

Identifying the “Latino” (and Latina!) in “Latino Independent Media”

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Across the spectrum of our differences, contemporary U.S. Latina/o independent media makers have consistently articulated our work as an alternative to and an intervention in the discursive and economic logics of mainstream media. We privilege the multiple transformative possibilities of media, and, while not ignoring the problem of resources, we de-center profit. Throughout the histories of radio, cinema, television, the Internet and other communications technologies, Latinas/os in the U.S. have creatively used these technologies toward our specific cultural, material and geo-political imperatives. In so doing, we have refigured the languages of these media and created new modes and conditions of production.¹ This essay is born out of these visions and histories of media making. It articulates U.S. Latina/o independent media as a praxis of *mestizaje* – of pluralities across political and historical specificities. Latina feminist philosopher María Lugones, in conversation with the work of Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) discusses *mestizaje* as follows:

As I uncover a connection between impurity and resistance, my Latina imagination moves from resistance to *mestizaje*. I think of *mestizaje* as an example of and a metaphor for both impurity and resistance. I hold on to the metaphor and adopt *mestizaje* as a central name for impure resistance to interlocked, intermeshed oppressions. (2003, 122)

Here, I propose *mestizaje* as a praxis of cultural production and political transformation with the hope of further elaborating Lugones' articulation of its multivalence. In Lugones' discussion, it refers to racial, cultural and geo-political hybridity, but it also mobilizes a radical epistemology. Importantly, *mestizaje* is described by Lugones as a constructed strategy of resistance, not as a given condition, that emerges from Latina and women of color feminist thinking and community organizing. In this sense, *mestizaje* is a process, a destination. A media praxis of *mestizaje* imagines an intentional community of U.S. Latina/o media makers with our "impurities" and complexities intact, as bodies and subjectivities marked in multiple and contradictory ways by race, gender, class and nation, and as artists and activists who draw from a range of historical, geographical and discursive flows to create symbolic and material interventions. This essay sketches out the context in which we might begin to further build U.S. Latina/o independent media networks and communities as a praxis of *mestizaje*, while also contending with the growth of mainstream U.S. Latina/o cultural industries. Drawing from contemporary U.S. Latina/o media theory and practice and Latina and Chicana feminist theory, I look at the representational, political and epistemological strategies of three independently produced videotapes, *The Missing Latina*, *Papapá*, and *Historias Paralelas/Home is Struggle*. I use the implications of these texts towards imagining U.S. Latina/o independent media praxis as a collective project of *mestizaje* and social change.

Identity as Pedagogy/Pedagogy as Identity

LATINA?! Many Latinas have been sighted in positions in Congress, teaching in universities and flying airplanes, but there's still no trace of them on T.V. If you

have any information that may help solve this mystery do not hesitate to call 1-800-L-A-T-I-N-A-S. Again, 1-800-L-A-T-I-N-A-S. This has been a news update and now we return to our regularly scheduled program. (Castillo-Perez and Gomez, 1992)

In their outrageous and outraged video, *The Missing Latina*, two Los Angeles high school students, Marisela Gomez and Emily Castillo-Perez, state an obvious but nonetheless crucial observation: Latinas are very hard to find on primetime television in the U.S. This observation is backed up by statistical research: Pachon, DeSipio, de la Garza, and Noriega (2000) found that in 1997, Latina/o members of the Screen Actors Guild worked 11,641 days compared to the 251,920 days of their “Non-Hispanic white” colleagues. More recently, while observing some change, media researcher and film scholar Chon Noriega concluded the following about network television:

In a preliminary analysis of prime-time series during 2001-2002, the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center noted significant improvement in front of the camera, with racial minorities now filling 29.3% of regular and recurring roles on the four networks. While the overall number is close to the national demographic of 30.9%, Latinos and Native Americans are represented at a rate less than half of their population. (2002, 1)

Noriega also reports that this lack of representation is matched by an absence behind the camera with only 4.5 “minority” writers and 6.9 directors (2).² The central strategy of Gomez and Castillo-Perez’s videotape is, appropriately, the symbolic re-occupation of prime time television. Activating their critical capacity for what Chicana feminist theorist Chela Sandoval calls “differential consciousness,”³ the two young media artists re-signify

clips from mainstream television programs, including local news, *Sisters*, *I Love Lucy*, and *Beverly Hills 90210*. Their reading of these texts produces “an other thinking”, an other order of meaning in which their own thinking and being is central.⁴ The producers insert themselves visually and aurally into prime time, through voice-over, special effects, and inter-cutting, enabling a simultaneous critique and correction of the absence of Latinas on TV. They interrupt the opening montage of *Sisters*, which consists of images of children’s hands being laid upon each other, with a wipe effect that reveals their own hands, and announce: “Not our sisters!” They create a dialogic space that is predicated precisely on their multiple positions as images, as absences, as spectators, and as producers.

The Missing Latina exemplifies the community-based contexts in which much of Latina/o independent media are produced and received by audiences.⁵ The videotape was produced on a small budget with limited production facilities, and is micro-distributed, in closed circuit screenings to audiences in schools and community organizations. It is the result of a youth media program, one of many around the U.S., and the world, that provides media and information communication technology training for children and teenagers in a context of critical media education. *The Missing Latina* was produced with video artist Gina Lamb who has been teaching media literacy and production for two decades in Los Angeles schools and community organizations. Youth media supports radically multiple forms of expression, the development of youth as cultural producers, and the inclusion of youth voices in civil society. Directed by committed artists and activists, such as Lamb, the most effective of these programs combine youth development, media production and critical media literacy, facilitating the emergence of

a complex critique and counter-discourse. Collective discussion and production work provide a framework for expressing young people's realities, including an understanding of the information economy in the U.S. and the world. The analysis of mainstream media enables youth to understand it as an important force in the construction of their very identities, and to create alternative texts that challenge dominant representations of race, gender, class and youth.⁶

In *The Missing Latina*, adopting and performing "Latina" identities is central to the videomakers, as it provides a necessary path to a critical re-reading and re-writing of representation and identity. As Marisela Gomez told Gina Lamb about the tape: "...our whole idea was to get that point across, which was that there was a Missing Latina, there are Missing Latinas, maybe not only Latinas, there are a lot of other minorities, but we focused on Latinas, because that's our background" (G. Lamb, personal communication, 2008). Yet Gomez and Castillo-Perez make it clear that they understand their Latinidad as one point on a spectrum of racialized and gendered identities and bodies. While the video continually parodies the marginalization of Latinas in the corporate media industry, it closes by playfully asserting the visual and social centrality of both Latinas and other youth of color. Preceded by the statement "What we need is a different world!" the videotape ends with an alternative *Beverly Hills 90210* sequence, with the title *Jefferson 90011*, in which a group of African-American, Asian-American and Latina/o high school students virtually push, via a pan wipe, the original all-white cast off the screen. This scene becomes a vehicle for imagining cross-cultural and cross-racial identification for young people of color that never fails to elicit a raucous and celebratory response from youth. When it was screened at the culturally and racially diverse South Central Los

Angeles high school in which they produced it, Thomas Jefferson High School, “kids would jump up and scream as if they were at a sporting event cheering on a winning team” (G. Lamb, personal communication, 2008). The video has since been continually screened in many different locations nationally, including schools, universities and community-based organizations.

The video demonstrates how independent media production, in this case, youth media, can motivate a critical discussion of Latinidad and engage both producers and audiences in a process of building *mestizaje* as resistance and coalition. It does not represent Latina identity as a monolithic, proscribed identity, but rather celebrates an unrecognized and perhaps unrecognizable Latinidad that is counter-posed to the “Missing Latina” on mainstream TV. The courageous, yet playful, Latinidad represented in the videotape is ignited in reaction to an analysis and critique of media representations, but sees beyond them to a “different world.” In this different world, there are many subject positions available. As discussed by Angharad Valdivia (2007), the creativity of the readings of Latinidad in popular culture texts by Latina/o youth audiences cannot be underestimated. In *The Missing Latina*, the creative reading of the producers becomes a strategy for a re-imagining that is inscribed in their own terms in their own videotape. Importantly, exposure to independent media and video art was also crucial for its production. As Marisela Gomez also related to Gina Lamb, “I didn’t notice too much about TV. I didn’t focus on the importance of television and the images that were on television and then I saw a couple of independent videos. I was not only exposed to video art, it changed me a lot, the way I thought about TV and the way I viewed TV” (G. Lamb, personal communication, 2008). The producers’ retaliatory self-representation echoes the

strategies of many other Latina/o media, visual and performance artists, who have for decades been developing identities, representations, and pedagogies that further non-essentialist, activist vocabularies of cultural experience in the face of their/our invisibility in dominant media and cultural institutions.⁷ Fulfilling multiple agendas of media production, education and community organizing, *The Missing Latina* proposes the possibility of self-reflexive, non-essentialist, collective media representations that have a transformational impact on audiences.

The Post-Colonial Producer: Mas allá de las categorías

The mobilizing of our hybrid individual and collective identities is one of the many ways that Latina/o independent media makers might advance liberatory possibilities, for ourselves and our diverse audiences. Crucial to our ongoing debates is the acknowledgement of our cultural, political, and aesthetic multiplicities, which can be held in productive tension. It is through the recognition and building on the strengths of our differences, to paraphrase Papusa Molina's thoughts on women of color coalition (1991), that we might approach this work, including an inventory of the hybridity of our subjectivities. My own hybrid attitude has been nurtured and developed through the *mestizaje* of my history. I am the daughter of an indigenous, Panamanian mother and Anglo-American father, making me, as they say in Panamá, a "Pana-Gringa," a term that I have re-signified as a post-colonial badge of honor. In my own videotape, *Canal Zone/La Zona del Canal* (1994), I map the colonial history of the Republic of Panama through my family's memories, including migration and settlement in the U.S. as well as the experiences of my family in Panama during the U.S invasion of 1989, to produce a

multivalent picture of the Canal as a birthplace. “The Land Divided, the World United:” This is the phrase that adorns the seal of the Panama Canal, signifying colonization and the global transit of cultures and material goods, a “contact zone” of U.S. and European imperialism (Pratt, 1997). Through the making of the videotape, post-colonial hybridity became a space of possibility and artistic production in which multiple personal and familial temporalities, cultures and geo-political sites merged.

Hybridity may be enacted as an endless process of intimate cartography as well as a mode of individual and collective media production. The media collective with which I worked from 1994 - 2007, Video Machete, engaged me in an ongoing process of facilitating diverse interests, experiences, and desires, to create joint projects.⁸ Video Machete is a Chicago-based intergenerational collective of community activists, educators, media artists, students, and youth dedicated to increasing democratic communication and economic and cultural equity through media education, collaborative production with community members, and grassroots distribution. The media we produced communicate the stories, perspectives, and community building strategies of youth, women, people of color, and recent immigrants, covering issues such as police brutality, queer young women’s issues, education reform, gentrification, and immigration. Through Video Machete and other community media projects, I have been engaged in the on-going project of creating politically engaged, intentional communities across multiple registers of difference. Even if they are temporary, these communities acknowledge and honor shared histories, and reveal and resist multiple oppressions.

Hybridity may also extend to the negotiations of our professional careers. As an independent media artist, educator, scholar and activist, my work is trans-disciplinary,

bringing together a range of theoretical, political, and aesthetic agendas. Sustained research and debate in academic contexts about issues crucial to Latina/o politics and media has been equally important to work in community-based media. Many independent media makers work on the borders of multiple worlds, including mainstream media production, making ourselves strangers in all of them. These travels are often motivated by economic necessity, but also out of the desire to create new contexts for our work. In Anzaldúa's (1987) sense of the borderlands, what our border dwelling creates is a traveling material, cultural and spiritual state, working in multiple institutional and theoretical contexts, with a constant sense of shifting languages and worlds.

This landscape of praxical hybridity provides us with a rich ground upon which to further build coalition across differences. We represent an enormous range of transnational histories, cultural affiliations, geographical regions, genders, sexualities, as well as aesthetic, theoretical, and political imperatives. Through our work, and the work of many before us, U.S. Latina/o independent media, including film, video, television, radio, publications, multi-media installations, and multiple forms of Internet-based production, has created alternative economic and social contexts for communication in which our multiplicities have thrived. Through years of struggle by diverse communities, there are now numerous community-based media production centers that provide training and equipment access to new producers and that might provide a crossroads for Latina/o media makers to come together and discuss ideas, projects and tactics. In these many decentralized locations, both the process of production and the exhibition of Latina/o independent media have the potential for the collective construction of senses of self and community that affirm open-ended, hybrid possibilities.

U.S. Latina/o Media Praxis

The *mestizaje* of U.S. Latina/o media mirrors the *mestizaje* that has characterized U.S. Latina/o cultural and political experience. The discourses emanating from and informing our work are rich and multiple, but we have yet to engage in a sustained dialogue about the connecting themes and potential sharing of resources that might co-exist with our multiplicity. Within communities of U.S. Latina/o independent media artists, there is no agreed upon political or cultural agenda; neither a shared commitment to a heterogeneity of representations nor a homogeneous vision of positive images.⁹ U.S. Latina/o media artists have, instead, often defined our media work in relation to our local or trans-local community organizing efforts, rather than as a collective praxis of media intervention as U.S. Latina/os. Many U.S. Latina/o media artists have worked alongside various social movements, including national liberation movements, feminist movements, and anti-capitalist movements, and used the theoretical paradigms of those movements to define the priorities of our representational strategies. This is true for what is perhaps the most important precedent for contemporary U.S. Latina/o independent media, the Chicano counter-cinemas that developed in the 1960's and 1970's alongside the Chicano movement. In tandem with the movement's emphasis on critique and counter-discourse, it became apparent to these Chicano filmmakers that they were under-represented by the mainstream media, and when they were represented, the representations were distorted and served to support racist, colonialist ideologies. This analysis is expressed in one of the most important manifestos of the period, by the collective Cine Aztlán, "Ya Basta Con Yankee Imperialist Documentaries!"¹⁰ Early Chicano video producers worked to

create media that, for the first time in the U.S., represented the experiences and political interests from a Chicano perspective. Emerging with the nationalist Chicano movement, with its analysis of internal colonialism and emphasis on cultural survival, one of the primary motives of these media makers was to create a space of recognition for Chicano cultural identity, as well as a forum for communication about events in the movement (Noriega, 1992b). Multiplicity and difference was not a priority in early Chicano cinema. Rather, unity became a key emphasis in the movement's process of collective identity construction. It took a decade of struggle for Chicana/o media praxis to include issues of gender and to carry multiple and diverse renderings of Chicanidad, producing new and complex meanings and possibilities (Noriega, 1996; Fregoso, 1992,1993).

However, many of these possibilities have been neglected. Despite our rich histories of production, and the on-going work of hundreds of independent makers, there has been little engagement with U.S. Latina/o independent media as a praxis of heterogeneous resistance by theorists, critics, academics and producers themselves. Despite its urgency, the project of critically engaging with the independent films, videotapes, video installations, and interactive digital media by U.S. Latina/os as even a distinct political and discursive project seems to be regarded as highly suspect or simply uninteresting. This avoidance partially reflects the current post-multicultural rejection of "identity politics" in cultural studies and social theory. It also reflects a tendency in media and cultural studies to privilege mainstream media as objects of analysis, upon which received theoretical paradigms can be much more easily applied, over independent media, which may present less disciplinary – and disciplined - semiotic dilemmas. Access to U.S. Latina/o independent media is itself an issue, as video art and independent media

generally remain marginalized in art history and criticism, and are still rare artifacts in museum collections, gallery exhibitions, and research archives. Furthermore, the community based contexts in which much of Latina/o art and media are produced has meant that the works themselves often remain in under-resourced archives of community based organizations, or lost forever as organizations close and their histories and resources dispersed (see González, 2003).

The problem of generatively articulating the hybridity of U.S. Latina/o independent media has proven to be an enormous challenge. Many of the examples of theory and criticism about our media display a remarkable ambivalence. In her article “Ethnicity, Politics, and Poetics: Latinos and Media Art,” Coco Fusco expresses skepticism about approaching an artist’s oeuvre for interpretation based on his or her “Latino” cultural and/or racial identity. She concisely argues, citing Stuart Hall, that race is not a fixed category that captures cultural identity, and that it is often used to create reductive, rather than complex, understandings of human experience:

Despite whatever convenience the terminology may offer governmental bureaucracies or cultural theorists, Latinos are not a race, nor do we constitute a unified culture. Our unprecedented prominence in representational arenas such as the mass media, the entertainment industry, advertising, and even academic discourses in the last decade have as much to do with the commodification of ethnicity in this postmodern, postindustrial society as they do with any collective experience or grassroots efforts (1991, 306).

Based on the statistics cited by Chon Noriega earlier in this essay, it is difficult to locate how Fusco understood “prominence” here, especially as the recent and dismal statistics

have still actually improved since 1991. Her observation of the rise of ethno-racial focused marketing is accurate, but interestingly, recent research on ethno-marketing documents both the marketability of Latina/o hybridity as well as the ways that it resists commodification (Dávila, 2001). There are multiple and contradictory ways that both advertisers and audiences negotiate the hybridity of Latinidad, revealing its slipperiness even in that realm of aggressive signification. Nevertheless, it is clear that Fusco's point is to deconstruct "Latino" as a collectively negotiated, self-determined category.

The growing body of racial formation and critical race theory (see Omi and Winant, 1986/1994) resonates with Fusco's sense of the diversity within categories of racialized people. But while "Latinos" are not a "race", it is clear that Latinas/os in the U.S. have been racialized, along with everyone else in the capitalist world-system. This acknowledgement might produce a vision of shared histories of struggle and oppositional cultures that is otherwise obfuscated. However, Fusco seems to argue that the category "Latino" is liberatory only in its deconstruction, and then goes on to describe in detail the work of several "Latino" media artists, leaving it to the reader to determine a logic to their aggregation. Fusco does not discuss why, given her critique of the term, it is important to bring these particular artists' work together under that rubric.

Fusco's paradoxical conclusion is one that resonates throughout the contemporary context of U.S. Latina/o Studies, and the on-going struggle to determine our subject. The solidity of the term "Latino" seems to go in and out of focus across different contexts, with many academics and artists embracing a radically fluid and critical definition of the category, while others actively work to calcify it. The addition of the "a" to "Latino" in Latina/o Studies program titles reflects a feminist desire to complicate the term, making it

reflect debate about the exclusion of Latinas in the canon. Most often, the recognition that the term “Latino” is not fixed or necessarily liberatory, however, has not meant that it has been abandoned. Rather, this recognition has afforded many, including other contributors to this volume, an opportunity to animate the term, and to participate in its ongoing construction.

In their introduction to *The Ethnic Eye: Latino Media Arts*, Chon Noriega and Ana López take up this challenge and mobilize a complex and hybrid definition of “Latino” identity to define the rationale for its collected articles. In the work of the numerous authors included within it, a range of identities, practices, and multiple theoretical positions are elaborated, including a number of works dealing primarily with independent media. Noriega and López wrestle with their use of the term "Latino," and in the end, both negate and confirm its usefulness:

Indeed, as a number of articles point out, the artists are often highly aware of constructing hybrid texts - mixing genres, languages, cultural codes - for diverse audiences or interpretive communities. Like these artists, we are caught trying to have it both ways, engaging in a willful ambivalence about critical location, textual classification, and spectatorship/reception - in short, about the need to name. So perhaps in closing we should name perversity - the contrariness of refusing fixity, essences, secure locations, singular affiliations - as the critical strategy under which this project has been undertaken. (1996, xx)

This is a very useful starting point for an other conception of Latina/o identity that provides both a momentum for movement as well as an emphasis on difference; an uncompromising symbolic verticality and horizontality. Why not call this a hybrid

Latinidad, or use these strategies towards describing what might constitute a liberatory Latina/o independent media praxis? The problem of representing the many in the one, a group in its multiplicity, or to borrow a phrase from Homi Bhabha, “the transnational and translational sense of the hybridity of imagined communities,” becomes apparent here (1994/2004, 7). Bhabha’s discussion of the cultural flows and hybridity of transnational, diasporic communities in post-coloniality offers an expansive and comparative critical frame that may be required to imagine Latinidad as it exists within and across transnational borders, with the geo-political location of the U.S. as one moment in its discursive construction.

This is a dilemma of representation, and U.S. Latina/o media has much to offer towards a critical engagement with this semiotics of hybridity. Frances Negrón-Muntaner, an independent media producer and theorist, moves in this direction with her essay in Noriega and Lopez’ book entitled “Drama Queens: Latino Gay and Lesbian Independent Film/Video.” Negrón-Muntaner describes the fluid positionalities of the queer/Latina/o both in front of and behind the camera, and constructs a new paradigm of Latina/o subjectivity. Discussing Karim Aïnouz’ film, *Seams*, she observes:

Just as translation is insufficient and “man” a symbolic structure, *Seams* uses several nonessentialist strategies to locate the speaking subject’s desires as a gay man. These strategies include the self-conscious use of Aïnouz’s great-aunts and grandmother’s stories to construct the voice of a male subject, the seduction of a “feminine” sensibility (melodrama), and the recurring images of cotton in various stages of transformation, metaphorically suggesting a subject always in process: raw, cotton balls, thread, waste. Parting from a discourse of affinity rather than

identity, *Seams* creates a fluid subject position unified only by the resistance to patriarchal power structures identified as hetero-sexist and homophobic and located in language (68).

The queer Latina/o mediamaker provides a paradigmatic example of identity as multiple – and the trans-disciplinary strategies employed to represent the complex perspectives and realities that ensue. Aïnouz’ film, and Negrón-Muntaner’s critical engagement with it, give us a glimpse of how re-mapping Latina/o subjectivities allows us to enter each other's territories, creating alliances and new political projects.

The Mercado as Flux

Some of the most important differences amongst contemporary U.S. Latina/o independent media makers are reflected in the different ways we have responded to the questions of funding and distribution. These answers reflect political imperatives. There is a schism between those producers who have become focused on using independent media as a stepping stone towards mainstream production and distribution, and those who have committed themselves ideologically and materially to methods of production and distribution that pose an alternative to the corporate media industry.

This schism represents a large-scale shift in how Latina/o politics are conceived on a national scale, the growth of ethno-marketing for racialized communities, as well as the changing role of Latina/os in the U.S. and transnational media marketplace. At the first ever “National Association of Latino Independent Producers” Conference, held in 1999 in San Francisco, the answer given to the often repeated question, “Why come together?” by the conference organizers and participants was the assumption that we

represented an eager and willing, albeit unorganized, production team ready to respond to the needs of a strong and growing marketplace.¹¹ This reflected neo-liberal assumptions rather than strategies for collective self-determination, although the latter kept surfacing as a nostalgic trope to code our desire.

The conference was organized in response to a crisis in independent media funding. A group of producers, writers, and arts administrators organized the conference in response to a decision by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting [CPB] to change the mechanism through which it distributed a pool of money for Latina/o producers. The conference was convened to compose a new organization that would then put its platform in front of CPB and demand, in the name of its constituency, to be given the opportunity to administer the fund. While I have not assessed the importance of this fund through other means, it seems to be a powerful tool for prestige and career building for a very small group of people rather than a means for a large-scale increase in “Latino independent media” production: When the entire group of producers, which numbered almost three hundred, was asked how many had ever received CPB funding, no more than ten hands were raised. It could be argued that this is precisely why the conference was organized. In any case, however, the conference organizers must have recognized the problematics of organizing the conference entirely around an economic solution that directly benefited so few producers, and wisely included in the conference title a reference to other possibilities: “Latino Independent Media: Public Television and Beyond.”

The “Beyond,” is, in fact, perhaps the most exciting location yet proposed for “Latino independent media.” Much of our work exceeds the categories and challenges

the paradigms of mainstream modes and genres of media production, and circulates outside of the industrial, but not the popular, economy of images. This represents a field of possibility for radical social transformation for some producers. But for others, the beyond represents the terrifying possibility of ongoing invisibility. In his discussion of the work of Guillermo Gomez-Peña, Homi Bhabha posits the ‘beyond’ as a site of possibility: “Being in the ‘beyond’, then, is to inhabit an intervening space, as any dictionary will tell you. But to dwell ‘in the beyond’ is also, as I have shown, to be part of a revisionary time, a return to the present to redescribe our cultural contemporaneity; to reinscribe our human, historic commonality; to touch the future on its hither side” (1994/2004, 10). The beyond may be a site of creative intervention depending on how it is mobilized by those who inhabit it.

Hierarchies imposed by the cultural industries imbue the contested field of independent media and how we understand the beyond that it offers. The alignment of visibility with mainstream media, both public and private, and invisibility with independent media was an underlying theme throughout the first gathering of Latina/o independent producers conference. This dichotomy echoes paradigms of marginality and centrality, with the culture industries posed as the central location of the public sphere, and sub-cultural, independent production positioned at the margins. This paradigm was present, for example, in a presentation of research on the numbers of Latina/os “in the media” (an earlier version of the study cited earlier in this essay) – leaving out, of course, independent media. While these statistics are obviously important and reveal one important aspect of the current media situation, the work of independent producers was ignored, as if the only media worth studying is corporate media. While more difficult, it

is possible to access U.S. Latina/o independent media, making an exclusive emphasis on the impact of corporate media on U.S. Latinas/os inadequate. The organization that was formed by the conference, the National Association of Latino Independent Producers, while it has created many important venues and workshops for producers, has continued to be marked by an emphasis on corporate media, with much of its work designed to support work for television broadcast.¹²

This dichotomizing emphasis has been actively resisted by many U.S. Latina/o independent mediamakers. The work of producer Alex Rivera represents a pluralist, trans-market form of independent media production that helps us to re-conceptualize the terms. Rivera brings together many different aesthetic languages, including experimental film, video art, performance art, as well as discourses of cinema and media studies. While quoting and critiquing mainstream media, his work has largely circulated through closed circuit screenings and within cyber-circuits, distributed via the Internet. In his videotape *Papapapá* (1997), Rivera traces the history of the potato as a history of the self and family. Using computer animation along with live footage of domestic spaces, and exterior location in Peru, including images of himself and his father, Rivera re-visions the media as a location for playful self-invention. Through the intertwining of mass media images with personal and cultural symbols, we come to understand the power of his father's, and his own, use of the media as an imaginary landscape in which personal and social history become coherent yet multi-dimensional. We understand the mainstream media as always re-written through the eyes of the spectator through Rivera's artisanal creation of the very images we are viewing.

This videotape suggests that these categories, both in terms of economic systems of production and distribution, and in aesthetic terms, are fluid. The work does not read mainstream media reductively. Materially and conceptually, Rivera shows us that it is possible for images produced in the mainstream market to be produced, read, or re-contextualized against, with and between the grain. The distribution of his work via instantaneous electronic delivery systems on the Internet challenges us to re-conceptualize the very notion of mainstream distribution as the only means by which media can be distributed to large numbers of people.¹³

Passing

If a heterogeneous presence is possible in post-coloniality, absences manifested through homogeneity and erasure are still equally plausible, in any form of media signification. Just as there is no one technique by which Latina/o experiences are made hyper-visible or erased by dominant media discourses, there is also no one authentic reality of Latina/o experiences represented in independent media. Both corporate and independent media make meaning using a plurality of strategies, which may be in turn innovative or repetitive, accurate or inaccurate, liberatory or oppressive, provocative or boring. The active production of radical subjectivities in and through representations of Latinas in dominant discourses has been provocatively theorized, and it is clear that spectators employ a range of critical reading strategies that may undermine or re-signify stereotypes towards a “radical hybridity.” (Guzmán & Valdivia, 2004; Valdivia, 2004b)

The promise of independent media becomes, then, not that of being a solitary and

privileged site of authentic representation or *mestizaje*, but rather a symbolic and material site of perhaps more, rather than less, maneuverability.

However, independent media may suffer from the same level of obligation to received structures of narrativity and representation as media produced in the corporate sphere. As producers, we all participate in economies of media production, engaging in a tangle of representational, economic and political assumptions and audience expectations. Latina/o media makers have had to compete with each other for limited resources, and align ourselves to the guiding principles of institutions that support us, but which are often not of our own creation. Museums and galleries, amongst the strongest supporters of independent media, have their own codes of aesthetics and ideologies, just as Hollywood does. Funding institutions, both governmental and private, have guidelines for productions that have pronounced effects on their final forms. There is a proliferation of independent film festivals that are focused on providing access to independent media for corporate distribution outlets. These festivals produce collectively understood but unwritten codes of production that privilege some discursive strategies over others. Thus, in our struggle to survive and produce media we align ourselves to the ways that these institutions define our work. Those producers who are best able to perceive and reproduce these discourses and received aesthetics are better funded.

Our challenge becomes, then, the re-construction and re-imagining of these discourses to create media with the integrity of our aesthetic and political beliefs and complex experiences, and to support and build alternative forms of economic support for our work. There are many internalized aesthetic and political notions that obstruct this project. In tandem with the growth of ethno-marketing, and stemming from the

assumption that more circulation and more images is better than less, many have simply taken for granted that we all should want to reach millions and make millions. In Chicana/o and Latina/o studies, there has been extensive scholarship on the independent films of the 1980's and '90's that crossed over to reach mass audiences through the corporate cinema distribution systems. The critical attention that these works garnered is at the expense of lesser-known works that are distributed in under-valued circuits of exchange, such as schools and community organizations, again revealing the power of the cultural industries to order our priorities, even as we work to constitute alternative sites.

It is often held as common sensical that if we work as independents to "break into" the inner circles of production and distribution of Hollywood we will create more "space" for other producers. We must begin, however, to use a much more complex picture of how our media circulates in order to develop and sustain subversive and de-centered strategies of production and distribution. As exemplified by the media discussed in this essay, U.S. Latina/o media circulates in a number of different parallel and simultaneous realms. Despite limited economic support for production, alternative Latina/o media makers have emerged all over the U.S. during the past few decades, and have made significant contributions to diverse cultures of resistance in multiple communities. Our work is screened in schools, cultural institutions, organizing movements, and has also been distributed via television, mainstream feature film circuits and the Internet. The diversity of ideas and forms is enormous, and is matched only by the diversity of locations and situations in which the work is screened.

Given this history of production and distribution, there is a strong case to be made for continuing on the path we are on, but clarifying our vision. If there is a continued, and

unnecessary, focus on the priorities of the mainstream media, we are in danger of supporting a further hegemony of those increasingly globalized forms. While some have argued that the increase in global flows of media have created more opportunities for the building of translocal connections and the local interpretation of global themes, access to the means of production and the representation of creative local cultures outside the realms of commodification remains an urgent issue and is by no means guaranteed by the expansion of media conglomerates both within the U.S. and globally (Mattelart, 2003). A focus on the active development of diverse, multiple and de-centered strategies of production and distribution offers us new venues, audiences and sources of financial support.

My Technology/My Self

Many of the theorists and media artists discussed in this essay have developed, quite rightly, a suspicion of “Latina/o” as a marker of identity-based commonality. The rejection of the possibility of a common project, however, is premature. A key barrier has been the lack of a flexible conception of Latinidad as multiplicity, which allows for moments of wholeness, fragmentation, and collectivity. Latina/o independent media practitioners have successfully developed, in multiple sites, an alternative aesthetics that transcends a unified, essentialist norm. We are a diverse community, and this plurality is represented and supported in our work. Yet, we must continue to build a coherent, critical praxis that transforms media technology towards a collective production of *mestizaje*.

The media discussed in this essay suggest that it is indeed possible and necessary to communicate the *mestizaje* of our personal, cultural and political lives. If not, it is

certain that aspects of our collective identity will be left invisible - the feminist, the queer, the post-macho Marielito, the lesbian Chicana, the “Pana-Gringa” – the subjectivities that challenge a homogenous conception of Latinidad. As we construct our media, we have the opportunity to re-imagine our communities. Our alternative techniques need not be unified or rigid. On the contrary, it is only in our own flexibility, in our ability to engage in dialogue, to listen, to respond thoughtfully to particular dilemmas, that our aesthetics will reflect and produce pluralities. Importantly, this is a project that includes questions of reading and writing; the collective critical production of alternative texts by media producers, spectators and scholars. Dominant discourses both essentialize our "otherness" as a totality but also categorize and separate us. An active sense of *mestizaje* requires that our understanding of what is our own be continually expanded and re-defined, questioning our imprisonment in territory which is defined as our native own (Trinh, 1991). It is important for multiple communities to seek out, support and critically engage with U.S. Latina/o independent media texts, just as it is important for U.S. Latina/o media producers to critically engage the multiple concerns and cultural flows of global Latinidad and other spaces of the post-colonial beyond.

Marta Bautís' *Historias Paralelas/Home Is Struggle* (1993) displays a radical diversity amongst U.S. Latinas and uncovers the transnational, diasporic hybridity that connects us. The videotape constructs the multiplicity of our identities, histories and politics with a multiplicity of representational strategies. The 50-minute videotape consists of a multi-layered web of interviews with U.S. Latinas, all recent immigrants to New York City. The interviews are interlaced with disparate images that defy genre, including still photographs of important historical events in the women's countries of

origin, portraits of the women from different times of their lives, animated political cartoons, and mass media images. Accompanying the images is a multi-layered soundtrack of sync-sound, location noise, and music, including tango, a paradigmatic hybrid from Bautís' birthplace.

Throughout, the women's words provide a non-linear and richly evocative set of stories that both intersect and diverge through temporal and spatial dimensions of cultural and personal history. Bautís, in dialogue with her interviewed participants, engages in an open-ended discussion about nation, race and gender. As the women offer their recollections, Bautís in turn offers a rhythm of images, sounds and inter-cutting that enables a multi-dimensional narrative to emerge. Through this process a new form of collective historiography emerges. The intersecting experiences of gender, coloniality, racialization, and U.S. sponsored conflicts and destabilizations of Latin American governments create a broad framework for the narration of very different, yet crucially connected, autobiographies.

Bautís' work again exemplifies how the hybridities of our identities can be expressed in our strategies of representation, as well as in our production processes and our approaches to distribution. The video has been distributed through independent media organizations and been used in community organizations, schools and conferences as a starting point for dialogue about Latina immigrant experience and struggles. Collaboratively produced and enabling a collective imagination, it engages and produces new communities and shared resources for ongoing media production. The result of this work is dialogue, a strong basis for the creation of new forms of *mestizaje*.

At this crucial moment of the globalization of media, economies, and cultures, U.S. Latina/o media and producers have the opportunity to collectively shape a discourse that may contribute to a global political economy of media of *mestizaje* and resistance. Our experiences of colonization, immigration, diaspora and hybridity resonate in open-ended and generative ways with global communities. How we choose to represent these experiences in our media, both to ourselves, and to the world, and how we conceive of the economic structures of the media we wish to create, may all have lasting consequences for the possibilities of media production that resists oppression and transforms the future of global empire.

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¹ Raymond Williams' (1974) distinction between a technology and what he calls its social form, i.e., television and broadcasting, enables my thinking here. There is nothing inherent in television technology that makes broadcasting inevitable. Instead of creating a centralized point of transmission to dispersed receivers, the model of all broadcasting, it is instead possible to imagine a network of dispersed receivers and transmitters, similar to telephones or the Internet. Thus broadcast is the social form of TV, the result of a complex set of political, economic, social and institutional negotiations.

² Noriega identifies "minority" as African American, Asian American, Native American and Latino.

³ In *Methodology of the Oppressed* (2000), Sandoval defines differential

consciousness as follows: “Differential consciousness is described as the zero degree of meaning, counternarrative, utopia/no-place, the abyss, amor en Aztlán, soul. It is accessed through varying passages that can include the differential form of social movement, the methodology of the oppressed, poetry, the transitive proverb, oppositional pastiche, coatlicue, the middle voice. These puncta release consciousness from its grounding in dominant language and narrative to experience the meanings that lie in the zero degree of power – of differential consciousness.” (146) While there are many aspects of Gomez and Castillo’s videotape that could be explored in relation to Sandoval’s sense of differential consciousness, the characteristic of “oppositional pastiche” is particularly resonant.

⁴ I use the phrase “an other thinking” in concert with Walter Mignolo’s (2000) use of it to describe the de-colonial thinking that emerges from Latina/o movements in the U.S., particularly referring to the work of Chicana and Latina feminisms. In turn, Mignolo is in conversation with Abdelkebir Khatibi’s use of the phrase.

⁵ While this remains largely unacknowledged, this community-based approach to production is influenced by the grassroots imperatives of New Latin American Cinema, a movement that, since the 1960's, has formed an important knowledge base for activist U.S. Latina/o (and other) independent producers. Producers such as Jorge Sanjines of Bolivia, and the Lilith Video Collective in Brazil, amongst many others, have organized productions in which communities were organized to discuss social problems and to determine the representation of these issues in films and videotapes. As discussed by Julianne Burton (1986), Sanjines' *Blood of the Condor* (1969), a feature-length narrative film performed by non-professional actors, tells the story of the establishment by the U.S.

Peace Corps of a sterilization center in a rural area of Bolivia which then incites a justifiable and violent response by surrounding campesinos. The film reportedly created similar reactions amongst viewers, who agitated for the expulsion of the Peace Corps from Bolivia. The Lilith Video Collective worked in the 1980's and '90's in Sao Paulo, Brazil and produced numerous feminist videotapes that prioritize women's voices and perspectives and are produced in a collaborative process (Lesage & Burton, 1988). There are many other examples, many of which remain undocumented. See Pick (1993) for further discussion of New Latin American Cinema and Boyle (1992) for a general discussion of activist video in the U.S.

⁶ Recently, numerous national and international youth media organizations and networks have emerged, with many of those focused on Internet access and training. For a discussion of recent strategies in youth media pedagogy in the U.S., including the work of Video Machete, see Goodman (2003) and Goldfarb (2000). Also, see the websites of The Center for Media Justice (www.youthmediacouncil.org), Third World Majority, (www.cultureisaweapon.org), Educational Video Center (www.evc.org) and The National Association of Media Arts Centers (www.namac.org) for information on current projects in youth and community media.

⁷ Although my focus here is on media art, across the fields of visual art and culture, performance and literature, there is an growing body of work by U.S. Latina/o artists that contends with these issues; as I discuss later in this essay, and as I mention in an earlier footnote regarding community based media, much of this work remains undocumented and under-valued by cultural and academic institutions and other critical apparati. The crisis in archiving the work of Chicana/o and Latina/o community based

artists and cultural institutions working in all visual arts media is discussed by González (2003). Conversely, the crisis in accessing institutionalized archives of Chicana/o and Latina/o film and other historical documents is discussed in Santisteban (2000). Despite the obstacles, however, scholarship is growing and important recent contributions to thinking on visual art and popular culture produced by U.S. Latinas/os include Saldívar (1997), Valdivia (2000, 2004a, 2004b, 2007), Fregoso (2003), Habell-Pallán (2005), Negrón-Muntaner (2007), and Pérez (2007).

⁸ See www.videomachete.org for information on current programs.

⁹ See Negrón-Muntaner (2000) for an additional discussion of the multiplicity of Latina/o media aesthetics.

¹⁰ This manifesto is re-printed in Noriega (1992a.)

¹¹ Reflections on the conference, partial documentation, and a list of participants were collected in *The Future of Latino Independent Media: A NALIP Sourcebook* (Noriega, 2000).

¹² See www.nalip.org for information on current programs.

¹³ Rivera's more recent work includes the formation of an online distribution collective of independent Latino filmmakers, www.subcine.org, as well as the production of a feature-length narrative film.