

CSWS Research Matters



Photo by Jack Liu.

Thinking Through a Research Trajectory, From Hollywood Latinas to Hair/Style

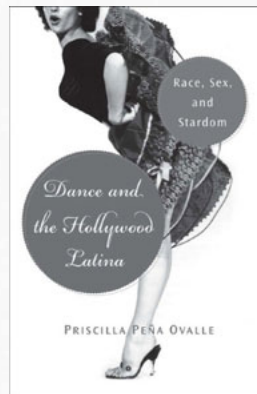
Latinas function as the in-between bodies that mediate and maintain the racial status quo of mainstream media

BY PRISCILLA PEÑA OVALLE, Associate Professor, University of Oregon Department of English & Associate Director, Cinema Studies

Just two years after publishing *Dance and the Hollywood Latina: Race, Sex, and Stardom* (Rutgers 2011), I am struck by the ways that researching and writing that book has impacted my next research venture, a multimedia project on hair, style, and racialized representations in visual media culture.

Dance and the Hollywood Latina, my first book, was born when I asked a simple question: Why is it that Latinas in movies and on television are always dancing? In researching the book, I realized that the dancing Hollywood Latina has functioned as a consistently mythical figure in mainstream U.S. media, a visual shorthand for identifying Latinas as sexually accessible to, yet temporary members of, mainstream white (media) culture. Starting in the early twentieth century, dance became the popular way that women like Dolores Del Rio, Carmen Miranda, and Rita Hayworth were simultaneously racialized and sexualized; the impression that Latinas were synonymous with dance was solidified with the later successes of Rita Moreno and Jennifer Lopez.

On the screen, the image of the dancing Latina has sold a kind of safe exoticism. In a media world where whiteness has long been figured as “normal” and blackness as “exotic,” the Hollywood Latina’s racial ambiguity has granted her access to the screen since cinema’s early years—even when racist policies required black men or women to be edited out of films screened in parts of the pre-Civil Rights South. As media industries have become increasingly invested in appearing “multicultural,” Hollywood Latinas have become all the more desirable as figures who diversify—but do not disrupt—the visualized hierarchy of race.



To explain this complex dynamic, I developed two terms that anchor my book’s analysis. The first term, “in-betweenness,” demarcates the ambiguously racialized space that Latinas have occupied in the hierarchy of visual representation. Oscillating between the “normalcy” of whiteness and the “exoticism” of blackness, Latinas function as the in-between

bodies that mediate and maintain the racial status quo of mainstream media. Some Latina performers have capitalized on their liminal stardom by maximizing their affiliation with the more desired racialized representation of the period. The second term, “racial mobility,” thus allows me to explain why Rita Hayworth (born Rita Cansino, an open secret among contemporary audiences) dyed her dark hair red and changed her name to align herself with whiteness while Jennifer Lopez later aligned herself with black popular culture to develop a multifaceted career.

While working on *Dance*, I was amazed by the function of hair—hairstyle, hair color, hair length—in the Hollywood Latina’s access to mainstream roles. Beyond dance, the Hollywood Latina has often been visualized with fair/caramel skin and long, dark brown hair that is typically lightly wavy or straight(ened). Indeed, hair played a critical role in determining the access that Hayworth, Miranda, and Lopez had to mainstream roles. Rita Cansino’s transformation to Rita Hayworth was facilitated by

Continued on other side



UNIVERSITY OF OREGON

An equal-opportunity, affirmative-action institution committed to cultural diversity and compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act. This publication will be made available in accessible formats upon request.
© 2012 University of Oregon

Continued from other side

her shift from brunette to redhead—a switch that led to increasingly mainstream (non-ethnicized) roles. Hayworth's hair became such a significant part of her persona that Columbia studios cameras captured the cut and coloring of Hayworth's hair (to a blonde bob, see Figure 1) by studio hairdresser Helen Hunt and director Orson Welles for *The Lady from Shanghai* (1948).

On the other hand, Carmen Miranda, known for her colorfully elaborate headdresses in WWII-era films, seemed to have no hair at all. Miranda's general lack of visible hair affiliated her with common representations of black women at the time; then, the women most likely to wear head coverings in film were black maids. As a Portuguese-born Brazilian woman, Miranda's initial fame was due to her ability to make Afro-Brazilian culture—like samba music and the fashions of African slave descendants in Bahia—accessible to non-black Brazilian audiences. In the United States, however, the racial and colonial complexity of Miranda's Brazilian stardom became a caricatured and conflated representation of Latin America that ultimately abbreviated her spectacular career; Miranda's Hollywood debut, *Down Argentine Way* (1940), had her Portuguese songs erroneously represent the local color of Spanish-speaking Argentina. One short publicity film—featured in the documentary *Bananas Is My Business* (Solberg 1995)—highlights one of the ways that Miranda's hair figured into her racialization and visualization in Hollywood. During an interview, Miranda sets out to “prove” that she has hair beneath her headdress. The film cuts to an obviously staged shot of Miranda removing her headdress and swinging her hair (Figure 2).



Fig. 1: Rita Hayworth and Orson Welles. Courtesy of the Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.

Miranda's hair, too lushly styled to have been trapped under a headdress, is revealed to be blonde. Miranda adds: “See, it's my own hair. I like it very much....This is not my natural color; they bleach it in Hollywood.” In proving that she has hair, Miranda produces the bleached blonde hair that might have enabled her to achieve mainstream roles—if Hollywood had been as kind to her accent as it was to her headdresses.

In June 2011, I developed a proposal for my second project, tentatively titled *Hair/Style*, at the Center for the Study of Women in Society's Writing and Promotion workshop. Where my first book focuses on film, *Hair/Style* explores the television industry to reveal how hair color and hairstyle operate as visual codes for race, gender, and agency in popular media narratives. According to these logics, viewers can quickly assess a female character's social and cultural status based on whether her hair is long or short, red or black, curly or straight. Such character assessments—assumptions necessitated by a medium that must convey massive amounts of information in a matter of minutes or seconds and often without explicit dialogue—reinforce racialized and sexualized conventions of female representation, especially in terms of a female character's ability to serve as an active agent.

Rather than develop *Hair/Style* as a traditional book, my goal is to design research that is accessible to a broader audience through multimedia and/or interactive forms. My intellectual genesis began with media production—from video at an inner-city high school to 16mm film and interactive media in college and graduate school. Publishing *Dance and the Hollywood Latina* gave me a new kind of production and professional experience. As a newly tenured faculty member at the University of Oregon, I am eager to integrate my academic and production identities. By working at the intersection of theory and practice, I hope to better explore the ways that something as simple as hair helps us make sense of race, gender, and nation on a daily basis. ■

Research Matters is published three times a year by the Center for the Study of Women in Society at the University of Oregon. For more information, call (541) 346-5015, or visit our website: csws.uoregon.edu



Fig. 2: Carmen Miranda proves she has hair for a press interview. Still from archival footage featured in Helena Solberg's documentary *Bananas Is My Business* (1995).