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From Rico Suave to Livin' La Vida Loca: A Decade of Evolution for Latino Pop Stars

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From “Rico Suave” to Livin’ “La Vida Loca”: A Decade of Evolution for Latino Pop Star Images

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Abstract

This essay surveys an arc of representation associated with the shifting projections of Latino male musical artists from the early 1990s to the end of the decade. This arc begins with the straightforward and seemingly uncomplicated, hence stereotypical, constructions of Gerardo and Kid Frost—two artists who were popular in the early 1990s—and ends with an analysis of the rather more complicated persona of Ricky Martin, whose public image has often challenged presumptions of Latino male identity and sexuality.

Introduction

Since the early 1990s U.S. popular music has increasingly accommodated Latina/os in a variety of musical genres. In rock music Los Lobos have been highly visible; rappers Kid Frost and Mello Man Ace have enjoyed cross-over success; Selena became a star through Tejano music; and popular "Top 40" music has seen various artists be successful, most recently Jennifer Lopez, Christina Aguilera, Marc Anthony, and Ricky Martin.

All this artistic activity and success has encouraged critical and scholarly analyses. Scholars have looked at the historical and sociological significance of Latino musicians in various musical genres (Loza, 1993). Some have delved into the cultural significance of the lyrics, which has proven fruitful to scholars of culture and communication (Delgado, 1998). Both approaches have demonstrated the significance of Latino recording artists and popularity of their music.

Crossing over, however, invites the commodification of the artistic product. Commodification centers on creating a product that can fetch a particular price in a given market. As artists and their music become products to be marketed and sold, success is rarely a question of the quality and characteristics of the artist, musical genre, or the lyrics. Instead, those elements work with the image of the artist or group: the marketing and packaging of the music to stores, radio stations, and other media outlets; and the public relations strategies employed to gain more notoriety for the musician(s) and their product(s) and a larger share of the marketplace.

Marketing communications present an image of the recording artist or group to the record-buying public, who may have varying degrees of understanding of and affinity for the music. Constructions of the artist or group are often re-presentations of culturally resonant identities. character types we have of media personalities. Such re-presentations are often stereotypical and reflect a tendency toward mass-marketing strategies that deploy oversimplified but attractive packaging. Such packaging often resonates with audiences because it employs elements that are part of our cultural vocabulary. On occasion the artist's exoticness and difference are packaged to attract an audience. Thus, we have such common products as boy bands or fresh-faced female teen artists—both relatively known and safe categories in the history of music and entertainment marketing. On the other hand, many gothic rock acts sell their difference, even their deviance, to particular audiences who find such constructions appealing or consonant with their own self-images and expectations.

Media Critique and the Presence of the Latino Male

A common approach to studying media representations of Latino identities is to examine character types—the stereotypical roles and identities that have been consistently associated with Latino males. Scholars have documented the narrow variations within which Latino male images are represented (Keller, 1993). Stereotypical representations can have a profound impact on audiences as well as on future productions of mediated entertainment. Several scholars have noted how the mass media have communicated a pattern of particular stereotypes associated with Latinos (Cortés, 1983). This is a result of the media—television, film, print, and music—acting as important sources of information and learning for many of us (Maciel & García-Acevedo, 1998). Patterns of re-presentation make stereotypes seem natural and real. The mass media create a learning environment where audiences are invited to accept stereotypes as true and accurate representations of individuals and groups.

For much of the U.S. entertainment industry's history the parameters for Latino representation have constrained what audiences get to see. Beginning with silent films the Latino male as *bandido* or Latin lover have been common stereotypes. These and other representations are oversimplified and overgeneralized, but they also fit into an ideological (meaning a society’s set of attitudes and beliefs) pattern of representation that serves multiple needs, including "in-group categorizations of out-groups" (Ramírez-Berg, 1990, p. 294).

While the bandit and the Latin lover remain fairly common elements of our media vocabulary, as mass-media messages about Latinos have proliferated new constructions have appeared. Additionally, new modes of analysis have provoked increasingly complex and nuanced understandings of how representations of Latinos are constructed, articulated, and received. The shifts in representations can be attributed to the changing demographics and expectations of audiences. the introduction of Latino-themed and produced media products, and shifts in culture allowing for innovation. Scholars have moved beyond mechanistic modes of analysis, tracing the historical presence of stereotypes in contemporary media discourses. In the case of the U.S. culture industries' constructions of Latinos, new frames of analysis can investigate the increasingly complicated dynamics involving construction, reception, and the circulation of meanings and images. Delgado (2000) noted that Kid Frost can and does articulate a complex and even confounding sense of Latino masculinity and machismo through his music, even if his persona is marketed to the mainstream in a manner consistent with the gangster variation of the bandit and greaser.

Various scholars have provided us with frames that challenge the meaning of identity constructions and reflect the tenor of the times. U.S. Latinos now occupy a more obvious and important place than in previous decades, simultaneously sustaining their own sense of mainstream popular culture and increasingly entering the U.S. popular culture mainstream—both likely the result of shifting demographics. Márez (1996) noted that Brownness has become a marker of Latino difference. perhaps negative for some communities and groups but affirming for others. Part of the process of affirmation involves a discursive mode of recovery, wherein Latinos communicate and reaffirm their cultures and celebrate their multiple identities (Delgado, 2000). The intimate act of recovering and re-presenting personal and cultural history and identity pushes the limits of constructions and (self) representations. By the end of the 1990s Latinos were moving toward a space in which identity constructions had to allow for greater diversity and variance. In terms of popular music. we shall see how artists at the end of the decade occupied a space different from that held by artists "discovered" at the beginning of the decade.

Part of the complexity surrounding Latino artists at the end of the 1990s involves their presence in mainstream popular culture and the continuation of mainstream cultural values. Latino artists face the challenge of entering the mainstream record-buying market even when mainstream values may not be receptive to Latino identities or cultures. The question, then, for Latino recording artists is whether to resist the mainstream, be overwhelmed by it, or try for some alternative. Offering an alternative path, José Esteban Muñoz (1999) has examined how identity strategies are employed to simultaneously enter the mainstream and resist mainstream values and preferences, suggesting how Latinos move in and through their contact with the U.S. cultural values and expectations.

From the Barrio to Suburbia: Constructing Gerardo and Kid Frost

In the early 1990s two Latino artists made significant inroads into the mainstream popular music consciousness. Working in rap/fop 40 genres, Gerardo and Kid Frost reflected the constraints imposed upon them and performed within those boundaries. Moreover, each participated in how the popular press constructed them for mass appeal and consumption. Both artists appear to have chosen marketing strategies that played into mainstream expectations of Latino identity.

When Latino artists work toward broad audience appeal, popular stereotypes necessarily prefigure their constructions. Industry demands positioned Gerardo and Kid Frost in ways consonant with their musical genres. Their boasts of sexual conquests, celebrations of violence, and articulations of their personae as dominant and predatory echoed stereotyped notions of Latino masculinity. Presenting themselves as modem day versions of the Latin Lover and the *bandido/*greaser*,* respectively, Gerardo and Kid Frost reminded audiences of common constructions of Latinos. These constructions are direct and simple. Gerardo presents himself as a dangerous,

passionate, and highly sexualized Latino. Gerardo, the Latin lover dripping with animal magnetism, is the embodiment of his hit song "Rico Suave." Naturalized as the highly sexualized macho. there could be no other option for Gerardo:

> *It's no coincidence that Gerardo always projects the image of dashingly handsome ladies' man and that his music consists of heavily pumped rhythms designed to keep you on the dance floor. "It was real," says Mr. Benesch [of lnterscope Records]. "Gerardo came to the table with an image that was natural for him and that's important. He's a good-looking guy and he moves in a way that excites the ladies. Everything fits." (Reynolds, 1992, p. 29)*

Gerardo doesn't resist this obvious and simplistic construction of his persona, saying, "'Rico Suave' was written mainly for the Spanish male. We're the Latin Lovers" (Cohen & Abrahams, 1991, p. 119). Further reinforcing the stereotypical characterization, Gerardo provides exercise tips that only Latin lovers could appreciate, "Safe sex works out your abs ... I don't work on my abs, but I have safe sex and that takes care of it" ("Gerardo," 1991, p. 80). The Latin Lover has everything he wants: cross-over success, celebrity, and women. As one journalist noted, "for the moment Gerardo has everything he's ever wanted: sex, credibility, and sex" [and good abs] (Giles, 1991, p. 58).

Kid Frost, on the other hand, presents the *bandidol*greaser variation of the macho Latino. His attire (work pants, Pendleton or starched white T-shirt, Ray Ban sunglasses, and a bandana) evokes the image of the East L.A. gangster also visible in such films as *Colors*, *American Me*, and *Blood In, Blood Out.* As is Gerardo, Kid Frost is well aware of how his attire and music project a particular persona:

> *[A]lthough he has issued a gringo mix of "La Raza" with less violent imagery, Frost defends the cultural roots he holds up in the song ... If you can't handle the reality, the realism of 'La Raza' don't be with it," he says. "But I'm not going to deny that there are cholos who are proud of where they come from." (Hochman, 1990, p. 37)*

Thus, though Kid Frost's persona is somewhat complicated by his appeals to cultural pride and nationalism (Delgado, 1998), he represents a violent Latino promising to be what the title to his first album implies, a *Hispanic Causing Panic.*

For many rappers persona and image are mirrored by lyrics. Kid Frost is no different; his lyrics affirm a rawness and violence signaling that he is not to be trifled with. Indeed, several of his songs indicate the lengths to which he will go to protect his pride, body, or property. Moreover, it appears Kid Frost's motives relate to his desire to maintain "authenticity"—"keeping it real" on the "street," a reflection of many gangster rappers' desire to connect their music to gangs and "thug life." One critic of Kid Frost's second album wrote, "Kid Frost has said that his hybrid of hard-core hip-hop and Latin rhythms is composed exclusively for Los Angeles's Chicano low riders and *gangstas.* This respect, understanding and devotion to the Chicano community gives Frost's second album its authenticity and verve" (Santiago, 1992, p. 54).

There can be no doubt that Kid Frost is clearly selling his experiences as authentically true. His persona is sold as a modem version of the *bandidol*greaser, a stereotype that resonates historically yet has contemporary parallels. This is not to deny that Kid Frost's persona, nor that of Gerardo, is without truth. The point is that in the early 1990s it was exactly these long-lived and obvious character types that appealed to the mainstream popular culture consciousness. These simplistic variations of a hyper-realized machismo reflected prevailing visions of Latinos.

Creating Ambiguity Through Stereotype: Ricky Martin, the New Latin Lover

Whereas Gerardo was constrained by traditional characteristics of the Latin Lover stereotype in the early 1990s, at the end of the same decade the marketing of Puerto Rican singer Ricky Martin was somewhat more sophisticated and thus more complicated (Calafell, 2000). Muñoz (1999) identified various strategies by which queers of color find ways to negotiate and maintain identities that are marginalized by the dominant society. Munoz suggests that this strategy, *disidentification,* allows people to work simultaneously on and against society's dominant ideologies (that is, the preferred ways of being, thinking, and identifying). Within this space, the dominant ideology is neither assimilated nor opposed, rather it is altered. It is within this alteration that we locate Ricky Martin's persona. More simply, through alteration of the traditional versions of the Latin lover "script," Martin's persona is complicated because it becomes imbued with a sexual ambiguity previously not permitted by this script.

As we have seen in the case of Gerardo, the Latin lover is oversexed, obsessed with his own sexuality, and always longing for the next heterosexual experience. Upon the release of his English language album *Ricky Martin* in 1999, Martin was immediately viewed through this script. One such example of this reception occurred on the cover of *Esquire* featuring a photograph of Martin with a bubble coming from his mouth proclaiming, "There's a Latin explosion in my pants!" (2000). This hypersexual image was easily contextualized within Martin's suggestive dancing, "the sexiest hip-swiveler since Elvis" (Trensiowski & Miller, 2000, p. 136), and his good looks, "classy and manly ... he's so hot I could just lick him" ("Best and Worst Dressed '99: Ricky Martin," p. 98). Furthermore, the narratives of heterosexual love in Martin's hits "Shake Your Bon Bon," "Livin' La Vida Loca," and "Maria" further cemented his place in the pantheon of Latin lovers. Though Martin had long been an international star (through his membership in the group Menudo, as a solo recording artist, and his stint as an actor on the popular soap opera *General Hospital)* he wasn't instantly recognizable to broad non-Latina/o communities in the United States; thus, his entrance through the Latin lover persona was appropriate due to the lack of complex images of Latina/os.

However, Martin's persona moves in and out of the Latin lover role by specifically referencing it in both onstage performances and offstage interviews and PR campaigns, while simultaneously disidentifying or disassociating with it through spectacle. In songs such as “Shake Your Bon Bon,” Martin's songwriters Robi Rosa, George Noriega, and Desmond Child directly recall the Latin lover and other scripts of heterosexuality by referencing the narratives of Romeo and Juliet and Mata Hari. Through these associations with well-known scripts of heterosexual love, and Martin's creation and embodiment of spectacle, the hypersexualized Latin lover persona (expressed in the song and reinforced by the video) is strengthened. Martin’s actions and persona present the Latin lover in excess, reminding us of what Lancaster (1997) called the element of performativity: “No matter who acts them out, such performative performances can never simply *imitate* or *mimic* some original practice, person, or type, for they are always *in excess* of their target. That is what distinguishes them as ‘performances’” (p. 14). The performative nature of Martin's actions allows him to disidentify with or disassociate from the Latin lover role, even while he simultaneously references it or works within a script understood by the dominant culture. Therefore, through these performances of excess he is never truly the Latin Lover perpetuated by racist ideologies. The excesses of Martin’s hypersexual embodiment create a spectacle allowing for a more complicated Latin lover than those who have previously occupied that space.

Ricky Martin’s performances of excess pave the way for performances of ambiguity that serve to further complicate any reception of Martin as a one-dimensional Latin lover. Martin’s performances of ambiguity take place in multiple arenas, including the realm of his private life. Caught in the web of hypersexuality, Martin's love life became fodder for the media in magazines ranging from *The Advocate* to *People.* Martin's refusal to answer questions about his love life led to intense speculation about his sexual orientation. Writing of Martin's counterpart Enrique Iglesias one publication proclaimed, "Move over, Ricky Martin! It's a Latin Lover without

sexual ambiguity" ("V-Day Top 10", 2000, p. 13), while gossip columnist Michael Musto begged, "Ricky Martin, please stop with the girlfriend talk, girlfriend!" (Griffiths, 1999, p. 35).

In response to these questions Martin offers that his private life is indeed private and "What I say about sexuality is, I leave it for my room and lock the door" (Griffiths, 1999, p. 31). Beyond refusing to answer questions about his sexual orientation, Martin also performs ambiguity in other respects: "When I do my music I don't focus on just women or men …. I want to see the guy bringing his girlfriend to the show and enjoying the music with her. I don't just want to see only girls. It's going to sound weird. but that's not the turn-on I'm looking for" (Griffiths, 1999, p. 32).

Martin's comfort in ambiguity is echoed in countless magazines such as *People:* "I can't get hung up on people whose lives are that empty, I'm an artist and you can fantasize about me however you want" (Tresniowski & Miller, 2000, p. 137) and *Entertainment Weekly*: "I am powerless over your thoughts. Go for it! And enjoy the ride" (Gordinier, 2000, p. 28). Even as Martin's offstage performances complicate the ways in which Latino masculinity is read, he continues to ground this complication in the Latin Lover script by pairing sensuality and ethnicity: "I think my work is very sensual .... But if you look at my culture, we perform music that's completely sensual. Everybody is free—dancing, shaking their hips. So if I shake my bonbon, that's who I am" (Ali, 2000, p 79). Though Martin's persona creates new spaces of representation for Latino masculinity, it remains grounded in vernacular discourse.

The importance of Martin's ambiguity doesn't lie in the question of whether Martin is gay. Rather, what is significant is that he can occupy a much more complicated space of Latino masculinity than did his predecessors. As noted by Judy Weider, editor-in-chief of *The Advocate,* "He's responding without squelching the rumors or immediately running around with women. And it doesn't seem to have impacted his sales at all" (Tresniowski & Miller, 2000, p. 137). Certainly Martin's image and ambiguity are entrenched in economics, as he acknowledges the benefits of ambiguity: "Sometimes I go well if it's going to sell some albums, why not? You can say anything you want. But I know how this works. I've been in the business for seventeen years now. I know how this works" (Geddie, 2000). However, the implications of these performances of identity transcend economic issues. Martin's appeal comes to exemplify the discourse of the "Latino crossover" that saturated media in 1999 as Martin crossed sexual and interethnic boundaries with much fluidity.

Ironically what is significant is not so much that Martin as a Latino artist singing in English crosses over into the mainstream; rather, the importance lies in the discourses and altered spaces that resulted. By finding an alternative successful and commercially marketable Latino persona, Ricky Martin demonstrates that certain dominant values may have shifted and that there is space within the long-held stereotypes to rescript the artistic persona's role.

Old Ways and New Strategies for Latinos

By examining three artists who enjoyed varying but undeniable levels of success during the 1990s, we have demonstrated that there have been mainstream cultural shifts that, in turn, have created new opportunities for identity construction. Still, the opportunities have continued to require a certain sensitivity to what Latino male identity means, as cultural stereotypes and expectation continue to resonate. While by no means a definitive statement, we hope that this essay has suggested that there are layered meanings attached to Latino masculinity and that media personalities (or is it products?) are subject to these layerings. Moreover, we have argued that while subject to these layerings of meaning, the Latino artist can select strategies that can echo previously held meanings or contribute to even richer layerings.

In the future, the concept of mainstream culture and dominant cultural values may have less significance and force. Until then, cultural identities that are marginalized or connected to a troubling legacy will require public

actors to recognize these forces and carefully walk the line that divides the mainstream and the margins. Audiences and consumers of popular culture may be asked to be more sensitive to their use of stereotypes. We might also ask the artists and producers of popular culture to be equally sensitive and caring about the stereotypes they construct.

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