Selena: Sexuality, Greater Mexico and the Song-and-Dance with Hegemony*

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> Metonymic object of desire. Metaphorical object of love. The former controls the phantasmatic *narrative*. The latter outlines the *crystallization* of fantasy and rules the poeticalness of the discourse of love...
>
> Julia Kristeva

I was not there in Houston, Texas in 1995 shortly before her death. I was not there, but the recent film of Selena – a national hit with Greater Mexico – opens in part with the now famous concert at the massive Houston Astrodome where professional football, baseball, rock concerts and rodeos usually hold the attention of the equally massive, largely Anglo-Texan crowds though the city now also throbs with the life of Greater Mexico and Central America.[1] Indeed, by a wonderful historical irony, she is the featured act of the annual Houston Livestock and Rodeo entertainment. Mexicans started the practice of cattle and livestock ranching in what is now the American Southwest, but today in one of many acts of appropriation, this cultural legacy now belongs to Anglo-Texas. However, the demographic but also the expressive growing strength of Mexicans in the United States now obliges the organizers of this event to include something for the Mexicans, and so, tonight is their night – Mexican night at the Livestock and Rodeo show in Houston, Texas, a city named for Sam Houston, the man who defeated the Mexican Army at San Jacinto in 1836 and secured Texas, ultimately for the United States racially and economically marginalizing the native Mexican population and those who joined them later as immigrants (DeLeon 1883, 1986; Montejano 1986; Zamora 1994). Some who were present – working-class friends of mine from Austin who drove down to Houston to see her – tell me that the film does more than justice to the actual event itself when Selena performed in concert before a mostly Mexican-origin audience of some other 61,000 equally intensely loyal fans.

Beneath – below – in the dressing area of the catacombs of the post-modern Astrodome – this monument to Anglo-Texan affluence and influence – she, from another way of life, dresses, waits and then walks up the runway from the dressing

area as her mother and father watch. Her media coverage has well-established her closeness to her family and particularly her love and respect for her father and her deference to his management of her career. Now the entire family works in the act depending on the centrality of her performance for their livelihood. And, one strongly suspects that this familial construction is not media-hype, but probably true. She turns to look at them, her family, with a soft smile and then, with serene calm confidence glides unto the Astrodome floor as a roar from the crowd goes up. She is wearing one of her several spectacular outfits, a gorgeous light purple and sequined, very tight-fitting, body suit, flared at the ankles with a short matching jacket. The outfit, which she designed and possibly sewed, beautifully accentuates her *morena* features and her body for which the English language kindly provides the word, 'voluptuous', a body, with its wide hips, at some distance from an Anglo-American image of Virginia Slim. Though she comes from a different, which is to say, Mexican and working-class, way of life, nothing about her this night even suggests that she does *not* belong here in the monumental Astrodome, for she is clearly in that class of flesh-and-blood women that Mexican men would call *monumentos* when I was growing up in the same predominantly Mexican South Texas where she also spent her young formative years. Waving to her wildly-cheering fans, she is then taken by carriage to the revolving stage in the middle of the floor; she ascends the stage aided by a retinue of young male stage hands and greets the crowd again with a great smile and a powerfully enunciated 'Hello, Houston!' Without hesitation the band – including her guitarist husband – picks up her cue and she launches into her concert, an array of her popular hit songs – from the playful *cumbia* rhythm, *Bidi-Bidi-Bom-Bom*, about young kids falling in love, to the romantically serious, *Amor Prohibido*, about forbidden adult love – songs of hers wildly popular at least on the American chart list labeled 'Mexican-American Pop', a category unknown until the late 1980s both with respect to the music and its people who hitherto had never been 'popular'. But she will, for this likely bi-lingual audience, also sing and dance songs in English some from what is being touted as her first major all-English 'cross-over' album, crossing her over that is, from her primary affiliation – the Greater Mexican world – to a broadly American and, indeed, a world-wide audience.

At a climactic point during an instrumental break in a fast-paced number, the short jacket dramatically comes off revealing the top of her outfit which covers only her breasts in a criss-cross pattern like the iconic cartridge belts of the Mexican Revolution leaving her shoulders and back, midriff and navel bare. But, tonight she is actually showing less, for this top is a departure from her famous, Madonna-like *bustiers* which she has worn on many other performative occasions. The crowd goes wild, again, and not for the last time. Her powerful singing that moves easily through several registers from low growls to soaring ranges is only part of the display, sexual in itself as are her lyrics, but, perhaps the lesser part in comparison to her management of her body as dancer. Like many other performers today, Selena dances as she sings, but during instrumental breaks in the music – as dancer – she uniquely dominates

the entire stage, in her case with a combination of provocative, marvelously executed Latin American *cumbia* and *merengue* steps with some other moves borrowed from varying forms of American rock and roll. Again the crowd goes wild. She dances in another instrumental break and at one moment, she abruptly dances away from the audience with her back to them, suddenly stops cold, half-turns the top half of her body to face the crowd and flashes one of her huge marvelous smiles. Wildness erupts yet again, and in a native category evoked by this presence, I overhear the *mexicano* man sitting in front of me quietly utter the word, *Chingaaaaao!* Nor would I be surprised to discover that the rest of the Mexican men and perhaps even the Mexican women sitting with me in that theater on the Mexican side of Austin, Texas two months ago are also experiencing her on the screen in some version of this native and primal evaluative category, *Chingao*, a local pronounciation of the formal, *Chingado*, literally 'fucked', a pronounciation which translates something like 'Fuuuck!', a working-class aesthetic evaluation of high approval in the idiom of a primal sexuality, wholly appropriate, I think, to this performer; a primal sentiment also shared, I suspect, by that mass Mexican-origin audience at the Astrodome in Houston, Texas in 1995 in those few weeks before her death. On March 31, 1995, as the news reports of her death started coming in on Friday afternoon at the beginning of Happy Hour all over Greater Mexico, I have no doubt many a Mexican – female and male – uttered the same word pronounced with a different inflection – *CHIN gao!* or *Fu*ck!, a pronounciation here not of aesthetics but of rage. I can only agree with this double-sentiment and would perhaps have uttered it myself had I really known her. I did not really know her or really much about her at her high moment, although I had seen her perform in 1985 when she was only fifteen at a dance in Kingsville, Texas.

For recently, I, too, in a very short spell, have also acceded to the spell, and, I would now wish to spell out why this is so, for them – working-class citizens of Greater Mexico – and for me, a former such citizen, now a fully-ensconced member of the left-of-center intelligentsia in the universities. Who is this young woman from working-class Greater Mexico whose life and death resonate so strongly with its people? What are 'we' now – those few of us, of Mexican, working-class background now raised in a 'critical' tradition as intellectuals – to make of her sheer mass-media, pop-cultural self so enveloped in fashion display, romantic lyrics and public consumption, a public consumption so centered on the sexual display of her body as 'woman' – stuff that 'we' academic intellectuals actually grew up with – witness any good working-class Mexican wedding – when, since then, this particular 'we' have been so tutored in deep suspicion of such performances from sources at least since the Frankfurt School but probably all the way back to Plato? For myself, I can only confess – and this is probably exactly the right term – that in wholly unexpected fashion, since her death, I have found myself returning once again to 'dance with the devil' as I did once before, albeit in a somewhat different fashion. I have elsewhere recounted how after a long period of study in the university and its inevitable acculturative affects, I

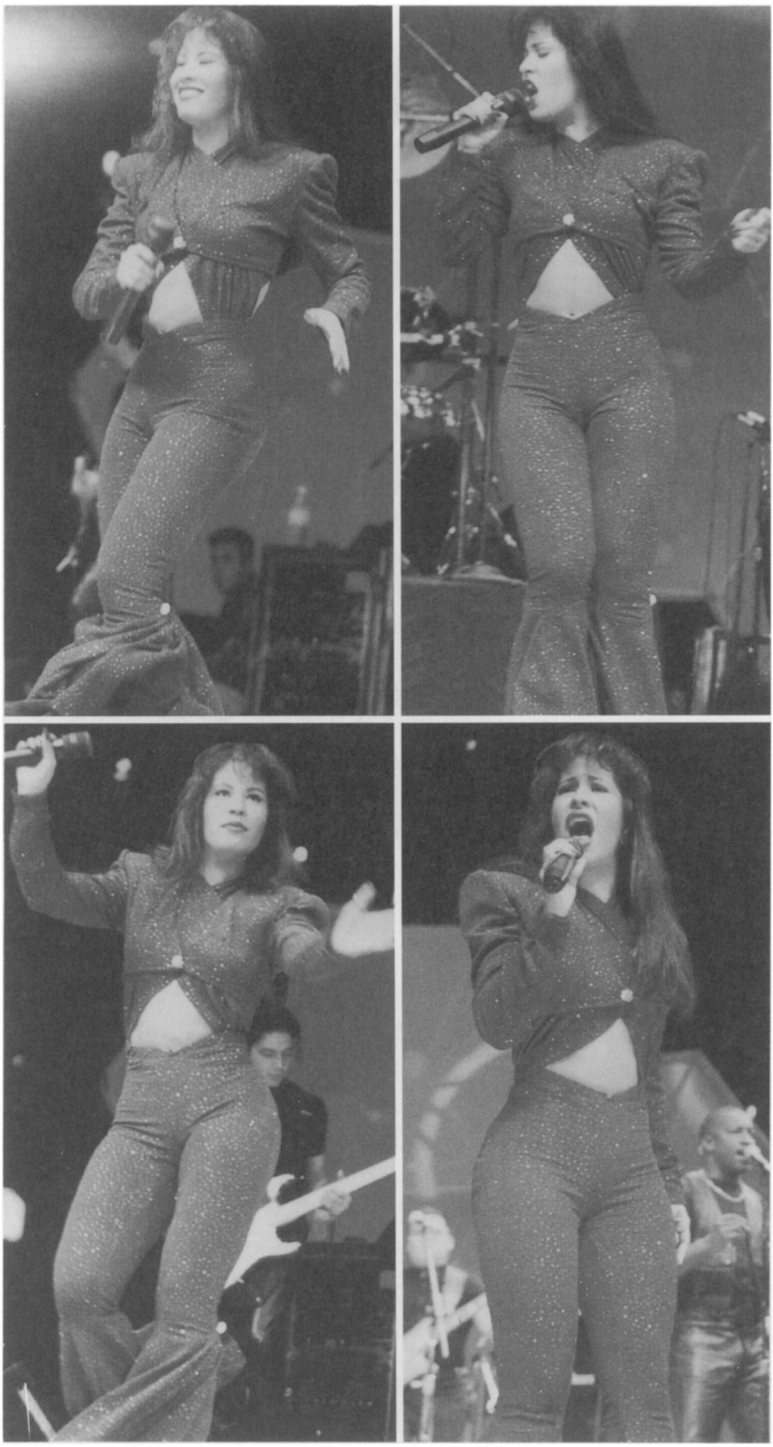

Figure 1. *Selena in concert, Houston, Texas 1995. Photos courtesy Arlene Richie, Media Sources, WWW.Photoworld.Com.*

decided to do anthropological fieldwork in the 1980s precisely in the kind of Greater Mexican working-class community that Selena sung and danced for and my own native community of origin as well (Limón 1994). At that time, this 'return to the source', as Amilcar Cabral once termed it, carried its own difficulties for this native intellectual now so much a creature of his mind (Cabral 1973). Not the least of these difficulties was quite literally having to re-experience my body so as to be able to literally learn how to dance again; to relearn how to let go and yet discipline my body to dance the polka dance so popular among my folks, a song form that Selena first mastered and never abandoned throughout her career even as she expanded her repertoire. But since that period of fieldwork, I have returned to the university, joined an English department, acquired a racially/ethnically-mixed family, and, of course, I have aged, none of which has been conducive to the continuing practice of my relearned skills or my continuous immersion in this working-class ambiance.

When I learned of Selena's death, I knew relatively little about her though out of some lingering sentiment for this kind of music and mostly curiosity, I began to listen to her music – my working-class brother was kind enough to make copies of one of her tapes for me (he owned them *all*) – and found it engaging enough but not so as to make me, and, I suspect others, into adoring fans by itself. Taken by themselves her songs are actually fairly stock romantic tunes. Something else was at work, and, now I can begin to understand that it had also been at work during my earlier period of fieldwork. That something was the Mexican female body in singing and dancing performance and in 'high fashion', *a la mexicana*. I had danced with such women – both in my younger years before the university and later in my fieldwork – women perhaps not as 'attractive' as Selena but sometimes close enough; women who dressed and made up their often equally voluptuous and *morena* bodies and faces in tight polyester fabrics of bold colors and with make-up that explored the limits of the word, 'garish'; women who, in their own idiom, refashioned the best that K-Mart and Target could offer, a refashioning at some considerable distance from Ann Taylor and L.L. Bean.[2] To see Selena in bodily performance in her film but also in the musical videos she made – my brother also owned these – was to be deeply reminded of this particular affiliation of desire in my former life, one whose resonance clearly still continued in my current academic existence. And there is possibly yet more, another basis for desire and identity between my life trajectory and that of my fellow, former working-class South Texan, Selena. I find myself wanting to believe that this young high-school drop-out who obtained her high school degree with correspondence courses while 'on the road', might actually understand the past and the present effort of this older Ph.D. to theorize Greater Mexican culture, including now herself, within the 'high' conceptual universe of 'cultural studies'; this, so as to give it greater salience and significance in the larger world of culture and politics in the same way that she also saw the advantages of 'crossing-over' into larger cultural ambiance for herself but also for her community.

Selena Perez Quintanilla began her life on April 16, 1971 and she died on March 31, 1995 shot to death by a former employee. Her assailant was Yolanda Saldivar, a thirty-five year old woman who, after an initial period as a star-struck Selena 'groupie', offered her services to Selena as an organizer of a fan club. She eventually became Selena's personal adviser and business consultant, especially in the management of a boutique to market Selena-inspired products for women – clothing, jewelry, perfume, etc. Although folk rumors persist of Saldivar's unrequited lesbian desire as a primary motive for the slaying, it would appear that Selena's discovery of Saldivar's financial mismanagement and embezzlement was the central motive coupled with Saldivar's emotional trauma at being fired from this position of proximity to stardom given her previous relatively unexciting life as a nurse. Selena met her in a motel room to discuss and conclude this failed relationship. As Selena was leaving the room, Saldivar drew a pistol, fired and mortally wounded the rising young star who died en route to the hospital (Patoski 1996:160–161). Saldivar was tried, convicted and imprisoned for life in a trial that further added to Selena's growing iconicity especially when recurrent photographs of her decidedly unattractive assailant appeared next to those of the decidedly attractive Selena.

The image of a young heroic fighting man, but sometimes also a woman, shot to death in the prime of their youth has great resonance with the Greater Mexican community, a fit subject for the epic-heroic folk ballads of Greater Mexico called *corridos*. When Selena died, the Greater Mexican community, especially in Texas, experienced a massive outpouring of grief and emotion unsurpassed within this community since the assassination of John F. Kennedy, who, to this day, remains one of the two or three non-Mexicans who have inspired the composition of *corridos* (Dickey 1978). But this heroic image of Selena continues to be grafted unto yet another popular image of Greater Mexico, that of the renown folk healer such as Don Pedrito Jaramillo, who unselfishly served his community and is honored after his death in 1904 by becoming an object of veneration including ritual pilgrimages to his places of birth and death that continue to this day (Limón 1994:187–197). Even as I write, members of this community continue to make pilgrimages to Selena's home, the motel where she was killed and to her gravesite. Sensing a great human interest story, the national media including *The New York Times* and *People Magazine* devoted front page and cover stories and photographs to her which, of course, only served to increase her cult status within her native Mexican community. It is a status that shows no sign of diminishment. It is not difficult to grasp the attraction of a young man defending the Mexican community 'with his pistol in his hand' or, in Kennedy's case of defending it with his policies and his cultural persona (Paredes 1971). Nor is it difficult to understand the veneration of a folk healer who has done great unselfish service in healing his community. But the case of Selena seems of a different cultural order. How are we to begin to explain how and why a working-class, twenty-three year old young woman from within this community could, in the 1990s, achieve this cultural status but on the basis of performative sexuality and mass media culture?

The purpose of this essay is to address this question as it has not quite been addressed before. I propose that at the heart of this instance of popular culture is the articulated conjunction of female sexuality, music and dancing and its involvement simultaneously in the psychic management of sexuality within Greater Mexico but also in relation to the on-going social inequality between Mexicans and Anglos in the United States. It is a subject that I believe is central to grasping the psycho-cultural and political origins of the extraordinary phenomenon that Selena was in her life and has certainly become in her death. Before moving to my analysis, we need to consider two other major current and alternative interpretations of this extraordinary phenomenon as well as one relatively more minor treatment.

Selena: Cultural affirmation or negation?

The journalist Joe Nick Patoski has written the most extended treatment of Selena, a well-researched, detailed biographical account of her life whose other great contribution is to provide us with the most detailed succinct account of the history of Texas-based Mexican music to date (1996). It does not pretend to be a theoretical treatment in any extended sense, although toward the end, he does offer an interpretation for Selena. It is an interpretation that veers in the direction of the Mexican religious and heroic cultural traditions noted earlier. For the Greater Mexican community, says Patoski,

> . . .Selena had already evolved from a pop star into an icon of grief, a symbol of how harsh, unjust and hurtful death can be, especially when it takes someone so young, promising and full of life . . . It was no small wonder that Selena was now immortalized in more street murals than Mexican revolutionaries Pancho Villa and Emiliano Zapata. and was almost as popular as the Virgin of Guadalupe . . . Her posthumous image was a touchstone for salvation, hope, and redemption; hence, the Selena shrines, the Selena votive candles, and the Selena veneration throughout the Latin world (ibid.:266–267).

But Patoski does not explain the qualitative cultural difference between these traditional images and Selena's construction as an icon of music, dance and sexuality, although elsewhere in his book, he is clearly aware of the latter. Commenting on Selena's passage from teen-ager to young woman, he says,

> . . .she let her raven hair grow thick and full, augmenting what nature denied with hairpieces. Her lips had filled out voluptuously; so had her breasts and hips. Her rear was 'the kind you could place a beer glass on without spilling the foam', as one admiring disc jockey put it. She was the total Latina. It showed in performance. Her personal bearing figured into the musical equation in a big way . . . Now she possessed the power to turn men on. For the first time Selena was being perceived as *una guapa*, a babe (ibid.:95).

As far as I know, the only other serious scholarly work on Selena is a very good unpublished paper by Luis Plasencia, my colleague at the University of Texas, read at the 1996 National Association of Chicana and Chicano Studies meetings in Chicago

(1996). Although early on in the paper he eschews any effort to offer what he calls the 'correct' reading, nonetheless, toward the end of the paper, he implies a theory and interpretation which make him less than persuaded that Selena performs to the ultimate benefit of Greater Mexico. He sees her success as a function of what he calls, 'the Selena morality play' whose principal six components that resonate with Greater Mexican culture are: (1) the dominance of males (her father) and the obedience of children (Selena); (2) the 'centrality of the family'; (3) 'the importance of children contributing their labor for the benefit of the family unit'; (4) 'the reaffirmation of an individualistic notion of economic well-being in the U.S. ... in other words, hard work and obedience in the labor market will overcome gender, ethnic, age and class discrimination'; (5) 'the importance of assimilation into the mainstream ... ethnic attachments and accouterments are OK, though the aim should be to "crossover" to "mainstream" society'; (6) 'Our consumption of cultural commodities are an important part of our assertion of ethnic identity and membership: i.e. our possession and support of such commodities enhances the viability and continuation of "our" Mexican-origin community' (1996:10). For him, Selena, in all of her performative self, seems to appear as a conduit or unwitting agent for the reproduction of capitalist values which he clearly thinks inimical to this community's interests, values such as patriarchy, family, child labor, individual striving, assimilation with only ethnic accouterments, and commodity consumption. Plascencia acknowledges that these values may be consistent with those actually held by this community – hence her resonant popularity – but he seems to be uncomfortable with them and her alleged reproduction of them. In the very posing of a key critical concluding question, he is clearly implying his political discomfort with Selena and this range of values which she allegedly reproduces: 'Is it possible', he concludes, 'to create alternative representations that engender ideologies that foster a different set of social relationships or different levels of controls over representations?' (1996:11).

Such an analysis, symptomatic of our left-critical culture emerging of the 'sixties', now strikes me as wanting in its Frankfurtian discursive abstraction from the energetic connection of Selena to her community, somewhat like Adorno commenting on jazz. It implicitly calls for yet another reading of 'false consciousness' among the passive untutored masses as they get 'taken in' by Selena as an agent, perhaps unwitting, of the capitalist hegemony specifically its 'culture industry' (Kellner 1995: 28–31). It may be so at some level and in part, and, its effects may vary from subject to subject, but such an analysis does seem to call for a dismissal of the enormous Greater Mexican cultural energy put into Selena as a public cultural delusion. Plascencia's analysis of Selena as a 'morality play' might also be questioned in terms of the very values that he seems to think are or should be problematic for this community, i.e. patriarchy, the family, child labor, individual achievement, assimilation and even commodity consumption although this is not my principal counter-argument.[3] Less critical, although not in open admiration like Patoski is an obituary by the rising novelist from Greater Mexico, Ana Castillo. If Patoski thinks of folk saints, Castillo

imagines Selena as a cult-goddess of purity attributing her success to her 'unblemished morality', her 'clean-cut married image' and to the 'joy' she brought to Greater Mexico from 'field workers to the urban unemployed, poor brown and countless others who elsewise may have given over to despair' (1995). What I find strangely missing in both Patoski's and Plascencia's analyses is a central analytical place for what is so overwhelmingly central in Selena's performance, namely her womanly sexuality. Both interpretations seem to assume or by-pass it, although Patoski does provide ample detail on this sexual factor as I have noted. Castillo takes explicit note of Selena's sexual *persona* only in this closing and qualified assessment where we sense her hesitation about her subject's sexualization; (the emphasis is mine): 'Because of her example and because of the ground she broke, *although exoticized* ... I am certain that the void she left will be filled with a new Selena' (1995).[4]

In what follows I want to propose that we can best understand this major phenomenon of the 1990s, if we see it as a confluence of several intercultural traditions concerning Greater Mexican female performative sexuality that have been partially generated within the historical and unequal engagement of Anglos and Mexicans in the United States. The life and death and cultural construction of Selena draw on these traditions even as she revises them and resolves their internal contradictions ultimately in the cultural-political interests of her native community. The first of these traditions is the prior history of such female performance in the U.S. Southwest.

Selena: The precursors

It is surely the case that Selena's style is substantially derived from the very American popular culture in which she grew up. In his own teen-age years her father, who managed her entire career even in her death, was himself an aspiring singer with his American-style rhythm and blues group called *Los Dinos* trying hard and failing to break into the nascent American rock and roll, rhythm and blues market of the late 1950s. Selena grew up not only with this parental influence which the film clearly shows, but as quite normal American teen-ager in the 1970s and 80s, she was of course, quite susceptible to the myriad of current American pop music styles of our time. If we continue to keep dancing as well as singing before us, one thinks of Tina Turner, Michael and Janet Jackson, certainly Paula Abdul and, of course, Madonna, to whom Selena is more often compared. Indeed, she would seem to be a child of this culture and her singing and dancing wholly in its debt. What the film tends to erase, however, – an erasure that itself speaks to the pressure of Anglo-American hegemony – is yet another tradition which Selena came to know also under her father's tutelage and within which she made her initial name 'in the business'. This is the tradition of *comjunto* and *orquesta* music, both playing predominantly polka music for the people of Greater Mexico as they continue to do today. This is a somewhat regional music quite native to this community, not as 'international' as

Latin-American or American pop musical rhythms and therefore less 'attractive' to the large musical conglomerates interested in broad market appeal. But, it is the case that even at the peak of her stardom, Selena never wholly abandoned this particular tradition always incorporating such selections within her concert repertoire. This tradition has been celebrated for its 'resistive' stance against Anglo-America and what has been seen as a colluding Mexican 'middle-class' (Limón 1983; Pena 1985). Nonetheless this tradition has always contained a gender contradiction featuring, as it does, almost exclusively men as performers, male-centered lyrics and male-dominated dancing (Limón 1994; Valdez and Halley 1996). As Plascencia begins to suggest, Selena draws on yet another and perhaps more relevant Greater Mexican musical tradition that constitutes yet another and possibly the most interesting of her precursors (Plascencia 1996:4).

Selena draws on but radically revises a tradition of popular, sexualized female singers but also dancers of Greater Mexico. A definitive study remains to be done on the full range of twentieth century popular working-class Greater Mexican female singers from both sides of the border who anticipated and, in a very real way prepared the ground for Selena. They would include the *ranchera*-singing lineage including now traditional figures like Lola Beltran and Lucha Villa from Mexico but also now the very contemporary American, though with Mexican parentage, Linda Ronstadt. Within this lineage we may also locate the Texan, Lydia Mendoza, who has received well-deserved and well-done scholarly attention from my other University of Texas colleague, James Nicolopulos, and there are any number of less-known figures in Texas and I suspect elsewhere (Nicolopulos 1993). Like Selena, these women also had their origins in the greater Mexican subaltern classes and like her, their presence and songs resonated with this public.[5] Unlike Selena, however, their bodily sexuality was not yet fully available as a key aspect of their performance. I say 'not fully', because it is quite impossible and an exercise in naiveté, for example, not to see the erotic presence of the fulsome Lucha Villa singing her *rancheras* in a low-cut Mexican peasant style blouse. There is yet another Mexican female singing tradition that also anticipates Selena but with closer proximity. Here I refer to the sultry siren nightclub singers of the pre- and post World War II period, *a la* Marlene Dietrich in Europe and Julie London in the U.S., but also to be found in Mexico and along the border. Often outfitted in tight, body-shaped low-cut, long evening dresses, these women sang equally sexy and sultry songs, principally *boleros*, to audiences in clubs ranging from the very upscale to the very proletariat. In the United States and very much a part of Selena's particular lineage, the incomparable Chelo Silva, also from Selena's Corpus Christi, Texas, is surely the preeminent example. As an aspiring musician growing up in this city in the 1950s, Selena's father would have been wholly aware of Chelo Silva's musical presence. However, it might also be said that this particular tradition reaches back to the nineteenth century in the American Southwest when some versions of such women sang and danced in the Mexican *cantinas* that dotted the area. One such dance was the fandango. But when such women danced before

the Anglo-American men who might also frequent these establishments, yet another distinct precursory tradition was born. As DeLeon notes, for such white men, 'The *fandango* ... was identified with lewd passions and lasciviousness ... *Senoritas* were described as especially sensuous when participating in the dance...' (1983:37). Such Anglo men came to identify such women, their singing but more so their dancing as a site of illicit sexual pleasure virtually inseparable from prostitution. As such, Mexican women's sexuality, as articulated in song and dance, became deeply involved in the developing nineteenth-century colonial relationship between Anglos and Mexicans but in psychologically and politically complicated ways as I have shown elsewhere (Limón n.d.). For the traditional Mexican male who also witnessed these various women, the signifying relationship was probably far less complicated; he would have a clear, unambivalent and unexoticized categorization of such women as sexually illicit, i.e. *cantineras, mujeres cabareteras, putas*, etc. (bar women, club women, whores).

I suggest that when Selena, or any other such Mexican woman, performs such popular music and dance in the United States, she does so within the semantic context of these traditions. Selena's unique expressive stance in her time consisted of her willingness to join together, with her superb voice and dancing, these different musical traditions in a way that no one had quite done before. But, she also fully expressed her bodily sexuality as no other such singer-dancer had ever quite done before for a mass public audience, an expression, as I have suggested, always done at great risk – the risk of the stigma of illicit, prostitutional sexuality from either cultural side. Within the Mexican tradition such stigmatization is, of course reinforced by a strong Christian-Catholic tradition for whom the repression of sexuality is central. In his novel *and the Earth did not Devour Him*, the South Texas-Mexican writer Tomas Rivera offers such a scene of instruction as he tells us of a nun preparing a group of Mexican children for their First Communion: 'Remember children ... now you know which are the mortal sins and which are the venial sins ... now you know that you are God's children, but you can also be children of the devil ... Now let's see, let us practice confessing our sins. Who would like to start off? Let us begin with the sins that we commit with our hands when we touch our bodies. Who would like to start?' (1987:118–119).

Selena as sexual revisionary

For the Greater Mexican or any other besieged community, it is important to obtain visible success in the larger society and to have 'their' respect, and, this, of course, Selena did with her ability to sing and dance successfully in an American pop idiom. By itself, however, I am not persuaded that it can account for her extraordinary success. Selena also operated within certain other powerful traditional semantic domains of singing, dancing and sexuality. Her distinctive cultural contribution, which is to say, the deep origin of her extraordinary popularity with Greater Mexico,

I would argue, is a result of her ability to revise these traditions in such a way as to still maintain a position of cultural integrity relative to her community at a particular moment of its conflicted history with Anglo-America.

I propose that Selena's display of her sheer sexuality provides a sanctioned realm of culturally deeply needed freedom for the people of Greater Mexico.[6] First, she draws on the already sexualized tradition of the Greater Mexican *rancheras* singers and night-club *chanteuses* such as Chelo Silva, a tradition previously largely confined to the enclosed ethnic cabarets and dance salons. Drawing on newly-acquired knowledge of the post-modern pop star system in America and the world, Selena transposes this tradition into the larger contested realm of public culture and asserts it there for and on behalf of the large masses of Mexicans as an important tradition. Though I suspect this transposition weighs heavily in her favor with the Greater Mexican public, themselves now more anxious to assert themselves in the public culture, this accomplishment would still not be enough to account for her popularity. She does more. Again, possibly borrowing from the Madonna and Paula Abdul influence in American pop music culture, she openly sexualizes this tradition in the most eroticized of ways. I suggest that for Christian-Catholic working-class Mexicans who trace their psycho-religious lineage back to scenes like Tomas Rivera's, Selena's public sexuality permits a much needed site of discharge and expression for a still too-repressed sexuality in this culture as true for women as for men, a transaction for sexual freedom, by the way, not inconsistent with their own ritualistic week-end liberating dance practice in public dance halls to the music of polkas, *cumbias* and *boleros*, musical-dance forms that inherently call for intimate body contact even as the bodies are energetically in motion like that of Selena (1994:141–167). But, as I have suggested above, this sexualized construction also occurs at great peril as Mexican woman always teeters on the precipice of harlotry either as constructed by Mexicans, often both female and male, and Anglos, a dilemma also faced by African-Americans today (Marriott 1997).

Selena controlled this dark possibility in two ways: first, through the simultaneous production of what I shall call a 'good girl' narrative evident in public statements about her and in the recent film. Her brazen sexuality on stage is bracketed, rendered acceptable and sanctioned by her well-noted activities off-stage. We learn that her favorite food is pizza; she contributes time and money to charities; she is wholly devoted to her family and her community, indeed, she lives in a modest home on the Mexican side of Corpus Christi, Texas next to her parents whose lawn she cuts herself dressed in nice shorts, sneakers and a pretty top; she is deferential to her father as one would expect of a girl in this culture, especially in the management of her career;[7] she is happily married to her lead guitarist who joined the band as a slightly crazy, Anglicized hippy rock musician only to be domesticated by her warmth, charm, kindness and love. Like so many other Mexican working-class young women, she wants to have babies. And, there is yet another part of the narrative that is even more effective. Her media coverage and the film tell us much of her

wonderful childhood of love, innocence and dreams of becoming a singer. In the film the most telling scene has the little girl Selena sitting on the roof of her house looking at the moon, dreaming and talking to her sister about her future, while below, visible through a window, their mother is preparing their beds, a scene, by the way, wholly appropriated from a painting by the South Texas born-and-raised artist, Carmen Lomas Garza called *Cama Para Suenos* (Beds for Dreams). Through this entire bracketing 'counter-narrative', Selena is able to achieve her full sexuality for herself and for the psychological benefit of her fellow Mexicans even as she defeats, or at least controls, the possibility of its racist and sexist appropriation. But, to an interesting degree, this serviceable control in the interest of herself and her community is also evident on stage, and it seems to me much bound up in her large open smile of full radiance, interestingly minimally sexualized, a smile which disarms and contains her body from the smile on down even as it allows this body to happen. To see her on stage and to know this other narrative and this smile is to acknowledge, yet control, to one's own interest, the discursive play of sexuality in a still-continuing field of colonial relationships and problematic sexuality specifically relative to the Greater Mexican community. Here, performatively, sexually and politically, lies a world of difference with Madonna with whom she is often compared. Like Selena in these remarks, Madonna has also been seen as a site of politically productive contradiction (Kellner 1995:263–296). But, even if one reads her at her allegedly most subversive, the question still remains, on whose behalf is this critical subversion at play? That is, what is the referent community to whom her subversion would matter especially since the general postmodern Anglo-American community today likely finds very little in the popular culture that can subversively shock? Such subversion is still possible, however, for a performer like Selena who positions her provocative self in the contested space between and within working-class Mexicans and the larger still inhospitable society.

I have lent her sexuality, intertwined with her music and dance, central explanatory force for the phenomenon of Selena, and, in this effort, I offer an interpretation focused on the sheer materiality of her intertwined singing, dancing and sexuality. For it is here, I think, that the Greater Mexican community finds its greatest resonance with Selena and the resolution of certain key issues. It is in the critical resolution of these sexual issues so involved in the colonial relationship between Anglos and Mexicans that Selena makes a fundamental contribution toward an affirming culture. Such an interpretation does not preclude Patoski's sense of her fundamental resonance with Greater Mexican religious values of life and death, but it does offer a more materially based, palpable discharge point for her energetic connection to this community, one based on a received tradition of sexualized music and dance at some distance from religious idealism. And it is all to the point that such an identity is sited upon Selena's particular body, in its voluptuousness perhaps highly representative of the greater Mexican working-class female body, possibly a body in a metonymic relationship to the whole of the culture.[8] But, in response to Plascencia, even if we

grant this sexual site of critique, what are we to make analytically of the 'hegemonic' consumerist culture that she also literally embodies. We can approach and address this question and contradiction, if we take these concepts of the hegemonic but also the 'counter-hegemonic' in a fluid manner, i.e. as a dance, if you will, as Williams himself did and so did Gramsci (Roseberry 1994:361). In Anglo-America the run-on expression, 'song-and-dance' is sometimes used to label an evasive, deceptive, frivolous social performance as when a politician is said to do his 'song-and-dance' at a press conference. The expression betrays a general popular sense that singing and dancing are not serious matters, but more like a game. However, I have suggested that in her song-and-dance within the hegemony, Selena may indeed be involved in a game but it is of a different order.

Serious games

For Williams, the cultural stuff of the counter-hegemonic seems to reside decisively outside the influence of capitalist culture, a capitalist culture, he tells us, that is '. . .continually resisted, limited, altered, challenged by pressures' (the counter-hegemonic) but 'pressures', he says, '. . .*not at all its own*' (1977:112, emphasis mine). However, hegemony is continuously in the business, often the literal business, of incorporating resistive elements of the counter-hegemony to its own interests. What he does not note as clearly is the possibility that those 'below', those subject to the hegemony, may also produce the counter-hegemonic not solely out of their very distinctive and 'pure' resources as Williams seems largely to imply but also by engaging on the terrain of the hegemonic and incorporating elements of its capitalist culture to its own end, although actually he does say the following:

> It would be wrong to overlook the importance of works and ideas which, while clearly affected by hegemonic limits and pressures, are at least in part significant breaks beyond them, which may again in part be neutralized, reduced, or incorporated, but which in their most active elements nevertheless come through as independent and original.

He continues to complete this fruitful formulation for grasping the problem at hand:

> And we are better able to see this, alongside more general recognition of the insistent pressures and limits of the hegemonic, if we develop modes of analysis which instead of reducing works to finished products, and activities to fixed positions, are capable of discerning in good faith, the finite but significant openness of many actual initiatives and contributions. The finite but significant openness of many works of art, as signifying forms making possible but also requiring persistent and variable signifying responses, is then especially relevant (1977:114).

Rather than Frankfurtian rigidities 'reducing works to finished products, and activities to fixed positions', Williams' and more recently Roseberry's (1994) more fluid appraisal of the way capitalist culture dominates – and doesn't – seems not only

more appropriate for trying to make sense of late capitalism and all of our lives in it, but it also strikes me as a perfect gloss for Selena as she sings and dances her body in the midst of such a capitalist culture, so much of this performance, 'within the insistent pressures and limits of the hegemonic' and yet somehow reaching through it 'independent and original' to connect with her Greater Mexican working-class audience, a connection driven by her *mexicana* sexuality which paradoxically might now be seen in the service of the 'counter-hegemonic.' Yet, I hesitate to call this 'resistance' against something else called the 'hegemony'. In a recent salutary essay, Michael Bell warns us that, 'a myopic focus on resistance ... can easily blind us to zones of complicity and, for that matter, of *sui generis* creativity' (1996:733).

There is no end to this debate over the politics of such expressive cultural data, a debate now in a sense handed to Plascencia and myself, a debate which actually marks the different critical trajectories of the Frankfurt School and Gramsci as he is inherited and revised by British cultural studies (Kellner 1995:101). We can only try to discern 'in good faith, the finite but significant openness of many actual initiatives and contributions' such as hers. And, if in such good faith, we watch, and listen and experience Selena with her people, I, at least, think we witness an energetic claim to an imperfect realm of freedom in and from late – and, for working-class Greater Mexicans – still 'Anglo' capitalism. But such freedom is never purely won and held. As Sherry Ortner, influenced by Williams, has recently argued, in anthropology, but cultural studies in general, we need to re-think critical and practice theory, for 'writing in terms of the old binaries – structure/event, structure/agency, habitus/practice – is ... a dead end' to which I would also add, 'hegemonic' and 'counter-hegemonic' (1996:12). She proposes an alternative model that she calls 'serious games'. In this case, rather than trying to fix Selena as a pure agency either on behalf of the subaltern or as a pure effect of, in this case, late capitalist social structure, we should think of her as manifestly social, the latter '...consisting of webs of relationship and interaction between multiple, shiftingly interrelated subject positions, none of which can be extracted as autonomous "agents"; 'yet', she continues,

> at the same time there is 'agency', that is, actors play with skill, intention, knowledge, intelligence. The idea that the game is 'serious' is meant to add into the equation the idea that power and inequality pervade the game of life in multiple ways, and that, while there may be playfulness and pleasure in the process the stakes of these games are often very high (1996:12).

Throughout this argument I have given centrality to Selena's sexuality in this serious game that she plays with capitalism and her people, though not as a conscious autonomous agent, and, it is no small matter that she plays the game as woman. After her theoretical introduction, Ortner's larger purpose in her book is to understand the possibilities of women's 'serious games' and how they work in what is everywhere, 'a hegemonically masculinist (if not "male dominant") social order...'. Recognizing that 'it is unsatisfactory to assume that women wholly identify with

the hegemonic order' she also recognizes that 'it is nonetheless difficult to come up with an alternative that does not fall into the opposite trap, casting woman as enacting wholly different (and often supposedly morally better – more "nurturant" and so forth) projects' (1996:16). There follows a series of brilliant collected essays in the book, all of them, however, based on ethnographic work in societies at the periphery of late capitalism. Yet, this woman-centered formulation might help us to recognize late-capitalist, Western pop-cultural Selena as Mexican woman playing yet this other 'serious game' with gender, negotiating and dancing her way through this contested site as well without lapsing into either side, that is, not withdrawing into an alternative and essentialist project but rather constructing herself sexually under the hegemonic 'male gaze' even while marshaling all of her resources so as to be in effective performative command of it. While always sensitive to the choreographing hegemony, she will *choose* her moves (Martin 1985). And, if this dance with the hegemony is as I think it is, doesn't part of her great appeal to many ordinary Mexican women lie in her victorious enactment of *their* own everyday dance with this hegemony, an engagement which many women must undertake within the male hegemony's own terms and from which they cannot easily withdraw.

Selena and the politics of Greater Mexico

With her music, dancing and sexuality as her discursive tools, Selena may have played out yet another role in the 1990s, a role enhanced by the particular configuration and collapse of electoral politics within the Greater Mexican community coupled with a new social assault from the dominant society particularly in California, factors which may also accentuate her great popularity built already on the psycho-cultural premises I have suggested.

A large part of the struggle of this community with the dominant society has taken the form of electoral politics, that is, concerted efforts across the Southwest but also the Mid-West (where there are also large Mexican concentrations) to elect what are often taken to be fully authentic, which is to say themselves of Mexican ancestry, individuals to represent the Greater Mexican community in various political forums ranging from local municipal office to appointments to the highest counsels, such as to the President of the United States. Such elections really began after the Second World War with the conjunction of available World War II veterans who received a college education paid for by the United States government under what was called the G.I. Bill together with a lessening racial segregation and a growing Greater Mexican demographic presence in the United States. This beginning reached a high point in the late 1980s and early 1990s when many such officials were elected or appointed, some to rather high office, with great publicity and great hope from the community. In Texas alone, Henry Cisneros was elected the first Mexican-descent mayor of San Antonio since the mid-nineteenth century while Lena Guerrero from South

Texas achieved the highest appointed office ever for a woman when Governor Ann Richards appointed her to the Texas Railroad Commission, which, notwithstanding its archaic name, actually oversees the always powerful oil and gas industry as well as the also quite powerful trucking industry operating in spacious Texas. She addressed the Democratic National Convention in 1990, and, in the power bars of Austin, the state capitol, there was serious talk of a future Texas governor, and, given her young age, a future Presidential contender. The San Antonio area elected only its second Mexican-descent U.S. Congressperson in Albert Bustamante, with early and honorable involvement in the Chicano movement, even as the state as a whole was electing another San Antonian, Dan Morales, as Attorney General by way of Harvard and no involvement in the Movement. For a community in such need of effective representation, it is a sad thing to say that by the mid-1990s, each of these highly elected individuals in which this community had put so much hope, effort and trust was seriously and hopelessly compromised on justifiable ethical, moral, legal or political grounds. Early on, Atttorney General Dan Morales started thinking about the Texas governorship – while learning to speak Spanish – even as he veered rightward politically so as to assure the Anglo vote in a state that is, like California, and, because of transplanted high-tech Anglo-Californians, becoming more Republican. As mayor of San Antonio, Henry Cisneros, later to serve as Secretary of Housing in the Clinton Administration, confessed to sexual philandering and now still faces possible charges of lying to the F.B.I about his cover-up payments to the ex-girlfriend. Congressperson Albert Bustamante was convicted on graft and corruption charges. As if more was yet needed, from a more distant past, the charismatic ex-Chicano Movement leader and candidate for the Texas Governorship on the Raza Unida Party – the former football star and incredibly attractive Ramsey Muniz, himself an exercise in attractive sexuality – was caught and convicted for his last and final time for drug-dealing and sentenced to life without parole.[9] But, in my opinion, the most hurtful case for the Texas Mexican community, and, one suspects, especially for the women of this community, was Lena Guerrero, who, in her too ambitious effort for high office, lied about the completion of her college degree at the University of Texas with high honors – she never finished – but also exaggerated her 'farmworker' origins. She was forced to resign. As this political collapse was taking place in Selena's Texas world, she was already a national star, and it is important to also recall the well-publicized arrest and conviction of California State Assemblyman Art Torres on drunk-driving charges even as city alderman, Ambrosio Medrano, from Chicago, was caught taking bribes and resigned his post.

These elected officials who actually spend far more time in touch with the ordinary citizens of Greater Mexico than, let us say, Chicano and Chicana academics, are probably the closest thing we have on a large scale to anything resembling Gramsci's organic intellectuals. In most cases, they are quite literally from these working class communities – with the notable exception of Cisneros and Morales – and they often do devote a great deal of time to articulating the issues and problems of their

communities and advocating in their favor. Yet, for whatever reason, none really acceptable, these particular representatives of the Greater Mexican body politic, morally and ethically failed their communities, which, given their relatively low voter turn-out, did not need more reason to believe that the system is corrupt.

My proposition at this point is actually quite simple and frankly speculative. In this mostly male wasteland of organized institutional politics, Selena, already richly and energetically connected to her community on other more sexual, expressive native terms, in effect, becomes the only remaining public cultural possibility of freedom and triumph with integrity, especially when the only other Texas-Mexican woman with any charisma, Lena Guerrero, turned out to be such a gross disappointment. At a moment of absolute perceived political failure within this community and the general irrelevance of other leadership sectors, Selena combined sheer musical and dancing talent, energized by a sexuality that served to draw out repression; together with a smile of sheer innocence and her well-known and quite real organic ties to family and community, and then tragically killed in well-understood cultural fashion – almost could not help but fill an enormous psychological void left by the general failure of the institutional leaders of this community in politics. Having filled at least part of that void in the most effectively effective manner, her sudden death could not but inspire such an outpouring of grief and loss. There is now no way of establishing this direct or, for that matter, indirect correlation, but I am struck by the moral and political conjunction.[10]

Selena Perez Quintanilla: 1971–1995

Selena's general accomplishments as an American pop star are evident, but her particular achievement on behalf of the Greater Mexican community has received little analytical notice other than the two commentators with whom I took some difference. In the foregoing, I have tried to shed some light on the enormous popularity of Selena within the Greater Mexican community both in her life and death. In this interpretive effort, I focused on her sexuality – articulated through her body, music and dancing – as the primary force driving this popularity arguing for its affirmative cultural and political consequences for a community still under pressure from the dominant 'Anglo' society. As such, she is in keeping with a long tradition of expressive resistance in music, dance and related forms of expressive culture, though, for me, in a much more interested and complicated fashion that speaks to the needs of our own time (Limón 1994; Flores 1995), rather than now exclusivist notions of male-dominated heroic 'resistance' (Paredes 1971; Pena 1983). But, in discussing this particular kind of sexuality – 'popular-cultural', 'hetero-sexual', 'patriarchically conditioned' – I hope also to have contributed to the rapidly emerging twin studies of sexuality and the body. As Terence Turner has recently noted, analyses of the latter seem to be largely premised on a now questionable Foucaultian account in

which we see 'a poststructuralist attempt to substitute a desocialized, depoliticized, and desubjectified theory of the body for a conception of embodied subjectivity and material bodily activity...' – activity such as I have argued for Selena – '...through which the body participates in multiple bodies and interpersonal social relations...' as she so evidently did for and within her community even as her body was also implicated in late-capitalist consumerist culture (1994:46). The closely related space of sexuality, on the other hand, has also been largely occupied by poststructuralist and predominantly gay-lesbian accounts. This appears to be even more the case in the sexuality scholarship on Greater Mexico as perhaps it actually should be, given that particular area of repression in this community. But, in all of these these general and specific terrains, as both Raymond Williams and Sherry Ortner have suggested, *all* initiatives and contributions involved in the potentially counter-hegemonic – including the most seemingly male-identified, consumerist and 'hetero-sexual' – deserve close analytical attention especially when they are performed with great energy and agency in the fluid space between the dominant and the dominated, the complicated site where Selena lived, sung and danced to the ultimate benefit of the people of Greater Mexico.

Notes

* I am very grateful to my colleague, Sandra Soto, for her close, attentive reading of an earlier version of this essay which has greatly profited from her criticism.

1. After Americo Paredes, I use the term 'Greater Mexico' to refer to, as he says, 'all of the areas inhabited by people of Mexican culture – not only within the present limits of the Republic of Mexico but in the United States as well – in a cultural rather than a political sense' (1977:xiv).
2. K-Mart and Target are low-budget chain department stores that cater to working-class populations in the United States.
3. That is, by asking whether any of these are contextually negative given the specific lived experience of this community deeply within late capitalism. (1) Yes, Selena's relationship with her father does speak of patriarchy but it was he, in his patriarchal insistence, that made her possible against an Anglo capitalist world that would deny her and all Mexicans as they had once denied him. (2) Again, yes, the family with all of its internal problematic is reified and valorized in this story; but, can one easily criticize and reject a social unit that has been so centrally necessary to the continuing survival of this community as Selena's story demonstrates? (3) Of course Mexican children have contributed their labor to their family, but this is not a frivolous arbitrary choice under the social conditions of Greater Mexico, and may, at certain moments, again, like the 'family', be wholly necessary for survival. (4) If anything, Selena's life teaches us that one does not achieve individually. Throughout her career, her connection with her family and her community, her collective consciousness is continuously emphasized. (5) To exploit the mainstream by performing well in it is not to assimilate; it is to do well in another terrain while remain master of your own, even as you change that terrain of the hegemonic by your very presence. The terms 'ethnic attachment' and 'accouterments' do not do justice to Selena's dance, music and frankly, her sexual *morena* self. Indeed, part of the community's identification with her may

be that, we all eat pizza and Selena can have her high fashion while remaining, in the words of the Greater Mexican poet, Juan Gomez-Quinones, '. . .just Mexican enough' (1972:46), which brings us finally to (6) the most troublesome question of commodity consumption allegedly encouraged by the Selena morality play. Plascencia is clearly uncomfortable with the Greater Mexican community's probable desire, reinforced by Selena, to acquire something of the commodities of the dominant culture – fashion, food, cars, etc. And, for traditional Mexican working-class women and Selena, surely something also needs to be especially said for the particular aesthetic resonance and consumption of sheer high-class sexy fashion commodities, which reinforced Selena's own serious investment in the design and construction of clothes and jewelry. What can one possibly say here except that none of us live free of the allure and desire created by late capitalist culture, but also that the acquisition of some such commodities, if only vicariously through figures like Selena, need not be construed as a totalizing negation of the self; that residual areas of working-class, ethnic experience are never wholly subsumed by such acquisition and that yes, in certain contexts, the very acquisition and display of such commodities might be empowering tactical victories for such groups?

4. As far as I know, Castillo's is the only assessment of Selena by a major feminist intellectual from the Greater Mexican community, an odd disjunction given that, at this point, Selena may well be the best known woman in and beyond this community.
5. A *ranchera* is a slow rhythm 'country-western' song often of *machismo*, unrequited love and ritual male drinking. Selena herself also sang in this genre. The album, *Dreaming of You*, contains such songs, and she also performed in this same genre in the film, *Don Juan de Marco*.
6. In her commentary on an earlier version of this essay, my colleague, Sandra Soto, wonders whether I might want to qualify this statement to say 'hetero-sexual' community. However, she also tells me that 'lesbians and gays loved Selena – you could see her represented in drag shows'. I choose to leave open the possibilities, although as Soto correctly notes, unlike Madonna, Selena did not 'gender-bend' as part of her performance. Selena's performance was clearly 'hetero-sexual'; its reception, however, may have sexually varied.
7. Yet, as further support for my thesis, her two major reported temporary ruptures with her father were (1) her decison to begin performing in sexually provocative attire and (2) her decision to marry Chris Perez, her lead guitarist, over her father's objections. They reconciled on the second issue, and, her father soon saw the powerful market appeal that her sexuality was producing. Always the good business manager, he acceded here as well (Patoski 1996:81–82, 97–99).
8. While I am making her sexually charged body in song and dance the site of this affirming culture, we should also not forget Selena's successful effort to learn to speak Spanish well after a childhood where she was taught only English by parents concerned about discrimination. Her speaking and singing body affirming the Spanish language is also an important part of her appeal.
9. The Raza Unida Party was a radical third-party effort among Mexicans in Texas to offer an ethnically-keyed alternative to the Democratic and Republican parties.
10. As Castillo notes in her obituary, 'we adore our boxers and baseballl stars, our crooners and actors. Just as the mainstream does. We are not so sure of our politicians, thinkers, writers and visual artists, just like the mainstream' (1995).

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