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Greenberg, Rachael Anne

Publication Date

2016

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Los Angeles

Is Yolanda Saldívar *Homo La Flor*?

Revisiting Selena Commodities and the
(im)Possibility of Queer Latinx Cultural Citizenship

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Master of Arts
in Chicana & Chicano Studies

by

Rachael Anne Greenberg

2016

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ABSTRACT OF THESIS

Is Yolanda Saldívar *Homo La Flor*?

Revisiting Selena Commodities and the
(im)Possibility of Queer Latinx Cultural Citizenship

by

Rachael Anne Greenberg

Master of Arts in Chicana & Chicano Studies

University of California, Los Angeles, 2016

Professor Rafael Perez-Torres, Co-Chair

Professor Robert C. Romero, Co-Chair

This thesis explores the queer dimensions of the posthumous career of the late Tejana singer, Selena Quintanilla-Pérez, to better understand how her commercial legacy shaped disparate and unequal modes of cultural, political and economic belonging for the Latina/o LGBTQ community. Drawing from a queer, legal framework of U.S. citizenship, as well as Latina/o performance and media scholarship, I contend that the production and consumption of “Selena commodities” provides a window into both shifting and stagnant representations of queer Latina/o identity within both U.S. popular culture and Latin American entertainment. For a population of new sexual subject-citizens, Selena’s commercial legacy is used as a transcultural

strategy to expand gender formations, express sexual fluidity and demand inclusion to public space. This thesis quantifies this alternative expression of belonging as *queer Latinx cultural citizenship*; a radical, embodied strategy of disidentification that emphasizes the connections between cultural and commercial visibility with the affirmation of cultural, racial, gendered and sexual difference from normative ideals and political enfranchisement. Yet this strategy towards representation does not always function equally across genders. By centering the legal, commercial and artistic dimensions of Selena's queer legacy, this thesis demonstrates how Selena commodities offer an incomplete platform from which to articulate *queer Latinx cultural citizenship*.

The thesis of Rachael Anne Greenberg is approved.

Chela Sandoval

Rafael Perez-Torres, Committee Co-Chair

Robert C. Romero, Committee Co-Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2016

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Chapter I: Introduction

“[Selena] was always proud of who she was and where she came from. That has always resonated with me. Not only as a Mexican American but also as a gay man. Since her death, she has become a huge icon in the gay community. She taught us to be ourselves and live life to the fullest.”

-Joe Valenzuela, Selena fan, Corpus Christi, April 22, 2015

“If people think that Selena and I had a lesbian relationship, you are not a fan of Selena.”

-Yolanda Saldívar, 20/20 Interview, ABC News, 1995

In October 1995, Yolanda Saldívar, an unmarried, working-class, non-feminine, Latina from South Texas, was convicted of first degree murder for the death of the *Tejana* superstar, Selena Quintanilla-Pérez (1971-1995). A few years later, four unmarried, working-class, openly lesbian, Latinas from San Antonio, Texas—Elizabeth Ramirez, Kristie Mayhugh, Cassandra Rivera and Anna Vasquez—were wrongly convicted of aggravated sexual assault of a child and indecency with a child (Chammah). Saldívar and “the San Antonio Four,” as the women have come to be known, are united by the experience of being prosecuted by both a court of law and the media, on the basis of their perceived, or confirmed homosexuality. Well before these women were convicted of a crime, legal officials targeted their sexuality as a measurement of their deviance and criminal capacity. Simultaneously, mass media sources emphasized the women’s gender non-normativity, feeding public perceptions of lesbians as “manlike abuser(s) of other women” (Mogul, Ritchie and Whitlock 27). While notions of culpability differ greatly between Yolanda Saldívar’s case and that of the San Antonio Four—Saldívar is guilty and the San Antonio Four are not, and have since been released from prison—these stories reveal a similar pattern: The Texas criminal justice system and mass media’s dual commitment to the

criminalization of queer people, particularly queer people of color; this pattern of policing is rooted in 19th century notions of U.S. citizenship and national belonging.

As this thesis demonstrates, the circumstances of Selena Quintanilla-Pérez's early death open a discursive space from which to analyze the connection between the criminalization of race, sexuality and gender, and citizenship, cultural belonging and the broader project of nation building. Primarily, Selena's posthumous career must be understood as a commercial structure, one that communicates (and promises) alternative, forms of cultural and ethnic belonging for the Latina/o community. Despite its emphasis on Latina/o inclusion however, does Selena's commercial market continue to marginalize its queer consumers? To further explore this question, it is imperative to understand how commercial actors, including the Selena market, exist in conversation with legal structures that dictate official modes of belonging and citizenship. Together, these commercial and legal institutions have worked to homogenize citizenship, a practice which often places queer people and queer people of color, outside of national boundaries of belonging. In turn, queer people, and queer people of color are often categorized as "queer criminal archetypes," a tool used by medical, legal and commercial actors to fuse queerness with criminality, under the pretext of national and individual security (Mogul, Ritchie and Whitlock). The image of a queer person as inherently criminal, particularly a queer person of color, can be easily packaged and sold for public consumption by the mass media, including newspapers, magazines, films, radio, music and theatre. Therefore, we must question how the persistence of the "queer criminal archetype" in the U.S. legal system and commercial sphere has influenced Selena's commercial market, and thus limited it's potential as a site of cultural and ethnic belonging.

This thesis explores how legal and commercial actors in the United States have exploited Selena's death / Saldívar's murder to maintain the image of the queer criminal archetype in the public sphere. Furthermore, I demonstrate how this unnatural conflation between criminality and queerness has shaped Selena's posthumous commercial legacy, making her a contradictory site of identification for her queer fans. Finally, I demonstrate the ways in which some cultural productions have queered Selena's image to disrupt the queer criminal archetype. In sum, this research questions the potential of Selena's commercial legacy to disrupt the criminalizing script within which queer people of color have been placed in the United States. I ask: Does commemorating, performing, and/or consuming Selena's image, provide a pathway towards a queer Latinx¹ cultural citizenship, or an alternative strategy of belonging that emphasizes the connections between cultural and commercial visibility? I also ask: Does commemorating, performing, and, or consuming Selena's image activate a strategy of dis-identification from the social constructs of the queer criminal archetype? This work contributes to on-going academic discourse concerning Selena's cultural, political and economic significance, namely my exploration of Selena as a site of gay Latino identification. My research also broadens and complicates previous lesbian theorizations of Selena's career by centering Yolanda Saldívar's image, and tracing its influence on Selena's legacy as a queer Latinx icon. Ultimately, this study challenges existing ways of thinking about Selena and *Selenidad*.

¹ In dialogue and solidarity with many queer activists, academics, and our allies, I use the term Latinx (pronounced "Latin-ex") to disrupt the masculine-centric umbrella term "Latino," and well as the more gender inclusive, but binary terms "Latina/o" and "Latin@". My research, which centers the gender and sexually non-conforming body, benefits from the use of the term Latinx, as the word captures the spectrum of gender identities (rather than a binary) for people of Latin American descent. When my analysis centers the gender, or sexually non-conforming subject, I use the term Latinx. I use the more gender inclusive term, Latina/o to refer more broadly to people of Latin American-origin who reside in the United States.

My case studies draw from significant, yet largely unexplored, components of Selena's commodified afterlife. These include: The criminal trial and media coverage of the *State of Texas vs. Yolanda Saldívar* (October 1995) and the play, *Selena: La Reina del Tex-Mex*² (Hugo Salcedo 1999). These case studies, which span the legal to the commercial realms, enable an exploration of the queer potential of Selena's legacy, or what I call, a *queer Latinx cultural citizenship*. An alternative strategy of belonging, queer Latinx cultural citizenship emphasizes the connections between cultural and commercial visibility with the affirmation of cultural, racial, gendered and sexual difference from normative ideals and political enfranchisement. Placing U.S. citizenship in conversation with consumption, this framework echoes the words of Latina media scholar Arlene Dávila, who posits that we live in a time where “nothing escapes commodification”; therefore, we may look towards commercial culture as a site from which “public identities and cultural citizenship are constructed in the current transnational context” (Dávila 10).

For queer people of color, commercial culture is a dominant source, or mechanism through which they are commanded to perform a heterosexual, or heteronormative public identity. “Heteronormativity,” is what political scientist Cathy J. Cohen refers to as a rigid system of identity performance, that is heavily raced, classed and exists within an inflexible dichotomy of gender norms (Cohen 439). Furthermore, heteronormativity centers whiteness, the nuclear family unit, relies on static and normative expressions of gender and sexuality, and purports itself to be the natural and legitimate mode of existence in civil society (Cohen 439). Echoing the words of the late queer, Latino performance scholar, José Estéban Muñoz, mass media's “call of heteronormativity” (33) can be undermined through a process of dis-

² For another academic analysis of Salcedo's play, see chapter 4 of the following book: Misemer, Sarah M. *Secular Saints: Performing Frida Kahlo, Carlos Gardel, Eva Perón, and Selena*. Boydell & Brewer, 2008.

identification, an embodied practice enabling one to publically transgress normative scripts of gender, sexuality and race, in affirmation of a (multiply) marginalized subjectivity. Similarly, queer Latinx cultural citizenship constitutes a consumption-based strategy of dis-identification, wherein the act of consuming a particular good, enables and/or emboldens one to publically perform a historically marginalized subjectivity. I further contend that the consumption and/or embodiment of culturally specific commodities, carries with it a radical potential, and a strategy through which a white, heteronormative politic of belonging is dis-identified, in service of generating new forms of membership. Following legal and academic discourse at the intersection of U.S. citizenship and cultural consumption, I examine the radical potential of Selena commodities and the making of a queer Latinx cultural citizenship, to show Selena as a complex and/or incomplete icon for queer Latinx fans.

Constructing a Framework for Analyzing Queer Latinx Cultural Citizenship

Drawing together queer legal theory with Latina/o performance and media studies, I provide a critical framework to analyze how Selena represents a complex queer legacy that both enables and disables the liberation of queer Latinx identity. Broadly, the thesis interrogates questions surrounding citizenship, transnationalism, commodification, heteronormativity, queer (in)visibility, criminalization, and the institutionalization of otherness to which a queer Latinx cultural citizenship responds. As Arlene Dávila argues, one of the values of studying commercial, or mass-mediated culture, is the opportunity to uncover the ways that national membership, citizenship and identity are produced and negotiated within the context of the transnational market (Dávila 11). More narrowly, the experiences among historically marginalized consumers in the United States suggest that mass commercial culture not only commodifies, but hierarchizes and promotes “normative ideals of culture, language, gender and

race, denoting lesser or greater degrees of belonging according to how closely individuals approximate such ideals within a given nation-state and its particular dominant confluences of these ‘identity’ variables” (Dávila 11). In other words, the racially, sexually, culturally or otherwise marginalized consumer often finds themselves in a paradoxical confrontation with U.S. commercial mass-mediated culture; the marginalized consumer in the U.S. is simultaneously excluded from representation, yet incentivized, and even commanded, to participate in commercial culture pursuant to their responsibilities as worthy citizens.

Latino literary historian, Raul Coronado engages with this paradox of inclusion and exclusion in “Selena’s Good Buy” (2001), one of the first academic reflections on the significance of Selena’s posthumous commercial career. Coronado contends that “Selena commodities,” or the outpour of goods branded with Selena’s image, represents a cultural value beyond mere utility and in fact, signifies an important exchange between the political economy and culture. (Coronado 104). Beyond capital gain, Selena “commodities have taken on personalities, representing emotions, values and ideals” (Coronado 104) and are linked to Texas Mexican’s individual and collective desire to be acknowledged by “mainstream (read Anglo) U.S. capital” (Coronado 87). Furthermore, Coronado contends that Texas Mexicans fervent demand for the production and consumption of Selena commodities echoes a collective “desire to surpass the racism and class exploitation [and] the yearning to change the social and cultural conditions” (93) which continue to marginalize the Texas Mexican community. Ultimately, Coronado introduces an important discussion regarding the complex intersection between commodification and cultural belonging: Selena commodities represent both a lucrative site from which the Texas Mexican consumer can be exploited by U.S. and transnational commercial

structures, while simultaneously experiencing the unprecedented visibility and affirmation of *Tejano* youth culture in mainstream media.

Coronado's discussion of Selena's commercial and cultural significance is expanded upon by theatre and dance scholar Deborah Paredez in the book *Selenidad: Selena, Latinos and the Performance of Memory* (2009). The notion of Selena as a commodifying structure is just one of three key components to Paredez's theoretical apparatus: *Selenidad*, which can be understood as a synthesis of fan cultures, commodifying structures, as well as a lens through which to see the evolving constructions of *Latinidad*, or latino-ness, and identity formation amongst US-born Latinxs at the turn of the 20th century (Paredez 2009). As a commodifying structure, *Selenidad* demonstrates how Selena's image has been absorbed into mainstream U.S. culture. *Selenidad* can be seen and heard through a multiplicity of artistic mediums, including, but not limited to: Hollywood cinema and the production of the 1997 biopic, *Selena* (Nava); independent films such as Lourdes Portillos' companion documentaries *Corpus: A Home Movie for Selena* (1999) and *A Conversation with Academics about Selena* (1999); cover bands; a civic monument; a museum; the annual commemorative music festival, *Fiesta de la Flor*; musical theatre; dramatic plays; public art; fashion; beauty products; and fan fiction³. In 2016 alone, Selena has been introduced as a wax statue at Madame Tussauds Hollywood; included in the Hollywood Walk of Fame Class of 2017; and chosen as the face of the newest, special collection of MAC cosmetics. Also notable is a current petition on Change.org for the Mattel corporation to release an official "Selena Quintanilla" Barbie (Ocampo 2016).

³ Among the diverse range of Selena commodities, the 1997 biopic, *Selena*, directed by Gregory Nava, gave Quintanilla the greatest level of posthumous visibility. At the time of its production, and for years following its release, the *Selena* movie was the highest budget film ever made by a Latino director. Similarly, Jennifer Lopez became the highest paid Latina actress in history for her portrayal of Selena (Coronado, 62). Other notable commercial dimensions of *Selenidad* include the off-broadway musical, *Selena Forever*, The Selena Museum (Corpus Christi, Texas), Mirador de la Flor (Selena Monument, Corpus Christi, Texas) and Selena's gravesite at Seaside Memorial, Corpus Christi.

Returning to the example of Selena's wax statue at Madame Tussauds Hollywood, we further understand the connection between Selena commodities and the process of Latina/o cultural and ethnic inclusion to U.S. popular culture. The day of the statue's unveiling, *The Los Angeles Times* quoted a dedicated Selena fan, Roger Gomez, as saying, "This is going to be a spot where a lot of her fans are going to come and see her and say, 'Yes, she represents us.'" (quoted in *Los Angeles Times*, Bermudez, August 31, 2016). The "us" to which Gomez refers are the many Latina/os who identify Selena as the one who broke the diversity barrier for Latina representation in Hollywood and in U.S. popular culture, more broadly. For many fans, Selena was the catalyst from which Hollywood began to recognize and affirm a brown, working-class Latina aesthetic. Paredez explains that 20th century U.S. popular culture and transnational Latin American representations of the Latina body were dominated by images of whiteness and upper class elitism (Paredez 134). In contrast, Selena's "decisions not to dye her hair, lighten her makeup palate, or alter her curvaceous body with surgical or sartorial technologies," appealed to a population of Latina/o consumers who for the first time saw and felt themselves represented on a mainstream platform (Paredez 134). The permanent installation of Selena's "working-class girl next door" aesthetic in Madame Tussauds museum is just the most recent example of how Selena's image continues to motivate Latina/o fans to feel affirmed and to occupy spaces that have historically excluded, or limited Latina representation, including Hollywood.

While Coronado's earlier argument contends that Selena commodities serve as a repository for "displaced dreams" among Texas Mexicans (Coronado 93), Paredez illustrates how Selena's legacy is inscribed by the dreams, both "displaced" and actualized, of her Latina/o fan-base. *Selenidad* not only reflects the desires and hopes of Latina/os, but measures how Latina/o communities actively reshaped their lives and identities as U.S. citizens and residents at

the end of the 20th century (Paredes 5). The need amongst many Latina/os to re-negotiate their individual and collective location(s) within U.S. citizenship was due in large part to emergent forms of political exclusion and economic exploitation that occurred throughout the country, but acutely affected those living in the U.S. borderlands region during the 1990s. Borrowing the term from Juan F. Perea's *Immigrants Out* (1997), Paredes defined the last decade of the 20th century as a period of "new nativism," which saw the passage of many anti-immigrant laws⁴, as well as the beginning of the post-North American Free Trade Agreement, or NAFTA (1994), era. Ratified by the U.S. Congress at the end of November 1993, NAFTA created a trilateral trade bloc between the Canada, the United States and Mexico, and ushered in an unprecedented era of globalization in the western hemisphere (McAnany and Wilkinson 1996).

The age of NAFTA saw major economic restructuring and cultural exchange, particularly between the United States and Mexico. While the U.S. government had spearheaded these new transnational and socio-economic flows, many white, U.S. citizens and media networks responded with xenophobic and nationalistic rhetoric that heightened a culture that was distinctly anti-immigrant, particularly against those of Latin American-origin. For many Latina/o communities on both sides of the border, these shifts meant the continuation and expansion of economic disenfranchisement, and a politically sanctioned culture that deemed U.S. Latina/o citizenship as suspect. Selena's rise to fame and posthumous career bisected this anti-Latino, socio-political climate in the United States. Therefore, the fervent need to maintain and consume Selena's legacy and image exists as a counter-strategy to the political and economic climate that served to further marginalize working-class U.S. Latina/os as a population that exists outside

⁴ These legislative acts included California's Proposition 187 (1994) and Proposition 227 (1998), the immigrant provisions of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act (1996) and the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (1996) and the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (1996). (Paredes 15)

normative citizenship and cultural belonging. My analysis in chapter three of Hugo Salcedo's play, *Selena: La Reina del Tex-Mex*, further articulates how the consumption and commemoration of Selena's legacy constitutes a transnational counter-strategy against power structures that actively marginalize the working class, queer Latinx subject.

To understand the theoretical and political significance of why and how queer fans have maintained Selena's legacy, we must similarly situate her death within the proper historical context of the LGBTQ community in the United States. Selena's rise to fame in the late 1980s followed an era of increased political and social conservatism, as well as a national preoccupation with sexual citizenship and homosexuality. During the early years of the Cold War, between the 1940s through the 1960s, the hunt for communists and other political dissidents was inextricably linked to local, state and federal government's efforts to purge queer people from working in the public sector (Mogul, Ritchie and Whitlock 38). The ruling on *Bowers v. Hardwick* (1986) signified the loss of civil liberties for queer people in the private space, as well. Supreme Court's decision⁵ upheld laws that criminalized private, sexual acts between "homosexuals." The right to have sex between two consenting adults, in the privacy of their own home, was stripped from the LGBTQ community; the same restrictions failed to be imposed onto heterosexual couples. Ultimately, *Bowers v. Hardwick* illustrates how legal structures have historically categorized queerness, even in private, a punishable offense (Mogul, Ritchie and Whitlock 72).

Alongside anti-homosexual political legislation, the 1980s were also marked by cultural campaigns against gays and lesbians. Chicana feminist Ellie Hernández notes that the national dialogue about homosexuality emerged in response to the HIV and AIDS pandemic that ravaged

⁵ The court's ruling in *Bowers v. Hardwick* (1986) was overturned seventeen years later with the landmark SCOTUS case *Lawrence v. Texas* (2003), which struck down sodomy laws in Texas and 13 other states.

the queer community with minimal government intervention (Hernandez 157). In addition, the “reform” culture of the 1980s saw the federal government’s efforts to combine economic restructuring with the restructure moral and ethical citizenship. Hernandez points to the joint effort between the Reagan administration (1981-88) and Lynne Cheney, the former head of the National Endowment for the Arts, to introduce multiple campaigns centering “family values,” while targeting “racial and sexual minorities as culpable for an apparent decline of American culture” (Vaid 1995, cited by Hernandez 157). The final decades of the 20th century illustrate the ways in which citizenship was shaped by a profound preoccupation towards, and reaction to, the increased visibility of racial and sexual diversity among U.S. citizens and residents. This historical context helps us connect Selena’s rise as a queer icon in the 1980s and 90s to the rise in legal and social initiatives to place queer people, and queer people of color, outside the boundaries of normative citizenship and national belonging.

Queering Selena Commodities

Selena’s statue at Madame Tussauds Hollywood is one of multiple examples of how her image continues to transform mainstream media’s representation of Latina/os, particularly along racial and class lines. Yet, how does Selena’s image make visible, or influence mainstream representations of queer Latinx identity? The consumption, or re-presentation of Selena’s image amongst queer Latinx fans is captured by Paredez’s concept of “queer *Selenidad*” (158). An extension of both commercial structures and modes of identity formation, queer *Selenidad* constitutes a platform to (re)articulate and embody “queer Latina/o grief, desire, critical commentary, and working-class Latina/o camp sensibilities” (159). These outlets for “queer Latino grief” take on various formations, including Chicana lesbian interpretations of Selena’s

death⁶ and most visibly, through the use of Selena's image in Latinx drag culture and impersonation. According to interviews conducted with gay Latino fans, Selena's image continues to thrive in Latino drag culture, Paredez argues, because of her stylistic and racial excess, as well as her reputation for having been an outcast within a conservative familial structure (Paredez 165). The process of queering and, or re-appropriating Selena commodities for the queer Latinx consumer often constitutes a type of memorial practice, one that honors Selena as an icon who paved the way for Latinx fans to publically express their gender and sexual identities more fluidly.

Paredez contends that queer *Selenidad* consists of “Lesbian readings of Selena’s death scene and queer performances of Selena,” including drag impersonation (159). Broadly, Chicana and Latina lesbian theorists utilize and contribute to queer *Selenidad* as a critique of Latino patriarchy, a framework through which to reveal the continued exploitation of, and violence against, the Latina body for capital gain. Much of the lesbian feminist criticism responds to, and attempts to re-claim, what Chicana lesbian theorist Alicia Gaspar de Alba identifies as the posthumous objectification and the commodification of the brown, female body for mass consumption. Gaspar de Alba argues that in many respects, Selena was a man-made icon—dually constructed by her father/manager, Abraham Quintanilla, and “by the male-dominant industries that are now raking in the profits of the Selena phenomenon” (cited by Pérez, 158). One of the industries that most quickly commodified and capitalized on Selena’s image was the entertainment industry, with the 1997 release of Gregory Nava’s biopic *Selena*. The cinematic representation of Selena has emerged as a site from which multiple Chicana lesbian theorists,

⁶ For critical lesbian speculation of Selena’s murder and legacy, see Chapter 5 of *Selenidad*, pg. 166-172; Cherrie Moragas’ play “Digging Up the Dirt,” and *A Conversation with Academics about Selena*, directed by Lourdes Portillo.

most notably Emma Pérez and Ellie Hernández⁷, have traced the transforming and fixed notions of Latina sexual subjectivities and desire.

A queer cinematic rebuttal to Nava's biopic is Lourdes Portillo's documentary *Corpus: A Home Movie for Selena* (1999) and its companion video, *A Conversation with Academics about Selena* (1999). The films are both contributions to and a windows into queer *Selenidad*, showcasing how Selena's image is re-articulated as a cultural practice among gay and lesbian Latinxs fans, artists and intellectuals. Between interviews with and footage of queer Latinx engagement with Selena, and conversations with Chicana feminist writers including Cherríe Moraga, Sandra Cisneros and Rosa Linda Fregoso, Portillo captures Selena's legacy as both a site of gay Latino male identification and a negotiated terrain of Latina sexuality and desire. Portillo does the important work of inscribing representations of queer *Latinidad* within Selena commodities. Particularly, by inscribing a Selena drag impersonator to the repertoire of Selena fans, Portillo invites us to glimpse the ways in which queer Latinxs have claimed Selena in defiance of mass media's "call of heteronormativity" (Muñoz 33) and in service of full representation within public space.

In conversation with Paredez' concept of queer *Selenidad*, this thesis questions the potential of Selena commodities for the queer Latinx consumer, as a site of resistance against the media's and the law's "call of heteronormativity." I argue that the disruption of heteronormativity within Selena commodities is mitigated by the presence and/or absence of the queer criminal archetype. Thus, I trace when and why certain Selena commodities reinforce the queer criminal narrative, and explore when they function as a mode of disidentification from

⁷ For further reading see Pérez, Emma. *The Decolonial Imaginary: Writing Chicanas into History*. University of Minnesota Press, 1999; and Hernández, Ellie. *Postnationalism in Chicana/o Literature and Culture*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009.

queer criminal archetypes. This necessitates an investigation of two processes: (1) the way in which queer criminal archetypes have shaped Selena commodities, and (2) the instances in which Selena commodities offer a strategy of dis-identification, or method through which queer criminalization can be subverted. To understand the broader implications of queer Latinx inclusion and exclusion from Selena commodities, the next section elaborates on the construction of “cultural citizenship,” or a sense of belonging generated by a marginalized population within a larger system of hierarchy (Hernández 161), as a related process to the consumption of, and participation in, queer *Selenidad*.

Towards a Queer Latinx Cultural Citizenship

Selena commodities have brought racial and class diversity to representations of Latina/os in U.S. popular culture and the Latin American entertainment industry (Paredes 134). However, I argue that representations of Latina/o sexual and gendered diversity remain limited within the market of Selena commodities. The re-appropriation of Selena’s image by some queer Latinx fans—namely, gay Latino men who perform as Selena drag impersonators—has effectively broadened sexual and gendered dimensions of popular Latina/o representation. Performing Selena as a cultural, linguistic, psychic survival strategy for a gay Latino is further illuminated through Muñoz’s concept of disidentification. Within this framework, the gay Latino impersonation of Selena can parallel a public performance of self-actualization, one that undermines discriminatory ideologies that criminalize “components of subjectivity that do not conform, or respond to narratives of universalization and normalization” (161). As later analysis in chapter three demonstrates, the political dimensions of queering of Selena’s image through the Latino body is a performed political action that disrupts hegemonic representations of race, beauty, masculinity and sexuality within *Latinidad*, U.S mainstream media and Latin American

entertainment. Given the previously mentioned legal and commercial structures that have historically criminalized and/or invisibilized the queer and queer of color experience in the United States, the public performance of queer self-actualization is intrinsically connected to popular notions of citizenship and social membership.

A traditional understanding of citizenship is situated within a legal framework, often described as the state of being vested with the rights, privileges, and duties of a citizen, such as the right to vote, apply for employment, run for elected office, and the freedom to pursue “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” (U.S. 1776). More contemporary and interdisciplinary scholarship on citizenship however, has shifted the language beyond the legal, towards alternative notions of social inclusion, belonging and public participation. Interdisciplinary scholar activist, Maylei Blackwell points to the work of U.S. Latino scholars like Renato Rosaldo, William Flores, Rina Benmayer, etc. whose theorizations have helped conceptualize a relationship between *cultural citizenship* and alternative claims to belonging and claims for exclusion (Blackwell, 2012). In the anthology, *Queer Migrations* (2005), the late gay Latino theorist, Horacio Roque Ramirez, states that “scholars have taken up the question of citizenship and specifically that of cultural citizenship to address Latino’s political claims for inclusion in the United States” (Luibhid & Cantu 162). Rather than embracing citizenship as status, or as a method of identification, used to define the “attributes of good citizens [and to] determine the way in which individuals are incorporated into the status of citizenship” (Canaday 8), these authors have documented how and why marginalized groups have created alternative strategies of belonging in the face of institutionalized exclusion.

In conversation with Muñoz’s theory of disidentification, to claim cultural citizenship is to resist assimilation into identity scripts that homogenize one’s identity and normalize how one

presents themselves in public space. In an early theorization on popular citizenship, Renato Rosaldo argues that:

Cultural citizenship refers to the right to be different and to belong in a participatory democratic sense. It claims that, in a democracy, social justice calls for equity among all citizens, even when such differences as race, religion, class, gender, or sexual orientation potentially couple be used to make certain people less equal or inferior to others. The notion of belonging means full membership in a group and the ability to influence one's destiny by having a significant voice in basic decisions (402).

As such, cultural citizenship refers to the right “to claim identity, space and rights based on the lived differences...in a society structured through cultural domination, inequality and marginalization” (Roque Ramírez 176). The notion of cultural citizenship has been adapted by queer Latina/o scholars as well, notably in the work of Roque Ramírez, which centers the organizing effort of Gay Latina/o migrants in San Francisco, to demonstrate how gay Latino cultural citizenship provokes a “particular queer radical promise: to activate [our] differences in order to situate ourselves as entitled, legitimate members of the body politic where heteronormativity and whiteness rule” (176). Performance scholar Ramón Rivera-Servera has similarly broadened notions of queer Latina/o belonging by connecting Latina/o queer night life and the “cultural geography” of the dancefloor as an alternative space from which to claim “liberation from oppression” and build community (Rivera-Servera 135-136). Be it within public organizing spaces, or the semi-private/public space of the queer Latinx nightclub, *cultural citizenship* offers an opportunity to consider how marginalized individuals and communities seek entitlement in the United States through quotidian practices.

For the queer Latinx community, Selena's music and legacy has been a strategy used to claim “cultural citizenship.” The interaction between queer *Selenidad* and cultural citizenship played out most recently during the days of mourning following the massacre at PULSE nightclub on June 12th 2016 in Orlando, Florida—the deadliest public mass shooting in modern

U.S. history that ended 49 lives, nearly all of whom were Latinx identified⁸. Mourning the loss of the queer Latinx nightclub as an untouchable, utopian space and uncensored realm of queer expression was a particularly salient grievance among the community of mourners. As Justin Torres, a gay, Latino-identified journalist articulated in the *Washington Post*, the queer Latina/o nightclub constitutes a safe world apart from institutions that seek to silence, marginalize and criminalize those outside the white, heterosexual hegemony. Torres writes:

Outside, tomorrow, hangovers, regrets, the grind. Outside, tomorrow, the struggle to effect change. But inside, tonight, none of that matters. Inside, tonight, the only imperative is to love... The only imperative is to be transformed, transfigured in the disco light. To lighten, loosen, see yourself reflected in the beauty of others. You didn't come here to be a martyr, you came to live, *papi*. To live, *mamacita*. To live, *hijos*. To live, *mariposas* (2).

Torres words help us understand how the unspeakable violence at Pulse nightclub comes to represent not only the slaughter of queer people of color, but also an attempt to eradicate the space of belonging that queer people of color build out of necessity. As another journalist wrote, “they killed us in our sanctuary, where we are at our most free. Not just free to be queer. Not just free to be Latino. But free to be both at the same time. That’s where they killed us” (Brammer 1). Latin night at a queer club is politically significant, precisely because it creates a semi-public/private space for those who exist at the intersection of racial, gendered and sexual difference. The desecration of this sacred space therefore, threatens the very the freedom and visibility of multiply marginalized subjects.

Unsurprisingly, Selena’s music emerged as a rallying site from which the queer Latinx community in the U.S. began to dialogue about the systemic racism and homophobia that contributed to the violent actions against their community. Miriam Zoila Pérez, a lesbian-

⁸ 23 of the victims were of Puerto Rican origin, and the majority of the others had ties to Mexico, Cuba, Venezuela, Guatemala and the Dominican Republic (NYTimes June 14 2016).

identified Latina and podcast host, describes hearing Selena's hit song, *El Chico Del Apartamento 512* at a Gay Pride event at a Washington DC nightclub a few nights after the attack in Orlando. Pérez emphasizes “the poignancy of the fact that Selena was actually murdered at 23 years old. Her life and her legacy has taken on a poignancy for the Latino community, particularly for Mexican-Americans” (NPR Staff 1). The subtext of Pérez' comment—that Selena's fame is necessarily linked to her early death—punctuates the complexity of Selena's legacy; that is, the magnitude of Selena's career is, in many ways, dependent upon an act of violence against the Latina body. Selena's legacy also functions as a cautionary tale for Latinas that links the commodification of the Latina body to violence. As Chicana author Sandra Cisneros points out, Selena's problematic legacy teaches that “you have to die before you're twenty-five years old, that makes you successful, that's how you get on the cover of Texas Monthly. You either get bludgeoned, raped or shot and if you're Chicana, that's the only way you get on the cover” (Portillo 1999). The Pulse massacre and Selena's music both reflect the continued marginalization of people of color, and queer people of color, and their systemic exclusion from protections afforded by normative citizenship and belonging.

Yet Selena's music also becomes the site from which the queer Latinx community begins to re-envision and re-build a space of belonging that had been violently attacked; after all, it was Selena's song that brought Pérez back out onto the queer Latinx dancefloor—a space that is both racially and sexually intersectional in which one can be “transformed, transfigured” (Torres), both queer and Latina/o, and empowered to dis-identify from the institutional “call to heteronormativity” (Muñoz 193). The role that Selena's music played the wake of the Pulse shooting—creating a space of belonging that affirms and makes visible and queer of color subjectivity—is just one example of how Selena commodities can hold a “queer radical promise”

(Roque Ramírez 176), and offer a strategy of disidentification from queer criminal archetypes and in turn, the ability to claim space and belonging in the face of heteronormative and white hegemony.

While the consumption of, and/or embodied engagement with Selena commodities offer some queer Latinx fans a strategy through which cultural citizenship can be claimed, these strategies are mediated by larger systems of power and do not always reach equally across genders. In fact, Selena commodities also reinforce narratives that criminalize queerness. My later analysis highlights how legal and media structures have shaped Selena commodities in ways that echo and sustain queer criminal archetypes. In particular, the method through which Yolanda Saldívar is depicted in media and cultural productions, actively criminalizes her perceived non-normative sexuality and more broadly, sustains popular representations of Latina lesbians as criminal, or deviant subjects. As such, Selena commodities both enable and disable embodied strategies towards queer Latinx cultural citizenship.

Project Relevance and Research Questions

This thesis explores how Selena commodities, as a commercial structure, both reinforce systemic patterns of racialized homophobia, and offer a liberatory strategy towards queer Latinx representation through a process of disidentification from queer criminal archetypes. Queer Latinx cultural citizenship, a framework that connects cultural and commercial visibility with the affirmation of intersectional differences, enables me to measure the “radical queer potential” (Roque Ramirez 176) of consuming, and or engaging with Selena commodities. The need to explore strategies for claiming citizenship “based on lived differences” (Roque Ramirez 176) is more urgent than ever. In the wake of Donald J. Trump’s election to the presidency of the United States, there is great fear that national and social membership for queer people and queer people

of color, regardless of legal status, will be threatened in ways equivalent to, or more oppressive than the wave of *new nativism* in the 1990s.

The contemporary era of globalization is on the precipice of a dramatic shift; and political and social trends across Europe and the United States suggest that a renewed period of isolationism and white nationalism will take its place. Thus, amidst these changes it is ever more relevant to reflect on the ways in which “the flow of populations and cultural goods” continue to create opportunities for new pluralities and hybrid identities, and most significantly, create new demands for establishing belonging (Dávila 11). A closer understanding of Selena commodities sheds light on the following question: How can the commercial and culture sphere continue to offer marginalized communities the tools to create safe spaces of belonging, in defiance of political and economic systems that seek to reinforce their subjugation? Selena commodities reflect queer Latinx representation and re-representation, the simultaneous reinforcement of systematic patterns of racialized homophobia, as well as a pathway to a queer Latinx cultural citizenship. This thesis is guided by the following research questions: how have Selena commodities maintained queer Latinx subjects within a criminalizing framework? And alternatively, how have queer Latinx fans also re-appropriated said commodities as a strategy to dis-identify from criminalizing scripts and claim a form of citizenship that extends beyond, and in defiance of, the national?

Chapter Roadmap

In the following chapter (II), I draw from Mogul, Ritchie and Whitlock’s concept of “queer criminal archetypes” to analyze the criminal case, the *State of Texas versus Yolanda Saldívar* (1995) as well as *Univison’s* post-trial interview with Saldívar, to highlight the ways in which Selena commodities, shaped by both legal and commercial structures, actively reinforce

narratives that criminalize queer Latina subjectivity. In the final chapter (III), I continue to explore the presence of “queer criminal archetypes” in another Selena commodity, the play, *Selena: La Reina del Tex-Mex* (1999) by Hugo Salcedo. My analysis of Salcedo’s work is framed in part by José Estéban’s concept of “disidentification,” (1999) as it showcases the performance of Selena as a strategy towards claiming a queer Latinx cultural citizenship for the gay Latino fan. In the case of Salcedo’s depiction of Yolanda Saldívar’s character however, the consumption of Selena commodities as a disidentificatory strategy is insufficient, and re-cribes the queer Latina subject within the familiar, criminalizing queer archetype. As we question the socio-political function of queering Selena commodities, this thesis maintains that Selena has been a successful site of identity liberation and belonging for gay Latino fans, while remaining a complex icon for Latina lesbians.

Chapter II: Making the Case for The Lethal Lesbian

For devoted Selena fans who make the pilgrimage to the singer’s hometown of Corpus Christi, Texas, one unofficial, yet crucial memorial site is room 158 at the Days Inn Motel. Though the room number has since been changed, any well-versed Selena fan knows it to be the room in which Selena was shot by Yolanda Saldívar, on the morning of March 31st 1995. Saldívar had recently been fired by Abraham Quintanilla, Selena’s father and manager, for allegedly embezzling thousands of dollars from their music production company, Q Productions (Patoski 195). After being confronted by the family a few weeks prior, Saldívar had asked the family to give her time to gather documentation that would prove her innocence. Selena Quintanilla met Saldívar at the Days Inn Motel on the night of March 30th to retrieve and review the financial records (Patoski 195).

Noticing that a few crucial documents were still missing, Quintanilla returned to the motel on the following morning to confront Saldívar (Patoski 197). Per police records, Saldívar told Selena that she had been raped on a recent trip to Monterrey, Mexico. Concerned, Selena drove Saldívar to a local hospital for an examination, but the doctor's results proved inconclusive. When Quintanilla and Saldívar arrived back to the motel, an argument ensued, wherein Quintanilla made a final request for the missing financial records (Patoski 197). The conflict escalated to the point that Saldívar produced a .38 caliber pistol, pointed it at her own head and then towards Quintanilla's. In response, Quintanilla moved towards the open motel room door, when Saldívar fired, striking Quintanilla in the right shoulder (Patoski 198). Wounded, Quintanilla runs through the motel's pool area, the parking lot and past a bank of rooms before collapsing in the motel lobby. Employees tend to her and call an ambulance, which transports her to a hospital. Quintanilla is pronounced dead at 1:05 pm on March 31st 1995 (Patoski 200). Six months later, on October 23, 1995, Saldívar was brought to trial and was convicted of first degree murder and sentenced to life in prison with the possibility of parole in 2030 (Valdez 2005).

From the courtroom to the newsroom, Selena's death created a public discourse that readily and swiftly conflated a lesbian identity with a criminal one. The notion of lesbian desire became a tipping point, a term used to measure Saldívar's capacity for criminal and violent behavior. By popular vote, the trial delivered on its promise to bring justice for Selena: Saldívar was convicted and behind bars. However, a closer examination of the trial and the media frenzy in which it was engulfed, point to the failure of justice elsewhere. The following analysis highlights how the U.S. legal system and mainstream news sources worked together to perpetuate a criminalizing narrative of people of color, particularly based on their perceived

sexual orientation and gender presentation. While “justice for Selena,” (Valdez 2005) may have been achieved by legal and mainstream media standards, the narrative of racialized, classist, lesbian-centered violence that was constructed around Saldívar, left a compromising legacy that limits representations of queerness within Selena commodities. The trial and the media framed Saldívar in a way that served little prosecutorial purpose; rather, the narrative was aimed at policing gender and sexual non-normativity, and ultimately reinforced the image of the queer criminal archetype as a socially and legally constructed object for mass consumption.

Using the crime scene investigation as a starting point, this chapter explores how public police records, court documents and U.S. Spanish language media have left a legacy of lesbophobia within Selena commodities. In the case of Saldívar, the legal system and mass media work to weave Saldívar into the script of “the homicidal lesbian,” a particular queer archetype in which a woman is portrayed as a “manlike abuser(s) of other woman” (Mogul, Ritchie and Whitlock 27). In placing Selena’s killer within the familiar criminalizing script of “the homicidal lesbian,” Saldívar’s crime story becomes a commodity itself. Within a U.S. context, the narrative of “Saldívar as a lethal lesbian” is easily marketable to a wide audience, as it merely echoes familiar tropes and stereotypes that have historically marked lesbians as inherently criminal “beyond redemption” (Mogul, Ritchie and Whitlock 29). It must also be noted that lesbians whose racial, gender and class identities exist outside a white, wealthy, heteronormative framework, are disproportionately targeted by criminalizing frameworks that erroneously measure one’s capacity for crime based on sexual expression

Exhibit I: The Police Report

The crime scene investigation from Friday, March 31st 1995, highlights how the murder investigation situates Saldívar within the queer criminal archetype, and relies on assumptions about “the danger, deception and dishonesty allegedly embedded in the sexual and gender nonconformity (Mogul, Ritchie and Whitlock 43).” The narrative details the hours leading up to and following Selena’s death, including a step by step description of the interaction between Selena and Yolanda inside the Days Inn motel room, Selena’s death, and finally, Saldívar’s near ten-hour standoff with the police, a marathon negotiation marked by suicide threats and exclamations from the cab of her pick-up truck. The investigation report cites Saldívar as saying:

“I love her. I didn’t mean to kill her...Her father hates me. Her father is responsible for this. He made me shoot her...Her father came between us.’ Just before 9:30 p.m. she surrenders, and the crowd that has gathered at the scene erupts into cheers as the police take her away. At midnight she issues a statement to police in which she confesses to shooting Selena and claims, ‘Her father had told her that *the papers* I had brought from Monterrey were wrong and that her father had said that I was a *lesbian*.’” (Obituary 1995, cited by Paredez. Emphasis mine)

The pairing of lesbian identity and deception is central to both Saldívar’s own stream of consciousness and the re-presentation of that consciousness within the police report. In her book *Selenidad*, Paredez’s offers a similar analysis to the scene, arguing that the statement “features a striking slippage between the financial record and the record of lesbian desire, or the evidence of financial duplicity and the evidence of sexual transgression” (167). In this instance, the legal system is reproducing the conflation of lesbianism with economic betrayal and criminality. In her attempt to argue on behalf of her own innocence, Saldívar herself has internalized the notion of the ‘deceptive lesbian’ and contributes to the reproduction of the queer criminal archetype.

Exhibit II: The Opening Statement

Douglas Tinker, Saldívar's defense attorney, uses language in his opening statement, that exploits a familiar queer criminal archetype: the narrative of lesbians as malevolently ambitious and untrustworthy. Tinker's statement attempts to discredit one of the prosecution's key witnesses, Quintanilla's father, Abraham, Tinker states that, "evidence will show that Abraham tried to show Yolanda Saldívar *as an opportunist*, even telling Selena that she *was a lesbian*, which is certainly not true and caused Selena to believe that Yolanda Saldívar was *taking money* from Selena" (1995, emphasis mine). Similar to the crime scene investigation, Tinker's argument relies on the causal relationship between sexual transgression and professional transgression. This language, which suggests that lesbian desire is a marker of one's moral and professional deviance, exploits preexisting legal practices that stigmatize and erode the credibility of LGBTQ people, and perpetuates an archetypal narrative that mark queer people as inherently deceptive (Mogul, Ritchie and Whitlock 75).

Exhibit III: Yolanda Saldívar, Appellant v. The State of Texas, Appellee

"Appellant maintains her written statement raises the issue of whether she caused complainant's death under the immediate influence of *sudden passion* arising from adequate cause. Appellant contends she became enraged after complainant told her that complainant's father accused her of *embezzlement* and *sexual deviance* and subsequently argued with complainant, which immediately escalated into a killing"

--- Yolanda Saldívar, Appellant v. The State of Texas, Appellee. October 1, 1998. Emphasis mine.

In the years since the trial, Saldívar has employed both legal and media outlets in an attempted to reframe the timeline of events on March 31st 1995. In the citation above, the appellant (Saldívar) requests that the appellee's (the court's) charge of first degree murder be

reexamined as an act of voluntary manslaughter⁹. Saldívar's appeal contends that her actions inside the motel room amount to an un-premeditated, crime of passion, provoked by the deceased's accusations of "sexual deviance" and "embezzlement" (Saldívar v. Texas 1998). These charges enraged the defendant to such an extent that she was overtaken by a "sudden passion," and shot the deceased as a result of this former provocation. The court ultimately did not support Saldívar's motion to appeal and found that Quintanilla's words did not provoke an "extreme emotional and psychological state defining sudden passion or adequate cause" (Saldívar v. Texas 1998).

What is supported by Saldívar's legal strategy however, and similar to the language of the police report and the opening statement, is the notion that "sexual deviance," or homosexuality, negatively implicates one's identity in multiple ways, beyond the sexual. Saldívar's legal framing of sexual deviance as criminal evokes early scientific constructions of homosexuality, wherein "sexually deviance" or homosexuality was medically and legally paired with psychopathic inferiority and emotional underdevelopment. Some queer migration scholars point to The Immigration Act of 1917, as the legislation that gave legal language through which queerness could be pathologized¹⁰ (see works by Sommerville; Cantú and Lubheid). Given this historic context, the language used in Saldívar's appeal upholds antiquated constructions of homosexuality, wherein non-normative sexual expression is legally viewed as abnormal, immoral and indicative of one's propensity towards criminal behavior.

⁹ "Manslaughter is an unlawful killing that doesn't involve malice aforethought—intent to seriously harm or kill, or extreme, reckless disregard for life. The absence of malice aforethought means that manslaughter involves less moral blame than either first or second degree murder." (Sara J. Berman, "Murder vs. Manslaughter," *NOLO legal Encyclopedia*, 2016. Online.)

¹⁰ The Act's "constitutional psychopathic inferiority" clause marked suspected homosexual migrants as moral imbeciles with abnormal sexual instincts and thus, excludible from U.S. borders and citizenry (Luibhéid xii).

Commodifying the Case for the Lethal Lesbian

Jim Ruddy:
Reporter for Entertainment Weekly

How important is the Selena trial to your network?

María Celeste Arrarás:
Host of Univisión's *Primer Impacto*

Well, the Selena trial is the most important event that we've had in many years. *Univisión* has not...money has been no object. This is a big event. *This is the OJ Simpson for Hispanics*. We have put forth every resource we have to give the public good coverage.

-Entertainment Weekly, October 1995. Emphasis mine.

Legal narratives are only one of multiple factors that help develop and sustain the influence of queer criminal archetypes in our cultural imagination. Media depictions—televised, print, digital—potently fuel the perception of queerness as inherently synonymous with other characteristics that have been deemed criminal, or taboo by major U.S. institutions. To understand how the media packaged Saldívar as a lethal lesbian, I closely examine how she is represented by the Spanish language network, *Univisión*, one of the most powerful media giants in the United States. As illustrated in the epigraph above, *Univisión* understood Saldívar's trial as the "OJ Simpson for Hispanics," or more transparently, a high profile criminal case with broad viewership and profit potential. Keeping this commercial context in mind, the network intentionally depicted Saldívar within a familiar script of "the homicidal lesbian," as a profit boosting strategy.

Exhibit III: The Exclusive TV Interview

María Celeste Arrarás's career in journalism is often associated with media coverage Selena's murder trial for two reasons: first, Arrarás secured the first exclusive interview with Yolanda Saldívar in November of 1995 following the trial (Arrarás 160); Second, Celeste published *El Secreto de Selena / Selena's Secret* (1997), a book that became one of the year's

best-sellers in Latino markets (Mendez and Cueto, 26). Arrarás was the first co-host of *Primer Impacto*, a weeknight news show known for exploiting the public's fascination with female (hyper)sexuality and lurid, violent true crime stories (Nitz, Reichert and Aune 14) Latina media scholar Arlene Dávila has commented on *Primer Impacto*'s reputation in Puerto Rico, where the show has been criticized "for their morals, especially their treatment of sex and for spoiling the values and quality of life of 'nuestro pueblo.'" (Dávila 164) With this context in mind, we are better equipped to understand precisely why *Univisión* in general, and *Primer Impacto* in particular, was so invested in the Selena trial: a true crime event that centers female against female violence and obsession is an easy sell to mainstream audiences. As Davila explains, the world of U.S. Hispanic media is dominated by wealthy, white, Latin American males (Dávila 26). Predictably, U.S. Hispanic networks are most interested in selling a criminalizing narrative that supports the on-going assumption of patriarchy; that intimacy between two women, particularly in the absence of a men, is inherently unnatural, immoral and ultimately dangerous. *Primer Impacto*'s interview with Saldívar must be understood as an extension of *Univisión*'s investment in maintaining gendered hierarchies through the content it produces.

Arrarás claims in *El Secreto* that her interview with Saldívar was merely a journalistic initiative aimed at presenting a fair and balanced news story and Saldívar's "opportunity to express [her] point of view...within a framework of seriousness, objectivity and respect" (Arrarás 31). However, a closer analysis of Arrarás's post-trial interview with Saldívar reveals how *Primer Impacto* and more importantly, *Univisión* media, drew from a discourse of queer criminalization, one which originated inside the Harris County courtroom, to market Saldívar within the homicidal lesbian archetype.

The interview between Saldívar and Arrarás aired on November 15, 1995, a few weeks following Saldívar's conviction. In the first few minutes of the interview, Saldívar introduces herself and explains that she has decided to tell her side of the story because of a recent dream in which Selena appeared and advised her, "*ya no calles, diga verdad...Madre mía, di lo que sabes, di lo todo. Ya que el mundo te ha condenado. Yo tengo mucho dolor. Dilo / Do not remain silent. Tell the truth...Dear mother, tell what you know, tell it all. The world has already condemned you. I am in such pain*" [00:50-2:03]. Saldívar further explains that a mysterious, unmarked, unsigned letter from Selena came into her possession. Saldívar reads part of the card¹¹:

"di mi historia, di tu historia y recuerda que yo te doy mil gracias por tu amor como madre para mí. Yo sé bien que todo es culpa de la persona que nos llevó a ese cuarto, yo sé que te hizo a ti, yo sé que me hizo a mí. Yo sé que tú no quisiste que yo muriera... /

tell my story, tell your story and remember that I thank you greatly for your love as my mother. I know very well that this is all the fault of the person who brought us to this room, and I know what he did to you, and what he did to me. I know that you did not want me to die..." (Saldívar, cited by Arrarás 165).

Univisión is strategic in beginning the exclusive interview by inviting Saldívar to recount numerous unsubstantiated claims concerning Selena's miraculous reappearance into Saldívar's life. These narratives do not work to generate empathy towards Saldívar, but rather exacerbate the public's suspicion of her mental and psychological instability.

According to queer legal scholars Mogul, Ritchie and Whitlock, a crucial character trait that is often cast onto "queer criminal archetypes" is the issue of their psychological or emotional normalcy (Mogul, Ritchie and Whitlock 43). Throughout the interview, Arrarás constructs Saldívar within the queer criminal framework by directly pairing the theme of Saldívar's mental stability, alongside an interrogation of Saldívar's deviant sexuality:

María Celeste: *En terminos de la relación entre tu y Selena. Tú dices que era*

¹¹ This portion of the interview was edited out of the final broadcast of the interview by request of Saldívar's defense attorneys, but were reproduced in Celeste's book, *El Secreto de Selena / Selena's Secret* (1997).

como entre madre y hija. Lo que ha salido en la prensa es todo lo puesto. Lo han pintado, este un momento dado, en que, tu eres lesbiana y estabas enamorada con Selena, obsesionada. Te voy a preguntar directamente: ¿tú eres lesbiana? ¿Y estabas enamorada de Selena, o no?

Yolanda: *Exactamente, no. Eso es una mentira, que se invocó desde dos personas, que fue de Martín Gomez y Abraham Quintanilla. Eso nunca fue realidad.*

María Celeste: *¿Tú no eres lesbian?*

Yolanda: *Yo no soy lesbiana.*

María Celeste: In terms of your relationship with Selena. You say that it was similar to one between mother and daughter. What has come out in the media and what stands at this moment, is that you are a lesbian and you were in love with Selena, you were obsessed with her. I am going to ask you directly: are you a lesbian? And were you in love with Selena, or no?

Yolanda: Definitely not. That is a lie that was created by two people, Martin Gomez and Abraham Quintanilla. That was never a reality.

María Celeste: You are not a lesbian?

Yolanda: I am not a lesbian [Primer Impacto 2:30]

The interrogation of Saldivar's perceived sexuality¹² by Arrarás, directly follows Saldivar's narration of her metaphysical contact with Selena. This interview sequencing—an abstract, otherworldly fantasy intending to prove one's innocence, alongside the question of lesbianism—effectively pairs queerness with an absence of emotional or psychological stability. As seen

¹² *Primer Impacto* has had a historic preoccupation with labeling the sexuality of public figures. In an episode of the show broadcast in 2002, Mexican journalist Fernando del Rincón asked the late, beloved Mexican singer Juan Gabriel if he was gay. Famously, Gabriel responded with the words “*dicen lo que se ve no se preguntan, mijo.*” Gabriel elaborated with equally coded words, explaining his belief in the power of artistic transcendence, namely his ability to transcend a culture of institutionalized homophobia as a visibly queer musician. “*Todo lo que uno hace es lo que se queda, lo que vale. Los hechos son lo más importantes,*” the subtext being, my career speaks louder than any words I could say. Gabriel's interview secured his position as the ultimate “tacit queer subject” for Latinx fans across the Americas. The term “tacit subject,” first defined by queer Latino scholar Carlos Ulises Decena, helps frame Gabriel as a queer subject who exercised ownership over of his sexual identity and most importantly, his ability to negotiate the degree to which his sexual identity became a point of public discussion. From *Univisión*'s perspective, the queer tacit subject represents a commodity through which queerness can be publically discussed, without directly discussing or confronting homophobia as an existing culture and structure of oppression. Unlike Gabriel, Saldivar's definitive rejection of the queer label problematizes at best, and forecloses at worst, any claim to a positive representation of Latinx lesbian subjectivity via a popular U.S. Spanish language media platform.

earlier in Saldívar's appeal, the (mis)conflation of queerness and mental infirmity echoes early homophobic, scientific constructions of same-sex attraction as synonymous with psychological instability. The institutional criminalization of homosexuality as it occurs in Saldívar's case, does not operate in isolation. Rather, it intersects with a larger history of surveilling, exploiting and criminalizing people of color, immigrants and poor people living within the United States, or who navigate both sides of its Southern border (Mogul, Ritchie and Whitlock 24). The criminalization and surveillance of queer people of color on the U.S. Mexico border is further explored in chapter three. *Univisión's* editorial strategy, which centered the image of the homicidal Latina lesbian alongside a pathologizing narrative, echoes the historic conflation of racialized queerness and mental instability by both U.S. medical and legal institutions. In casting Saldívar's sexuality and psychological state as suspect, *Primer Impacto* has situated her more neatly into the trope of "the queer criminal archetype," a familiar packaging meant to attract a greater number of television viewers.

As this juncture in the interview, Arrarás gives Saldívar the opportunity to argue her way out of a racially and sexually criminalizing script that casts her as inevitably blameworthy and criminal. Saldívar highlights her moral imperative towards heteronormativity, and a religious commitment to purity, humility and innocence. Following her inquiry into Saldívar's sexuality, Arrarás asks:

María Celeste: *¿A ti, te gustan los hombres?*

Yolanda: *A mi me gustan los hombres, sí. Exactamente he tenido novios. Yo nunca, a-aprobado de "eso." Te voy a decir una cosa, yo y Selena li, li, líemos la biblia. Ella fue la que me enseñó a mí, como decir, Jeovah, nuestro Señor [Saldívar points up to the heavens], porque yo no podía decirlo.*

María Celeste: *¿Nunca hubo ningún tipo de relación romántica?*

Yolanda: *Exactamente, no.*

María Celeste: You are attracted to men?

Yolanda: I am attracted to me, yes. I have definitely had boyfriends. I have never been involved in “that.” I am going to tell you one this, Selena and I, we re- re-, we read the bible. She was the one who taught me to say, Jehovah, our lord, because I had not been able to say so before.

María Celeste: So there was never any type of romantic relationship?

Yolanda: Definitely not. [Primer Impacto, 2:40]

Initially, it appears that Arrarás’ line of questioning gives Saldívar the opportunity to extricate herself from the queer criminal archetype, to prove her heterosexuality and thus, affirm her diminished capacity for crime. Upon closer examination however, Saldívar has merely been placed within an impossible identity framework, one upheld by rules, norms, practices and institutions that have historically marked women like Saldívar as “unworthy [and] a threat to moral order and ultimately criminal” (Mogul, Ritchie and Whitlock 25). Saldívar’s calculated response, one that pairs attraction to men alongside religious faith, constitutes her attempt to distance herself from the criminalizing connotations of homosexuality and reframe herself within a script of “heteronormativity” (Cohen 439). Saldívar’s positionality—unmarried, working class, not-feminine presenting, Mexican-American—inherently places her outside the protective boundaries of white, middle class, heteronormativity, and thus, exposes her to scrutiny and policing based on her race, gender and sexual expression. The interview continues for nearly 45 more minutes, and while the question of Saldívar’s sexuality does not resurface, the initial collision between Saldívar’s multiply marginalized subjectivity and heteronormativity, further markets her as untrustworthy, psychologically unsound and sexually suspect. Saldívar’s dismissal of her own perceived lesbian subjectivity, alongside adamant claims of her

heterosexual and pious, Christian identity (prompted by Arrarás and *Univisión*) actively contributes to the construction of the “queer criminal archetype” as a marketable commodity within media and legal spheres.

The continued presence of “the queer criminal archetype” through media platforms such as *Univisión’s Primer Impacto*, has significant consequences within *Selenidad*, primarily the permanent inscription of “the lethal lesbian” within Selena commodities. More broadly however, the interview is a window into how the U.S. Spanish language media in 1990s, contributed to the public formation of a queer Latinx identity on the basis of preexisting, criminalizing, racist and homophobic narratives. Drawing from Dávila’s assertion that “marketing has always been involved in the making of public identities” (10), it can be concluded that the marketing of a queer Latinx criminal archetype on television, actively shapes the making of queer Latinx public identities within the broader community. The marketing influence of US Spanish networks is further compounded when the image in question is packaged and broadcast by *Univisión*, the highest rated Hispanic network in the U.S. with a robust consumer base (Dávila 26).

According to Nielsen ratings—the audience measurement system for U.S. television programming—*Primer Impacto’s* interview with Saldívar gathered an estimated 4.5 million viewers, making it one of the five top-rated programs in the history of Spanish-language television (Arrarás 184). Understanding its role in the making of public identities amongst Spanish speaking Latina/os in the United States, *Univisión’s* interview with Saldívar was an opportunity to challenge the existing narratives of “the queer criminal archetype.” Nevertheless, the interview draws from, and maintains a heteronormative framework as a strategy to measure one’s sexual identity, mental stability and ultimately, one’s capacity for crime. As such, Saldívar’s non-normative sexual, gendered and racial subjectivity effectively erodes her

credibility within legal and cultural spheres, and perpetuates racialized and homophobic representations of Latina lesbians in U.S. mass media and Latin American entertainment.

As my final chapter indicates, the queer Latinx subject is not always necessarily criminalized within Selena commodities. In fact, in the years following the trial against Saldívar, Selena's legacy and image has created space for an alternative type of queer Latinx identity performance that breaks with the racialized paradigm of the queer criminal archetype. Selena becomes a potential site from which normative categories of gender, sexuality, language and national membership are dis-identified and re-imagined. Drawing together an interdisciplinary framework that includes queer Latino performance studies and Latina/o cultural studies, the following analysis demonstrates how Selena's legacy, as it has been represented through a dramatic cultural production, both disrupts and maintains the legacy of the racialized, queer criminal archetype. Methodologically, I engage in a close reading of the play's manuscript, while centering the socio-political dimensions of Salcedo's narrative and artistic choices. Ultimately, *Selena: La Reina del Tex-Mex* (1999), showcases Selena's legacy as a complex site from which to claim queer Latinx cultural citizenship.

III: Hugo Salcedo's "Selena: La Reina del Tex-Mex" (1999) and Queering Citizenship at the U.S. Mexico Border

You would never see drag queens speaking in Spanish.
You would never hear them joking around in Spanish.
All of that was a world that was invisible and was not talked about,
did not exist, was kept in the closet.
Maybe your sexuality wasn't in the closet anymore,
but still, your basic roots was still in the closet.
And Selena had a very big part of it. Where people were just like, I am someone.
This area I come from, I can be just as glamorous as anyone else.

- Franco Ruiz Mondini, *Corpus: A Home Movie For Selena* (Portillo 1999)

Hugo Salcedo's unique *Mexicanist* perspective makes a significant contribution to *Selenidad*, broadening the reach of Selena commodities towards a transnational and transcultural context. Salcedo is a Mexican-born playwright, who published *Selena: La Reina del Tex-Mex* (1999) in commemoration of the 4th anniversary of Quintanilla's passing, while working as a visiting professor at la Universidad Autónoma de Nuevo León (UANL, Monterrey, Nuevo León, México). The play unfolds over the course of twelve acts and showcases ten different roles, which are performed by overlapping characters. *Selena* presents a version of the days leading up to, and months following the singer's death. Certain elements of Salcedo's narrative are fictionalized, while other scenes are near replicas of the actual timeline of events. Spatially, the story is mapped out along the U.S. Mexico borderland, moving between Eagle Pass and a Southern Texan prison, to an unspecified border checkpoint and Corpus Christi. The play's two opening scenes are fictional: *Opertura / Overture* and *El Deseo / The Desire*. One more poetic and the other more social critique, both monologues reflect on life at the U.S. / Mexico border from the perspective of a Latina/o migrant. The monologues introduce readers to two principal characters of the play. The first, *Unión Americana*, a transvestite and Selena drag impersonator; and the second, Yolanda Saldívar, well known to most readers as Selena's former fan-club manager and murderer.

The following scenes narrate the various responses to Selena's murder, first from the perspective of fellow Tejano singers in *Puentes y Fronteras / Bridges and Borders* and then, through a re-creation of María Celeste Arrarás's interview with Saldívar on *Primer Impacto*. The play then shifts, drawing less from the historical timeline of events, and more from Salcedo's imagination. What follows are a series of scenes between Selena, Abraham Quintanilla, Yolanda and Chris Pérez, Selena's late husband. A triangulation of power unfolds, generating a struggle

between a patriarch's desire to maintain exclusive control over his daughter, a daughter's longing for independence (over both body and career), and a third-party lover (a role filled at times by Chris, and other times by Saldívar), who threatens both the father's near biblical authority and his capitalist aspirations.

The final acts include the fated meeting between Selena and Yolanda inside the motel room, and Yolanda's subsequent standoff with police in the motel parking lot following the shooting. The play ends with a closing monologue from *Unión Americana*, during which he reminds us that Selena is not dead, so long as she lives within his body. It is through his resurrection, through his drag performance of her, that we may glimpse a different future, one in which "*no hay fronteras*" / "there are no borders" (27). The song *La Carcacha* by Selena y Los Dinos envelopes the stage and the entire cast enters, enacting one final celebration for "la santa Selena," the queen of Tex-Mex (27).

The entire script is a queer *ofrenda*, an offering, to the immaculate Selena, who is framed in near goddess-like terms. Simultaneously, it constitutes an important site of investigation for those interested in the mechanics of Selena as a border-based, queer Latinx icon. Similar to the work of Lourdes Portillo, I read Salcedo's play as a queer, artistic rendering of Selena's legacy. The play is also situated within the context of Selena commodities, as it constitutes a product available for mass consumption. In this chapter, I highlight Salcedo's use of space, language and aesthetic, to further outline my theory of queer Latinx cultural citizenship. This case study allows me to explore the nuances of Selena as a queer icon, and "the queer radical potential" of performing Selena as a disruptive strategy against national, gendered and sexual binaries. As we question the socio-political function of queer Selena commodities, this analysis concludes that Selena has been marketed as a source of identity liberation and transcendence for her gay Latino

fans, while remaining a cautionary tale for Latina lesbians, and a reminder of the continued repression of non-normative sexual desire and expression.

The Cost of Queering Selena

To understand the stakes of Salcedo's queer intervention in the predominantly heteronormative market of Selena commodities, it is helpful to return to the earlier example of Lourdes Portillo's documentary *Corpus* (1999)—released the same year Salcedo's play was published—and the significant content criticism it received. According to the aforementioned article published by the *Los Angeles Times*, Selena's father, Abraham Quintanilla, “objected to some fleeting moments in the film, which include a drag-queen Selena impersonator, rumors of the singer's alleged plastic surgery and speculation about an intimate relationship between fan club president Yolanda Saldivar and Selena” (LATimes 1999). The Quintanilla's lawyer goes on to justify the family's objections to the film, explaining that ““Out in California [the state where the filmmaker is based] that's not going to be a big deal...But in South Texas, it's not a good thing.”” The Quintanilla family took legal actions against the documentary, prompting Portillo to pull her film from a scheduled screening at a film festival (LATimes 1999). Beyond issues of capital and copyright, Mr. Quintanilla objects to the visibility of queerness within his daughter's legacy, exposing Selena as a point of gay Latino identification and perhaps, lesbian desire.

Ironically, Salcedo's play dramatizes all three themes to which Quintanilla has objected: Selena drag culture, the exploitation of the female body for corporate profit, and the potential of a Latina lesbian subjectivity. Through its visible affirmation of sexual and gendered diversity among Selena fans, *Selena: la Reina del Tex-Mex* rescues the queer subject from the heteronormative limitations that confine most Selena commodities. As this analysis demonstrates however, Salcedo's rebranding of Selena's legacy for the queer Latinx consumer only liberates

the gay Latino subject (*Unión Americana*), while the Latina lesbian subject (Yolanda Saldívar) is unable to transcend the archetype that has historically deemed criminality and queerness as inherently linked.

*Fluid Bodies, Fluid Border:
On Becoming Selena and the Liberation of the Queer Latino Body*

A consideration of Selena as a subject of queer Latino identification and worship, sheds light on how Selena, as a mode of embodied performance, challenges dominant narratives of nationality, sexuality and gender. The radical act of becoming Selena, or dragging as Selena, is seen in the first moments of the play, during which the audience meets *Unión Americana*, a transvestite, dressed as Selena. *Unión Americana* proceeds to explain how Selena is not dead, because: “*te llevo conmigo, bajo este tu nuevo traje de la Unión Americana, porque soy tu fan, tu gerente, tu entrañable amiga. Y te doy vida con mis actos de todos los días / I carry you with me, underneath this new suite of the United States, because I am your fan, your manager, your endearing friend. My actions give you life everyday* (8). This moment of collision, between our own gendered expectations of who Selena was, and her reincarnation into a man’s body, speaks to the critical function of drag performance, and its ability to disrupt once fixed categories of gender and sexuality. In a scholarly critique of the acclaimed documentary, *Paris is Burning* (Livingston, 1991), which chronicles “house” or “ball” culture for queer men of color and drag queens living in New York City in the 1980s, black feminist scholar bell hooks explains that “cross-dressing, appearing in drag, transvestism, and transsexualism emerge in a context where the notion of subjectivity is challenged, where identity is always perceived as capable of construction, invention, change” (hooks 145). *Unión Americana* emerges in a similar context, wherein historically fixed notions of sexuality, gender and national affiliation are presented as fluid. The dominant narrative that inscribes Selena commodities operates within a rigid,

heteronormative framework—Mexican-American / cis-gendered female / heterosexual / bilingual, but English dominant. This framework is interrupted by Salcedo, whose articulation of *Unión Americana* actively queers dominant representations of Selena. This theatrical queering situates Selena, both theoretically and geographically in an in-between space, between nations, sexualities, genders, which once seemed fixed, but are now subject to questioning and reinterpretation.

Beyond markers of identity, the queering of Selena's image through the Latino body also reinterprets the racialized (white) hierarchy of femininity often mapped out in drag culture. In her speculative response to *Paris is Burning*, hooks argues that the film fails to present drag as subversive, along both racial and gendered lines. While the film's representation of black gay drag ball culture challenges the heterosexism of black masculinity, hooks contends that "the idea of womanness and femininity is totally personified by whiteness" (147). That is to say, male to female cross dressing and gender bending, particularly among men of color, does not necessarily challenge the idealization of white femininity. I argue however, that queering Selena through performance, breaks with drag culture's rootedness in the idealization white womanhood and makes space for the celebration and veneration of one's brownness.

Crucial to this rupture is Selena's aesthetic, costuming and self-fashioning, which crossed queerness with *Latinidad*, excess and flamboyance with a distinctly working class, Latina aesthetic. While we do not know Salcedo's particular artistic vision for *Unión Americana*'s costume, we as readers are invited to imagine that the character's dress as reflective of one of Selena's famous looks. As Paredez explains, it was common knowledge that the singer "performed in outfits of her own design, characterized by their sexual suggestiveness [combining] low-cut, sequin-studded bustiers with midriff-baring, tight-fitting, flared-cut pants"

(12). While this look was incorrectly registered by mainstream pop culture as a “mexicanized” re-articulation of Madonna, Selena’s style more closely, mirrored a regionally specific, working-class, Chicana/Tejana aesthetic normally “derided as too ‘country,’ ‘low-class,’ or racially marked for cosmopolitan or transnational appeal” (Paredes 131).

Perhaps *Unión Americana* is dressed in Selena’s iconic purple pantsuit, the one worn at the famous concert at the Houston Astrodome nearly one month before her death (Paredes 2). Or maybe he wears sparkling, black spandex pants with a hand-made, bedazzled bustier. Regardless, we can assume that *Unión Americana*’s costume echos the simultaneous glitz and accessibility afforded by Selena’s self-fashioning. This blending of glitter with a working class, *Tejana* sensibility, is precisely what situates Selena, and by extension, *Unión Americana*, outside normative (white), female beauty standards. Unlike the notion of womanhood that Jenny Livingston presents in *Paris is Burning*, I read Salcedo’s presentation of Selena drag as a subversive, embodied performance that does not aspire to whiteness. Rather, performing Selena ruptures both racial and gendered normativity by refusing to separate one’s queerness with one’s *latinidad*, or latino-ness. Through Selena’s legacy and *Unión Americana*’s living body, we are offered a model for glittery success, predicated on the enactment of one’s DIY (do-it-yourself), working class, racialized sensibility. As such, Salcedo makes the case for Selena drag as an embodied strategy for those who straddle the seemingly paradoxical spheres of glitter and glamour with the daily working class struggle.

Crossing as a Queer Security Threat

While Selena serves as a site from which to enact a public, gay Latino subjectivity, that freedom is limited in queer representation. More specifically, Selena’s queered and politicized identity is more accessible to the gay Latino subject, than the Latina lesbian. This unequal,

gendered access to Selena as a queer icon, plays out most directly in Salcedo's sixth act, *¡Ciña, oh Patria! / Embrace Thy Homeland*. The scene begins somewhere along Texas' border with Mexico, when Yolanda Saldívar is caught by the U.S. border patrol, jumping the dividing metal fence. An offstage voice directed at Yolanda yells "¡Stop! ¡Pare! ¡Pare!" (15). *Unión Americana*'s character steps forward, revealing that he has assumed the role of the border patrol officer. An interrogation of Yolanda commences, during which she explains that she is in fact a U.S. citizen and she was merely retracing her parent's migration journey from México many years before.

The verbal exchange between *Unión Americana* and Yolanda is a window into U.S. cultural politics of the 1990s, highlighting a xenophobic, anti-immigrant sentiment and the perceived economic threat that migrants posed to U.S. citizens. A turning point arises when Yolanda recognizes *Unión Americana*'s character as Jaime García, the son of family friend from Apodaca, Nuevo León, México. These ties to México seem to challenge Jaime / *Unión Americana*'s self-image as an assimilated U.S. citizen and in response, he begins to sing the U.S. national anthem. Yolanda joins in, singing Mexico's national anthem. The two trade off verses, until Yolanda strategically mentions her professional connection to *la reina* and offers Selena paraphernalia, free of charge, in hopes that Jaime will expedite her border crossing. The scene ends ambiguously: Jaime / *Unión Americana* does not openly accept Yolanda's bribes, and she does not cross the border.

Unlike previous scenes, which make obvious connections to Selena's life narrative, this imagined scenario on the border showcases how Salcedo has utilized the spatial and temporal elements of Selena's career to shed light on a significant social critique: The United States' longstanding fear and exclusion of queer migrants of color. As mentioned in chapter one, U.S.

institutional actors have been involved in surveilling migrant sexuality since the late 19th century with the passage of the Page Law (1875). Surveillance first manifested in the form of immigration legislation, “one of the earliest federal bureaucracies and the first to leave substantial documentation of its response to sexual perversion” (Canaday 14). Beginning in 1924, the US Border Patrol became the extension of federal immigration legislation, charged with the responsibility of enforcing U.S. immigration restrictions comprehensively by preventing unauthorized border crossings and policing borderland regions to detect and arrest persons defined as unauthorized immigrants” (Lytle Hernandez 2). Since its inception, the U.S. border patrol served as the human face of a Eurocentric, immigration legislation that actively privileged normative notions of masculinity, heterosexuality, whiteness and middle to upper middle class status (Lubheid xxi). The sexual and gendered politics of the contemporary U.S. – Mexico border is merely the current manifestation of a long history of heightened surveillance, policing and criminalization for working class, queer, migrants of color. In the context of the national imperative towards a white, patriarchal heterosexuality, the queer migrant of color assumes another dimension of the criminal archetype, what Mogul, Richie and Whitlock refer to as, the “queer security threat,” (36) a criminalizing script that has been reinforced through white anxiety and xenophobia, as well as a legacy of homophobic immigrant legislation in the United States. The archetype evokes the belief that queer subjects exist in dangerous opposition to an essentialized notion of family, community and the nation (Mogul, Ritchie, Whitlock 36).

I read both *Unión Americana* and Yolanda Saldívar’s characters in this scene as queer figures, both of whom must navigate and resist the label of queer security threat. *Unión Americana*’s cross costuming as a U.S. border patrol agent constitutes Salcedo’s challenge to the

archetype that maintains queers as security threats. Alternatively, Yolanda's character and border crossing strategies merely reinforce her position within the criminalizing script.

In ¡*Ciña, oh Patria!* / Embrace thy Homeland, *Unión Americana*'s queerness is communicated more subtly than during the opening monologue. *Unión Americana* may no longer be in Selena drag, yet his role as Jaime García remains dynamically transgressive. Doubling as a border patrol agent, *Unión Americana* / Jaime García disrupts and satirizes border patrol masculinity, U.S. nationalism and the racism and homophobia of the immigration system. Stage directions indicate that *Unión Americana* is dressed as the Statue of Liberty, and wearing roller skates. The juxtaposition of a hyper-patriotic costume, alongside Jaime's first lines to Yolanda, "*Aquí es propiedad privada. No puede entrar y salir como en su casa* / This here is private property. You can't come and go as if it were your house" (15), function as political satire, exposing the tremendous gap between the myth of the United States as a nation of foreigners and its actual treatment of immigrants. He demands to know "*¿Por qué nos hace gastar millones de dólares en puertas y cerrojos?* / Why do you make us spend millions of dollars on doors and locks?" (15) and further characterizes the flow of economic migrants to the United States as "*el moho...la humedad...la sarna* / like fungus, like dampness, like scabies" (15). Jaime's anti-immigrant sentiment effectively dissolves the theoretical promise communicated by his costume, namely Lady liberty's commitment to welcoming "your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free" with a "lamp beside the golden door!" (Lazarus 1990).

Salcedo's critique of the U.S. immigration system narrows with a pointed undermining of the heteronormativity, Euro-centrism and hyper-nationalism of the U.S. border patrol. To understand the queer critical potential of *Unión Americana*'s performance, I turn to José Estéban

Muñoz’s concept of “tactical misrecognition,” (106) which enables *Unión Americana* (and us as readers) to see himself as a border patrol agent, to critique what that agent represents. Given his unconventional uniform, Salcedo clearly does not intend for *Unión Americana* to pass, or represent a real border patrol agent. Rather, *Unión Americana* performs what Muñoz calls “interiorized passing,” part and parcel of a “tactical misrecognition” of the self (106). Aspects of the self that are toxic, or antithetical to the U.S. border patrol—brownness, gayness, transvestism—are all present underneath this external display of militaristic patriotism. Through his performance of Jaime García, *Unión Americana* simultaneously inhabits and undermines the authority of the U.S. border patrol, while satirizing America’s self-identification as a *nation of immigrants*. As he does through Selena drag, *Unión Americana* once again crosses and disrupts supposedly fixed power structures, shifted from being the policed, to acting in the role of police. *Unión Americana*’s “tactical misrecognition” as a border patrol agent contributes to Salcedo’s overall argument that Selena’s legacy offers critical survival strategies that can be used to navigate institutional structures of power that have historically marked queer migrants of color as “queer security threats.”

Alternatively, Salcedo’s decision to place Yolanda within the role of an undocumented border crosser, limits her ability to transcend the framework of illegality, and ultimately fixes her within the “queer security threat” archetype. My analytic lens of Yolanda as queer is informed by the primary sources presented in chapter two, which demonstrate how homophobic discourse, from both legal and commercial spheres, constructed Yolanda’s *lethal lesbian* image. Departing from this dominant characterization of lesbians as “manlike,” and “deceptive” (Mogul, Ritchie, Whitlock 27) Yolanda’s embodiment of a migrant crossing the border fence from Mexico into Texas takes on a new sociopolitical dimension. In fact, the image of a gender deviant, working

class, Latina in confrontation with the U.S. border patrol connects Yolanda with a genealogy of sexual and gendered monitoring along the U.S.-Mexican border, a space from which homosexuals were excludable until 1990 (qtd. in Luibheid, 106).

Ethnic studies scholar Eithne Luibhéid has done the important work of excavating this history of surveillance and exclusion of lesbians at the border in her analysis of the 5th Circuit case *Quiroz v. Neelly* (1961), in which Sara Harb Quiroz, a legal permanent U.S. resident, was stopped at the Ciudad Juarez / El Paso border crossing for what Luibheid surmises was “looking like a lesbian” (77). Official court documents confirm that Quiroz was detained “based on looks. Based on the way she dressed. The way she acted. The way she talked,” and was subsequently coerced into an oral and written confession of her own homosexuality” (Luibheid, 106). In the years following the case, testimonies from border patrol agents further suggestion that Quiroz was indeed stopped on the basis of her non-whiteness, her gender deviance and her working class status. Writing in 1993, U.S. border patrol agent Venson Davis justifies the actions of sexual surveillance along the border:

“Sexual deviancy and sex-related criminal activities are not foreign to the morally weakened American society, and when undocumented aliens bring with them their additional measure of sexual and criminal misconduct, it furthers the deterioration of our quality of life” (qtd. in Mogul, Ritchie, Whitlock 37)

Quiroz becomes a proxy for all that is toxic to the United States’ self-image. When situated in the spatial context of the U.S.-Mexico border, her gender non-conformity and her racialized Latina identity mark her as a threat to the nation’s white, heteronormative imperative. Yolanda, embodying a similar border crosser role, comes to represent the same national threat. Like Quiroz, Yolanda is a lawful resident, born in “*la Unión Americana* / the United States” (15) whose only personal interest is employment. Nevertheless, her performance of crossing the border, coupled with her gender non-conforming, Latina aesthetic, enhance her criminal capacity

and mark her as an illegal migrant “*sin derechos, a apropiarse del trabajo de los nuestros*” / unlawfully, in order to take our [true American] jobs” (15).

The confluence of sexual and gender non-conformity with “criminal misconduct” further defines Yolanda’s character when she tells *Unión Americana* about her connection to Selena. Sensing that her role as “*la presidenta del club de admiradoras* / the fan-club president” (16) may give her leverage to cross the border, she asks:

¿Te gustaría tener un autógrafo de ella? ¿Una camiseta? ¿Una gorra? ¿Un llevarito? Pídeme lo que quieras. Yo no me presto a estas cosas, no es ético. Pero solo por tratarse del hijo de doña Eduviges pídemelo lo que quieras. ¿Quieres que te la presente? Te va a encantar, Jaime

Would you like her autograph? A t-shirt? A hat? A keychain? Ask me for whatever you want. I don’t pay for these things. It is not ethical. But for being the son of Doña Eduviges, ask me for whatever you want. Do you want me to introduce her to you? You’re going to love her, Jaime. (Salcedo 16)

Salcedo concludes the scene ambiguously, before Jaime responds to Yolanda’s offer. What is clear however, is Yolanda’s crossing strategy: she has stolen from the woman to whom she claims devotion, to attain geographic and economic mobility. Yolanda’s exploitation of her intimate access to Selena, and her unlawful use of Selena commodities, further articulate her role within the queer criminal archetype. In the eyes of the State, Yolanda’s sexual and gender deviance inherently suggests another type of deviance, or untrustworthiness. Indeed, that deviance emerges in the form of Yolanda’s embezzlement, reaffirming the State’s assumption that queer subjects pose multiple threats to the nation; that by defying normative scripts of gender and sexuality, queers must also defy laws of national security and threaten our individual liberties as worthy citizens of the United States.

Salcedo’s choice to depict Yolanda as a thief is most likely influenced by the information presented at the trial and the Quintanilla family’s allegations that Saldívar embezzled \$30,000

from the fan club and the boutiques (Arrarás 228-229). Notably however, is the playwright's choice to re-contextualize the image of Yolanda as thief, within the geo-political space of the U.S.-Mexico border, where she steals goods as a strategy to cross an international border and the divide from illegality to legality. Rather than transcending the queer criminal archetype however, Salcedo re-inscribes her within it. Within this criminalizing framework, Yolanda's unlawful consumption of Selena commodities helps to reinforce homophobic assumptions towards individuals who publically express lesbian desire. Yolanda's gender non-conformity and deviant sexuality become key factors that motivate a type of woman-against-woman violence. In this case, the female body (Selena) is exploited for another's personal gain (Yolanda's). More broadly, Salcedo's imagined scenario remains a cautionary tale for all gender non-conforming, working class Latina lesbians who navigate the U.S.-Mexico borderlands; their bodies recall a narrative of "sexual and criminal misconduct," that threaten the quality of life for those who subscribe to the U.S.' white, heteronormative familial framework (qtd. in Mogul, Ritchie, Whitlock 37).

In considering *Selena: la Reina del Tex-Mex* as a cultural production that is marketable and empowering for queer Selena fans, Salcedo leaves readers with a complex legacy that speaks to the continued barriers that mitigate the full, public expression of queer Latinx subjectivity. *Unión Americana*'s character reflects utopia and hope, a blueprint for how Selena's legacy empowers her fans to transcend the queer criminal archetypes within which they have been placed. In the play's closing monologue, *Siempre Selena / Always Selena*, *Unión Americana* is dressed in Selena drag and proclaims that she will "*¡Renace en mí! ¡Yo soy tu fan número uno! ¡El cuerpo que necesitas para dar vida a tus canciones! Ambas somos solo una: fundimos la materia y el espíritu / Be born again in me! I am your number one fan! [I am] The body that you*

need to give your songs life! Both, we are one: we merge body and spirit” (27). *Unión Americana* teaches that transcendence is reached in exchange for giving one’s body over to Selena’s memory; it is through the performance of Selena, not the superficial consumption of her, that the queer Latinx body may undermine normative scripts of gender, sexuality, language and nation, and claim a rootedness or belonging to place.

When *Unión Americana* steps into Selena’s body, “*no hay fronteras. Las barreras se borran. Los idiomas se enriquecen. Yo soy la mentira realizable, y entre las dos construimos un puente, un puente entre la gente. ¡Yo soy la Unión Americana!* / There are no borders. The borders are erased. Languages become enriched. I am the attainable lie and between us two, we build a bridge, a bridge between the people. I am the United States!” (27). Selena’s image, both original and reproduced, is a site through which violent binaries dissolve and hybridity blooms; where the hyper-militarized space of opposition transforms into a space of collective exchange and possibility. It is through *Unión Americana*’s character that Salcedo makes the connection between Selena’s legacy and a queer Latinx cultural citizenship. The character teaches that through the embodiment of Selena, the queer Latinx subject may claim a type of cultural citizenship to the U.S. – Mexico border, a space that has historically criminalized the queer Latinx body, and marked it as racially and sexually deviant. The lesson emerges: to become Selena, is to find a pathway towards authenticity in one’s body, an embodied strategy wherein the queer Latinx body can be used to subvert and transcend supposedly fixed power structures that hierarchize and exclude based on race, class, sexuality and gender presentation. Most powerfully, Selena’s legacy offers an embodied strategy to claim belonging as both a queer and Latinx subject. This duality, which has historically been denied because of cultural and structural

racism and homophobia, finds synthesis and unprecedented radical place-ness within Selena's legacy and the spaces it has created.

The contradictions of Selena's queer legacy are reflected through Yolanda's character, a representation of butch-Latina-lesbian borderlands subjectivity that remains confined to the homophobic, elitist and racist rhetoric embedded within queer criminal archetypes. Yolanda's performance of a border crosser further marks her as a queer security threat, without the opportunity to challenge, or transcend institutional modes of surveillance that register the queer migrant body as defiant to the nation's heteronormative, white imperative. Unlike *Unión Americana*, whose corporal unity with Selena challenges gendered, sexual and racial binaries, Yolanda's corporeal approximation to Selena merely reinforces the imagine of the homicidal lesbian, and her capacity to abuse woman (Mogul, Ritchie, Whitlock 27).

By official records and Salcedo's recreation, the series of events that unfolded in room 158 of the Days Inn Motel on March 31st 1995 between Selena and Yolanda fit squarely within what historian Lisa Duggan refers to as "the homicidal lesbian narrative" (Mogul, Ritchie, Whitlock 27). A variation of the queer criminal archetype, the homicidal lesbian narrative centers the butch/femme lesbian couple and a secretive plan to elope, one which violently ends with a lovers quarrel and murder. Salcedo's reproduction of the motel scene does little to challenge the underlying homophobic discourse of the homicidal lesbian love narrative. Nearing the end of the play, Yolanda and Selena meet in room 158 of the Days Inn motel; they quarrel about Yolanda's alleged embezzlement and the damage it has done to their relationship; unable to agree about their future together, Yolanda shoots the gun she is holding, fatally wounding Selena. The scene ends with the sounds of *Amor Prohibido / Forbidden Love*, a song recorded by

Selena y Los Dinos that is popularly known as an unofficial anthem for “lesbians, gays, and particularly the ‘drag queens’ who performed Selena’s songs” (Pérez 159).

Salcedo’s decision to overlay the final scene between Selena and Yolanda with a song that speaks to the prohibition of love between two women, captures the paradox of Selena as a queer Latinx icon, particularly within the Latina lesbian community. Selena’s legacy offers the simultaneous recognition of Latina lesbian desire and a reminder of its continued taboo status and repression. The homosocial intimacy between Selena and Yolanda comes to represent a threat to stability of the patriarchal order and in turn, transforms the relationship into a cautionary tale, warning of the inherent violence that ensues when love occurs between two women. Salcedo’s play provokes and celebrates gay Latino male identification with Selena, while revealing the complexities for the Latina lesbian community to self-reflexively engage with Selena’s memory. Herein lies the tragic legacy of lesophobia that Yolanda Saldívar’s story has imprinted on Selena commodities: The story of Selena’s death, commodified and re-produced through legal, media and artistic outlets over the past twenty-one years, only engages Latina lesbian subjectivity when it fits easily within a criminalizing, archetypal framework, one that marks lesbian desire as deviant, untrustworthy and violent beyond redemption. If Selena commodities continue to portray Latina lesbian subjectivity through a criminalizing lens, *Selenidad* as a commercial structure, offers a complex and/or incomplete pathway towards queer Latinx cultural citizenship for Latina lesbians.

Conclusion: Whose Queer Selenidad?

The group of incarcerated women first mentioned in this study—the San Antonio Four—recently made news headlines again. In the 2016 documentary, *Southwest of Salem: The Story of the San Antonio Four*, director Deborah S. Esquenazi sheds a new, *queerer* light on the old

“lethal lesbian” narrative, by drawing together home videos, media coverage and real time footage of the court proceedings. Esquenazi’s portrayal of the San Antonio Four highlights the implausibility of the women’s charges and the crucial role that homophobia played in the process of criminalization. The home videos capture the women’s lives before and after their incarceration, and provide a counter-story to the legal and media narrative which framed the women within an archetypal script, categorizing them as a gang of satanic lesbian killers. Central to this counter narrative is the alternative, or queer family formation that drew the four women together and formed the basis of their social and emotional relationships. The queer family they created offered the women a space of refuge amidst the private and public culture of homophobia of the 1990s in South Texas. In fact, it was the queer familial ties linking the San Antonio Four that gave the prosecution the tools to re-package the women as a violent, lesbian gang who took advantage of young girls is if they were “sacrificial lamb(s)” (Chammah 2014). Esquenazi’s documentary challenges the criminalization of queer family formation, while discrediting the notion that queer or, chosen families are unnatural or dangerous. Instead, the queer family emerges as a space through which a group of Latina lesbians, living in a conservative Texan town, found a unique sense of belonging and safety.

The documentary ends inconclusively: In February 2016, Texas judge Pat Priest, ruled that the four women were entitled to new trials, but “their assertion of proof of actual innocence falls short of the mark” (Esquenazi 2016). This confirms that despite the preponderance of evidence proving the innocence of the women, including the recanted testimony from one of the victims in 2012 (Chammah 16), the charge of ‘sex offender’ would remain on their records unless otherwise overturned by the court of criminal appeals in a future trial. The film’s ending illustrates that justice has yet to be legitimized on a legal level for the San Antonio Four.

Southwest of Salem however, reflects the triumph of social justice and the “queer radical potential” of cultural productions to undermine and transcend the legal and media narratives that criminalize and racialize lesbian subjectivity. Ultimately, the film invites its viewers to watch the formation of a queer Latinx cultural citizenship, in defiance of U.S. institutional structures that continue to criminalize queer and queer people of color, and commodify the image of queer criminal archetype. Esquenazi’s film provides an example of what has yet to be expressed by queer *Selenidad*—the public and liberated expression of Latina lesbian subjectivity. I point to the “queer radical potential” of *Southwest of Salem* to contextualize my concluding argument: The incomplete potential of queer *Selenidad*.

By centering legal, commercial and artistic commodities that articulate queer dimensions of Selena’s legacy, I have demonstrated in this thesis that queer Selena commodities offer an incomplete platform from which to articulate queer Latinx cultural citizenship. I have asked whether Selena commodities have maintained queer Latinx subjects within a criminalizing framework; and furthermore, how queer Latinx fans have re-appropriated said commodities as a strategy of disidentification from criminalizing scripts and an alternative method to express citizenship. My analysis indicates that Selena commodities have been effectively re-appropriated by gay Latino fans and used as a strategy of disidentification, an embodied practice that undermines and disrupts the U.S. institutional narratives that have marked him as ‘other,’ and have criminalized his subjectivity based on race, gender, class and sexuality. As illustrated through the earlier discussion of Selena in drag culture, most centrally the example of the character *Unión Americana*, the act of performing Selena disrupts legal imperatives towards heteronormativity and commercial demands that maintain the dominance of (white) beauty

standards. Selena's image provides the gay Latino fan a model from which he can claim a queer, cultural belonging that transcends national barriers and official modes of attachment.

Alternatively, this thesis complicates previous theorizations of Selena as a queer Latinx icon by highlighting the absence of a liberated Latina lesbian subject within Selena commodities. The criminalization and subsequent commodification of Yolanda Saldívar's perceived non-normative sexuality have inscribed Selena commodities with the image of the homicidal lesbian subject. I argue that the presence of Saldívar within Selena's posthumous legacy has profoundly problematized the possibility for more positive representations of Latina lesbian subjectivity within queer *Selenidad*. For the Latina lesbian Selena fan, the singer's legacy offers a complex site of identification that often exists in tension with dominant narratives that criminalize lesbian subjectivity. In sum, Selena commodities both deactivate and sustain queer criminal archetypes, and offer an incomplete pathway towards a queer Latinx cultural citizenship.

The ongoing dialogue regarding Selena's legacy, Latina/o identity politics, and U.S. popular culture remains increasingly relevant, particularly given the country's volatile political climate. The potential policy shifts under the forthcoming Trump presidency represent a devastating threat to the civil liberties of queer people and queer people of color. All modes of documentation for queer citizens—national, gender, martial—are vulnerable. In this historical moment, when forthcoming institutional changes are likely to create a further wedge between U.S. citizenship and queer communities (particularly of color), we must look towards the cultural sphere, towards artists, writers and musicians, who are working to heal this unnatural disjuncture. From the MAC makeup line, to Selena drag culture, Selena commodities have done much to heal the gap between queerness and belonging on behalf of the gay Latino community.

Selena commodities must also do their part to heal the continued criminalization and silencing of Latina lesbian subjectivity.

Academic scholarship¹³ can do its part to frame Selena's legacy in a way that exposes the persisting influence of homophobia, patriarchy and racism. But how might the commercial realm account for Yolanda Saldívar's legacy in a way that no longer pathologizes her perceived sexuality? How might future cultural re-productions of Selena strive to frame Yolanda Saldívar's character as both murderer *and* victim of patriarchy and homophobia? How might one explore the structural causes that motivated Saldívar's violent actions, beginning with the question of lesbian desire and the material consequences of repression. To expand queer *Selenidad* and create a more equitable pathway to queer Latinx cultural citizenship—across genders—Selena commodities must grapple with Saldívar not simply as a lethal lesbian, but also as a vulnerable subject of systemic oppression; as a victim of institutional structures that continue to marginalize worthy citizens on the basis of race, class, and (perceived) sexual and gender expression.

¹³ See chapter 5 “Como la Flor” Reprised: Queer Selenidad from Deborah Paredez’ *Selenidad: Selena, Latinos, and the Performance of Memory* (2009); chapter 5 “Giving Us That Brown Soul: Selena’s Departures and Arrival” from Deborah Vargas’ *Dissonant Divas in Chicana Music: The Limits of La Onda* (2012).

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