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Remembering Selena, Re-membering *Latinidad*

Deborah Paredez

During the 1990s, both mainstream and marginal communities in the United States took part in conspicuously celebrating the Latina celebrity. This (re)emergence of the highly visible, hyper-sexualized Latina performer coincided with numerous legislative and discursive attacks on Latina/os and with shifting and renewed assertions of Latina/o identity, or *latinidad*.¹ More precisely, the Latina body was often and

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¹ The xenophobic hysteria that marked the decade was manifested in the passage of legislative acts that included California's Proposition 187 (1994), the immigrant provisions of The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act (1996), and the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (1996). Proposition 187 denied access to public health care and schooling to all undocumented persons. Although much of Proposition 187 was overturned by federal court decisions (deemed unconstitutional), Congress ultimately enacted national legislation that enforced some of the proposition's provisions within the welfare and immigration reform bills passed in 1996. The immigration-related provisions of the Work Opportunity Act sought drastic welfare cuts targeted at legal immigrants while the Immigration Reform Act further entrenched the border's status as a militarized zone with increased border patrols and fences, thereby constructing all Latina/os outside the borders of American citizenry. The draconian measures enforced by these acts severely disenfranchised many US Latina/o communities, even while mainstream corporations celebrated the booming Latina/o market.

For more on the various attempts to theorize *latinidad* see: Frances R. Aparicio and Susana Chávez-Silverman, ed., *Tropicalizations: Transcultural Representations of Latinidad* (Hanover: University of New England Press, 1997); William V. Flores and Rina Benmayor, ed., *Latino Cultural Citizenship: Claiming Identity, Space and Rights* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997); Nilda Flores-González, "The Racialization of Latinos: The Meaning of Latina/o Identity for the Second Generation," *Latino Studies Journal* 10.3 (1999): 3–31; and Felix Padilla, *Latino Ethnic Consciousness: The Case of Mexican Americans and Puerto*

variously celebrated both as the means through which hegemonic forces sought to occlude and thereby to ignore the political economic plights of Latina/os and as the site upon which Latina/o communities attempted to stage their presence within the nation. One of the most visible Latinas during this time was Selena Quintanilla Perez, whose popularity and eventual posthumous iconization enabled the visibility of other Latinas throughout the decade and set into motion the most recent Latin Music Boom that exploded in the 1990s.²

Selena initially achieved phenomenal success within and ultimately took part in transforming Tejano music, a popular Latina/o performance genre that emerged from the dynamic Texas-Mexico border region. Within the rhythms of Tejano music, one can trace the legacy of power occupations and negotiations that have marked South Texas; Mexican *rancheras* and *cumbias* collide with German polkas, Afro-Caribbean rhythms and mainstream US pop, hip hop, and country western influences often all within the same song.³ Selena mastered traditional Tejano musical conventions with a repertoire that included Spanish-language Mariachi ballads, English-language pop love songs, and code-switching *cumbias*, even while she reinvented the male-dominated genre with performances that highlighted the racialized and sexualized Tejana body. And yet, despite her regional Tejana markings, which traditionally connote a decisively un-hip, non-urban, blue-collar sensibility within the larger Latina/o imaginary,⁴ Selena gained overwhelming popularity among diverse and often divided Latina/o communities across the US during a historical moment characterized by emergent and often competing articulations of political and cultural identity among Latina/os. That is, Selena represented and ultimately redefined Texas-Mexico border culture, while simultaneously succeeding in crossing over aesthetic, cultural, and national borders.⁵

Ricans in Chicago (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995). Scholars in theatre, performance, and film studies have also produced nuanced analyses of *latinidad* in relation to cultural production. See for example: José Estaban Muñoz, "Feeling Brown: Ethnicity and Affect in Ricardo Bracho's *The Sweetest Hangover (and Other STDs)*," *Theatre Journal* 52 (2000): 67–80; Jennifer Negrón-Muntaner, "Jennifer's Butt," *Aztlán* 22.2 (1997): 181–95; and David Román, "Latino Performance and Identity," *Aztlán* 22.2 (1997): 151–70.

² As Jennifer Lopez's career, which skyrocketed following her portrayal of Selena in Gregory Nava's 1997 biopic *Selena*, demonstrates, despite ahistorical mainstream accounts that suggest otherwise, this was not the first Latin music explosion that marked the century. See, for example, John Storm Roberts, *The Latin Tinge: The Impact of Latin American Music on the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979).

³ For more on the political economic implications of Tejano music see Manuel Peña, *Música Tejana: The Cultural Economy of Artistic Transformation* (College Station: Texas A & M Press, 1999). For nuanced analyses that explore the ways in which Selena operated within this context, see: Raúl Coronado, Jr., "Selena's Good Buy: Texas Mexicans, History, y Selena Meet Transnational Capitalism," *Aztlán* 26.1 (2001): 59–100; and Deborah R. Vargas, "Cruzando Frontejas: Remapping Selena's Tejano Music Crossover," *Changing Chicana Traditions*, ed. Norma Cantú and Olga Nájera-Ramírez (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, In Press).

⁴ In an interview with Manuel Peña, Cameron Randle, a record executive within the Tejano music industry, makes this point clear: "We just came back from the *Billboard Magazine* Latin conference in Miami. And you go down and get a sobering reminder of Tejano's place within the Latino family, musically. It's still treated essentially as a blue-collar, secondary genre of music that is confined to a geographical area." See Peña, *Música Tejana*, 196.

⁵ EMI Latin Records, with whom Selena had secured a deal in 1989 when she was 18, took a large part in engineering her successful crossover from a regionally-identified Tejana to a nationally

Selena's popularity gained tremendous momentum after she was murdered at age 23 by the former president of her fan club in 1995. Following her death, a staggering number of memorial tributes, public performances of grief, and a proliferation of Selena impersonations were enacted in her honor.⁶ Mainstream representational and corporate forces capitalized on Selena's posthumous iconization, invoking her as a means for increasing profits by tapping into the Latina/o market and for reinforcing the borders of America.⁷ Thus, while for many Latina/o communities Selena's tragedy offered a site upon which to render visible their own tragic plights resulting from concurrent xenophobic legislation, numerous corporate forces acknowledged Selena's tragedy as a way to inform Latina/os that they could become American only by becoming consumers. Undeniably, the Selena tragedy has emerged as both a significant site of (counter)cultural affirmation and as a lucrative industry. This essay, informed by the productive convergence between theatre studies and Latina/o studies, investigates the role of the tragic narrative within the makings of *latinidad* by exploring the question: "What does it mean to mourn Selena?" This line of inquiry follows the lead of other Latina/o performance scholars who have focused critical attention on the ways in which Latina/o celebrity has functioned as a significant and dynamic cultural force throughout the nation's history.⁸ As such, this essay takes part in the tradition of

marketable Latina, thereby highlighting the ways in which *latinidad* operates not simply as a space of cultural affirmation but, as Frances Negrón-Muntaner notes, as a "technology" deployed by various, often competing, publics. See Negrón-Muntaner, "Jennifer's Butt," 184.

⁶ These include feature-length and documentary films, video and magazine tributes, television specials, websites, commemorative Coca-Cola bottles, murals in her hometown and in New York City's Lower East Side, Selena dance contests, Selena Barbie dolls, biographies, monuments, a scholarship fund, a museum, and a display of one of her costumes at the Smithsonian. Theatre has also turned its attention toward her in the form of a ballet (*When Dreams Explode*) staged by New York's Ballet Hispanico in 1996, a play (*Un Ritmo de Frontera*) that ran for five weeks at Tijuana's Social Security Theatre in 1997, and a touring musical, *Selena Forever*, launched in San Antonio in March 2000 to commemorate the five-year anniversary of her death and re-staged in Los Angeles in May 2001 as *Selena: A Musical Celebration of Life*.

⁷ In an article printed in *The Houston Chronicle*, Anna Maria Arias, editor and publisher of the Washington DC-based *Latina Style* magazine, asserts, "The next census will validate the market in larger numbers than we can imagine. Selena's death was a turning point for the emergence of the US Latino market. It's like twenty years ago and someone is telling you to invest in the high-tech industry. The same thing can be said now for the Hispanic market. Invest now." Hector D. Cantu, "Selena's Death Got Attention of Market," *The Houston Chronicle*, 28 March 1999, 1.

People Weekly magazine became acutely aware of and quickly capitalized upon the Latina/o market immediately following Selena's death. For the cover of their April 17, 1995 issue, editors at the magazine ran a split cover for the first time in its history. In seven states (primarily throughout the US Southwest), Selena graced the cover, while throughout the rest of the country, the cover featured the all-Caucasian cast of the NBC sitcom, *Friends*. When the 422,000 copies of the *People Weekly* issue honoring Selena sold out nearly overnight, executives at the magazine stunned by this apparently sudden sign of Latina/o purchasing power responded by deciding to run two printings of a 76-page "Special Tribute" issue devoted to Selena released later that month. When both printings of the special issue also sold out, *People* began plans for launching *People en Español*, a magazine aimed exclusively at the untapped Latina/o market. Other publishers took notice and by the end of 1996, *Newsweek en Español* and *Latina* joined *People en Español* on the newsstands.

⁸ A few notable examples of this trend include: Michelle Habell-Pallán, "El Vez is 'Taking Care of Business': The Inter/national Appeal of Chicano Popular Music," *Cultural Studies* 13.2 (1999): 195-210; Michelle Habell-Pallán and Mary Romero, ed., *Latina/o Popular Culture* (New York: New York University Press, In Press); José E. Muñoz's work on Pedro Zamora in *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999); Frances Negrón-

enriching Latina/o Studies with a nuanced understanding of performance and of encouraging the continued re-mapping of the traditional borders circumscribing American theatre studies.

Selena Latina/os Forever: Tragedy and Latinidad

A year following our initial meeting at the San Antonio premiere of the musical *Selena Forever*, sixteen year-old Francisco Vara-Orta and I continue to discuss the political implications of remembering Selena. Vara-Orta asserts:

If I could have changed something about the musical, I would have focused more on what happened after she died. [The play] needed to move past her murder. Many people think of Selena's death as just another tragedy, but Selena was not killed due to her own fault. I mean, it was a tragedy, but there was some triumph in what she achieved in death. When she died, this phenomenon happened. Because of her contribution to Tex-Mex culture, [Latina] girls felt someone like them was on TV—and not just for being a whore, a drug addict, a politician who forgot where they came from, or a Hispanic wannabe. Because of her work, I started to learn Spanish. Her *Amor Prohibido* album was the first album I ever bought with lyrics in the language my blood is rooted in. Because of her . . . Hispanics are on the stage and are drawing a crowd that many never believed would enter a theatre unless they were going to sweep the floors. Catch my drift? Selena . . . made a lot of Americans wake up and smell the *frijoles*.⁹

Vara-Orta's rhetorical movement from his memory of Selena to a commentary about Tex-Mex culture, Hispanics, and ultimately all Americans not only underscores the scope of Selena's impact but also signals the ways in which the tragedy of Selena offers many Latina/os a narrative framework through which to critique the political economic positions of Latina/os within the theatre and indeed throughout the US. Moreover, his desire for and subsequent articulation of an alternative narrative closure for the story of Selena's tragedy reveals how the act of mourning Selena invariably begets the imagining of a future for Latina/os that moves past her murder and toward a space of cultural and political reclamation.

Vara-Orta's comments echo Joseph Roach's insights about the structure of classical tragedy and its relationship to the performance of memory. Roach writes, "The choreography of catastrophic closure—Fortinbras arrives, Aeneas departs, Creon remains—offers a way of imagining what comes next as well as what has already happened. Under the seductive linearity of its influence, memory operates as an alternation between retrospection and anticipation that is itself, for better or worse, a work of art."¹⁰ Both Vara-Orta and Roach display a nuanced understanding that

Muntaner, "Jennifer's Butt"; José Quiroga's discussion of Ricky Martin in *Tropics of Desire* (New York: New York University Press, 2001); David Román, "Latino Geneologies: Broadway and Beyond, the Case of John Leguizamo" in an unpublished manuscript from his book-in-progress on contemporary American theatre; Alberto Sandoval-Sanchez, *José Can You See?: Latinos On and Off Broadway* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1999).

⁹ Francisco Vara-Orta, personal interview, 23 July 2001.

¹⁰ Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 33. Adrien Kear and Deborah Lynn Steinberg, in their edited volume, *Mourning Diana*, also note how the classical tragic model "provides an exposition of the performative structures of mourning. That is, the public performance of grief brings about the community it appears to represent precisely by invoking the ghosts of the past. The theatre of mourning, then, provides a key stage for the performative construction of the contemporary through the dramatic rearticulation of the past."

embedded within the classical tragic narrative structure as well as within the enactment of memory is a consideration of the future and not simply the past. While Roach ultimately derides the “restrictive linearity” of this Western narrative structure, wherein he posits that the future is inevitably invested with the “fatality of the past,” in favor of non-Western spirit-world ceremonies that provide closure through celebration and not “in obligatory fifth act carnage,”¹¹ his insights about the classical tragic structure nonetheless also suggest that the imagined future is not entirely circumscribed by fated catastrophe. Indeed, while the closure of Western tragedy requires that, as Roach notes, “the die is cast, the cast must die,” it also invariably portends a particular future event: that is, the subsequent change of state that will follow from the fifth-act carnage.

It is precisely this aspect of Selena’s tragedy—the contemplation of impending changes of state and political economic affairs to which Francisco alludes—toward which I wish to direct our attention. As Vara-Orta’s comments about the phenomenon following Selena’s death suggest, the act of mourning Selena constituted one of the most provocative and generative ways in which Latina/os in the US articulated a critical formulation of *latinidad* during the 1990s and in which Latina/os continue to assert Fortinbras’s—or rather, Francisco’s—arrival in the millennium. I am interested in examining the ways in which the tragedy of Selena provided many Latina/os with a compelling discursive space in which to decry both past and concurrent tragic consequences they faced as a result of new nativist hysteria that marked the decade as well as to imagine a future wherein Latina/os would gain significant political economic and representational ground in light of the 2000 Census projections and findings.¹²

In this article, I plan to situate the diverse array of Selena commemorations within this socio-political context and to end with an ethnographic analysis of a deeply contested Selena memorial site: the touring musical initially entitled *Selena Forever* and recently re-staged and remounted as *Selena: A Musical Celebration of Life* (see Fig. 1). My

Adrien Kear and Deborah Lynn Steinberg, “Ghost Writing” in *Mourning Diana: Nation, Culture and the Performance of Grief*, ed. Kear and Steinberg (London: Routledge, 1999), 6.

¹¹ Roach, *Cities*, 35.

¹² I borrow the term “new nativism” from Juan Perea and George Sánchez. See Juan Perea, ed., *Immigrants Out: The New Nativism and the Anti-Immigrant Impulse in the US* (New York: New York University Press, 1999) and George Sánchez, “Face the Nation: Race, Immigration, and the Rise of Nativism in Late Twentieth Century America,” *International Migration Review* 31 (1997): 1009–30.

As the countless news articles on the 2000 Census projections and findings report, the Latina/o population surpassed projected figures and now constitute the fastest growing minority in the nation. This deluge of analysis points to the ways in which the 2000 Census constitutes an important indicator of how Latina/os have re-configured and are continuing to reshape national discourses on race and ethnicity. See, for example, Juan Andrade, “Latino Population Boom Shakes Up Entire Country,” *Chicago Sun-Times*, 1 July 2001, late sports final ed., 35; William Booth, “California Minorities Are Now the Majority; Non-Hispanic Whites Dip Below 50%,” *The Washington Post*, 31 August 2000, final ed., A01; Tom Gorman, “California and the West: A Tripling of the Number of Latinos Led the Increase,” *Los Angeles Times*, 14 March 2000, 3; Greg Johnson, “Gaining Insight Into the Latino Middle Class,” *Los Angeles Times*, 11 June 2001, 1; Georgia Pabst, “Census Data Show Impact for Latinos,” *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, 16 July 2001, final ed., 6A; Lori Rodriguez, “The Census: Big Gains for Latinos in Census,” *The Houston Chronicle*, 11 March 2001, A1; Richard Simon, “Presidential Candidates are Courting Voters in the Wake of Census Figures that Predict Latinos Will Soon Be the Largest Minority Group,” *Los Angeles Times*, 18 September 1999, 12.



Figure 1. Veronica Vasquez as Selena in *Selena Forever*. Courtesy of Gabriele Reyes.

methodological approach constitutes a response to Jill Dolan's call for a "model of exchange between theatre and other fields and disciplines rather than one in which the performative evacuates theatre studies."¹³ Dolan argues for a retention of theatre studies as a disciplinary home while calling for the productive disruption of its "apparent coherence" through the inclusion of people it has historically excluded.¹⁴ The *Selena* musical and the controversies surrounding its production offer an ideal site for fulfilling Dolan's (re)vision of theatre studies because, as this essay will detail, it reveals the historically fraught relationship between Latina/os and mainstream US theatre while also underscoring theatre's efficacy as a localized and generative space wherein, as Dolan notes, "oppositional cultural work is frequently conducted."¹⁵

¹³ Jill Dolan, "Geographies of Learning: Theatre Studies, Performance, and the 'Performative,'" *Theatre Journal* 45 (1993): 421. Dolan urges theatre scholars to "borrow back the use-value other fields have found in ours" (418). She observes: "Theories of the performative creatively borrow from concepts in theatre studies to make their claim for the constructed nature of subjectivity, suggesting that social subjects perform themselves in negotiation with the delimiting cultural conventions of the geography within which they move. But as much as performativity seems to capture the academic imagination, and as much as performance captures the political field, theatrical performances, as located, historical sites for interventionist work in social identity constructions, are rarely considered across the disciplines, methods, and politics that borrow its terms" (419–20). As one possible methodological approach, she proposes exploring theatre studies as "an ethnography, while avoiding the imperialist gesture of the anthropologist's gaze" (436). My work takes up this call.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 420.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 423.

Indeed, while the subject and methods of my work attempt a productive intervention in theatre studies, the theoretical premise guiding this essay undeniably highlights how theatre studies' nuanced understanding of both the symbolic and the material body in performance provide a healthy injection into the field of Latina/o Studies. My approach to the performances of mourning Selena is deeply informed by Joseph Roach's keen observation that memory, like performance, "operates as both quotation and invention, an improvisation on borrowed themes, with claims on the future as well as the past."¹⁶ Understood within this theoretical framework, the various incarnations of Selena memorials can provide insights into the ways in which the act of remembering Selena operates not only as a site wherein corporate interests commodify and capitalize upon the Latina/o market but also as a complex form of cultural expression wherein many Latina/os render visible and articulate the tragedies of a collective history of subjugation and create visions for a future change of state in light of shifting and renewed assertions of *latinidad*.

The Queen is Dead; Long Live the Queen

Within hours following Selena's murder on March 31, 1995, thousands of her fans in cities from Los Angeles to Miami poured into the streets carrying signs of remembrances and holding candlelight vigils in her honor. In Corpus Christi, Selena's hometown, traffic near her house in the working class neighborhood of Molina trailed on for over a mile as hundreds drove by in a somber procession, bearing shoe polish messages like "Selena Lives On" on their windows. Hundreds more gathered at the Day's Inn Motel, where Selena had been fatally shot by the former president of her fan club. By the following day, thousands of her fans made the pilgrimage to Corpus Christi, transforming the motel and the 6-foot-high chain link fence surrounding Selena's home into canvases of banners, photos, flowers, flags from the US, Mexico, and El Salvador, and notes penned by visitors from throughout the continental United States, Mexico, Puerto Rico, Colombia, and Canada.¹⁷

In response to this tremendous outpouring of grief, Selena's family arranged a day-long wake on Saturday, April 1 at the city's Bayfront Auditorium (later renamed the Selena Auditorium), where nearly 50,000 mourners filed past her closed casket in steady solemnity throughout the day. At one point during the afternoon, a rumor began to spread that Selena was not really dead and that, in fact, the whole affair was simply a publicity stunt. Selena's family, in an effort to calm the crowd, ordered the coffin opened briefly to reveal her corpse. Other episodes of Selena's exposure continued throughout the following weeks across the nation as countless Americans—predominantly but not exclusively Latina/os—mourned the tragic and untimely death of the Queen of Tejano Music, prompting one journalist to proclaim: "The veneration of Selena is taking on a life of its own."¹⁸

These public performances of grief spurred a range of reactions from corporate enterprises and from cultural commentators. These responses reveal the multiple publics invested in the circulation of the Latina body; or, more precisely, they highlight

¹⁶ Roach, *Cities*, 34.

¹⁷ Bill Hewitt, Joseph Harmes, and Bob Stewart, "Before Her Time," *People Weekly*, 17 August 1995, 48–53.

¹⁸ Joe Nick Patoski, "The Queen is Dead," *Texas Monthly*, May 1995, 110.

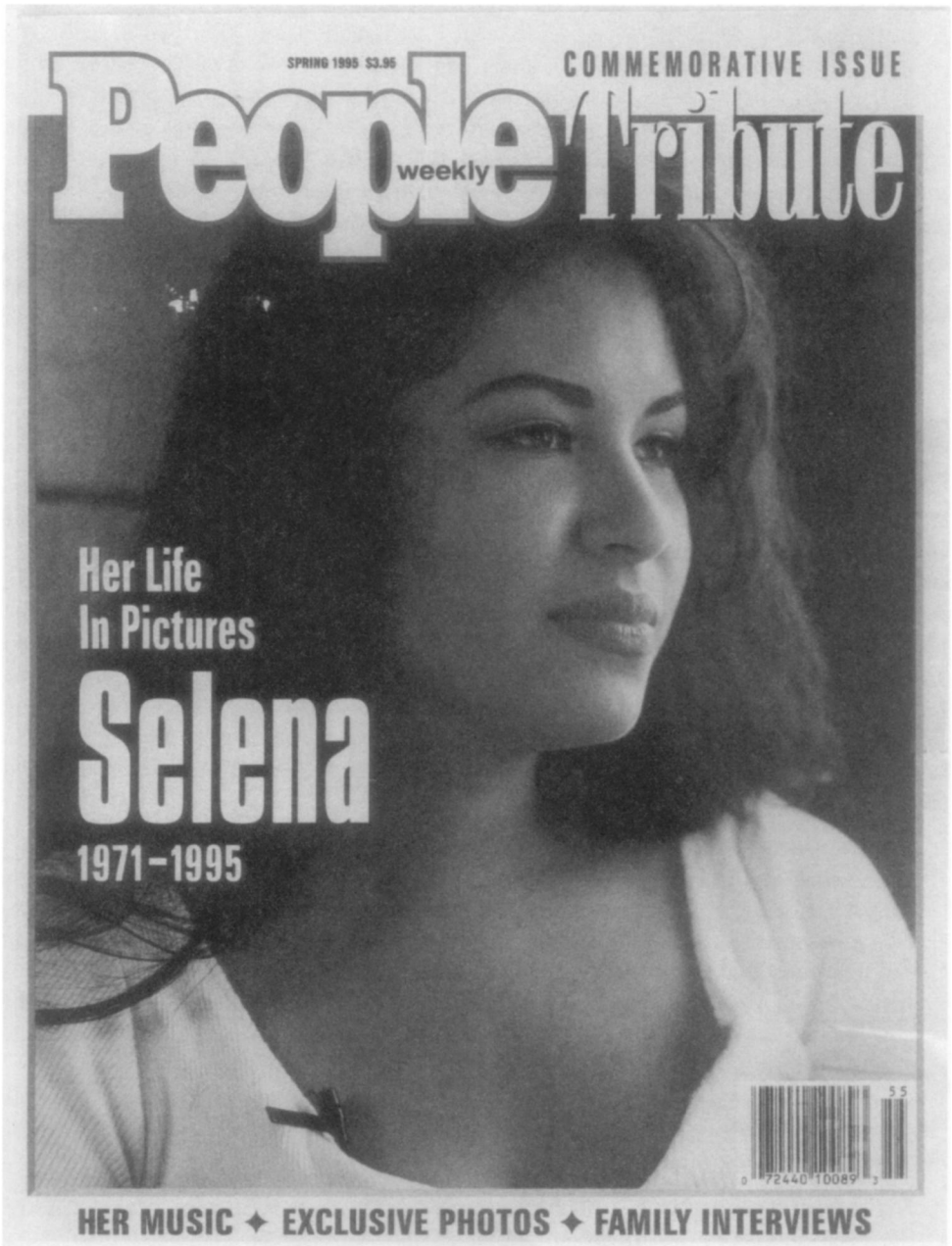


Figure 2. *People Weekly* commemorative issue featuring Selena, spring 1995.
Reproduced by permission *People Weekly*.

the tension between the visibility of Selena's tragedy and the concurrent invisibility of Latina/o political economic tragedies within the national(ist) imaginary.¹⁹ Among the most notorious and indeed among the most virulent reactions to Selena's death was radio shock-jock Howard Stern's response. On the morning of Selena's burial, Stern played one of Selena's songs accompanied by the sound of gunfire while he parodied, with an attempted Spanish accent, the thousands of weeping mourners who had attended Selena's wake. He then announced: "Spanish people have the worst taste in music. They have no depth . . . Selena? Her music is awful. I don't know what Mexicans are into. If you're going to sing about what's going on in Mexico, what can you say? . . . You can't grow crops, you got a cardboard house, your eleven-year-old daughter is a prostitute. . . . This is music to perform abortions to."²⁰ Outraged by his comments, two disc jockeys from KXTJ, a Tejano radio station in Houston, called in to the show to protest. In response, Stern asserted, "If you don't like it, go back to Mexico," following his comments with the claim that if his Mexican-American critics were to achieve political power in America, "It's *adios*, Constitution. They'd ruin this country, too."²¹ Stern later issued an apology in Spanish following the deluge of complaints filed against the station, including the threat of a nation-wide boycott of the show's corporate sponsors issued by the League of United Latin American Citizens, a national Latina/o advocacy group in Texas.

Stern's parodic performance and the public battles it provoked reveal how within the fraught space of Selena's memory, competing claims to America are enacted. Here, to mourn Selena is to proclaim Latina/o purchasing power, while "not mourning" her—to borrow Richard Johnson's productive formulation²²—redraws the borders of America to exclude Latina/os, or in Stern's words, "Spanish people" who should "go back to Mexico." Furthermore, the positioning of Selena and her fans as Mexican and thereby beyond the borders of American citizenry, despite the fact that Selena was US-born and raised and learned Spanish as an adult, allows Stern to locate the source of their problems in Mexico and not in US investments in transnational capitalism. While Diana Taylor argues that for Stern, Selena's death "proves too lowly to constitute a [social] drama" and is thereby "reduced to an incident,"²³ I suggest that Stern's acknowledgment of Selena and her fans actually signals his fear that the substantial presence of Latina/os rendered visible at Selena's wake constitutes significantly more than a mere incident. Stern's comment that the Constitution would be forsaken should Mexican Americans achieve political power reveals his belief that the rising numbers of Latina/os pose a very real threat to the national(ist) order. That is, while Stern may

¹⁹ This is not to suggest that all mainstream forms of representation devoted attention to Selena's death; however, it is also important to note that she remains one of the few Latinas to be eulogized in such periodicals as the *New York Times*, *The New Yorker*, *The Nation*, and *The New Republic*.

²⁰ David Hinckley, "Stern Heats Up Mexican Tempers," *Daily News*, 6 April 1995, 102; and María Celeste Arraras, *Selena's Secret* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997), 24.

²¹ Hinckley, "Stern," 102.

²² In his discussion about Princess Diana, Johnson notes that the conscious decision to "not mourn" Diana is equally fraught with politicized implications as the decision to mourn the princess. Richard Johnson, "Exemplary Differences: Mourning (and Not Mourning) a Princess," in *Mourning Diana: Nation, Culture and the Performance of Grief*, ed. Adrien Kear and Deborah Lynn Steinberg (London: Routledge, 1999), 15–39.

²³ Diana Taylor, "Downloading Grief: Minority Populations Mourn Diana," in *Mourning Diana*, 198.

attempt to reduce the event to an inconsequential incident, his trenchant and labored efforts to re-draw the American border to exclude Latina/os actually underscore the explicit xenophobic anxiety that the excessive displays of grief among Selena fans represent an uncontrollable force in the nation. Thus, Stern's act of "not mourning" Selena reflects and ultimately reinforces the new nativist sentiments that were circulating at the time and that resulted the following year in the passage of the most restrictive immigration legislation in US history.²⁴

In the years since Howard Stern's remarks, Selena emerged not only as a site upon which the nation enacted its anxieties about as well as the voyeuristic desires to consume the so-called Latin Boom but also as a highly visible site upon which many Latina/os attempted to assert their claim to the nation. This evocation of Selena is vividly expressed in the website, *Forever Selena, Census 2000*, one of the hundreds of websites that have proliferated in her honor. The site appropriates the rhetoric of the US Census, urging fans to "Show everyone that you were counted."²⁵ Given the widely publicized problems faced by official Census 2000 takers to count Latina/os, the site's conflation of Selena commemoration with the machinations of the census carries significant symbolic value for many Latina/os. Consider that Selena was often revered as an embodiment of the traditionally undervalued aspects of *latinidad*: the *morena* (dark-skinned) and the working class. Here then, the website suggests, Latina/os can "get counted" and thereby proclaim their growing numbers through (an affiliation with) Selena. Ultimately, the site's pairing of Selena with the Census not only configures the space of Selena's memory as a safe and affirming place to register Latina/o presence within America but also demands that America take notice of the most often ignored and disenfranchized segments of Latina/o communities.

In another example which evokes Selena as a means through which to assert Latina/os within the American imaginary, Gregory Nava, director of *Selena*, the film based on Selena's life, told the *New York Times*: "Look at Elvis, James Dean and Marilyn. They were all brought down by their self-destructive natures. But for Selena to have been brought down this way is more tragic than the others because she really was living the American dream."²⁶ Nava positions Selena alongside this trinity of icons not simply to assert her presence within this pantheon but, in fact, to destabilize their iconic American status by suggesting that Selena's story is more tragic than the others precisely because of her exemplary performance as an American. Here, Nava displays an acute awareness of the classical mandate that tragic status is contingent upon citizenship status, and he exploits this construct as a way to position Selena within the American rubric. But Nava's statement does not signal a simplistically assimilationist

²⁴ Indeed, it is important to note that Stern issued his statement just 24 hours before Senator Alfonse D'Amato (R-NY) parodied Judge Lance Ito on Don Imus's nationally syndicated morning radio show. Critical of Judge Ito's handling of the O.J. Simpson trial, D'Amato launched into a fake Japanese accent, despite the fact that Judge Ito does not speak with one, proclaiming: "Judge Ito will never let it end. Judge Ito loves the limelight. He is making a disgrace of the judicial system, little Judge Ito." See Lois Romano, "The Reliable Source," *The Washington Post*, 6 April 1995, final ed., B03. Considered alongside D'Amato's performance of yellow-face, Stern's performance of "not mourning" Selena underscores the ways in which Selena's discursive body was often evoked to police the body politic.

²⁵ See "Forever Selena: Census 2000," <<http://free.freespeech.org/selena/census/>>.

²⁶ Larry Rohter, "A Legend Grows, and So Does an Industry," *New York Times*, 12 January 1997, H39. Emphasis added.

move, for he also disrupts the very category of Americanness by invoking Selena to dethrone traditional iconic American figures, not simply to include her complacently among them. Nava's attention to the function of tragedy within the maintenance of the state surfaces in his equation of the ultimate tragic status with the fulfillment of the American Dream, characterized by Selena's lack of a self-destructive nature. Within the context of the concurrent legislation and new nativist discourse that often criminalized Latina/o behavior, Nava's evocation of Selena emerges as a way to (re)position discursively Latina/os within the borders of the nation. Here the Selena tragedy emerges as a means through which Latina/os strive to re-configure traditional notions of American identity. As such, Nava's comments do not merely suggest a Latina/o/American binary, but rather, they trouble the very line insisting on their mutual exclusivity.

This industry of commemoration that followed Selena's death invariably included the publication of articles by a range of cultural critics attempting to theorize upon the phenomenon.²⁷ Many characterized the public displays of grief and mourning as simply facile examples of fallen celebrity hagiography and/or as the excessive emotional displays of a community outside of the American imaginary.²⁸ This depiction emerged from even among apparently sympathetic analyses of Selena's grieving fans. In the same *New York Times* article in which Nava's comments appeared, Joe Nick Patoski, one of Selena's biographers, reflected upon the powerful responses to Selena's death: "There was something Shakespearean in its sweep, with people crying in the streets and wandering around trying to touch this tragedy. I know a lot of people put their hopes and dreams in Elvis, but I believe this runs even deeper. So much of Mexican society has been built on suffering and sadness since the time of the conquistadors, so this event was really made for this culture."²⁹ Like Nava, Patoski deploys traditional notions of tragedy to explain the Selena phenomenon. But whereas Nava uses Selena's tragedy as a way to posit her as an American, Patoski evokes the tragedy as way to characterize those who mourn her as part of Mexican culture that by its very inevitably tragic nature, according to Patoski, "built on suffering and sadness," is always and already not-American. Here and elsewhere, representations of Mexican grief over Selena reinforce dominant constructs of Latina/os along the lines of what José Esteban Muñoz terms "affective excess" whereby Latina/os are positioned outside the boundaries of "appropriate" performances of national affect by which "standard models of US citizenship are based."³⁰ As such, these representations do not signal a "brief moment of cultural openness" toward Latina/os, as Jennifer

²⁷ See, for example, Ana Castillo, "Selena Aside," *The Nation*, 29 May 1995, 764–66; Sarah Kerr, "Selena's Siren Song," *The New Yorker*, 30 October 1995, 35–36; Joe Nick Patoski, "The Queen is Dead"; and Ilan Stavans, "Dreaming of You," *The New Republic*, 20 November 1995, 24–25.

²⁸ For example, in his widely reprinted article, "Dreaming of You" (later reprinted as "Santa Selena"), prominent Latin/o American scholar and cultural critic, Ilan Stavans offers a cursory and indeed a cavalier analysis of the process of Selena's iconization wherein he reinscribes the border as a racialized site of pathologized fans who uncritically worship Selena as "a patron saint."

²⁹ Rhoter, "A Legend," H39. Emphasis added.

³⁰ Muñoz writes, "From the vantage point of [the 'official'] national affect code, Latino affect appears over the top and excessive . . . The 'failure' of Latino affect, in relation to the hegemonic protocols of North American affective comportment, revolves around an understanding of the Latina or the Latino as affective excess." José Esteban Muñoz, "Feeling Brown," *Theatre Journal* 52 (2000): 70.

Willis and Alberto Gonzalez have suggested,³¹ but operate as part of a larger discursive and legislative project that seeks to close off America's borders by positioning Latina/os outside of the American rubric. Unfortunately, while Patoski may have been attempting to elevate the mainstream status of Selena's death to something Shakespearean in scope, his comments ultimately invoke Selena's grieving fans to forward the claim that Selena was one of theirs (Latina/os or, in Patoski's words, "Mexican culture") and not one of ours (American).

***Selena Forever* for a Limited Run: A Promotional Overview**

A careful analysis of the promotion and performances circulating within and around the musical based on Selena's life troubles both the construct of Selena memorials as the acts of excessively affective un-American Latina/os and the traditional boundaries circumscribing American theatre. *Selena Forever* was launched in San Antonio, Texas in March 2000 as the first nationally touring Latina/o production in the history of US musical theatre. The play's producers, librettist, composer and director were all seasoned professionals within the theatre business.³² The show's press release announced that the musical was originally scheduled to tour eight cities, concentrated in the Southwest and Chicago. Following this preliminary tour, the production team hoped the show would eventually make it to Broadway, as one news article announced: "They're banking on a barrio-to-Broadway phenomena that doesn't lose touch with its roots, said director Bill Virchis."³³

Rhetoric equating Selena's story with the American Dream pervaded the promotional process of the staged production. Just as it had with Gregory Nava's comments during the promotion of *Selena*, librettist Edward Gallardo, in one of the first interviews promoting the musical, asserted, "All young people, not just Hispanics, can identify with her. It's the story of an American family."³⁴ Gallardo positions Selena as an American and not simply a Hispanic figure, thereby attempting to draw in larger audiences and to assert Latina/o presence and performance within the traditional constructs of the nation and the theatre. But ultimately this and other efforts to universalize or, more precisely, to American-ize Selena's story were overshadowed by

³¹ Jennifer Willis and Alberto Gonzalez, "Reconceptualizing Gender Through Dialogue: The Case of the Tex-Mex Madonna," *Women and Language* 20 (1997): 9–12.

³² Producers Jerry Frankel, Michael Vega, Tom Quinn, and Forbes Chandlish had among them financed previously successful Broadway productions that included *Jekyll and Hyde*, *The Wiz*, *Death of a Salesman*, and *Charlie Brown*. Edward Gallardo, the librettist, is the Puerto Rican playwright best known for his play, *Simpson Street*, which depicted a Nuyorican family's struggles in the Bronx. *Selena Forever* marked the fourteenth musical Cuban-born composer, Fernando Rivas, had scored. Director William Alejandro ("Bill") Virchis had previously worked on the Los Angeles production of the iconic Latina/o play, Luis Valdez's *Zoot Suit*.

³³ Ellen Bernstein, "Selena Forever Performers Prepare for Opening Night," *Corpus Christi Caller-Times*, 12 March 2000.

³⁴ Ellen Bernstein, "Selena's Tragic Life Headed to the Stage," *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, 18 October 1999, 2. This promotional rhetoric proved effective, at least in part. A review of the production in the *Chicago Sun-Times* proclaimed, "Representing the American dream, Selena serves as every immigrant's story. No matter what nationality, anyone can identify with her triumph and ultimate tragedy." Laura Emerick, "Selena Forever," *Chicago Sun-Times*, 28 April 2000, final ed., 44. Ironically, in the attempt to ally Selena with the American dream, the review positions her alongside "every immigrant" ignoring the fact that both she and her parents were born and raised in the United States.

repeated discussions of how the musical sought to deal with (the traditional absence of) Latina/o spectatorship within the theatre.

Many of the news features covering the musical focused substantial attention on the supposed problem of the lack of theatre savvy among Latina/o audiences. One description of the scene at the musical's premiere in San Antonio noted, "The crowd at the preview show Wednesday night certainly was not typical for a stage musical. . . . A [Latina] woman . . . gingerly approached an usher and, pointing to the programs in his hand, asked in a soft, uncertain voice, 'Sir, can I have one of . . . those? Whatever they are.' She said she had never been to the theater."³⁵ Another news report acknowledged that the musical had succeeded in accomplishing what other mainstream theatrical endeavors had heretofore been unable to do:

Broadway or not, the musical's opening in San Antonio brought a large number of Hispanics into Municipal Auditorium—quite a feat as producers across the country are trying to figure out ways of getting Hispanics and other minorities in the seats. Many fans at the opening night said that it was their first time to a real theater. . . . "I don't usually go to the theater," said Myra Martinez of San Antonio. "I get that feeling from a lot of people here—the only reason we're out here is because it's Selena. . . . We loved her and this is our way of mourning."³⁶

These depictions of Latina/os as neophyte theatregoers eventually figured prominently in the debates over the show's abrupt cancellation during May 2000 in Los Angeles, as a comment from the *San Diego Union-Tribune* makes clear: "Unlike any tried and true musical productions where there are strong advance ticket sales, *Selena Forever* was aimed at a market that wasn't so theater savvy."³⁷

While the show's cancellation resulted ostensibly from a dispute over marketing between the show's producers and the Los Angeles promoters at the Universal Amphitheatre where the musical was scheduled for a five-day run, interviews published in news features covering the controversy pointed toward Latina/os' inability to perform proper theatre etiquette as the source of the show's woes.³⁸ Both the show's production team and the Los Angeles promoters frequently evoked this depiction of Latina/o spectatorship in their criticisms of one another. When promoters used low advance ticket sales as evidence that Latina/os were unreliable and unskilled theatre audiences, the show's representatives rebuffed their claim by arguing that advance ticket sales were an unreliable gauge because Latina/os were

³⁵ Alisa Valdes-Rodriguez, "An Eternal Star Shines 'Forever,'" *Los Angeles Times*, 25 March 2000, F1.

³⁶ Ricardo Baca, "Forever a Local Legend," *Corpus Christi Caller-Times*, 21 March 2000.

³⁷ Nina Garin, "When 'Forever' Isn't," *San Diego Union-Tribune*, 23 May 2000, E1.

³⁸ Eduardo Cancela, general manager and vice president of KLAX-FM, a popular Spanish-language radio station, claimed that the show's cancellation was due solely to poor marketing: "[Cancela] said he knew nothing about the show, even though KLAX is one of the few stations that still play Selena's music. 'I can't believe in a city with 5 million Latinos, you can't find an audience for a show like that. She's huge Something like this, it's all in the marketing. I don't think they got the word out very well. We didn't get any ads. I haven't seen ads anywhere.'" Alisa Valdes-Rodriguez, "L.A. Run of Stage Musical, *Selena Forever* is Canceled," *Los Angeles Times*, 9 May 2000, F1. Cancela's remarks are among only a few criticisms of the play's promoters that do not succumb to the premise that the ultimate source of the production's problem was Latina/os' inability to master theatre-going etiquette.

"last minute ticket buyers."³⁹ Unfortunately, in the production team's efforts to call for a different marketing strategy, they ironically direct the blame for poor sales onto Latina/o failure to adequately perform as appropriate theatre spectators. Clearly, not unlike the rhetoric surrounding depictions of the excessive affect of Selena's mourning fans, these discussions rely upon and reinforce the assumption that Latina/os always and already operate outside dominant norms for behavior. Furthermore, the preoccupation with etiquette, a behavioral code historically deployed to reinforce class and racial hierarchies primarily through the disavowal of its own racialized and bourgeois markings, strategically obscures the ways in which larger political economic forces may prevent many Latina/os from purchasing tickets in advance or in which conventional theatre's historical exclusion of Latina/os contributes substantially to their purported lack of theatre savvy. We need only recall Francisco Vara-Orta's earlier comment that within the theatre's traditional history, Latina/os have generally been invited in only to "sweep the floors." The production team's attempt to promote Selena and her fans as embodiments of the American Dream is undermined by these depictions, which reinscribe notions of Latina/os as beyond the borders of America(n theatre).

The musical was ultimately resurrected by the Ricardo Montalban Nosotros Foundation that sought to re-stage the production as a way to launch a Latina/o performance center at the Doolittle Theatre on Hollywood Boulevard.⁴⁰ Jerry Velasco, the Foundation's president proclaimed, "[Establishing a Latina/o-run theater] has been 31 years [in the making]. It's Ricardo Montalban's dream that is at stake here."⁴¹ Alas, Selena lives on as the vehicle through which Montalban's dreams shall be realized. That is, Selena's memory enables the assertion of a Latina/o presence within the Los Angeles theatre scene. Once again, Selena provides the space in which *latinidad* is launched. Indeed, as a performance analysis of the staged production will reveal, Selena was often evoked as the effigy through which other paternalistic Latino dreams were lived.⁴²

³⁹ An interview published in the *Los Angeles Times* illustrates: "Robert Treviño who arranged sponsors for the tour said: 'Latinos are new to the theater,' echoing comments made at the musical's premiere in San Antonio by its director, William Alejandro Virchis, and producer Tom Quinn [who commented]: 'They come at the last minute.'" Valdes-Rodriguez, "L.A. Run of Stage Musical *Selena Forever* is Canceled." Treviño continued to deploy this characterization in an interview printed in *Billboard*: "Maybe Latinos did not understand the concept." Ramiro Burr, "'Selena' Show's Producers Sue HOB," *Billboard*, 1 July 2000, 40. In another interview that appeared in the *San Diego Union-Tribune*, director Bill Virchis commented, "Latinos are more of a walk-up buying market. The same tactics used for *Cats* won't work for this audience. We had discussions everyday about how we were going to reach this market. This tour is sort of like Johnny Appleseed, you have to build an audience, it's an expensive thing. But the reward was that many of these people had never been in a theater before." Garin, "When 'Forever,'" E1.

⁴⁰ The *Los Angeles Times* noted, "*Selena* has assumed a symbolic importance greater than most commercial productions in Los Angeles, for it is the first production at the Doolittle since the Ricardo Montalban Nosotros Foundation bought the theater last year with the intent of converting it into a Latino-oriented performing arts center." Don Shirley, "*Selena* Producers Upbeat Despite Losses," *Los Angeles Times*, 13 June 2001, F1.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, F1.

⁴² Here I deploy Joseph Roach's notion of the effigy as "the cultural trend in which the body of an actor serves as a medium . . . in secular rituals through which a modernized society communicates with its past." Roach, *Cities*, 78.

A *Barrio-to-Balcony* Phenomena

Selena Forever, an ambitious attempt to combine elements of the Tejano concert with recent pop opera conventions within American musical theatre, was financed by a two million-dollar budget that included corporate sponsorship from Coca Cola and Southwest Airlines. Its thirty-member cast—of which ninety-five percent were Latina/os—persuasively demonstrates that the lack of Latina/o representation throughout mainstream media is by no means due to a dearth of Latina/o acting talent. In fact, as a result of the lead role's demanding requirements which included fourteen solos, two promising Latina actresses—Veronica Vazquez and Rebecca Valadez—shared the role of adult Selena.⁴³ Other characters included a “Young Selena,” members of Selena's family and an ensemble who often acted as a chorus referred to as “*Los Sueños del Pueblo*” (The People's Dreams, see Fig. 3). The set resembled a concert stage with platforms framed by scaffolding and backed by screens that showed both archival video footage of Selena and live-action projections of Vazquez and Valadez as Selena during the staged concert scenes. According to the costume designer, many of the costumes were drawn from Selena's own design renderings.⁴⁴ The lighting design, with its multi-hued pyrotechnic displays, followed the stage design's attempt to evoke the atmosphere of a concert tour. The musical's thirty-five songs included nine Selena hits interspersed among original compositions influenced by and often derivative of the styles of other big budget musicals like *Pump Boys and Dinettes* and *The Wiz*. And while the musical sought to create a stage hybrid through its mixture of Selena's Tejano repertoire with Fernando Rivas's original score,⁴⁵ the conspicuous lack of intermingling of Tejano rhythms and traditional American musical styles within Rivas' score served ultimately to reinforce the discrete categorization between Tejano and American music.

As much of the press coverage about *Selena Forever* noted, the audience was composed largely of intergenerational Latina/o families. In fact, a significant portion of the audience was composed of children and teenagers accompanied by their parents. The evening of the musical's premiere, I joined approximately 3,000 other audience members along with vendors selling various Selena paraphernalia, newspaper reporters, and camera crews from television stations including *Univisión*, a national pan-Latina/o television network. At performances following opening night in San Antonio, Los Angeles, and in other cities, audience numbers did, in fact, decline, but this decline was not necessarily due to a lack of Latina/o theatre savvy. Precisely because the event may have been understood by many as a family activity, even the least expensive ticket prices (\$19.95) may have been prohibitive for a number of working class Latina/o families who constituted a large part of Selena's fan base. Furthermore, a possible reason for the low turnout in Chicago, for example, may have had to do with the fact that its venue, the Rosemont Theatre, is difficult to access by

⁴³ Vazquez performed for evening shows, Valadez for matinees.

⁴⁴ Deborah Martin, “Outfits Based on Selena's Design Sketches,” *San Antonio Express News on the Web*, 21 March 2000, <<http://www.mysa.com/mysanantonio/extras/selena/stor.../032100selena2.shtm>>. In addition to her formidable talents as a performer, Selena was also an aspiring designer who had launched her own design line before she died.

⁴⁵ Laura Emerick, “New Stage Musical Revisits Singer's Life,” *Chicago Sun-Times*, 21 April 2000, Weekend Plus section, 9.

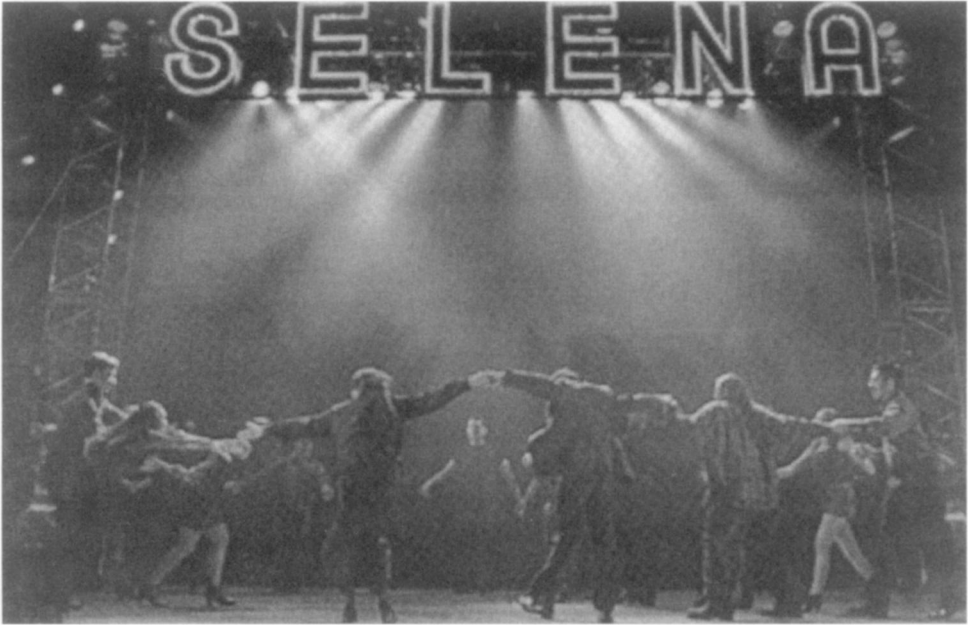


Figure 3. *Los Sueños del Pueblo*, from *Selena Forever*. Courtesy of Gabriele Reyes.

public transportation. And yet, the fans who did attend the musical displayed explicit signs of engagement with the performance. At a Sunday matinee in Chicago, a middle-aged woman waved a Mexican flag and sang along during Selena's concert scenes. In response to a scene wherein Selena defies her father's restrictions against her desire to wear her trademark sexually suggestive outfits, a Latina teenager at a San Antonio performance screamed out, "Go Selena!" This young woman's response both signals the powerful ways in which Selena offers many Latinas a discursive space in which to articulate a Latina subjectivity and also points toward the ways in which the plot devices and characterizations within *Selena Forever* often called for an intervention from its feminist spectators.

The musical begins with the sound of a single gunshot and the wail of sirens followed by a multimedia montage featuring highlights from Selena's life and career. The show then proceeds with an episodic chronicle of Selena's journey from girlhood to crossover superstardom.⁴⁶ The element that propels the play's action—and subsequently Selena's success—is her father's own (failed) dream of becoming a famous musician.⁴⁷ In one of the play's early musical numbers, "Abraham's Dream," Selena's father details the racism faced by his doo-wop band in its attempt at stardom many years before. When, during the song's reprise near the middle of the first act, Selena takes up and completes the final bars of "Abraham's Dream," she is positioned as the

⁴⁶ The play, with its culminating moment wherein record executive, José Behar discovers Selena and announces, "She's ready to cross over," ultimately fails to complicate the assimilationist crossover narrative in which Selena's life story has been frequently framed.

⁴⁷ Indeed, Selena acts as a stand-in for the entire community's dreams, as the show's chorus, "*Los Sueños del Pueblo*" suggests.

surrogate through which to enact her father's unfulfilled desires. Through this staged overlap, the progressive fight against racism is achieved by the father's discursive management of the daughter. In fact, despite the prevailing discourse that Selena did not die as a result of a tragic flaw, the musical number near the play's close, "You're Too Trusting, Selena," suggests that her flaw and eventual downfall emerged as a result of her refusal to heed her father's warnings about her fan club president. The musical thereby attributes the blame for Selena's death to her deviance from her father's management.

The play does, however, reward one moment of Selena's rebellion against her father. When Selena, much to her father's dismay, falls in love with her guitar player, Chris Perez, the two lovers meet for a clandestine rendezvous at a local pizza parlor. Upon her return from the restaurant where they consummated their desire with a kiss, Selena relates the story to her sister in a song entitled, "Pizza and Coke."⁴⁸ Here, escape from the strict Latino father is permitted, and indeed, love is achieved through the consumption of all-American commodities. Thus, even Selena's romantic narrative is framed within the assimilationist discourse of the crossover into the American market. This narrative frame ironically echoes mainstream celebrations of Selena that acknowledge Latina/os within the American imaginary only as docile consumers within the operations of capitalism.

Despite the musical's sizable cast, wide range of musical numbers and sensory-saturating multi-media technology, throughout its duration I found myself preoccupied with what was missing from the production. I noted that two musical numbers printed on the program were cut: "My Daughter Wants To Be Just Like Selena" and "Dress Like Selena." I sat and wondered about the others who evoked Selena, not in an attempt to manage her, but, rather, in an effort to manage their own histories and futures. Like Francisco before me, I wanted to move past her murder, move past the patriarchal confines of the staged performance, and toward her ensuing phenomenon.

Perhaps, then, a better way to embark upon an examination of the San Antonio production of *Selena Forever* is to begin in classic epic fashion—in the middle of the action. Let's begin in the middle of the opening night performance—in the middle of the musical's narrative about the struggle between the father and the lover over the possession of Selena. Or, more precisely, let's begin in the middle of the space between the story, just after the curtain has closed for intermission. Let's begin in the middle of the balcony where I am seated along with other Selena fans unable to afford or unwilling to pay for the more expensive tickets.

I turn away from the stage to face Francisco Vara-Orta, the Mexican-American teenager whose comments launched this essay and who was seated next to his mother in the row behind me. Francisco is dressed impeccably for the occasion, his thick black hair slicked back and gleaming. He is wearing a contemporary version of a black and white pinstriped zoot suit on the lapel of which is pinned a black Hard Rock Café commemorative guitar pendant with Selena's name written across it. His ensemble clearly signifies toward multiple moments in Latina/o history. To be Latina/o and to wear a zoot suit signify a remembrance of and an affiliation with the young, urban,

⁴⁸ Selena landed a contract with Coca Cola early in her career and continued to make endorsements for the company until her death.

male *pachucos* of the 1940s who donned the suit as an emblem of resistance. The zoot suit was characterized by its overly wide padded shoulders and excessively draped trousers. Its too-too-much style, outlawed by the war effort because it required too much material, commanded attention. Thus, for economically disenfranchised *pachucos*, the suit became a way to demand acknowledgment of their presence and to defy normative codes of appropriately tailored fashion.⁴⁹

By literally affixing the memorial Selena guitar onto his zoot suit, Francisco locates Selena's tragedy in an oppositional history, a history of struggle and resistance, that is not, as the musical and its promotional materials assert, about the attainment of the American Dream. His ensemble also situates *Selena Forever* within Latina/o theatre history with its evocation of that other Broadway-bound Latina/o play, Luis Valdez's *Zoot Suit*. Francisco is remembering Selena:

What drew me to her at first was her persona. She was so versatile. She could sing anything; there are seven different styles of music on her last album. It was her persona. It's the same thing with any actor; they can play a drunk or a cowboy or whatever, but that doesn't mean that's who they really are. Selena was the Tex-Mex Madonna and she was also the girl-next-door. It's the way all of our daughters and mothers are. She was one of the family.⁵⁰

Here Francisco evokes Selena or, more precisely, Selena's persona to construct "our . . . family" wherein the women are skilled performers able and, in fact, often required to navigate within the overdetermined, sexualized virgin/whore or, girl-next-door/Tex-Mex Madonna, binary. Here, the articulation of *latinidad* is contingent upon the production of publicly performing, sexualized Latina bodies. But, here also, Francisco's focus on the notion of persona—"that doesn't mean that's who they really are"—points to the very constructedness of these bodies. Precisely because performance is always and already repetition with revision, Francisco's focus on Selena's and our mothers' and daughters' personas acknowledges a space wherein these women can enact a critical mimesis, can perform or repeat these roles with a critical difference.

As I continue to talk with Francisco during intermission, I become struck by the creative act of his style, by his persona. I ask him if he wouldn't mind if I photographed him for my project, and he graciously agrees. As we begin to make our way outside of the confines of the balcony area—my camera in hand—a middle-aged Latina in a security guard uniform intercepts and detains me. "I need your film, ma'am," she tells me. "You're going to have to give me your film." Like any belligerent fan, I protest, refuse to let go of my camera, insist that I hadn't taken any photographs of the actual production, put up an ultimately futile fight. But my fight is far less significant, far less meaningful than the fight that ensues around me, as the balcony community comes to my defense, rallying around me, around the undeveloped image. A young Latina behind me stands up, voice insistent: "She didn't take any pictures! She didn't take any pictures!" A middle-aged Latina three rows back approaches me,

⁴⁹ For more on the zoot suit as an emblem of resistance, see: Douglas Henry Daniels, "Los Angeles Zoot: Race 'Riot,' the Pachuco, and Black Music Culture," *The Journal of Negro History* 82 (1997): 201–21; Maurizio Mazón, *The Zoot-Suit Riots: The Psychology of Symbolic Annihilation* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1992); Chon A. Noriega, "Fashion Crimes: Chicano Identity and Clothing," *Aztlán* 26 (2001): 1–12.

⁵⁰ Personal interview.

voice conspiratorial: "If you need a witness, I'll be one. If they take your film, make sure they destroy it right in front of your eyes, because you never know what they're going to do with it." My great-aunt Lucia, seated beside me, begins shouting at what is by now the two young Latina/o cops surrounding us: "Hey, see that flash that just went off down there, in the third row? Why don't you do your job down there?" Francisco rallies, voice authoritative: "If this were the Real Selena, she wouldn't care if we did have a camera. She would have posed for us."

Undeniably, this battle over the confiscated film is, in many ways, not unlike others that invariably ensue at theatre events and concerts wherein determined fans defy the "No Cameras Allowed" admonitions. But what is interesting to me here are the ways in which this particular battle was deeply informed by and ultimately took part in enacting the larger struggles for ownership of Selena's image and of the various processes of consumption and identity assertions that cross over and often come into conflict across her body. In this particular performative context—in the balcony of the theatre, dressed in his zoot suit—Francisco mourns the loss of Selena as a way of articulating a mistrust in any singular, dominant claim of ownership and control over the Latina body, and by extension over Latina/o cultural production. At this moment, when the Latina/o balcony community remembers Selena or instructs me to follow vigilantly the circulation of my film, they are speaking out against the act of surveillance that is part of the process of commodification.⁵¹ And yet, Francisco's attention to the "real" Selena as someone both capable of and indeed skilled at posing, also highlights the possibilities for Latina/os to negotiate what Peggy Phelan describes as the "trap of the visible."⁵² Thus, contrary to the depictions circulating around the production, Francisco's and the other balcony members' defense of my right to the undeveloped film reveals their theatre savvy. The balcony community's demand for access to Selena constitutes a demand for access to the site wherein the re-representation and consumption of Latina/o culture are literally being staged.⁵³

Ultimately, this struggle over the undeveloped image emerges as a struggle over the future, over the soon-to-be-developed power and presence of rapidly growing Latina/o communities. More particularly, this event highlights how the policing, seizure, proliferation, and recuperation of the performing Latina body will figure centrally in this struggle over claims to the nation. Anabel Medina, another savvy Latina spectator at *Selena Forever*, conveys an incisive awareness of the tension between the hyper-visibility of the Latina body and the persistent invisibility of Latina/o communities within the dominant US imaginary. Medina observes, "Unfortunately, when she [Selena] had that tragedy, they were saying she had raunchy clothes and that she was like Madonna. I don't think she was copying Madonna. That's what they all said. I think that they just didn't want to deal with our culture."⁵⁴

⁵¹ Their comments ultimately critique the same apparatus that Peggy Phelan critiques: the "trap of visibility [that] summons surveillance . . . [and] provokes the colonialist/imperial appetite for possession." See Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 6.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 6.

⁵³ The balcony struggle also recalls Peggy Phelan's comment about the generative power of absence: "In the clarity of her absence, we redefined ourselves. The Real was the absence of her; we were representations of that loss." *Ibid.*, 12.

⁵⁴ Personal interview.

Medina astutely understands mainstream comparisons of Selena with Madonna, not as celebratory assertions of her successful crossover or as unequivocal acknowledgments of Latina/os within the national imaginary, but rather as part of a legacy wherein the hyper-sexualization of Latinas is circulated as a way to consume but, as Medina notes, not to deal with Latina/o culture. Medina's observation points toward the possible dangers that arise from the deployment of Selena as the vehicle through which to decry larger Latina/o political economic injustices. As her comments make clear, not only are Latinas made visible in ways that can ultimately re-enact imperialist constructions of racialized sexuality, but more particularly her sexuality is used to efface the very tragedy of her own and larger Latina/o communities' plights. Thus, as Medina seems keenly aware, the repeated comparisons to Madonna strategically evoke Latina sexuality as means by which both to mark its excessiveness and to contain it. Medina thereby lays bare the possible consequences for Latina bodies when Selena—or the undeveloped daughter—is evoked as the site upon which the borders of the nation are redrawn.

Selena: A Musical Celebration Surrogation of Life

By way of conclusion, I want to turn our attention briefly toward the closing moments of the most recent staging of the Selena musical (see Fig. 4). The Los Angeles incarnation of *Selena: A Musical Celebration of Life* maintained the same basic story line as *Selena Forever*, while pairing down the cast and the use of some of its multimedia spectacle.⁵⁵ Ironically, despite the streamlining, I discovered in the play's final musical number, "*Como la Flor* Reprise," a glimmering suggestion of what I found lacking in the original production. In the show's concluding minutes, a young Latina fan named Teresa, portrayed by Agina Alvarez, mourns Selena by performing her, by powerfully reprising Selena's signature song. And in this final moment of surrogation—just as the nation has witnessed with Jennifer Lopez, the woman who most famously performed Selena—the surrogate transcends the original or, to echo Francisco, moves past Selena's murder toward a space of self-realization.⁵⁶ In this final staging, a young Latina's ability to negotiate the visible—and the audible, as Alvarez's vocal skills attest—embodies the musical's assertion that the future for Latina/os is upon us, that we have begun to arrive through the body of Selena. Or, more precisely, the enactment of young Latina performances of surrogation signals the arrival of an impending change of state following and indeed, enabled by Selena's tragedy.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ The Chorus was replaced by a single narrator, The Accordion Man, a figure reminiscent of El Pachuco in *Zoot Suit* and Che in *Evita*. Nearly all of the changes in the show were the results of budget constraints.

⁵⁶ Two of the reviews published in the *Los Angeles Times* also comment upon the surprising and powerful "transcendence" of the show's closing moments. Michael Phillips writes, "And in an often plodding show's final minutes, something bizarre happens: it finds itself." Michael Phillips, "Storytelling Takes Back Seat to Music in Dreamy *Selena*," *Los Angeles Times*, 24 April 2001, F1. Julio Martinez remarks: "Also deserving mention [is] diminutive Agina Alvarez, who offers a transcendent, show-closing, a cappella reprise of *Como La Flor*." Julio Martinez, "Selena Returns in Patchy New Musical," *Los Angeles Times*, 24 April 2001, F1.

⁵⁷ Interestingly, on the day following the evening in which I attended the musical in L.A., I tuned into the local NPR affiliate, whereon the 1996 episode of *This American Life* that depicted the Chicago auditions for the movie *Selena* was being re-broadcast. The episode featured an interview with a young girl named Jessica, who shortly after Selena's death, traveled to Corpus Christi and mourned Selena by

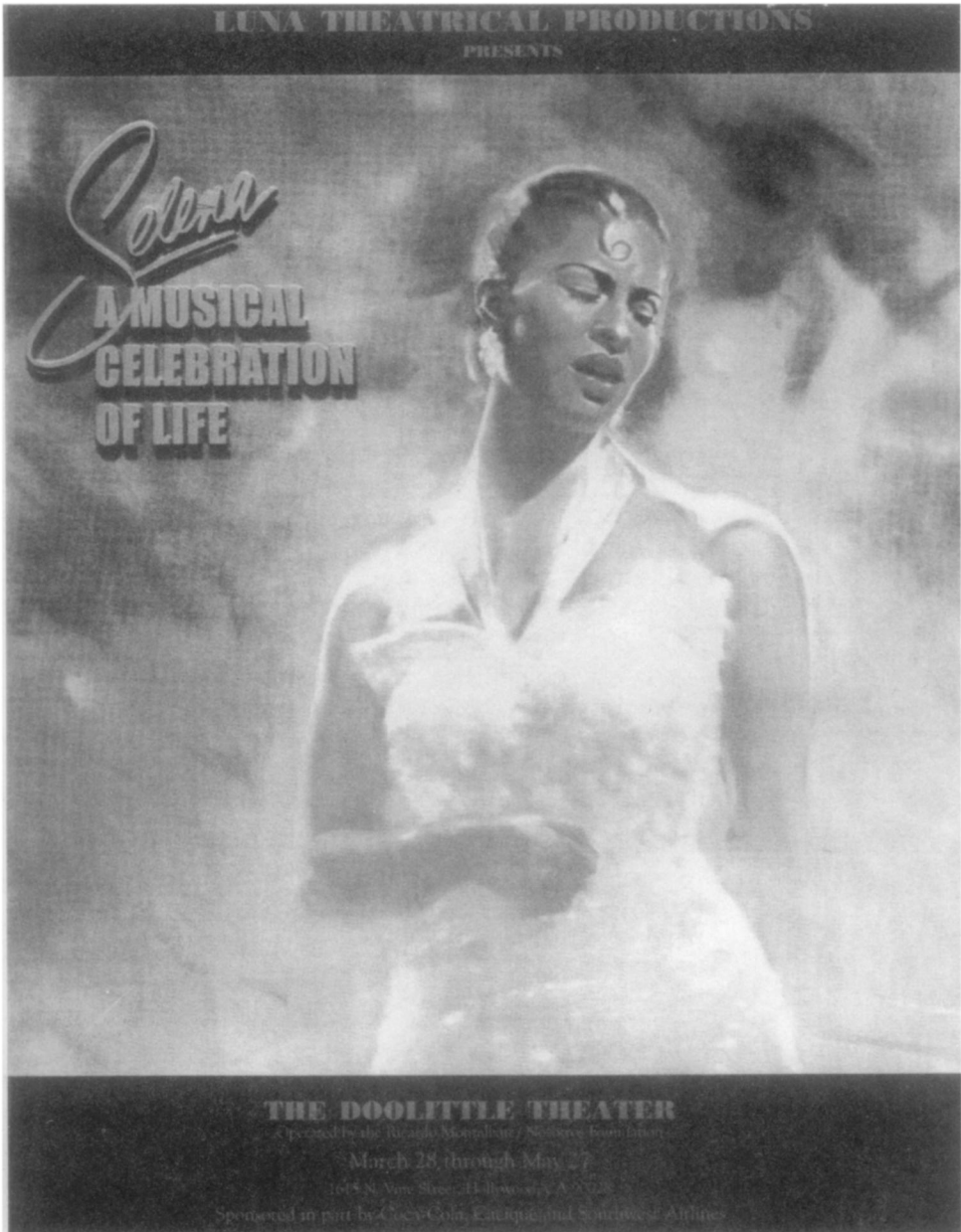


Figure 4. Program cover for *Selena: A Musical Celebration of Life*.
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The Los Angeles musical's final glimpse forward, in conjunction with Francisco's and the San Antonio musical's albeit significantly divergent focus on the managing of the daughter's body, (re)configures Selena as both the tragic figure through whom Latina/os re-member their own tragic histories and the re-generative daughter of our nation, as our issue, securing changes of state in our future. Our motherland has been confiscated and colonized; our daughter's potential and, insofar as Selena acts as the synecdoche of *latinidad*, our potential, thus lies in the future. Moreover, not only does Selena embody a daughter of the nation, she successfully (re)produces them, as Jennifer Lopez's rise to superstardom suggests. But here we are reminded again of the price this construct exacts. Recall that during the promotional process of the film, *Selena*, Lopez was repeatedly asked if her uncanny portrayal of Selena involved a fake butt, prompting her, in interview after interview, to lay claim to her rear end.⁵⁸ A configuration of *latinidad* contingent upon the mourning over and eventual proliferation of the publicly performing Latina body may enable the imaginings of a future wherein Latina/os constitute a significant force, but as Lopez reminds us, it will also require Latinas to labor in exhaustive attempts to reclaim ownership rights to the "nation's" body.

performing "*Como La Flor*" at her gravesite. I explore the implications of the process of "becoming Selena" and examine more closely the episode of *This American Life* in my book-length project, *Crossing Over Selena's Body: Latina Performance and Latinidad*.

⁵⁸ As is now widely known, significant media attention was devoted to Jennifer Lopez's and Selena's ample, and thus racialized and hyper-sexualized, rear ends, thereby partaking in the colonial reduction of the woman of color to her sexual(ized) body parts. For example, in response to Cristina, the popular *Univisión* talk-show host, who inquired, "*Todo eso es tuyo?*" (Is that your real body?), Lopez stood up, turned her back to the camera, patted her rear end and proclaimed, "*Todo es mio*" (It's all mine). Frances Negrón-Muntaner conducts a brilliant analysis of this interview in "Jennifer's Butt."