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ENG 350: Latinx Literature

Research Essay

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Caliente, Crazy, and Conveniently Marketable: Latinx Female Bodies in American Media

Robert Wise and Jerome Robbins' *West Side Story* is a popular source for representations of Latinx (specifically Puerto Rican) culture that has survived fifty-seven years of media evolution and remains a "cult classic" to this day. The "Maria" stereotype that sprouted from the film's main female protagonist, who was depicted as Puerto Rican by a white actress, and one of its most well-known musical numbers—titled "Maria"—has been used as a way to not only describe Latinx women, but promote the idea that all Latinx women fit into one category of Latinx womanhood.² While it is no secret that Latinx women are sexualized, the erasure of potential intersectionality promoted by the song as well as the treatment of the Puerto Rican women by their masculine counterparts and the rival gang of white Americans are only a fraction of the long history of female Latinx representation in popular American culture.

Words like *caliente*, "spicy," and "exotic" once carried deep cultural roots within Latinx communities, but there was a turning point where their meanings changed from cultural to sexual. This language, used traditionally by men, has been twisted from its original meaning to carrying blatantly offensive connotations. This shift began when Latinx women started being

¹ Due to the Anglicization of the Spanish "i" as an English "i," the use of either in this essay when referring to the name, song, or stereotype of "Maria" is deliberate. In *West Side Story*, which will serve as a prevalent object of analysis in this essay, "i" is used in reference to the song or the character. Because of this, I will also be using the "i" when speaking about the "Maria" stereotype as it is drawn from the film's main character. The "i" is used by me to accent my name as well as by Judith Ortiz Cofer in her work and will be accordingly referenced as such.

² The "Maria" stereotype is a popular image (Latina, brown haired, dark skinned, dependent, flimsy, etc.) based on the film's main female protagonist, Maria, and the song dedicated to her that perpetuates the idea that all Latinx women embody the same physical, emotional, and mental characteristics.

represented in popular media and were taken advantage of by prominent players in the marketing business as tools to sell products, promote films and television shows, and gain a popular following by “accurately” representing the “Other” that are Latinx women.³ But what happens when these same Latinx women take this language and sexualize themselves? Judith Ortiz Cofer says it best in her piece about her experiences as a Puerto Rican woman when talking about how a Latinx woman’s decision to wear what she deems attractive “can be lost in translation” when met with “mainstream” men who have been taught to view certain things as “sexual signal[s] (151). Attempts made by Latinx women to reclaim their bodies and their language result in more “evidence” in support of stereotypical Latinx female narratives, proving how little agency this community has when it comes to their own representation in American society.

Caliente, “spicy,” and “exotic” are three of the most common words applied to Latinx women in derogatory ways. In their cultural sense the words do not differ greatly from their dictionary meanings; *caliente* is attributed to things like food or the weather, “spicy” is essentially a nonexistent term as the majority of Latinx persons agree a distinction exists between “spicy” and “seasoned,” Latinx persons preferring the latter, however the term still holds the same reference to food, and “exotic” is used to describe things in nature.⁴ Defined by their popular slang meanings the words take on completely different connotations. *Caliente* becomes “hot,” “spicy” is now “sassy,” and “exotic” means “fetishized.” These words took on new meanings when Latinx women began being represented and marked to American audiences.

³ This “Other” is in reference to the representations of Latinx women “in relation to dominant constructions of Whiteness and femininity” (Martynuska 73).

⁴ The Oxford English Dictionary (OED) and the Oxford Spanish Dictionary (OSD) define these terms as follows: “caliente:” (translated) “1. something marked by heat or is giving off heat... 3. angry, lively or passionate... 5. feels or has the tendency to feel large sexual excitement,” “spicy: 1a. having the characteristic qualities of spice... 6a. full of spirit, smartness, or ‘go,’” “exotic: a. belonging to another country, foreign, alien.”

Understanding how Latinx female bodies are represented and why those representations are problematic is essential to understanding why the Latinx female body is being represented at all. Latin American colonialism has caused “whiteness and white notions of beauty (*blanquemento*) [to] reign supreme,” especially in media outlets where there is an immense “privileging of lighter skinned Latinas” (Molina Guzmán 4). The existing remnants of colonialism in Latin America have normalized the usage of lighter skinned Latinx women within the media to the point where “contemporary U.S. media constructions” of Latinx bodies are “informed by colonial hierarchies of raced and gendered bodies that privilege whiteness over blackness” (5). A preference for “whiteness” over “blackness” not only exists, but a third racially ambiguous category has also grown in prominence over time to the point where contemporary U.S. media depicts “racially ambiguous and commodifiable brownness” in its Latinx characters (5). Not only is colonialism still present in modern representations of Latinx persons, but now the potential for intersectional identities in terms of race within U.S. media outlets have been minimized. One of the smallest percentages of intersectional visibility in U.S. media is that of Afro-Latinas, and many of the ambiguous Latinx women portrayed in media rarely claim national Latinx identities. The conglomeration of Latinx identities that are portrayed in the media conveys the idea that all Latinx bodies are the same. Yet this is untrue as, according to Myra Mendible’s work on the Latinx body in the media, a “template” does not exist.

Mendible argues that “the Latina body,” is “a convenient fiction” that was created from a “mass-produced combination of myth, desire, location, marketing, and political expedience” (1). Basically, there can be no singular representation of the Latinx female body in the media because no such body *exists* outside of media representations—the result of marketing efforts that attempted to put together the image of “the Latina body.” In line with Isabel Molina Guzmán’s

description of racial ambiguity and convenient brownness in Latinx female characters in U.S. media, Mendible takes the stereotype a step further to include “curvy bottoms, full lips, and dark hair,” as being pushed by U.S. media outlets as the norm for all Latinx female bodies (2). Where Mendible fails in her argument is that she does not take into consideration historical and cultural elements that may influence these images. Ortiz Cofer states that her experience with this “Latina body” and the stereotypes surrounding it “is [based on] custom, however, not chromosomes” (150). Expanding on this idea, there are potential reasons for some elements of “the Latina body” being the way they are. Take the “curvy bottoms” for example. Meals eaten in Latinx communities tend to include fried dishes (i.e. fried plantains, *empanadas*, *arepas*, *mariquitas*). Fried foods contain more saturated fats and calories, thus influencing the shape of one’s body to be rounder or fuller. This is not to say that all Latinx women eat fried foods or are affected by fried foods in the same fashion, but it is a cultural element that contributes to the occasional difference between Latinx bodies and white American bodies that Mendible does not explore. That said, Mendible does allow room for those who wish to claim “the Latina body” image and its different parts to do so, citing Jennifer Lopez and Selena Quintanilla as prime examples of Latinx women who have claimed this image as “symbols of ethnic pride” (2). While it is perfectly valid to accept this identity and proudly promote it, Mendible argues that this self-acceptance must be carefully treaded because the potential for self-sexualization exists. So, if Latinx women hold what appears to be power over the way they identify themselves, why has there been a severe misrepresentation of these women in all forms of marketing? This happens, in part, because the people in charge of what gets produced onto billboards, labels, and big screens make the final decisions about what and how these women will be represented, and the majority of the time the people serving in these positions are not Latinx women.

So what about “Maria”? *West Side Story* was created by four men who “admitted their ignorance of Puerto Rican culture, and therefore, they did not intend for the story to be taken as an accurate representation” of this culture and its people (Brown 194). These men openly admitted to having no intentions of representing Puerto Rican culture accurately and yet the film has survived as a “cult classic” in part due to its impressive musical numbers and Shakespearean plot. Frances Negrón-Muntaner places the popularity of the film in its ability to represent its Puerto Rican characters as “U.S. Puerto Ricans.” According to her this “constructs Puerto Rican subjectivity as criminal (men), and victimized (women),” as “two sites of shameful identification” that share the same amount of weight; for Negrón-Muntaner there is an equal misrepresentation of Puerto Rican men and women in *West Side Story* that develops from the United States’ lack of recognition towards their “Caribbean wards” (85). No mentions of Puerto Rico’s role as a United States commonwealth exist in the film except for a singular line when the leader of the Puerto Rican gang states that “Puerto Rico is in America now.” This distancing of Puerto Rican and American relations makes it easier for audiences to swallow the demeaning representation of a community of people that are, legally, their fellow Americans.

“It was not only a single Puerto Rican who was hailed as a criminal,” Negrón-Muntaner states, “it was a generalized ‘Puerto Rican youth.’” Puerto Rican men and women were both represented the way white Americans wanted to see them: as thug men who were unafraid of causing harm to white men and virgin women who could throw themselves at white men’s feet (86). However, as Małgorzata Martynuska argues, virginity did not play a role in the fascination towards Puerto Rican women in *West Side Story*; it was all about “bright colours, rhythmic music, and brown skin” as well as “seductive clothing, curvaceous hips and breasts, long brunette hair or extravagant jewellery” (73). Martynuska divides Latinx female characters into

three categories: the “*cantina* girl” who is an exotic dancer or is sexually available, the “*señorita*” who begins the film with strong morals and ends up becoming “bad,” and the “*vamp*” who takes advantage of her intelligence to manipulate men towards violent behavior (74-75). These three categories are still prevalent in today’s representations of Latinx women and, I would argue, are the three most recognizable characterizations of Latinx women in American media.

Regardless of these different opinions, Puerto Rican women in the film were either victimized (Maria) or sexualized (Anita). The fact that Maria not only plays the lead female role in the film but also has an entire musical number dedicated to her speaks volumes when taking into consideration the fact that her partner was a white man while the partner of the second most important Puerto Rican female character, Anita, was another Puerto Rican. Ortiz Cofer asserts that she “was kept under strict surveillance, since virtue and modesty were, by cultural equation, the same as family honor,” and yet she received “a conflicting message” because “Puerto Rican mothers also encouraged their daughters to look and act like women and to dress in clothes [their] Anglo friends and their mothers found too ‘mature’ for [their] age.” To Ortiz Cofer, both elements “[were], and [are] cultural” (149). This same binary exists between the “innocent, passive, virginal” Maria and the “‘hot-blooded,’ ‘fiery,’ spontaneous, and worldly” Anita (Brown 197). In the film it is Anita, the girlfriend of the murdered leader of the Puerto Rican gang, who is sexually assaulted by the white gang members, not Maria—whose anger and heartbreak at the end of the film brings together the two gangs. In an audience reception study lead by Kennaria Brown, several working class Puerto Rican women were shown *West Side Story* in order to provide deeper insight into these controversial representations of the film’s female characters.

Brown begins her piece by asserting that the only reason *West Side Story* is still popular is because “it has yet to be replaced by another popular Puerto Rican story,” which I believe Negrón-Muntaner, in her argument about Puerto Ricans as “U.S. Puerto Ricans,” would agree with (194). There has yet to be another film portrayal of Puerto Ricans that has reached the same critical acclaim and popularity as *West Side Story*. The film’s 1961 release date plays a role in the fact that there have been no other “cult classic” films about Puerto Ricans. The fifty-seven years between the film’s release date and today were marked by an increase in social justice and activism involvement, specifically by American youth. It is much more socially acceptable to protest inaccurate representations of a culture in today’s world than it would have been fifty-seven years ago. Audiences, specifically audiences of color, are more attentive to problematic elements in the media because social justice issues have grown in relevancy since the film’s release. If a film like *West Side Story* were to be made today, several of the key components that made the film so popular would need to be removed or revised due to their problematic nature. The film’s use of brown-face on its actors, the heavily accented English, bright clothing, and musical numbers whose roots have no connection to real Puerto Rican culture that lead American audiences to believe they watching accurate representations of Puerto Ricans and their culture would need to be changed in order to satisfy the current demands from audiences for accurate and inoffensive portrayals. This demand is recognized by the Puerto Rican women Brown showed the film to.

These women critiqued two central points: Natalie Wood’s “Maria” and the “America” musical number. The first of these, Natalie Wood’s characterization of “Maria,” was criticized because Wood’s brown-face was not convincing to the women as they could still see her “pointy nose,” and the actress “did not possess hips,” nor were her accent and syntax convincing; the

women essentially identified the “Latina body” that Mendible argues does not exist (203-204). When talking about “America,” one of the most historically critiqued parts in the film, the women cited their own experiences with gendered tensions and their mixed feelings towards Puerto Rico as being accurately represented in the musical number.⁵ The opinions of these Puerto Rican women are important to look at because contradictions between the popular perspective marketed towards Puerto Ricans about what they should believe (“‘America’ does not represent us because we love our island”) and what they are allowed to believe (“maybe our Puerto Rico is not all good food and pretty flora”) opens the possibility for discussion about how even the opinions of the people supposedly represented in films can be altered simply through subtle marketing. This same marketing is what has led to the misconception that “Maria” the musical number is offensive towards Latinx women when in reality the problem with the song is not in its lyrics but in its rebranding as a “go-to” form of romantic expression, implying that all Latinx women are “Maria.”

The song is flattering, comparing a name to beautiful things like music and prayer, and is a strong declaration of sentiment towards a beloved. The problem with “Maria” is the people who sing it and why they sing it. Ortiz Cofer describes instances where strangers sang this song to her, a Latinx woman whose name is not María, simply because of her ethnicity. The constancy of the song in her life leads Ortiz Cofer to declare that “María had followed [her]” even when she went to a different country on the other side of the planet (148). This idea stresses the issue with the song’s usage’s main implication: all Latinx women are “Maria.” But what does being “Maria” mean, and why is that characterization so offensive? When sung “Maria” by a stranger in London, Ortiz Cofer says that the man, who was “probably a corporate executive, well

⁵ This is due to the strong tension between Puerto Rican men and women on their differing opinions of life in America and the negative portrayal of Puerto Rico by the female Puerto Ricans.

educated,” assumed that she, “merely a character in his cartoon-populated universe,” would not take offense to his actions unlike a white woman because with a white woman “[h]e would perhaps have checked his impulse by assuming that she could be somebody’s wife or mother, or at least *somebody* who might take offense,” characteristics he believed the “cartoon” Ortiz Cofer was not able of possessing (152). The song itself is referring to an arguably meek Puerto Rican girl who falls in love with the ex-leader of a rival gang of white men. The deep racial and ethnic conflicts within the story are overshadowed by the love between these two people; Maria hardly addresses any of the racial or ethnic tensions in her life except when in relation to her romance. The song, while a sweet tribute, does not encompass all angles of the Latinx female identity, and to sing it to Latinx women perpetuates the assumption that all Latinx women are the same; their individuality is being disregarded in favor of the ideal created by the song.

Going back to the three original buzzwords we see that stereotypes are not created out of thin air yet the cultural roots behind them are ignored. The first word that has changed in meaning because of this is *caliente*. Taking a Spanish word to describe the Latinx female body in a derogatory way just adds to the insult. Ortiz Cofer states that “mixed cultural signals have perpetuated certain stereotypes” (150). “[I]t is custom, however, not chromosomes,” according to Ortiz Cofer, that lead Latinx women to “choose scarlet over pale pink” due to the environment being made up of “a riot of primary colors.” Chromosomes lead to things like “showing [their] skin” in the hot climate “to keep cool as well as to look sexy” (150). Ortiz Cofer attributes this to Latinx women “fe[eling] freer to dress and move more provocatively” due to their protection by “traditions, mores, and laws of a Spanish/Catholic system of morality and machismo” (150). This analysis partly relies on the belief that *all* Latin American communities still rely on “a Spanish/Catholic system” which is not true despite the large Spanish and Catholic influences in

Latin America. The implication that this system “of morality and machismo” provides protection to the women of Latin America also completely ignores the overarching meaning of “machismo” that is all about taking advantage of Latinx women’s sexuality. While the final part of Ortiz Cofer’s claim is not exactly accurate, there is something to be said about the feeling of freedom that comes from being surrounded by like-minded individuals participating in the same cultural norms as you are versus being placed in a society whose norms are to criticize yours.

Secondly, since when is being “spicy” the same as being “passionate?” Since Americans’ love of Latin American food, specifically Mexican food, was heavily branded by the distributors of these foods and instead of “seasoned” the food became “spicy.” Latinx women appear in food packaging for “spicy” products, most noticeably on Cholula hot sauce bottles. Marketers have “a one-dimensional view” about promoting Latinx products because “[i]n their special vocabulary” those words are used “as the adjectives of choice for describing not only the foods but also the women of Latin America” (Ortiz Cofer 150). This creates a direct, subconscious, correlation between a “spicy” food and Latinx femininity, and it is these kinds of intentionally minute details marketed towards consumers that create the connection between Latinx women and “spiciness.” Along the same lines of comparing Latinx women to “spicy” foods, a belief exists that “Latin girls [a]re supposed to mature early” which likens Latinx female womanhood to fruits or vegetables. Ortiz Cofer personally felt like she “was supposed to *ripen*, not just grow into womanhood like other girls” which is a valid comparison to make considering the word “mature” is commonly used in relation to fruits and vegetables (151). This brings to mind another popular marketing image surrounding Latinx women: the Chiquita Banana logo modeled after Carmen Miranda. All of these food advertisements surrounding Latinx females promote the notion that their bodies are meant for consumption, particularly by American males.

The word “exotic” also caters to male American consumption. Travel agencies advertise the tropical Latin American flora, fauna, artwork, customs, etc. as “exotic” while also presenting pictures of attractive Latinx women that represent Mendible’s “the Latina body” as a way of marketing these countries. The entire concept of “exoticism” is centered on an “Other” that is going against a “norm;” in this case, the “Other” are obviously Latinx women and the “norm” are white American women. “Exotic” Latinx women have long dark hair and usually speak with accents that sometimes require captions during the programming in order for the character to be understood whereas white women have light, typically blonde, hair and are very easy to understand. Latinx women are typically clothed in bright colors and floral prints while white female characters wear nondescript shirts, jeans, and other simple clothing items. The word “exotic” also implies the notion that something is unfamiliar and foreign. While Latinx cultures can be unfamiliar to Americans, these people are much closer geographically to the United States than white Europeans, but the narratives surrounding Latinx communities imply a stronger sense of “Otherness” than those evoked by white Europeans. And of course there is the idea that “exotic” locations are only meant to be visited and enjoyed for a certain amount of time. These places and customs are at the disposal of the tourists, a narrative that bleeds into how these tourists view the women in these “exotic” places. This perspective comes from a place of distinct male, occasionally white, privilege that feeds on the notion that Americans are entitled to things, people, and places that do not belong to them. A strong example of this is the American acquisition of Puerto Rico, Guam, and the Philippines as a result of the Spanish-American war and their subsequent abuse and neglect of these countries beyond tourism.

In their original contexts these words cannot be used to describe Latinx women because their original definitions apply only to typically nonhuman objects like food and foliage. Their

modern connotations also carry implications that should not be applied to humans because of their degrading nature. However, if you were to ask a Latinx woman if she was “passionate” or “opinionated” she would say “yes” because those words do not carry strong negative connotations and can be used to describe women from *any* racial or ethnic group. If you asked her if she was “spicy” chances are she would disagree strongly because “spicy” implies a subconscious comparison to an inanimate object that is incapable of feeling. The problem lies in the words’ offensive rebranding. The roots of problems like this can be found by looking at Latinx girlhoods in comparison to their white American counterparts.

Young Latinx girls are usually raised differently from white American girls. Their girlhoods differ because of factors like culture and traditions. When I was a young girl I was much more likely to show up in the cafeteria with *arroz con lechón* than a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. Quinceañeras and Sweet Sixteens, two popular coming-of-age traditions in their respective cultures, are different traditions with similar roots. Details like this impact the upbringings of these culturally different girls. Ortiz Cofer describes one disconnect related to these differences as “[w]hen a Puerto Rican girl dressed in her idea of what is attractive,” meaning bright colors and jingling bracelets “meets a man from the mainstream culture,” typically American culture, “who has been trained to react to certain types of clothing as a sexual signal, a clash is likely to take place” (151). This “clash” can take the form of sexual harassment, assault, or rape. Suddenly the issue of differing girlhoods becomes a question of personal safety.

But why is this issue worth noting? Do these words and representations actually affect Latinx women individually or is it more a matter surrounding the collective that people have issues with? I can speak from experience that these words are more than just a way to describe a collective and are certainly applied to individuals. It shocks me that almost no scholarly work has

been done on this subject and the only “sources” available are those by websites like BuzzFeed, *Teen Vogue*, and *Cosmo* who, while they have considerable impact on social norms and trends, hold very little weight in reputable academic communities. The only resources available at my disposal, then, are the ways that Latinx female fiction and nonfiction authors describe their attitudes towards the vocabulary used to sexualize Latinx women in their works and my personal voice. My own experience with these words allows me to validate this claim and, considering the lack of research done on this subject, I believe it is a helpful lens that, while not representative of all Latinx female experiences, is still instructive and worth sharing.

As a Puerto Rican Cuban American, I acquired my stereotypical “Latina body” when I was ten years old and have been actively sexualized since. My family and I go on vacations often enough that I have developed social skills around people my age, and from different cultures, extremely well and am confident in voicing my often dissenting, or “sassy,” opinions. Because of this the term *caliente* has been directed at me countless times by total strangers. My ability to dance that developed after three years of traditional Latin dance training combined with my short height, bilingual abilities, and long hair have earned me the “exotic” label on several occasions as well. Once one of my favorite authors was doing a book signing and when I told him my name he immediately dove into a rendition of “Maria.” I felt uncomfortable, though I will admit not offended. The lack of conversation around the sexual narratives surrounding Latinx women was never discussed in my home because my parents believed it would keep me from seeing everyone I encountered as a potential threat to my self-confidence. It was not until my second year of higher education that I began to comprehend that the derogatory language used against me was not, as I originally understood it to be, complimentary. I was branded “spicy” for my snarky attitude, *caliente* for my “sexy” body, and “exotic” because of a nationality that, while

different from most, was still connected to an American citizenship. Only now do I recognize how dehumanizing it is to be compared to inanimate objects like food and the weather and I know I am not the only Latinx woman that has experienced a situation like this.

Ortiz Cofer, as I have described, was very conscious of her Latinx female identity when strangers sang “Maria” to her, “reminding [her] of a prime fact of [her] life: you can leave the Island, master the English language, and travel as far as you can but if you are a Latina . . . the Island travels with you” (148). I felt the same way as soon as I realized what the song’s connotations were; once you have been branded a “Maria” that title stays with you as much as your nationality does. But while Ortiz Cofer argues that this “can win you that extra minute of someone’s attention,” is that extra minute worth sacrificing your individuality (148)? I do not believe so, if only because this perpetuates the notion that Latinx women are taking advantage of the stereotypes placed against them rather than accepting them for the sake of self-appreciation or rejecting them all together.

There is a clear paradox at work here: while it is in a Latinx woman’s own agency to self-sexualize and proudly reclaim words that have been “re-signified” as a form of self-empowerment, the *use* of the language, regardless of who is using it or for what purpose, “facilitate[s] the greater visibility of marginalized subjectivities” (Arrizón 192). Using buzzwords even if the intention is to reclaim them can have a dual effect: “spicy” can be interpreted as “a passionate brown body and the subjectivity of those who have struggled for recognition in the pursuit of agency,” however it can also be interpreted as an “Othering” of “‘hypersexual’ brown/dark bodies” (191). This paradox only solidifies the idea that Latinx women have no agency over the way they are represented in American society.

The influence that U.S. media marketing teams have over the representation of Latinx female bodies is too strong, and the lack of scholarly research on the origins and effects of these representations does not help.⁶ These portrayals have adverse effects on the “upward mobility among Latinas in their professions” because they are “partially responsible for the denial of opportunities” for these women regardless of potential bilingual abilities, competency, or education levels (Ortiz Cofer 153). By degrading Latinx women with rebranded terminology to fit an ideal of what “the Latina body” is supposed to be, media outlets contribute to the growing aversion towards Latinx bodies in the current political climate while also promoting the sexualization and victimizing of Latinx women. Americans want to throw out Latinx men who are “taking American jobs” but will look up “hot Latina” in their porn searches and fetishize the Latinx female body for their own perverted desires (Mendible 2). Even films that have survived decades of critical acclaim for their representation of Puerto Rican culture only model the Puerto Ricans that Americans want to see: criminal men and virginal, or sexy, women. It is not surprising that Latinx women are still being sexualized in American society since this same society will continue to market Latinx women’s bodies until every product in American households has a Cholula girl or Chiquita Banana dancer on it.

⁶ Research *does* exist on this topic as evidenced by publications like *Latinos, Inc.*, however this specific area of research is nowhere near as accessible and fleshed out as it should be. There is a “lack” of research on the topic; it is not nonexistent, only minimal.

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