

## Articles



# From the New Heights: The City and Migrating Latinas in *Real Women Have Curves* and *María Full of Grace*

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In the twenty-first century, Latina/o visual culture has taken a refreshing turn in the representation of Latina desire, sexuality, and freedom as a new generation of actresses and directors contributes to this medium in cultural and film studies. In particular, film directors have created alternative models for Latinas who migrate within cities in the U.S. and across transnational borders signifying a domestic and global expansion of Latinidad. This study focuses on Chicanas' and Latinas' journeys to control their bodies and minds in the context of urban migrations between the cultures of Latin America and the United States in two cinematic narratives. In the post-2000 decade, two critically acclaimed independent films, *Real Women Have Curves* (2002) and *María Full of Grace* (2004), have depicted Latina adolescents coming of age in transnational cities, Bogotá, Los Angeles, and New York, to demonstrate how the politics of the body and mind can affect the dynamics of family relationships and the division of labor within the larger scheme of globalization. While *Real Women Have Curves* portrays the *bildungsroman* of Ana García, a Mexican American female adolescent growing up in an East Los Angeles neighborhood, *María Full of Grace* traces the experiences of María Alvarez, a young Colombian female transforming into womanhood from a small town in Colombia to the capital, Bogotá, and eventually to New York City. Although the films are situated in different geographical and cultural contexts, the Latina protagonists in both visual narratives represent an autonomous voice resisting the institutionalization of patriarchy, be it in the family structure or the labor force as well as the containment of sexual expression, as limited choices for women within the space of the city.

While the Latina protagonist in each film may begin her story from a specific national point of departure, both eventually reach a self-awareness about their place in society as they undergo similar urban experiences in Boyle Heights in Los Angeles in *Real Women Have Curves* and Jackson Heights, Queens, in New York City in *María Full of Grace*. Despite the different cultural backgrounds and national heritages, both Latina protagonists face similar obstacles as they contest and resist similar cultural values, orthodox religion (Catholicism) and cultural/ideological clashes with an older generation, such as the mother figure. The directors of these films—Patricia Cardoso for *Real Women* and Joshua Marston for *María*—have redefined the cinematic lens through the eyes of young Latinas in the face of hegemonic forces such as U.S. imperialism, domestically and globally. In *From Bananas to Buttocks*, Myra Mendible observes that “given the fresh incentives generated by a global U.S. economy and its increasing interdependency, a crop of so-called ‘crossover’ Latina performers-born and raised in the United States-now mediates this ‘new’ and decidedly multicultural America, their bodies enticing symbols of equal access, cultural negotiation, and transgression” (12).

Historically speaking, the juxtaposition of these two films, *Real Women Have Curves* and *María Full of Grace*, in this comparative study is quite timely and significant.<sup>1</sup> In general, Hollywood has contributed minimal representations of autonomous and powerful Latina and Latin American women figures in mainstream cinema. From the films of Dolores del Río in the silent period to that of Rita Hayworth and Carmen Miranda whose career was based upon the image of being able to carry an impossibly tall fruit basket on her head in the 1940s, Latinas on screen have been either exoticized or tropicalized, lacking any significant agency in representing themselves.<sup>2</sup> Scholars consider these early stages of Latinas’ participation in cinema as a constant negotiation of the body in the construction of the Hollywood Latina.<sup>3</sup>

In the 1980s Chicano/Latino directors/filmmakers made an effort to incorporate more Chicana/Latina actresses and protagonists in their acclaimed feature films such as *Zoot Suit* (1981), *The Ballad of Gregorio Cortéz* (1982), *La Bamba* (1987), and *Stand and Deliver* (1987).<sup>4</sup> Yet again, Chicanas entered a dependency complex because they formed part of the family structure as mothers, daughters, sisters, or other family members, in supporting roles, mostly judged in

comparison to a male counterpart. On screen, Latinas were viewed as an extension of an existing social structure that does not necessarily allow them to exert personal, professional, or sexual autonomy regarding the control of their lives. In the 1990s, a series of Chicano/U.S. Latino films emerged to the forefront of popular culture where Chicana/Latina actresses exhibited more substance as leading ladies. For instance, the independent film *Selena* (1997) about the brief tragic life of the Tejana singer, Selena Quintanilla Pérez, proved to be quite successful among young audiences. This film also placed the Bronx Puerto Rican actress, Jennifer Lopez, on the map as a star.<sup>5</sup>

In the first decade of the twenty-first century, the public has witnessed an emergence of more substantial Latina actresses and a crossover of Latin American ones in English-speaking films who have taken on more meaningful roles historically and culturally—U.S. Latina America Ferrera in *Real Women Have Curves*, the Oscar-nominated Mexican Salma Hayek in *Frida* (2002) and the Argentine Mia Maestro and Mexican Hayek again in *In the Time of the Butterflies* (2001). Along with this cohort of actresses, joins the Colombian newcomer, Catalina Sandino Moreno, who gives an Oscar-nominated performance in *María Full of Grace*.<sup>6</sup> In this decade a transnational collaboration also emerges between U.S. Latina and Latin American actresses, for example, America Ferrera and Salma Hayek respectively, in the televised hit series *Ugly Betty* (produced by Salma Hayek), which began to air in the fall of 2006, yielded high ratings and garnered many awards.<sup>7</sup> These actresses on both sides of the U.S./Latin American borderlands are engaging in global conversations to capture an American spectatorship as much as command an international following and critical acclaim for their roles.

#### *REAL WOMEN HAVE CURVES*

In *Real Women Have Curves*, an eighteen-year-old Chicana (Mexican American) woman, Ana García, finds herself caught between loyalty to her close-knit Mexican family who lives in Boyle Heights, a historical neighborhood with the largest Mexican descent population in the U.S., and pursuing a higher education at the prestigious Ivy League Columbia University in New York City. In order to understand these challenges, the director Cardoso explores multi-faceted aspects of Ana García's life in different neighborhoods in Los Angeles to demonstrate

how the politics of the body and sexuality are interconnected to her search for freedom of thought and intellectual expression.<sup>8</sup>

The film narrative unfolds as the spectator accompanies the protagonist Ana on urban journeys from her working-class home in Boyle Heights to her high school in the affluent Beverly Hills. Cardoso cleverly shifts spaces between Ana's neighborhood stores, the warehouses and factories in downtown and finally, to the nicely mowed lawns in the residential Beverly Hills. By paying close attention to the details of Ana's bus route to school, at least two transfers in one journey, from the east to the west side of Los Angeles, Cardoso illustrates the economic and physical hardships that a young Chicana must endure to reach her goals, that is to say, attend a reputable high school to earn a quality education that may not always be available in her own neighborhood.<sup>9</sup> Likewise, Ana does not have the luxury of being driven to school because all her family members, including the women, must work to support themselves and thus, cannot spare the time. The spectator gains a firsthand account of the struggles, perseverance, and ambition within the character of Ana because he/she literally rides with her from neighborhood to neighborhood: an appropriate strategy to introduce the trials of growing up working-class in a megalopolis like Los Angeles. By crossing geographical boundaries in Los Angeles, Ana traverses social classes as well. Cardoso focuses on the streets and all the social activity in Boyle Heights, but riding the bus takes on a life of its own because this mobile activity bridges Ana's body and mind to other worlds and other possibilities.<sup>10</sup> Her body travels from one social space to another and in the process, Ana exposes herself to different social experiences, which she would never have known, had she remained within the boundaries of her neighborhood. Cardoso purposely demonstrates the socioeconomic discrepancies within the varied neighborhoods of metropolitan Los Angeles underlining the effects on young working-class Latinas who have dreams of making their own choices regarding their future.

#### FAMILY HOME LIFE: UNDOMESTICATING THE BODY

In developing a discourse on the body in *Real Women Have Curves*, Cardoso explores the cultural context of Ana's family home life by paying attention to cultural practices transported from Mexico (e.g., statue of la Virgen de Guadalupe, telenovelas). Cardoso reveals the incompatible perspectives between generations in the García

household. Rather than portray the father as the patriarchal head of the household, the character of the mother Carmen García (played by the late Lupe Ontiveros) presents herself as determined, stubborn, and domineering in the film.<sup>11</sup> The cultural tension that ensues between Carmen and her younger daughter, Ana, is palpable as they hardly agree on what constitutes “una hija decente,” especially when it comes to issues such as virginity, ladylike behavior in public, and control of one’s physical appearance (e.g., body weight), to find an appropriate husband.

The younger female generation represented by Ana and her sister Estela in the García family provides an alternative on the choices bestowed upon Chicanas living and working in an urban working-class neighborhood. While Estela coordinates seamstresses in a garment factory by designing and making fashion dresses to be sold to the high-end store, Bloomingdale’s, Ana is completing her last high school year in Beverly Hills and working part-time as a fast food cashier in her neighborhood Boyle Heights. Unlike Carmen’s generation, Estela and Ana do not choose marriage as an immediate goal. Although these two young women move in different social and educational circles, they aspire to make a better future for themselves through their *own* efforts in the workforce or academia. Moreover, Ana hopes to continue her education by attending college to have choices in her future rather than live a life of resignation such as her mother. In order to do so, Ana needs to remove herself from the constraints of her immediate family who do not always understand her actions nor goals, with the exception of her grandfather (abuelito). The film suggests that a younger generation of Chicanas do not have to rely on the financial assistance nor benefits of a male provider as the generation of the mother Carmen does, but rather on themselves. The characters of Ana and Estela exemplify confident women who determine their future through their own thoughts and actions. The mother, Carmen, though, disrupts their dreams and goals when she nags her daughters about their body images or “curves,” because she still adheres to the patriarchal structure of family, or tradition, that subjugates women who do not discipline their bodies to satisfy men. Cardoso presents these radically opposing views by women of different generations and cultural tendencies to show that although tensions within Latino families still persist in the post-2000 period, Latinas must have the will to structure their lives as they please.

## KNOWLEDGE AND FREEDOM

In order to resist her mother Carmen's negative criticism regarding her body weight, Ana develops her intellectual abilities and self-confidence. She attends the prestigious Beverly Hills High School where she is fortunate to meet strong, confident, and respectful male role models such as Mr. Guzmán (played by well-known comedian George López) and her secretive Anglo-American boyfriend, Jimmy (played by Brian Sites). Virtually all of Ana's Anglo-American peers are privileged enough to take international trips (e.g., backpacking through Europe), attend competitive universities (e.g., M.I.T.). Unlike Ana, they take these opportunities for granted. In spite of Ana's limited economic resources, though, Mr. Guzmán recognizes her academic abilities and that which "she has to contribute to the world." He mentors her by encouraging her to apply to a university, informing her that scholarships are available to low-income students so financial necessity should not be a prohibitive factor in seeking opportunities in higher education. By putting pen to the paper to write her personal essay for admission to Columbia University, Ana begins to take control of her life and essentially, her future. Her mind and body are slowly learning how to become part of a competitive educational system rather than be left behind. Yet, this effort becomes a worthwhile task because as a Latina, her acceptance to Columbia University increases the visibility of Latinos/as in higher education. Her main obstacle, then, becomes her unwilling mother, who refuses to allow her to attend under the guise of pressing "family matters" such as taking care of *abuelo* and helping her sister Estela at the factory. Interestingly enough, Cardoso takes the spectators to another level in this development, for she wishes to encourage Latinas to step out of their comfort zones in their communities to confront challenges and fulfill their dreams. Why not share their knowledge, experiences, and intellect of the city with a wider world? This does not mean that they leave behind their communities, but rather, take those experiences with them and give back to their communities.

As for gender and race, the character of Jimmy is instrumental in Ana's growth into womanhood: emotionally, intellectually, and sexually. Despite the difference in class, gender, and race, he listens and converses with Ana on equal terms. This relationship between an Anglo-American male and Latina female further represents a cultural rupture in cinematic narrative because the Latina character

is no longer inferior to him as the stereotypical servant, prostitute, or airhead/flighty girlfriend so often portrayed in mainstream films. Although they come from different neighborhoods in Los Angeles that exemplify socioeconomic discrepancies, they are on equal footing as intellectual counterparts in joking and following their curiosity about one another. Perhaps Ana feels at ease with Jimmy because since she was a young child she had developed strong and trusting relationships with the male members of her family, from her father and male cousins to her Mexican grandfather, *abuelo*, who teaches her the value of finding one's treasure ("tesoro") in people rather than in material wealth. In fact, Ana and Jimmy have a mutual respect for one another that also leads to a healthy friendship rather than patriarchal/racial dominance. Because of the mother's traditional expectations of her daughters, though, Ana must hide her dating with Jimmy to avoid problems and being labeled "a disobedient daughter."

The relationship with Jimmy is also crucial to Ana's development because it affords her the opportunity to explore her body and sexuality, allowing her to be more in control of the decisions in her life. Although Ana does not conform to the mainstream's expectations of a *Cosmopolitan* or *Vogue* model, namely thin, seductive, and glamorous, Cardoso purposefully emphasizes Ana's body as that of a woman of color with curves. Instead of encouraging her daughter, Ana's mother is disappointed because she is overweight and thus, not as eligible for marriage in her mother's view. The spectator witnesses a double marginalization. By taking Jimmy as a "secret" boyfriend and lover, Ana declares her own sexual revolution and liberation in that she is following her own mind and desires by refusing to be a virgin until marriage, thereby contesting cultural expectations.<sup>12</sup> Ana rejects these cultural and religious standards because she is intelligent enough to realize that she should be in control of her own body. As she states to her mother in a factory scene, "A woman can think for herself. She has thoughts and feelings" illustrating that the intellect should supercede the superficiality of body image. Ana also takes precautions and considers the consequences of her decisions. For example, when she buys Cuban cigars for her *abuelo*, she also seeks advice on choice of birth control from the Latina pharmacist in her neighborhood, Boyle Heights. Rather than fear being scolded on such matters, Ana takes the initiative in being educated on birth control, exemplifying that the repression and guilt of orthodox Catholicism can no longer

hinder this generation of intelligent Latinas, who seek empowerment through knowledge rather than suffering the consequences of ignorance and possibly, risk pregnancy or “end up panzonas (pregnant),” as the mother would say.

Since Ana refuses to be reprimanded by her mother for her weight and “unacceptable” body image, she invites the spectator to join her in the exploration of her body on screen, similar to the self-portrait that Mexican painter Frida Kahlo explored in her paintings, or acts of “self-portraiture.” Cardoso juxtaposes two scenes in the film where Ana is looking at her body in the mirror. The first takes place after her sexual initiation (losing her virginity) to Jimmy. Ana asks him to turn on the lights after they have sex because she wants him to accept her—mind, body, and spirit—with “curves” and all. She says, “This is who I am,” affirming her identity. He replies, “Qué bonita!” signifying that he accepts her figure and character because he sees beyond the exteriority. He not only acknowledges her intellectually as a Chicana, but physically as well, accepting her body type which is not the typical Hollywood female protagonist. In fact, after their physical intimacy, Ana is the one who distances herself from Jimmy, letting him know that he does not have to write to her when they go their separate ways to college. After all, he “will probably end up meeting some skinny girl.” Jimmy refuses to accept this gesture on her part and promises to write to her. Rather than construct a genre of romance with the typical fairy tale ending, Cardoso represents this relationship realistically, that is to say, the young couple may break up even though they have engaged in sex, further empowering Ana with the independence to make her own choices and achieve her dreams.

In another scene at the family home, Ana further develops confidence in herself as she looks at her body in the mirror. The mother discovers that Ana has no shame in looking at her nude body and concludes that her daughter has had sex. Carmen says, “You tramp. You lost your virginity, didn’t you? You are not only fat, but now you are also a *puta*.”<sup>13</sup> Ana declares, “Because there is more to me than what’s in between my legs.” The mother resorts to slapping the daughter because she has been disrespected. Again, Carmen views Ana under the *marianismo* model: she is either good or bad following the virgin/whore complex.<sup>14</sup> In this case, the mother chooses to view Ana in a negative light as a traitor to family values. Cardoso suggests that mothers like Carmen are not ready to accept the fact that their

daughters are maturing rapidly in a city like Los Angeles and entering womanhood in a completely different culture than their generation with more independence and choices to make. In fact, the mother is so obsessed with a woman's reproductive system that she convinces herself that she is pregnant at middle age. When Carmen discovers that she is undergoing menopause, she quickly refers to Ana's biological assets as a woman and advises her to lose weight not for herself, but in order to marry, following a traditional courting pattern, that will eventually, give her grandchildren. Again, the mother prefers to depend on a woman's physical rather than intellectual assets to initiate a relationship with the opposite sex. Cardoso cautions young Chicanas/Latinas with these examples not to fall into the trappings of their bodies, which will change over time, to pursue a man; that is to say, rely on their biological role or "spitfire" image in exchange for their intellectual resources. Unlike many past Latina roles constructed primarily by Hollywood, Ana prefers to follow a different path to achieve self-fulfillment, autonomy, and respect.

#### FACTORY WORKERS UNITED: A COMMUNITY OF WOMEN

Cardoso, nonetheless, does not reject the community from which the protagonist Ana descends in Boyle Heights. After celebrating her graduation from high school with her family, Carmen informs the daughter, Ana, that she must begin to work at her sister's seamstress factory to contribute financially to the family. Shocked and disillusioned, Ana unwillingly begins a new phase of her life as part of her sister's labor force. Rather than attend college like her peers, Ana must sacrifice one year of her education by helping out her older sister, working at the mother's request. By situating the women's labor force at Estela's factory in the film, Cardoso critiques Latina women's working conditions in the garment industry in relationship to globalization. Ana, at first considered an outsider, becomes aware of the economic inequalities that exist between the Latina seamstresses working for her sister Estela in the factory and the corporate world represented by Bloomingdale's, which reflects a social and economic hierarchy within metropolitan Los Angeles. While the women's labor is only compensated by eighteen dollars per designed dress produced, the company profits six hundred dollars per dress. Rightly calling the labor place a "sweatshop," which alludes to "Third World working conditions for women," Ana is scolded by Estela who misinterprets her assessment as

one of being condescending towards her. As Ana gains experience in the workplace, though, she learns that the factory has lessons to offer.

In a much publicized and advertised disrobing scene in *Real Women Have Curves*, Cardoso brings the title of her film to center stage as she unabashedly exhibits a fashion of *real* women's bodies to the spectator in semi-*Full Monty* form. In response to the poor working conditions in the factory, lacking air conditioning in a hot and humid atmosphere, Ana takes off her clothes, but keeps on her undergarments. She encourages the other women to do so because "we are all women here." At first unwilling, but then in gradual agreement, the fellow compañeras undress in a subtle competition to show who has more cellulite or stretch marks, exhibiting a certain pride in their "curves" and mocking the ideal "thin" woman so emulated in society. By playfully referring to themselves as animals (ie., elephant, hippo, Orca), the female workers compete with one another to see who is the one with more "curves." Although one of the co-workers Rosalie reminds the mother to admire her daughters, Ana and Estela, for their beauty in spite of their weight, Carmen is shocked at the disrobing and the "loose" attitude and behavior on the women's part because it is indecent, but, more importantly to her, because they are fat. Ana responds, "Mamá, I do want to lose weight, but part of me does not because my weight says to everyone, 'Fuck You!'" At this point, Ana receives her due recognition, respect, and support from her fellow female factory workers united. She states proudly to her mother, "Look at us. This is who we are, Mamá, REAL WOMEN." (my emphasis) Like Ana, Cardoso demonstrates in this scene the Latina's "declaration of independence," through pride in her body in a city context and one who prefers to follow her own dictates in defining beauty and aesthetics on her own terms as *real women* should.

In leaving the family to study at Columbia University in New York City, Cardoso illustrates how Ana transcends class, gender, and race limitations by taking initiatives into her own hands. Her decisions on sex, college, and moving away from home, not always compatible with the values of her family, make her independent of a patriarchal system, but she does not forget them so easily. In *Real Women Have Curves*, Cardoso breaks with the visual representation of subjugated Chicanas and Latinas on screen because she presents these women in a more realistic and contemporary fashion, especially with regards

to the politics of the body and mind across cultures, neighborhoods, and cities.

### MARÍA FULL OF GRACE

In *María Full of Grace*, director Joshua Marston portrays a cinematic narrative encompassing the struggles of a seventeen-year-old girl, María Alvarez, who journeys from a small town in Colombia, to the capital Bogotá, and eventually settles in Jackson Heights, Queens, in New York City, in the global context of international drug trade. Traditionally, Hollywood has tended to over-sensationalize U.S.-Latin American political relations (i.e. *Traffic*) when it comes to representing drug issues as criminal activity caused by Latin American neighbors. Although drugs play a major role in this film as a catalyst, Marston also shows the effects of this monopoly by focusing on the women as “mules,” usually young girls from Latin American countries such as Colombia carrying drugs in their bodies, and the risks they must endure to subsidize dominant groups in power such as, drug lords in Colombia and the U.S. While drugs may be a business and/or diversion for dominant groups on both sides of the international border (U.S./Colombia), Marston unveils the intricacies behind this dangerous means of survival for poor women from developing countries like Colombia and calls attention to its exploitation of female bodies across transnational borders.<sup>15</sup> By viewing the matter in this light, the spectator begins to understand how the protagonist María must risk her body, and potentially her life, to help her family who depends on her for economic survival.

Employed as a factory worker in a rose plantation in a small town outside Bogotá, María feels trapped physically and psychologically as much at work as at home. The boss of the rose factory, where numerous women work because of the limited job opportunities, treats them inhumanely, barely giving them enough time for breaks, let alone interaction with one another. He controls their minds as well as their bodies. He also appears to care more about the products, roses, rather than the actual women workers, regardless if they are feeling ill. Refusing to take further humiliation and the condescending tone of the boss, María, in a pregnant state, quits her job because she feels disrespected and exploited by him at a crucial moment when he does not allow her to go to the restroom to vomit due to morning sickness. In this scene, Marston demonstrates the strong-willed character

of María, very similar to Ana in *Real Women Have Curves*, who wishes to maintain a degree of dignity, autonomy, and self-respect, despite the lack of socioeconomic power over her boss. Even though María may be perceived as a marginal figure locally and globally, she does not conform to the limits placed upon her and breaks with cinematic representations of the dependent woman as a victim from a developing nation.

María's dissatisfaction, however, extends to her family home life as well. She does not bring home a paycheck for herself, but instead sustains a female household: a sister who is a single mother with a baby, a domineering mother, and an elderly, helpless grandmother; role models she would rather evade because their lives are stagnant and they exploit her good will. Neither the workplace nor domestic life values María as a human being on a basic level. When she informs her mother that she quit her job, the mother is outraged because working at the rose factory is one of the few "trabajos decentes" (decent jobs) for a girl like María, insinuating that other young girls in her situation may resort to other means of support, such as prostitution, in a town with limited resources. Either way, Marston seems to be pointing to the fact that young women in María's situation may have very few options when it comes to earning a living to make ends meet. Choices are not under their control in this social context. With such a lack of understanding from work or family, María seeks comfort in her peers, such as her friends.

#### LIBERATING THE BODY AND MIND

For young working-class women in Latin American small towns, opportunities are few and far in between. In María's case, the search for freedom and happiness is interconnected to the desire to escape the physical and psychological containment of her body and mind. Since she comes of age in what appears to be a matriarchal household, she feels no inhibitions about patriarchal dominance and restrictions and thus, becomes sexually involved as a teenager; yet, because she is ignorant of birth control, living in a country where Catholicism prevails, she becomes pregnant unexpectedly, unlike Ana in *Real Women Have Curves*. Upon first glance, it appears that pregnancy will constitute a hindrance in María's life. Yet, she refuses to be a helpless victim by looking at the example of her dependent sister and thus, takes matters into her own hands.

In *María Full of Grace*, Marston does not present the typical narrative of a young woman who is left pregnant and dependent on male protection in terms of marriage or financial support. Rather, the protagonist María decides to take control of her life for the consequences of becoming pregnant with her irresponsible boyfriend's child. In the context of an orthodox Catholicism, a religion that traditionally condones sexual experiences outside marriage, especially for "decent" and "proper" young Latinas, María finds herself in trouble because her pregnancy, like her sister's represents another social stigma, not to mention, financial burden to the family. Knowing that her family of females relies on her for financial support, she can hardly imagine a future, where she must also become dependent on a male provider such as her indifferent boyfriend, Juan. It is unexpected yet logical that she refuses his marriage proposal because they are too young and not fully committed to one another in love. Rather than rely on a man, María decides to take destiny into her own hands by seeking employment outside the limits of her hometown. Thus, she migrates from her hometown to the metropolis of Bogotá.

The encounter with the sharp and savvy urbanite, Franklin, is instrumental in allowing María to develop and seek opportunities outside the vicinity of her hometown. They had met at a dance where she abandoned her boyfriend, Juan, when he became uncontrollably drunk, and consequently, Franklin took the opportunity to ask her to dance. When he invites her on a day trip to find a job in Bogotá, her life takes an interesting turn in the film. María reverses the stereotype often relegated to Latina women on screen (who become pregnant, depend on males and/or the social welfare system). She rejects Juan and the convention of family dependency to which the women in her family have fallen victim. This decision is quite unusual for a young woman in her situation, but she refuses to settle for less which illustrates her determination in resolving her own problems without anyone's interference or help, an attitude similar to Ana in *Real Women Have Curves*. Furthermore, she never tells anyone in her family that she is pregnant because she needs to be self-sufficient and independent of their judgments or constraints on the choices in her life. By silencing her pregnancy, María is able to seek work opportunities in Bogotá, which eventually leads her to transnational crossings beyond Colombia. By removing herself from the pressures of her family life, she is able to think somewhat more clearly about

her situation. Few young Latinas in her situation would think or even dream of taking such steps to transform their economic state, but some like María do so out of necessity.

In shifting her focus to travel to work in the city, María radically transforms her life from the safety and limited opportunities in her small town to risks at the global level. Franklin convinces her that she is “too pretty” to work as a housekeeper in the city. So he becomes the mediator who introduces María to the drug lord, Don Javier, in Bogotá: paradoxically, it is a means to earning a living. By becoming a “mule” carrier for drugs, María is willing to risk her life and that of her baby in this transnational transportation system from Colombia to the United States. As desperate as she may appear at first, María transforms an “illegal” process of mule trafficking drugs to the United States into a journey of survival and awareness of how to control her body and life. She receives a sum of \$5,000 as payment for risking her life by swallowing sixty-two pellets filled with heroin. Certainly, Marston illustrates the effects of globalization on a young Colombian working-class female who falls into the manipulation of capitalism on women’s bodies by coming to the U.S. in search of better work opportunities. In one critical scene, Marston focuses on how Don Javier trains María in swallowing the pellets that carry the heroin to be transported across national borders. The drug lord feels her stomach, a gesture in transforming her body into a commodity to assert that all the pellets are in place. Interestingly enough, he caresses the drugs rather than the growing embryo. Echoing the previous boss at the rose factory, María’s life becomes valueless and disposable because she is not worth as much as the product, in this case the drugs.

#### TRAVEL TO THE U.S.: MIGRATING BODIES

The motif of the journey, leaving the homeland in Colombia, becomes a significant element in María’s search for freedom in a transnational urban context. In an important airplane scene traveling from Colombia to the U.S., where María and her “mule” co-workers, Blanca, Lucy, and other fellow Colombian women are passengers, a dramatic moment develops in the cinematic narrative. Appearing calm on the outside, but stressing nervously inside, María accidentally evacuates a pellet from her body, thus producing panic because every pellet represents money and must be accounted for upon her arrival in the U.S., according to Don Javier. Otherwise, she and her family in

Colombia could be harassed or worse, killed for misplacing the drugs and destabilizing capital gains. She immediately re-swallows the pellet to contain the drugs in her body. In talking to her friend, Lucy, María is also informed of the address of Lucy's settled married sister, Carla, who has made a home for herself and husband, in Jackson Heights. Although Lucy had visited the U.S. on two previous occasions to complete the "mule" tasks, she does not contact Carla because she is ashamed of the stigma attached to dealing with drug dealers and risking her own life. María further realizes that she can only depend on her community of "mules," women like herself in moments of crisis, similar to Ana's community of female factory workers united in *Real Women*. Marston exposes women's exploited bodies at the hands of transnational globalization processes in the U.S. as well as Colombia.

While *María Full of Grace* may critique the machinations behind the drug trade in Colombia as far as women and their bodies are concerned, the role of the U.S. is interrogated. Although María may feel safe upon her arrival at the New York City airport, her life takes an unexpected turn as immigration detention officers detain and drill her about her business in the U.S., suspecting correctly that she is illegally trafficking drugs. Despite the fact that the narrative could at this point turn into a cliché about another female mule getting caught in this dangerous drug endeavor, Marston devises a way out for María. After requiring of María a urine sample, the officials discover that they cannot perform an x-ray on María, as she is pregnant. Thus, the officers will be unable to detect the pellets in her stomach. Ironically, María's pregnancy, or her baby, saves her from the impact of U.S. law. However, in Colombia the baby would have kept María, having to confront and live through the limitations of her small town life. In this scene, the spectator may sympathize with María because she must uphold her end of the bargain with the drug lord to avoid tragedy upon herself and her family in Colombia. Marston cleverly alludes to the biblical story of Mary and the baby, Jesus, who saved and sacrificed himself for his mother's life, "full of grace," representing the title of the film as well.<sup>16</sup> Although María may be considered a "criminal" before U.S. officials, the director suggests that she redeems herself and her child in the U.S. by exposing the corruption and social injustices in the collaboration between Colombia and the U.S. on a global economic scale who should be held accountable for exploiting the powerless on both sides of the international border.

Furthermore, in the role of transporter or “mule,” María does not represent the typical Colombian (or Latin American) immigrant who comes to the U.S. in search of the American Dream. Rather, she awakens to the reality of violence against women’s bodies in the drug trade. Upon leaving the airport, the U.S. drug dealers pick up María, Blanca, and Lucy to collect the drugs at a hotel and pay them their dues, as was negotiated back in Colombia with Don Javier. In this process, however, María discovers that Lucy is fatally ill because some pellets had accidentally leaked in her body, causing her to pass out. The callous and abusive drug dealers decide to cut up Lucy’s body to acquire the heroin pellets for their capital compensation rather than care for her failing health. María and Blanca not only discover Lucy’s mutilated body the following day, but they also learn that the drug dealers have abandoned the women with her dead body for which they can be arrested as suspects. Once again, women’s bodies as mules become disposable. Horrified, María and Blanca escape with their own pellets to find safety for themselves. Without knowing anyone and, much less, mastering any English, María decides to search for Lucy’s sister Carla in Jackson Heights which is home to one of the largest communities of Colombian immigrants in the U.S. since the 1980s.<sup>17</sup> In this scene, Marston astutely critiques the larger patriarchal networks that take advantage of immigrant women’s bodies as exploited labor for their capital gains.

#### TOWARD A TRANSNATIONAL COMMUNITY: THE NEW HOMELAND IN JACKSON HEIGHTS

In the neighborhood of Jackson Heights, María learns about the positive side of living in the U.S. as a Colombian immigrant through legitimate work by meeting different fellow nationals. She witnesses and participates in the community within Jackson Heights, which consists of a network of people who help each other rather than stigmatize or suffocate one another as they do in the homeland to survive.<sup>18</sup> In meeting Lucy’s relatives, pregnant Carla and her husband, María realizes that making a decent living can be possible in the United States. She also discovers that she could probably better help her close-knit family back in Colombia if she were working in the United States as do Carla and her husband. At one point Carla says, “One’s heart just becomes big when family in Colombia receives a paycheck from the U.S.” At this moment, María learns that she can

empower herself, her baby, and family back in Colombia by settling in the U.S. Through Carla, María and Blanca also meet Don Fernando, endowed with the respectful title of “mayor” of Little Colombia in Jackson Heights, because he understand the precarious situation of struggling immigrants and thus, helps people, legal or not, look for jobs. In this example, the film also breaks with stereotypes about Latin American immigrants by demonstrating the sacrifice and hard labor that they must undergo to survive in cities such as New York, very similar to Ana’s family in Los Angeles in *Real Women Have Curves*. They are not just “illegals” taking away jobs from U.S. citizens, but rather they have to earn their dues by working at difficult jobs like Carla and her husband.

By walking down Roosevelt Avenue in Jackson Heights, María, like the spectator, sees stores (e.g., Casa Colombia), little food stands, and rose flower shops (sold for more in the U.S. than their production’s worth in Colombia), where Colombians earn a living through legitimate and legal means by living in the United States and not resort to carrying drugs like mules. Instead of feeling nostalgia for her homeland of Colombia, she feels more at home and finds a sense of community in Little Colombia, Jackson Heights, New York City. By exploring the neighborhood, María notices and visits a bilingual woman’s clinic to learn more about the state of her health, her body, and future baby. When she takes a sonogram and hears her baby’s heartbeat, almost instantly, María turns around her responsibility from a carefree teenager to a caring and responsible mother. Similar to the scene where Ana views her body in the mirror in *Real Women Have Curves*, the sonogram machine projects an image of the female body that reinforces and empowers María. Pregnancy, a consequence of unplanned sex for María, becomes a rite of passage into womanhood for her in New York City. She demonstrates maturity and independence as she reflects on the possibilities and future for her and her unborn baby. Although the gratification of capital lured her into the U.S. illegally, María gradually learns to appreciate the efforts and labor of Colombian immigrants in the United States as a consequence of globalization. María, however, wishes to recuperate her agency against all hegemonic forces and take control of her body and life, as does Ana in *Real Women Have Curves*.

## LATINAS REDEFINE THE CITY

The two critically acclaimed films, *Real Women Have Curves* and *María, Full of Grace*, offer quite a different representation of Latina leading ladies on the screen than earlier decades as the directors complicate the portrait of female subjectivity. Through intergenerational relationships, real dreams as opposed to celluloid fantasies, and personal autonomy, these films present the challenges of controlling one's destiny for single Latina women who are at the interstices of different cultures in hemispheric dialogues. The directors also explore how Latinas navigate their bodies and minds by redefining their urban experiences through several neighborhoods such as Boyle Heights and Jackson Heights in city contexts, urban experiences that lead each protagonist to negotiate her role as an obedient daughter and independent woman. Both, Ana and María, end up in New York City in search of a better life, a space of one's own, be it education or new job opportunities and a better understanding of their choices. The aforementioned films by directors Cardoso and Marston are a tribute to single migrating Latinas in the city, with curves and full of grace, striving to achieve freedom of mind, body and spirit in the (new) heights.

## Notes

1. *Real Women Have Curves* has garnered initial critical attention from scholars such as Beltrán, Guzmán-Molina, and Valdivia, but more in-depth studies are needed such as the current one to address the context of the city.

2. See Aparicio and Silverman's introduction in *Tropicalizations* (1997).

3. I take the term of the Hollywood Latina from Beltrán who looks at how the image of Latinas on the screen was informed by the politics of the historical moment, be it the Depression, or the Good Neighbor Policy, for example. Peña Ovalle explores how dance through race and sex influenced the making of the Hollywood Latina from the silent period to the post-2000 period.

4. In Fregoso's *The Bronze Screen* (1993) and Noriega's *Chicanos and Film* (1992), the critics point to a teleology of Chicano independent films starting with the civil rights movement in the 1960s, but many were only available on a limited basis to small, specific audiences that these small-budget films hardly developed a following outside their immediate cultural circles. Accessibility and distribution are, undoubtedly, influential factors.

5. Aparicio (2003) discusses “sites where Latinidad is constituted, such as the case of Jennifer López becoming Selena for the Gregory Nava film, critics can tease out some of the analogous forms of resistance that bring together a Boricua from the Bronx and a Tejana singer.”

6. See Sandino Moreno’s later roles in *Love in the Time of Cholera* (2008) and *Che* (2008). Whereas, she portrays a more traditional role in the first film, she embarks as the Argentine political activist’s wife in the second, being active in love and war.

7. Awards include Emmy and Golden Globe Best Actress for Ferrera and Best New Comedy for *Ugly Betty* (2006-2009). The American televised series *Ugly Betty* is, in actuality, a remake or reformulation of Spanish-speaking telenovelas, the award-winning *La fea más bella* (2007) in Mexico starring Angélica Vale, daughter of the legendary Mexican actress, Angélica María, coined as la novia de México, and originally, *Yo soy Betty, la fea* (1999-2001) from Colombia.

8. See Meyer (2002), Mitchell (2002), and Thomas (2002) for reviews of *Real Women Have Curves*.

9. See Mike Davis’s chapter, “Education Ground Zero,” in *Magical Urbanism* (2001).

10. See Marisela Norte’s essay, “Best MTA Bus Line: The Number 18, Yes, Let’s Take a Trip Down Whittier Boulevard” (2005).

11. See Noriega’s homage to Lupe Ontiveros in the *Huffington Post* (March 1, 2013) in response to the Academy Award’s oversight/omission of her death during the 2013 ceremony.

12. In “A Woman of No Consequence/Una Mujer Cualquiera” (1997), Cisneros discusses the experience of having secret sex hidden from her parents, a somewhat similar situation to Ana’s relationship with Jimmy in *Real Women Have Curves*.

13. This scene is reminiscent of one in Váldez’s *Zoot Suit* (1981) where the mother, also played, interestingly enough, by Ontiveros, unintentionally calls her Chicana daughter a *puta* (a prostitute) when she actually meant to call her a *pachuca* (woman who dressed in the zoot suit style in the 1940s), still maintaining a condescending attitude. For a genealogy of the historical figure of the *pachuca*, see Ramírez’s *The Woman in the Zoot Suit* (2009).

14. See Hershfield’s chapter, “The Timeless Paradox: Mother and Whore,” in *Mexican Cinema/Mexican Woman, 1940-1950* (1996) where she explores the paradigms of La Malinche and La Virgen of Guadalupe as models for Mexican womanhood in society and its adaptability on screen. These archetypes continue in Chicana/Latina films as well.

15. See Holden (2004), Stein (2004), and Thomas (2004) for reviews of *María, Full of Grace*.

16. For reference to this biblical allusion, see Emily Davis's comparative article, "The Intimacies of Globalization: Bodies and Borders On-Screen" (2006).

17. See Heredia (2013) for Jackson Heights as a historically significant neighborhood for Colombians.

18. See Escobar's "Dual Citizenship and Political Participation" (2006) to understand how Colombian communities in New York City maintain transnational ties to their country of origin while living in their adopted homeland in the United States.

19. A preliminary version of this article was first presented at a Letras Feministas panel at the Modern Languages Association in 2005. I would like to thank the editor Sandra Ruíz for inviting me to contribute to this special issue on Hemispheric Intersections and her thoughtful comments on this critical piece.

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