Ricourt, Milagros
Reseña de "Latina/o Stars in U. S. Eyes: The Making and Meaning of Film and T.V. Stardom" de Mary C. Beltrán
The City University of New York
New York, Estados Unidos

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Estas son fallas metodológicas. El libro también tiene una seria falla ideológica: el ignorar los importantes estudios que denuncian la tergiversación que impone la visión de la cultura dominante sobre los puertorriqueños en la obra. *West Side Story* creó una imagen caricaturesca de nosotros y algunos de nuestros intelectuales han reaccionado a ella y la han desconstruido. Wells decide ignorar o desconoce esos meritorios esfuerzos críticos. Por ejemplo, la autora ignora los excelentes trabajos de Alberto Sandoval Sánchez (“*A Puerto Rican Reading of the America of West Side Story*”) y de Frances Negrón-Muntaner (“*Feeling Pretty: West Side Story and the Puerto Rican Identity*”). Estos trabajos son indispensables para entender el “musical” y la película y le hubieran servido grandemente a Wells a desarrollar ciertos aspecto de la obra que estos dos investigadores estudian de manera ejemplar. Por ejemplo, Wells hubiera podido aclarar sus ideas sobre el problemático personaje de Anybodys si hubiera leído el trabajo de Negrón-Muntaner. Es una pena porque estos textos están escritos en inglés y, por ello, son accesibles para la autora; una simple búsqueda en un fondo de datos bibliográficos en cualquier biblioteca la hubiera llevado a esos trabajos. Wells quizás se excuse y diga que no estudia la película, la base para los estudios de Sandoval y Negrón-Muntaner, pero estos trabajos sirven para entender la obra de teatro también porque parten de la imagen totalizante o platónica de *West Side Story* que Wells decide ignorar. Pero lo que en el fondo ocurre es que Wells, como estudiosa, se interesa más por el detalle—su libro está lleno de datos curiosos y reveladores—pero ignora los aspectos problemáticos de la pieza que estudia. Wells parte de que estudia una obra maestra canonizada y, en el fondo, no quiere indagar en esos aspectos problemáticos de la misma. A pesar de ello, y por esa misma minuciosidad de investigadora de archivos, *West Side Story, Cultural Perspectives on an American Musical* es un libro que hay que tener presente cuando se ve la obra desde la perspectiva de la musicología y, también y a pesar de sus fallas, desde la de los estudios puertorriqueños.

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**Latina/o Stars in U. S. Eyes: The Making and Meaning of Film and T.V. Stardom**

By Mary C. Beltrán  
Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2009  
224 pages; $25.00 [paper]

**REVIEWER:** Milagros Ricourt—The City University of New York, Lehman College

Earlier cultural critics viewed modern cultural artifacts in two different ways: as a mechanism to assert social change or as a mechanism to generate capitalist consumption. Neither approach imagined how a particular minority group in the United States would be commodified by mass media and how local and global *Latinidad* would be taught as a racialized construction, and in this way would be used to control that minority population. The mass media portrait of Latinos distorts their histories, culture, and social conditions by breaking diversity and building a homogenous ethnic and racial category.

The book reviewed here discusses the nuances of Latinidad in Hollywood and U.S. television, offering a fresh look at the *Latinization* of U.S. mass media. This review interrogates Latina/o media studies in the work of Mary C. Beltrán.
With that in mind, I will provide throughout analysis of the author’s position, arguments, and conclusions.

In *Latina/o Stars in the U.S. Eyes: The Making of Meanings of Films and TV Stardom*, Mary C. Beltrán provides an analysis of the U.S. entertainment media’s imagining of Latina/os and the historical evolution of Latina/o representation in film and entertainment television from the silent film era to the present. Based on the collection of data in several leading film and television archives, the author acknowledges the number of Latino/a actors and actress in different historical periods during the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Beltrán looks at the interaction of what she calls “Hollywood Latinidad” and “Latinidades.” In the author’s treatment, “Hollywood Latinidad,” or the industry’s construction of a “collective imagined Latin-ess through media products and star publicity” (p. 3) has the potential of influencing Latinidades or Latina/o or identity formation through lived experience by Latinas/os themselves. Beltrán adds that stardom works on a national and global scale as “a powerful social force” (p. 5), teaching notions of identity, gender, class, race, and ethnicity within U.S. notions of whiteness. On the other hand, Beltrán states that the message sent by the media influences self-images, the looks of particular groups, and plays an important role in defining young people’s sense of self, as well as affects social relations between ethnic groups. The significance of these dynamics is even more important at a time when Latino numbers are growing in dramatic proportions. In this context, Latina/os are rising in U.S. films and television. Beltrán looks at this phenomenon from a historical perspective. She states that “the climate of a particular social era (...) has an influence [the visibility of Latinas/os]” (p. 9). Actress and actors’ success responds to a historical juncture, influencing “the diversity and disparity of opportunities experienced by Latina(o) actors over the decades” (p. 4).

Beltrán provides vivid examples to illustrate the evolution of “Hollywood Latinidad.” The early period of films, or the first “Latin Wave,” shaped stars’ images in a manner that promoted them as acceptably foreign and thus non-racialized stars to the American and global public (p. 38). In the evolution of the film industry, Latina/o stars suffered a racial politics of casting that designated them as unacceptable for leading roles because of their accents. The “translation artist” Desi Arnaz’s evolution from bandleader to good neighbor on the prime time television show *I Love Lucy* resulted in his becoming a suitable role model of Latino assimilation. But the discrimination against and continuous racialization of Latinas/os continued with the history of Rita Moreno and Edward James Olmos.

Although the looks and language requirements are basically the same as in the past—light skin color with European phenotype, the ability to speak English well without accent, and being slim—these norms have significantly varied in the new millennium. Today there are more actors with dark skin tones and a more indigenous phenotype such as the actress Rosario Dawson and comedian George Lopez. The vogue of mestizaje not only challenges the Hollywood construction of Latinidad but also offers a potential for transgression. But Beltrán calls for awareness because Hollywood “still rests on distinctive elements and traits, a conundrum with which actors have to contend” (p. 171).

For over one hundred years, U.S. mass media have represented Latinas/os as stereotypes, and provided representations that make the image of one group member representative of the entire group. Latina/o representations or misrepresentations range from the “greaser” Mexican lazy unworthy bandit
or the sensuous Latin Lover in silent films, to the “Lady in the Tutti-Fruti Hat” or the “Queen of Technicolor,” to the camouflage of Rachel Welch and Rita Hayworth. Today we have Jennifer Lopez’s body and that of Jessica Alba presented as exemplary of mestizaje.

The crucial question is whether the traditional stereotyped images have been transformed into more realistic and/or empowering images.

One of Beltrán’s most important contentions is the notion that the film industry and television are in constant movement. There are no fixed representations of Latina/o stardom or of “Hollywood Latinidad.” This gives us a most valuable analysis of the role of Latinas/os in the evolution of film and television. Changes over time, and contestation over the position of Latinas/os in America, have affected the construction of Latinidades in film and television in the United States. However, important issues are left unresolved: Can the increasing numbers of Latinas/os in film and television end the stereotyping of Latinas/os by the media? Are U.S. notions of Latinas/os race, sexuality, and class becoming more realistic and empowering? Does the presentation of different Latinas/os by the media mean that the media has finally accepted their diversity?

One must be careful with the use of racial ambiguity in the description of Latinas in Hollywood, U.S., television and global mass media. Is it that racial ambiguity is more appealing to the global mass media? This question has been explored. For example, García Canclini has conceptualized Latinidad as a hybrid, embodying multiple races and ethnic backgrounds. At the same time, he alerts the reader about the threats of hybridity in a global marketplace (García Canclini 1995). In this sense, the popularity of racially ambiguous Latinas can be viewed as global multicultural products (Molina Guzmán 2010: 19). On the other hand, when one looks at Jennifer Lopez’s or Jessica Alba’s body, one can see that their figure has the same characteristics as that of previous Latina actresses. It is also important to recognize that the values projected in films and television remain unchanged, and that the homogenous and colonialist typing of Latinos as a mechanism of regulation and control is still present in the United States.¹

Thus, the representation of Latinas continues to be basically unchanged, and the book reviewed does not offer a critical analysis of the use and abuse of the Latina body in films and United States mass media. Also important is the omission of the Latino economic, political, and migratory condition and how the American mass media hide the present status of that particular sector of this minority population. I would like to end by asking the question, Why are black Latino actresses such as Puerto Rican Rosie Perez or Dominican Zoe Saldaña overlooked in the analysis? Explaining why successful black Latinas in Hollywood are out of the picture in the contemporary analysis of Latinas in Hollywood and American mass media would be a revealing topic in its own right.

NOTES

¹ Benjamin (2003) argues that modern mass media artifacts such as film could be useful for social change. M. Horkheimer and T. W. Adorno (1969) argue different from Benjamin when affirming that the system of cultural production (films, radio, broadcasting, newspapers, and magazines) is dominated by advertisement and commercial powers, serving to create dependency on the system of capitalist consumption.
hooks (1996) defends that film teaches its audience.


Dyer (2002) states that cultural representations of social grouping such as women, black people, ethnic minorities (like Latina(o), homosexuals, the disabled, and the aged become represented in homogenous constructions inserted in the norms of U.S. society.

Dávila (2001) argues that Latinos representation in mass media still favors whiteness and ignores blackness.

REFERENCES


The Afro-Latin@ Reader: History and Culture in the United States
Edited by Miriam Jiménez-Román and Juan Flores
Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010
592 pages; $29.95 [paper]

REVIEWER: Roberto Márquez, Mt. Holyoke College

Among the new crop of notable books devoted to Latin@’s which, to name just a few of the more recent, includes the Norton Anthology of Latino Literature; Laird Bergard and Herbert Klein’s controversial Hispanics in the United States: A Demographic, Social, and Economic History, 1980–2003; Claudio Ivan Remeseira’s Hispanic New York: A Sourcebook and, of those also singling-out that city, Edward J. Sullivan’s Nueva York 1613–1945 and Lorrin Thomas’s admirable Puerto Rican Citizen: History and Political Identity in 20th Century New York City, The Afro-Latin@ Reader is undoubtedly one of the most authentically novel, richly and instructively revealing.

With more than sixty-five individual contributors and weighing in at well over half a thousand pages, one is first struck by the sheer breath and sweep of Miriam Jiménez Román’s and Juan Flores’ anthological exploration in depth, which includes detailed charting and bringing into critical view of the defining coordinates, varied topography, and sundry textures of a terrain and territory that (discretely evaded, artfully dodged, or habitually veiled in a tellingly calculated hush) is all too seldom so fruitfully traveled in and remains on the whole still insufficiently surveyed. Indeed, some appear even at this late date—anxiously or piously—to believe, with the ancient cartographers, that “there be dragons.” Arguably, and surely topically, among the longest and most patiently
José André De León American Literature Association Conference 2013 Session 9-B Seeing and Saying: Visual Articulations of Latinidad What is My Body Worth? The Exploitation of the Body of Color It’s not unfamiliar territory to see and hear on the news of the disappearance of a young white Anglo American woman in the Caribbean while on spring break.

The spitfire, described as the Latina ‘harlot’ by Charles Ramirez Berg, can be traced to the early years of silent film, and earlier, to frontier literature.