundbreaking study of pachucas during and after the Second World War, scholarship dealing with representation overly concerned with sanitized images belies the reality of complex and contradictory sexual experiences (Ramírez 2009).

New theories and epistemologies interrogate and explain racial, gender and class sexual subjectivities, while arguments for positive and binary notions of sexual subjectivities contain, confine and overdetermine sexuality.
Conclusion

I began by addressing the previous scarcity of feminist film analyses that seriously engaged in a close reading of difference in relationship to Latinas, and have provided an account of recent work in Latino/a studies as a corrective to this previous lack. Films where Latin American, Mexican American and Puerto Rican women are the subjects made my own analysis possible, but what concerns me now is the lack of Latina or Latina-subject films in the twenty-first century that would allow a discussion of Latina sexual subjectivity to continue. It was approximately 10 years after The House of the Spirits, I Like It Like That and Mi Vida Loca that Latina-themed films such as Tortilla Soup (2001), Real Women Have Curves (2002) and How the Garcia Girls Spent Their Summer (2005) came to the silver screen. Although these three films did receive critical acclaim as art or independent films, all focus on Mexican American women, and none of them approach or broach the more transgressive aspects of sexuality that their popular mid-1990s predecessors attempt to explore.

Two theoretical premises need to underlie an approach to understanding sexual, ethnic and gender subjectivities beyond cultural binaries, or what I name a Latina cine-subjectivity. The first is the theorization of sites where images of Latinas reverse the look of the gaze through the mise-en-scène; the second is the isolation of narrative moments of cinematic resistance that press beyond monosexuality and heteronormative assumptions. Films available to a large and wide audience offer productive material with which to begin such work—that is, the convergence of theoretical inquiry and material examples, especially insofar as mass-produced films can act as an apparatus to disseminate counter-portrayals and trans(in)formative images of the designated ‘Other’. As many popular cultural critics have said elsewhere, there are both dominant and oppositional ways to encode and decode popular cultural texts, allowing for the discussion of mass-produced films not only in order to gather and create multiple meanings and readings, but also to make possible practical, cultural and political usage (Hall 1994, 1997). Film and the cinema can act as a recognizable site for such an intervention by creating narrative and cinematic instances that disrupt the gaze, refocus the look and open up the possibility of seeing Latinas in a multiplicity of ways.

Meaningful and multifaceted representation in film is analogous to those moments when historically marginalized groups have spoken up and against their misrepresentations, presenting and incessantly representing counter-portrayals in the media-informed, culturally biased
and politically charged public sphere. I am thinking in particular of the moments in social relations when those designated as the Other are denied subjectivity and prevented from asserting their agency and resisting the hegemonic discourse and practices that seek to dehumanize and ultimately dislocate them from power and self-representation. In other words, cinematic moments that provide meaningful representation in the context of already existing narrative forms, along with imaginative aesthetics, may constitute a similar intervention to the moments when a subject in the material world gains power and self-autonomy through counter-hegemonic speech acts and cultural practices in view of the white supremacist, class-stratified and sexist power structure. In our material world, this is always an ongoing process, a hegemonic struggle that is never over and done with. A film analysis that made claims for these moments as being wholly representative of cultural transformation would be suspect, not because of the unrealistic notion of such a probability, but because it would wrongfully present our struggles as over, as in the past, as a postmodern moment outside of the specificity of the reality of our own historical circumstances.

At particular moments in all three films, we see, through a close reading of their narrative and mise-en-scène, the reality of a multiple subjectivity that is located on, across and between several identity formations and sexualities, which, like the material world, people simultaneously experience and negotiate. As cultural historian George Sánchez writes, one must abandon ‘any notion that individuals occupy one undifferentiated cultural position’ in favor of the reality of ‘multiple identities and [at times] contradictory positions’ (Sánchez 1994: 8). The images produced in The House of the Spirits, I Like It Like That and Mi Vida Loca see and screen difference in a way that speaks to this reality by de-essentializing and broadening the ethnic, race, class, sexuality and gender ideologies produced in the popular cultural imagination. The House of the Spirits points to the contradiction of sexual object choice and female desire; I Like It Like That reveals the performative and fluid possibilities of gender, as well as the hybridity of black and Latino cultures; and Mi Vida Loca reflects the struggle for agency in Chicana heterosexual relationships and in their material lives.

Taken together, these three portrayals begin important cultural work in the rethinking of sexualities, as they unthink the rigidity of monosexuality, destabilize normative conceptions of gender, and reinvigorate agency and egalitarianism in heterosexual relations. The urgency of these filmic representations is politically pressing and culturally necessary. Popular film, similar to other mass-produced historical and cultural artifacts can tells us where our culture is, but more imaginatively, film can

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10 The idea of film performing cultural work and acting as a social technology is central here. For a discussion of the use of film as a social technology—that is, as an apparatus which produces, deploys and affects the material interpretation of these differences—see Lauretis (1987: ix).
suggest to us where our culture ought to be. Portions of the object relations hitherto discussed provide pieces of filmic agency that may contribute to a larger metanarrative of affective representation. Performance theorist José E. Muñoz articulates the urgency of such work in his analysis of Latina cultural production and the affect impact of “narratives of being and becoming,” when he writes that representation can act as “descriptive of the receptors we use to hear each other and the frequencies on which certain [subjects] speak and are heard or, more importantly, felt” (Muñoz 2006: 677). It is then through the looking glass of the movie camera that reflections of a Latina cinesubjectivity has the potential to take form. Images that begin the work of creating Latina cinesubjectivity produce a new way of seeing and talk back to the pathology of Latina cinematic presentations by interrogating, and therefore transforming, the look of, how we respond to, and ultimately feel the counterpositionalities of the gaze.

**Works Cited**


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