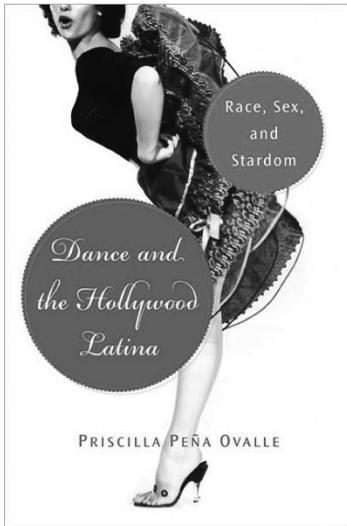


Marika Piday-Warren

## Book Review: Priscilla Peña Ovalle, *Dance and the Hollywood Latina: Race, Sex, and Stardom*

Rutgers University Press, 2010.  
\$72.00 (hardcover), \$25.95 (paper or e-book)



Deftly navigating between theoretical sophistication and literary verve, Priscilla Peña Ovalle's *Dance and the Hollywood Latina: Race, Sex, and Stardom* is an accessible and provocative exploration of race, gender, and the heavily weighted cinematic image of the brown female body in motion. Combining archival research with intensive theory, Ovalle provides a comprehensive historiography of dancing Latinas in film as well as a prescient look at their representational evolution which has led us to our current cultural moment—one that reifies and segregates the figure of the sensual fiery Latina. This image, despite shifting contexts and preoccupations, has maintained a remarkable, even dismaying, consistency and currency. In her introduction, Ovalle lays out her meticulous methodology, which employs a recombinant approach of interdisciplinary fields, theories, and historical research to support her central contention: the Hollywood Latina has come to embody an entrenched set of racialized and sexualized codes of imagery and performance

that have fixed her as a naturalized part of the cinematic landscape. Ovalle approaches this thesis by first interrogating exactly why dance has become a requisite part of the Latina star's career trajectory and she poses the following questions: "What is the myth of the Hollywood Latina and how do dance, race, and sexuality operate as its intertwining code in Hollywood film? Second, how has the unique in-betweenness and racial mobility of the dancing Latina body contributed to the reiterative production of a cohesive racial identity in the United States?"<sup>1</sup>

Her chosen theories are Latino/a studies and classical cinema theory inflected by a bit of performance studies, though she admits that the figure of the Latina in motion is the primary focus, rather than the strictly technical aspect of dance. She also clarifies her chosen terminology, especially the intentional and very pointed use of "Latina," defending her invocation of the historically reductive or misleading word by stating, "In this volume I broadly use the term 'Latina' to reclaim

and reorient the dismissive cultural collapse that has allowed Hollywood to consistently conflate Mexico, Brazil, Puerto Rico, and other Latin American regions with each other and with Spain. The term ‘Latina’ exposes how --regardless of the performer’s persona or self-identification—such errors rank, racialize, and sexualize Latin American countries within the cinematic frame according to shifting U.S. social, cultural, and political interests.”<sup>2</sup>

Ovalle’s most powerful and resonant contention is that the Latina serves as a liminal figure that negotiates the poles of race in America, namely the often incommensurate binaries of black and white. Additionally, the Latina’s physicality allows her a more fluid movement within racial categories than that of her darker minority counterparts. To explore this phenomenon, Ovalle relies on the terms “in-betweenness” and “racial mobility,” and she uses them frequently throughout. In-betweenness demarcates the ambiguously racialized space that Latinas occupy in the hierarchy of visual representation, “Oscillating between the normalcy of whiteness and the exoticism of blackness, Latinas function as in-between bodies to mediate and maintain the racial status quo.”<sup>3</sup> In reference to the concept of racial mobility, Ovalle argues that this mainstream accessibility is often determined by the casting of male leads: “The Hollywood Latina’s racial mobility is dependent on her specific intersection of nonwhiteness and femaleness and her position on the sliding-scale hierarchy can be greatly influenced by the Romantic lead cast opposite her.”<sup>4</sup> While the idea of brown females existing as a sort of palatable safe zone between the races has been extant for some time, Ovalle goes beyond the observation in an analysis of what exactly makes them a safer minority and how such constructions are implemented.

In terms of the book’s structure, Ovalle employs chronological case studies to exemplify the broader use of Latinas. Each chapter is given over to a deconstruction—both biographical and semiotic—of a specific star. The second chapter focuses on Dolores del Rio and the strategic use of a Spanish Fantasy Past to downplay del Rio’s Mexican origins and offer up an image of continental elitism that also cleaves to the larger

preoccupation of Los Angeles boosterism in the 1930s. Chapter 3 delves into the politically charged though regrettably limited career of Carmen Miranda, whose persona was so excessive and extravagant that she became synonymous with Latin America and the symbol of the Good Neighbor foreign policy in her spectacularized musical reign. Ovalle’s fourth chapter, on Rita Hayworth, focuses on the star’s cosmetic transformation and Americanization, which changed her image from brunette spitfire into the iconic redheaded sex goddess of classical era film. Chapter 5, on Rita Moreno, casts the Puerto Rican triple threat as the all-star minority, one whose very versatility and plurality gave her the most career longevity of any the stars previously discussed. The final chapter, on Jennifer Lopez, comes full circle by returning to one of Ovalle’s major preoccupations, namely Lopez’s racial mobility and shifting liminal status, as she has vacillated between a black, urban image (especially in her music industry phase) and an overall whitening of her image.

Ovalle has an undeniably winning authorial personality that pervades her writing, making it an enjoyable work. There is a warmth and genuine investment in the topic, allowing her to bridge academic jargon and distancing intellectual discussion with the fervor of a politicized clarion call. Although she maintains a scholarly objectivity, we are ultimately left in no doubt that she is passionate about and personally invested in the subject, endowing the book with an accessibility for its readership. Her choice of persona-based case studies is ideal: each chapter, replete with biographic treasures and semiological deconstruction, provides insight into and explication of the star body and its historical context. Additionally, the cumulative effect of the chapters crafts a clear and ineluctable trajectory of the dancing Latina’s career, existence, and evolution, including the progress, the stasis, and even the regression. In charting the fraught paths of these stars, Ovalle often depressingly reveals the disparity of actual social change and the still woefully circumscribed space of existence for Latinas in film and their persistent stereotypical representation in visual culture. By situating each female star within her historical context, Ovalle continually demonstrates how each woman’s construction, publicity, and body of work are

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reflective of her time and carefully orchestrated to reinforce or influence public perceptions of Latinas. Each female star becomes metonymic of a specific time and place, and her image is used strategically by cultivating inexorable visual codes that position these actresses for the entirety of their careers. Consequently, each chapter has merit as a biographical historiography of a Latina star, but taken as an aggregate whole they have even more significance in articulating the protean and often insidious nature of racial identity construction, showing how expansive and yet constricting the space for female minorities can be.

A weak point in the text is Ovalle's own self-professed lack of expertise in the dance field. She admits in her introduction that the technical aspects of dance are not her forte, which sometimes proves a frustration in her descriptive or synoptic paragraphs because she uses rather vague adjectives and descriptions of dance moves

that do not fully capture the moment or convey the technical mastery—or in some cases the improvisational freedom—of the dancer. Ovalle is aware that dance analysis is not her *métier*, but the book occasionally suffers for it when she attempts close textual analysis of a dance sequence and has to rely on vague or unspecified terms that fail to properly describe the choreography and requisite artistry.

In terms of usage, *Dance and the Hollywood Latina* is compelling as a whole and shows the full scope of Ovalle's research and the strength and resilience of her thesis. However it could also be effectively taught in the classroom as single chapters. The J Lo chapter, especially, would be productively assigned for visual studies or communication classes, not only for its relevancy and accessibility, but for its open-ended address to the present multicultural moment and its attention to the commodification of ethnic cool.

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### Notes

1 Priscilla Peña Ovalle, *Dance and the Hollywood Latina: Race, Sex, and Stardom*, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2010), 2.

2 Ibid., 4.

3 Ibid., 7.

4 Ibid., 9.

