

From Reel to ‘Real’: Sofia Vergara and Mediated Latinidad in American Popular Culture

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ABSTRACT

Sofia Vergara is a Columbian actor who has been working in American entertainment industry for over two decades now and is famous for playing the role of Gloria Pritchett on ABC’s popular sitcom *Modern Family*. Not unlike her character’s predicament in the show, Vergara’s accent has been a source of ridicule on multiple occasions at various places, which includes most famously *The Ellen Degeneres Show*, where Vergara has made numerous appearances as a celebrity guest. The show has often revealed skewed power dynamics between its White host and Latina guest where the latter is made out to be the racialized ‘Other’. Vergara’s personhood is constructed in oppositional terms with Whiteness serving as the norm and Vergara as an unsavory deviance from that norm. Her differences are not celebrated but are exaggerated and represented as an inadequacy which is made to appear irreconcilable with qualities that are deemed quintessentially American. Going behind the veneer of conviviality that is the mainstay of *The Ellen Degeneres Show*, this paper attempts to uncover the racial overtones and undertones that underpin the frivolity of primetime American television.

Keywords: American network television, American entertainment business, *The Ellen Degeneres Show*, *Modern Family*, discriminate, racialized sexuality

Introduction

Sofia Vergara rose to fame in the United States, and across the globe, while playing the role of Gloria Delgado-Pritchett on ABC’s Emmy winning, hugely popular sitcom, *Modern Family*. Today, Vergara is frequently counted among the most successful and famous celebrities in the United States (Cuccinello, 2017) who remained the world’s highest earning TV actor for the sixth consecutive year in 2017 (*The Telegraph*, 2017). Vergara hails from Colombia and figures among the miniscule minority of Latina/os in the United States to have swiftly climbed to the top of the ladder of success, claiming an elite media space that has, for most part of the history of American entertainment business, not been easily accessible to people of Latin American origin or descent. As a Colombian Latina, Vergara’s success is a rare phenomenon in the United States—as is her visibility in American network television—given her non-privileged ethnicity that remains underrepresented, and stereotyped and racialized when represented, in the dominant visual experiences proffered by mainstream U.S. popular culture.

Myriam N. Torres, writing from her own subject position as a Columbian Latina in America argues, “...the set of dispositions and behaviours and the probability of being able to enact them as the cultural capital are definitely unequal for different people, depending on their gender, race-skin colour, national origin, first language, socioeconomic class, age, sexual orientation, and so forth.” She contends that while hard work and ability are likely to be strong indicators of success for those who have privileged “set of identity characteristics and dispositions” those factors do not apply evenly to individuals who live with minority identities and embody various forms of marginalizations. She makes a critical assertion: “...being Latina nowadays in America has a very high cost in terms of the opportunities available to us and the misrecognition of our values, capabilities and potential” (Torres, 2004, p. 124). However, paradoxically, it is precisely

Vergara’s non-privileged ethnicity that has been her capital– contrary to the quotidian realities of Latina/os in 21st century America. Even as Latina/os remain under-represented in American popular culture, Molina-Guzman and Validivia (2004) argues, “the Latinidad, the state and process of being, becoming, and/or appearing Latina/o” has become the “‘It’ ethnicity and style in contemporary US mainstream culture” (p. 206). Thus, despite their underrepresentation, the screen presence of Latinas is characterized through processes of racialization, eroticization, and exoticization whenever exceptions are made. This is the entry point through which an attempt is made in this paper to explore the convoluted ethno-racial dynamics that has shaped American popular culture for the longest time which, as has been claimed by current scholarship, primarily appears to be invested in the “social construction of whiteness, and correspondingly with capitalist cultural commodification” (Figueroa, 265, p. 2003). Vergara’s success story cannot be narrated and comprehended without addressing the problems and politics of representation of the racial/ethnic/ethnoracial “Other” who is always depicted as “less than the declared and constructed ideal” (Merskin, 2007, p. 135) in America’s socio-racial hierarchy dominated by non-ethnic Whites. Identity, argues Stuart Hall, is a “structured representation” which assumes all its positives through the purported negatives of those it situates itself against (Hall, 1997, p. 21). It is only through the knowledge of the ‘Other’ and the often racialized meanings that is attributed to and associated with them that one comes to be acquainted with their identarian knowledge of themselves. The Self is constructed almost at the same time as that of the ‘Other’. Processes of Otherization which facilitate significations of the ‘Other’ are most often insidious and invisible but in critical moments they are foregrounded as benign and fashioned in a manner that is unremarkable so as to elude critique. When such Otherization is overlooked, ignored, dismissed and excluded from public and political discourse, it is effectively depoliticized. In turn, it invisibilizes and marginalizes experiences of the ‘Others’ while intensifying their struggles against surreptitious forms of ‘Othering’ which also prolong the cultural disadvantage, social prejudice, political underrepresentation and overall structural vilification of their identities and communities.

Vergara’s representation provides critical opportunities for (re)investing in the study of race, ethnicity, gender and sexuality in 21st century America to understand how they communicate with each other in the context of neoliberal multiculturalism while its non-ethnic White majority grapples with their racial anxieties even as a “post-race” national imaginary prevails, which, despite its inclusionary pretenses, remains hostile towards immigration and wary of the inevitable changes in America’s socio-cultural landscapes that it has brought about and could potentially further alter. Sofia Vergara, who became a naturalized citizen of the U.S. in 2014, could be hailed as the poster child of the “American dream” that promises success if one has talent and the willingness to work hard in a world where disadvantages associated with marginalized identities no longer endure and do not have a deciding influence on one’s life choices and chances. Today, Vergara is not only an actor of global fame but also an entrepreneur, the face of many high-end products and also the founding partner of a production company; Vergara, at present, is a highly regarded brand. Her success story is of great value to privileged voices that strive to deploticize issues of race and racism in America and hence find it convenient to be convinced by shining examples of “post race” success, such as Vergara’s, crafted and sold by the media. However, critical investigations into Vergara’s representation on U.S. television offers valuable insights into how glamorous, seemingly “apolitical” narratives emanating from mainstream media hold cues and provide subtexts through which post-racial imaginings can be challenged in public culture.

Torres’ lived experiences differ drastically from Vergara’s; the latter’s projection as the ideal representation of Latina femininity and sexuality on television has led her to reap benefits from her racialization and exoticization which is implausible in everyday non-glamorous/glamorized, non-fictional contexts. Vergara’s success as Gloria Delgado-Pritchett on *Modern Family* hinges on racialized practices of ‘Othering’ which coerces Vergara’s character to conform to Latina stereotypes firmly established, and in vogue, in the U.S. media. Bhaba calls stereotypes fixity’s “major discursive strategy.” He argues, “Fixity...is a paradoxical mode of representation: it connotes rigidity and an unchanging order as well as disorder, degeneracy and daemonic

repetition. Likewise the stereotype...is a form of knowledge and identification that vacillates between what is always ‘in place’, already known and something that must be anxiously repeated” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 66). Processes of racialized ‘Otherization’ is then constituted by and constitutive of stereotypes that impose the burden of rigid definitions onto an identity group dismissively ignoring in-group variations that debunk supercilious claims made and sustained by stereotypes.

On *Modern Family*, Vergara’s character is the Latina wife of a much older White man. On the show, Vergara’s desirability is augmented by her “exoticization” as the hot and intriguing, while also amusing, and on occasions juvenile, foreign ‘Other’, which simultaneously makes her a conquest to her husband and “conquest worthy” to other men who are frequently enticed by her enigmatic allure. Vergara’s phenomenal success, hence, cannot be dissociated from racialized representational politics that has contributed greatly to her celebrity. Vergara’s stardom is founded upon the aggressive commodification and marketing of her “difference” by leveraging which Vergara has risen to fame and fortune. Her mediated “difference”, however, is based upon resemblances replete in gendered, racialized representations of Latinas that are at the heart of popular entertainment in the U.S. Typical to mainstream media’s representation of Latinas, Vergara’s sexual allure is exaggerated and typified on *Modern Family*; her objectification catering to dominant images of Latinas that have constructed hypersexualized notions of Latina femininity, reinforcing an inflexible conception of what can and should visually be deemed as “authentic” Latina portrayal on screen. Molina-Guzmán argues that in the era of globalization, Vergara and her portrayal of the role of Gloria Delgado-Pritchett on *Modern Family* are both highly commodifiable across the globe because of the multiplicity of globally resonating identities that she and her screen character embody. Marked as white phenotypically, Vergara’s whiteness is ethnically distinct which “makes her more globally marketable by tapping into audiences who may identify with or occupy a multiplicity of identities—white, brown, ethnic, Latina, Colombian, immigrant, woman, mother and so on” (Molina-Guzmán, 2014, p. 66) However, while Vergara/Gloria proves to be widely marketable, her marketability is devised through complex processes whereby she is “both racialized

and gendered as the feminized, foreign, but desirable ethnoracial other” (Molina-Guzmán, 2014, p. 74). Her desirability does not obliterate her foreignness, but it is precisely her foreignness—her being marked as an “ethnoracial Other”—that constitutes her desirability and contributes to her commodification. However, even though Latinas are easily marketable in the age of neoliberal multiculturalism and globalization, Myra Mendible argues that the racialized sexuality of the Latina body is often represented as a threat to the ““American” social body, a foreign other against whom the ideals of the domestic self, particularly its narratives of white femininity and moral virtue, could be defined” (Mendible, 2006). Despite the inherent “threat” that the Latina body (re)presents, this body also provides “a titillating alter/native: a transgressive sexuality that made her eroticized exoticism an object of desire” (Mendible, 2006). Monsivais has shown in his research how historically “America has used race, ethnicity, and culture as criteria for describing and determining who is an American” (Monsivais, 2004, p. 34), contributing to present notions of who can be legitimate claimants of that identity and whose claims would be entertained and whose contested. The well-marketed exoticization and hypersexualization through which Vergara’s image—as also the screen image of Latinas—is constructed confines her to the rigid bounds of that inflexible representational strategy so that her ability to self-identify also occurs through means of sexualized self-exoticization which then provides mainstream media the opportunity of further racialization and ‘Othering’.

This paper focuses attention on the almost seamless transition from the reel to the seemingly “real” that Vergara’s Latina self is obliged to make in order to reinforce her cultural difference as limitation and that of others she is understood to represent. The paper focuses critical attention on the popular American talk show, *The Ellen Degeneres Show*, where despite appearing as herself, a celebrity guest, on numerous occasions, Vergara was not allowed to dissociate, in critical moments, from the stereotypes engendered by her hot Latina ‘spitfire’ character on *Modern Family*. Just as racialized humour serves as the mainstay of *Modern Family* to elicit laughter at the expense of “casual” racialization, racialized humor has been used in abundance by Ellen Degeneres on several occasions to depict Vergara’s differences as

inadequacies that can be ‘deservedly’ mocked and ridiculed for their “inherent” hilarity and ludicrousness. This paper attempts to problematize Vergara’s interactions with Ellen Degeneres and tries to cull out moments of racialization, thus, challenging the notion of “apolitical” racial humor that the show’s White host attempts to promote. On *The Ellen Degeneres Show*, Vergara has been made the quintessential Latina ‘Other’ who is “inferior” and an indubitable failure at assimilation while she is simultaneously exoticized, hypercommodified, eroticized, racialized towards the aim of fulfilling makers’ revenue goals by meeting demands of public consumption. Molina-Guzmán argues that gendered racialization in the media works by racializing the feminine other (Molina-Guzmán, 2014). Feminist women of colour have for long critiqued theories which treat gender and race separately, not allowing them to enter into dialogue with each other. Such theories have proved to be inadequate as they failed to take into account the lives of women of colour who are doubly marginalized because of their gender and marginalized racial/ethnonracial identities. In the exploration of the issues that emerge in the present study, the engagement of gender and race is of critical importance.

Identity, Politics and Representation

The panethnic identity label “Latina/o” and the demographic category of “Latinidad” is employed to identify people whose origins can be traced to any of the 30 countries in the Spanish Caribbean and Latin America who constitute an “imagined community of recent, established and multigenerational immigrants from diverse cultural, linguistic, racial, and economic backgrounds” in the United States (Molina-Guzmán & Valdivia, 2004, p. 207). Avila-Saavedra argues that owing to these diversities Latina/o identity is contested and contestable, making it an inherently flexible social identity category. Despite homogenizing impulses of media and culture industries, the foundations on which a collective Latina/o identity is built—like shared language, religion, culture—remain rather frail. However, regardless of the frailty or lack of cohesiveness, and despite significant variances at the core of this panethnic identity construction, the terms Latinidad and Latina/o have come to denote people of Latin American origin or descent in the United States many of whom self-identify with the umbrella term and

identity categorization (Avila-Saavedra, 2010). However, as various ethno-national groups have emerged who prefer using nationality-specific identity labels, and owing to the inherent heterogeneity of socio-cultural values within their communities, the panethnic label “Latina/o” has not escaped debate in academic circles over its political and academic salience. But despite such contestations, many scholars prefer working with this umbrella terminology as panethnic identity labels promote, and are conducive to, comparative analyses and extend recognition to the evolving Latina/o identity in the United States (Molina-Guzmán, 2006). Moreover, because of contentions accompanying postcolonial constructions of the Latinidad, possibilities for critical exploration of “broad range of popular signifiers associated with representations of Latina/o identity in the United States” are created (Molina-Guzmán & Valdivia, 2004, p. 207). Aparicio argues that the concept of Latinidad despite being homogenized by mainstream media and for profit culture industries, also allows the exploration of convergences and divergences that are critical to understanding postcolonial Latina/o subjectivities and hybrid expressions of culture diverse across Latina/o communities owing to differences in national origin or descent. The term Latinidad and its conceptual utilization provides avenues to interrogate how interlatino transculturations, encounters and identity constructions shape Latina/o subjectivities, thus facilitating alternative ways of accessing interlatino knowledge which homogenized representations, primarily representational strategies by those wielding power outside of Latina/o communities, fail to deliver (Aparicio, 2003). Acknowledging the conceptual efficacy of the term along with the intellectual, socio-cultural possibilities that it opens up, there is abundant scope to investigate the limitations and critical omissions in representations of Latina/os in American popular culture. As an identity category socially constructed in the United States, Latinidad suggests poverty of the dominant imagination pertaining to the Latina/os revealing ample distortions that accompany Latina/o media imaginary while the term also signifies an untapped potential. It suggests opportunities of investing in knowledge production at inter-community levels by exploiting dominant representational limitations. Acknowledging Latinidad as an inadequate media construction in the United States offers the scope of analyzing mediated racialized,

sexualized and gendered ethnoracial discourses in mainstream popular culture and what it reveals about “post race” America.

Latinas/os are presently the largest ethnic minority in the United States who are 63 million strong—including undocumented migrants—with the collective purchasing power of one trillion dollars (Aldama, 2013). Saldaña-Portillo argues that transnational Latina/o studies or transnational American studies must not neglect, but follow from, an analysis of the United States’ neocolonial interventions in nineteenth and twentieth centuries in the Americas that led to the increase in Latina/o immigration and the dependence of the U.S. economy on Latin American markets for natural resources (Saldaña-Portillo, 2007). This dependence also resulted in greater migration to the U.S. Moreover, Latina/o population grew rapidly from 1980s throughout the 1990s at a rate that was five times higher than the population growth of non-Latina/o Blacks and ten times higher than that of non-Latina/o whites. Immigration reforms in the 20th century also gave a boost to transnational migration resulting in increased migratory flows into the U.S from Latin America. At the turn of the 21st century, Latina/os started to feature prominently in the socio-cultural landscape of America owing to their business ventures, circulation of bilingual newspapers, organizations dedicated to the cultivation and preservation of arts and culture and the increasing political clout of the Latina/o population (Zavella, 2000). In his research, Soto-Vásquez has found that starting with Bill Clinton’s administration, the pan-ethnic identity label Latina/o was frequently used by American presidents including George Bush who took over the reins of the Clinton administration. The term was used also used later, more heavily, by Barack Obama. There were several discernible reasons for the use of this term which Vasquez attributes to the necessary political wisdom of viewing Latina/os as a formidable voting bloc that needed to be communicated to and mobilized and who were also being identified as an ethnoracial group distinct from African Americans (Soto-Vásquez, 2017).

This demographic shift has led advertisers as well as different kinds of media, including and especially the entertainment media, to address them not only as a new potent target audience but also use their inclusion in the mediascape “to deliver a message of ethnic hip-ness to

the general audience” (Valdivia, 2005, p. 61). Latin/o media visibility is embedded in the logic of neoliberal multiculturalism which has contributed to heightened racial tensions in the United States. Molina-Guzmán argues that even though Latina/os have become a “sought after media demographic”, their increased prominence “has also resulted in a nativistic political climate” in the United States that is increasingly becoming antagonistic towards Latina/o immigrants. The hostility is further intensified due to processes of racialization or the “extension of racial meanings” to groups that were not racially classified before (Molina-Guzmán, 2006, p. 233). Taking into account myriad divergences that prohibit essentialization, Esteban del Rio argues that there is no quintessential Latina/o subject but a collective identity is “fashioned out of a multitude of differences through communication” (del Río, 2006, p. 392). Therefore, it is through the politics of representation that Latina/o identity is made intelligible in popular culture (del Río, 2006) and in society.

Flores contends that the unequal, historical, colonial relationship between the United States and Latin America not only explains Latino migration to the United States but has also determined the “position and conditions” of Latinos in U.S. society. Moreover, their present socio-cultural location and movements are defined by the economic situation of their “home” countries in the transnational economic power hierarchy (Flores, 1997). Since the 1990s, Latin America had a per capita GDP which was only a little over one-fourth of that of the U.S. Even though there was growth in per capita GDP between 1950 and 2000, it did not occur at a pace sufficient to close the development gap between the United States and countries in Latin America. Inequality in income distribution persists in the latter while economic growth shows little promise (Domínguez, 2008). During the twentieth century, the United States started placing emphasis on modernization which as a developmental model had proved to be beneficial for it. Washington insisted that modernization was universally applicable and its purported universality would override region specific limitations and obstacles that could hinder such a developmental goal. The US seemed to believe during this period that its economic recommendations, along with its political-economic ideas, values and institutions when adopted by other countries would register a linear growth from traditional to modern.

However, when this development utopia was not realized in Latin America, U.S. officials began “to view Latin Americans as childlike, racially inferior, and incapable of developing democratic institutions or the values central to the US model. They were presented in caricature and through stereotypes” (Ryan, 1999, p. 293). The racialization of Latin Americans and its reinforcement through stereotypes continued in the post-Cold War era when the U.S.-Mexico border was militarized and other significant political events like the Panama invasion of 1989, the Cuban embargo, the plebiscite in Puerto Rico, NAFTA’s establishment happened along with corporate globalizing trends which contributed to the renewal of antiquated sets of images, icons and stereotypes associated with Latin America which was disseminated through and by mass media and figured prominently in literature of the time, which contained in them newer meanings highly suggestive of contemporary power relations, the U.S. government’s political agenda as well as corporate interests that influenced it (Aparicio, 1997). Hence, contemporary depictions of Latina/os in the media, literature, historical writing, music and folklore are replete with stereotypes that have had a long history (Aparicio, 1997)—the history of colonialism, United States’ rise to superpower status, its neocolonial overtures and postwar hegemony and denigration of Latin American countries that lagged behind or resisted its imperialist maneuvers. Rio argues that, “The dominant, historical regime of representation for Latina/os consists of invisibility, marginalization and negative stereotypes” (del Río, 2006, p. 389). He compares this with new regimes of representation which are a lot more positive than before but also sees in this representational regime, possibilities of raising—and investing in finding answers to—critical questions pertaining to the political economy of Latina/o incorporation in the U.S. national imaginary. Mainstream media is driven by capitalist compulsions that offer for public consumption “Latina/o life as an exotic, spicy, and new addition to the multicultural mainstream” (del Río, 2006, p. 389) while creating few possibilities were acknowledgement could be extended to the historical existence of U.S. Latina/o populations or the civil rights and political movements that had captured attention in the 1970s (del Río, 2006). The popular rendition of national and cultural communities without reference to their history and politics points to the fact that strategies of

representation that are employed to increase public consumption of the ethno-racial Other rely on multiculturalist pretensions that depend on celebrating exoticization while erasing crucial political-economic histories of marginalization and exploitation that could explain the need for migration and provide insights into the present subjugated location(s) of Latina/o populations in the US. Since, such a complex history of domination and subjugation has not been made palatable for audiences; popular media relies on often-repeated racialized rhetorics about the ‘Other’ to justify unwritten systems of exclusion in place. Based on a neoliberal premise, motivated by globalization, inclusion is highly suspect as capitalist celebrations of multiculturalism has not been able to rid itself of marginalization and stereotyping of Latina/os in mainstream media.

Sofia Vergara and *The Ellen Degeneres Show*: Us vs. Them?

Ellen Degeneres started her career as a stand-up comic in the 1980s. She went on to have a modestly successful acting career in Hollywood movies and on television, before famously ‘coming out’ as gay in the late 1990s. Her career suffered a brief setback during this time before bouncing back with the launch of her eponymous daytime talk show in 2003 which, slowly but surely, made her a household name, a huge star and one of the most loved celebrities in American television history. *The Ellen Degeneres Show* has been identified as one of the primary factors that returned her fame, and boosted it, in mainstream media that had been unwilling to accommodate her queerness in the late 1990s (Skerski, 2007). However, Ellen’s public acceptance on her re-emergence was conditional. She appeared to “pass”, as Shugart argues, not by hiding her sexual orientation but by retaining “some degree of heterosexual privilege by virtue of diffusing her lesbian identity with ambiguous performances” (Shugart, 2003, p. 48). She actively underplayed her queerness and declared her dissociation with “militant” and “radical” queer communities thus establishing her sexual orientation as essentially non-threatening, not impossible to ignore and hence easily marketable (Skerski, 2007). The show was meant to be a “light-hearted day time talk show characterized as “humor without an agenda”” (Skerski, 2007, p. 375), where its “domesticated” host “just wants to make people laugh” (Skerski, 2007, p. 378). Hence, Ellen’s

brand of humor was decidedly constructed as “apolitical”: non-disruptive, appropriate by conservative standards of morality and decency, easily accessible and consumable. It was seemingly “harmless” since it posed no threat to the status quo. It is through the establishment of Ellen’s brand of humor as essentially apolitical and innocuous that Ellen enabled her to indulge in racist and sexist humor on the show. Once she revived her career that had once been consigned to oblivion, Ellen re-invented herself as a comedian, as someone whose heart is in the right place and who is effortlessly funny and astonishingly kind, so much so that her detractors could be held guilty of lacking a sense of humor or of being unnecessarily militant. Sofia Vergara, on the other hand, at the receiving end of Ellen’s impertinence, is forced to be complicit in her racialization and objectification debilitated by the hegemonic consensus on Degeneres’ humor being fundamentally benign and from her own public perception as a “funny lady” who is almost always unflappable—someone who does not shy away from indulging in self-deprecating humor every now and then.

One of the primary markers of differentiation between Vergara and Degeneres on the show has been established as Vergara’s Columbian accent. Because of it, Vergara has been the object of ridicule on the show every time she has appeared on it. In November 2010, on one of Vergara’s earlier appearances on the show, Ellen looks at the audience and says, “I look at everybody and I see they are trying to figure out what you said. Everybody was explaining to somebody what you said. How long have you been in the US?” Vergara had been in the US for sixteen years by that time. While acknowledging the fact that it must be incredibly difficult to learn a new language after moving to a new country, Ellen followed it with an offensive and untoward question: “Can you get rid of the accent?” (22zooley, 2010). However, despite Ellen’s derision of Vergara’s accent and the many egregious attempts she made to “fix” it, Vergara’s accent has provided steady fodder for humor on the show almost every time she has appeared on it. Evidently, Ellen has capitalized on Vergara’s “difference” by overstating it, by insisting that the audience recognize its comical quality, consequently enabling them to appreciate the seemingly “blithe” humor evolving from it. Resultantly, Degeneres has been able to posit herself as unassailable to critique. On another occasion, a few years later, in 2013,

The Ellen Show’s channel on YouTube posted a video titled *Sofia Vergara is a Cover Girl (Even Though She Can’t Say It)*. CoverGirl is a popular cosmetics brand in America that featured Vergara for the first time in 2012 in one of its advertisements. In keeping with the brand’s tradition, Vergara had to mouth the slogan “Easy, Breezy, Beautiful CoverGirl” in their ads. When she appeared on the show, Degeneres made her repeat the slogan. Vergara initially faltered before saying it in a perfectly intelligible manner. However, Degeneres was not impressed; she laughed and exclaimed “I don’t know how you got hired!” In the same episode, Degeneres also mocked Vergara’s pronunciation of the word “gift”, making the studio audience erupt in roars of laughter (TheEllenShow, 2013).

Vergara’s being held up as the object of ridicule on the show on account of her ‘foreign’ accent has been normalized, the audience inured to it on account of Degeneres’ trite humor which, in effect, helps mask its vacuous racialized character. Ellen’s irreverence, reflected in her inappropriate levity, has been fundamental to her interactions with Vergara so much so that it was even employed in the creation of a commercial for CoverGirl in which Degeneres and Vergara were cast together. Towards the end of the advertisement, Vergara is shown complaining to Degeneres for stealing one of her lines. “That’s what I was supposed to say now”, Vergara insists. Ellen retorts, “Well no one can understand you.” Vergara feigns discomfiture. A few seconds later, when it is time for them to mouth CoverGirl’s signature slogan, Vergara speaks indistinctly, pretending her inability to say her line accurately. As if vindicated, Ellen responds “That’s what I am talking about, see. What did you just say?” Ellen then goes on to mimic her incoherence before the commercial ends (Guillo, 2012). However, in the CoverGirl commercial that features Vergara exclusively, she mouths the slogan with perfect ease, without stuttering or fumbling (Unofficial covergirl, 2012). However, her screen-friendly, commodifiable friendship with Ellen is built on an unequal foundation and its edifice is, hence, emblematic of it at all times. Vergara is always “lesser than” her non-ethnic White counterpart, always limited in her capacity and hence justifiably subordinated. Ellen’s humor assumes an unseemly, obtuse, hidebound, racialized character when it addresses Vergara which can be read as denigration of the ‘Other’ who is restrictively defined by her

superficial limitations to make her seem mired in her own unconquerable inabilities.

On one of Vergara’s recent appearances on the *Ellen Degeneres Show*, in October 21, 2017, Ellen makes didactic attempts to make Vergara say the English word flabbergasted. When Vergara says it without incident, Ellen throws another challenge her way: discombobulated. She falters, her speech becomes slurry and Ellen has a good laugh over it. Degeneres insists on making her say it accurately despite Vergara’s numerous failed attempts and her palpable exhaustion at the almost enervating exercise. Ellen appears intransigent (TheEllenShow, 2017).

Zentella argues, incorrect grammar or erroneous pronunciation mark their speakers as essentially inferior. Moreover, foreign languages are already considered inherently intrusive and Spanish, particularly, “invades “white public space.”” She states, “In English, persistent foreign accents and non-standard verbs also signal an unwillingness to assimilate and a lack of discipline that requires external controls...” (Zentella, 2007, p. 26). Vergara’s “foreignness” is distinguishable without being alienating. But Ellen makes Vergara appear inaccessible by exaggerating her difference in keeping with her own daytime persona as a comic turned talk show host and Vergara’s *Modern Family* character Gloria who is frequently shown struggling with the English language for comedic effect. Ellen’s ‘Otherization’ of Vergara is neither individualistic nor inane. It contributes to the racialization of Latina/os and contributes in the maintenance of stereotypes about their (in)capability and adaptability. Villumsen argues, “By maintaining and cultivating an image of Latinos as immigrants, not mastering the English language, it is further established that Latinos are foreigners, new to the United States, who do not belong in the country in the same way as the Anglo population. This reinforces “Othering” by maintaining Latinos as outsider, the Others, not as “real” Americans...” (Villumsen, 2012, p. 47). Vergara’s accent is established as markedly “un-American” that cannot be consumed by American audiences without effort. Lippi-Green states that it is not a foreign accent per se that marks its speaker as “un-American.” A foreign accent assumes a racial significance when its bearer is a person of colour who strongly

indicates a third-world origin. She contends that mastery over the English language is emblematic of a “successfully assimilated immigrant” and “is promoted as the one and the only possible language of a unified and healthy nation” (Lippi-Green, 2012, p. 249) and those who cannot speak it, or cannot speak it “properly”, are thought to have failed the test of successful assimilation and are ostracized. Like her character Gloria Delgado-Pritchett on *Modern Family* and her “comedic use of language”, Sofia Vergara’s pronunciation, language use and accent are made to evoke uproarious laughter to mark Vergara as “different, exotic, forever an outsider” (Molina-Guzmán, 2012).

However, it is not only Vergara’s accent that is made to justify the process of her gender, racialized, eroticized ‘Otherization.’ It is also her physical attributes that have been overemphasized and distinguished through parodies on *The Ellen Degeneres Show* to mark her Latina body as distinctly “un-American.” Myra Mendible contends, “The ideological construction of “American identity” (and by extension, “American interests”) entails more than assimilation into the particulars of lifestyle or normative cultural values; it has historically involved the foregrounding of physical characteristics said to represent “Americanness” and register moral and intellectual fitness. From early anthropological debates about the existence of an American type...to contemporary images of “all-American girls” as blond and blue-eyed, dominant notions of American identity have relied on embodiment for reification” (Mendible, 2007, p. 6).

In the Halloween episode of her show’s 10th season in 2012, Degeneres dressed up as Sofia Vergara. She wore a dress similar to that of Vergara’s Zuhair Murad gown at the 2012 Emmys which had caused her a (widely publicized) wardrobe malfunction. In that episode, Ellen used padded curve-enhancements exaggerating Vergara’s curvature. Ellen’s caricature of Vergara was hyper-sexual containing frequent allusions to Vergara’s breasts—referred to as her “pumpkins” by Degeneres—and her body. Degeneres mocked Vergara’s accent—which has now become an immutable tradition of the show—and claimed it was fake. Mimicking Vergara’s Columbian accent, Ellen stated, “I am so beautiful and so busy with cover girl and diet pepsi and burger king and my clothing line and the award winning Modern

Family, I get so much work with this fake accent. People think it’s real; I don’t know why people think it’s real.” As this was happening, Vergara entered the stage feigning mock anger, staring at Ellen disapprovingly. Unfazed, Ellen observed: “It is like looking in a mirror” (Menendez, 2013). The Latino Rebels wrote an opinion piece on their websites expressing their disgust at Ellen’s distasteful skit and titled it, “Ellen and Sofia Laughing All the Way Back to the Caveman Era.” It says, “...the curvaceous Latinas are now the latest hipster Halloween costume, as the following Ellen segment shows” (Letty, 2012).

In one of her show’s segments in 2015 titled “The Three Sofias,” Reese Witherspoon, Ellen Degeneres and Sofia Vergara are shown dressed up in similar outfits. Both Witherspoon and Degeneres are named Sofia and are made to speak in a Columbian accent like Vergara’s. It is meant to be another parody of Vergara/Gloria and, by extension, of Latinas whom Vergara and her *Modern Family* character represent. Vergara enters the set calling for “Sofia”. Responding to her call, Degeneres and Witherspoon enter the scene, wearing padded curve enhancements, clearly parodying Vergara’s appearance. Vergara’s says, “I think I am in love with a man and I was trying some beautiful jewellery because I like the bling-bling and this man offered me, to buy it for me, I think it’s because I have a very big personality.” Reese Witherspoon says, “Me too, I have big personality and it’s so crazy because the same thing happened to me, I was in it to buy jewellery because I like the bling-bling and a man offered to buy it for me too because I have two dimples,” pointing to her breasts. Ellen says, “Same thing happened to me. I was in the store buying the jewellery because of the blong-blong and the man ordered it to offer to me because of the two big boobies” (TheEllenShow, 2015).

Latinas are frequently portrayed in the US media in highly sexist ways. They are mostly depicted as temptresses/gold diggers with desires of upward mobility which their immigrant status and working class station cannot incontrovertibly guarantee. Hence, they are reliant on White men for sustenance as shown in *Modern Family* where Vergara’s character is married to a significantly older, wealthy, White man with two adult children from his previous marriage who takes good care of Gloria and her teenage son Manny. The parody by Ellen

Degeneres and Reese Witherspoon hints at this hegemonic narrative established in popular culture without attempting to communicate any other derivable meaning. That Latina bodies are hypersexualized in the White cultural imagination is evidenced by the caricature of Vergara’s exotic sexuality and femininity that is carried out by Degeneres on the Halloween episode and is further reinforced by Degeneres and Witherspoon—two non-ethnic White women—on another occasion on the show. Molina-Guzman states, “...Latina bodies in the media landscape are both culturally desirable and socially contested, as consumable and dangerous” (Molina-Guzmán, 2010, p. 2). Thus, while Vergara’s Latina body is eroticized and exoticized on *The Ellen Degeneres Show*, the parodies also serve the function of marking Latina bodies as different and quintessentially “un-American.” The exoticized Latina body, and the exaggerated, hypereroticized imagination of it is imagined to serve a threat to non-ethnic White women and an invitation to non-ethnic White men. Latinas are frequently portrayed as hypersexual, who are always at the mercy of their material and sexual desires towards the fulfillment of which they aim to seduce primarily White men. It is imagined that Latinas use their body and sexuality to serve their selfish basal wants and consumerist aspirations which—owing to colonial imaginings of White male domination and the subjugation of women of colour—is primarily thought to be successfully and adequately fulfilled by non-ethnic White men. “The Three Sofias” are the visual representation of this narrative which reveals an anxiety about Latina femininity and sexuality in the dominant White cultural imagination. Shugart argues that people of colour are consistently characterized in the media as “undisciplined, unrefined, primitive, exotic, inappropriately sexual, emotional, and unstable” qualities which, in stereotyped representations, are also attributed to Latina/os. She observes, “The injustices and inaccuracies of such representations aside, they function to “reinforce the attitude of White superiority,” which is conversely articulated as ordered, civilized, rational, disciplined, and morally superior” (Shugart, 2007, p. 118). Latinas are often represented as femme fatales who lead White men astray. It is this narrative that parodies by Degeneres and Witherspoon on *The Ellen Degeneres Show* feed through the hypersexualization of the Latina body and suggestions of her deriving material gains from it,

thus racializing Latinas as sexually available, materialistic, opportunistic, and dangerous.

Aparacio (2003) argues that in popular culture, the Latina entertainers’ body, their long and dark hair and full hips, even though have on occasions become symbols of pride in their ethnoracial identities, they cannot be cast out of colonial history of subordination and patriarchal masculinist domination in which they remain embedded to this day. The bodies of Latinas, along with Afro-Caribbean and women of colour, were historically viewed as subjugated bodies that were to satisfy erotic desires of men who dominated. They were also required to fulfill through their reproductive ability the insatiable labour wants of colonial and imperial economies. Writing about Selena Quintanilla and Jennifer Lopez whose rear ends were just as celebrated in Hollywood as them, Aparicio writes that “both bodies of Selena and Lopez were literally sites through which hegemonic notions of physical beauty and value were being contested and struggled. Both bodies were public enactments and physical embodiments of simultaneous colonial desire and subaltern resistance” (Aparicio, 2003, p. 100). As normative Euro-American standards of beauty do not allow for fuller breasts and rear ends to be celebrated as aesthetically appealing, Latina bodies not only act as resistance against those standards but also cast out their bearer as underclass and un-American, only suitable for commodification and fetishization. Even as strategies of visual representation represent Latinas as desirable and available, Ovalle argues that her image can only remain impermanent “since she cannot legitimately reproduce the nation in the presence of white women” (Ovalle, 2011, p. 5). Latinas can only “reify a gendered, racialized, sexualized and nationalized ‘Other’ against which the hegemonic ideal of the US citizen is measured and visualized” (Ovalle, 2011, p. 22). Vergara’s ethnic femininity and her racialized sexuality is posited as “un-American” by contrasting it with that of Witherspoon who can, if not Degeneres herself, stand in for normative American femininity who can legitimately produce Vergara’s differences by positioning herself against her ethnic, “foreign” exoticness.

Conclusion

Ellen has derived entertainment value out of racializing Vergara who is performatively marked by Degeneres as the definitive ‘Other’ who is different, underdeveloped and unfit for assimilation. By doing this, Degeneres was able to reaffirm her own ‘acceptable’ Americanness, and her being in the identifiable mainstream, despite her marginalized sexual identity. Vergara has been laughed at and ridiculed for her accent and the exoticization and hypersexualization of her body has been employed in the process of her racialized ‘Otherization’ to establish her as a laughable deviant to the acceptable frames of White femininity and sexuality. Even though entertainment media offers space to Latinas, these spaces are yet to be democratized when it comes to privileging the voices of America’s ethnoracial ‘Others’. On screen, those deemed racially inferior are not given the power to decide the script of their own depiction. The task lies with those that have the power and the privilege to position themselves as knowers and can legitimately claim to be celebrating diverse cultures and cultural realities in 21st century America. The myth of post-race America is also conducive to the production of, albeit invisibilized, cores and peripheries where the latter has to agree to the definition of what constitutes racism and what cannot, should not, and does not.

There are certain dominant characteristics that are presented as authentic to the image of Latinas in American popular culture. Olive skin, curvy, long hair, dark eyes Latina wearing tight clothes and high heels is a dominant stereotyped image whose two most prominent representatives are Sofia Vergara and Salma Hayek, argues Bucciferro. The other two stereotyped image is of undocumented immigrants and the homemaker. Bucciferro asserts that “These images function as heuristic devices that conceptually put non-White women in specific boxes, limiting their ability for self-definition and negating their individuality” (Bucciferro, 2014, p. 91). When Latinas are persistently ‘Otherized’, there is a crucial economic cost attached to it. Racializations that distinguish Latinas on the basis of their skin colour, culture, and language, identify them as “Others” and are used to justify systemic exclusion and economic discrimination (Villanueva, 2002, p. 151). Dávila argues that English-speaking Latina/os and those educated

in the United States are usually privileged in the economic sector as they are the ones who are offered better-paying jobs than Spanish-dominant Latina/os. However, even as the latter is more discriminated against systemically, they are considered authentic representatives of Latina/os. However, the affluence of U.S. born Latina/os when combined with the linguistic and purported cultural authenticity of the foreign-born, present a highly marketable image of Latinidad (Dávila, 2001). Vergara fits into this mould as a Latina who came to the U.S. as an immigrant, earned fame and wealth while retaining her “authenticity”. Her denigration is the denigration of foreign-born Latina/os who speak accented English are working class, who struggle for economic opportunities and are mired in poverty and needs to be challenged as this study has attempted to do.

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