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How Tutti-Frutti Hats and Booties Reshaped American Cultures

The hypnotizing sway of the Carmen Miranda's colorful hips, the flirtatious flicker of her dark eyes, and her heavily accented singing voice introduced Americans to an exciting new object of obsession, sexualization, objectification, and adoration: the Latina entertainer. The umbrella term "Latina" is broad and somewhat fluid, but in this paper I will define Latinas as "women of Latin American birth or heritage, including women from North, Central, and South America and the Spanish-speaking Caribbean" (Ruiz and Korrol 5). Born in Portugal but raised in Brazil and identified as Brazilian, Miranda falls under this expansive term. The legacy of the Latina entertainer has evolved and reappeared in mainstream American culture since Miranda's success in the 1940's and 50's, most recently in the career of Jennifer Lopez, the Puerto Rican singer, actress, dancer, fashion mogul, and television personality. While both Carmen Miranda and Jennifer Lopez have enjoyed great popularity in America among the dominant white culture, their success has been anchored to their status as brown and exotic others- seductive yet distinct outsiders. This racialized and sexualized seclusion from white "normativity" simultaneously limits Miranda and Lopez from being fully accepted into mainstream society as equals and paradoxically empowers them to challenge social norms from the "outside." Carmen Miranda and Jennifer Lopez have been instrumental in increasing the visibility of Latinas in the media, though they primarily remain in the complex context of otherness, but their success has also generated restricted and generic definitions of Latinas in the U.S. While both Miranda and Lopez have been racialized and sexualized by mainstream American society, each woman has demonstrated significant agency in shaping her successful career.

Though Latinas have lived in America since before the nation's founding, the meteoric rise to fame of Carmen Miranda after she came to the U.S. in 1939 finally put a Latina face on

Broadway and then the big screen. Miranda's years in Hollywood coincided with the Good Neighbor Policy, a Washington effort to align the U.S. with fellow countries in the Western Hemisphere, specifically those in Latin America, in order to "shore up economic ties and thwart Nazi influence in the region" (O'Neil 202). Consequently, Hollywood began producing more Latin-themed films and casted the talented Miranda in sixteen of them in a span of less than fifteen years. Miranda's accent and style, inspired by Afro-Brazilian women's *baiana* and Brazilian samba music, both broadcasted her *Latinidad* to huge audiences and infused Hollywood with diversity and multiculturalism. Unfortunately, these films type-casted Miranda as she portrayed "stereotypical images of Latinos as perpetual fun-seekers, flirts, and flamboyant dancers" (O'Neil 203). Although Miranda contributed to legitimizing stereotypes, she ultimately "was able to create some awareness within the United States of cultures below its border due to her popularity" (Ellis 79). Pricilla Peña Ovalle, assistant professor of film and media studies at the University of Oregon, similarly conceded that "in spite of Fox studio's insensitivity to Latin America and the limited characterizations it offered Miranda, its film catalog represents a contradictory period of progress for non-white performers in mainstream Hollywood film" (Ovalle 55). While her legacy in Hollywood has been controversial and problematic, Miranda's undeniable presence has helped to facilitate progress and cultural awareness that mainstream America had been previously lacking.

Carmen Miranda introduced American audiences to Latinas, and Jennifer Lopez has since made it impossible for America to ignore them. As an actress, recording artist, dancer, business woman, fashion designer, and television personality, Lopez's products are consumed everywhere from movie theaters, to living rooms, to a billboard or the local Macy's. She "continues to grace more magazine covers than most any other star," Latina, white, or otherwise (Guzmán and

Valdivia 209). Through her multiple and diverse ventures, Lopez has become a “crossover success,” signifying that the recognition of Latinas has greatly increased since Miranda’s days of being type-casted and strictly limited to the same stereotypical act (Valdivia 137). While Lopez’s career notes that the representation of Latinas in the media has made significant gains, she still shares the status of “the Other” with Miranda as a Latina woman performing in the context of “the dominant U.S. binary of Black or White identities” (Guzmán and Valdivia 214).

In the U.S., Latinas occupy a space of otherness between the privileged position of whites and the denounced position of blacks, which consequently leaves Latina/os out of dominant racial discourse. This secluded space provides Latinas with opportunities of bridging and challenging these norms and financially benefitting from working between them, but it also positions Latinas as outsiders -- exotic, hyper-sexualized beings that are somehow less than fully human. While all actresses in Hollywood are to some extent sexualized, the sexualization of Latina actresses is tied to race, and manifests itself in specific, exoticized ways. This racialized otherness presents a paradox: Latina bodies are marginalized and “marked as other, yet it is that otherness that also marks Latinas as desirable” (Guzmán and Valdivia 212). Scholars Isabel Molina Guzmán and Angharad N. Valdivia connect Latina’s otherness to being desirable, implying that the marginalization of Latina bodies leads to the sexualization.

Both Miranda and Lopez have been viewed as these exotic others and have consequently been fetishized by U.S. mainstream culture. Carmen Miranda’s bold costumes, red lips, olive skin, and accented English distinctly separated her from her white counterparts in films and presented her as exotic. Eroticized through these exotic qualities, Miranda and other Latina actresses “became fetishes, goddesses to be admired, desired, and, hence, dehumanized’ (Ellis 64). As exotic others, Latinas represent exciting and erotic images to admire, yet, due to their

lack of “pure” whiteness, they are inappropriate mates and are limited to becoming dehumanized and fetishized objects.

For example, Jennifer Lopez similarly inhabits the realm of the sexualized other with the attention focused on her large buttocks. Her famed “bootie is marked as unusually large... and by implication not Anglo-Saxon,” therefore she too is banished to the in-between (Guzmán and Valdivia 212). Again, as an exotic other, Lopez’s butt “is glamorized and sexually fetishized,” reducing her to an anatomical part synonymous with over sexuality and defecation- topics, considered dirty and taboo by white mainstream culture. Due to their position as racialized others, Miranda and Lopez are hypersexualized and stripped of a respected human identity.

While “otherness” limits the Latina entertainers to dehumanized sexual symbols, it also permits them to act in less-restricted ways by challenging the dominant culture. It was Miranda’s ability to move between cultures that enabled her to find success in Brazil and the United States. In the first half of the 1900’s, Brazil was strictly stratified along class lines with white elites rejecting the value of the black poor. As a working-class, light skinned woman singing the African inspired samba, Miranda looked like the rich, and related to the poor, existing in-between the two sides, and thus became “the embodiment of Brazilian popular music” (Ovalle 58). Her connection to the rich and poor made her the perfect unifying force the Brazilian President Getúlio Vargas was searching for and “enabled her to challenge societal norms” with the full support of the state (Ovalle 57). Miranda sang on the radio, a radical move for a woman, and popularized an African and consequently “low-class” style of music and dress, making gains for both women and blacks.

Once in America, Miranda again transmitted “black styles and culture through a white body” but this time “under the code or guise of Latinness” instead of whiteness (Ovalle 60). As

an “other” in America, Miranda was able to access mainstream culture, unlike blacks, and also emulate and engage with black culture, unlike whites. Miranda’s explicitly African Bahian look became incredibly popular in U.S. department stores, and Saks Fifth Avenue filled its windows with mannequins adorned in colorful turbans and modified bairns (O’Neil 199). The promotion of an inherently black style in New York City, one of the fashion capitals of the world, stands as a testament to Miranda’s excellence at mediating between blackness and whiteness in order to break the normative rules of society.

As a signifier of her otherness, Jennifer Lopez’s bodacious butt excluded her from hegemonic society but also enabled her to challenge and reshape that very same society. Lopez’s butt has often been the focus of interviews, magazine covers, journalistic discourse, and pop culture. Her curvaceousness has mediated between “white normativity and black unacceptability” by enticing both groups yet belonging to neither (Valdivia 39). Before Jennifer Lopez, the well-endowed buttocks was “generally considered shameful by American standards of beauty and propriety,” but Lopez’s commanding presence as a celebrated other “ushered in a butt focus...and therefore has intervened in the codes of beauty and femininity” (Negrón-Muntaner 237, Valdivia 142). Lopez successfully toppled former “buttless” notions of beauty that mainly encompassed thin whites and provided curvaceous women of color an opportunity to reclaim their legitimate beauty as well. In this drastic inversion of beauty, we can see how Lopez maneuvers between whites and blacks. Similarly to Miranda, Lopez’s light skin allows her to access white society in a non-threatening guise, while simultaneously performing blackness in specific ways. Though Lopez’s butt is more aligned with female African Americans’ (stigmatized) curvaceous bodies, her preferential treatment as a light skinned other permits her to perform and popularize blackness among whites. While otherness can limit Latinas to restrictive

sexual and racial identities, it can also empower them to voice new opinions in conflict with societal customs.

As “others” performing for a dominant society they do not belong to, Miranda and Lopez have both earned significant financial benefits through their token status as Latinas. In order to find success in Brazil and the United States where she occupied a space of in-between, “Miranda created an outrageous stage identity and utilized the fetishization of her racialized body for male audiences to her benefit” (Ellis 69). This benefit played out to the tune of an income well above \$200,000 a year by 1945, making Miranda the highest-paid woman in America (O’Neil 201). Lopez currently holds a similar position as the highest paid Latina actress, hauling in \$13 million per movie ((Guzmán and Valdivia 209). Frances Negrón-Muntaner locates the source of Lopez’s immense revenue and jokes commenting, “No wonder she says ‘I have a curvaceous Latin body...I like to accentuate that.’ So would I- all the way to the bank” (Frances Negrón-Muntaner 235). While Miranda’s stage identity and exoticism, and Lopez’s shapely butt, are tied to their status as “others” in mainstream American society, both have used these labels in order to exert agency in leveraging their restricted but desirable roles and bodies to gain wealth and fame.

Carmen Miranda and Jennifer Lopez’s shared status as particularly influential others caused their voices/portrayals to be privileged as the all-encompassing model of who Latinas are. As the most widely consumed Latina stars of their times, they “serve as emblems of Latinidad in the popular imagination, they also, as Alberto Sandoval-Sánchez contends, ‘put into question who is Latino/a, what is Latino identity, and which images of Latinidad predominate and circulate” (Valdivia 17). Clearly, the most visible Latina has the power to define who a Latina is and how she is perceived through circulated images.

In her widely popular movies, Miranda's signature and unchanging style of "colorful costumes, heavily accented English, and performative body parts (hips, arms, and eyes)" produced a "generic, if exaggerated, Latin American Other" (Ovalle 50). The redundancy of Miranda's performances as she played Cuban, Brazilian, and Argentinian Latinas implies that there exists only one homogenized Latina identity and erases all diversity within the group.

Her stagnant roles express exactly how this generic Latina is to act. Due to her early place in Hollywood, restrictive roles, and redundant portrayals, Miranda can be viewed as the founding mother of Latina stereotypes in Hollywood film. In particular, she equates Latinidad with what is now referred to as tropicalism: the close association of Latino/as with "bright colors, rhythmic music, and brown or olive skin" along with "red-colored lips, bright seductive clothing, curvaceous hips and breasts, long brunette hair, and extravagant jewelry" for Latinas in particular (Guzmán and Valdivia 211). These tropes constitute some of the most enduring stereotypes of Latinas, revealing both the influential power Miranda had in the 1950s and 1960s but also the great harm she caused. In many of her movies, Miranda has few or no lines of dialogue, which in turn indicates that the common Latina lacks a voice and therefore also lacks agency in her personal life. These harmful restrictive stereotypes consequently "started a tradition still prevalent in mass media Latino/a depictions" (Ellis 78).

Jennifer Lopez's immense success and status as the most famous Latina has similarly put her in the privileged position of speaking on behalf of all Latinas. Angharad Valdivia notes this and writes "J.Lo is the contemporary signifier for Latinidad and stands alone in a nearly iconic position vis-à-vis other mainstream Latina actresses" (Valdivia 130). As the lone icon placed above other Latina actresses, Lopez acts as an authoritative embodiment of Latinidad for white, mainstream audiences. And of course, the butt figuratively does a lot of the talking. Speaking

about her curvaceous body, Lopez claims, “They’re [wardrobe designers] always trying to minimize- put it that way- and its because we see all those actresses who are so thin and white. Latinas have a certain body type. Even the thin ones, we are curvy” (Lockhart 163). Lopez here indicates that her “certain body type” stands in opposition to the typical white bodies and therefore symbolized the norm for Latinas. While her body type has contested the normative standards of beauty, it has also limited the Latina space of beauty to curvaceous bodies with voluptuous breasts and butts. Consequently, Lopez’s desirable butt has excluded “*puertorriqueñas chumbas* (flat reared) who are victimized by their lack” (Negrón-Muntaner 237). Lopez has therefore defined beautiful Latinas as those with curves- a new but restricted definition.

Similarly to Carmen Miranda, Lopez’s portrayal of Latinas has taken on a panethnic flair. With regard to Lopez’s early movies *Mi familia*, *Selena*, and *Money Train*, Valdivia remarks that Lopez is “like earlier Latina or Hispanics stars (perhaps most notable Carmen Miranda). [her] film roles signify multiple Latin/Spanish populations” (Valdivia 155). Lopez has been able to move between the diverse Latina identities in her cinematic portrayals but I argue that Lopez’s interpretations are less restrictively homogenizing than Miranda’s portrayals. Lopez’s characters capture more nuance than Miranda’s in regards to their specific Latina ethnicity. For example, in Lopez’s breakout role playing the late Tejano superstar Selena, she convincingly portrays Selena and satisfies Mexican-American critics who had been outraged at casting a non-Tejano, in this case Puerto Rican, actress (Lockhart 150). Lopez’s nuanced yet pan-ethnic approach speaks to the growing trend in mainstream America: “On the one hand, there is an effort to flatten all difference in the brown race. On the other hand, there is the recognition that not all browns are alike” (Valdivia 134). As both the token Latina used to satisfy Hollywood’s expectations as an

exotic other and an actress aware of nuance and difference, Lopez embodies this conflicting movement.

While Miranda and Lopez, especially Miranda, can be viewed as commodified others manipulated by Hollywood to portray a specific idea of *Latinidad*, both women have undeniably exerted agency in their successful careers. Miranda's start in Brazil demonstrates the power she had over her own life. In Brazil, "whether smoking in public, driving her own car, or using the coarse slang of the streets, Carmen Miranda reveled in defying the social constraints placed on women in her era" and demonstrated a "strong-willed independence [that] would serve her well in the male-dominated world of the entertainment industry" (O'Neil 196). Miranda's radical behavior was the result of her "strong-willed independence" that challenged notions of proper femininity. An enduring symbol of Miranda's agency is her clothing style. By developing her own style based off of marginalized Afro-Brazilians, "Miranda wrested the traditional control that men have had over the look of women's bodies" (Ovalle 59). And while Miranda certainly lacked complete control over her representation in U.S. films, she remained committed to dictating the style of her clothes and continuously made alteration to her dress, changing that "Hollywood designers were doing to her original *baiana*" (Ellis 65). By making these alterations, Miranda declared that through her years in Hollywood she continuously desired to portray authenticity with her *baiana*, a symbol of Brazilianness and Africanness.

Jennifer Lopez's greater degree of agency than Carmen Miranda proves the progress of Latina actresses in Hollywood. Though Lopez is put in the space of "in-betweenness", she has demonstrated agency in manipulating and maneuvering around this barrier. The scholar Tara Lockhart comments that "Lopez's formations are always in flux, contingent on the star herself, who can choose how and where to align and represent herself," locating the agency of self-

representation on Lopez (Lockhart 164). As a result of Lopez's star power, her agent was able to convince the producer of *The Wedding Planner* to cast Lopez in the non-Latina role as an ambiguously white Italian-American (Guzmán and Valdivia 215). Lopez's ability to characterize herself as various Latinas and even as non-Latinas demonstrates the authority Lopez has to manipulate her own representation, a power unavailable to Carmen Miranda. In the same vein of self-representation, Lopez can be seen as an adept agent at creating a fan-friendly personality. Lopez distances herself from critics and aligns herself with a supportive fan base. She explains, "journalists try to create a persona that's not really there... but now I feel that the public understands me better than some writer. There are people who know who I really am" (qtd. in Lockhart 152). Lopez thus represents herself as an accessible and authentic person closely related to understanding fans and rejects negative journalistic discourse as imagined and incorrect. On-screen and off, Lopez has a significant amount of control over her representation.

As the most famous and highest paid Latina entertainers of their time, Carmen Miranda and Jennifer Lopez exemplify the complicated place Latinas locate in the media and society. While the stereotypes popularized by Carmen Miranda have endured, Jennifer Lopez has also been able to provide an example of a multi-talented Latina who more obviously exerts her own agency. By working in an American society marked by the binary of favorable whiteness and condemned blackness, these Latinas were secluded as "others" and consequently sexualized because of their seemingly exotic features. Miranda and Lopez were limited by this separation but also became dissenting voices that challenged rigid customs of racism and beauty in dominant culture. These women leave a complicated legacy, representing ties to colonialism as less than human "others" and stereotypical *Latinidad* while reaching for empowerment, agency, and success in a male-dominated arena.

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