



Latinidad and Film

Queer and Feminist Cinema
in the Americas

Dania Abreu-Torres · Rosana Blanco-Cano
Rita E. Urquijo-Ruiz



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With the special contribution of Henriette Korthals Altes,
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PREFACE



In the film *Danzón*, the main character, Julia, arrives in Veracruz in search of her dance partner. With suitcases in hand, she walks with confidence out of the train station, looking ahead, as if understanding that whatever situation she will face, she will do so on her own. Through a panoramic gaze, the director of the film, María Novaro, affirms Julia's confidence by showing multiple men looking at her body as she is passing by. Instead of framing Julia through a male, voyeuristic point of view, Novaro shifts the patriarchal gaze and transforms her film into a reclamation of her protagonist's independence and agency. This book's objectives are formulated

around such female and queer agencies and aim to shift how we, students, faculty, and the general public, watch and understand U.S. Latinx and Latin American films.

Latinidad and Film: Queer and Feminist Cinema in the Americas presents a series of films that have not been analyzed in depth before and, in some cases, have not reached wide distribution, being limited to screenings at festivals and special events. These films, however, have been thresholds on how U.S. Latinx, Latin American, and Caribbean histories have moved from heteronormative patriarchal discourses to more gender-inclusive ones. All chapters feature directors that have allied themselves with new strategies to represent families, queer individuals, the home, and the women/people that manage the domestic and public spaces they inhabit. Most of the directors are women whose mission is to portray womanhood in all its aspects, the negative and the positive, as they offer alternatives to gender relations. We hope that the 11 films included not only foster discussions about history, sexuality, and gender politics but also conversations about representation, the precarious situation of the film industry for Latinx and Latin American directors, in Latin America, the United States, and the Caribbean, as well as the need for a better international and U.S. distribution of these groundbreaking films.

We, the co-authors of this book, have been working on this manuscript since 2017 when Diana Chavarría, Cindi Marín, and Megan Medrano, three brilliant students in our Latin American film studies courses, accepted to collaborate with us on a project as part of the Summer Undergraduate Research Fellowship (SURF) from the Mellon Initiative at Trinity University. Since then, the project has taken many forms and included a variation of films and analyses. The pandemic in 2020 halted our efforts and the work we had achieved at that time but also allowed for space to reframe our theories, rethink the logistics of the films included, and define our target audiences. This book is intended for undergraduate and graduate students who would like to learn more about U.S. Latinx, Latin American, and Caribbean films in the periphery of what may be called the Latinx/Latin American film canon; for the faculty that teach film courses so they have a companion that would allow for deeper conversations with their students; and for the general public so that by reading about these films they can have a sense of how they portray and represent particular stories centered around family and gender expectations that have changed through time and in relationship with the United States and Hollywood.

This book would not have been possible without the support of the Mellon Initiative at Trinity University, the Department of Modern Languages and Literatures, and the special contribution of our students Diana, Cindi, and Megan. They provided some of the foundational work and analyses in various chapters and we are forever grateful and proud of their contributions. They, like Julia in *Danzón*, helped us to confidently navigate the challenging path of writing this book and to look forward to its completion.

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CONTENTS

| | | |
|----------|---|----|
| Part I | Breaking the Mold | 1 |
| 1 | <i>Danzón</i> (María Novaro, 1991, Mexico/Spain) | 3 |
| 2 | <i>Brincando el Charco: Portrait of a Puerto Rican</i> (Frances Negrón-Muntaner, 1994, U.S./Puerto Rico) | 15 |
| Part II | Anxieties and Sexualities | 27 |
| 3 | <i>Tan de Repente</i> (Diego Lerman, 2002, Argentina) | 29 |
| 4 | <i>Madeinusa</i> (Claudia Llosa, 2006, Perú) | 41 |
| 5 | <i>Qué Tan Lejos</i> (Tania Hermida, 2006, Ecuador) | 51 |
| Part III | Breaking the Binary | 63 |
| 6 | <i>La Mission</i> (Peter Bratt, 2009, USA) | 65 |
| 7 | <i>Entre Nos</i> (Paola Mendoza and Gloria La Morte, 2009, USA) | 73 |

| | | |
|----------------------------|---|-----|
| 8 | <i>La Hija Natural</i> (Dir. Leticia Tonos. 2011, República Dominicana) | 85 |
| Part IV Depatriarchalizing | | 99 |
| 9 | <i>Mosquita y Mari</i> (Aurora Guerrero. 2012, USA) | 101 |
| 10 | <i>Pelo Malo</i> (Mariana Rondón. 2013, Venezuela) | 113 |
| 11 | <i>Bruising for Besos</i> (Adelina Anthony, 2016, USA) | 127 |
| Index | | 141 |

LIST OF FIGURES

| | | |
|-----------|---|-----|
| Fig. 1.1 | Julia and Susy dancing danzón | 9 |
| Fig. 3.1 | Marcia receives an offer from Mao and Lenin | 32 |
| Fig. 5.1 | Esperanza and Tristeza traveling together | 52 |
| Fig. 7.1 | Gabriel, Mariana, and Andrea | 75 |
| Fig. 9.1 | <i>Mari y Mosquita</i> bonding | 103 |
| Fig. 11.1 | Daña and Yoli meet | 135 |

INTRODUCTION

Latin American cinema has provided a consistent influence on international filmography and cinematic movements since the mid-twentieth century. The Golden Age of Mexican Cinema (1930–1960), the Brazilian Cinema Novo (1960 and 1970), and the Cuban revolutionary films during the 1960s, as well as other creators and contributors, have inspired multiple studies that have evidenced the impact of this cinema. Presently, however, research regarding sexuality and gender issues especially focused on Latin American women and LGBTQ+ directors is minimal. This book, *Latinidad and Film: Queer and Feminist Cinema in the Americas*, examines a total of 11 contemporary Latin American and U.S. Latinx films that critically deal with gender and sexuality, emphasizing the underexplored perspectives of women directors and queer (LGBTQ+) cinematic identities in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Through a close examination of these films, we reflect on how such productions critically offer cultural discourses that either prevent or enable agency for women within the Latin American and U.S. Latinx contemporary film industries. In addition, we closely examine cinematic styles that break with traditional heteronormative and/or male-centric visual conventions, thus proposing that cinema, through innovative visual language, is empowering these groups and communities that historically have been excluded from mainstream films. For this analysis, we want to adopt the definition of queerness proposed by Venkatesh: we want to make visible films that are devoted to the “unpack[ing] of heteronormative politics and subjectivities” (22), thus evidencing those discourses as cultural and therefore, malleable. As Venkatesh proposes as well, it is urgent to make visible films that are

creating empathy toward the queer characters and stories for the simple and yet important fact of humanizing queer identities. At the same time, it is urgent to open new spaces of discursive power in society. *Latinidad and Film* provides the readers with a unique perspective by examining and creating analytical dialogues with productions that come from the margins of Latin American industries as well. Historically, places like Mexico, Argentina, and Brazil have been the main centers of film production. This book, however, is an explorative attempt to make visible the Latinx/Latin American cinema from other countries: Ecuador, Puerto Rico, Venezuela, Dominican Republic, among others. The 11 films examined cover a broad array of cinematic perspectives and styles from the 1990s to 2016. At the same time, the analysis considers cinema as a cultural artifact, in which meaning and visual representations may depend on a specific context, either socio-historical, economic, or political, and that cultural practices and discourses can be debunked such as patriarchal oppression and homophobia in Latinx/Latin American identities.

Patriarchy, according to Julieta Paredes, is that discourse that not only oppresses women but that represents all the exploitations (of gender, race, representation, and economic oppression) that have marked our modern times (1). In order to be liberated from it, cultural producers, as a community, must “depatriarchalize” (*despatriarcalizar*) spaces and representations in which stereotypes and limiting social conventions have been the customary ways to create an idea of Latin America and the U.S. Latinx cultures to the world. The cinematic productions considered in this book subvert these patriarchal discourses by disarming the stereotypes, questioning such conventions, and leading new figures that will rewrite how Latin American and U.S. Latinx societies and their political and economic systems are represented through the reconfiguration of the family and its gender roles contained within limiting social institutions.

Historically, the patriarchal and heterosexist institution of the family has been the allegorical representation of the nation in Latin America and beyond. Often, this allegory is related to the discourse of mestizaje, the ideal biological possibility of the union of a European man with an Indigenous woman. Casta paintings [“cuadros de castas”] in Mexico and Peru are the perfect examples of this biological discourse and how it is transformed into a political and economic ideology by creating a functional, racial, and gender hierarchy. *Latinidad and Film* confronts these nationalist discourses and hierarchies by bringing the points of view of

women and LGBTQ+ directors on how families and the national allegory around them are much more diverse and complex than the traditional heterosexual family representation. In the films examined in this book, father figures are mostly absent, girls explore the streets to find alternatives out of social and gender expectations, boys are inscribed in the domestic sphere and discover new forms of gender identity, and mothers are more complex than the virginal and sacrificial figures often associated with them. We aim to highlight the complexities and nuances of Latin American, Caribbean, and U.S. Latinx cinema in order to present alternatives and new modes of creating families and, therefore, communities that go beyond the national, heteronormative construct. We intend to present a more contemporary and exhaustive analysis of the films by proposing not only close readings of the productions but also paying specific attention to the discursive and visual components of the films (plot, characters, setting) as well as also considering the external elements that influence the creative process involved in filmmaking (the director's background and context, participant producers, and the cinematographer's point of view). The stories in front and behind the cameras portray women and/or queer individuals that are constantly challenging patriarchal and heteronormative discourses in the U.S. Latinx and Latin American communities. These films are queering the Latin American and U.S. Latinx cinema industry by creating non-conformist gender narratives, styles, and characters that enable spectators to go beyond the "safe distance" (Venkatesh 26) in relation to film and be more empathic toward the multiple struggles that women and the LGBTQ+ community still experience in the contexts that we are analyzing.

Latinidad and Film is organized into four main parts that emphasize the type of cultural subversion that each film presents: Breaking the Mold; Anxieties and Sexualities; Breaking the Binary; and Depatriarchalizing. Below we offer a brief description of each section and its films as a way to guide the reader to the main principles of the analysis and to provide an overview of the subsequent chapters.

PART I: BREAKING THE MOLD

The films by women directors in the 1990s were a response to the dominant patriarchal oppression, women's sexualization, and the family and romantic relationships that most of the 1980s films portrayed. The films in this section represent an exploration of how to break the

heteropatriarchal mold and include other discourses on cinematic representation, particularly as part of national discourses and the standardization of gender conventions.

1. *Danzón (Mexico, María Novaro, 1991)*

Besides providing a reflection on Novaro's prolific career, the first section of the chapter analyzes how her film *Danzón* can be read as transitional: one that exemplifies the changes to the cinematic production laws that enabled new ways of producing film in Mexico in the 1990s. In this sense, the chapter also explores how *Danzón* connects nostalgic discourses on Mexican identity from the Golden Age of Mexican Cinema, with a reflexive perspective that centers on the importance of social, cultural, and economic agency for women in contemporary Mexico. Through the examined aspects, the chapter critically reflects on visual resources that Novaro uses in her film to depict the evolution of her protagonist who starts following the very strict norms of danzón and Mexican society but who later becomes a more independent dancer who also decides the direction of her own life and how she lives sexually and owns her body.

2. *Brincando el Charco (the United States, Mainland and Puerto Rico, Frances Negrón-Muntaner, 1994)*

Frances Negrón-Muntaner's film is considered an experimental experience of queerness and national identity, while also intersecting it with racial discourses in the Puerto Rican national imaginary. *Brincando el Charco* deconstructs and reconstructs Puerto Rican identity by questioning its basic performance premise: the family. Each member has a specific gender role and the main character, Claudia, does not follow the one assigned to her. She is a lesbian and her definition of national identity is completely different from what is expected from her. Although the material may provide for a melodramatic perspective, Negrón-Muntaner breaks with this approach by focusing on reflections about her different experiences with Puerto Rican and other diverse communities in Philadelphia. The "history" represented in the film is fragmented, interrupted, and artificial as any other cultural production, but it has a conscience of artificiality that allows the spectator to trace a new kind of national identity, queering the national performance in a hopeful light for inclusion.

PART II: ANXIETIES AND SEXUALITIES

After breaking the mold on how women and the LGBTQ+ community should be considered in the discussions of national discourses, the films in this section further the exploration of the individuals in the collective and manifest their anxieties of belonging. Sexuality, both as a chosen and active engagement, is redefined and consistently questioned, moving the film-makers to negotiate and propose new standards of sexual engagement, activity, and psychological resilience.

3. *Tan de Repente* (Argentina, Diego Lerman, 2002)

An internationally co-produced film, Diego Lerman's opera prima, *Tan de Repente* (2002), is directly connected to the so-called New Argentine Film by portraying a gray image of Buenos Aires and its inhabitants. In addition to analyzing some of the main features in Lerman's oeuvre, the chapter centers on three moments in which the status quo and its corresponding inertia are shattered, presenting, both visually and discursively, innovative approaches to the concept of relationships, love, desire, and the notion of happiness. The everyday life of a young working-class woman is disrupted through the actions of the two protagonists: two young lesbians who live their lives on the margins of what is considered acceptable. This black-and-white film proves to have a complex repertoire of emotions that break with traditional conventions of representation, allowing the spectators to contemplate other ways of defining the female and lesbian identity in post-crisis Argentina.

4. *Madeinusa* (Peru, Claudia Llosa, 2006)

As a powerful but controversial film, *Madeinusa* is a portrayal of an Indigenous community that questions the interactions of power and gender. The chapter analyzes how Llosa constructs a strong female character in a dystopian circumstance that dialogues with the Indigenous community's realities from which it is inspired. Corruption, sexual abuse, and sexual freedom are some of the themes exposed in the film and in which Madeinusa, the protagonist, thrives, as she is able to manipulate the desires of others to fulfill her own. The focus on the religious environment in which the storyline is developed emphasizes the breaking of the conventional rules of modesty and conservatism by imagining a god that turns his back on his children so they can play in absolute freedom as they