

# The Latina Body in Visual Culture: A Motion for Dance as a Medium

By  
Anaïs Valentina Paccione

*A senior thesis and project submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the  
degree of Bachelor of Arts in Media Studies*

VASSAR COLLEGE

Advisors: Eva Woods Peiró and Colleen Ballerino Cohen

Submitted on April 28, 2014

# Table of Contents

PREFACE.....	1
INTRODUCTION.....	3
CHAPTER I: Marketing an Urban Latinidad.....	7
CHAPTER II: Choreographing a Message: Symbolic Meaning within the Medium.....	27
CONCLUSION: A Reflection.....	42
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	45
CREATIVE COMPONENT LINK: <a href="https://www.vimeo.com/93172728">https://www.vimeo.com/93172728</a>	

## Preface

*The following is to be a multidisciplinary, multimedia exploration.*

As a Latina dancer, choreographer, and lifelong hip hop fan, I had the desire to investigate a form of media that for as long as I can remember has been a part of my life—the music video. On the surface my interest seems self-explanatory given my dance experience and heritage. Latina representations in music videos are highly stereotypical, therefore I would like to change the ways that we watch and understand the dancing Latina body as she moves. Yet, I realized that in order to imagine new video representations, I must acquire a deeper understanding of the marketing of Latina bodies in the U.S. entertainment industry, and an understanding of this racialized of body within the realm of visualized popular music.

By looking at the mechanisms at work in today's American pop culture, I have attempted to produce my own visual take on the Latina dancing body. By working from the position of a Latina amateur media producer, a dancing Latina body on film, and a student who is researching visual and written texts about the dancing Latina body, I will attempt to organically link the exploration of my topic with the creative process. Considering the dancing Latina body's context in today's popular culture, I will produce a non-traditional music video that works to expose the underlying ability to convey messages through dance, and thus the potential available to the dancing Latina body within music video's multimedia\* form.

---

\* Multimedia here refers to music, lyrics, visuals, and setting of a music video.

In my first chapter, I aim to contextualize the Latina body in popular media. To move into the artistic realm of creating a music video, in my second chapter I break down the often overlooked role of choreography itself, showing how it functions as a more subtle though equally important form of communicating messages inside of the multimedia structure of music videos. I consider choreography to be a dominant factor and by probing it I argue that we can understand choreography as a means of complicating stereotypical portrayals of Latinas in music videos.

My thesis thus calls for a re-thinking of how we consume the performance of choreographed dance in music videos in regards to the Latina body. The objective is to set this alternative understanding in motion through my exploration of choreography as a medium in and of itself and in conjunction with socio-cultural readings of the Latina body in popular culture in my first chapter. The creative component of this thesis therefore aims to construct a meta-narrative about the role of creative expression, choreography, and dance for female social engagement, and thus cultural engagement as with the hip hop dance art form. My conclusion reflects upon my creative component and analyzes the challenges in employing the medium of choreography to critique mainstream music videos featuring the dancing Latina body.

## Introduction

# No Matter Where I Go I Know Where I Came From

*“From In Living Color to movie scripts,  
To On the 6 to J. Lo to these headline clips  
I stayed grounded as the amounts roll in,  
I'm real, I thought I told you”*

-Jennifer Lopez  
*“Jenny from the Block”*

With this investigation, I shall focus on the American entertainment industry as it contributes to popular knowledge about ethnicity, race, and gender. Popular media creates discourse about Latinidad, a sociological construct which informs the way Latina/os are conceived, presented, and thus received by a global audience. The entertainment media's imagining of Latina/o performers influences presuppositions of what consumers of media expect from Latina/os and how they value people of Latin American descent as part of America's "Melting Pot." In regards to spectator and audience practices, this discourse orchestrated by the media warrants exploration due to the fact that most of the audiences in the United States function in racially segregated spaces, and for this reason the "Latin Wave" of the 1990s and 2000s must be considered from multiple perspectives. Audiences center much of their understanding of other races and ethnicities based on what they see in popular media. If these audiences do not interact with racial communities in person, they must rely on the media as a peek into the lives of these "Others." Today's media atmosphere with its speed, accessibility, and wide circulation enables heightened media visibility and the consumption of this visibility of Latinas by global audiences, thus inevitably influencing perceptions of Latinas and their

positioning in society. According to Michelle Habell-Pallán, is it “highly likely that heightened media visibility, counted with the growth of Latino populations throughout the nation, is contributing to the anxieties about who or what Latinas and Latinos are and their status within the nation” (Molina-Guzmán 8).

The entertainment business is more than simple entertainment. It is precisely that—a business. This includes constructions of stardom, as celebrity-making is a business as well. With celebrity-making in regards to Latinas, a certain level of ethnic authenticity needs to be established in order for producers and managers to market these women as such and cater to the trends and demands of the entertainment industry. In my first chapter, I will answer questions surrounding the entertainment industry’s marketing of Latinas and their ethnic ambiguity and exoticness—thought it is a safe “otherness” punctuated with a trendy urban aesthetic.

The process of ascribing meaning to racial groups is an unstable, continuous process which is informed by political and social structures. The dominant representation of Latina bodies in American popular media caters to hegemonic ideals of performance of race and conceptions of beauty. Dance is an integral facet of Latin American identity, politics, and history. As articulated by Delgado and Muñoz, “The body dancing to Latin rhythms analyzes and articulates the conflicts that have crossed Latino/American identity and history from the conquest of the continent to California’s passage of the racist Proposition 187” (Delgado and Muñoz 9). In visual culture, the performance of dance is the key factor that complicates this hegemonic domination, as it paradoxically has the power to provide creative agency to Latina bodies in music video representations, as I will demonstrate in my own music video.

The media privileges particular performances of Latina identity, as I will detail in Chapter I. I will discuss tropes which adhere to hyper-sexualized performance, white ideals of beauty, and the performance of dance and Latina bodies in motion. These media practices circulate dominant norms and public understandings about Latinidad as gendered, racialized, exotic, and ultimately consumable in popular culture. Mainstream media takes part in formations of Latinidad visually and through narrative content in order to keep these processes in place. Female audiences in particular, as I will detail in Chapter II, may cultivate the artistic ability to push back against the media's representations. In Chapter II, I will investigate creative expression through choreography, and how we may understand dance as its own medium.

I have chosen to outline Jennifer Lopez's career trajectory as a case study in looking at the dancing Latina body. Jennifer Lopez's career functions as an example in the evolution and transformation of the Latina dancing body, catering to an urban, ethnic aesthetic in regards to looks and performance of music and dance. Focusing in on the 2000s to today, we see that this performance and dance aspect in popular culture has increasingly become tied to an urban cultural taste. The "urban" style trend is now accessible and commodifiable, fueled by today's pop culture giants such as MTV, and popularized by the "urban Latina" with the most relevant example being Jennifer Lopez. Why has the construction of race and sexuality through an urban Latina lens exploded in today's pop culture? How do these representations and fandoms reflect broader social and cultural concerns?

My creative component will play on the larger themes which I explore throughout the thesis. In regards to choreography, I attempt to demonstrate the emotional experience

of choreographing, and the sharing of choreography with other women as social participation in the pastime of dance. Along with these themes, I will add in the themes of publicity images and media signs taken from mainstream music videos. Together, these visuals aim to create a montage-inspired, non-traditional music video.

The overarching question I present: what do we do with this all of this discussion of the dancing Latina body in regards to music video, and why is the music video itself important to look at through this lens?



## Chapter I

# Marketing an Urban Latinidad

*“The stakes here are about more than entertainment. They’re about who we allow to dance inside our imaginations and why.”*

–Kristal Brent Zook

*Color by Fox: The Fox Network and the Revolution in Black Television*

The brown or racially ambiguous body is often tied to the performance of dance in visual culture, becoming an enticing moving image intended to sell us a variety of products. Visual examples in such a notion provide a starting point into the exploration of Latinidad and the dancing Latina body in visual culture, marking an association between “desire” and “Latina dancer” (Ovalle 14). Our starting point begins with Jell-O. Jell-O pudding’s 2008 dulce de leche flavor commercial, “Mural,” a beautiful Latina seductively begins to wiggle and gyrate as a result of the pleasure of the Latin American inspired dessert. Her gyration animates more female backup dancers to perform similar movements, and finally a man appearing as a “Latin Lover” marked by his Speedy Gonzalez-esque white suit costuming begins a sexy salsa duet with the main Latina, all while a voiceover narrates about “pure desire”, and the commercial’s jingle blasts lyrics like “Deep in my soul/Baby, it’s meant to be/The wiggle in my heart/Is gonna set you free” (Ovalle 16). For the Latina, the lyrics promise success in seducing the male with her “wiggle” and “jiggle,” while for the consumers the wiggle and jiggle promises pleasure. Down a similar route is Eva Longoria’s Magnum “Mayan Mystica” chocolate ice cream commercial. In this case, the sexual innuendo is at the forefront, with the pun of the name Magnum for the ice cream and also a well-known condom brand. In the

commercial, Longoria is exploited erotically, with an additional problematic layer of the commercial's appropriation of the Mayan culture intended to add exotic mystery to the product. As I will demonstrate, this type of marketing of Latinidad makes its way into the realm of visual mainstream music culture in music videos.

Latinas' entrance into commodity culture is an affirmation of the increasing mainstreaming of Latinidad and thus Latinas into American visual pop culture. Demographic shifts along with the globalization of deregulated media markets have dramatically increased the number of Latina/o media outlets, advertising dollars, and focus on Latina/o audiences. Latin Americans form one of the largest nonwhite groups in the United States at approximately 17% according to the United States Census Bureau of 2013. Playing a large role in this demographic, Latino youth, as *Newsweek* once stated, is creating a certain "Generation ñ" affirming their unique space in American culture (*Newsweek* 1999). Similarly, as *New York Magazine* has written, there has been a "Latino explosion" in cultural life, a notable "Latin Wave" initiating in the late 1990s in mainstream culture (*New York Magazine* 1999). As a result of a rise in Spanish and English-speaking Latino news outlets that promote Latina/o performers, there has been a more pronounced openness to Latina/o stardom in the United States (Beltrán 6).

Over the course of countless junctures in media history dating as far back as to when Thomas Edison filmed the Spanish dancer in *Carmencita* (1894)—a dancing brown female figure who thus became the first woman recorded by an Edison camera and one of the first dancing bodies on film—Latina stars have been labeled in ways that suggest Latinas are inherently sexy, fiery, irresistible even (Ovalle 1). Latina bodies are simultaneously desirable, consumable, and dangerous—conversely, representations

include notions of assumed fertility, sexuality, domesticity, and subservience. In terms of racialization, Latina bodies are presented visually as objects that simultaneously exemplify the normalcy of whiteness and the exoticism of blackness as established in popular visual culture.

Exploration into representations of the Latina body warrants discussion of the term “Latinidad” in order to discuss with adequate context the symbolic situation and cultural reception of Latinas in popular media in the United States. The term is a social construct, shaped externally by factors such as advertising, marketing, the U.S. Census, and internally by subjectivities and communal cultural constructs. The definition is malleable, articulated in unique ways for different Latina/os—no two definitions are identical. Racialization is a multilateral process imposed by the state but also reflects the Latino population’s active engagement with its own culturally determined understanding of race (Almaguer 214). There are new forms of identity formation emerging in Latina/o communities as a result of inter-latino cultural changes and sharing. In pop culture’s definition of Latinidad, there are aspects that may be embraced or rejected by people who identify as Latina/o. Pop culture has perpetuated signifiers of Latinidad that may be deemed stereotypical, which may ironically be embraced by Latina/os. This is especially apparent in the realm of dance. While Latin dance is often stereotypically linked with Latinos, it is a significant cultural pastime that is embraced by people of Latin American descent. This Latin dance includes everything from salsa movements (fast footwork, swaying hips, pirouettes, and complicated partner work) to sensual rotations of the hips in dance, and more recently dance forms inspired by hip hop and Latin-fusion hip hop aesthetics. Chapter II will detail specifics of these dance forms.

It is important to recall that desires and conflicts differ between Latino groups. The lines between ethnicity and race are blurred when it comes to communicating Latinidad, resulting in a racialization or production of an ethnoracial Latina/o identity. This complicates definitions of performance of Latinidad and promotes stereotypes. According to Torres-Saillant, this process of “ethnoracial ontology” is nothing new—Ethnoracial ontology is a core aspect in the construction of Americanness: “In their foundational statements, the early ruling elites imagined the United States as a white, European-descended, monolingual nation, leaving outside the contours of Americanness those segments of the population that diverged from the imagined profile” (Torres-Saillant 124). The process of racialization refers to when groups are categorized as outside of the dominant United States classification of social identity. The mainstream media participates in racialization as it constructs Latinidad in order to reaffirm the view of America as a dominantly white, Anglo-Saxon Protestant nation, with Latina/o culture as exotic, foreign, consumable, and marketable.

Latina images in United States entertainment media can be described as ambivalent, often one-dimensional. However, 1990s and 2000s representations are more complex than those from the beginning of popular film. Racially ambiguous but ethnically marked feminine bodies are being utilized to sell a variety of products ranging from food as in my previous examples, to tabloids, and even haute couture. One needs only to look at the list of haute couture designer gowns worn by Latinas such as Jennifer Lopez, Christina Aguilera, and Shakira at awards events and magazine covers such as *Vogue* and *Elle*. In regards to tabloids, Jennifer Lopez appeared on twenty-nine tabloid covers, such as *People*, *Us Weekly*, and *in Touch* in 2004 alone, which made up 14% of

tabloids for that year (Molina-Guzmán 51). Ethnicity, and specifically minority female ethnic sexuality, can be commodified and packaged, thus rendering Latinas more “safe” and acceptable enough to be distributed for the consumption of worldwide audiences (Molina-Guzmán 2). There is a simultaneous popular demand for ethnic female sexuality, and meanwhile a backlash against multicultural, racially ambiguous women, a resistance which may be attributed to tensions surrounding immigration and changes in demographics in the United States over the last decade—Latina/os are perceived as threats against definitions established by non-Latino Americans.

Media signifiers of Latinidad repeat familiar characteristics that convey ethnicity using language, dress, and music. Within music video, Latinidad is typically communicated through appearance and dance, with settings and backdrops subliminally reminding the viewer where these women trace their roots: picture Jennifer Lopez in the “I’m Gonna Be Alright” video (Meyers 2002), surrounded by stereotypes associated with Latino communities in the Bronx—girls tanning in bikinis in lawn chairs on concrete sidewalks, the social space of the barbershop, women doing laundry inside of a Laundromat, playing stickball in the middle of the block. These stereotypes are reinforced as Latino, as multiple characters in the video wear Puerto Rican flags on their clothing. Other videos bring the tracing of roots even further, filmed in tropical beach settings reminiscent of Latin American shores, such as Lopez’s “Love Don’t Cost a Thing” (Hunter 2000) and “I’m Into You” (Matsoukas 2011), which was shot in various locations in Mexico. Different forms of media communicate Latinidad through racial characteristics of appearance such as facial features, hair texture, and skin color. This is especially apparent in advertisements. For example, a 2007 Head & Shoulders

advertisement campaign featured testimonials from black, white and brown women. A Latina featured in the commercial credits Head & Shoulders for giving her hair “movement, like salsa,” as the camera frames her in its only medium shot as she performs a salsa dance (Ovalle 1).

Obviously, many Latinas know how to dance and greatly enjoy it. However, in mainstream media, dance positions the Latina as racialized and sexualized, and places her into a category of opposite white/Anglo women. Simultaneous processes of racialization and gendering causes perceptions of these feminized representations as less valuable than masculine images, resulting in a double marginalization as feminine and other. The female ethnic body is doubly othered in comparison to whiteness and femininity with the linked processes of racialization and gendering. These representations perhaps function as “exaggerated” visions of the U.S. social and racial hierarchy.

The dancing Latina-in-motion is an elemental facet of U.S. national imaginary, transforming into something that Ovalle has named the “Latina myth,” an age-old notion as “the mythology of the Hollywood Latina buries the colonial and imperial history of the Americas—long the burden of the brown female body—in the racialized and sexualized image of the Hollywood Latina” (Ovalle 2). Myra Mendible further explains this historical process of sexualizing the Latina, as since the early nineteenth century, “her racially marked sexuality signaled a threat to the body politic, a foreign other against whom the ideals of the domestic self, particularly its narratives of white femininity and moral virtue, could be defined.” The Latina body simultaneously offers a tempting alternative as “an exotic object of imperial and sexual desire” (Mendible 8).

Dance is a mechanism of communicating racial and sexual meanings, which add to the myth of the Hollywood Latina, a myth that Hollywood has historically perpetuated surrounding the brown female body in general. It is as if dance is a requirement for Latina stardom, and at the backbone of it all are the notions of desirability and availability. In American popular media, the dancing Latina body is a symbol of the performance required for stardom and nonwhite female agency in an “alternately hostile and hospitable national sphere.” The dancing Latina embodies a physical “look,” (normalized and stereotyped physical actions and Latin styles of choreography) resulting in the carrying of a symbolic burden in the entertainment world, in which she embodies an “in-betweenness” (not white and not black) allowing for potential racial mobility.

The dancing Latina on-screen is codified as desirable and available, but “her image is impermanent since she cannot legitimately reproduce the nation when in the presence of white women” (Ovalle 5). She systematically becomes the dancing, temporary love interest of white men. She is placed into a category of “Other,” as the embodiment of promise and the fulfillment of national and sexual conquest. The dancing Latina body is stuck in a place between liberation and limitation: she is mythologized as sexual and assertive, at the same time as she is cast as the love interest of male performers. Dance restricts Latinas to stereotypical roles. Though dance seems stereotypical, it actually often requires most emotion, energy, and skills out of these Latinas’ screen time.

Visualization and perpetuation in the twentieth century have relied on codified depictions of dance and racialized sexuality that signify the panethnic Latina’s amoral behavior and impermanence. The visual representations suggest the Latina’s innate

dance abilities and fiery, passionate demeanor, all with the emphasis on physical mobility through dance movement, choreographed or not. Thus, there is an intersection of performance and racialized sexuality within visual culture.

The art of dance has a paradoxical effect on the representation of Latina bodies on screen. Latina dancers have the potential to use dance to gain agency within mini-narratives in music videos. Dance gives Latina characters narrative subjectivity, challenging the passivity and docility of female character representations. The paradox is that this racializes and sexualizes their bodies and thus perpetuates a myth that Latina women are naturally passionate and promiscuous. The performance of passion through dance forms the ideological Latina body. Latina's passion "marked through dance because it is a distinct marker of her identification as Latina" (Ovalle 15). Paradoxically, dance facilitates her hyper-sexualization and narrative agency. These tropes have existed since the beginning of Hollywood, but in the 1990s and 2000s, and specifically with music video, the frame shifted the image of the Latina body towards the urban space of the city and ethnic space of blackness. This notable placement into the urban space suggests a visual manifestation of unresolved social and political tensions between the United States and Latin American countries, tensions which are symbolized in the space of a still-segregated inner-city New York neighborhoods and embodied by the Latina's brown body. However, today this urban aesthetic is precisely what makes these music videos sell.

The Latina body now is a transitional body for today's multicultural market with its framing as an urban body. Today's various media venues coupled with a global market create a multiplicity of meanings based off of the Latina myth. With this urban



placement, Latinas may use the pleasure and power of dance in order to manipulate their roles. Latinas have had to maneuver and negotiate within a space of racial ambiguity where mainstream media has historically placed them. Latina dancers have the potential to create a balance. Using their bodies as a medium in familiar sexual ways—thus achieves agency in a career and nation that would otherwise exclude her and her movement. In terms of racial mobility and financial success, Latina performers are able to maneuver their in-betweenness to either side of the black/white binary, reaching a desired racialized representation to achieve marketability or success. Latinas on-screen tend to be costumed with a marketable exotic look that can be interpreted as ‘ethnic’ yet remains accessible enough that white women consumers of mainstream media are able to appropriate- whether it be through hair coloring, tanning, makeup, or fashion.

There is clear evidence that white ideals of beauty are still held to a higher standard overall in Latina/o media. One must only observe the representational privileging in television programs produced in a variety of Latin American countries with Mexico, Puerto Rico, and Venezuela being a few of many examples. According to Arlene Dávila, “contemporary U.S. media constructions of Latina identity, beauty, and desirability—often driven by U.S. Latina/o marketing and advertising firms—are also informed by colonial hierarchies of raced and gendered bodies that privilege whiteness over blackness” (Dávila). Comparatively, Latinas are racialized as brown rather than white or black. Latinas are depicted as ambiguous—not really white and not really black. They get placed in an unclear realm of “panethnic identity” as racially ambiguous and commodifiable. Numerous Latina/o Studies scholars such as Valdivia, María Lugones, and Néstor García Canclini have theorized that *Latinidad* is a “hybrid identity space,”

suggesting that Latinas may identify with subcategories branching from Latinidad, for example labels such as American, Nuyorican, Chicana, Latina” and so on (Molina-Guzmán 6). The middle-ground, ambiguous space enforces racial poles of difference when imagining and forming the nation. Yet simultaneously ethnic and racial, this space of ambiguousness allows for a flexible performance of identity. This flexible performance can be interpreted as an oppositional performance of racialization: Latinas opting to perform within a racially flexible identity. The space of ambiguousness moves away from whiteness as the ideal, and rejects blackness as stigmatized.

In understanding these media processes and their mechanisms, it helps to consider them within an established framework. Foucault’s “Docile Bodies” framework can be applied to these gendered/racialized constructions of Latinidad as ambiguous, sexualized bodies. Latina bodies are disciplined into docility, while following a process of “symbolic colonization” as described by Isabel Molina-Guzmán in *Dangerous Curves*. In a Foucauldian sense, the media functions as a social body working in the interest of maintaining governance and power. The media discipline the ethnic, racial, and gendered Latina body into docility. Mainstream media works in the interest of governing the state by presenting the discourse of Latinidad in a way that is disciplined and homogenized, commodifying gendered and racialized discourses on Latinidad and ethnicity. Thus, global media’s image of the Latina body is one that is both gendered and racialized, and though the Latinas come from diverse backgrounds, they are represented as homogeneous docile bodies. According to Foucault’s definition, forces in power normalize bodies to serve prevailing relations of dominance and subordination. Docile bodies depend on the subject. Some Latinas willingly subject themselves to bodily discipline by changing their

looks, while others are heavily influenced to conform. In the game of achieving financial success and global marketability, discipline, productivity, and docility work together.

The most prominent visual example of “Docile Bodies” at work in relation to the Latina body is that of Latinas conforming to fit norms of beauty, and here Jennifer Lopez’s beauty trajectory provides visual evidence. Over the last century, most Latina stars who have “made it” have had fair skin and European features, looking at stars such as Shakira with her blonde locks and Jennifer Lopez’s eventual high-fashion makeover. Representations of Latina beauty and desirability privilege whiteness over more ethnic features such as dark skin and textured or curly hair. Dominant media practices influence the performance of ethnicity and race and follow with the process of Foucault’s “Docile Bodies” as Molina-Guzmán states, “Feminine nonwhite bodies are central to the biological, cultural, and social reproduction of the nation and as such must be ‘disciplined’ in the interest of maintaining governance” (Molina-Guzmán 12). Latina celebrities manipulate their own bodies in order to fit profitable and marketable visions within mainstream media.

The ambiguous ethnoracial identity embraced by Latinas in mainstream media pushes back against dominant categorization of race in the U.S., however, ethnoracial ambiguity works to media producers’ advantage in marketing, as this along with sexualized Latina exoticness are utilized in their efforts to appeal to global audiences. Media performances that utilize Latinidad as a “symbol of potential transformations in identity and economic rationale for the global circulation of ethnically and racially ambiguous women,” result in ethnic and racial instability. Mainstream performances of

Latinidad require this instability in order to sell the ambiguously brown body (Molina-Guzmán 6).

Marketability stems from Latinas' performance of a safe yet sexualized femininity, the "safeness" coming from their ethnoracial ambiguity seemingly unthreatening to the American patriarchal and racial order. While marketability signifies a promise towards financial success, the calculated performance of a "safe" femininity and race suggests a move towards racial instability. Following a Foucauldian framework, mainstream media discourses about Latinidad can be explicitly or subversively pleasurable, yet at the same time productive of dominant power structures (Molina-Guzmán 9). Commodification is almost entirely inescapable. For this reason, commercial culture cannot be simplified as a means of sheer entertainment or commercial manipulation—it must be understood as a mechanism of contemporary identities and therefore notions of belonging and entitlement (Dávila 10).

Mainstream media's depiction of docile Latina bodies falls into the way the nation imagines itself. Media discourses about Latinas inform the national imaginary about citizenship and form a part in the imagined nation. In the case of Latinas, it is these media practices that emphasize sexual exoticness in addition to ethnic fluidity and ambiguity which position them as not only nationally but globally consumable docile bodies under the erotic gaze of the United States.

In understanding the reasons behind these representations, we must also interrogate the dynamics of star production and promotion. Latina star images reflect and challenge the shifting status of Latinas in relation to racial, class, gendered notions and notions of citizenship and national identity. Representation and stardom provide clues

regarding the sociopolitical status of a people within a society. These representations play a role in fostering relationships between various racial and ethnic groups. Non-Latinos receive images of what Latinidad “is” or appears to be, meanwhile these representations affect how Latinas define and perceive themselves and their heritage. As film, television, and music videos are platforms through which ethnic notions and racial identities are reinforced, challenged, made meaningful—they become places where ideologies are produced and negotiated. Media stars become role models, influencing in establishments of self-image and aspirations. Images create powerful messages that young people are forced to respond to by adopting or rejecting them. Images affect racial attitudes and social relations. The burden of representation is heavier now as Latinas represent an increasing population. At the same time, there is a developing “Latinowood” (Beltrán 7) with successful Latino producers, filmmakers, and performers coming up in historically white Hollywood as we know it—hopefully indicating a sign for improvement in Latino creative agency in mainstream media.

Hollywood underwent pronounced shifts during the 1990s, with an increasing interest in casting African American and Latina women—Jennifer Lopez, Salma Hayek, and multiracial Latinas Jessica Alba and Rosario Dawson to name a few. The entertainment industry recognized potential profits they could earn from the growing Latina/o population and therefore audience in the United States. The goal was to market nonwhite stars to both white audiences and audiences of color. Presumably, celebrities of color would appeal to audiences of color—thus talent managers, agents, and producers had to inspire white audiences to get on board. There were several talent managers and producers who rose to success in the 1990s, such as Eric Gold, “Babyface,” and Benny

Medina, who specialized in the promotion of nonwhite performers. The success of Ricky Martin, Jennifer Lopez, Christina Aguilera, and other Latina/o performers can be seen as proof of the Latin Wave in U.S. entertainment in the 1990s.

The mainstreaming and commodification of blackness and black popular culture through television and music as opposed to traditional Hollywood whiteness is an important moment in entertainment history in relation to dance and the Latina body. The 1990s and 2000s created a historical period of multicultural racialization in popular visual media, perpetuated by Hollywood film as well as visual music entertainment media. During this period, visual pop culture reproduced a hierarchy of light female non-whiteness which became marketable as both urban and multicultural. Urban style here refers to a nonwhite ethnic aesthetic, ideally a seemingly authentic aesthetic to encourage fan acceptance. The construction of a Latina authenticity is important in establishing the desirability of Latina stars in both the eyes of white audiences and audiences of color, especially Latina/o audiences themselves. Latina stars must be established as legitimate Latinas before their audiences can deem them worth aspiring towards and worthy of fan admiration.

Jennifer Lopez's stardom is a case study in media representation of the Latina body. Her Latina body, specifically her backside, has notoriously been highlighted in various magazines *Entertainment Weekly*, beginning in the late 1990s. "Booty hype" played a major part during her emergence as big star, happening at the same time she was gaining recognition from films like *Selena* (1997) and *Out of Sight* (1998), solidifying her potential to become a huge star on a global scale. Lopez's self-marketing can actually be interpreted as oppositional and productive. As a Puerto Rican woman with a curvy

figure, recognizing her own beauty despite Hollywood's existing norms can be considered positively influential to Latina audiences. In her self-marketing, Lopez challenged the existing Anglo norms of beauty. Jennifer Lopez's "rags to riches" life trajectory establishes her as an authentic Latina.

Lopez began with years of work as a dancer, with her "big break" coming when she was cast as one of the Flygirls on *In Living Color* (1990-94), in which she appeared as a "homegirl," with dark lipstick, big earrings, and an even bigger attitude communicated through hip hop dance. Rosie Perez, choreographer of the show at the time, cited Lopez's curvy body type as one of the reasons she beat out over two thousand hopefuls, as the producers predicted she would be more attractive to viewers. Her body type arguably "contributed to the view that she was a 'real' Latina and thus fitting for a show targeting the 'urban' demographic" (Beltrán 136).

Eric Gold, a talent agent who was adept at packaging multiethnic performers and projects, managed Lopez's career for a period of time during her rise to super-stardom. His promotion of her emphasized her talent and most importantly, her cultural authenticity, or an image of cultural authenticity that would be accepted by consumers of entertainment. To play a part in constructing her legitimacy as Latina, media outlets turned to discussion of her body. Interviewers shamelessly asked if her backside was real to which she would respond, "Todo es mío." With these types of statements in Latina/o media outlets along with American ones, Lopez ascribed power to her body, as she repeatedly demonstrated pride in the size of her rear. With time and the circulation of this type of on-and-off screen persona, Lopez established herself as authentic to Latina/o audiences. In the next stage of her trajectory into celebrity-dom, the objective was to

market her to non-Latino audiences and achieve mainstream stardom. Her marketing tactics paralleled Latina performers of earlier decades at this stage, though the emphasis on her body and rear end dominated most of the promotion. She often spoke of the uniqueness of her curvy body in comparison to other Hollywood actresses (*Movieline* Feb 1998).

The tendency of reporters to focus on her body indicates a process of racialization, marking Latinas as women in possession of “more body,” emotion, and sexual passion than their white counterparts. Tabloids historically recognize sex symbols for their bodies, though what made Lopez’s situation unique was the tying of this body to her ethnicity. At the same time, Lopez appeared to actively take the opportunity to discuss her pride for her body and ethnicity. The emphasis was obviously a result of deeply embedded notions of the sexualized Latina body in American pop culture, however Lopez and her management team also deliberately emphasized it.

With the rise in her success, Lopez was recognized in Hollywood as a Latina finding her way into the traditionally white star system, a “real” Latina breaking into notoriously white Hollywood, but at the same time fitting right into the stereotype of a hot-commodity Latina. She established herself as a force to be reckoned with as she marketed a profitable star image and brand, eventually creating a franchise around her name, with her entrance into the fashion industry.

Latinas need to establish their Latinidad and authenticity in order to become marketable to Latina/os. But, to appeal to white AND colored audiences, they have to transform to fit an image of ethnic beauty that appeals to white audiences as well. The term “crossover” is often utilized in order to celebrate and “sell” Latinas, in warranting



their appeal to wide and profitable audiences. Latina/o media professionals typically avoid the term—“crossover” positions Latina/os as outsiders, as exotic flavors, standing out as “Other” in the white American mainstream. Ambivalence in the reception of Latino stars is highlighted when we see Latino stars referred to as “crossover” in mainstream marketing, even if said stars had been raised in the United States. Crossover stardom ideology reinforces metaphorical borders, which assert that Latina/o’s place remains outside of Hollywood. With understanding the reinforcement of the idea of borders, it is important to consider anti-Latina/o and anti-immigration rhetoric centered on United States and Mexico border tensions. Ultimately, we may question to what crossover stars are supposedly crossing? If we look at the American population, our media audience is not all white, our media audience is multicultural. The crossover argument is weakened once we consider multicultural consumers of American popular culture.

The Americanization of Latina performers is a deliberate business move towards achieving a hegemonic ideal of Hollywood beauty and physique. For instance, Jennifer Lopez’s makeover—lightening and straightening her hair, losing weight, rumored cosmetic surgery—took her from appearing as a “fleshy Latina” to a skinny, high-fashion icon. This beauty business move possibly helped in selling her to a broader audience as her career advanced, making her an actual Hollywood star rather than simply a dancing Latina body. She wears a variety of ethnic looks at her public appearances, ranging from Latina erotic object to elegant Hollywood star as of recently. Jennifer Lopez’s transformation is evidence that ethnic images are manipulated, exploited and eventually avoided. With these physical transformations, Lopez demonstrated her successful rise

above her racialized categorization as a Latina and used it as an accessory in her manipulation of media spectacle. Thus, Lopez benefitted from her Latinidad—unconfined by it, avoiding being typecast, and maximizing her profit by emphasizing her versatility as a performer on film.

Once again Lopez is a prime example of malleability of the iconographic Latina body. Her career blossomed during the era of the growing media interest in multiculturalism, as she gained popularity at the same time black popular culture was becoming marketable. In the mainstream media of the 1990s and 2000s, Jennifer Lopez and her team played a part in the exploitation of multicultural multimedia discourses that commodified black popular culture with an urban aesthetic. She became a commodifiable representation of urban American nonwhiteness and in-betweenness. Her essence as a racially mobile performer was transformed from a visible pleasure to a tangible, wearable one with the advent of her clothing line, J.Lo—a collection of urban-influenced streetwear sold at a range of prices, so that fans of a wide variety of economic background could gain access to her clothing aesthetic. Lopez adopted the nickname J.Lo, and the name stuck. Her third album, as well as her clothing line utilized the catchy alias. Ironically, the name highlights her ethnic, urban image despite cutting off her Hispanic last name. Her career trajectory is an example of self-commodification through which she negotiated her own representation on the screen, moving from exclusively performing in Latina roles in the beginning of her career, to playing white roles, such as her Italian character in *The Wedding Planner* (2001). Her publicity is multi-faceted, catering to audiences of different ages, ethnicities, and genders. Her in-betweenness became an urban commodity available not only to spectators and consumers, but also to

other nonwhite female performers as well—her racial ambiguity transformed into tangible commodities available for purchase.

The visualized realm of popular music compartmentalized the traditions of the Hollywood Latina and is another platform in which Lopez negotiated her appearance and ethnicity. At the same time, she and her production team emphasized her ambiguity and versatility, as we can see in one of her first largely successful music videos, “If You Had My Love” (1999). In her dance break segment of this video, a voyeur who is navigating through her website to watch her dance videos chooses between one which says “HOUSE” in which she performs a sassy hip hop dance routine in baggy pants, sneakers, with hair secured in a ponytail and “LATIN SOUL” where she transforms her look with a tight silver dress, high heels, and blonde, free-flowing straight hair. She conveys her ethnicity as a Latina in her expertise in salsa dancing, after already having communicated her Nuyorican, urban roots through her mastery of hip hop dance. Lopez’s team compartmentalized her Puerto Rican/Nuyorican roots on MTV at the same time that MTV increased its representation of nonwhite performers/performance.

The visualized realm of popular music was the arena for the aforementioned tangible, racially ambiguous, urban aesthetic, making it accessible to spectators from a wide range of a racial spectrum. MTV accentuated and regulated nonwhiteness in music video performances—it was the advertising stage for this new urban trend in pop culture, and the number one franchise in the legacy of music videos. Jennifer Lopez mediated MTV’s visual commodification of nonwhiteness for the U.S. entertainment industry market. Ovalle states, “As the trajectory of the Hollywood Latina has made plain, Latinas are in-between bodies in the hierarchy of visual representation and have

functioned as ambiguously racialized performers working within the scope of whiteness and blackness” (Ovalle 128).

There is no denying that obstacles remain and stereotypes persist despite moves towards a more productive marketing of Latina bodies. There is an “unchanging paradigm of racialization through body-focused discourses that are associated with Hollywood Latinidad.” The reoccurring success of her career along with other ambiguous Latinas provides evidence of “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” (Beltrán 152).

## Chapter II

# Choreographing a Message: Symbolic Meaning within the Medium

*“Dance sets politics in motion, bringing people together in rhythmic affinity where identification takes the form of histories written on the body through gesture.”*

-Celeste Fraser Delgado & José Esteban Muñoz

*Every-night Life: Culture and Dance in*

*Latin/o America*

Much of pop culture study relies on text, verbal, and visual cultural objects, but rarely do we consider kinesthetic actions as pop culture information. The omission of such kinesthetic action as dance from pop cultural scholarship marks “the continuing rhetorical association of bodily expressivity with non-dominant groups” (Desmond 35). Music videos are multimedia forms, namely because of their fusion of moving image, music, text as in song lyrics, and finally dance. Yet in much of the investigation on music video, an analysis of dance and choreography is absent while considering the different media working together to create the music video message. In the female-address music video form to be discussed, choreography functions as a symbolic, artistic transmitter of messages. The interaction between music, image, lyrics, and dance has the power to create complex social meanings.

Musical and visual codes work together to make music video not only an artistic medium, but also an ideological one. The song is the guide and initiator, but meaning is made with the interplay between music and image. Music videos are unpredictable as a result of these different elements pushing and pulling us in different directions. Critics

may call this structure disorienting, but this is precisely the quality that allows for freedom in creating a visualized music designed to be constantly engaging, with the viewer's attention constantly in flux.

The mass media in America generates a culture of consumerism, and visualized popular music is no exception. The objective of music video is to “sell” the song first and foremost, and therefore selling the star by showcasing the artist while manipulating the iconography of the pop star. Music videos within a consumer society are products to be sold, and thus each one is competing against others of its kind. We can see that they inherently promise the same thing as nearly every other product inside of consumer society: a means in which to better oneself or make oneself richer by consuming. This promise is backed up with images in which we see advancement or upgrade, and in the case of Latinas in music videos, racial mobility in action. We see someone, whether it be an established star or dancer, who has made the transformation, and is therefore enviable from the spectator's position. To be envied is to achieve glamour, and the visualized realm of mainstream urban pop and hip hop music is a constant manufacture of glamour, no matter how realistic the setting of the video. The performers have “made it” and we are conditioned to feel that we should envy them.

One-dimensional and stereotypical Latina representations in music videos are consequences of the limitations of the medium. At the base of it, a key limitation of music video is its missing dialogue—while there are words present in the lyrics, the lack of dialogue inhibits the development of the narrative. Dancers in the video are silenced. With these fragmented narratives, there is a lack of cause an effect. Thus, many of the elements of videos seem to lack a sense of motivation, namely, in the case of dancers,

and even furthermore in the case of dancers of color. Stories are not given in full, and all of these limitations become problematic when representing a group or ethnicity, which then appears one-dimensional. Since selling the song is the focus, narrative must take a second seat, otherwise the viewer may be drawn into the narrative possibilities rather than pay attention to the musical commodity.

But, what happens when we take the time to tap into the narrative possibilities of dance? We forget that dance itself is a medium of its own within the medium of music video. Dance has the ability to “speak” for itself, choreographed or improvised. Choreographed here refers to dance moves that feature a complex dance vocabulary, motions that are rehearsed and replicable. Improvisational dance may be influenced or inspired by learned choreography. Both forms function as expressive tools. Dancers in music videos may not have audible voices, but choreography has the power to communicate abstract and ideological meanings visually.

An idea to consider in regards to choreography is whether within the frame of the music video the music is animating the choreography, or is the choreography creating its own narrative independent of the music. I propose that a key to the creation of an oppositional or critical music video is the advent of letting the choreography speak for itself. Is it possible to create a video in which the dancers are the ones with a voice and agency? Is it possible to create a narrative through dance, independent of the urban setting? The fast-paced editing of music videos can point out discontinuity by making us aware of the space between images. There are spaces of unknown events between shots and the action of the music video narrative gaps with seemingly unconnected sequences of events, and the viewer is responsible for filling in these gaps on their own, perceiving

and interpreting. For example, we may see a shot of a singer lip-syncing their song inside of their room, and in the next scene we see them in a totally different location, such as a party or nightclub. The voyeuristic liberty of filling in the shots with our own imaginations has the potential to inspire pleasure in viewership, and perhaps this is precisely what fosters the continued success of music videos—consumerism thrives on pleasure. As this is not usually done on purpose, rather, they occur due to the limitations of the medium itself, perhaps this very technique can be used in an oppositional fashion—to signal that these gaps exist, and how narratives can be conveyed through dance.

To understand the “meaning” or intention of dance itself as information and text, we must ask a series of questions. What kinds of movements are considered acceptable, and inside of what historical or geographical context? Who dances and who does not? In deconstructing movement and choreography, we can get a picture of socially constructed attitudes towards the body and its usage in specific societies from an abstract and artistic scale. Not only that, we may also gain clues about relationships and interactions between variously marked bodies. Therefore, an analysis of dance has the potential to become a starting point in order to ask larger-scale questions. Deconstructing representations of the dancing Latina body must not only include the mediation effects in visual culture, but an analysis at the level of the body of what configures these dance forms.

Fernando Ortiz characterized Latin dance as “the rapid and extremely complex movements of the African dance, in which feet, legs, hips, torsos, arms hands, head, face, eyes, tongue, and finally all human organs take part in mimetic expressions that form steps, gestures, visages, and uncountable dance figures” (Delgado and Muñoz 12). There



is much overlap in the United States public discourse on “blacks” and “Latinos” in hip hop dance and culture. Jane Desmond in “Embodying Difference: Issues in Dance and Cultural Studies” states,

It is no accident that both ‘blacks’ and ‘Latinos’ are said to ‘have rhythm.’ This lumping together of ‘race,’ ‘national origin,’ and supposed genetic propensity for rhythmic movement rests on an implicit division between moving and thinking, mind and body. Even the upper classes of Latin America do not escape this stereotyping; since their ‘Latinness’ can be said to override their class distancing from the realm of the supposedly ‘naturally’ expressive body. (Delgado and Muñoz 24)

Attributing an ability to move rhythmically to nature fails to recognize dance as a “conscious strategic practice” (Delgado and Muñoz 24).

Hip hop dance as well as Latin dance place emphasis on pelvic motion and syncopated rhythms. Hip hop dance requires a loose, grounded neutral stance, with the knees bent and legs spread apart. Hip hop dance emphasizes sharp and repeated pelvic thrusts along with pelvic grinds of various speeds according to the music. Hip hop includes intricate footwork in stepping and hopping patterns. These steps and jumps match with the beats of the music. Upper body movements are characterized by isolated arm, hands, and head movements, and in the most impressive routines, these isolations are complex positions opposite of the leg work. Latin and hip hop dance are polyrhythmic. Latin and hip hop dance is perceived as sexualized because of their unique formal qualities in conjunction with the music. Movement through space and body shapes are curved rather than square. Particularly specific to Latin forms of dance, the

pelvis moves with more freedom, rotating in various circular motions. The torso is flexible rather than upright and stable. Choreographed dances of these genres allow for a certain degree of freedom, as freestyling is inherent in both of these styles. For example, when a group of dancers performs a salsa step in unison, it is likely that their arms move freely at their sides to the rhythm, while the feet move in the structured forward and backward three-step base. Due to the improvisational nature of these dance styles, they are constantly re-inscribed over time, according to trends in current music and dance. The example of this today is the trend of fusing Latin and hip hop dance moves together in choreographed sequences, which we can see throughout various music videos such as the examples I have presented thus far.

Contemporary forms of Latin and hip hop dance and the fusion of the two create a stark contrast in relation to upright and forms of dance such as ballet, waltz, and even upright social dance. The music is key in its qualities—mainstream hip hop and Latin music both contain complex, compelling rhythms derived from African bases. With this comparison in mind, Americans regard hip hop and Latin dance genres such as salsa, mambo, merengue, and samba as dangerous and sexy forms of choreographic expression and perceive them as reflections of the ethnic bodies who perform them for spectators' gaze (Shay 169).

In re-thinking how we consume choreographed dance in music videos in relation to the dancing Latina body, it is important to locate in which types of music videos we may centralize the potential to actually visualize this re-thinking. In the book *Gender Politics and MTV*, Lewis evaluates male-address and female-address music videos on MTV during the 1980s. Obviously, as the music video industry has grown these

definitions have complicated, but the structure of female-address videos remains consistent in its signs. The female-address music video, as articulated by Lisa A. Lewis, is a space in which females may complicate and challenge the elements specific to the music video medium, thus calling for audiences to consider female experience. Female-address videos are produced to resonate with female cultural experiences, specifically those which concern topics of adolescence and gender, and the videos contain access signs and discovery signs for young female spectators. Access signs are symbols from which women in music videos visually appropriate the privileged experiences of men. This is accomplished through visual signs of female entrance into spaces typically deemed masculine. Women perform “take-overs” of these male domains, attempting to challenge the gender assumptions presiding over MTV’s visual male discourse (Lewis 109). A visual example of women performing a takeover of male space is in Destiny’s Child “Lose My Breath” (Klasfeld 2004) music video. The final scene in the video is a complex hip hop dance sequence on the streets, starring Destiny’s Child just after they cut through a dance battle circle and completely steal the spotlight from men who had been showing off their moves.

Discovery signs signal precisely that—the discovery of connection with female identity. Discovery signs celebrate female-coded activities of cultural expression, signs which work to combat devaluation of female unique cultural experience. Discovery signs present images of activities shared by young women, examples including the enjoyment of fashion and personal style and the art and social pastime of dance. These signs embody female methods for negotiating setbacks associated with female-identity and adolescence. The two types of signs work in tandem. Access signs push towards equal

rights and agency for women, while discovery signs present the value of female culture within this constant battle towards achieving greater agency. With these in sight, girls are encouraged to pursue their very own cultural agency (Lewis 109).

With such signs circulating in the public social domain of entertainment media, it is no surprise that the visualized realm of popular music renders itself more and more influential. Such so, that these music videos remediate actual advertisements promoting commodities, consumerism, racial, and class uplift. Images of glamour in music videos offer the spectator a mental image of themselves benefitting from and made glamorous by the product, in these cases we may say that the “product” is the combination of the look and style, and the talent of the performers on screen, in this case looking at young women embodying an urban aesthetic performing within an urban setting. As John Berger suggests in *Ways of Seeing*, the spectator envies their imaginary, more glamorous self after this visualization. The glamorous and enviable self is transformed into an enviable being by having the power to gain envy of others. The process crosses over into the social sphere, as the objective of becoming enviable eclipses the desire for the “product” at hand. The visualization of racial mobility promises happiness through gaining the envy of others. On the personal level, the feeling of being envied creates a feeling of reassurance in oneself. Glamour becomes power; you are what you own in capitalist society (Berger 131).

Publicity images and advertisements, and thus music videos are designed to activate the spectator and consumers’ sense of acquiring ideals deemed important by consumerist society. In fact, music videos become even stronger than photographic advertisements, as the medium is constructed to become a highly sensory object. Playing

with the senses—for example, the pulsating beat of the music, the heat of a hot summer afternoon in the streets of the City—puts the spectator in that position. Women watch dancers taking over the streets and male-dominated arenas, moving through hard-hitting choreography wearing updated urban threads. Music videos in the eyes of female spectators are manifestations of these fashionable dream worlds popularized by the entertainment industry. The representations of mobility and success make the spectator look into themselves and feel dissatisfied to some degree because they are without the talent, commodities, the envy visually presented. With this, alongside desire, music videos foster sentiments of anxiety—the anxiety caused by *not* having. The anxiety within consumer society follows that if you have nothing, you are ultimately considered nothing by others. Those who lack commodities and access to racial mobility are considered faceless, restricted from gaining acceptance from society (Berger 143). Advertisement-based media use only the future tense, but one can never fully achieve the success the images present. What they present is unattainable because these images are constantly changing. Perpetually unattainable dreams are presented, yet we continue to chase them. Popular culture’s credibility and success is judged through the relevance of its promise to the present-day consumer (Berger 146-8).

We may wonder why we succumb to publicity images, especially once we consider the ways in which they function. It is these forms of publicity images that hook the spectator of the music video. Publicity remains credible as the future that publicity promises and what it actually provides works in tandem with the gap between what the spectators and consumers know themselves to be and what they would like to eventually become. These gaps melt into one. Instead of an unpromising gap of lack, it is a gap

mollified with glamorous dreams and aspirations (Berger 148). Berger states, “All hopes are gathered together, made homogeneous, simplified, so that they become the intense yet vague, magical yet repeatable promise offered in every purchase. No other kind of hope or satisfaction or pleasure can any longer be envisaged within the culture of capitalism” (Berger 153). Capitalism makes the majority define its interests narrowly and create distinctions between what is desirable and what is not (Berger 154).

Latinas are stuck in a position between who they are as labeled by the majority, and who they want to become. But these desires are molded by a capitalist, disciplinary society. The reaction from female spectators is to employ forms of imitation as participation in the social sphere of popular music.

A woman’s presence is inherently multifaceted, in that it is more than just an image—everything a woman visually performs is linked to her presence. Female-address music videos incorporate personal style manipulation as a means of constructing one’s own entrance into “girl culture.” With female pop stars, the creation and integration of distinct visual fashion styles and integrating these styles into the female-address textuality of their videos influences fans to participate in style-imitation. Like Madonna and Cyndi Lauper in the 1980s, young women of various ethnicities have begun a sort of style imitation based off of Latina women that appear music videos as a means of keeping up with the trend of the commodification of the urban aesthetic during the 1990s and 2000s.

Style imitation transcends into the realm of dance, specifically hip hop dance. The fans create their own meanings of female social experience based on what they see in pop culture. With the (docile) body at the core, physical appearance is a fundamental

means to creation of female identity. In the case of Latina women, appearance manipulation means more than manipulating a female identity, it crosses over into the realm of manipulating an ethnic identity as well in regards to conceptions of looks and beauty as I detailed in Chapter I.

Active involvement in popular culture arenas such as popular music and the social activity of dance can actually function as a means of artistically expressing resistance towards oppressive social conditions. Following Richard Dyer, fan activity is most prominent among groups for whom identity conflicts are most intense. Women in these types of social groups face the burden of carrying the baggage of socially marginalized identities. Fan activity in everyday life is an active application of female-address textualities (Lewis 150-51). These are responses to the experiences of gender inequality, artistic manifestations and projections of a range of sentiments—from opposition, frustration, or celebrations of gender, culture, and ethnicity. Because of this, pop ideology becomes most attractive to marginalized groups—it incites fantasies of racial and class uplift through stardom, especially when young Latina women are bombarded on multiple forms of media with stars such as Jennifer Lopez, a woman who came from humble beginnings and successfully achieved economic success. Stardom and visibility in these music videos becomes a symbolic solution for cravings of recognition. Obviously, this is especially important for Latinas as female minorities. Seeing trajectories of racial mobility in action through music videos and star success instills a sense of possibility, which in turn inspires the drive to move from the realm of fantasy into real career direction. Madonna and Jennifer Lopez, among successful female artists cite seeing women singing and dancing on screen as partially responsible for their desire

to pursue a career in the entertainment business. Lopez told *Cosmopolitan*, “I was really moved watching *West Side Story* as a young girl and seeing Puerto Rican stars in it [...] not to mention the singing and dancing! Rita Moreno became a hero to me” (*Cosmopolitan* October 2013).

These sentiments and concepts surrounding social conditions require expression, but are often difficult to communicate artistically. John Martin created the most famous communication theory of dance. Martin defines dance as “the expression, by means of bodily movement arranged in significant form, of concepts which transcend the individual’s power to express by rational and intellectual means” (Martin “The Modern Dance 84). According to Martin’s conceptions, art itself is a non-discursive form of communication coming into the “scheme of human experience in order to explain those things for which words are not adequate” (Martin 13). He proposed that certain subjective, psychological, emotional experiences can not be completely understood cognitively and may only be communicated through the medium of art. Art is a medium through which non-cognitive dimensions of human experience may be communicated. Dance transfers emotional experiences via movement through the choreographer, then performer (if they are not one and the same) and outwards toward the spectator. “If it does less than this, it is not a work of art” (Martin 37).

Yet, the problem is that a performance of dance is not cognitively perfectly understandable by spectators. It is open to interpretation. The emotions, as well as the expressive movements are “irrational.” Martin states, “...it is these grasped but intangible emotional and mental experiences that the dancer of today finds himself forced to express through the irrational medium of bodily movement...the artist senses



something unknown and unknowable and expresses it irrationally” (Martin “The Modern Dance” 10). In the music video medium, this communication of dance is further complicated. The addition of video, music, lyrics, and settings each come to the forefront, making the choreography take a back seat.

Genre and ethnicity play a role in the setting of mainstream music videos in their attempts at succeeding economically. Hip hop music videos supposedly move towards “realistic” settings in their depictions of “the hood” in addition to antithetical settings which convey extreme luxury and wealth, evidence of the performers “making it.” It is important to look at the settings in which choreographed dance sequences typically occur. The most prominent recurring setting is that of the street. With a critical gaze, the apparent stereotypical setting may be considered more than just a simple backdrop of masculine space. The street and the hood are symbolic vehicles through which females may gain access to the male-dominated sphere. Women perform “take-overs”—literally through choreographed dance—of male space and thus male patriarchal privilege. Christina Aguilera’s “Can’t Hold Us Down” (LaChapelle 2003) provides a scenario of this type. In the beginning of the video set in a bustling urban street setting, Aguilera is touched inappropriately by a young man. She stands her ground, and gradually is joined by other girlfriends and women on the street, erupting in an all-out girls versus boys dance battle in the middle of the road. In this way, she and her girls enter the male-established space and successfully complete their “take-over.” Through dance performance on the street, the setting is transformed into a site for female camaraderie and solidarity against patriarchy.

Choreographed synchronized movement works to complicate the voyeur's gaze. Within videos containing female dancers performing choreographed movement, choreography occasionally fills the frames and effectively takes space away from men. In this sense, dance and choreography lead to symbolic accomplishment for women in music videos. Symbolically, hip hop dance is an artistic vehicle for an abstract representation of female militancy, control, and discipline. Hip hop dance contains elements of aggression, at times integrated with wild sexual energy. When hip hop dance is analyzed through the intricacies of the choreography, the performers' control over their bodies encourages a certain reevaluation of the other elements of music video that at first glance seem to work against the empowerment of women. The performance of dance incites a reevaluation of the typical revealing costume choices and provocative representations. Through this lens, the representations move from presumed objectification to signs of pleasure and indulgence in oneself as a woman with power. It is a reclamation of dance, as opposed to objectification or victimization. Dance becomes a symbol of mobility in regards to gender and in the case of Latinas, ethnicity as well. The classic example of this type of accomplishment through hip hop dance is that of the "dance battle" in music videos, such as the Destiny's Child and Christina Aguilera examples. The act of dancing is a physical expression of bodily pleasure through artistic ability and expertise as a result of and in pursuit of upward mobility. According to Angela McRobbie, dance is an activity of control, pleasure, and sensuality for girls. As an activity, it offers girls a positive form of expression, a way to connect with one another.

The concept of a hybrid Latin and hip hop dance movement in music video signals complex interactions among ideology, cultural forms, and power differentials inside real-world society, outside the realm of visual pop culture. Commodification of movement styles, but also a modification, adoption, and rejection, signals the production of “social identities through physical enactment” (Desmond 35). Differences in movement styles distinguish different groups from each other—marking constructions of gender, race, ethnicity, or class. Dance styles are fostered inside of a network of relationships to other styles of dance, thus creating their meanings within the context of other socially meaningful dances. The meanings of dance within their specific contexts are constructed in a Foucauldian sense by societal discursive practices and limitations (Desmond 37).

## Conclusion: A Reflection

An analysis of dance is a starting point in the move towards asking large-scale questions. Deconstructing representations of the dancing Latina body must not only include the mediation effects in visual culture, but an analysis at the level of the body of what configures these dance forms. The concept of a hybrid Latin and hip hop dance movement in music video signals complex interactions among ideology, cultural forms, and power differentials inside real-world society, outside the realm of visual pop culture.

With my music video, I attempted to create a contrast between images that represent themes of publicity and consumer society, and images which intend to invoke the contrasting urban, “authentic” hip hop aesthetics. With this contrast, I attempted to bring attention to the ways in which consumerism and glamour attempt to discipline the dancing Latina body in visual culture. Not only is there an obvious visual contrast in the appearance and representation of the dancers and Jennifer Lopez, the contrast is made further apparent through the choreography they perform.

I took clips from two different Jennifer Lopez music videos: “Live It Up” (Terrero 2013) and “I’m Real” (Meyers 2001). I also cut in clips of her performances with the Flygirls on “In Living Color.” “Live It Up” is one of Lopez’s more extravagant and opulent music videos, taking place in a high fashion show in Paris and on the beach in Saint-Tropez. The choreography she and her dancers perform in the catwalk scenes is upright, sharp, clean, and executed with tight control. It is not at all free-flowing or loose—it is serious and intense. Her wardrobe and appearance mirrors this aesthetic, as she is constrained in elaborate haute couture ensembles with her hair tightly secured. In

the beach scenes, her hair is let down but she does not appear free or relaxed—she is poised and alluring, almost otherworldly, and visually she is racially ambiguous.

It is in the spaces between these shots that I intercut moments from “I’m Real” and Flygirl performances. There are glaring difference in Lopez’s appearance and performance of dance. In “I’m Real,” Lopez is casual, her dancing appears improvised and her clothing choices are informal. She performs in an urban space. In the Flygirl routines, Lopez is almost unrecognizable compared to the “Live It Up” video clips. She is marketed as a Puerto Rican homegirl decked out in hip hop wear. The hip hop choreography is effervescent, bouncy, and wild. The hip hop choreography with its qualities of freedom, aggression, and rebellion, is meant to call attention to the traps of consumer culture and pursuit of unattainable ideals of publicity images, glamour, and docile bodies in my interpretation of a music video.

Throughout my thesis, I interrogated the fact that the performance of choreography is often represented as an innate ability for Latina characters in music videos. In mainstream music video, we typically do not see the creative process represented through the medium of music video itself. The visualized creative process that I have placed into my video provides an alternative representation of the dancing Latina body. My video opens and closes with a mini-narrative that sets up the overarching theme of reclamation of dance, and dance as an arena for expression and social interaction and empowerment for young women. The narrative, enacted without words, depicts a young woman creating and choreographing a hip hop dance. This advances into an almost dream-like montage of the aforementioned Jennifer Lopez videos. The piece ends with the young choreographer sharing her creative expression

with friends. Thus, the video presents camaraderie and collaboration between female dancers. The location of the dance studio and Latina character's entrance into it shows that dance is a routine practice for her and a part of her life. The dance studio location is important in refuting the innate ability of dance, as it is a space of learned and practiced skill. I chose music that would allow the unfolding of my video without complications due to lyrics.

Throughout my artistic process, I brainstormed countless means in which I could have approached the themes I explored in my text. The truth is that there are many, many ways in which we may begin to attack these themes visually and artistically. In the future, I hope that in creating productive work that attempts positive change in Latina representations, we consider the possibilities in the intricacies of the art of dance itself, as an active emotive medium.

## Works Cited

Beltrán, Mary C. *Latina/o Stars in U.S. Eyes: The Making and Meanings of Film and TV Stardom*. Press, 2009.

Berger, John. *Ways of Seeing*. London: British Broadcasting Corporation and Penguin Books, 1972. Print.

Dávila, Arlene M. *Latinos, Inc.: The Marketing and Making of a People*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001. Print.

Delgado, Celeste Fraser, and José Esteban Muñoz. "Rebellions of Everynight Life." *Everynight Life: Culture and Dance in Latin/o America*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1997. Print.

Desmond, Jane C. "Embodying Difference: Issues in Dance and Cultural Studies." *Everynight Life: Culture and Dance in Latin/o America*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1997. Print.

Lewis, Lisa A. *Gender Politics and MTV: Voicing the Difference*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990. Print.

Martin, John. *Introduction to the Dance*. New York, New York: Princeton Book Co.- Dance Horizons, 1965. Print.

---. *The Modern Dance*. New York, New York: Princeton Book Co.- Dance Horizons, 1965. Print.

Mendible, Myra. *From Bananas to Buttocks: The Latina Body in Popular Film and Culture*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007. Print.

Molina-Guzmán, Isabel. *Dangerous Curves: Latina Bodies in the Media*. New York and London: New York University Press, 2010.

Movieline Staff. "Jennifer Lopez: The Wow." *Movieline: The Vault*. 1 Feb 1998. Web. 20 Apr 2014.  
<<http://movieline.com/1998/02/01/the-wow-jennifer-lopez/>>

Newsweek Staff. "The Legacy of Generation ñ." *Newsweek* 11 Jul 1999. Web. 20 Apr 2014.  
<[http://www.newsweek.com/legacy-generation-n-168392#disqus\\_comment](http://www.newsweek.com/legacy-generation-n-168392#disqus_comment)>

Ovalle, Priscilla Peña. *Dance and the Hollywood Latina: Race, Sex, and Stardom*. New Brunswick and London: Rutgers University Press, 2011.

Poblete, Juan and Tomás Almaguer. "At the Crossroads of Race: Latino/a Studies and Race Making in the United States." *Critical Latin American and Latino Studies*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003. Print.

Shay, Anthony. "Latin American Dances: Sin and Sex Made Safe." *Dancing Across Borders: The American Fascination with Exotic Dance Forms*. Jefferson, North Carolina and London: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2007. Print.

Torres-Saillant, Silvio. "Inventing the Race: Latinos and the Ethnoracial Pentagon." *Latino Studies* 1, no. 1 (March 2003): 124.

United States. Census Bureau. Population Estimates. "State and County QuickFacts." *United States Census 2012*. Washington: US Census Bureau, 27 Mar 2014. Web. 1 Apr 2014.  
<<http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/00000.html>>

Vernallis, Carol. *Experiencing Music Video: Aesthetics and Cultural Context*. New York, New York: Columbia University Press, 2004. Print.

## Music Video Works Cited

Hunter, Paul. "If You Had My Love." 1999. Music Video. *YouTube*. Jennifer Lopez Vevo. 2 Oct 2009. Web. 15 Apr 2014.  
<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IYfkl-HXfuU>>

Hunter, Paul. "Love Don't Cost A Thing." 2000. Music Video. *YouTube*. Jennifer Lopez Vevo. 25 Mar 2011. Web. 15 Apr 2014.  
<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4kGvIESGvbs>>

Klasfeld, Marc. "Lose My Breath." 2004. Music Video. *YouTube*. Vevo. 25 Oct 2009. Web. 16 Apr 2014.  
<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AqeliF0DITg>>

LaChapelle, David. "Can't Hold Us Down." 2003. Music Video. *YouTube*. Christina Aguilera Vevo. 17 Nov 2009. Web. 16 Apr 2014.  
<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dg8QgUIKXHw>>

Matsoukas, Melina. "I'm Into You." 2011. Music Video. *YouTube*. Jennifer Lopez Vevo. 2 May 2011. Web. 15 Apr 2014.  
<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IgLcQmlN2Xg>>

Meyers, Dave. "I'm Gonna Be Alright." 2002. Music Video. *YouTube*. Jennifer Lopez Vevo. 26 Mar 2011. Web. 15 Apr 2014.  
<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LzX23qVqyJg>>



Meyers, Dave. "I'm Real." 2001. Music Video. *YouTube*. Jennifer Lopez Vevo. 2 Oct. 2009. Web. 18 Apr 2014.  
<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sjx9oSJDAVQ>>

Terrero, Jessy. "Live It Up." 2013. Music Video. *YouTube*. Jennifer Lopez Vevo. 17 May 2013. Web. 18 April 2014.  
<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BofL1AaiTjo>>