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Cover Page Footnote

This article is from an earlier iteration of *Diálogo* which had the subtitle "A Bilingual Journal." The publication is now titled "Diálogo: An Interdisciplinary Studies Journal."

FROM AVA GARDNER TO “MIS NALGAS”:



The Story of our Beautiful Brown Skinned Sexuality

Linda Garcia Merchant
Voces Primeras, LLC

Childhood summers are great for developing lifelong habits and 1972 marked the starting point for all of my idiosyncratic adult behaviors. I was twelve years old when reading long books and watching old movies on television became my passion. One of the films on my list that summer was “The Barefoot Contessa”.

Made in 1954 it starred Humphrey Bogart, Rossano Brazzi and a woman I idolized, Ava Gardner. It is about the short but full life of Maria Vargas, a beautiful, independent fire-brand that can act, but cannot be contained. In the end, what had made Maria a success as an actress, became her undoing as a person.

The story has many parallels to Ms. Gardner’s personal life. Her legendary beauty prevented the world from really knowing or caring who she was. In reality, she worried the world would one day discover that her looks were so-so and her talent even less so.

My attraction to Ava Gardner began with my firm belief that she was Latina. No matter how often my mother would tell me that she was not, I knew deep down that mom was wrong. I knew that Ava Gardner was not only Latina, we were related and I had proof of this connection.

You see, when my mother turned 21 my grandparents had a photographic portrait taken of her and my Aunt Linda. Momma’s picture hung above the fake fireplace mantle in the living room. Momma bore a marked resemblance to a young Lena Horne. Aunt Linda’s picture hung in the dining room over the sideboard. Aunt Linda was a dead ringer for Ava Gardner.

Growing up with Aunt Linda and Mom gave me entrance into their 1960’s glamorous world of getting ready for dates, parties and even work. I would sit on my mom’s bed and watch the two of them as they teased hair, curled eyelashes, clasped jewelry, snapped stockings into garters, slid polished toes into alligator skin pumps, and looked into mirrors that reflected their great beauty. I thought they were the most beautiful women in the world.

So when I saw the thin ankle bracelet on the bronzed ankle of Ava Gardner (as Maria Vargas) peeking out from behind the curtain, I felt something telling me I had seen that ankle before. When Humphrey Bogart as director Harry Dawes said to Ms. Vargas, “Senorita, your bare feet are showing”, her response was to wiggle two beautifully polished red toenails. I felt that tug again. I remembered, Aunt Linda had a thin ankle bracelet, red toenails and feet just like Ava’s. Ava Gardner had to be Latina.

So when Maria Vargas flings open the curtain and displays the flash of an angry response to the interruption in painfully mangled Spanish my suspicions were confirmed. I even remember saying out loud, ‘Wow, she looks like Aunt Linda’.

Movies give an audience the opportunity to suspend belief and I chose to do just that with *The Barefoot Contessa*. I believed that Ava Gardner as Maria Vargas was the most beautiful Latina on film. I also believed in the beauty and sexuality she used as her power and that made Ava Gardner one of the legendary Hollywood beauties of the fifties.

It was a sexual power I had seen in Aunt Linda and Mom. I watched when they would first walk into a room, how men would stop talking and women would scan them for some small imperfection only to be disappointed and become more envious. I had seen the look of quiet rejection on the face of an equally strong man when given a disapproving or unsatisfied look from these women's blazing, brown eyes.

Watching "The Barefoot Contessa," I wanted to believe that the rest of the world could see our power, not just our beauty, and come to respect it. However, when the movie was over, real life returned and I would have to wait thirty years before empowered Latinas would again appear in my American media.

In the meantime, Latinas would be maids, hookers or long suffering mothers, sometimes funny, many times caring and nurturing, but always non-threatening and definitely non-descript. If Latinas were able to use their sexual power in a film, there was always a price to pay, usually death, of themselves or someone close to them, breaking that spirit. The power we had with Ava, died with Maria Vargas at the funeral at the end of the film.

They may have died in film but they didn't disappear from my personal life. Strong and beautiful women are the rule in Latino families. So when I began working on my second documentary feature on performance art, "Palabras Dulces, Palabras Amargas" I knew that I wanted to do something that celebrated our beautiful brown skinned sexual empowerment.

"Palabras Dulces, Palabras Amargas (Sweet Words, Bitter Words)" is the story of performance art as done by La Dulce Palabra Spoken Word Ensemble, a collective of multi-generational Latinas.

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The film includes seven pieces on a variety of topics including sexual empowerment. One of two pieces on the subject is called, "Mis Nalgas" by Evon Flores Barrera.

Standing in a mottled key light and wearing high heels, a white oxford man's shirt, fishnet stockings and vinyl panties, Evon, looking straight into the camera delivers the first salvo across the bow of our sexual consciousness. 'Esta noche, te presento algo maravilloso', 'Tonight I present to you, something marvelous'. This establishing shot of 'Mis Nalgas' creates a space that leaves nothing in question about the power of Ms. Flores Barrera's sexuality.

During rehearsals I mentioned to Evon that she bore a strong resemblance to another sexually charged Latina, Brazilian actress Sonia Braga. Evon smiled, made no comment in return and then during filming, channeled many Braga-isms into her performance.

There are many moments in this work that celebrate all of what it means to be beautiful, brown and Latina. 'Mis Nalgas' while done in a tongue-in-cheek fashion relays a bigger message than just its humor. It demonstrates thirty years after Ava Gardner as Maria Vargas, a Latina's right to live a space that is happy, healthy, and confidently sexual.

I knew as a child Ava Gardner being Latina was important because I needed to know that like her, the standard of beauty I ascribed to included one that existed both internally and externally. That it didn't just define the standard of beauty as white, thin, blue-eyed, blonde, and often, self absorbed.

I needed to know that it is a standard that continues to include and accept the rich and curious nature of distractingly beautiful, brown women, with fiery brown eyes, and voluptuous bodies like Ava, Mom, Aunt Linda, and Evon. This higher and better standard includes but doesn't necessarily expect, motherhood, careers, marriage and movements.

In all of my films, the most important message to be gained is that Latinas are not just stunning creatures engaging one's passions. We are also smart, interesting, fearless and can do anything. We are all of these things together and together they are what make us exceptional. Ava Gardner as Maria Vargas knew it, Aunt Linda and Mom knew it, and Evon Flores Barrera, 'con sus nalgas' knows it and embraces it with enthusiastic joy.

LINDA GARCIA MERCHANT (Voces Primeras, LLC), a documentary filmmaker, Linda created Voces Primeras to capture the work of pioneering Latinas in the midwest. Her debut film *Las Mujeres de la Caucus Chicana* was presented in 2008 by the Womens Center at DePaul University for Womens' History Month. Linda's second film, *Palabras Dulces, Palabras Amargas (Sweet Words, Bitter Words)* features La Dulce Palabra Spoken Word Ensemble and premiered as part of the 2009 Sor Juana Festival at the National Museum of Mexican Art in Chicago.
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