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Girls from the Heights: From Mexican Spitfire to Maddy Perez

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Girls from the Heights: *Mexican Spitfire* to Maddy Perez

The Latina, oftentimes from the "rough side of town," ready to pull off her hoop earrings and gear up for a fight. The hot and cold woman every man is mystified by. The ultimate conquest. Although the minds of Gen Z may picture Maddy Perez from *Euphoria* swinging her white former best friend around a hallway like a rag doll, this is, by no means, a new phenomenon. Neither does this trend begin with the trademark Spicy Latinas of the 90s and early 2000s like Sofia Vergara and Salma Hayek. The allure of the exoticism of Latin women, especially as they relate to white men, has been a fascination of film and television writers for as long as they've been portrayed in these media. This trope has its roots in the fetishization of women of color and the cultural stereotypes that follow Latin Americans to this day. It's essential to explore how the image of the Spicy Latina came into focus in order to better understand the role the lack of Latine representation in current media plays in perpetuating this outdated and persistent trope.

Although not the first actress to embody tropes of this nature, this timeline begins with the most prolific Spicy Latina to flourish during the era of early "talkies": Lupe Velez. The Mexican actress embodied the culmination of a pattern of Latinas being typed as "hot tamales" that originated in 1880s vaudeville, as well as the influence of the "Latin Lover" trope that followed male actors playing Latinos in Hollywood in the 1920's and 30's (Szoenyi). These two tropes on their own portray a kind of racist exoticism that insinuates an inherent promiscuity or sexual danger surrounding Latine people, but they're polished and hidden under a veneer of something that seems outwardly complimentary, that being the implication that Latine people are inherently sexually attractive.

This, perhaps, is why Lupe Velez was made to play into these tropes in her work, adopting a "hot temper" and an "exaggerated accent" while exhibiting her extensive talent in song, dance, and comedy; eventually, the titles of her movies, like *Hot Pepper* (1933) and *Mexican Spitfire* (1940) became synonymous with Latinas as a whole (Szoenyi). However, this overt sexual identity is a double-edged sword in a culture that simultaneously commodifies and sells sex while looking down upon those women who deign to express their autonomy in any way that isn't deemed sufficiently austere. This was exemplified in that, when Velez was in the media for threatening other actresses and stabbing her husband, the media automatically defaulted to unsympathetically blaming traits inherent in her onscreen persona while neglecting to mention her childhood trauma or the effects of her tumultuous career on her mental health (Szoenyi). While these behaviors should not be excused, this incident is indicative of the dangerous environment created when these tropes follow Latinas off the movie screens.

As time went on, the Spitfire type became refined as it began to take on characteristics of another trope common among Latinas in the media, that of the *doméstica.* This trope, which places a Latina immigrant in a role of domestic servitude to white people, imbues the sassy Latina with an underlying air of submission and an implicit desire to be accepted by white people as part of a version of the "American dream" that Latine people are actually allowed to access (Padilla 42). This is not only limiting the "acceptable" aspirations of Latine immigrants for upward mobility to assimilation and servitude, but it creates a depiction in the media in of interpersonal relationships between white people and Latinas which serves as a microcosm of this dynamic. Using the character of Rosario from the television show *Will and Grace,* first airing in 1998, as a case study, Yajaira Padilla makes the astute observation that the character serves as an example of this synthesis of sass and servitude by explaining that her propensity to

be “sarcastic and poignantly blunt” creates the illusion of a character with agency, while her status as an undocumented immigrant in continued servitude to white people deliberately undermines it (47). The essence of the *doméstica* permeates the attitude about Latinas in media at large, the literal power dynamic between maid and master becoming an implicit power dynamic between white people and Latinas.

While the *doméstica* trope is not inherently sexual, it has been used in romantic settings where we see this power imbalance, at best, glossed over, and, at worst, romanticized. This can be seen in another movie mentioned by Padilla, *Maid in Manhattan (2002),* in which Jennifer Lopez plays a single mother who, through working as a maid, falls in love with a white, Republican political candidate who ultimately helps to pull her out of poverty (41). This continues to perpetuate this flawed thesis that proximity to whiteness and relationships to white people are the way to success for Latinas and that finding a wealthy, white man to take care of them is aspirational. As such, the Latina, at least in romantic contexts, becomes the victim of the white male gaze.

As the spitfire and the *doméstica* continue to bleed into one another, the role of literal servitude that the Latinas play to men becomes a role of romantic or sexual servitude. Even when the woman is given a strong personality and sexual autonomy within the narrative, the Latina’s existence, in the metatextual sense, is as a commodity who not only exists to be consumed, but implicitly *desires* to be consumed in such a way. This is evident in the biopic *Frida*, in which Salma Hayek, as Frida, is portrayed as hypersexual and engages in “as much sexual intimacy as possible with her boyfriend in her closet” (Lipman 27). Whether or not Frida actually was this promiscuous in real life is inconsequential, since she was an adult woman engaging in consensual sexual activity. The problem is the way that Frida’s sexuality is graphically and

gratuitously exploited for the benefit of the men watching, who are able to use Frida's (and, by extension, Hayek's) body as an object for their own titillation.

If even a movie that is intentionally trying to portray the life of a real woman in a truthful way cannot resist turning its protagonist into a Spicy Latina, those characters who are grounded in pure fiction are even more susceptible to this trope. This is seen in Alfonso Cuarón's *Y Tu Mamá También* in which the female character exists mostly as a means for the two teenage boy protagonists to come of age, with both boys trying to and, ultimately, succeeding in engaging in sexual intercourse with her (Lipman 28). This is made especially predatory on the part of the film maker because the female character is initially portrayed as coming from a broken past, which makes her both emotionally and sexually unavailable, and her having sex with the two boys is wrongfully portrayed as them succeeding in breaking down her walls and emotionally connecting with her, as seen in how she becomes kinder to the boys after the three engage in sex together. In reality, this scene is nothing more than the boys getting exactly what they want out of her, and then finally treating her like a whole person once they do, a pattern of behavior rooted in disrespect for the autonomy women have over their own bodies.

This, ultimately, provides the modern thesis of what the Spicy Latina fantasy truly entails: a woman who provides enough sass and emotional "spiciness" to make her an alluring challenge, but who, ultimately, yearns for fulfillment and healing through being given value, security, and sexual affirmation from men. Though these men *can* be of any race, the structure of this gaze is inextricably linked to its origin in the exotic fantasy of a white, male dominated Hollywood, and stinks of a uniquely white patriarchy.

The question now is this: To what extent is this trope relevant to the, admittedly, more diverse landscape of film and television in 2022? The answer proposed probably isn't what one

would hope to be true; while not nearly as explicit as the days of Lupe Velez in the 40s or even the heyday of movies like *Y Tu Mamá También* and *Frida* in the early 2000s, this trope is still prevalent, even if it exists under a defensive veneer of satire or absurdity.

Perhaps one of the most prominent examples of this is Sofia Vergara's character, Gloria, in the show *Modern Family,* a show which released its last episode no more than 2 years ago in 2020. Gloria perpetuates the vision of the "sexy trophy wife" that gets into arguments with her white husband and other members of her family, needing to be calmed by her white partner who feels the need to walk on eggshells so she doesn't "go all Latin on him" (Hernandez). The context of this trope existing in a comedic show creates an environment in the discourse where some defend this as a deconstruction of the trope or a satirical portrayal meant to criticize it. However, the way other characters or even the audience view Gloria must be critically examined and subverted by the narrative for it to be properly satirical, and this does not happen within the narrative context of the show. Her character is meant to be taken at face value, but the label of "comedy" allows plausible deniability for the audience.

This culminates in what Isabel Molina-Guzmán calls the "Post-Racial Network Era" during which, despite having diverse casts, television and film still "[reifies] White, middle-class standards of living while ignoring social and political structures" in a way that frames racism as an individual affliction and denies any implicit racial framing in the way the show is made (1). This is especially insidious because, since systemic oppression and cultural stereotypes are never addressed, characters that model cultural stereotypes are not victims of bias, but the result of a thesis that implicitly legitimizes the veracity of these stereotypical traits as intrinsic qualities of people in these marginalized groups.

This phenomenon that Molina-Guzmán describes is prevalent in shows with Latina characters made in the 2010s and 2020s, perhaps the most recent example being the character of Maddy Perez in the HBO show *Euphoria.* Her character arc is defined almost solely by her relationship with her white boyfriend, Nate Jacobs, and how she bends over backwards to live up to the image of subservient femininity that he desires in the name of "love." The show's framing tries to convince the viewer that Maddy has the *real* control, opposes Nate's attempts to control her, and is willing to stand up for herself, albeit in ways that manifest in classic "spiciness," sometimes to the point of physical violence. This creates that same illusion of autonomy and independence that has existed for as long as the spitfire type has. However, this is undercut by what the audience actually sees, which is Maddy living in a way that is manufactured and dishonest in order to get and keep Nate, like lying about being a virgin and playing submissive in order to let him feel like a man (Colocho and Cortez). He misses the challenge of her aggressive spirit when he begins dating someone else in Season Two, but it's ultimately the parts of Maddy that are most submissive and demure that he actually wants to have a relationship with. This is played sincerely, and, whether it's meant to be realistic or not, it is evidence that this trope is still alive and well.

The lack of real subversion and media that are critical of these tropes is indicative of the underrepresentation of Latine people in the types of media that perpetuate them. Not only do Hispanics make up only 16% of those who work in the motion picture and video industries, but they make up only 8% of people in the newspaper, periodical, book, and directory publishing industries ("Hispanic Underrepresentation In The Media"). This means that, not only do Latine people have little control over how their own stories are told, but they are also underrepresented in the types of media that provide avenues for criticism and analysis. While critics like Gabby

Colocho and Sophia Cortez do point out the ways in which these depictions "[normalize] violence and sexual harassment," they are greatly outnumbered by those who foster the illusion of a post-racial society and media (Colocho and Cortez).

The Spicy Latina trope will cease to exist when Latinas are finally truthfully portrayed in fiction, and media allows Latina voices to be centered in discourse surrounding their stories to challenge the cultural hegemony of the white male gaze. Not all hope is lost, however, as there do exist portrayals that feel reflective of what some real Latinas are going through. Shows like *Jane the Virgin*, with its writer's room full of female-identifying Latine voices, creates, in its titular main character, a Latina whose culture is central to her outlook on life while still making her vulnerable, awkward, kind, and strong in a way that doesn't need to be "spicy." She serves as proof that the Latina identity is so much richer than the confines of the Spicy Latina trope would imply. Latinas do not exist to add spice to whiteness, they are individuals whose true stories are as worthy to be told as anyone else's.

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