

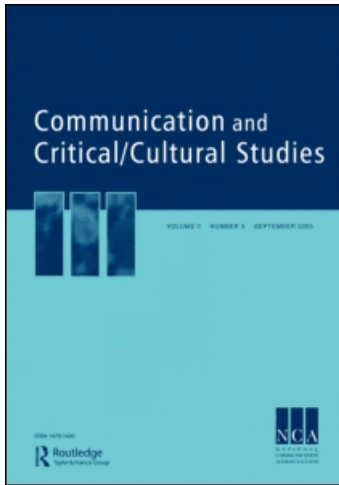
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# Crossing Over: Hybridity and Hegemony in the Popular Media

Helene A. Shugart

*In this essay, I assess how the threat of “hybridity,” as represented in the mediated construction of Jennifer Lopez, is negotiated and contained in the context of contemporary popular culture. I argue that, in this case, hybridity is shored up against a narrative of authentic “otherness,” secured via a particularly gendered and sexualized discourse of excess, in ways that implicitly address a crisis of racial/ethnic integrity and ultimately serve to preserve whiteness. This case study of the contemporary cultural management of hybridity provides meaningful insight as to the continence of whiteness in a (post)modern age as well as to how its borders are marshaled and maintained in the face of attendant challenges.*

*Keywords: Hybridity; Whiteness; Excess; Popular Culture*

Cultural critics across disciplines have identified and assessed the ways in which representations of “other” are coded to the end of reinforcing and reproducing conventional discourses that maintain the marginalization of designated “others.”<sup>1</sup> Perhaps not surprisingly, much of this analysis has been relevant to mediated representations, given their reach, pervasiveness, and, thus, profound implications for wide and varied audiences. Critical analyses of how disenfranchised individuals and communities are mediated in such a way as to perpetuate dominant discourses include, for instance, assessments of representations of gender, race/ethnicity, class, and sexuality.<sup>2</sup>

Many of these critics note, however, that conventional sensibilities regarding alterity are not necessarily promulgated in the context of the contemporary media in blatantly stereotypical ways, even if stereotypes certainly remain available.<sup>3</sup> Rather, problematic representations are more typically articulated to audiences under the

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Helene A. Shugart is Associate Professor in the Department of Communication at University of Utah. A version of this essay was presented at the 2003 annual conference of the National Communication Association, in Miami Beach, Florida. The author would like to thank John Sloop and two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments and suggestions. Correspondence to: Helene A. Shugart, Department of Communication, University of Utah, 255 South Central Campus Drive, LNCO 2400, Salt Lake City, UT 84112, USA. E-mail: hs17@utah.edu

guise of diversity and progressiveness. Certainly, in terms of sheer quantity, representations of otherness are available to audiences of contemporary media as never before, even if those representations still do not reflect the actual demographics of the general population.<sup>4</sup> However, visibility alone is no guarantor of legitimacy. While the increased availability of these representations of otherness in conjunction with an apparent sensitivity to patently stereotypical portrayals may signal a response on the part of the media to increasing pressures for diversity in the effort to secure broader audiences, those representations are often parlayed in ways that reify oppressive discourses. For instance, Watts and Orbe caution against a trend in the popular media to represent “authentic blackness,” which they argue is symbolic of a “white . . . fascination” with and appetite for black expression that may well serve to ensure its availability for commodification and consumption.<sup>5</sup> In a similar vein, Shugart, Waggoner, and Hallstein argue that popular mediated representations of “third-wave” feminism, promoted as chic and cutting edge, in fact serve to reinforce very conventional sensibilities regarding gender.<sup>6</sup> Accordingly, although more—and arguably, more diverse—representations of otherness have become available in popular media fare, they nonetheless may be framed by and for prevailing dominant discourses of privilege.

In this essay, I examine one such strategy by which, I believe, otherness is mediated in such a way as to ostensibly promote diversity and alterity even as it reifies traditional discourses of whiteness. In particular, as a case study, I examine the mediated representation of Jennifer Lopez, arguably the most visible Latina in contemporary mainstream popular culture. In fact, Lopez has been the subject of considerable analysis already for this very reason, primarily as relevant to mediated constructions of ethnic and class identity(ies) and body politics,<sup>7</sup> issues that I also will address in this analysis. My interest in this essay is specifically focused upon the rhetorical negotiation of hybridity as it occurs on the mediated body of Jennifer Lopez. I argue that, in this case, despite the appearance that hybridity has been embraced in contemporary (especially popular) culture, it is shored up against a narrative of authentic “otherness,” secured via a particularly gendered and sexualized discourse of excess, in ways that implicitly address a crisis of racial and ethnic integrity and ultimately serve to preserve whiteness. This case study of the contemporary cultural management of hybridity provides meaningful insight as to the contenance of whiteness in a (post)modern age as well as to how its borders are marshaled and maintained in the face of attendant challenges.

### **Mediated Images of Latinidad**

Although, as noted, representations of “diversity” (as defined against whiteness) in mainstream media venues have increased in recent years, Latinos remain proportionately less visible—especially in news and entertainment fare—than any other “ethnic” group, including whites, blacks, Asians, Pacific Islanders, and American Indians. Specifically, despite comprising the nation’s “largest ethnic minority” at 13 percent, as recently as 2002, a UCLA study found that “Hispanic characters received

an average 3 percent of the available screen time on prime time series broadcast by the top six networks,” as compared to Caucasians receiving 81 percent of available screen time against their 70 percent of the population, and African Americans receiving 15 percent against their 12.7 percent.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, “Latinos are more likely than other group to receive portrayal in the media that reinforces crude and demeaning cultural stereotypes.”<sup>9</sup> Indeed, this is so despite policies and sentiments ostensibly designed to promote positive portrayals of ethnic groups and other minorities, such as the Good Neighbor Policy resurrected under Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s administration, which established a Motion Picture Section specifically charged with producing films and ensuring positive portrayals of Latinos to the end of “carry[ing] the message of democracy and friendship below the Rio Grande” so as to offset “dubious political allegiances” of Latin American countries and to ensure the safety of US investments in them;<sup>10</sup> and also despite general political and multicultural trends in the 1970s and 1980s born of a frustration with overt stereotyping and oppression of disenfranchised groups.<sup>11</sup>

Such overtures notwithstanding, Berg argues that, in particular, six basic Latino stereotypes have dominated—and continue to be pervasive in—Hollywood cinema in particular and mainstream media fare in general. These stereotypes, further, are highly gendered: Latinos are most available to audiences as “*el bandido*,” historically the crude Mexican bandit of Westerns but still present today as, for instance, the volatile “tough” homeboy or hood; or the more refined, wealthy, and sinister generically Latin American drug lord.<sup>12</sup> The “male buffoon”—à la Ricky Ricardo, of “I Love Lucy,” or Cheech Marin—is another stereotype; this character is “simpleminded . . . he cannot master standard English . . . and he childishly regresses into emotionality.”<sup>13</sup> Finally, Latin men are and have been presented in mediated texts as “the Latin lover,” the smouldering, erotic, exotic, and somewhat dangerous character who embodies the “romantic promise that, sexually, things could very well get out of control.”<sup>14</sup> This stereotype, argues Berg, originated with Rudolph Valentino and has remained available to audiences in, for instance, roles played by Ricardo Montalban and Antonio Banderas.

Latinas also have a place in the popular mediascape, and they, too, can be identified in terms of three prominent stereotypes that generally correspond with those of Latin men, according to Berg. In particular, Latinas have been and continue to be available to audiences as “the harlot,” or the female version of *el bandido*, who is “lusty and hot tempered . . . a slave to her passions,” and the object of her desire is, more often than not, a white male.<sup>15</sup> The feminine version of the male buffoon, the “female clown” is primarily utilized, argues Berg, to “neutralize the screen Latina’s sexuality . . . so that the [Anglo] hero [has] reason to reject the Latina in favour of the Anglo woman, thereby maintaining the WASP status quo.”<sup>16</sup> This character is a familiar trope in popular media fare, exemplified especially by the colorful, comical Carmen Miranda. The female counterpart of the Latin (male) lover is the “dark lady”: Similarly exotic and erotic, she is “virginal, inscrutable, and aristocratic. . . . Her cool distance is what makes her fascinating to Anglo males.”<sup>17</sup>

Notably, racialized sexuality is the axis on which each of these Latina stereotypes turns; this is so, Lopez argues, because “the Latin American woman poses a double threat—sexual and racial—to Hollywood’s ethnographic and colonial authority.”<sup>18</sup> Many critics find the dichotomy between the “rich, valuable, and virginal *senoritas* and the spitfires or ‘*catineras* of easy virtue”<sup>19</sup> particularly significant—the latter characterization basically being a conflation of Berg’s “harlot” and “female clown.” Although the “virgin and whore” tropes are not necessarily unique to Latinas in mediated representations of women, the particular shapes that they assume are distinctive—again, the aristocratic “lady” of an ancient, exotic culture, and the fiery, sexy, often funny temptress. Class also is implicit and significant in these distinctions, which continue to be salient—for example, in the mediated representations of Penélope Cruz and Rosie Perez, respectively;<sup>20</sup> Valdivia has noted this same dynamic as manifest in mediated representations of Cruz and Jennifer Lopez, as well, with Cruz signing in for Spanish “whiteness”—and refined sensibilities—and Lopez signing in as relatively more primitive, “closer to the body and nature.”<sup>21</sup> In a similar vein, Molina Guzmán has traced the ways in which, in press coverage of the event, female relatives of Elian Gonzales were drawn against each other along similar tropes of conservative “white” refinement and “racialized . . . Latina otherness,” specifically as defined against both conservative US Cuban community politics and broader cultural “backlash” narratives of immigration.<sup>22</sup> Cortés acknowledges this dualism, although he notes further that some historical and many contemporary Latinas available to audiences in popular media fare, like Salma Hayek, for instance, in fact embody both of these extremes.<sup>23</sup>

The very notions of “race” and/or “ethnicity,” of course, are figured against a powerful discourse of whiteness. Many cultural critics have noted that whiteness has been normalized and privileged to the point of profound invisibility; indeed, “a silence about itself is the primary prerogative of whiteness.”<sup>24</sup> In fact, whiteness typically is made visible primarily if not exclusively via “the signifying capacities of color”; as Shohat notes, ethnicities only make sense in relation to other ethnicities.<sup>25</sup> Perhaps the most familiar pattern to exemplify this is the fairly consistent characterization of people of color as, for instance, undisciplined, unrefined, primitive, exotic, inappropriately sexual, emotional, and unstable;<sup>26</sup> certainly, various configurations of all of these qualities are present in the common characterizations of Latina/os noted above. The injustices and inaccuracies of such representations aside, they function to “reinforce the attitude of White superiority,” which is conversely articulated as ordered, civilized, rational, disciplined, and morally superior.<sup>27</sup>

Perhaps obviously, this binary of whiteness and “otherness” has been highly efficacious to the end of maintaining and reinforcing white privilege. In relatively recent years, however, the carefully constructed chasm between the two has been tested in a variety of ways, especially with regard to the integration of people of color into social, cultural, and political contexts previously defined as the exclusive provinces and domains of whiteness. Attendant to these challenges, a discourse of assimilation, wherein the “other” was encouraged to adopt and emulate the practices and priorities of whiteness, evolved as a measure of preservation insofar as, if the

racial category of “white” became the subject of interrogation, the *discourse* of whiteness emerged intact and arguably was reinforced by its implicit designation as the benchmark and signifier of cultural legitimacy. But in many respects, the ideological utility of assimilation for whiteness rests upon a *clear* presumption and designation of otherness, such that its explicit rejection serves to bolster whiteness. Arguably, the threat to whiteness is perhaps most intense when otherness is not so clearly defined, and the boundary between the two is easily and frequently traversed and thus transgressed. Negra argues that certain ethnicities, in particular those that feature elements of whiteness in combination with features of otherness, “can serve as a marker of disruption, drawing attention to the precarious cultural power associated with whiteness.”<sup>28</sup> In other words, individuals who exist at the margins of whiteness—hybrid individuals—pose a profound threat to whiteness insofar as they are poised to expose it *as a discourse*. In essence, hybridity threatens to make whiteness visible.

### Exploring Hybridity

While other critics also have noted the general contemporary trend of mediated representations that merge apparently contradictory gendered tropes in popular female icons, ostensibly to the end of acknowledging a more sophisticated understanding of the complexity of femininity,<sup>29</sup> “hybridity,” or a “space where bodies and identity resist stable categories, and [where] meaning is ambivalent, contradictory, and historically shifting,” is generally understood as relevant to race and ethnicity.<sup>30</sup> Hybridity is often invoked in reference to the blending or blurring of races and ethnicities—variously described as, for instance, “cultural heterogeneity” or “mongrel cultural forms”—and it has particular relevance to postcolonial theory in this regard.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, hybridity as a theoretical concept, argues Kraidy, “has become a master trope across many spheres of cultural research, theory, and criticism,”<sup>32</sup> and a number of scholars across disciplines have addressed its political implications. Several cultural critics laud the progressive and transgressive nature of hybridity; Bhabha, for instance, identifies the subversive and appropriative value in hybridity’s ability to “translate, and therefore reinscribe, the social imaginary.”<sup>33</sup> In a similar vein, Werbner identifies “the transgressive power of symbolic hybrids to subvert categorical oppositions and hence to create the conditions for cultural reflexivity and change.”<sup>34</sup>

Others, however, are warier of hybridity, cautioning that—conceptually as well as in terms of its manifestations—it is at least potentially if not inherently hegemonic.<sup>35</sup> Gomez-Peña, suspicious of the same ambiguity lauded by hybridity’s proponents, notes that “precisely because of its elasticity and open nature, the hybrid model can be appropriated by anyone to mean practically anything. Since the essence of its borders is oscillation, these boundaries can be conveniently repositioned to include and exclude different people and communities.”<sup>36</sup> Chow makes this point more directly, charging that hybridity is yet another example of what “a dominant culture permits in the interest of maintaining its own equilibrium.”<sup>37</sup> In essence, these critics

contend that hybridity is ultimately a hegemonic construct created by and for dominant interests.

Cognizant of this hegemonic potential, Hamid Naficy makes a further distinction between hybridity and syncretism.<sup>38</sup> Hybridity, he argues, is ambiguous, dynamic, and unstable, constantly shifting and blending the features of two or more cultures in ways that sometimes display certain features more prominently than others—it is always indeterminate, always in flux. Syncretism, on the other hand, is relatively static, defined as the impregnation of one culture by that of another (or multiple others) with the consequence of creating a third culture—one that is considerably more stable, permanent, and comfortable than hybridity. Naficy argues further that hybridity constantly seeks to resolve itself into syncretism, for the latter offers the promise of community that eludes the former. While this impulse may well originate within hybrid individuals, Naficy points out that syncretism is not necessarily organic, crafted by said individuals; indeed, syncretic identities may well be designed and imposed by dominant interests as a way to harness hybridity in ways that ultimately benefit them.

Despite all of the implications that hybridity has for communication, as Kraidy argues, “sustained treatments that theorize cultural hybridity as a communicative space or practice . . . remain rare.” Approaching hybridity from the perspective of communication—more specifically, as a “communicative practice constitutive of, and constituted by, social and economic arrangements”—recognizes, in a way that existing literature regarding the concept does not, that “transcultural relations are complex, processual, and dynamic.”<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, an approach that is theoretically informed and driven by communication “allows us to comprehend how, under certain conditions, in certain contexts, ideological elements coalesce in a certain discourse of hybridity.”<sup>40</sup> To this end, “our attention needs to be redirected from debating the political and theoretical usefulness of hybridity, to analyzing how hegemonic structures operate in a variety of contexts to construct different hybridities.”<sup>41</sup> Analysis of representations of hybridity is not only warranted but imperative, Kraidy concludes, in order to assess the components of those discourses and their implications.

Molina Guzmán and Valdivia concur, and they find analysis of hybridity as it occurs in popular culture especially germane: “Hybridity as a theoretical concept is particularly significant for analyzing popular representations of ethnic populations [with] histories of colonialism and imperialism.” They further assert that “the contemporary experience of Latinas,” in particular, “is informed by the complex dynamics of hybridity as a cultural practice and expression.”<sup>42</sup> Accordingly, Latina identity is itself arguably a “hybrid form” within US culture, and as such is rife with the potential to challenge or disrupt dominant discourses and practices relevant to race/ethnicity as well as to gender. Analysis of the mediated discourse of Latinas in mainstream popular culture, where their hybridity is ensconced within the familiar and less politically charged narrative of “crossover,”<sup>43</sup> is thus especially revealing of those sites of potential rupture and, equally significant, of how that challenge might be managed.

As scores of cultural critics have noted, the political economy of the dominant or “mainstream” media is a crucial consideration in any analysis of mediated representation, and its relevance to hybridity is no exception. Valdivia, especially, has noted the significant, sustained market appeal of hybridity, especially as predicated on the Latina/o body, given the fact that Latina/os are the fastest growing demographic in the United States:<sup>44</sup> “The marketing of ambiguity opens up a huge space for appealing to a ‘newly discovered’ heterogeneous population.” This is, she suggests, the “flip side” of strategic essentialism as relevant to popular cultural representations.<sup>45</sup> Naficy, as well, asserts that the promise and stability of syncretism, which affords hybrid individuals a position in the broader culture, is available only when hybrid individuals become “consummate consumers.”<sup>46</sup> Indeed, drawing on Naficy, Levine has chronicled precisely this dynamic in Telemundo’s market-driven “construction of a particular [syncretic] Latino/a identity.”<sup>47</sup> Both Naficy and Levine, then, suggest that syncretism is appealing and beneficial to dominant, capitalist interests in terms of sheer profitability. However, I would submit that competing, no less salient interests are at stake with respect to broader issues relevant to race and ethnicity, namely, the inherent and rather profound threat posed to whiteness by the sedimentation of a “third” — syncretic — culture, one that inherently gives the lie to the rigid distinctions between white and “other” that comprise, after all, the cornerstone of whiteness. Although syncretism arguably can be understood as a means of containing the threat of hybridity by “fixing” it in particular, hegemonic ways, it seems to me that the relatively unstable and infinitely more malleable nature of hybridity may well represent the lesser of two evils in the interest of preserving white privilege. Certainly, hybridity also constitutes a threat, but its very instability renders it an ideal vehicle for all manner of representations that can be marshaled in various ways to negotiate potential ruptures to a discourse of whiteness; Valdivia, in fact, has identified four such ways, including morphing, fragmentation, palette, and ambiguity—all strategies that purport to embrace or celebrate hybridity but in fact ultimately reify whiteness, at the very least by reinforcing the symbolic displacement and erasure of blackness and “Mexicanness,” both within *Latinidad* and without.<sup>48</sup> While syncretism doubtless holds significant market appeal for certain media interests and for targeted hybrid audiences (consumers), as Naficy and Levine have argued, in terms of a broader cultural ideology and discourse of whiteness, the benefit of hybridity is that it can be cast as exotic and aesthetic mingling rather than merging or fusion; as cultural encounters or even collisions rather than confluences. Informed by these assumptions, my interest in this essay is to examine how hybridity is managed on the body of Jennifer Lopez in ways that implicitly navigate, negotiate, and maintain the distinction between whiteness and “other.”

As the most visible Latina in contemporary popular culture,<sup>49</sup> Jennifer Lopez is perhaps the obvious “text” to which critics who are interested in hybridity as it occurs on the mediated Latina body are likely to turn; as Valdivia asserts, she is the “ideal ambiguous body.”<sup>50</sup> Indeed, Lopez embodies hybridity on a number of levels; given her coloring and “more or less European facial features, [she is] physically ‘any-woman’”;<sup>51</sup> of ambiguous and indeterminate ethnicity, leading her to be cast in roles

that (when they are specified at all) run the gamut from, for example, Latina, Latin-American, Chicana, Puerto Rican, Spanish, American, or Nuyorrican. Thus, in her performances, hybridity occurs on the body of Jennifer Lopez at least to the extent that “other,” generally Latin, ethnicities are blurred in her performances; distinctions between them are erased. But hybridity is relevant in Lopez’ case also to the extent that she is discursively constructed as a “crossover” sensation; as Beltran explains, “while crossover is defined most simply as becoming popular with a new audience, . . . it often is used, especially by the entertainment news media, to refer [to] non-white performers who succeed in becoming popular with white audiences.”<sup>52</sup> Moreover, crossover success is often directly proportionate to how that nonwhite performer can “transcend” their race or ethnicity and assume or assimilate into dominant (white) conventions and sensibilities—or at least can reject ethnic specificities which are consistent with those sensibilities. Cepeda has chronicled exactly these dynamics in the recent “Latin(o) music boom” in the US, noting the decontextualization and dehistoricization of Latinidad required for “crossover.”<sup>53</sup> Lopez is situated particularly well to be a crossover, not only due to her ambiguous physical characteristics but also because of her fluent English and lack of any accent; indeed, so malleable is her ethnicity for these reasons that she was cast as an Italian American in the film *The Wedding Planner*. She has, in essence, “tapped into the ability to perform a panethnic other in order to meet Hollywood’s desire for the commodified exotic other.”<sup>54</sup> Thus, as the performances of Lopez demonstrate, hybridity in the realm of popular culture is a two-edged sword: While it has the potential to rupture or at least decenter white discursive practices, it may well be incorporated into and wielded as just such a practice itself, a “hegemonic process that keeps non-white stars in their place.”<sup>55</sup>

I also am interested in exploring and assessing hybridity as it occurs in the case of Jennifer Lopez, especially as it intersects with and engages a crisis of whiteness. Accordingly, I am interested in how the rhetoric of hybridity, as available in the case of Jennifer Lopez, invokes hybridity while simultaneously denying its feasibility. Specifically, I argue that the way in which hybridity is articulated in Lopez’s case offers a salve to this crisis by implicitly underscoring her “otherness” via a particular ethnically and sexually charged discourse of excess, to the end of establishing that hybridity is a consequence of a whimsical yet unwieldy and ultimately unfeasible collision—rather than conflation or fusion—of cultures, thereby securing and reinforcing the borders of whiteness.

Like other critics who have examined hybridity in other ways and contexts, I have selected Jennifer Lopez as my subject of analysis because she is Latina and because she is highly visible in contemporary mediated popular culture—more so than other Latinas available in that arena, like Salma Hayek, Shakira, and Paulina Rubio, for instance. As a popular musician and actor, Lopez is available to audiences in a number of mediated contexts: musical recordings, radio play, music videos, live or recorded performances, film, and considerable media coverage in the form of interviews, profiles, and press coverage. For this analysis, I examine Lopez’s discursive representations both visually—in music videos, concert footage, television

“entertainment news” coverage, and photographs—and verbally, as apparent in interviews, profiles, and press releases.

### Jennifer Lopez: All That and More

Jennifer Lopez is one of the most recognizable figures in contemporary popular culture. Primarily known as a singer, she also is well known to the public as an actor, appearing in such major studio and/or popular films as *Monster-In-Law*, *Shall We Dance*, *Maid in Manhattan*, *Angel Eyes*, *The Cell*, *The Wedding Planner*, *Out of Sight*, and *Selena*, and, earlier in her entertainment career, as a dancer, especially as a “fly girl” on the comedy television show *In Living Color*. Her music career has been especially successful; all of her releases—*Rebirth*, *On the 6*, *J.Lo*, and *This Is Me . . . Then*—have earned platinum status several times over, and her music videos consistently enjoy heavy rotation on MTV, BET, and VH1. Her success is notable not least because she is “the highest paid Latina actress in the world at \$12 million a picture” as well as the most successful Latina singer in the history of mainstream US popular culture.<sup>56</sup> Capitalizing on her fame, she also owns multiple clothing, fashion accessory, and perfume lines as well as a popular Los Angeles restaurant. Accordingly, Lopez is highly visible, regularly and readily available in the popular consciousness not only in terms of her professional endeavors but also in coverage of her personal life, either in the context of those endeavors or otherwise. Mediated representations of Lopez thus are numerous and varied, but they are strikingly consistent in their discursive characterization of her as excessive—indeed, excess is invoked in virtually all aspects of her construction. Although the characterization of contemporary celebrities as excessive is by no means unique,<sup>57</sup> in the case of Jennifer Lopez, it is deployed in such a way—racially and sexually marked—as to define and manage her hybrid status.

### *The Look*

Perhaps most obviously, excess is highly apparent in the “look” and style associated with Lopez as represented in the popular media. In addition to their expense, her fashion choices are frequently noted as being “glamorous,” “ultra-feminine,” “dramatic,” “colorful,” and generally accessorized with “large, glam jewelry” and “extravagant makeup.”<sup>58</sup> More specifically, Lopez’ fashion choices are most frequently discussed with respect to their outré qualities; her apparent predilection for “daring,” “skintight,” “body hugging,” “unconventional,” and “revealing” clothing that “show[s] off those incredible curves” is portrayed in coverage of her attendance at award shows, at film premieres, and in interviews.<sup>59</sup>

Although, as noted, the discourse of excess is standard fare in coverage of celebrities, especially as relevant to fashion, the shape that it assumes as relevant to Lopez’ appearance and aesthetic is distinctive. More to the point, it is quite consistent with the trope of tropicalism, which is characterized by the homogenization of various Latin American and Caribbean ethnicities by virtue of generally—and

generically—attributing to people of those cultures brown skin, bright, primary colors, and energetic music.<sup>60</sup> As Molina Guzmán and Valdivia note, the feminine variation of this trope is “the spitfire female Latina characterized by red-colored lips, bright seductive clothing, curvaceous hips and breasts, long brunette hair, and extravagant jewelry.”<sup>61</sup> Thus, while inordinate attention to female celebrities’ fashion choices is not at all unusual in the popular literature, the particular ways that it is articulated in relation to Lopez is laden, in light of tendencies toward tropicalism, with signifiers relevant to gendered ethnicity—her “colorful” clothing is noted for setting off her “glowing bronze skin,” for instance; her “curve-hugging” and “shape-revealing” outfits inevitably, if implicitly, reference her “Latin” body, and more specifically, bottom, given the overwhelming presence of her rear end in popular discourse; and her “daring and dramatic” makeup choices fit neatly within the trope of tropicalization.<sup>62</sup> Furthermore, although Lopez’ “unconventional” and “revolutionary fashion sense”<sup>63</sup> is celebrated in these representations, such characterizations staunchly configure her against an implicit norm of female celebrity, which, if excessive, is presumably not “ethnic.” This is perhaps most apparent in press coverage of her most recent clothing line, Sweetface, which features cashmere “bum-baring” microshorts, rhinestone-studded jeans, and “truckloads of fur and diamonds.”<sup>64</sup> Excess is clearly apparent in these characterizations, and elements of tropicalization are relatively easy to infer from them. More to the point, however, excess is explicitly connected to ethnicity in ways that simultaneously acknowledge Lopez’ hybridity—Sweetface is described as “a mix of her urban influences growing up in the Bronx and the haute couture she has worn in her current life”<sup>65</sup>—yet, importantly, ultimately anchors her as ethnically “other”: it is “sexy street glamour,” a “playful take on West Side Story.”<sup>66</sup> Hybridity is similarly made apparent and simultaneously denied in the advertising campaign for one of her perfume lines, Still. The photographs are powerfully evocative of Marilyn Monroe, featuring Lopez in a platinum blond wig and Monroe’s signature pink halter dress, and her poses mimic many of Monroe’s classic shots. Discussion of that campaign in the popular media, however, focused especially on Lopez’ ethnicity, describing it as “a Latina take” on the vintage sex symbol and that “she looks like a piece of Mayan sculpture.”<sup>67</sup>

If this dynamic is apparent in general discussions of Lopez’ general appearance, it is definitively secured in the specific discourse regarding Lopez’ most notorious physical attribute: her buttocks. Lopez is at least as well known for her rear end as for anything else in terms of her mediated representation in popular culture.<sup>68</sup> Its notoriety is relevant to its relative size; that is, it is deemed remarkable because it is larger and more prominent (relative to Lopez’ frame) than the established norm for women’s buttocks in the realm of mainstream popular culture. Lopez, in general, is described as “curvy,” “voluptuous,” and “larger,” and her butt, in particular, is described as “legendary” and “Rubenesque,” “ample,” “callypigian,” “a booty that’s redefined beauty,” “bodacious,” and “fleshy.”<sup>69</sup> So valuable is Lopez’ bottom to her public persona and even her career that she has had it insured for the excessive sum of \$300 million,<sup>70</sup> a fact that warranted considerable coverage and contributed to a conflation of Lopez with her rear end in the public consciousness. Clearly, excess is

the axis on which the representation of Lopez' buttocks turns—if only as defined relative to an established cultural (white) norm, in the context of mainstream mediated popular culture, that ordains a small, tightly toned, fairly contained female rear end.

Indeed, the embracing by the contemporary popular media of the female “big butt” represents a significant departure from the mainstream norm in recent history. The last 20 years, argues Bordo, have established as a physical ideal for women “a body that is absolutely tight, contained, ‘bolted down,’ firm . . . an excess-free body.”<sup>71</sup> This fear of excess in the form of flesh, she argues, is “a metaphor for anxiety about internal processes out of control—unrestrained desire, unrestrained hunger, uncontrolled impulse”<sup>72</sup>—a metaphor that has particular implications for gender insofar as the need for “containment and control have been culturally constructed and coded as female. . . . Women’s desires are by their very nature excessive, irrational, threatening to erupt and challenge the patriarchal order.”<sup>73</sup> A large—excessive—and unmistakably female rear end thus poses a significant threat to the management of female desire. Indeed, while masculinity clearly serves as the organizing principle of the contained female body, it also is highly correlated with—arguably an embodiment of—the discourse of whiteness, which, if also implicitly masculine, is predicated upon the control and discipline of excess. Negrón-Muntaner specifically notes the racialized dimensions of the big butt, arguing that the excess it represents is threatening to the dominant cultural order especially as relevant to race and ethnicity:

A big *culo* does not only upset hegemonic (white) notions of beauty and good taste, it is a sign for the dark, incomprehensible excess of ‘Latino’ and other African diaspora cultures. . . . Like hegemonic white perceptions of Latinos, big butts are impractical and dangerous. A big Latin rear end is an invitation to pleasure construed as illicit

implying as it does excess of food and excess of sex.<sup>74</sup> Indeed, the excess that characterizes Lopez' rear end is not defined simply or even primarily in terms of gendered norms and expectations; it is framed in terms of race/ethnicity as it intersects with gender. That is, Lopez' bottom is unequivocally represented as a “Latin” butt.<sup>75</sup>

But the excess manifest in Lopez' rear end features and has implications for race/ethnicity in ways beyond mere challenge to mainstream, “white” norms; in fact, the general, much-touted mainstream popularity of the plump female rear end renders it apparently inherently resistive to key principles of whiteness—specifically, discipline and control. Until very recently, the idealization of the large female posterior was contained within distinctly marginalized communities generally organized along the lines of race and ethnicity—for example, African, African American, Caribbean, and Latino communities<sup>76</sup>—and thus apprehended by dominant, mainstream conventions as evidence of these cultures' vulgarity and primitive nature: “As the body itself is dominantly imagined within the West as belonging to the ‘nature’ side of the nature/culture duality, the *more* body one has had, the more uncultured and

uncivilized one has been expected to be.”<sup>77</sup> The relatively sudden representation of the big butt as not only tolerable but universally desirable for *all* women—as epitomized, arguably, in the representation of Jennifer Lopez—seems inconsistent and, more to the point, fundamentally subversive, especially as relevant to conventional discourses of race and ethnicity as well as gender. As Beltran argues, the “body-obsessed publicity” could be indicative of “changing cultural standards within the mainstream media as a whole.”<sup>78</sup> Indeed, this cultural phenomenon may well signal hybridization, a melding and integration of different cultural practices and predilections, to the extent that the boundaries between whiteness and otherness are effectively blurred.

However, contained within this apparent rhetoric of hybridity are clear if implicit indicators of its ultimate unfeasibility. In the first place, the mere fact and proportion of public obsession with Lopez’ “Latin” butt reveals an assumption that “the public” is white. As Dyer has argued with regard to the 1930s African American actor Paul Robeson, mainstream success of people of color historically has hinged upon the extent to which white notions of race and ethnicity can be inscribed on those bodies, a process that effectively “deactivates” their transgressive potential.<sup>79</sup> As a number of cultural critics have noted, “dominant representations of Latinas and African American women are predominately characterized by an emphasis on the breasts, hips, and buttocks,” reflecting the “white” notion that women of color are highly sexually available, proficient, and desirable—that is, their racialization hinges upon their sexual exoticization.<sup>80</sup> Perhaps the most notorious example of this is Saartjie Baartman, a black South African woman with exceptionally large buttocks, who was known as the “Hottentot Venus” and displayed in a cage and at parties in Europe during the eighteenth century.<sup>81</sup> Her large rear end was constructed as evidence of her excessive sexuality and sexual availability as well as “racial contamination,”<sup>82</sup> discursively securing her exotic Otherness. As Beltran points out, the public discourse surrounding Lopez’ bottom is not that far removed from that of Baartman;<sup>83</sup> for instance, the portraits depicting Baartman’s “grotesquely disproportionate buttocks, as though she were in a permanent bodily state of ‘presenting’ to the male”<sup>84</sup> is entirely consistent with the inordinate fixation on—fetishization of—Lopez’ bottom. Similarly, irrespective of the nature of coverage, Lopez’ posterior almost invariably gets a mention, and it is often the sole subject of that coverage.<sup>85</sup> Indeed, perhaps the most compelling evidence that Lopez’ rear end functions to preserve rather than erase ethnic difference, contentions to the contrary notwithstanding, is that despite the fact that it has gotten noticeably smaller in the last ten years and is arguably not much bigger than the historically acceptable “white” female rear end,<sup>86</sup> it continues to be fetishized and circulated in the popular media, especially as a characteristically “Latina butt.”<sup>87</sup>

Fetishism as relevant to representations of race and ethnicity has been well documented in terms of its objectification of difference or otherness via displacement, or the “substitution of an object for some dangerous and powerful force.”<sup>88</sup> Fetishism further is characterized by disavowal, such that “a powerful fascination or desire is both *indulged* and at the same time *denied*.”<sup>89</sup> This is arguably apparent in

the case of Jennifer Lopez, where her racialized, exoticized Otherness is displaced, reduced to, and inscribed upon her rear end while articulated (and legitimized) as an appreciation for and incorporation (into the mainstream) of culturally diverse forms of beauty. The marked difference that characterizes the fetishization of Lopez' butt—as “ample” and “Latina”—is presented as laudable and thus justifies unregulated voyeurism, which functions in turn to define and contain whatever threat to discursive conventions that she may embody.

But fetishism assumes an even more complex dimension as seen through the lens of hybridity. While fetishism of the distinctively “Other” appears to consistently play out in the popular consciousness in the ways noted above, in cases where otherness is vague, ambiguous, and even amorphous—that is, in hybrid cases—I would argue that different dynamics inhere. Most notably, in the “hybrid” case of Jennifer Lopez, her rear end is not simply fetishized, although it certainly is that; it has also become a popular, even universal standard of female beauty, arguably *the* contemporary standard of the beautiful bottom, even among white women. While this still turns on an implicit assumption of “authentic otherness,” it is a marked contrast to fetishization predicated on *definitive* otherness, where the feature that is fetishized, as in Baartman's case, is sharply defined against very contrary conventions of whiteness. Bhabha (1994) has noted the phenomenon of “mimicry” in this regard as relevant to hybridity, and he finds it rife with transgressive potential: “The ambivalence of mimicry—almost but not quite—suggests that the fetishized colonial culture is potentially and strategically an insurgent counter-appeal.”<sup>90</sup> In this vein, some critics have argued that the mainstream appreciation of Lopez' rear end, if obsessive, is indicative of her “potential to disturb not just notions of appearance but also of the social order.”<sup>91</sup> In other words, Lopez may indeed have “a big ole cross-over butt.”<sup>92</sup>

Although I do not dispute the challenge to the standard of beauty that has been posed by the discourse of excess surrounding Jennifer Lopez' bottom, I am less convinced that it is—or has the potential to be—disruptive to the social order, as Beltran argues. Rather, I find it symptomatic of general trends in the contemporary popular media that anticipate and offset such potential challenges. Indeed, the excessive discourse of excess, so to speak, located squarely on Lopez' rear end, works very efficiently to hybridize her on several levels, each of which contains and manages resistive messages of race and ethnicity even as whiteness is reasserted. At one level, Lopez' bottom is rendered the chief signifier of “authentic” but generalized racial and ethnic otherness—that is, very few if any distinctions need to be drawn among the myriad variety of races and ethnicities, and in fact, Lopez' butt is wielded in the public discourse as something of an amulet of cultural diversity, effectively erasing and dismissing differences. This is true not only insofar as Latina identities are homogenized but also of black women of various origins. As noted, the large rear end has been associated with women of color—and fetishized accordingly—for a very long time, and notably, that has been especially true historically of black women.<sup>93</sup> Although the large rear end has been and continues to be a notable standard of beauty in many black communities,<sup>94</sup> arguably more consistently so than

in Latino communities, it was introduced into the mainstream (white) public discourse on the body of Jennifer Lopez, who, for the reasons established earlier, was more available for a camouflaging discourse of hybridization and thus less threatening. Although the large black female butt—for example, on the person of Beyoncé—has gained entrée into the mainstream under Lopez’ umbrella, it is notable that hers was and remains the standard. As Molina Guzmán and Valdivia assert, “for this booty economy to retain its value, popular culture representations of Latinidad must continue to construct that mythical brown race that falls somewhere between Whiteness and Blackness.”<sup>95</sup> The public obsession with and embracing of Lopez’ rear end serves to hybridize her by conflating her with and effectively subsuming various other “non-white” races and ethnicities under that discourse; more to the point, the discourse deftly deflects and dismisses consideration of those differences.

The public discourse of Lopez’ bottom serves another hybridizing function as well, however. Its articulation as a “universal” standard of female beauty—i.e., relevant to white women, as well—functions superficially to erase distinctions between whiteness and otherness; that is, her posterior is promoted as proof and legitimacy of cultural diversity. The fact that a “Latina butt” is portrayed as not only desirable but ideal can be presented as evidence of the fact that race/ethnicity are “nonissues” even as, ironically, the “authentic” nature of the Latina butt constitutes the powerful premise for that logic—that is, distinctions based on race or ethnicity are presented as illusory, a position that easily passes as progressive according to conventional sensibilities. On the one hand, there is no small measure of trivialization at work here; that a rear end is identified as the chief positive signifier of race and ethnicity in the popular consciousness speaks volumes of the esteem in which “otherness” is held—as Negrón-Muntaner has said, “nobody can quite take a *culo* seriously.”<sup>96</sup> More to the point, the price of progress so defined is silence; those who would argue that such incorporation of otherness/“diversity” is more accurately understood as appropriation or as subsuming and erasing difference are effectively denounced as themselves invested in maintaining racial and ethnic distinctions. Thus, Lopez’ bottom is much more than just a fetish or even a token; its ostensibly hybrid nature, thoroughly steeped in a presumption of “otherness” and thus rendering impossible the specter of integration or even assimilation, has rendered it a powerful force field for the preservation of whiteness in mainstream popular culture.

### *The Behavior*

Another, primary way in which hybridity is negotiated in Lopez’ representation in the popular media is relative to the popular discourse surrounding her excessive behavior, especially as established by her material wealth and lavish lifestyle. Although the mere characterization of her as excessive is not distinctive, again, the contextualization of that characterization in a corresponding discourse of ethnicity is

indeed notable; it is precisely due to this contextualization that the unfeasibility of hybridity is established.

Like most celebrities of Lopez' stature and renown, her financial worth and assets have been frequently recited in the press.<sup>97</sup> In particular, Lopez' excessive spending is fodder for much of the popular press about her; indeed, she is frequently depicted as out of control; her spending is described as impulsive, casual, and characterized accordingly by sprees.<sup>98</sup> Consistent with this notion of excess as a consequence of being out of control, much has been made of the money and gifts that she has lavished on her lovers and husbands.<sup>99</sup> The fact that she is the recipient of extravagant gifts is also prominently featured in the popular press;<sup>100</sup> even if Lopez is not doing the buying in these cases, the lavish nature of such gifts contributes further to a characterization of her as associated with excess.

Lopez' representation as having esoteric tastes and "demanding . . . the finer things" cultivates a perception of excess as characteristic of her and begins to link her excesses more clearly to a lapse in moral virtue. She has been touted a "diva" who insists upon, for instance, "a dressing room fitted out with white orchids, white walls, a white sofa and an endless stock of Evian—room-temperature only, thank you."<sup>101</sup> For her appearance at the 2001 Academy Awards, her artificial eyelashes made of red fox fur garnered as much press as any other fashion coverage.<sup>102</sup> Such esoteric choices, again, secure her character in the public consciousness as defined by excess; more specifically, characterizing those choices as unreasonable and selfish "demands" works to establish her excessiveness as a character flaw.

The (im)moral dimensions of excess are perhaps most prominently engaged with respect to Lopez' romantic choices. Her two very public relationships with prominent celebrities, two short, failed marriages, and her most recent wedding in 2004 generated considerable speculation regarding her impulsive and dramatic nature, especially as relevant to her timing of those relationships—indeed, *Rolling Stone* anointed Lopez "the Zsa Zsa Gabor of our generation."<sup>103</sup> Lopez' relationship with actor Ben Affleck (the spectacle that characterized the union was dubbed "Bennifer") was almost always cited in the press in the context of the fact that it occurred "before the ink drie[d] on Lopez's divorce papers."<sup>104</sup> Her marriage to singer Marc Anthony, to whom she is currently married, also raised eyebrows with respect to how quickly it followed on the heels of her breakup with Affleck.<sup>105</sup> Although in a slightly different respect, Lopez' relationship with hip hop recording artist and producer Sean "P. Diddy" Combs also contributed to a popular association of her with excess insofar as a memorable scandal—related to a nightclub shooting while they were in attendance—that involved the two prior to the end of that relationship. The sheer spectacle surrounding the event, which included an indictment trial for Combs, who was found to have an unregistered gun in his possession, evoked the specter of out-of-control, reckless, and dangerous behavior, which at least tainted Lopez by association if not directly.<sup>106</sup> In general, mediated representations of Lopez' past relationships and romantic choices cultivate an apprehension of her as erratic, hyperemotional, tempestuous, flamboyant, and out of control. Although these representations are not in themselves racialized—as I argue below, that happens as a

result of their contextualization—on their own terms, they serve to establish a highly receptive premise for that logic insofar as their congruence with the stereotypically “racialized Latina” that Molina Guzmán has described.<sup>107</sup>

Again, excess is the language of contemporary celebrity and thus is not inherently racialized in these specific characterizations (although I would argue that they most certainly are gendered). However, markers of ethnicity and, more specifically, gendered ethnicity are very much present in the broader mediated representations of Jennifer Lopez’ particular excesses. Most significantly, the excess that characterized Lopez is juxtaposed sharply with, in all relatively in-depth coverage and much cursory coverage as well, markedly humble beginnings—beginnings that are simultaneously established as “Latin”—thus locating her as very much an example of the “American Dream” as predicated on ethnic difference and assimilation.<sup>108</sup> Lopez is described as a “Latina girl from the Bronx . . . the daughter of a Puerto Rican teacher and computer specialist.”<sup>109</sup> Furthermore, a marked conservatism characterizes Lopez’ early home life in the mediated discourse: “Churchgoing Catholics who had emigrated from Puerto Rico, Lopez’s parents—especially her mother—encouraged their daughters’ talents while also keeping a close watch on them.”<sup>110</sup> That Puerto Rican context is represented as a constant feature of Lopez’ life; her father is reported as saying of his children, “they know that if something doesn’t work out for them, they can always come and have a bowl of rice and beans.”<sup>111</sup> Lopez’ humble, decidedly ethnic origins are also portrayed as the secret to her success; Lopez, cited frequently in the popular press as very ambitious and a hard worker, has been quoted as saying “I get my work ethic from my parents”; in one profile, her sister, Lynda, corroborates this, stating, “Our parents had a strong work ethic—there wasn’t really any other way. . . . They led by example. They would tell us we could never miss a day of work—and they didn’t.”<sup>112</sup> The simple ethnic home that is portrayed in these descriptions is articulated as still very much a part of Lopez’ identity, thus securing her identification in the popular consciousness as Latina.

This conservatism is clearly coded in Lopez’ case as steeped in ethnicity and class, and it stands in sharp contrast to the excess that characterizes Lopez in the popular media. Accordingly, the specific discourse around Lopez’ financial and moral excesses, especially in conjunction with the particular narrative about her “roots,” serves to give the lie to Lopez’ hybridity. That is, a perception of Lopez as excessive and out of control is drawn sharply against her “authentic” ethnic roots—and her deviation from those roots, if it endowed her with superficial success, is implicitly identified as the reason for her moral decline. Although some reports characterize her as fundamentally modest and humble—“Jennifer still comes to the Bronx and sleeps on her mother’s couch”—even that characterization is predicated upon a consciousness of her as defined by the flamboyant trappings of fame, wealth, and success and her “crash-and-burn” lifestyle.<sup>113</sup> Lopez’ song “Jenny from the Block,” in fact, addresses this dichotomy: “Don’t be fooled by the rocks that I got,” she sings, “I’m still Jenny from the block.” However, notably, her ethnicity is invoked in these narratives precisely in order to invite an evaluation of Lopez’ excessive and

unchecked behavior; more specifically, this is a logic predicated on a discourse of containment and exclusivity rather than hybridity or even assimilation. That is, the preservation of authentic “otherness” is touted as morally virtuous: humble, modest, and controlled.

This dynamic is definitively affirmed and secured in the most recent coverage of Jennifer Lopez, following her 2004 marriage to salsa singer Marc Anthony. All traces of excess have effectively been erased from current popular discourse about Lopez; rather, she has been recast as thoroughly demure, quiet, and contained. In sharp contrast to her previous portrayal as reckless, out of control, and flamboyant, she is now described as “mellow,” “at peace,” and “low key,” preferring the privacy of a “simple” life and subscribing firmly to a “less is more” philosophy.<sup>114</sup> Her recent professional endeavors are described as more “mature,” as well, her acting described as having a “depth” and “subtlety” lacking in her earlier roles.<sup>115</sup> Even her taste has changed, evidently—rather than the outrageousness, glamorous, and colorful style that was associated with Lopez in earlier years, she is now lauded for her “tasteful” and “subtle” design and fashion choices.<sup>116</sup> This characterization is heavily gendered insofar as speculation about her possible pregnancy regularly abounds in the popular press, and much is made of her “nesting” behavior, her desire to “settle down” and “become a wife and mother.”<sup>117</sup>

But if this coverage showcases the domestication of Lopez, it is heavily steeped in and engaged with a discourse of ethnic authenticity. This is established primarily via her relationship with Anthony, a well-known salsa singer who is very much articulated and perceived in the popular media as “authentically” Latino—although he is known to mainstream US audiences by dint of a successful English-language song release a few years ago, his music is almost exclusively Spanish, and his fan base is likewise overwhelmingly Spanish speaking. Notably, Lopez’ marriage to Anthony, with the exception of a first marriage that ended prior to her national and international celebrity, represented her first public relationship with a Latino—prior to that, she had been deeply involved with or married to white men or black men, a feature that also contributed to her perception as hybrid in, I would argue, threatening ways. Indeed, in contrast to the hybridity that characterized earlier coverage of Lopez, their shared ethnic heritage is a prominent feature in press coverage about them; they are touted as “Latin superstars,” “two famous Nuyoricans” with “singing, dancing, and heritage” in common.<sup>118</sup> Their shared ethnicity is established as more than just superficial, however; Tauber notes that “it’s not hard to see the bond between the two. After all, his Marco-from-the-block story mirrors Lopez’s in many ways: Like her, he was raised in New York City by parents of Puerto Rican descent.”<sup>119</sup> Accordingly, the narrative surrounding Lopez’ marriage to Anthony is one of returning to her roots, a narrative that is further steeped in a discourse of authentic otherness: “This relationship with Marc . . . goes back to a time in her life when things were much simpler for her.”<sup>120</sup> Consistent with the pervasive subtext in coverage during her “unchecked” phase that moral virtue is intrinsic in cultural integrity, then, the threat of hybridity that Lopez posed is effectively disciplined and contained by virtue of her moving further away from the borders of whiteness—a perception further cultivated

by her increasing activity in Latin communities and culture, including charity work; working with Anthony and others on Spanish-speaking albums; and performing Spanish songs in highly visible public venues like the Grammys. Her recent film venture, *Bordertown*, which addresses the serial killing of women in Juarez, Mexico, is similarly cast in this light—as a manifestation of Lopez’ social conscience, especially insofar as she is “muy simpatica, down-to-earth” and can relate to the murdered women.<sup>121</sup> Notably, discussion of this film is also framed in terms of the narrative of Lopez’ being restored to her “authentic” ethnic self; the director of *Bordertown*, Gregory Nava, also directed *Selena*, about the popular Tejana singer who was killed, in which Lopez starred before her rise to success. Lopez’ signing on to the film, then, represents her “com[ing] full circle.”<sup>122</sup>

A motif of discipline and containment is closely correlated with Lopez’ return to her (ethnic) roots, and it is conveyed in especially gendered ways. Marc Anthony’s physical proximity to Lopez is frequently noted; they are described as “always together,” “joined at the hip,” observing each others’ interviews and performances, and even performing together (in Spanish).<sup>123</sup> Furthermore, she is effectively recast as a loving, traditional wife, even to the extent that she is described as “Marc’s groupie”: “It’s no longer him by her side watching her work and supporting her,” says a source close to the couple. “It’s a role reversal. Now she’s there to support him.”<sup>124</sup> On those rare occasions that she is identified as apart from him in recent press coverage, the narrative of “authentic” ethnicity and/or domestication is evoked in other ways. For instance, the large entourage that accompanies her is described as “very Puerto Rican,”<sup>125</sup> and she is also noted as traveling with her mother when Anthony is unavailable or relying on her for advice.<sup>126</sup> Lopez’s return to her roots, ensured (and, it is implicitly suggested, chaperoned) primarily by her husband (or other Latina/os, in his absence), has restored her to her authentic ethnic self and effectively curtailed her dangerously reckless hybridity, a sentiment captured in the following observation: “It’s almost like she married her high school sweetheart,” says an insider. “She wanted to be where she belongs. This is where she belongs.”<sup>127</sup>

## Conclusion

Molina Guzmán and Valdivia have argued that “Latina/o identity, as a hybrid form within US culture, remaps dominant hierarchies of identity and challenges popular notions of place and nation.”<sup>128</sup> In their analysis of Latina iconicity, they assert more specifically that Latina icons like Jennifer Lopez—“independent, racially and ethically undetermined, and transnational women”—at least have the potential to “rupture . . . borders that surround contemporary signification of Latinas.” She and other Latina icons “render Eurocentric discourses of racial and national purity untenable.”<sup>129</sup> This perspective reflects the arguments of many hybridity theorists who champion the concept as a “disruptive democratic discourse” that can erode dominant discourses of race, ethnicity, and postcolonialism.<sup>130</sup>

But other theorists are warier, and Molina Guzmán and Valdivia are themselves cautiously optimistic, noting that despite the resistive potential inherent in hybrid

bodies, those bodies also are ideally positioned as “the contemporary site for the production and consumption of identity.”<sup>131</sup> That is, the very openness and ambiguity that characterize hybridity render it a “floating signifier” especially vulnerable to appropriation.<sup>132</sup> In particular, Kraidy asserts, hybridity’s vulnerability is related to two paradoxes, “(a) hybridity’s concurrent subversiveness and pervasiveness, and (b) hybridity’s extreme polysemy and instability.”<sup>133</sup> In other words, as many critics argue, hybridity may well be hegemonically constructed by and for those very dominant interests against which they are ostensibly drawn.<sup>134</sup> Accordingly, Kraidy issues a call to communication scholars, in particular, to address hybridity’s “propensity for conceptual and political slippage”—or, stated more baldly, to examine “hybridities as practices of hegemony.”<sup>135</sup>

Analysis of hybrid texts and/or of texts that turn on hybridity, particularly as they occur in the context of dominant media, Kraidy and others argue, is especially warranted in that they might redress the general “paucity of postcolonial analysis of contemporary Western media representation” of non-Western or non-white cultures and members thereof.<sup>136</sup> Such analysis is of the essence, postcolonial critics argue, due to the “disproportionate influence of the West as a cultural forum.”<sup>137</sup> Hybridity may well be the form that discourses about “otherness” assume in the context of contemporary Western media. If this is true, particular attention must be directed to how hybridity is made available in that context, for merely identifying its hegemonic character does not provide a truly critical apprehension of hegemony at work. In this vein, Naficy and Levine respectively have examined the media-driven establishment of syncretic identities, or the sedimentation of hybridity into a stable “third” culture characterized by the fusion of dominant and exile or immigrant cultures, to the end of creating dependable markets within an increasingly heterogeneous population.<sup>138</sup>

Although I concede the significant market value of syncretism, I submit that it is less beneficial—indeed, downright threatening—to another, powerful dominant interest, namely, to whiteness. Although a measure of containment can arguably be secured by virtue of “fixing” hybridity via syncretism, affording permanence to the notion that racial and ethnic borders are incontinent and permeable strikes at the very heart of whiteness. Thus, I would assert that hybridity, while itself threatening to whiteness, is infinitely more malleable and versatile than syncretism and thus the lesser of two evils—indeed, its very tenuousness, relative to syncretism, arguably tempers its threat. Accordingly, I suggest that hybridity is more desirable to dominant sensibilities and thus more widely available in contemporary mainstream media, more often than not rendered strategically in various ways that ultimately serve to restabilize whiteness. To this end, Valdivia has identified four common representations of hybridity—morphing, fragmentation, palette, and ambiguity—in the popular media, noting “the capitalist preference for syncretic comfort” reflected in the mainstream media’s predilection for certain strategies and not for others.<sup>139</sup> Like Valdivia, I am intrigued by representations of hybridity in the popular media, although I depart from her assumption that the mainstream media prefer syncretism to hybridity. I concur with her assertion that Jennifer Lopez is represented as ambiguous, and therefore unsettling to a discourse of whiteness; however, I would

submit that Lopez' ambiguity is ideally positioned to be managed via particular rhetorical strategies and configurations apparent in the actual discourse that engages her ambiguous representation—specifically, a gendered and ethnically charged discourse of excess—that in fact firmly realigns her as “other” even as she is ostensibly embraced as hybrid. Tracing her representation over the last several years elucidates how hybridity is ultimately portrayed as unfeasible and even destructive; under the guise of the incorporation or fusion of cultures, hybridity as embodied by Jennifer Lopez is in fact articulated as, transiently and at its best, a chic aesthetic mingling of cultures; ultimately, however, even in those best cases, it is evinced as an unwieldy *collision* of cultures.

The challenges to whiteness in a contemporary, global, and highly mediated age are many, varied, and increasing exponentially, and in fact, in such a postmodern era, hybridity may well represent the most lethal and pervasive threat facing whiteness. Accordingly, as Kraidy suggests, assessment of the rhetorical construction of hybridity in the popular consciousness is imperative in order to discern the ideological shape that it assumes.<sup>140</sup> In the case of Jennifer Lopez, the promise of hybridity in fact is realized as hegemonic. Whether the same strategies and techniques are marshaled to maintain the borders and continence of whiteness in the face of other, inevitable hybrid threats, in popular cultural and other contexts, remains to be seen. Certainly, it warrants further attention.

## Notes

- [1] See, e.g., Larry Gross, *Up from Invisibility: Lesbians, Gay Men, and the Media in America* (New York: Columbia University, 2001); Stuart Hall, “Encoding/Decoding,” in *Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies, 1972–1979*, ed. Stuart Hall (London: Hutchinson, 1980), 128–138; bell hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Boston: South End, 1990); T. T. Minh-ha, *When the Moon Waxes Red: Representation, Gender and Cultural Politics* (New York: Routledge, 1991); Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon, 1978); Guyatri C. Spivak, *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (New York: Routledge, 1988).
- [2] For studies of mediated representations of gender, see, e.g., Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (Berkeley: University of California, 1993); Bonnie J. Dow, *Prime-time Feminism: Television, Media Culture, and the Women's Movement since 1970* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996); Susan Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War against American Women* (New York: Crown, 1991); Susan Faludi, *Stiffed: The Betrayal of the American Man* (New York: William Morrow, 1999); Jean Kilbourne, “Beauty and the Beast of Advertising,” in *Gender, Race, and Class in Media*, ed. G. Dines and J. M. Humez (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1995), 121–25; Judith Mayne, “The Woman at the Keyhole: Women's Cinema and Feminist Criticism,” in *Revision: Essays in Feminist Film Criticism*, ed. Mary Ann Doane, P. Mellencamp, and L. Williams (Los Angeles: American Film Institute, 1984), 49–66; Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” *Screen* 16 (1975): 6–18; Janice A. Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984); Nick Trujillo, “Hegemonic Masculinity on the Mound: Media Representations of Nolan Ryan and American Sports Culture,” *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 8 (1991): 290–308; Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty are Used against Women* (New York:

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- [49] E.g., Beltran; Molina Guzmán and Valdivia; Valdivia, *A Latina in the Land of Hollywood*.
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- [51] Molina Guzmán and Valdivia, 214.
- [52] Beltran, 74.
- [53] Maria Elena Cepeda, "Mucho Loco for Ricky Martin; or the Politics of Chronology, Crossover, and Language with the Latin(o) Music 'Boom,'" *Popular Music and Society* 24 (2000): 55–71; see also Maria Elena Cepeda, "Shakira as the Idealized, Transnational Citizen: A Case Study of Colombianidad in Transition," *Latino Studies*, 1 (2003): 211–32.

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- [79] Richard Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society* (London: Macmillan, 1986), 115.
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- [117] "Everyone Looks Pregnant," *People*, 19 September 2005, 160; "Jennifer Lopez On Tour and In Style"; Tom Gliatto, "Nest in Peace," *People*, 26 July 2004, 58–63; Tom Jokic, "Jenny Gets Right," *Tribute*, April 2005, 22; Karen S. Schneider, "This is Me . . . Now," *People*, 3 March 2005, 66–72; Tauber, "Jennifer's Big Surprise!"
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- [120] Adkins, 21.
- [121] "J.Lo Takes Mexico," *People*, 24 October 2005, 23; see also "Banderas in *Bordertown* with Lopez"; "Jennifer Lopez On Tour and In Style."
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- [129] Molina Guzmán and Valdivia, 219.
- [130] Joseph, 1; see also, e.g., Bhabha, "The 'Other' Question"; Moore-Gilbert; Werbner.
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- [135] Kraidy, 332; 335, emphasis in original.
- [136] Kraidy, 318; see also Bhabha, "The 'Other' Question"; Garcia-Canclini; Molina Guzmán and Valdivia.
- [137] Bhabha, "The 'Other' Question," 21.
- [138] Naficy; Levine.
- [139] Valdivia, "Geographies of Latinidad," 316.
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