

# WORKING THE AFFECT SHIFT



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Latina Service Workers in U.S. Film

Steve Nava



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*Working the Affect Shift: Latina Service Workers in U.S. Film*

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*For the women and men who toil under injustice.*

*To the pride and joy of my life, my son Kian Nava, and to my niece  
Nia Nava, and nephews Sammie Joe Garcia and Evan Zulaica,  
my growing family who gives me life and inspiration.*



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# INTRODUCTION

## Defining the Terms

What is neoliberalism and how has it changed the way the nation “sees” and “feels” about race and national hierarchy in the new millennium? What are the racial and gendered national ideals, attitudes, and collective feelings that seem to subsume Latina working-poor identities into “normal American” middle-class life? What makes movies with sometimes problematic and contentious racial and gendered national ideals somehow attractive for mainstream consumption? What do American individualism and the ideals of “multicultural tolerance” have to do with Latina film images? For Cultural Studies researchers interested in recent Latina representation, and researchers of racial representation more generally, neoliberalism has posed a new problematic in explaining the significance of racial and class meanings. To engage these questions and make connections between the abstract ideals of neoliberalism and multiculturalism, in this book I offer an interpretation of how American media producers reproduce racial and gender hierarchy in mainstream commercial film representations. I offer a reflection on the cultural contours and the influence of entertainment film media images on our national identity by highlighting the national tensions embedded in five film examples.

Neoliberalism, the optimistic belief in the power of private markets to produce both wealth and social prosperity to all who are motivated to seek such objects, has grown in leaps and bounds since the 1970s, thanks to new technologies and increased global interconnection. The optimistic neoliberal stance gains much of its global currency from the multicultural assumption that social differences will wither away in significance as the belief in the social power of free markets and nationally focused involvement in it increases. Within our neoliberal times, the national citizen, now decidedly global, assumes that race, class, gender, and sexual identity doesn’t matter as much as the choices he/she makes, thus understanding social class and racial division become less of an issue. *After all, why should a pros-*

*perous American minority complain?* Why should non-minorities care about social differences if “*we all have equal opportunities now?*” At least, this seems to be the view from the mainstream media.

Can neoliberal optimism and the fervor for capitalist innovation eliminate the significance of so-called “racial difference?” Has this already started to happen in America or is there a trend toward a different kind of racial multicultural consciousness? How do we describe a multiculturalism heavily based on fantasies concocted by filmmakers and advertisements? Further, what does the nation *look like* on film and in the spectacle of the media in these neoliberal times?

To be clear, I am not attempting to re-define neoliberalism as much as I am inquiring about its recent ideological effects on our national entertainment images of working-class, immigrant Latinas and ‘Latinaness’ at large. I define neoliberalism much like David Harvey, as an unstable and contradictory political form. Neoliberal ideology is promoted for mainstream media consumption more than any other dominant ideal, save for “the American Dream.” For those who believe in neoliberalism and its forward-looking, curative promises, unfettered capitalism is the fix for all social problems. Its main tenet contained in the phrase “trickle-down theory” is the ever-ready answer. When it doesn’t fix the problem, political figureheads tend to have someone or *other* to blame, as I will argue here later.

So why should we care about the national *affect* or about the tensions represented in film and media images? As citizens of a globally integrated world, we should be invested in understanding the cultural logic of such racial and gender blaming, lest we pass down accepted racial and gendered oppressions to the next generation. The next generations has enough to deal with as it is.

For example, if we look closely at neoliberal American culture, we see that demands from the Left to strengthen social welfare safety programs easily fall on deaf ears, because neoliberal thinking is so ‘present-focused.’ Social safety nets like Medicare and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) are safeguards against future social problems that often result from social desperation. *Social* welfare is exactly what the name implies, but when thrown into the cacophony of products and advertisements, the obvious seems somehow illogical. Demands for real solutions to ongoing but historically-rooted *social* ills are undermined by the neoliberal idea that the invisible hand of the market cures all. In that view, the past no longer has any effect on the present and the continued existence of suffering

endured by “minority” communities can be blamed on “cultural inadequacies” of that community. Questions like, “*Did they earn it?*” seem more appropriate within the logic of neoliberal capitalism. In my mind it is clear that US prisons would be less full if we had a better education and welfare system. Looking through the lens of neoliberal capitalism only allows focus on the immediate profitability of a given social program to the average citizen. However these types of demands for measurable results stem from a false idea; just look at the results of Bush’s No Child Left Behind (2001) educational policy. Learning has been replaced by an attempt to catch up with other nations who can boast better educational outcomes. Why? Because those nations are growing faster in the global market. In my view, you can never “fix” a social problem like the education system with a top-down approach. You must come together and work with those involved to ascertain what the local problems are. The top-down approach only fits within the logic of neoliberal capitalism. We should know by now that systemic change is a long and uneven process that requires more than throwing money and staff at the problem. Short-sighted thinking and individual-minded optimism do not lend themselves well to solving collective social problems like social welfare, public education, social security, and ecological sustainability. Such problems are best dealt with as long term issues that require forward thinking and caution rather than immediate satisfaction or quick, lucrative fixes. Neoliberalism and its value of privatization are more than just an optimistic, nationalist mindset, but is also a cultural way of being that shapes everyday reality. Production and consumption are good places to examine this dubious ideology.

This national attachment to individual profitability above any focus on addressing long-term social needs threatens to throw the nation into a deeper economic, cultural, environmental, and political crisis as the problems of the poor continue to increase. The poor and disenfranchised will merely continue to grow in numbers and desperation. As Harvey writes:

Private enterprise and entrepreneurial initiatives are seen as the keys to innovation and wealth creation. Intellectual property rights are protected (for example through patents) so as to encourage technological changes. Continuous increases in productivity should then deliver higher living standards to everyone. Under the assumption that ‘a rising tide lifts all boats’ or of ‘trickle down’, neoliberal

theory holds that elimination of poverty (both domestically and worldwide) can best be secured through free markets and free trade. (2005: 65)

The problem with the ‘immediate wealth creation’ approach is that the social sustainability factor is often left unexamined in favor of an immediate feeling that wealth is being created and somehow society will benefit from that wealth in meaningful ways.

In current representations of neoliberal capitalism in movies and the mainstream media, there are many epistemological gaps and elisions that we should be concerned about if our nation is to deal productively with the many social ills we need to address. The problem of racial difference and political turmoil due to historical ethnic domination is only one of them, but it is the one I will deal with in this book. Indeed, race sits at the intersection of gender and class, providing very meaningful, entangled markers of identity - despite what mainstream media discourse seems to attest. I will show how some of these entanglements are viewed and felt in film and media images.

*The Latina Immigrant as “Choosing” Greener Pastures*

The hegemony of neoliberal ideology is central for understanding my study of mainstream film representations of the US Latina working-class and of immigrant Latinas. The way that neoliberalist assumptions define immigrant motivations for coming to the US illustrates how neoliberalism has shaped race and national identity more and more over the last thirty-odd years. Neoliberalists, often embodied in Republican commentators, assert that “rational personal choices” are the primary motivating factors for immigrants to come to the United States, when in fact, most Latin American immigrants come to the United States to escape harsher forms of oppression than they surmise the US might furnish. The US border is what stands between them and survival in a brutal global economy.

On the other hand, the propagandistic neoliberalists in their truncated historical memory imagine a poverty-stricken second or third world subject making a difficult choice: either suffer poverty or make the difficult trek to *El Norte* to realize their American Dream. This story seems reasonable in a common sense way. Unfortunately, this present-focused assumption does not take into account the historical mistreatment of immigrants by US agents and agencies, nor the historical legacy of negative racialization and treatment of non-

white people globally. After all, as the band *U2*'s Bono once sang in the song *Bullet the Blue Sky* (1987), once the oppressed (El Salvadorian) women and children “run into the arms of America,” America can only embrace them. The fantasy of an ever-open-armed America is hard to shake, especially since it brings such comfort to the global psyche. It's comforting to think there is a benevolent patriarch out there watching over the world, but it's only a myth. Here is where our current American hope seems to lie: in the tension between wanting immigrants to return to their native countries and wanting them to embody the American Dream. We have to decide, border fences or an amicable border policy? Neither one seems feasible in the current US/Mexican border puzzle.

Neoliberal ideology, like most political ideals, is based on an often emotionally driven commitment to a desired structural outcome. In this case, trickle-down theory is the assumed outcome of continued private industrial growth. Neoliberalism is the current hegemonic rationality, and its promoters' irrational commitment to an unattainable utopian “pure free market” future is sometimes questioned in the mainstream press, yet it persists in driving much of the real activity and assumptions of our times. For this reason, it is difficult to have a conversation about multiculturalism and immigrant identities without deconstructing neoliberalism and how it structures our US culture today.

*“Bring me your tired, your poor,” no matter their hue?*

Despite the fact that a strong desire to search for cheap producers and “docile” consumers mark today's neoliberal global markets, the assumption by many dollars-and-sense economists is that the “invisible hand of the market” is efficiently moving workers from up the social ladder. Meanwhile, the message often heard in the mainstream media is that immigrant workers take the jobs that native workers do not want (Jonas 2006: 12; Vogel in Yates 2007: 65). In fact, this assumption is complicated by the Pew 2006 study entitled “America's Immigration Quandary,” that finds that it is the working-classes with the lowest educational attainment that are most threatened by immigrant labor competition. If one were to look at the present economy, that is, without examining the historical role of big business in benefiting from labor competition between minorities and working class whites, one would think this a reasonable assumption. Lower wages mean higher profits for big business. However, it is really US teenagers that are in competition with Latin American immigrants

for lower tier jobs. Therefore, much of the angry anti-immigrant rhetoric we hear in the news seems misdirected.

Latina service workers suffer the brunt of such anti-immigrant sentiment. It is clear that Latina immigrant women and Latinas of various generations, even the ones who have been in the US since before the Southwest was taken from Mexico, are devaluated by such hateful rhetoric. In order to understand these workers' current predicament, one must grasp: 1) historical international turmoil between the US and Mexico; 2) the historical degradation of women during each industrial and post-industrial transformation of the political economy; and 3) the role of race in defining the lines of inequality globally. The influence of neoliberal values on our current discourse, even when addressing cultural differences, does not take into account the primary role of race in the life outcomes for Latina service laborers and others struggling in the neoliberal global economy. I hope to illuminate the dynamics of race on Latina subjectivity- in the context of neoliberal global market culture in this book.

*The Neoliberal Multicultural Aesthetic: How We Should Look and Feel*

Neoliberalism has a look and feel in our mainstream culture that requires cultural analysis if we are to locate and separate it from the desire for a more democratic country. We cannot afford to fall into the kinds of assumptions fostered by neoliberal multicultural entertainment and political rhetoric, no matter how funny or fun, or indeed, "positive" and "optimistic" it might appear. We cannot laugh away years of racial and gender conflict. Rather, we must engage the injuries of race and gender oppression.

Contemporary images of US Latinas can teach us about the everyday collective feelings shaped by US neoliberal multiculturalism. We can trace contradictory social structures and reconfigurations of power embedded in film and media culture, but it requires dispelling the myths of race and national identity that seem to hide minority lives. Importantly, we must also recognize how central film and media images are in defining how we think about race, class and gender difference. National feelings are continually shaping the limited representation of minority subjects in our country and beyond, distorting the true relations between US minorities and the mainstream. Though this is not a new phenomenon, recent changes in *national affect* in our culture have transformed this relationality. Our collective national feelings about immigrants and minorities have shifted towards what seems to be thought of as "progressive" but, when we

look closer, looks more like an updated configuration of age-old racial and gender political commitments. My question is, how do Latina identities fare in this new configuration, this racial and gender hierarchy in a so-called color-blind and free America?

*What is "Affect?"*

Put simply, and for my purposes here, *affect* are the *pre-social* feelings groups have that are triggered when the mass media defines the source of a social problem or other intense phenomenon. When the social problem is defined, collective sentiments take on a structured meaning and a set of social actions begin to take on a recognizable shape. If feelings are our own, and emotions are expressions of feelings (that can be feigned in performance), then affect is the aspect that we are most guided by socially. We act on feelings and when these feelings are social, they lead to social action. Lawrence Grossberg (2005) defines affect as follows:

[E]motions, moods, desires, violation, attention, caring. It is about the investments we make in the world. People define themselves affectively, by what matters to them, as much as they do ideologically, by the content of their beliefs. Affect is organized by what I call *mattering maps*, which identify where we belong in the world. By connecting the different places we belong to, they construct a sense of unity and identity in our lives...Mattering maps enable people to feel that they own their projects and possibilities and that they have some control over their lives and the worlds. (231-2)

Affective attachments to national ideals shape the ways people identify themselves and others, measuring others and the self against often-unquestioned ideals (e.g., personal responsibility, racial purity, market freedom, and accumulation). Implicitly measured against such ideals, Latinas in the United States have been treated ambivalently in mainstream representations, especially Latina immigrants. Stereotypes have represented extremes. During one political moment they are seen as hardworking and idealized for their "lack of complaint" and at other political moments, they are seen as an invasive peril (Chavez 2001). It is their mainstream political silence that makes such assumptions possible. This affective ambivalence describes the culturally imaginative aspect of identity and nationality. In this book

I focus on mainstream affect, but this does not mean minority groups themselves do not have their own structure of collective sentiments that coalesce around certain cultural objects. As Cvetkovitch (2003) argues, sexual and gender minorities have an archive of feeling, whereby shared cultural things act as “repositories of feelings and emotions, which are encoded not only in the content of the texts themselves but in the practices that surround their production and reception (7).” These authors understand how power is exerted through expression of feelings, emotions and affect.

Race, class, and gender always structure national identity in terms of belonging and hierarchy (Berlant 1997). In this way, as contradictory as it might sound at first, attachments to national ideals and the tensions they invoke are born of *emotionally constituted rationalities*. For example, solutions for undocumented immigration, e.g. tightening border security through use of the military, might best be understood as an emotional response based in assumptions about US superiority, which are themselves grounded in historical domination of Latin America and its people rather than a rational solution to a current national problem. The emotionally driven attitude toward Latin American people in this cultural logic, the logic of “national protection of a national border,” is partly driven by our national conscious and its fear of the return of the repressed. *What if those silenced begin to talk back in anger?* Historical dominance and oppression have little place within neoliberal multicultural rhetoric, but they persist in shaping national affect today. The national feeling towards Latin American immigrants and anyone who resembles them seems to just want them to go away or remain unseen. What is the consequence of such a national sentiment on the minority subject? How is this represented in the mainstream media?

### *Past Latino Images*

In the 1980s, there were very few multicultural film narratives that exhibited a complex representation of Mexican Americans, or Latin characters in general. Indeed, there were few Latino mainstream television shows (Noriega 2000) and few mainstream media programs featuring complex representations (List 1996; Beltran 2002; Rodriguez 2004). The representations that did exist in mainstream American movies were for the most part confined within the borders of racialized, gendered, and national stereotypes. As I will analyze in the coming chapters, the historical images of Latinas, at best, reflected an ambivalence that also characterizes larger US sentiments toward

Latinas. There are historical efforts to include Latina and Latino characters, but there is little criticism of racism towards Latinos as a structural phenomenon. As I will argue, the multicultural discourse in North America sets identifiable discursive limits to US Mexican and Latino public expression, and mainstream film is emblematic of the discursive limits Latino representation in the neoliberal era.

It is safe to say that Latina images in the Reagan years were extremely abject while some representations were extraordinarily positive. Though this hyperbolic and ambivalent representation still characterizes mainstream representations, especially of immigrants, there have been recent movie images of the late 1990s and early 2000s that include relatively complex and empowered characters, exhibiting social mobility, critical intelligence, complicated personal motivations, and sometimes non-hyperbolic expressions of Latina identity. That is to say, recent images do not stop—in terms of depth of characterization—at representing Latinas as extremely optimistic and assimilated members of middle-class society on one end, and as existing in abject poverty and as completely alienated individuals on the other end. The improvement of Latina images could be understood as a sign of success on the part of minority media activists, but such celebration would require a reflection on the continuing oppression and suppression of Latina public presence as well. Any neoliberal multicultural celebration would be followed by a significant hangover if we look at the lives of Latina workers today.

Oddly however, such “positive” representations—for example, empowered women in movies like *Spanglish*, *Maid in Manhattan*, *Made in L.A.*, and successful men in television shows like *George Lopez*—were produced during a particularly strained social context. This post-1990s period is characteristic of a continued global heightening of techno-driven, hyper-consumerist culture and neoliberal ideology. The growth of neoliberal culture has created new contradictions. One example is the formation of new service jobs, like the increased desire for low-cost childcare, which Latin American women have populated almost exclusively in states with a growing Latin American presence, such as California, Texas, New York, New Jersey, North Carolina, Oregon and Washington. Despite the opportunity this new market niche creates for Latin American women, it also contributes to a kind of assumption of the “underclass” status for these very women. This market growth also comes with US-Mexican border tensions and the ubiquity of hyper-consumerism, indeed, only a few years before the market crash and the Obama administration.

In this discursive period, from the 1990s until the Obama administration, Latina images have gone through some very contradictory transformations. Although I have chosen the Obama administration as a marker of the end of the period of films I will analyze, I am not claiming this end point is the end of the neoliberal multicultural moment. I am merely claiming that the racial meanings and perceptions Americans have become accustomed to are transformed because of the racial change that Obama as a ‘black President’ represents on the level of national fantasy, which I will return to in this book’s conclusion. The Post-Obama racial political landscape is another book-length project in itself.

Changes to the race, class, and gender structure of society remains to be seen outside the imaginary realm of attitudes, gestures, and everyday claims about our nation’s diversity and hierarchy. On the level of fantasy, the meaning of race has taken on new significance that requires a deconstructive contextual analysis in order to understand the complex ways national feelings about Latinas in the US are expressed through media images. Indeed, we have experienced—whether consciously or not—an affective shift on the ways Latinas are represented and in the way we as a nation imagine the types of emotional work they do for our nation.

The films I will analyze are indeed still characteristic examples of ambivalent representations, meaning Latino representations swing from hyperbolically positive to negative images. Latinos are not simply the darlings of a celebratory representation, nor are they the menacing bandits of the Mexican Revolution era (turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century). The new images are more diverse and multidimensional. These more complex images even exist within their hyper-consumerist context, which can be best explained as an attempt by media producers to attract a broader and broader audience. However, despite this increased complexity, many minority images still maintain a fetishistic characteristic. Latina maids for example, maintain the image of the exotic, a sexualized and racialized image. The fetishized media image of Latina maids can easily be replaced by another exotic racialized image: the Latino can be interchangeable with the fetishized Indian, black, poor, lesbian, gay, etc. Thus, their new complex image—although shows the leaps and bounds of Civil Rights advancements reflected in US culture—also testify to the continuity of limited acceptance of their presence by commercial media producers.

I ultimately ask, if Latinas are now part of the tableau of a truly multicultural US mainstream, then why must their images remain subject to older stereotypes? Why must we hearken back to past stereotypes in order to make Latina images legible in the mainstream? Why do many of the more presumably progressive mainstream images still depict them as naturally tethered and as slowly emerging from formerly oppressive hierarchical relationships with whites? It is my assertion that the new mainstream multicultural Latina image elides the oppression that has contributed to Latino identity formation in the US. In a complicated way, media producers exploit that very oppressive context, by making reference to the oppressive order without seriously treating it as a social problem. Whether consciously or unconsciously, they exploit the affective tensions between national and gendered subjects. Without addressing social justice in any serious way, such new multicultural images exploit marginality for the sake of mainstream enjoyment and make questionable gestures toward multiracial progress toward equality.

Cultural political context and race representation are the primary sociological categories required for truly evaluating the progressive nature of (otherwise fun and empowering) media representations. Neoliberalism's effects on multiculturalism in America truly matter. They are transforming our collective culture by orientating us to understand our identities in less meaningful and productive ways than perhaps we should accept.

The films I will examine reflect the dominant accepted values of the neoliberal multicultural era. They place Latina characters within cultural assimilation narratives, expressing classical liberal values of individual effort and opportunities eliding the cultural context of many Latina lives. To properly represent the challenges facing the Latina working poor, in contrast to their film portrayals, would require critically examining social systems of racial and gender inequality.

To be fair, despite this elision, the films I examine here, *Spanglish*, *Maid in Manhattan*, and *Lone Star*, do offer empowered images of individual Latinas. However, as I will show in detail, their characterization remains subject to very paternalistic assimilationist ideals worthy of circumspection. These representations incorporate immigrant and US-born subjectivities into the American neoliberal capitalist fold, but based on questionable racial and gendered national ideals. What makes such films popular? These are important questions, if we believe that mass entertainment is one important form of knowledge production that really does influence US identities and hierarchies.

*Play, Negotiation, and Struggle*

Although my discussion thus far has been concerned with national ideologies and their influence on representation, I do not want to limit my analysis to simply locating examples of such ideology in film images. Beyond ideology, I will delve into the affect embedded in film images and the intimate interpersonal exchanges that occur in such films. I will analyze the narrative and aesthetic of these films, their context, and the ways fictional characters are oriented toward each other. All of these factors taken together orchestrate a play, a negotiation of cultural politics, and embody a power struggle within historical national racial, gender, class, and sexual tensions. I will argue that the cultural interplay that we find in film images are indeed strongly influenced by their neoliberal context; by the social ideologies of our day.

*Theoretical Concepts*

In addition to the concept of ‘affect,’ a central theoretical analytic I will use here is the concept of *performativity*. Judith Butler has convincingly used the language of performativity (or the discursive and ritual performance of identity) to explain how social identity is naturalized, or made to blend in with the accepted cultural reality through everyday repetition. She describes the expression of identity through the language of the *discursive play of power relations* in language and bodily expression. She analyzes the relationship between power and identity in terms of subjects who are structured through discourse; a subject reducible to the effects of power and its ability to name (Butler 1995; Magnus 2006). Butler (1990) in her famous book, *Gender Trouble*, abstracted from the ways racial politics and commitments play out in everyday life, offering a new liberatory and transcendent conception of gender politics and identity. Her concept of gender *performativity* challenges previous feminist ideals about “uniting under one banner: women,” by arguing that “gender” and “sex” should be divorced to extricate the idea that women’s gender is equivalent to their supposed biological function: reproduction.

When applied to real lives, this cognitive re-orientation might have the effect of freeing up masculine and feminine associations with particular statuses, labor positions, life styles, and assumptions, allowing people to perform their various possible masculine and feminine identities across the spectrum. In this utopian imaginary that Butler suggests, identities might free themselves up, so that rather than suppressing, say a woman’s “masculine expression” to fit

the repeated “normal” feminine gender expectation, she may express her masculine and feminine aspects across a whole spectrum. By divorcing the physical body from a gender expectation, Butler isolates the body in the realm of discourse and thus, language and expressive culture more generally. This space of linguistic and bodily expression is where new gender performativities—new possibilities for new identities—can take place. So, what does this have to do with Latina film representations and the circulation of Latina images?

The idea of performativity is useful in film and other entertainment media analysis for understanding both stereotyped identity performances as well as subversions or otherwise re-imagined versions of previously normalized and objectified identities. By examining Latina identity as *performativity* in film, I too urge the reader to divorce the image of the body from the assumption that “Latinas”—a part of a socio-historical national nomenclature—are essentially *Latinas*. Latinas, like any social category, is a term that rests on often politically charged assumptions. Depending on context, the term Latina carries much political baggage and the reader must suspend their assumptions about what a Latina is, in order to understand how Latina identities stand in relationship to their white counterparts. Only then can one see the narrowness of Latina images in the mainstream context.

Indeed, there is no one way to be a Latina and thus, filmic representations are *repetitions* as Butler says, of a hegemonic view of what Latinas are assumed to be. Latinas are historically fluid social identities, yet in the present mainstream media, depicted as often static and non-diverse identities. Using the notion of performativity I examine how Latina images both repeat stereotypic Latina representations as well as how these images resist the normative discourse through new twists and challenges to the normative stereotypic historical representation that audiences might expect to see. In this representational *play*, we can locate the influence of neoliberal and multicultural values that dominate our national culture.

### *Performativity as a Politically Invested Identity Play*

Butler’s theoretical formulation promises to only partly answer these questions: How do we describe the current normative movie discourse that—as I will argue—effectively interpellates Latina identity into a racialized labor hierarchy? How does national culture shape representation and how does it look differently than previous images? Although Butler has been criticized for, “underestim[ing] the power of subjects to work together to determine their lives and the

social conditions that structure their existence,” I look at film images to show the ideological assumptions in entertainment media that anti-racists and feminist activists and critics are troubled by (Magnus 2006: 82). I look at mainstream film here as an important space for examining such performative *play*, how Latina subjectivities are partly structured by national discourse in entertainment media. Latina film images are one example of how identities are classified in our national entertainment culture. As Hall (1998) has reminded us in “Notes on Deconstructing the ‘Popular:’”

The danger arises because we tend to think of cultural forms as a whole and coherent: either wholly corrupt or wholly authentic. Whereas, they are deeply contradictory; they play on contradictions, especially when they play in the domain of the ‘popular’...What matters is not the intrinsic or historically fixed objects of culture, but the state of play in cultural relations...what counts is the class struggle in and over culture. (188-9)

Identities and hierarchies in this view are both malleable, but always subject to the continuity of historical hegemonic power. Today’s neo-liberal brand of multiculturalism has a strong influence on power relations across our national identities. And of course, to further complicate US cultural identities, hierarchies are as structured by race and gender as they are by class. In terms of race, class and gender, Latina identity has historically been represented ambivalently and has been subject to contradictory forms of assimilation into national institutions and the American image. Given these facts, Latina images in multicultural movies as well as in our national culture more generally, seem both narrow and racially ideological from my perspective. At a time when indigenous people across the Americas (and globally) are struggling for economic and cultural survival, it seems ideological to represent US Latina laborers as non-indigenous people; as whitish Mexicans as in *Spanglish*, or as a glamorous Nuyorican in *Maid in Manhattan*. Although these choices might say more about European beauty ideals than about neoliberalism and multiculturalism, it is my estimation that race, beauty ideals, and post-colonial forms of capitalism are all bound up in our culture. These factors at least partly define who we are in relation to each other, and who is and is not deserving of certain rights and privileges in the nation.

*Indigenous People as Voiceless Across Borders*

Indeed, these contradictions of racial meaning even take on varied perceptions from one side of the US-Mexican border to the other. Vila (2003) found that, when shown images of both clean suburban areas and dilapidated housing areas across both sides of the border, randomly chosen respondents associated the poor areas with Mexico and the suburban areas with the US side. Despite the fact that the suburban images were taken on the Mexican side, the stereotypes were clearly expressed. Marginalized areas and people are both equally ghettoized in the global media and on the streets. Moreover, Fox (2006) argues that the abrupt insertion of indigenous migrants (arguably the most marginalized of the Americas) into media discourse has cast them as either a threat to local communities or as victims, but rarely as collective actors in the global economy. In agreement with Fox, indigenous people have been politically, socially and culturally silenced throughout history and still today.

*What do I mean by "Latinas"?*

Juan Flores (2000) argues that the ways Latinos are imagined within advertising culture and within the social sciences can often incorporate their racial, cultural, national, and linguistic diversity into its theory of Latino unity as well as how their ethnic distinctions are stereotypically represented. Flores argues that a sustained analysis of Latino racialization as a historically varied experience with an emphasis on internal antagonism can have the effect of creating more productive unity than uncritically lumping them all together as an assumed monolith; a voting bloc, a threat to America, or as a consumer market. Omi (1998) tends to agree, arguing that pan-ethnic orientations to politics have the effect of diminishing the possibility of universal goals and thus, although serve to consolidate "like" groups, and can help facilitate lobbying voting blocs for gaining collective rights and privileges, can have the negative effect of reinforcing false notions of intra-group harmony, stereotypes, and obscure diverse needs of lower class members of pan-ethnic groups.

In the spirit of this criticism, I examine the discursive play in film imaginings of Latina identity as an assumed "unity" and as personal experiences of "being ethnic" in America. Latino is best understood as a multitude of experiences located within historical struggle with white hegemonic national culture and within its own sub-group. The *Latino imaginary*, in Flores' view, is the way both Latino and non-Latino agen-