

Jennifer Lopez, Hollywood, and the American Dream¹

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1. Introduction

As Frances R. Aparicio (2004) writes, “forms of expressive culture” including movies are “important sites for exploring bicultural identity, debates on representation, and the cultural agency” of Latinos/as in the U.S. (p. 355). It is noteworthy that various scholars of Latina/o Studies, Media Studies, Cultural Studies have paid attention to the *Nuyorican* (New York-born Puerto Rican) performer, Jennifer Lopez as one of the most successful Latina stars in America.² According to Mary Beltrán (2009) Jennifer Lopez’s career and the popular discourse on her more broadly is “a window into shifts in Latina/o opportunity and status in Hollywood, the United States, and increasingly, in global media markets” (p. 133). Isabel Molina-Guzmán (2010), referring to Richard Dyer’s theory that “Hollywood stars are their bodies” (p. 85), points out that discourses that surround ethnoracial star bodies illustrate “how ethnic women function in symbolically important ways as constitutive of national identity discourse” in the United States (p. 86).

So, when we think of Jennifer Lopez (1969-), mainly as a film actress (but not exclusively so), we need to consider her on-screen gendered and racial identity and her on-screen and off-screen relation to the discourse of the American Dream (Ovalle, 2008). In this paper, I will provide an overview of Lopez’s career, touch upon some of her films—up to Wayne Wang’s *Maid in Manhattan* (2002)—and consider how we might evaluate Jennifer Lopez in terms of Latina/Latino identity and cultural citizenship in America. In other words, I will consider these points alongside some of the key issues in the successful career of Jennifer Lopez, heavily relying on Beltrán, Molina-Guzmán, and Ovalle among others. Although there are many issues comprising the discourse of the

Latina performer, they are overwhelmingly based on “the persistence of whiteness” (Bernardi, 2008), or racial, gendered identity, explicit and implicit, in American culture.

2. The Bronx and Lopez’s Early Career as a Dancer

Born in 1969 in the Bronx, New York, Lopez had a middle-class upbringing. Both of her parents are immigrants from Puerto Rico and Jennifer is the second of their three daughters. Like Rita Moreno, Lopez’s Latina role model, Lopez aspired to a career in dance and theater from an early age. She passed the audition to become one of the house dancers called “Fly Girls” in Fox TV’s Afrocentric sketch comedy series *In Living Color* (1990-94) and appeared in sixty one episodes in 1991-1993. She also appeared as a dancer in some music videos, such as Janet Jackson’s “That’s the Way Love Goes” (1993). Lopez next secured roles in Fox’s series *South Central*, which featured a working-class African American family in working-class Los Angeles³ (Beltrán, 2009, pp. 135-136).

Lopez began to secure film roles, too. One of them was in Gregory Nava’s film of a Mexican American family saga, *My Family* (1995), in which Lopez played a young Mexican mother who survives hardships in Depression-era United States. Lopez then played a Puerto Rican cop in *Money Train* (1995), co-starring with Wesley Snipes and Woody Harrelson, and she acted as a Latina school teacher to Robin William’s adult child in *Jack* (1996). In her early career as a performer, she was promoted primarily to Latina/o and African American markets (Beltrán, 2009, pp. 135-136).

In terms of Lopez’s publicity and image construction, a marginalized status as a daughter

born to, and raised by, immigrants in the working-class environment of the Bronx is desirable for the American 'rags-to-riches' narrative. Lopez needs to be 'Jenny from the Block,' as the title of one of her CD singles indicate.

3. Selena Quintanilla, Lopez as Selena, and the Racialized Latina Body

The growing market of Latina/o population in the U.S. encouraged the entertainment industry and media to promote African American and Latina/o actors as potential stars and Latina/o-themed films and TV series. Both Spanish-and-English and English-language Latina/o-oriented magazines and news outlets promoted Latina/o performers and reports on Latina/o celebrities increased (Beltrán, 2009, p. 133).

One of the first Latinas to gain widespread fame in U.S. popular culture was the Tejana singer, Selena Quintanilla Perez (1971-1995). Sales of her recordings were strengthening and she won the Grammy Award (best Mexican-American album) in 1993 for her album *Live*. However, the young Texas-born singer was killed at the height of her fame by her fan club manager. Her posthumous English-language album became a big hit, too (Beltrán, 2009, pp. 133-134).

The life story of the legendary singer became the subject of Gregory Nava's next film, titled *Selena* (1995), in which Lopez played the Mexican American performer. The film was financially and critically successful. Lopez's performance as the late Selena was well received and this helped launch Lopez's (on-screen) career. Molina-Guzmán (2010), referring to Aparicio, speaks to how the similarities between the Puerto Rican actor (Jennifer Lopez) and the Tejana star (Selena) and their remarkable visibility through this movie contributed to forming "Latina identity" and producing "a bridge across the ethnic specific identities of Latina audiences and toward a more collective sense of an ethnoracial Latina community" (p. 58).

However, Frances Negrón-Muntaner (2004) points out that the focus on their curvaceous bodies (their 'generous' rear ends) is "how Latinas are constituted as racialized subjects" (p. 232) and that the reference to that part of the body is "often a way

of speaking about Africa in(side) America" (p. 233), connoting 'non-whiteness' and 'otherness.' Magdalena Barrera (2002) examines the fetish discussion of Lopez's body in historical context and compares Lopez and Saartjie Baartman (c. 1789-1815), known as the "Hottentot Venus." Baartman was a Khoikhoi woman from South Africa whose naked body was made a spectacle throughout Europe in the early 1800s.

Lopez's subsequent film roles include a Cuban immigrant nanny and the girlfriend of a jewel thief played by Jack Nicholson in *Blood and Wine* (1997), a documentary filmmaker named Terri Flores in an action movie set in Amazonian jungle in *Anaconda* (1997), and a police officer opposite George Clooney's thief in Steven Soderbergh's *Out of Sight* (1998). According to Beltrán (2009), the promotion strategy was to market Lopez to non-Latino audiences and put an emphasis on Lopez's voluptuous body, similar to the marketing of earlier Latina performers. In the U.S. popular media the discussion about her body, particularly her backside was rampant (Beltrán, 2009, pp. 141-144).

4. Media's Focus on Lopez's Excessive/ Exotic Body, Crossover Stardom, and the U.S-Mexico Border

As Beltrán (2009) says, the media's emphasis on Lopez's backside was not only because of the "notions of the sexualized Latina body in U.S. popular culture" but "a deliberate move on the part of Lopez and her management team"(p. 143). In response to the media's discourse and discussion of her body, Lopez continuously expressed "her bodily and (to a lesser extent) ethnic pride" and seemed to "[feel] no need to change her body in order to attain success as a Hollywood actress"(Beltrán, 2009, p. 143). Although the Latina curvaceous body was 'excessive' or 'exotic' by Hollywood and U.S. beauty standards, Lopez's assertion presented the possibility of broadening the beauty standards themselves, posing a challenge to the American tradition in that sense. If Lopez's publicity emphasized her position of "crossover stardom," appealing to diverse audiences, both Latina/o and white, Beltrán (2009) says, such promotion itself reflects the implied line between a

white/traditional/mainstream boundary and that of a non-white Latina/o/nontraditional/outsider (p. 145).

In response to “the increasing Latina/o visibility” (Beltrán, 2009, p. 144) in America, there had been growing anti-Latina/o and anti-immigration sentiment which often centered on the U.S.-Mexico geographical border. If we consider the history of U.S.-Mexico border, symbolized by the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848, this anti-immigration rhetoric can be understood as “the fear that the Southwest might become part of Mexico, as it once was”(Coco Fusco quoted in Beltrán, 2009, pp. 145-146) . Maybe the American concern about the border is more cultural than just geographical as Beltrán (2009) suggests: “Formulations of crossover stardom similarly construct and maintain figurative borders, in this case which insist that Latina/os’ ‘natural’ place remains outside the Hollywood industries and that Latina/o stardom is thus unusual and new” (p. 146).

5. Lopez’s Relationship to Blackness and Racialized Urban Culture

Molina-Guzmán (2010) points out Lopez’s relationship to blackness and racialized urban culture, raising, for example, her close relationship with Sean Combs, her *beau de jour*, the hip-hop mogul, and the producer of some of her successful albums. In some of her music videos Lopez is “sporting African braids, ... Black hip-hop artists, street hoops, bling, and Lopez’s Puerto Rican booty work together to create an identity that is not-quite-black but clearly establishes her outside whiteness and within the domain of urban black and Puerto Rican culture”(p. 64). After the arrest of Lopez and Combs in relation to a shooting outside a New York nightclub (she was released without charges), she ended her relationship with Combs. However, around that time, Lopez, whose entertainment career had started as “a brown-haired, curly-headed, hip-hop dancer on the black variety program *In Living Color*, was visually and musically situated within the domain of urban popular culture” (Molina-Guzmán, 2010, p. 64). Her association with Combs “slowed her move toward whiteness” and her “embrace of black popular culture and racialized class identity as an urban Latina (specifically a Puerto Rican from the Bronx)”

prevented her from breaking with the typecasting (Molina-Guzmán, 2010, p. 64).

6. Lopez’s Whitewashing, the American Dream, and Racial Ambiguity

As a business strategy to cater to the hegemonic ideal of Hollywood beauty, Lopez changed both her appearance and star image. Despite her assertions that she liked her body the way it was, she is said to have undergone a physical transformation, including the slimming-down of body, straightening of hair, and the lightening of skin. According to Priscilla P. Ovalle (2008), this was the “process of becoming visually American in both Hollywood and the United States” (p. 174). Ovalle (2008) elaborates on this process and says:

Access to the American Dream is a rite of passage requiring the marks of assimilation: a strong work ethic and/or acceptance of hegemonic beauty standards...Lopez’s appearance has similarly required tailoring to conform to idealized notions of screen beauty, effectively moving her career beyond “just a Latina actress.” (p. 174)

It is, in other words, what Ovalle (2008) calls “the equation of the American Dream with lightness” (p. 175).

After playing a role in the psychological thriller *The Cell* (2000), Lopez entered into a new cinematic territory, romantic comedy. According to Beltrán (2009), the Hollywood romantic comedy is “a genre through which notions of white American femininity have often been articulated and conversely in which Latinas have seldom been cast” (p. 148). In *The Wedding Planner* (2001) Lopez played an Italian American (a white character), named Mary Fiore. Mary is an overworked wedding planner who finds that she is planning the wedding of a pediatrician she has been dating. In the end Mary marries this white man (played by Matthew McConaughey), not the passionate Italian suitor whose command of English is rather weak—embodying his lack of assimilation or Americanization (Alan Dodd and Martin Fradley, 2009, p. 196).

Lopez had now begun to play (almost) white characters. Lopez aimed to “rise above her racialized status as a Latina” and also took advantage of her body for media spectacle. “Lopez’s ethnic and racial fluidity” was part of “the evolution of her star image” (Beltrán, 2009, pp. 151-152).

7. Resentment Against Immigration and Lopez, Her Relationship with Ben Affleck as Cultural Threat to Normative White Heterosexuality

Although, as Beltrán (2009) says, Lopez’s new promotional strategy was to evolve her image to both benefit from being Latina and to not be confined by it, the backlash against ‘Bennifer’ (the nickname of the sensational celebrity couple, Jennifer Lopez and Ben Affleck) “hints at the consequences of overexposure and perhaps that Latina/o stars are not able to ever fully lose their racialized status” (p. 152). Molina-Guzmán (2010) adds to this:

[T]he peak visibility of her success from 2001 to 2004—when she released two music albums, five films, and appeared on countless magazine and tabloid covers—resulted in tabloid coverage that contributed to the symbolic colonization of the Puerto Rican star. No longer interested in Lopez’s glamorous wardrobe, beautiful voluptuous body, and Horatio Alger American dream success, the tabloids turned their white gaze on Lopez’s exorbitant financial demands and uncontrollable sexuality. (p. 70)

As the background to this backlash against Lopez, Molina-Guzmán (2010) points to the general sentiment against multiculturalism and immigration among those white people who are “left behind by globalization” and who “work out their economic anxieties by attacking educational programs and policies that benefit ethnic and racial minorities through a discourse of resentment” (pp. 78-79). This anti-immigration sentiment ran parallel to the backlash against Lopez’s global success and against her body: “Lopez’s body becomes a contested site of the status of ethnic and racial minorities” (Molina-

Guzmán, 2010, p. 83) in the U.S. imaginary. As such, economic and political discourse leads to the matter of American cultural identity:

The Puerto Rican Lopez as U.S. celebrity is celebrated for her Horatio Alger success yet disciplined for her racial transgression into white heteronormative domesticity. Latinas can stand in for the globally exotic and symbolize ongoing changes within the U.S. nation, but they cannot represent or reproduce the nation itself. The African resonances located within her bountiful body/booty are too large a threat for a nation still invested in notions of binary racial purity as either black or white. (Molina-Guzmán, 2010, p. 83)

Lopez later came to be constructed as “a good Puerto Rican wife and mother” and lost “her tabloid title of best Hollywood booty” to Jessica Biel (Molina-Guzmán, 2010, p. 86).

8. *Maid in Manhattan* (2002) as Symbolizing Lopez’s Career

Lopez’s access to mainstream Hollywood is symbolized in her big hit *Maid in Manhattan* (2002), a Cinderella fairytale romantic comedy. Lopez plays a domestic worker (maid), as the title suggests, and the title pun emphasizes Lopez’s Nuyorican authenticity—Lopez, or ‘Jenny from the Block (Bronx),’ has been made in Manhattan. The film opens with a tracking shot of the Statue of Liberty, which symbolizes the history of immigration, the American Dream, and “the dreams of the romantic comedy” as Deborah Jermyn (2009) says (p. 17).

Lopez is Marisa Ventura, a Latina single mother living in a working-class Bronx neighborhood, and works as a maid in a high-class hotel in downtown Manhattan. One day, she tries on the designer clothes of a wealthy guest staying at the hotel and meets Chris Marshall, an assemblyman who is preparing for campaign for the Senate. Chris mistakes her for a socialite and invites her for a night of dancing. When Chris discovers her true identity, their relationship seems to come to an end, but, thanks to Marisa’s son

Ty, who has formed a friendship with Chris, the maid and the congressman start over.

As Ovalle (2008) says, the plot develops around the mistaken identity of Marisa/Lopez or her passing as a white socialite wearing the Dolce & Gabbana white suit. This is “a modernized passing narrative in a multicultural era” (Ovalle, 2008, p. 175). Reminiscent of Julia Roberts’ character in *Pretty Woman*, Marisa’s dream-like transformation from a working-class Latina domestic worker to a high-class white socialite reflects the trajectory of upward mobility, the American Dream, of Marisa/Lopez, from ‘Jenny from the Block’ to Lopez as a star/celebrity.

Does Marisa’s upward mobility (promotion to management) endorse the American Dream (social rise for the second generation of immigrants)? Hilary Radner (2011) comments on the film that, against the endorsement of “Marisa’s possibilities for advancement,” the only way “to emerge out of the invisibility” (marginalization) seems “to become a star” because Chris fails to recognize Marisa if and when she is cleaning his bathroom in a maid’s uniform (p. 107). On the other hand, Molina-Guzmán (2010), juxtaposing this film with another Latina maid film, *Spanglish* (2004), points out that these two films avoid anti-immigration discourse by reimagining Latina laborers in America as “domestic nurturers of whiteness and white domesticity” and addressing the “increasing anxiety about the U.S. Latina/o population” in America (p. 174).

9. Conclusion—Lopez’s Accomplishments and Limitations

The development of Lopez’s career as a performer shows her riding well in the current wave (“Latin Wave” in the 1990s)⁴ and fitting in the American Dream narrative—the upward mobility from a “working-class” immigrant to the star status through the ethics of hard work, just as the discourse of Marisa/Lopez in *Maid in Manhattan* tries to convey. And thus, even a Latina immigrant can become a manager as the hotel manager in this film says, “Anything is possible.”

However, her career also brings into relief obstacles in Hollywood in terms of “Latina

opportunity for stardom” and continuous “racialization through body-focused discourses” (Beltrán, 2009, p. 152). As Beltrán (2009) details, this persistent restriction shows “continuing tensions and ambivalence in the popular imagination toward Latina/os in the United States, particularly regarding their positioning in relation to unambivalently white Americans” (p. 152).

As mentioned earlier, Lopez’s alleged pride in keeping her “Latina” voluptuous body as it is and its possibility of breathing new life into American hegemonic beauty standards have been disciplined and curtailed because the “exotic”/“excessive” posits a threat to the persistent binary of white and black in the U.S. popular imagination. The threat must be contained and made safe. As a “nation of immigrants,” America has often distinguished desirable/useful immigrants from undesirable/illegal ones, and this emerges in racial, ethnic stereotypes, such as the representation of Latino male violence, especially Mexican machismo, that has long circulated in American cinema as Leah Perry (2016) points out (p. 20). Another example of stereotypical discourse of Latinas, especially Mexican immigrants, that Perry (2016) mentions is that they are putting heavy burdens on the American economy because of their “reproduction and family formation” (p. 30).

Although Selena and Lopez were born in America and were/are American, they have been identified as (Mexican or Puerto Rican) immigrants in the American popular imaginary. Lopez’s film roles changed from obviously Latina characters to racially ambiguous and (almost) white ones as she and her marketers aimed to appeal not only to Latina/o or black markets but also to the mainstream audience. To illustrate how “culture is politics by other means” (Perry, 2016, p. 22), let me finally quote from Molina-Guzmán (2010) on her interpretation of how Latina characters are represented in recent Hollywood:

[The] success of *Spanglish*, *Maid in Manhattan*, or *Ugly Betty* [TV series] depends on representations of Latinas devoid of political challenges to dominant definitions of the United States. ... Mexican identity must still be contained more than 150 years after the U.S. conquest of Mexico; Puerto

Rican identity must still be disciplined 100 years after the U.S. colonization of Puerto Rico; and U.S. Latina identity must be homogenized to serve the United States' continuing imperialistic relationship with Mexico, the Spanish Caribbean, and Latin America. (pp. 178-179)

Jennifer Lopez has had her name emblazoned in the Hollywood Walk of Fame, following the lead of other Latina stars such as Katy Juardo (1924-2002) and Reta Moreno (1931-)⁵. Lopez seems to have achieved the American Dream in that sense⁶. However, her roles and images in American popular culture have had to be molded or restricted, to greater or lesser extents, in order to cater to mainstream American identity politics. Jennifer Lopez's career aptly presents an example of how a Latina star has to strategically navigate and survive the cultural, social, and political sentiment of the times.

Notes

1. This paper is based on my oral presentations at the STEM-AEM-ICEM (SAI) Joint Conference at Kookmin University, September 23-25, 2016, and at the AEM Higashi Nihon Chapter Annual Meeting at Reitaku University Tokyo Research Center, December 4, 2016.
2. As I have been working on this paper, Leah Perry's latest book, *The Cultural Politics of U.S. Immigration: Gender, Race, and Politics* (2016) has given me academic stimuli and a clearer vision of "the connections among public policy, pop culture, and media" in terms of Jennifer Lopez studies. See Perry, p. 22.
3. As for the actual episodes of the TV series *In Living Color* and *South Central*, in which Lopez appeared, I referred to Jennifer Lopez at IMDb.
4. Perry (2016) says that the success of Latina performers such as Selena and Lopez "inspired fans with their American Dream stories" (p. 178). However, he also claims that the Latina/o boom was actually lucrative for the market and media, not for the better conditions of Latina/o immigrants in the U.S. See Perry, p. 178.
5. See A Complete List of Latinos Immortalized on Hollywood Walk of Fame. Cinemovie. Updated November 12, 2013. <http://cinemovie.tv/Blogs/latinos-immortalized-on-hollywood-walk-of-fame>.
6. Although I have not discussed Lopez in terms of her relationship to feminism, some critics have mentioned or analyzed Lopez and her film roles from the viewpoint of postfeminism or chick lit postfeminism for women of color. See, for example, C. Holmlund (2005), pp. 117-118, M. Mendible (2008), pp. 162-166, A. Everett (2012), pp. 252-253, J. Butler (2013), p. 51.

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