




2022

FIRST-PERSON POLITICS: STRATEGIES OF LATIN/X AMERICAN WOMEN TO CHANGE THE NEOLIBERAL REQUIREMENTS FOR EMPOWERMENT AND INCLUSION ONE SHARE, LIKE, SUBSCRIBE AT A TIME

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Digital Object Identifier: <https://doi.org/10.13023/etd.2022.425>

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DISSERTATION

A dissertation submitted in fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of
Philosophy in the College of Hispanic Studies at the University of Kentucky

By

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Lexington, Kentucky

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2022

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ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

FIRST-PERSON POLITICS: STRATEGIES OF LATIN/X AMERICAN WOMEN TO CHANGE THE NEOLIBERAL REQUIREMENTS FOR EMPOWERMENT AND INCLUSION ONE SHARE, LIKE, SUBSCRIBE AT A TIME

This project investigates the strategies of Latin/x American women who have used their voices and influence in the media to break barriers, enter spaces that have excluded them, and advocate for changes so that young girls like them do not have to face these same limitations. Chapter One investigates politicians who, from their political power positions, interweave personal stories with their accomplishments to provide role models for these careers. Chapter Two identifies actors who combine their personal stories with activist causes to alter representation in TV and film. The YouTubers in Chapter Three bolster a rhetoric of empowerment to encourage girls/women to be their own bosses. A pattern emerges in both hemispheres where influential women from various sectors (politics, Hollywood, YouTube) have initially gained attention through their careers, garnered a following on social media, and from this place of power have used their platform to share personal stories in order to offer counter narratives and advocate for the possibilities, opportunities, and inclusion of the next generation of young Latin/x American girls and women.

KEYWORDS: (Digital) Feminist Activism, Social Media, Celebrity Studies, Latin/x American Culture

Marlee Northcutt

31 October 2022

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Introduction

This project studies an inter-generational group of Latin/x American women with high-profile public careers (1960s-2020s) who strategically use their mainstream social media influence to share their personal stories targeted at a younger audience, enter spaces that have excluded and misrepresented them, and advocate for changes so that the next generation does not face these same limitations.

Historically, Latin/x American cultural expression thematizes invisibility, misunderstanding, and misrepresentation. Latin/x American women have faced a double challenge of stereotyping by mainstream media and exclusion from male-dominated movements. But the recent boom in Latin/x women's self-representation underwritten by neoliberal social media culture, such as the example of Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's couture "Tax the Rich" dress at the 2021 Met Gala, evinces a new and significant form of activism.

Using discourse and textual analysis, and digital ethnography of autobiographies, interviews, and YouTube videos, I present case studies of both Latin American and US Latinx women who have propelled themselves to the center of media culture and become influencers for social inclusion. The combination of case studies from both Latin America and the United States allows readers to see the parallel patterns of resistance and strategies that are used across borders. Although they often function in different ways, the mixture of examples highlights a through line and commonality amongst all the women. Scholars of Latin/x American celebrity media presence tend to dismiss this kind of activism because it does not break with mainstream neoliberalism (Báez, Beltrán, Dávila, Molina-Guzmán, Mukherjee and Banet-Weiser, Noriega, Valdivia, Zeisler). Yet what is

missed in this dismissal is that although they may not be directly toppling neoliberal power structures, these women work to exploit, subvert, and challenge them from within through accessible personal stories that seek to help future generations reshape these systems and structures. These patterns exist in each of the cases: both the Latin American and US Latinx examples.

The first-person autobiographical narratives of the women in my study are potentiated by the social media premise of sharing personal information, cultivating a public identity, and “just being yourself.” This ambiguous mandate to “be yourself” often reinforces neoliberal messaging about independence, autonomy, empowerment, beauty, gender roles, sexuality, and work. Nevertheless, this “be yourself” motto affords access to the center of social media power, a platform for rewriting the requirements for empowerment and inclusion. Additionally, it can be seen as a method to inform and encourage their audience, especially young girls, of their epistemic advantage and ability to navigate multiple worlds simultaneously. Together, one story, one share, one like at a time, they offer strategies such as what I call “aspirational mirroring” and “career coalitions” to navigate white, male, hierarchical, neoliberal culture not designed to propel Latinas to success, they invite others to share their experiences through what I call “story stacking,” and they create a web of interconnected instances showing a larger story of misrepresentation, exclusion, and discrimination that is more powerful than each story alone.

Polit-identivists: Autobiographical Tool with Political Pull

Chapter One investigates the autobiographies, interviews, documentaries, and social media of public and political figures (Dolores Huerta, Sonia Sotomayor, Michelle

Bachelet, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez) who, in this digital age, have chosen to interweave their personal stories with their professional accomplishments to provide role models for the next generation to aspire to these careers. These “polit-identivists,” whose identity becomes integral to their activism once they have obtained a spotlight for their political careers, become role models for the next generation to know their possibilities for raising their voices and obtaining decision making power positions with the potential for policies and change in the interest of underrepresented groups. Additionally, in this chapter I look at the generational progression that is occurring where, over time, it is becoming easier for political figures to incorporate their personal stories into their process of campaigning and accessing the political positions as evidenced by Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and her social media savviness. It is important to note that these figures are targeting a young audience with their personal stories through the publication of autobiographies for young adults or children. This is a strategy being used that I define as “aspirational mirroring” to create role models for future generations by making counternarratives visible with the rhetoric that people with similar backgrounds can aspire to similar accomplishments. Young people have the ability to see themselves reflected in the story as well as see possibilities for their future that they may not see from other sources of input in their lives.

One example of a case study from Chapter One would be Sonia Sotomayor who is the first Latina Justice of the Supreme Court. In 2013, she wrote a memoir called *My Beloved World*. A reader might expect her autobiography to be about her accomplishments; instead, however, the story she chooses to tell is of her life growing up in the Bronx, her struggles with diabetes, the death of her father, her difficult relationship

with her mother, and her journey through Ivy league institutions navigating comments questioning her place there due to affirmative action. The book does not even cover her later life or her appointment to the Supreme Court. She uses her work and her accomplishments as a way to draw readers in, but the story she chooses to tell is about her experiences earlier in life. Sotomayor acknowledges that her background does not naturally lead her to aspire to this influential position, yet she shares that this is what actually propelled her and set her apart. She obtains influence in public office through conventional access, yet from this place of power, chooses to tell her personal stories, attributing her success to her background to create role models for future generations to aspire to power positions. For this reason, she has also written children's books about her life story with this audience in mind. In Chapter One, what becomes evident from the combination of the case studies is that these patterns and pathways to success exemplified by Sonia Sotomayor are repeated and the women follow similar patterns in order to garner success and use their platform, power, and stories to influence the next generation.

Actractivists: Celebrity Status Turns Activist Apparatus

Chapter Two considers actors (Rita Moreno, Jennifer Lopez, Salma Hayek, America Ferrera, Diane Guerrero, Gina Rodriguez, Yalitza Aparicio Martínez, María Mercedes Coroy, Daniela Vega, Indya Moore) in the television and film industry who gain a following through their careers and combine their personal stories with activist causes to increase Latinx representation and rewrite identity narratives by countering negative mainstream stereotypes. They become what I call “actractivists,” drawing viewers in with acting careers and celebrity clout, using their platform to question the institution, processes, and protocols that gave them this access and following, and

becoming activists for personal causes. Additionally, their original roles and success as actors are turning into opportunities for becoming directors and producers who then have more power over the stories that they create and perpetuate. Overall, the “actractivists” recognize this sacrifice of self and lack of representation from within the industry, decide that they do not want this loss and invisibility to continue, and work to change the status quo for the future through their activism.

One highlight from this chapter would be the case of America Ferrera. She is an actor, producer, and director known for her roles in *Real Women Have Curves* (2002) and *Ugly Betty* (2006). She garnered success through her acting career and now uses her influence to talk openly about discrimination and stereotyping in the interviews she does as well as social media. She has published a book called *American Like Me* (2018) which combines her own story and perspective as a Latina growing up in the United States as well as other “American stories like hers” to highlight other voices who have not been able to tell all the parts of their stories before. She uses a strategy of what I call “story stacking” where she uses her influence to provide a platform to unify individual instances, allowing for a bigger picture idea of the issues she addresses in her own story, increasing the power and legitimacy of their words. She has also created different organizations and movements such as I Will Harness for the purpose of amplifying marginalized voices and also the movement on social media called Poderistas to “elevate, celebrate, and inspire Latinas to leverage their own power.” Additionally, she has moved into production roles and worked on the Netflix show *Gentefied* to create counter-narratives that challenge stereotypical representation. As with Chapter One, what becomes evident in Chapter Two is that there are many resonances and similarities in the

strategies that the actors use to garner success and use their influence, especially on social media, to share their stories with the goal of changing the systems, structures, and protocols of the film and television industry to alter and increase representation.

Aesthetivists: Beauty Norm Becomes Empowerment Platform

Chapter Three identifies YouTubers (Dulce Candy, Lele Pons, Bethany Mota, Yuya) who use beauty as a platform for activist causes by interweaving personal experiences, attempting to empower women to be their own bosses and market themselves for business growth and economic gain. Whereas in the political sphere and Hollywood where access to these institutions traditionally requires a sacrifice of self or a separation between personal identity and work, YouTube, an American video-sharing site founded in California, alters this dynamic to where identity is deeply tied to success and a new type of career. Although it seems like a platform open to everyone and where the free expression of identity is supported, the ability to gain a following and “success” depends on many factors that do not naturally lend themselves to marginalized groups and often result in a masking of identity. In this chapter I look at the tactics of various Latinx and Latin American women to infiltrate this platform, gain a following, and use their influence to share personal stories and for advocacy. The YouTubers themselves become literal brand names who attach their identities and daily lives to the image and products they are selling and advertising. They become what I call “aesthetivists” who initially gain a following through their cosmetics, aesthetics, and beauty advertising, to earn the right to be heard and often share personal stories, Latinx and Latin American life experiences, or to advocate for causes related to them. They go through what I call a metamorphosis once they have garnered a following and enter into a second public life

where they are able to more openly share about their personal experiences.

Autobiography is expanded to the digital realm and there is an underlying push for consciousness intertwined with the superficial found in everyday lives. YouTube offers a platform to present personal stories in an accessible way which increases consciousness of other narratives and counter stories. The mixture of superficial consumerism and vulnerable expositions of life experiences allows for representation of different types of stories that many viewers and mainstream audiences might not typically have access to in their everyday lives.

A chapter highlight would be the case of Dulce Candy, a YouTube beauty vlogger who started her YouTube channel after returning from deployment in Iraq where she wore a uniform and could not wear makeup. She mostly creates content about her daily life with skincare, makeup, and fashion tutorials. Within these fun and light videos, she also includes brief moments where she shares her personal story and background. For example, in one video she draws out her life story and depicts her journey crossing the border from Mexico, and in another video, she addresses criticism and comments about her not being “Mexican enough.” She seems to now be building her recognizability as a Latina woman through sharing her personal story by publishing the book *The Sweet Life* (2015), an autobiographical self-help book about turning her struggles into opportunities and inspiring her readers to do the same, creating videos in Spanish, and getting involved in politics and immigration activism. Dulce Candy draws viewers in with cosmetics and fashion but there seems to be more space and opportunity to talk about herself and her personal experiences after this level of success has been gained. Her metamorphosis and entrance into a second public life are evinced by a change in her YouTube platform. In

2021 she decided to leave her original YouTube channel called “Dulce Candy” in which she had 2 million followers to start a new channel called “Sweet Soul by Dulce Candy” where she focuses more on her spiritual and health journey and which she feels is more representative of her current life. The YouTubers of Chapter Three increase the case studies presented in the first two chapters and further solidify the repetition of a similar strategy used among all of the women to share their personal stories and experiences in autobiographical form and then advocate for causes related to them with the goal of increasing representation and helping the next generation not have to face the same struggles with discrimination, misrepresentation, underrepresentation, and misunderstanding that they had to face.

Some of these women challenge dominant neoliberal cultural structures; others commodify *Latinidad* and their activism becomes a brand. I argue that the accumulation, accessibility, and dissemination of these digital media stories serves as an evidentiary archive of the discrimination, stereotyping, and exclusion that these prominent Latin/x American women have faced, and of the strategies of resistance that they have employed to survive the neoliberal present, redefining activism by combining dissent with success.

Key terms

- Polit-identivists: politics + identity + activist

The individuals who fall under the category of polit-identivists initially gain a following through politics, but their activism turns personal, and identity becomes integral as they advocate for the potential of young people from similar backgrounds. They garner political prominence but later turn their careers into a platform for activism and advocacy

for the younger generation by using their identities and personal stories to become role models. Identity and personal stories become intrinsically tied to their political and public lives and impact their advocacy and activism. They aspire to be role models for the next generation to know their possibilities for raising their voices and obtaining decision making power positions with the potential for policies and change in the interest of underrepresented groups.

- Atractivists/ atractivism: actor + activist/ activism

The individuals termed atractivists attract viewers in with acting careers and celebrity clout but then use their platform to question the institutions, processes, and protocols that gave them this access and following, and become activists for personal causes. Their social media accounts become integral, and their personal lives and public persona become deeply entrenched in their activism. The term atractivism offers a new avenue to identify more accurately a form of activism used in mainstream culture by powerful and popular actors that has adapted to the increased use of internet technology. This form of activism is not radical and does not completely eschew, attack, or topple dominant systems and structures, but rather works within the structures to incrementally change and shift with a hybrid form of mainstream atractivism. It is different from radical forms of activism in that it is particular to the individual and instead of fighting for everyone, they are fighting certain fights pertaining to their experiences. Activism seems to exist in this dichotomy between either falling into the traps of neoliberalism, commodification, and more superficial associations and on the other hand radicalism. Atractivism falls somewhere in the middle: using career, influence, and success as a platform to share

personal stories with the goal of helping the next generation not have to face the same struggles.

- Aesthetivists: aesthetics + activist

The individuals considered to be aesthetivists initially gain a following through their cosmetics, aesthetics, and beauty advertising on YouTube, to earn the right to be heard. Yet, from this place of prominence and over time they often share personal stories about their life experiences and advocate for causes related to them. They turn their platforms into something that goes beyond themselves and advocate for others with similar backgrounds and experiences. They garner attention through their aesthetics and then create a platform that they eventually use to share their personal stories with an audience who is influenced by their lives and actions and are able to either see themselves reflected or are exposed to life experiences that are different from their own. Beauty becomes a platform that they use to garner success to be able to open up and share their personal stories in an attempt to advocate for and help others. Their career is ultimately built around becoming a brand and selling both their stories and products related to themselves. They combine seemingly surface level matters of beauty and cosmetics with personal and often vulnerable expositions of life experiences. Their personal stories become primary sources of relatability in that they allow the individual to draw viewers in to be able to share their experiences.

- Aspirational mirroring

This strategy uses one's place of power to target young people and offer role models to make alternative narratives accessible so that they can both see themselves reflected as

well as potential pathways that may not be otherwise evident from other sources of input in their lives. People who use this strategy create opportunities where young people can see themselves reflected, sometimes for the first time, but also in new ways where their possibilities, which may have seemed limited before, become clearer and broader.

- Career coalitions

Individuals who use career coalitions create networks and connections and use their platform to launch others in their careers so that the cycle continues with exponential growth. They use their influence and power to produce, create, and boost the careers of others who then have the capacity to continue the cycle and alter representation and stereotyping. The individuals in this study form both horizontal career coalitions within their own time period by making connections with other prominent people in their career fields and work together for common causes, but they are also forming inter-generational career coalition cycles of networked career boosts by using their platform to invest in the following generation and initiating or launching them further in their careers and giving them the opportunities to do the same for others. They use their platforms to open the door and bring others like them into their own careers and spheres of influence.

- Story stacking

This strategy is used by the influencers in this study who create a platform or organization to unify individual instances, allowing for a bigger picture idea of particular issues being addressed, increasing the power and legitimacy of each individual's story. An example of this would be the book *American Like Me: Reflections on Life Between Cultures* in which America Ferrera gathers stories from thirty-one other celebrities who share their stories about what it is like to live a life in between cultures. The accumulation

of individual stories allows the reader to understand on a larger scale an American narrative with struggles of identity, belonging, and visibility that is richer in context than each story that stands alone. This dissertation also aims to use this strategy by uniting each individual case study to show a larger scale vision of exclusion, discrimination, and stereotyping common among the experiences of these women as well as the individual strategies that they use that ultimately form a pattern of resistance.

- Fugen (future generation) time-release activism

This term is used to describe the phenomenon that results from the strategies used by the women in this study because of the ways in which they use their platforms to target the next generation. They are forming career coalitions and using aspirational mirroring through their social media connections and the publications of young adult and children's books where their focus is on shaping the minds of the next generation. By investing their time, resources, and stories into the next generation the goal is to bring about fugen (future generation) time-release activism. As a result of the consistent message to the younger generation inspiring them to aspire to power positions or encouraging them to not shy away from or hide their personal experiences and background but rather to embrace them, these women hope that in the future these young girls will continue the work that they have begun and continue the cycle to the next generation. In addition, they hope to alter and increase representation in politics, Hollywood, and YouTube.

One indication of this fugen time-release activism is that there has been a recent explosion of demand for and representation of Latinx individuals in the young adult fiction market, both characters as well as authors. Another example is the case of Gina Rodriguez who garnered success through conventional means by auditioning and earning

her breakout role in *Jane the Virgin* (2014). Since then she has turned her success as an actor into a platform to alter and increase representation in television and film. She has become a producer with the power to create stories that counter stereotypes and inspire the next generation as well as boost the career of a young girl who has the potential to continue the cycle of countering stereotypes and increasing representation. For example, Gina Rodriguez is a producer on the Disney+ series *Diary of a Future President* that offers the possibility/image/idea of a Cuban American girl becoming President of the United States. Not only does this use the strategy of aspirational mirroring by offering this possibility for young girls like her but she also uses career coalitions because she has used her power to cast a young Latina girl, Tess Romero, whose first role counters stereotypes. Tess Romero will have the power to continue these changes in her upcoming career by garnering more roles and influence to then be able to influence the next generation with a similar message about possibilities using her own story and experiences.

Another example of fugen time-release activism has to do with the case of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez who challenged incumbent congressman Joe Crowley in 2018. Since then, there has been speculation about “The AOC Effect” of progressive women challenging moderate Democratic incumbents. The term “AOC Effect” has been used in articles such as Marie Claire and Vox. According to an article from Rutgers Eagleton Institute of Politics on the CAWP page (Center for American Women and Politics) called “Will There Be An AOC Effect in 2020?” there has been an increase in Democratic women candidates for the U.S. House that are challenging incumbents of their own party as well as more Democratic women candidates than Republican women candidates for

the U.S. House that are challenging incumbents. This increase in Democratic women House candidates running as primary challengers is unprecedented in the past three decades. In addition, in *AOC: The Fearless Rise and Powerful Resonance of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez*, Erin Aubry Kaplan argues that there is evidence that AOC is part of a shift toward the acceptance of socialism: “The lack of a living connection to the real fruits of American promise is having consequences, chiefly that an acceptance of socialism is rising among the young. A frequently cited Harvard poll illustrates that young people are embracing democratic socialism more and more, tacking more and more left on practically every issue. AOC is part of this shift” (92). Nathan J. Robinson cites a similar shift toward socialism in this same volume of essays: “The majority of young people today are more sympathetic to socialism than capitalism, and 70 percent say they would vote for a socialist. This turn is remarkable; for many years, the “socialist” label was seen as political suicide” (146). These statistics provide evidence of the impact that AOC is having on the next generation and evidence of what I call fugen time-release activism.

- Neoliberalism

I understand neoliberalism to be characterized by a shift to deregulation, privatization, withdrawal of the state from social aid, with a free-market capital system and marked by a reliance on capital-enhancing, self-reliant, self-governing, autonomous individuals who are valued for their work, entrepreneurialism, and for being productive citizens that contribute to the market economy as discussed by David Harvey in *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (2005). This shift to neoliberal thinking as both an economic system and a social ideology I believe is the underlying force and impetus that has contributed to the

emergence of both post- and popular feminism which have adapted to promote these similar qualities that create a good neoliberal citizen in a free-market capitalist system and has been displayed, solidified, and advanced through the media. The media have allowed the neoliberal agenda of individualism, self-reliance, self-governing, and capital-enhancing autonomy to be internalized into the female body and put on display to the point where girls and women equate visibility and purchasing to power.

- Latina, Latinx

As many critics would suggest, labels and categories that attempt to unify, such as the term Hispanic or Latino/a, encompass a vast group of people that are incredibly heterogenous with different geographic, historical, cultural, and political backgrounds and as Cristina Beltrán underlines in *The Trouble with Unity: Latino Politics and the Creation of Identity* (2010), there is trouble with unity. As Arlene Dávila outlines in *Latinos Inc.: The Marketing and Making of a People* (2001), there was an attempt to unify and categorize a group of people that are extremely diverse in the case of marketing and trying to commodify and sell a brand to consumers as well as in Hollywood with trying to project an image and represent a group of diverse people with stereotypical and homogeneous representations of the ethnically ambiguous, racially flexible, consumable, panethnic woman, for example. According to Cristina Beltrán, Arlene Dávila, G Cristina Mora, and Suzanne Oboler, the term Latinx is an open, in between, in flux and constantly changing term. The Latina body has been used in the media and cultural productions to reflect and create notions of what it means to be not only a woman but a Latina woman and how these ideas and representations of stars in particular as well as advertisements and marketing influence and teach what it means to be Latina to both young girls and

women and like Arlene Dávila says, this marketing and branding actually constitute these labels and terms such as Hispanic, Latino, and Latinx which are open, ambiguous, in-flux and changing. According to Oboler, originally debate over this terminology had a primary focus on the terms Latino/a versus Hispanic. Then there was a shift to where Latino/a was used more widely but in a generalizing way and has been criticized for its homogenizing effects that according to McCracken, “elides historical specificity, ethnic and racial differences, sexual preference, and varying class perspectives into a monolithic conception” (5). The term Latinx has been deployed to address some of these criticisms considering the use of x at the end allows the user to not have to gender the word in binary terms of male and female. However, terms such as Afro-Latinx have emerged to redress the issues of a lack of recognition of race that the term also encompasses.

According to Tanya Katerí Hernández in *Keywords for Latina/o Studies* (2017), “the terms ‘Afro-Latina’ and ‘Afro-Latino’ refer to those Latinas/os in the United States who are of African ancestry and choose blackness as a racial identity in addition to identifying along ethnic lines with their Latina/o national origins. The terms are not exclusive to the United States, as activists of African and the Caribbean have also begun to use them” (5).

According to Frances R. Aparicio, the term can be described as “a site of competing authenticities and paradigms of identity that, together, and in conflict with each other, constitute the heterogeneous experiences of various Latina/o national groups” (113).

Further, Aparicio writes, “it is important to highlight the mobile, nomadic nature of this signifier, for it allows the field and its practitioners to rewrite, transform, and reclaim the term, even if, and precisely because, the signified, its referential content, the Latin American descent population in the United States, is constantly changing” (116). In this

project I use the term Latinx to refer to individuals who live in the United States that identify as having an ethnic background from a Latin American country.

- Influencer

In this project, I use the term influencer to refer to the individuals who have garnered attention and use their celebrity status and social media platforms to influence their followers and viewers. In the case of the individuals in Chapter Two, they garner their celebrity status through their acting careers and then typically turn to social media where they use their celebrity status to influence their followers for activist causes related to their personal experiences. However, for the individuals in Chapter Three, the YouTubers, their online influencing is the means by which they garner attention and develop a celebrity status. Often times, the use of the term influencer in those cases refers to their access to a digital community through YouTube where their followers become the audience that they advertise to and they turn their platform into brand deals and advertising opportunities to get paid online for endorsing products. Once they have obtained a certain level of economic success through using these brand deals, the pattern I emphasize and recognize is that they then turn their attention and focus on activism and advocacy for causes related to their personal experiences.

- Digital ethnography

In *Digital Ethnography: Principles and Practice* (2016), Sarah Pink, Heather Horst, John Postill, Larissa Hjorth, Tania Lewis, and Jo Tacchi define ethnography as “iterative-inductive research (that evolves in design through the study), drawing on a family of methods...that acknowledges the role of theory as well as the researcher’s own role and

that views humans as part object/part subject” (3). However, in terms of digital ethnography, contact with participants is often mediated as opposed to direct. Sociologist Dhiraj Murthy describes digital ethnography as being “centered on data-gathering methods [that] are mediated by computer-mediated communication” (5). The authors further offer examples of what might be included in digital ethnography such as “in conversation with people throughout their everyday lives. We might be watching what people do by digitally tracking them or asking them to invite us into their social media practices. Listening may involve reading, or it might involve sensing and communicating in other ways. Ethnographic writing might be replaced by video, photography, or blogging” (3). As a result, this project uses digital ethnography in the study of the individuals by viewing them as part object/part subject through mediated rather than direct contact where data is gathered through computer-mediated communication such as observing the everyday lives of the individuals through their social media, photographs, videos, and YouTube vlogs. This analysis helps us understand how individual women use social media as well as the examples that come together from the sum of the individual instances to see the broader context and question why they use social media in this way, ultimately outlining the pattern of using social media and YouTube for representation activism and targeting the next generation.

Common Strategies

- Gain access to politics, Hollywood, YouTube through conventional means (elections, auditioning, beauty advertising)
- Garner an audience through success and accomplishments
- Share personal stories that are often painful because they do not fit the mainstream mold (through autobiographical accounts)
- Go through a metamorphosis and second public life

- Use platform for activism and to advocate for others like them (especially focusing on future generations)

Despite their wide-ranging backgrounds, historical contexts, and interests, these influential women coincide in projecting their voices through digital and social media in an era of neoliberal politics that legitimize first-person activism. This analysis over many case studies reveals similarities in their approaches and activism in the current cultural moment where Latin/x American identity and representation are integral components of their advocacy and personal stories, experiences, and first-person accounts through digital and social media become the means by which they raise their voices in an era of neoliberal politics. A pattern emerges where an individual gains access to these structured spaces (political positions, Hollywood, YouTube) through conventional means required of the institutions (being elected, auditioning for roles, using beauty advertising). Within these confines, they obtain a foothold and earn an audience through their success and accomplishments. However, their stories do not end there. They go through a metamorphosis and enter a second public life that is less conventional and more vulnerable and intimate. Once they have gained attention and a following, they then choose to share their personal stories, which are often used as tools for activism and to advocate for change. The entry point for securing access may be more superficial through achievements, fame, or beauty to become mainstreamed and garner support. It might be tempting to write them off at this point where identity appears to have been sacrificed for success or obfuscated by their careers, yet the personal narratives told from a first-person perspective attempt to combat this loss of identity and background, advocate for changes that will help others not have to make these sacrifices and make these opportunities more accessible to others like them.

Method

The genesis of this project stemmed from an interest in autobiographies and YouTube vlogging and the way in which Latin/x Americans share their stories and garner influence. I began by searching for autobiographies written by Latinxs and I discovered a trend in the use of this medium by prominent and famous figures, many of whom were actors or celebrities. As a result, the primary questions that I wanted to investigate became: Why are these famous women choosing to publish autobiographies and share their stories? Who is their intended audience? What is the message they are sending to this audience? Why are they sending it? What underlying forces are causing them to feel the need to write these autobiographies and send this message? I was not solely interested in their careers; in fact, I often read their autobiographies before investigating their roles or the reasons they were famous. As I began reading their first-person accounts, I started noticing patterns and undertones of advocacy resulting from their personal experiences. In the era of social networking sites, when one wants to know more about a person, investigating their social media accounts provides valuable insight into their lives and self-representation. Therefore, a vital component of the case studies entails the use of the women's social media in which the undertones of advocacy became more prominent and vocalized, solidifying an aspect of their public persona as an activist.

I noticed that many of the famous Latin/x American women who had written autobiographies or focused on first-person storytelling fell into categories based on their careers; as a result, I decided to structure my project by grouping the women and dividing the chapters based on their sphere of influence such as politics, acting, and YouTube. In order to increase the volume of voices, I searched for other famous Latin/x American

women who were using similar strategies in order to develop my criteria for the choice of subjects. Oftentimes, I googled lists of most popular Latin/x American politicians, actors, and YouTubers or most popular autobiographies by Latin/x American politicians, actors, and YouTubers and chose the individuals at the top of the lists or the ones who were the most prominent or famous for their careers and categories. From there, I further narrowed down my choices using the criteria of the patterns that emerged among the most popular individuals such as: they garner a celebrity status, write an autobiography or proliferate some sort of first-person account, use social media for movements and advocacy, and target a youth audience. It should be noted that the choice of women who are at the center of mainstream media and the tops of these google lists has resulted in a particular representation of *Latinidad*, skewed more towards brownness or lighter-skinned individuals, that does not fully encompass the racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity that the term should represent. This is symptomatic of a larger issue in the associations of *Latinidad* with a white skew and erasure of Black or Indigenous Latinxs, for example.

Each case study took shape by researching and identifying the ways in which the women coincide in their strategies and patterns that became evident as the volume of examples increased. The purpose of each case study is to gather various sources of first-person accounts, from autobiographies to interviews to social media accounts, to understand the social persona of these celebrity Latin/x American actors and how that is related to activism. The focus is not fully on their acting careers and roles, but rather on the public personae they cultivate due to the platform they build resulting from their work. The case studies are combined and divided into sections signaled by sub-headings that indicate the common patterns and strategies outlined in the introduction. Overall,

these individuals were chosen in order to show the contributions, similarities, and differences of the strategies of various groupings of women attempting to combat a common and pervasive issue across generations and geographic and cultural borders.

The various groupings of politicians, actors, and YouTubers show parallels that exist in their strategies to fight against stereotyping and alter representation. I draw out the ways in which their strategies overlap as well as build on one another which is why many of the case studies have similar headings and many repetitions can be noticed.

What can be observed as the volume of case studies and voices increases is an intermediary form of activism in this common struggle where the politicians, actors, and YouTubers draw an audience in using their celebrity clout to then turn their platform into activism to influence the next generation and form coalitions to help others like themselves struggling with similar challenges. The chapters characterize this intermediary form of activism through individual examples that are grouped in ways that show similar strategies being used repeatedly by different generations in different geographical locations to identify a current phenomenon so that it can lay the groundwork for the study of future generations of Latin/x Americans who will build off and continue this form of activism that combines dissent with success used by the women in this investigation or alter it as new strategies and ideas emerge to combat underrepresentation and misrepresentation.

Common Patterns

- Autobiography + personal stories
- Activism
- Targeting the next generation + aspirational mirroring
- Be yourself message
- Social media + celebrity status

The following chapters will consist of case studies in which I analyze women from different spheres of influence and outline these common strategies that exist in each case. What becomes evident through the comparison of their stories and story stacking is not just that they use similar strategies, but there are also common patterns in their pathways from successful careers to sharing personal stories to advocating for change in future generations. These patterns form the structure for this analysis.

- **Autobiography + Personal Stories**

One pattern evidenced by the combination of all of the case studies is the use of autobiographies and sharing of personal stories. These women initially garner attention and access mainstream popularity through conventional means. Their debut and first public life appear more conformist in order to gain success. However, once they have a platform and following, they tend to go through a metamorphosis and enter a second public life in which they feel they have the freedom and financial and career stability to open up about their personal experiences and backgrounds. In most cases, the women choose to publish an autobiography once they have achieved success in their given sphere of influence. What becomes evident in the analysis of their autobiographies is that the primary focus is not on their careers or success but rather their life experiences and backgrounds. They do not shy away from sharing painful stories of their experiences being othered, stereotyped, left out, and discriminated against. A common characteristic of their autobiographical storytelling is describing some way in which they faced and overcame challenging circumstances. Their personal stories help them relate to their audiences and as a result they garner legitimacy as they turn their experiences into platforms for activism. Even if the women do not choose to publish an autobiography in a

formal capacity, in each case, first-person accounts and stories become integral to their public persona as over time the barrier between the public and personal breaks down whether that is in book format, on YouTube, or on social media.

- **Rita Moreno-** *Rita Moreno: A Memoir* (2013)
- **Sonia Sotomayor-** *My Beloved Word* (2013)
- **Jennifer Lopez-** *True Love* (2014)
- **America Ferrera-** *American Like Me: Reflections on Life Between Cultures* (2018)
- **Diane Guerrero-** *In the Country We Love* (2016)
- **Daniela Vega-** *Rebeldía, Resistencia, Amor* (2019)
- **Lele Pons-** *Surviving High School* (2016)
- **Dulce Candy-** *The Sweet Life: Find Passion, Embrace Fear, and Create Success on Your Own Terms* (2015)
- **Bethany Mota-** *Make Your Mind Up: My Guide to Finding Your Own Style, Life, and Motivation!* (2017)
- **Yuya-** *Los secretos de Yuya* (2014), *Las confesiones de Yuya* (2015)
- **Activism**

Another common thread among the patterns in the stories of the women in this project is that once they have garnered success and attention in their careers and have started opening up and sharing more about their personal backgrounds and challenging experiences, they then use those experiences to become activists for change so that others do not face similar challenges that they faced. In this dissertation, the compilation of case studies demonstrates an intermediary form of activism that is often digital and which

neither fully embraces nor completely rejects mainstream neoliberal culture, but rather exists somewhere in the middle, through an infiltration of industries to work from within, combining dissent with success.

- **Targeting the next generation + aspirational mirroring**

An important aspect and common trend among the case studies is that their target audience is young people, especially young girls. In the majority of the case studies, the women decide to publish autobiographies, but in addition to their autobiographies, many women also choose to publish a book with children or young adults as an audience. Through the analysis of these cases studies, it becomes clear that their intention in their activism is not necessarily to change minds, but rather to shape minds and the next generation. The women turn themselves into role models and use a strategy that I call aspirational mirroring in which they offer their own stories as an example to allow young people of similar backgrounds to see themselves reflected in some way while simultaneously offering possibilities for their future that they may not have been able to imagine before.

- **Dolores Huerta-** *Dolores Huerta: A Hero to Migrant Workers* (2012) by Sarah Warren and Robert Casilla, *Side by Side/ Lado al lado* (2020) by Monica Brown and Joe Cepeda
- **Sonia Sotomayor-** Young adult autobiography: *The Beloved World of Sonia Sotomayor* (2017), Children's books: *Turning Pages: My Life Story* (2018), *Just Ask! Be Different, Be Brave, Be You* (2019), *Just Help! How to Build a Better World* (2022)
- **Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez-** *The ABCs of AOC* (2019) by Jamia Wilson

- **Rita Moreno-** *A Girl Named Rosita: The Story of Rita Moreno* (2020) by Anika Aldamuy Denise
- **Diane Guerrero-** Young adult autobiography: *My Family Divided: One Girl's Journey of Home, Loss, and Hope* (2018)
- **Lele Pons-** *Surviving High School* (2016)
- **Dulce Candy-** *The Sweet Life: Find Passion, Embrace Fear, and Create Success on Your Own Terms* (2015)
- **Bethany Mota-** *Make Your Mind Up: My Guide to Finding Your Own Style, Life, and Motivation!* (2017)
- **Yuya-** *Los secretos de Yuya* (2014), *Las confesiones de Yuya* (2015)
- **Be yourself message**

Another commonality among the case studies is that in most cases the women are sending a similar message through their social media, YouTube channels, autobiographies, and children's books. The message they are imparting to both their followers and especially to young girls in the next generation is this message of 'be yourself.' The message can appear in various formats, but it has similar intentions throughout each case. I argue that this message can be seen as a way in which the women are trying to inform the next generation about their epistemic advantage and encouraging them to use it. The women offer their own stories as examples, attributing their identities and backgrounds to their success and urging young girls to do the same instead of eschewing or rejecting aspects of themselves that do not fit into mainstream culture. The fact that this is a recurring message among the women also signals that there are underlying forces that pressure these girls and women to not feel like they are able to be themselves in the first place.

- **Social media + celebrity status**

A universal on-ramp for the women in this project to be able to share their stories and use their platform for activism is through garnering celebrity status and using social media. For many of the women, over time, a major function of their social media accounts is for activism. For this reason, in many of the case studies, Instagram and social media posts and accounts are used to explain the ways in which the women share personal stories and advocate for various causes.

Repetitions and Resonances

Overall, throughout the following chapters, these key terms, common strategies, and common patterns will be fleshed out as the examples and stories stack together. What can be observed through the story stacking is the repetitions and resonances throughout the different case studies. The repetitions reinforce the overall, bigger picture patterns that emerge from these women from various careers who coincide in their strategies to combat a lack of representation, stereotyping, discrimination, and misrepresentation. Their target audience of the younger generation will pick up on these patterns either directly or subconsciously and will adopt and alter these strategies in the generations to come.

Latin/x American Women's Digital First-Person Activism

With one tweet she started a movement. This statement could be said of multiple women in various places around the world. However, the scope of this project considers the strategies of Latinx and Latin American women who have used their voices and influence in the media to break barriers and advocate for change for others. For example, Marcela Ojeda, an Argentine radio journalist, initiated an enduring global movement called Ni Una Menos (Not One Less) when she tweeted her call to action in 2015: “Actrices, políticas, artistas, empresarias, referentes sociales...mujeres, todas, bah...no vamos a levantar la voz? NOS ESTAN MATANDO.” (Actresses, politicians, artists, businesswomen, social referents, women, everyone, bah...are we not going to lift up our voice? THEY ARE KILLING US; Terzian 1). As a result of this message, which was a response to the murder of a young pregnant girl named Chiara Páez, other female journalists and academics united their voices in this fight against gender-based violence with protests, marches and a nationally recognized social media movement using the hashtag #NiUnaMenos.

This social justice movement, initiated on social media and through hashtags, is not the only one of its kind. Similarly, in the United States, women have taken hold of a social media movement against sexual harassment and assault after Tarana Burke, a civil rights activist from the Bronx, used Myspace in 2006 as a platform to open a conversation about the pervasiveness of sexual abuse using the hashtag #MeToo which brought about an onslaught of other voices with similar experiences to help women know they are not alone in 2014 when actress Alyssa Milano used it on Twitter to ask other women who have experienced sexual assault or harassment to reply with “me too” to give

the world an idea of the magnitude of this issue. This “Me Too” movement has spread to different countries with various iterations that combine with the same goal of making women’s voices heard and bringing to light an issue. For example, according to a *New York Times* article, in Mexico in 2019, a young activist named Ana González initiated what they called a “#MeToo avalanche” when she tweeted about the abuse of 10 women. Following this, many other women reported additional examples of mistreatment with hashtags like #MeTooEscritores, #MeTooCine, #MeTooAcademicosMexicanos and #YoTeCreo. In the United States, Latinx women have also used various hashtags to bring awareness to issues revolving around Latinx identity, representation in film, policy issues, and politics such as #EmbracetheLatinx, #LaGenteUnida, #iwillharness, #latinxhouse, all of which have the goal of changing and expanding opportunities and inclusion. The Ni Una Menos movement (which means “Not One Less”) represents a Latin American based grassroots feminist movement that originated in Argentina but spread across many other Latin American countries with a focus on gender-based violence, particularly machista violence as described by the Ni Una Menos official website. This movement that protests issues such as gender roles, sexual harassment, sex workers’ rights, transgender rights, sexual objectification, and the legality of abortion received national recognition through the use of the hashtag on social media. This resulted in the unification of voices that culminated in demonstrations in various countries such as Argentina, Uruguay, Peru, and Chile. These demonstrations concur every year on June 3 since 2015.

These grass roots movements start out with one woman speaking out, but what ignites these responses, followings, and activism is the use of media which provides a

platform for these voices, their stories to be heard, and for other women to join. Women's voices are growing louder, and social media enables the projection of these stories. However, this platform has not always existed. Historically, women have reported feeling left out, invisible and excluded from areas such as politics, the job market, and other spheres of public life traditionally dominated by men. For example, according to Mary Talbot in *Language and Gender* (1998), "daring to address the public—whether orally or in writing—was damaging to a woman's reputation for many centuries" and as a result, "being forced to remain silent, to have no public voice, is like being invisible" (105). This feeling of invisibility is not only well evidenced in the frustrations of women but also in the writings and expressions of marginalized groups of people who are othered by a dominant culture and excluded from certain public spaces not originally created with them in mind. Despite this culturally created dichotomy placing women in the private sphere and men in the public, women have consistently sought and fought for inclusion in spaces that were not originally created for them and in the process have broken barriers and made history using various tactics providing a model for other excluded groups.

Several scholars have analyzed this link that exists and has emerged of women using media for activism and to further feminist causes. In *Feminist Media: Participatory Spaces, Networks and Cultural Citizenship* (2012), this collection of essays edited by Elke Zobl and Ricarda Drüeke looks at the ways in which women have used media as strategies of inclusion signaling the importance of alternative media that challenges social orders, creates participatory spaces, cultivates cultural citizenship and bolsters social justice change. In particular, Sigrid Kannengießler highlights the importance of storytelling for empowerment, which I also see as a key component to activism in the

examples of this work. Although these authors look at the tie between media and activism for women, this is a precursor to the way in which this same strategy has expanded and strengthened with the use of social media. Additionally, Stefanie Grünangerl highlights the difficulties that result from this strategy of inclusion in that it is hard to create a participatory culture and there is often a lack of resources. The advantage of the cases in this project, though, is that the women initially achieve success in their careers or other areas of their lives which garner this audience and financial security first so that this is not an obstacle to their activism. Overall, these scholars show that a trend exists where women use feminist media production with the purpose of social change throughout the world.

It is clear that media serves as a platform that women use to make their voices heard and it provides a way for collecting these stories to amplify them. In fact, Melissa Benn, Ealasaid Munro, and Ragnar Jónsson have all theorized a fourth wave of feminism that has gone digital. The popularity of social media and its prevalence has furthered the power of women's voices and activist causes on the internet and a main area where this has emerged is a response of women to sexism and gender violence. Various studies have already surfaced to analyze women's "fourth wave" use of social media to fight against this abuse. For example, *Digital Feminist Activism: Girls and Women Fight Back against Rape Culture* (2019) looks at the complexities and challenges of using social media as a platform for this topic from the point of view of the women and girls who use it. From this idea studies about hashtag feminism (Berridge and Portwood-Stacer, 2015; Dixon, 2014; Horeck, 2014; Clark, 2014) have developed which mainly tie the social media platform to women talking about gender abuse and sexism. In "Hashtagging Girlhood:

#IAmMalala, #BringBackOurGirls and Gendering Representations of Global Politics” (2016), Helen Berents looks at the use of hashtags by girls to protest violence against women in Pakistan and Nigeria. “#MeToo and the Promise and Pitfalls of Challenging Rape Culture through Digital Feminist Activism” (2018) explores how the #MeToo movement exploded the already building trend of women using social media to create dialogue about issues surrounding sexism, rape culture, and violence.

Initially, a common, unifying concern that began the strategy of using social media and hashtag activism was the fight against gender violence and abuse with, for example, the #MeToo movement and the various iterations that followed. This can also be seen in the case of the protest that went viral called “Un violador en tu camino” in Chile where a feminist art collective named “LasTesis” used the performance of this song to teach about taking the blame away from women who have been sexually abused to question the structures and the systems of their countries; the accessibility of this message was amplified by the song’s going viral on international social media.

As a result, women around the world from Peru to France to England to India also put on blindfolds to perform this song and protest. This is a collective issue common to women of all cultures, ethnicities, and backgrounds, but once this method was established, a similar strategy was then used in more specific ways in which certain groups of people combined their voices using hashtags and movements bringing to light issues relevant to their experiences. This strategy reflects what Patricia Hill Collins discusses in the book *Black Feminist Thought* (1990) where the key to survival (in this case for Black women) is unifying individual instances of everyday consciousness into a collective group standpoint that is self-defined and not imposed. According to Larisa

Mann in “What Can Feminism Learn from New Media?” (2014), and other scholars (Martin and Valenti, Clark, Kendall, Okolosie, Zandt), social media has become an important platform for women of color to unify these individual instances. For example, in the case of Latinx people in the United States, a prominent issue is the lack of representation in television, film, and politics. As a result, this group of individuals with common experiences banded together to create social media movements to advocate for these causes.

With this new terrain of women using media for activism, studies have emerged that look into the effectiveness of this strategy. For example, Mary Joyce’s book *Digital Activism Decoded: The New Mechanics of Change* (2010), aggregates the voices of many scholars who are both optimistic and pessimistic about the utility of this form of activism stating that a cause cannot completely function online (Ganz), it’s difficult to measure the results of these campaigns (Karpf), or it will not bring a radical break from the past or radical change (Nielsen). Malcolm Gladwell uses the term “clicktivism” to criticize social media activism as an ineffective form that creates “weak ties” in the article “Small Change: Why the Revolution Will Not be Tweeted” (2010). Paolo Gerbaudo also posits similar questions about the effectiveness of social media in *Tweets and the Streets: Social Media and Contemporary Activism* (2012) and concludes that these activists become “soft leaders” that set the scene for action. Other scholars also recognize the complication that consumerism and sales tied to activism brings to feminist goals (Stampler, 2013; Kelly, 2014). Primarily, critics question its effectiveness and look at it in terms of whether these movements will result in action. As opposed to action, however, the main concern in this project and for the female activists in this study is not solely whether

followers will act, but rather if they will be moved to feel and empathize. Their aim is not necessarily to change minds, but rather to shape the minds of the next generation.

Historically, Latin/x American writings and expression have embodied the feeling of invisibility, misunderstanding, and misrepresentation and attempts at visibility have either resulted in a dismissal, stereotyping, or a loss of identity. Similar to what Kimberlé Crenshaw describes in “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color” (1991) with political intersectionality where overlapping experiences can result in double subordination with, for example, women of color feeling marginalized by both feminist and antiracist politics, Latin/x American women, in particular, have articulated a double challenge of feeling misunderstood, omitted, and stereotyped (particularly in the attribution of body type and physical appearance) in mainstream media as well as fighting for inclusion in male-dominated Latin/x American movements. The result of these feelings reflects what Gloria Anzaldúa articulates in *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987) of existing in between two spaces, not belonging anywhere, and feeling invisible. These feeling of misrepresentation and the fight for visibility are not new. Yet what this project is interested in is what these women are actually saying, why they are saying it, and how they are saying it through autobiography and first-person accounts in this current neoliberal cultural moment.

In the past thirty years, there have been perceived booms of representation in politics, television, and film. In fact, Latin/x American women have more roles and representation on screen than men, which is a shift from the previous decades, and in Latin America, there are multiple instances of women presidents, which is unprecedented. However, many critics are wary of celebrating these surges because they

argue that increased presence does not equate to true representation (Dávila, Báez, Beltrán), but rather homogenizes a diverse group of people in a way that dismisses difference (Beltrán, Dávila, Molina-Guzmán, Mora, Valdivia) and they assert that access to mainstream audiences requires a sacrifice of identity (race, history, background). Some scholars have recognized this loss of identity due to mainstream entrance and have articulated possible avenues for change, identifying the internet and digital media as powerful tools for bolstering communities and opportunities for control over self-representation (Negrón-Muntaner). Digital platforms have great potential to address these issues with self-representation yet mainly have been used as the source of a type of feminist activism that aggregates voices through hashtag movements to raise awareness of sexism and violence to further feminist causes (Berents, Gunn, Jackson, Joyce, Kendall). Although the initial impetus for these social media movements was in response to gender violence and abuse against women, and media activism and the surrounding scholarship has largely been identified and defined by this issue, this particular topic does not encompass all of the potential for social media activism.

In this project, I will look at the strategies that women's movements writ large have used to make their voices heard and enter male-dominated spaces and I analyze how Latinx and Latin American women share these tactics to access mainstream and public spheres not traditionally designed for them (politics, Hollywood, YouTube). Similar to the #NiUnaMenos and #MeToo movements, this strategy uses media and public discourses to amplify voices, but my project focuses on the lives and stories of a certain group of influential women and the ways in which they not only garner this power but use it for personal causes. What is important to note about that initial incendiary tweet by

Ojeda is the group of people she directly calls out: “Actrices, políticas, artistas, empresarias, referentes sociales...mujeres, todas...” (Actresses, politicians, artists, businesswomen, social referents...women, everyone...; Terzian 1). Why is it that she chooses to address this group? Similarly, with the #MeToo movement, actress Alyssa Milano ignited the response in 2014 of a movement that had been created 10 years prior. In this project, I have chosen to look at female politicians, actresses, and YouTube influencers who, I argue, are using the attention they gain through these careers to advocate for the amplification of other voices like theirs. A pattern emerges amongst these women and between these hemispheres where they gain attention through careers in politics, acting, and YouTubing. From this place of power and influence, the Latin/x American women who have previously been left out and excluded from these mainstream spheres then choose to share their personal stories and first-person accounts in order to advocate for opportunities of other women and marginalized groups like them, creating a type of activism that hinges on identity and access to an audience (oftentimes digitally connected). Expanding the successful tactics used in the gender violence movements to other issues allows for a broader understanding of the potential for social media activism.

Situated Knowledge, Epistemic Advantage, *La Facultad*

According to Donna Haraway in “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective” (1988), “the only way to find a larger vision is to be somewhere in particular” (590). In this work Haraway discusses situated knowledges and asserts that greater objectivity is the result of acknowledging one’s own position. This discussion stems from Marxist theory of the proletariat worker in which Marx argued that the worker had a different vantage point that allowed a greater

understanding; yet the discussion on standpoint theory and situated knowledges deepens the argument in the direction of women showing how the Marxist idea of production does not take into account the reproduction of women. Haraway pushes for a feminist objectivity so that knowledge is embodied, situated, locatable, and accountable, therefore giving a more reliable view of the world. From this point of departure, Sandra Harding discusses standpoint theory in “Rethinking Standpoint Theory: What is Strong Objectivity?” (1993) and the ways in which objectivity is actually maximized through one’s situatedness because knowledge is socially situated, and some locations (marginalized) are better starting points. In a similar vein, both Patricia Hill Collins in “Defining Black Feminist Thought” (1990) and Uma Narayan in “The Project of Feminist Epistemology: Perspectives from a Nonwestern Feminist” (1989) expand on this idea of situatedness and identify other vantage points that differ based on race and ethnicity as well as gender. For example, Hill Collins pushes for a shift from an Anglocentric to Afrocentric worldview in articulating Black feminist thought in order to express Black women’s standpoint and Narayan critiques Anglocentric and Western feminisms for overlooking the perspectives of non-westerners. What is portrayed through this discussion and later analyzed by Sara Ahmed in *Living a Feminist Life* (2017), is the role of the body and the ways in which a person’s particular standpoint, position, experiences, and body enable them to see the world in a certain way which contributes to a greater understanding of the full picture.

As a result, this positioning and standpoint offer what Narayan describes as “epistemic advantage” in which those members of a *dominated* group have knowledge of the *dominant* group which allows them greater insight and ability to critique and navigate

two worlds. Yet our bodies and our standpoints can also limit us when, for example, living between two worlds creates confusion and rootlessness or when those who are in the dominant group have set up and organized the world in a way that certain bodies have easier access and maneuverability. Haraway makes clear that situated knowledges pushes for a feminist objectivity that has to function in opposition to a Man and White ideal of objectivity. Similarly, Narayan identifies a common trap of Westerners falling into the erroneous thinking that standpoints are universally valid. Therefore, it is necessary to recognize both the advantages and limitations of a particular standpoint as well as the dominant forces that are operating which define these parameters. What becomes clear is that a particular standpoint allows a person the ability to ask certain questions that someone with another standpoint would not have the capability to ask and it is from here that this project emerges.

Autobiography

The key to my analysis is autobiographical accounts in which I analyze the discourse that the women use to describe themselves; therefore, they bring back to the forefront aspects of themselves that are often undermined for mainstream entrance such as background, history, race, economic status, clearly situating themselves and their experiences and offering embodied knowledge that is locatable. In this way, their personal stories become fodder to legitimize their activism and their fight for representation, calling out the perceived universal perspective of the White Man which does not portray their lived experiences. As Narayan discusses, these women have an “epistemic advantage” in that their vantage point and experiences allow them insight into not only their own positioning but also the inner workings of the dominant group which

increases their ability to critique and navigate it. They learn the rules of the game in order to later subvert them. As Sara Ahmed would add, “feminism is sensational” (21) and the body is important in this discussion so that ordinary, everyday things that are automatic and do not always enter the conscious level become important and essential. These personal details become a theoretical tool to elicit the “clicking moment” for the audience to understand another person’s experiences. In the same way, this is the role that the autobiographical accounts play in this analysis. The ordinary, everyday items of these women’s stories become tools for their activism. What becomes evident in the autobiographical stories is the commonalities of talking about their backgrounds and the discrimination or stereotyping they faced in the past and overcoming these challenges to reach a place of success and prominence so that they can send a message to the younger generation about ‘being yourself.’

“Be Yourself” Message

This recurring theme of ‘be yourself’ may seem innocuous and even banal to someone whose identity is in line with the dominant, perceived universal experience of whiteness operating in the United States. However, beneath the surface, this message has a completely different meaning depending on one’s standpoint. For some, this phrase is a polite gesture of encouragement, yet for others, ‘being yourself’ entails a plethora of complicated possible meanings and associations related to ethnicity, race, politics, sexuality, or cultural identity. This ambiguous mandate to ‘be yourself’ underlies the barriers to self-expression, cultural citizenship, and political participation for Latin/x American girls and women receiving neoliberal messages about independence, autonomy, empowerment, work, and economic contribution. According to Donna

Haraway in discussing standpoint theory and situated knowledges, one's body provides a certain way to see the world and through sharing stories and listening to each other, different ways to see and perceive the world become evident. The fact that the influential women in my study, from various spheres of influence (politics, Hollywood, YouTube), are all sending a similar message about 'being yourself,' signals an underlying problem of cultural and structural forces that pressure her to sacrifice or change to fit in or be successful. This expression is a symptom that elicits the questions of why they are sending this message, to whom, and who/what is telling them not to be themselves in the first place. These are questions that only their standpoint allows them to ask. Investigating the context from which they are operating and the forces which they are fighting against is necessary for understanding the way that they operate within the current cultural moment and the strategies they use for resistance.

Activism

Some existent scholarship analyzes Latin/x American celebrities, representation, and stereotypes (Báez, Beltrán, Dávila, Noriega), studies Latina women in the media (Báez, Molina-Guzmán, Valdivia), examines celebrities and (commodity) activism (Mukherjee and Banet-Weiser, Zeisler), and even investigates Latina celebrity activism (Banet-Weiser). Ultimately, these studies critique the commodification and obfuscation of feminist causes by celebrities and question whether this mainstream advocacy can be considered feminist activism or even activism at all. In my project, which offers case studies of both Latin American and US Latinx women, using discourse and textual analysis, and digital ethnography of autobiographies, interviews, and YouTube videos, I

study women who have propelled themselves to the center of mainstream culture and from this platform of influence use it for activism.

At this point, many scholars write this kind of activism off as falling short of structural change or radical impact because they do not always break entirely with mainstream or neoliberal structures. The entry point for securing access may be more superficial through achievements, fame, or beauty to garner support, which might result in the dismissal of their activism as being less serious, scholarly, or important because background appears to be sacrificed for success or obfuscated by their careers, yet the key to my analysis is the use of autobiography and first-person narratives which highlight background history in order to legitimize their activism to alter the requirements for entry and prevent the cycle of sacrifice and lack of representation from continuing in the future. What is missed in this dismissal is that although they may not be directly toppling neoliberal power structures, they work within the systems to sometimes exploit, subvert, and challenge them with their personal stories targeting the younger generation in order to influence these systems and structures in the future. What their standpoint allows one to ask and what I want to analyze is why is ‘be yourself’ their message? What does ‘be yourself’ mean? Where does the need to say ‘be yourself’ come from? Who/what is telling them not to be themselves in the first place?

Intermediary Form of Activism

Similar to Gloria Anzaldúa in *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987) she describes existing in an in-between state, straddling multiple cultures, yet not belonging to any. The result is an erasure because there was no space for her experiences in a binaristic system. In response, her strategy of resistance is to offer a new culture, a new form of self-

identification, an alternative option, a new home, new strategies to call out, identify, and resist white supremacy and heteropatriarchy: the new *mestiza*. For the women in this project, they exist between a dichotomy of activism that is either completely for neoliberal culture or completely resistant to it. In reality, these women exist in between. For this reason, they are often criticized or dismissed. Yet, I argue that like Anzaldúa, they create a new space that is in between these two binary options because they work within neoliberalism but fight against it using the power they garner from their influence and success, and they attempt to shift categories from within and offer counter-narratives. They learn the rules of the game to be able to access and participate, become successful and possess cultural power, and then use their status to subvert, thwart, and advocate for change. Their standpoint offers them an “epistemic advantage” as Narayan would say or “la facultad” as Anzaldúa would describe in the way that they are able to recognize and sense subtle parts of different worlds since they have access to and participate in them all. These women’s assertion to ‘be yourself’ can be seen as a response and resistance to this neoliberal message which seeks to perpetuate itself through hierarchy and competition. By sending this message these women attempt to break this perpetuation and their message to ‘be yourself’ is a way of telling the next generation about their “epistemic advantage” and offering advice for how to cultivate it. Instead of seeing their background as a hindrance, these women provide young girls with ideas and possibilities and assert that their identity is what actually propelled them to success. In this way, their autobiographies, social media, and activism become an integral part in providing their followers and audience with ways to navigate a white male-dominated neoliberal cultural system that is not designed to propel them to success but which their standpoints and

situated knowledge give them access to. Yet on the other hand, this advantage and access also has its limitations because their positionality and their bodies still limit what they are able to achieve.

Neoliberalism and Horizontal Hierarchies

This message to ‘be yourself’ does not materialize from nowhere, but rather is the result of the accumulation of lived experiences that become connected in order to see the pervasiveness of neoliberalism operating beneath the surface. According to David Harvey in *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (2005) a few key players such as Deng Xiaoping, Paul Volcker, Margaret Thatcher, and Ronald Reagan in the 1970s-1980s dramatically transformed and revolutionized social and economic systems through neoliberalism, “a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade” (2). This shift toward deregulation, privatization, and withdrawal of the state from social aid with a free-market capital system not only affects economic facets but also has cultural implications and influences virtually every aspect of life. For example, it is marked by a reliance on individuals who are autonomous, self-reliant, self-governing, self-disciplining, competitive, capital-enhancing agents who are valued for their work, entrepreneurialism, and for being productive citizens that contribute to the market economy. More specifically, many theorists in the field of Gender and Women’s studies investigate the impact of neoliberalism on women and have articulated various forms of feminism such as post- (Gill, Butler, Dosekun, Shields Dobson), popular (Banet-Weiser, Zobl & Drueke, Favaro), neoliberal (Rottenberg), and marketplace (Zeisler). They

describe how neoliberal ideology affects the ways in which women strive to present and characterize themselves in order to fulfill the qualities of the ideal citizen by becoming confident, strong, capable, fun-loving, empowered, hardworking, and with the “freedom” to choose.

As a result, the neoliberal agenda of individualism and capital enhancing autonomy becomes internalized into the female body and put on display in the media to the point where girls and women equate visibility to purchasing power. Therefore, the goal is not social change or equality, but rather solving the problem of women being left out and having low self-confidence by telling them to be a good neoliberal citizen and overcome these feelings and judgments without questioning or challenging the structures or systems that made her feel self-conscious or oppressed in the first place. It is not disruptive to capitalism or mainstream politics and serves neoliberalism, being driven by empowering women to become a better economic subject able to govern herself with a can-do, entrepreneurial spirit of gumption and resilience and where her goods are self-esteem, confidence, and competence. For the women in my study, they are not free from the pervasiveness of neoliberalism and these ideologies and are also operating within this system and structure, striving to fulfill the characteristics and requirements of a good neoliberal citizen producer; however, the dominant narrative and the structures of power are set up in a way so that certain people are propelled to success and others are hindered, making her feel like she has to be someone else in order to succeed. The women in this study are aware of these powers and structures and the requirements for success. They are able to navigate multiple worlds and often play by the rules to access their careers. Yet, once they have garnered success they share their personal stories and background

experiences, offering counternarratives and increased, diverse representation. They then send a ‘be yourself’ message attempting to clue the next generation into their epistemic advantage and encourage them to not follow the same cycle or make the same identity sacrifices they made to gain access. They attempt to alter the rules by moving into production roles or forming career coalitions to bolster the careers of others. What Mikki Kendall makes clear in her book *Hood Feminism* (2013) is how mainstream feminism falls short in representing women who are not white, cis gendered, middle class, heterosexual and for that reason she introduces “hood feminism” and pushes for activism that meets basic needs and makes hunger and racism a feminist issue because these problems represent the struggles of her own community.

The emergence of “hood feminism” is one example that results from the influence of neoliberalism as an economic system that creates and maintains hierarchical power structures which preference and propel certain people while marginalizing others and this filters down into other sectors of life and culture, resulting in a need for these othered groups of people to band together and resist or create new spaces for themselves. However, what often happens as a result of these dominant neoliberal structures which revolve around competition and independence, and which propel certain people while marginalizing others is that the “othered” groups then compete with one another for what is perceived as limited resources and this creates horizontal hierarches and division between groups, ultimately diverting attention and fight away from the common oppressive structures. According to Michael Omi and Howard Winant in “The Theory of Racial Formation” (2014), race is what they call a ‘master category’ and becomes a way of “making people” in order to shape aspects of culture and life through categorization.

They argue that it is neither an illusion nor rooted in nature but is an unstable concept with real social consequences and whose meaning is constantly being transformed. Race then becomes the basis for ascribing racial scripts to people by forming lasting associations. For example, in *How Race is Made in America* (2014) Natalia Molina gives the example of the use of racial scripts to establish Mexican immigration post-1924 as a problem by building on past scripts related to slavery which has had lasting implications on what “Mexican” means even today. As a result, “Mexicans, cognizant of how racial positioning operated, tried to establish themselves as superior to blacks” (41), creating horizontal hierarchies and diverting attention from those first imposing the scripts.

Mike Gonzalez in *The Plot to Change America: How Identity Politics is Dividing the Land of the Free* (2020), Walter Benn Michaels in *The Trouble with Diversity: How we Learned to Love Identity and Ignore Inequality* (2006), and Amy Chua in *Political Tribes: Group Instinct and the Fate of Nations* (2018) discuss the dangers of identity politics and how it can lead to detrimental division. For example, Michaels points out how the main emphasis has become diversity over equality which ultimately legitimizes inequality as opposed to eradicating it so that there is no longer a critique of class structure. As a result, it becomes a competition between groups for what is left behind as opposed to a social justice fight so that CEOs make less money, and their workers make more. With the women in my study, I look at three different realms of influence from politics to acting to YouTube which have positions not made with these women in mind. Yet they are able to attain success (working within neoliberalism and its dominating structures) and from this position they notice that others have been stopped and they fight against this to shift the requirements for entry and create counter-narratives through their

‘be yourself’ message. In some cases, these women compete and face conflict due to division and competition with other marginalized groups, and in other cases, they focus on and directly challenge the common oppressive structures that hinder them all.

Chapters: Polit-identivists, Atractivists, Aesthetivists

As described above, this project consists of three body chapters dividing women by their realms of influence. In the following chapters I offer case studies of both Latin American and US Latinx women, using discourse, textual analysis, and digital ethnography of autobiographies, interviews, and YouTube videos, to reveal the strategies these women use within their realm of (social) media and career influence to break barriers and advocate for changes so that young girls do not have to sacrifice identity for success/access. They create a type of activism that hinges on background, experiences, and access to a digitally connected audience and address issues outside the typically conceived notions of what social media activism entails (gender violence and sexual abuse).

In Chapter One, “Polit-identivists: Autobiographical Tool with Political Pull,” I will investigate public and political figures (Dolores Huerta, Sonia Sotomayor, Michelle Bachelet, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez) who, at the outset focused on their careers but, in this digital age, choose to interweave their personal stories with their accomplishments to provide role models for the next generation to aspire to these careers. In Chapter Two, “Atractivists: Celebrity Status Turns Activist Apparatus,” I will look at actresses (Rita Moreno, Salma Hayek, Jennifer Lopez, America Ferrera, Diane Guerrero, Gina Rodriguez, Yalitza Aparicio Martínez, María Mercedes Coroy, Daniela Vega, Indya Moore) in the television and film industry who gain a following through their careers and

combine their personal stories with activist causes to alter representation and the narratives being told in TV and film. In Chapter Three, “Aesthetivists: Beauty Norm Becomes Empowerment Platform,” I will identify YouTubers (Dulce Candy, Lele Pons, Bethany Mota, Yuya, Mariale Marrero) who use beauty as a platform for activist causes by interweaving personal experiences, attempting to empower women to be their own bosses and create their own brand.

Each chapter represents an inter-generational progression from the older generation of political figures of Chapter One who began their careers in the 60s and 70s, participating in grassroots and political movements in a profession that lent itself well to activism and opened the door for this type of advocacy from women; to the mixed generation of actresses of Chapter Two who entered their careers in the 90s and early 2000s, joining and starting organizations for equality for women, making it more acceptable for women in the entertainment world to advocate for personal causes; and finally to the current generation of YouTubers in Chapter Three who have taken advantage of new technology and the digital platform of the 2000s which prefers and propels careers and activism contingent upon identity. Together, my three body chapters reveal the ways in which this activism has evolved and expanded over time to become more personal based on the space these Latin/x Americans have created for themselves, opportunities they have opened for younger generations, and what the public has been able to accept at the time, in certain professions. The accumulation of the repetitions and resonances that exist throughout each case study reveal a common strategy of these women to combine their dissent with success, characterizing a form of intermediary activism.

Chapter One

Polit-identivists: Autobiographical Tool with Political Pull

Chapter One concentrates on political leaders and representatives including Dolores Huerta, Sonia Sotomayor, Michelle Bachelet, and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez who gain a following through advocacy and careers in the political sphere. They then use this influence and their accomplishments to “earn the right” to share their stories and break down the barrier between the personal and the political. Despite starting out in careers in activism and politics, their vulnerable accounts of background stories transform them into what I call “polit-identivists” because they gain a following through politics, but their activism turns personal, and identity becomes integral as they advocate for the potential of young people from similar backgrounds. These leaders have each overcome odds (gender, age, language, health, wealth) to attain their positions but then use their platform to advocate for others by sharing their stories and offering themselves as heroes and role models for the next generation.

The Struggle for Inclusive Representation

For centuries, women have been excluded from public office and underrepresented in social justice movements. According to Karen Vieira Powers in *Women in the Crucible of Conquest: The Gendered Genesis of Spanish American Society* (2005) this exclusion of women from political power and public spaces dates back all the way to the 16th Century with the introduction of Spanish customs to Indigenous practices. For example, prior to the arrival of the Spaniards, the Aztec empire operated on a political system divided by gender where men and women had their own separate spheres of authority which operated in complementary ways. On the other hand, the European

practice was based on a patriarchal system so that women then became legal minors, unable to officially represent themselves in court, and were stripped of their political power positions. According to Nora Jaffary and Jane Manegan in *Colonial Spanish American Women and Religious Discourse* (2018), however, one way that women found to advocate for themselves and subvert their exclusion was by using the courts to “redress social and legal injustice.” They found ways to navigate within the structures for their own benefit.

Another way that women worked the system during this colonial period was by becoming nuns which offered them more independence and authority. As Electra Arenal and Stacey Schlau write in *Untold Stories: Hispanic Nuns in Their Own Words* (2010), “Nuns circumvented an ideology that promoted women’s silence and learned to couch their thought in language acceptable to authority” (15). In the convent women could write, and many chose to author autobiographies, which recently have been published, giving readers today a direct glimpse into the lives of these women. Despite the introduction of Spanish culture and patriarchal systems that attempted to exclude women, Vieira Power states that “many [women] resisted these changes with all the means at their disposal” (47). I would argue that since this time, women have continued to fight for equality with all the means at their disposal and have begun to gain ground in the political and public activism sphere using similar tactics as the women of the past by using the authority they can garner and advocating through their stories.

In the United States there has yet to be a female President, despite the efforts of Hillary Clinton, an American politician who was First Lady from 1993-2001 and who was the first woman to be nominated for President of the United States by a major

political party in 2016. Despite the absence of women as head of state, in lower levels of political power, women have gradually increased representation in the United States. For example, according to a study done by Rutgers Center for American Women and Politics, women in elective office have increased from 3%, 7%, 0% in 1971 to 20.6%, 23.7%, 25.4% in 2018 (representation in U.S Congress, Statewide Elective, and State Legislatures, respectively; “Women in”). The representation of Latina women in public office is smaller, yet this representation follows an analogous trend of increasing over time to where there are 124 Latina State legislators and 10 Latinas in Congress according to Gender Watch 2018, “a nonpartisan project to track, analyze and illuminate gender dynamics in elections” (Bejarano). Therefore, female representation in political power has been increasing in the United States.

In Latin America, there have been various female presidents within the last 40 years and as a result of these women in political power, female representation has increased as well. Similar to Hillary Clinton who was a former First Lady, it appears that these women also initially access power positions through family ties. For example, Isabel Perón was the first female President of Argentina in 1974 after serving as Vice President to her husband, Juan Perón, who died during his Presidency. Violeta Chamorro, President of Nicaragua in 1990, married into a powerful family and entered politics after the assassination of her journalist husband. Mireya Moscoso, President of Panamá in 1999, was the wife of former President Arnulfo Arias. These right leaning presidents broke the first barrier that excluded women from the presidency. Then in the 21st century Latin America made history by having four female Presidents in office at one time in 2014: Michelle Bachelet (Chile), Cristina Fernández de Kirchner (Argentina), Laura

Chinchilla (Costa Rica) and Dilma Rousseff (Brazil). It is important to note that this second group of women represent a shift toward the left in countries where democracy followed dictatorships. This turn to the left in Latin America is called the pink tide, a term used by Larry Rohter, a reporter for the *New York Times* to describe a change from the red tide (of communism) to a pink tide of a shift to the left and transition to democracy. In many cases, these women accessed political power through family ties, especially to husbands who were presidents. This initial entrance broke the barrier and made it more acceptable for other women to access this power and as a result, according to an article by Emilie Sweigart in *Americas Quarterly*, “The election of four female presidents punctuated a longer-term shift in Latin American political culture: from 1995 to January 2019, women increased their presence in national legislatures from 13.7% to 30.7%. by mid-2019, women held 28.5% of the region’s cabinet positions” (1). Consequently, in both the United States and Latin America, women have been gaining ground and power within the political systems which were not originally intended to include them.

Scholars have investigated and theorized about how it has been possible for women to gain political power in a machista culture in Latin America which traditionally considers the role of women to belong to the private or personal sphere. For example, in an article by Karel Kouba and Petra Poskocilová, the authors hypothesize that factors such as socioeconomic development, legislative gender quotas, family connections, and ballot elections enable this. In addition, this phenomenon of women in power of leftist governments can also be considered a reaction to the masculine dictatorships and femininity is used as a source of resistance to create new associations between femininity,

modernity, progress, and democracy. The work of Nikki Craske in *Women and Politics in Latin America* (1999) gives an overview of women's political participation in Latin America since the 1940s where women were originally pigeonholed into the traditional private sphere and were limited by the gender construction of machismo/marianismo. Craske recognizes the ways that women have been organizing and attributes the door being opened for women in political power to grassroots organizations and movements such as the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, an Argentine human rights organization that petitioned for the reappearance of their disappeared children in 1977. She also calls for a broadening of U.S. feminism to include Latin America and she sees this overlap and connection between these two groups of women. In my project, I see this connection as well and I look at the similarities in the movements of women in the United States and Latin America and the social justice movements that foregrounded the rise of women in politics. In *Pink Tide: Media Access and Political Power in Latin America* (2017), Lee Artz looks at the trend of the "pink tide" and notices that this shift leads to public access to media and there is a direct correlation between media, democracy, and social justice. Although it does delve into media, Artz's study does not take into consideration social media which I analyze in this work as an important area that contributes to democracy by providing a platform and accessibility to the voiceless and I argue that autobiographical stories are key to this.

Therefore, this chapter consists of case studies using textual analysis of first-person autobiographical accounts of prominent Latin/x American public and political figures who begin their careers following conventional means to obtain their power positions and from this place of influence, share personal stories as fodder for activism

and causes related to their personal experiences. In addition to the autobiographical accounts, a trend in the examples includes the publication of children's versions of their stories and targeting the next generation. The chapter displays a generational progression from Dolores Huerta fighting for workers' rights beginning in the 1960s to Sonia Sotomayor making history as the first Latina Supreme Court Justice in the early 2000s to Michelle Bachelet serving two terms as President of Chile between 2006 and 2018 to Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez drawing national attention with her election to the House of Representatives in 2018. Despite the fact that these women worked during different decades, and even in different countries, there exist parallels in the ways in which they combine their personal lives with their political and social justice work. Due to the accumulation of the case studies and examples in this chapter, it becomes evident that there are many repetitions and parallels in their stories including their backgrounds, pathways to success in their careers, and then their trajectories in their personal lives beyond their careers. The case studies reveal that these women coincide in their strategies for activism and change through the use of their personal stories revealing the ways in which the current audience reacts and responds to storytelling, autobiography, and documentary. They all have been successful in their careers; yet they each choose to share about their personal lives in some capacity. For example, in each case, as the women furthered their careers, the more they began to share about their personal lives. They use similar tactics to share their stories in various autobiographical capacities from books to documentaries to social media accounts. What this chapter argues is that a certain level of achievement or success in their careers is a pathway to opening up about their personal stories and using this as fuel for activism targeting the next generation with

the intention of encouraging them to aspire to similar careers and offer counter narratives to their perceived potential.

These representatives become what I call “polit-identivists” by gaining political prominence and then turning their careers into a platform to be activists and advocate for the younger generation by using their identities and personal stories. Through the use of their children’s books and projects targeting young people, they explicitly desire to inspire the next generation; however, they sometimes fall short in actually addressing the root issues that cause themselves and others like them to feel like underdogs or outsiders in the first place. What becomes evident by analyzing the generational progression is the way that advocacy becomes more prominent from the onset of the newer generation’s career and that there is greater awareness and recognition of the root issues that hinder Latin/x American individuals from aspiring to political careers as well as a direct fight against these issues.

Dolores Huerta

Dolores Huerta, a civil rights activist and labor leader for the United Farm Workers in the 1960s, fought tirelessly for the improvement of lives and wages of farm workers by organizing strikes and founding the National Farm Workers Association (NFWA) alongside César Chávez. Writings about Huerta have historically been tied to Chávez and her work has often been overshadowed or invisibilized by her partner’s fame to the point where she has been recognized as his assistant. For example, in the biopic *César Chávez* (2014), Dolores Huerta’s role is minimal. Many descriptions of the film characterize Chávez’s effort as individual and singular. To wit, the tag line on *Amazon Prime* reads, “His triumphant journey is a testament to *one individual’s* power to change

the world” (emphasis mine). Additionally, she was often not even recognized as a co-founder of the NFWA in the past and during the time she was involved in the organization.

Documentary + Personal Stories

Therefore, the release of the 2017 documentary called *Dolores*, which is described as having unprecedented access to the private mother of 11 and chronicles her life from childhood to her early years working for the United Farm Workers, offers an alternative perspective. Her story has been spotlighted and retold recently to bring a new version of the narrative to light where she is the main focus and not the sidekick of César Chávez in a contemporary setting. The documentary details the ways in which she was sidelined from being named as Chávez’s successor as the United Farm Workers (UFW) President, despite being the organization’s co-founder and co-principal leader. This re-telling of her story includes an intimate look at her personal family life. In an interview in a *Time Magazine* article called “Pioneering Labor Activist Dolores Huerta,” responding to being overlooked or left out of the narrative about United Farm Workers, Huerta says, “I never felt overlooked because I didn’t *expect* any kind of recognition...we never think of getting credit or recognition or even taking the power. We didn’t think in those terms. Of course, I think that’s changing now and there’s a surge of women who are not only running for office but getting elected.” Huerta is no longer being overlooked, and as an example, actress Renée Zellweger recognized Dolores Huerta and her activism, calling her an American hero in her acceptance speech for Best Actress at the Oscars in 2020. Huerta’s story is the same now as it was then, but there is a different audience listening now than there was in the past and the strategy to target this current audience, as

evidenced by the case studies in this project, is documentary and a form of personal autobiographical narrative with access to her private life.

Dolores Huerta's activism has become more personal, fighting and advocating for women like her who are made invisible or overshadowed. In order to understand the recent spotlight and recognition as an important role model and figure it is necessary to look at her personal life and the trajectory of her career and the ways in which they became intertwined as well as how this biographical information is made available to her audience. Huerta was born in New Mexico in 1930 but after her parents divorced when she was eight years old, she moved with her mother to California. One important reason for understanding her background is seeing the ways in which her parents impacted her path in advocacy. For example, her father was a farm worker and miner as well as a union activist who even ran for political office and was on the New Mexico legislature. Huerta followed in her mother's footsteps in the way that her mother was independent, involved in community activism, and ran a hotel where she often let low-wage workers stay for free or offered very affordable rates. With the examples of her parents who were very involved in their community, Huerta began her activism in high school and then continued when she herself became a teacher and was impacted by her students coming to school with empty stomachs. Throughout her life she was first-hand witness to economic injustice which led to her lifelong fight to change this. From there she became involved in organizing and leading in the Stockton Community Service Organization and later met César Chávez with whom she shared a desire to organize farm workers, so they launched National Farm Workers Association in 1962. Over time she became an asset for negotiating and ultimately was the spokesperson for the organization. However, after the

death of César Chávez, Huerta was not named the new President by the organization and decided to move on from it pursuing a different path and founding her own organization.

This biographical information about the life and work of Dolores Huerta can be found on her organization's website called the Dolores Huerta Foundation. She established this foundation in 2003 after receiving the Puffin/Nation prize for Creative Citizenship. What becomes evident through reading her own account of her biographical information is that she has been at work and advocating since the 1940s; however, her story and the impact of her work has not been made known or recognized until the 2000s when she was able to start her own organization and share her story in her own words. One way in which her story becomes clear as well as the way her personal life is intertwined with her life work and advocacy is through the 2017 documentary *Dolores*. The film encapsulates the bind that existed between Huerta's personal life as a mother as well as her incessant fight for farm workers. It chronicles the historical trajectory of the work she did with the labor movement and the ways she altered the organization because her presence made it acceptable for other women to be out there in the picket lines and led to the non-violence philosophy of the group that affected real change in the improvement of farm worker's lives. For example, their labor union had more women involved in the organization than any other union at the time and for a long time Huerta was the only woman on the board.

Breaking Stereotypes

Today Huerta is seen as a prominent historical figure for female activists, but in the past, she was very scandalous because of her personal life as a twice divorced mother of eleven children. What seems like such inspiring and revolutionary work for a woman

today, brought with it criticism during the time in which she was working. In the documentary, they show an interview with a grower and the interviewer asks the man, “What about Dolores upsets people?” to which the grower responds, “It’s her personal life. All of her children. Without marriage. It’s not accepted” (45). Huerta infuriated people who wanted to see her in a more traditional role. At the time when she was involved in the labor movement, the personal part of her life hindered her ability to advance in the organization; however, today these aspects of her personal life set her apart and elevate her status as a feminist activist and role model for women and other single mothers or women with mixed families. Therefore, she now chooses to share those parts of her life through first-person storytelling in her documentary which is not a strategy she would have used in the past.

In addition to the historical information given about Huerta’s work and character as a fighter, there is also an emphasis on her personal family life including discussions about her romantic involvement as well as the perspectives of her children. It becomes evident that her family dynamic was far from the traditional, expected nuclear family. For example, many of the interviewees included in the documentary are actually Huerta’s children. The film gives voice to her sons and daughters who talk about their experiences growing up and having her as their mother as well as the sacrifices she made for her activism. On the one hand, a main message of the film is that Huerta’s story is nothing to be ashamed of as many people such as the grower would desire her to feel. On the other hand, the film does not shy away from reality and Huerta is not cast as a perfect mother and only seen in a positive way. Instead, she is human and realistic as represented through the point of view of her children who become emotional when talking about

missing their mother when she was gone for long stretches of time, or staying with other families for a time and not wanting to go back to live with their mother after having such stability, or resenting the fact that their mother took a vow of poverty in order to relate to the people she was advocating for and they did not have the same material possessions that others had. These real emotions and painful memories are not edited out to depict Huerta as a perfect mother; instead, they give a glimpse into her humanity and the sacrifices she made for the cause she was fighting for.

Activism + Targeting the Next Generation

Huerta addresses these same situations of pain in relation to her children in her own interviews and speaks of these choices and sacrifices. She comments that she would not wish the same sacrifices on others and recognizes she knew she caused pain; however, what motivated her to continue was that she felt like she was giving her children more than she was asking them to sacrifice in giving them a meaningful life. Separate from the documentary, in 2005 Huerta wrote an article for the *Sun Journal* titled “Being More Than a Good Mother Involves Activism” in which she describes how she sees motherhood as a key to lead by example and influence the next generation which is a characteristic and pattern of the polit-identivists in this chapter. Huerta writes, “getting kids involved with us develops their conscience and confidence in their own power to do good” (Huerta). She argues that activism should be a priority for mothers and recognizes the impact that their involvement would have on their children and generations to come. Huerta articulates her reasoning for her own actions as a mother and questions and elicits the involvement of mothers in activism by saying, “some mothers are busy working long hours to buy things they don’t really need. Why not work less, live more simply, so you

can spend more time on activism and with family?” (Huerta). For Huerta, her duties as a mother and a citizen are inseparable.

Both Huerta’s actions and her ideas about creating a multi-generational structure of activists become evident in the interviews and lives of her children, many of whom have become activists in their own rights and many of whom discuss the difficulty of not always having their mother around but also understanding her reason for doing it: for a cause that was bigger than themselves and in which they are now involved. For example, Huerta’s youngest daughter, Camila Chávez, is the Executive Director of the Dolores Huerta Foundation and at the end of the documentary, the text informs, “Dolores Huerta’s children carry on their mother’s legacy as organizers, educators, doctors, lawyers, and community leaders” (1:32:56). The fact that Huerta’s children are now involved in community advocacy is evidence of her desire and goal to target the next generation, a pattern of the polit-identivists. One life event that really evinced the love her children have for her, despite her frequent absence during their childhood while fighting relentlessly for justice, was in 1988 when, at the age of 58, she was assaulted by police while protesting against presidential candidate George Bush and suffered broken ribs and spleen. One of her daughters commented that the best thing that came from this tragedy was that it brought all of her siblings together to be with Huerta as she recovered.

Not only does the documentary bring Dolores Huerta to life through the combination of her personal life and her public work as an activist to inspire other women, solidifying her as an important woman in history, but it also sends the message of the importance of her story for the next generation. After Huerta’s assault, injury, and lengthy recovery, she then shifted her focus to women’s rights. According to the Dolores

Huerta Foundation website, “she traversed the country for two years on behalf of the Feminist Majority’s Feminization of Power: 50/50 by the year 2000 Campaign encouraging Latina’s to run for office. The campaign resulted in a significant increase in the number of women representatives at the local, state, and federal levels.” What the documentary reveals in addition to this written information is that over time Dolores’s perspective about the role of women changed and advanced. For example, she met Gloria Steinem, who does interviews for the documentary, and Huerta discusses how in the past, on the issue of women’s choice, she did not initially understand that it was about women’s bodies and their right and over time her view on the topic shifted. What also shifted and transformed over time was Huerta’s view of herself and her confidence in her place and role. Huerta comments in the documentary that she “used to think it was wrong for her to try to take credit for the work that she did, but [she doesn’t] think that way anymore” (1:28:05). Not only is this revelation and articulation important for herself, but what also matters is that she is doing public speaking and sending this message to other women.

One of her daughters comments that her mother’s story is important for young Chicanas and women of color to see statues of her and that her work is recognized for what it was: “[Y]ou can’t write women out of history” (1:20), she asserts, showing the impact that Dolores has had on her family, especially the women in her family in that now her daughter is an advocate and making statements about women in history and how important her mother’s story is for the next generation. This shows the vertical and horizontal career coalitions that Huerta has formed combining her personal life with her public activity as an activist and the ways she is using her own words to share her story to

make it accessible and inspire the next generation to learn from her experiences and mistakes and aspire to political power and advocacy influence. The statement of Huerta's daughter to not write women out of history feels emphatic because prior to the sharing of Huerta's personal story and the eventual recognition of her work in the 2000s, she had largely been written out of the history of the labor movement and relegated to the role of sidekick to César Chávez. This is why autobiographical and first-person narrative become so important in re-writing and re-telling history now that Huerta has the power to tell it in her own way, in her own words and is a key strategy for the polit-identivists.

Children's Stories + Aspirational Mirroring

In addition to the documentary giving an inside and personal perspective on Huerta's life, another tactic to further her message of inspiring the next generation is the targeting of young people through publishing children's stories. Following the premiere of the documentary about Huerta in 2017 in which, for the first time, Dolores shares her story in her own words, redresses wrongs, and counters the existing narrative about her in relation to César Chávez, many stories emerge from other authors that solidify, emphasize, and further proliferate these changes to a wider audience including children's books as well as a biography written about her which will be discussed in the following section. For example, there are multiple children's books that exist depicting the work and activism of Dolores Huerta. One example is the 2012 book called *Dolores Huerta: A Hero to Migrant Workers* in which Dolores is identified in different active capacities for her roles as a teacher, detective, friend, warrior, organizer, storyteller, peacemaker, mother, woman, fortune-teller, and hunter. The descriptions of her parallel the emphasis in her documentary that her personal life is integral to her identity as well as her public

work because she is described as both an organizer and a mother. A main message that is disseminated through Huerta's story is that she defies expectations and helps others do the same. For example, it emphasizes, "Some people think she should quiet down and let the men do the talking. Dolores gets louder. She asks other women to speak up, too. Their voices rise up together, booming over the farm, roaring into the city, rumbling across the country" (18). This statement reflects horizontal and vertical career coalitions as Huerta gains prominence and then uses her platform to target the next generation and bring others in to give them a platform so that their work can expand and multiply exponentially. The publishing of children's stories exhibits a strategy of the political-identivist of targeting young people and offering them role models and making alternative narratives accessible so that young people can see themselves reflected as well as potential pathways that may not be evident otherwise, which is what I call aspirational mirroring.

This strategy is also important to re-writing history and furthering the message that women cannot be written out. This becomes evident in the children's book *Side by Side: The Story of Dolores Huerta and Cesar Chavez* (2020). This book chronicles the lives and work of both Dolores Huerta and César Chávez literally as they did it all side by side where one page highlights Huerta's story and the next Chávez's. As opposed to the way in which Huerta has historically been left out or her work has been minimized as an assistant to Chávez, in this story it is evident that they were co-laborers throughout their journeys. An additional way in which the re-writing of history becomes evident is with the iconic phrase "¡Sí, se puede!" The origins of this phrase are controversial, and it has often been attributed to Chávez despite the fact that Huerta claims to have coined it.

However, in this re-writing of history targeted at the next generation, Huerta receives the credit when it describes, “When their bosses bullied them, the workers used to say, “We can’t do it. We can’t win. But with the help of Dolores, they began to chant, “¡Sí, se puede! Yes, we can!” (20). These children’s stories are an important strategy for vertical career coalitions, aspirational mirroring, and re-writing history in an accessible way to inspire young people to aspire to power.

First-Person Activism

Similar to the message exemplified in the children’s stories of Dolores Huerta defying expectations for women by speaking up when she was told to be quiet, this message is paralleled in the analysis of Stacey K. Sowards in *Sí, ella puede: The Rhetorical Legacy of Dolores Huerta and the United Farm Workers* (2019). In addition, this biography of Huerta follows a similar strategy of the children’s books of re-writing history to include Huerta and depict her as a leading lady and not a sidekick of Chávez. Sowards argues that Huerta’s personal life has shaped her public personae and she looks at Huerta’s rhetorical practices and legacy and how this contributed to her iconic status today as opposed to her obfuscation in historical accounts of the farm worker movement. Her analysis reinforces this investigation and many cases of women in the public sphere and the ways in which there is a fundamental bind between activism and personal life.

One prominent strategy that Sowers lays out as an impetus to Huerta’s success not only consists of the influence of her family and early life but also her attachment to Chávez. Paralleling my later discussion on Michelle Bachelet and other successful female Presidents, Huerta uses her access and relationship with men to propel her career. Sowards writes, “I argue that Huerta’s early family life, her mother’s role in her life, and

her relationship with César Chávez were major factors that enabled her to become a powerful leader of the United Farm Workers and an outspoken advocate for Chicana women and other marginalized groups” (32). Instead of seeing her connection to family members or men as a negative factor in her pathway to success, I argue that this can be seen as an adept tactic used by women to gain entry into male dominated spaces not traditionally accepting of women but how this foot in the door results in women breaking the door wide open for others. This pattern of behavior and trail blazing becomes evident in the case of both Huerta and other polit-identivists in this chapter. Additionally, Huerta’s upbringing is another factor in her ability to defy expectations because she often was taken care of by her grandfather while her mother worked and therefore, she saw a role reversal for men and women which gave her access to a counter-narrative that affected her later life as a non-traditional mother. The fact that her early life and mother offered her a counter-narrative allowed her to offer her life as a counter-narrative to other young girls to see alternative possibilities for their lives as evidenced through the impact she had on her own daughters and the children who read her children’s books.

Like the Michelle Bachelet section of this chapter in which I analyze the former President’s public discourse, Sowards investigates the public discourse of Dolores Huerta in her speeches and the ways in which she defied stereotypes while simultaneously using some aspects that were expected of her gender. I argue that Michelle Bachelet uses similar tactics in her discourse by making her more radical and unaccepted stances more palatable by combining both expected and unexpected aspects of her speech to be more successful. Similarly, as a Mexican American woman, Huerta was expected to be reserved and apolitical, but her public persona was outspoken, confident, and unafraid.

According to Sowards, “[Huerta] manipulated preferred and comfortable rhetorical forms while turning uncomfortable or marginalized forms into potentially acceptable practice” (79). For example, “Huerta inverted seemingly powerless rhetorical options such as tears and emotional appeals into connective rhetorical practices that may have evoked reactions in her audiences such as guilt, anger, sentimentality, and passion” (80). Huerta uses rhetorical strategies that are expected of women, such as tears and emotion, in a subversive way through public speaking and for activism in a leadership role. She also used her children and talked about the strength of family to break boundaries between the public and private because she was often pregnant, nursing, and raising children while working.

Overall, Huerta has been doing this work and advocating using strategies that are relevant today. In the past, she did not get credit for the work she did to organize the farm workers and she was seen as Chávez’s assistant. However, the changing times and the emergence of the #MeToo movement and feminist movements push Dolores Huerta and her story to the forefront to where she becomes a main figure. Her story and the facts are the same, but her recent prominence and the re-writing of her story reveals a shift in our culture towards the recognition of women. Women are craving and searching for stories of women and their fight in order to expand the examples so that young people can have role models and can see possibilities for themselves to aspire to power positions. It is especially powerful that the people who are fighting and working to correct the misunderstandings and misrepresentations about Dolores Huerta’s story and her place in history are her own daughters and her children who are now activists. Huerta broke boundaries for women and their roles by combining expected elements for the purpose of

leadership and for revolutionary roles for herself. She also used family and personal life in speeches to break the barrier between private and public life becoming what I call a polit-identivist. She disrupted the traditional idea of family by being pregnant, nursing, and raising kids while working as a divorced mother and rejected social norms of the nuclear family.

At the end of the documentary Huerta explains, “All that a person has is his or her story. Who they are. What their families have gone through. This is their story. And we are trying to deny them their story and taking away their power” (1:29:50). Huerta comments on the power of story and how integral this is to power and identity. The polit-identivists in this chapter show how fundamentally tied identity and personal stories are to their political and public lives and how ultimately their personal stories are what impact and legitimize their advocacy and activism. Huerta’s main fight is for social justice, and she started out advocating for workers and laborers. Despite the fact that she herself was never a laborer nor was her family, in order to relate to who she was advocating for she took a vow of poverty. Even though she started out in grassroots movements, ultimately, she ended up shifting towards advocating for women and children and sending a message towards young women to help them embrace their own stories and their power in the way that she has done by raising her voice and no longer feeling wrong about taking credit. She now tells other young girls and women to make sure they get credit for their ideas and work. She sees the power of stories and her story is now being disseminated through documentaries, interviews, and children’s books. The message to young girls that Huerta asserts in the documentary outlines a common strategy used by the women throughout this project: Together, they are offering a broad-

scale, specifically targeted message to young girls about the power of their own experiences and stories as a force for change, ultimately meant to shape them as they grow in order to impact future generations to aspire to influence and power and change the rules of entry to these positions to increase overall representation.

Michelle Bachelet

Within the last 40 years, Latin America has had a series of female Presidents who initially accessed this position through family ties, especially to previous Presidents who were their husbands. This connection and initial entrance broke the barrier so that it became more acceptable and normal for women to hold this position. For example, Michelle Bachelet made history by becoming the first woman President of Chile as well as the first President of Chile to be reelected since 1932 when she served two terms (2006-2010, 2014-2018). Many scholars have singled her out as being the first woman to be elected as President without a tie to a political male leader in Latin America (Jalalzai, Waylen, Franceschet and Thomas). Although she is the first woman to be elected without a tie through marriage, these analyses downplay her familial tie considering her father was an Air Force general who was martyred opposing Augusto Pinochet and was tortured to death in 1974. Even though the first female Presidents accessed their executive positions through connections to men, they opened the door for other women and began to set the standard for women in political power. I will analyze Michelle Bachelet's speeches and argue that despite criticism for being too feminine, she does not shy away from this but rather transforms it into a strength. Her discourse incorporates aspects of her personal identity as a woman, a mother and a doctor, through which she gains legitimacy and support by empathizing with other marginalized groups. I identify ways

that she maintains a balance between agentic and feminine characteristics as a strategy to navigate cultural gender expectations to obtain power and creates new links between femininity, modernity, and progress to redefine this perceived weakness as a strength. Then, once in this position, she uses her power to make history and create the first government with parity of representation. As a result, she contributes to the advancement of women in political power by providing more opportunities and becomes a role model for a strategy to navigate a historically male dominated sphere as a woman. This trajectory reflects the strategies used by the polit-identivists of accessing their positions through conventional means and working from within to change representation.

Like Dolores Huerta's trajectory as an activist being influenced by her early life and parents' example and further continuing this cycle with her own children, Bachelet's early life influenced her rise to power. Bachelet's road to the culminating point of executive power was neither simple nor easy. Her father was a general in the Air Force under Salvador Allende and the coup d'état of 1973 by Augusto Pinochet changed the trajectory of the life of both her father and her family. Alberto Bachelet, her father, was captured, tortured, and died imprisoned. As a result, Michelle and her mother were detained and trapped inside a torture center. These traumatic events affected her career and political ideas because she left her home country to live in Australia, Germany, and the United States, but when she returned to Chile, she became a doctor and worked in a clinic for torture victims. She developed her knowledge of the armed forces so that, after the fall of Pinochet, she was able to enter politics. She served as Health Minister and Defense Minister under the presidency of Ricardo Lagos which precipitated her nomination to the presidency. In her campaign, she faced challenges due to aspects of her

identity as a woman, agnostic, and divorced mother in a country with strong ties to Catholicism. She incorporates aspects of her personal identity and receives criticism for being too feminine which creates the perception that she is weak. However, this personal information gives her legitimacy in order to empathize with other people with similar experiences and other marginalized groups.

Autobiographical Account

This background information can be found in biographies about Bachelet, however, in order to see the more emotional and personal side of these experiences for Bachelet, she does a podcast in 2021 called *Awake at Night* with Melissa Fleming in which she gives insight into these events. She describes what it was like to experience the trauma of her father's death as well as her time being imprisoned and how her family's connections caused her and her mother to be treated better than others and to avoid physical torture. The podcast platform and the distance of time from the actual event gives access to these personal details not found in other written accounts. This highlights a similar pattern to other polit-identivists who later in their careers or after their political careers have ended, open up using first-person stories about things that happened in their personal lives in the past. Bachelet comments, "But you know, Melissa, I haven't spoken about it for so long that I'm just remembering all these things" (21:30). Because of these experiences, Bachelet explains how she has a greater ability to connect to people when she asserts, "So I always think in this job that I'm doing now, for me, when I'm speaking to people I say, you don't need to explain me that. I've been there. I have been arbitrarily detained. I've been with enforced disappearance" (13). She uses her personal experiences to relate to others. During her first presidency, she faced political unrest and labor strikes.

Nonetheless, in this position she set the standard for change and to include more women with a government with parity of representation and at the end of her presidency she had a high approval rating. Her second nomination to the presidency preceded a succession of other female presidents that served at the same time in 2014 and her second presidency expanded her goals to open the door even more with more lasting changes for women.

Power in the Personal

On the surface, it seems like the series of female presidents in Latina America was achieving power due to connections to men in political power or family ties. But on a deeper level, a change to the left in response to dictatorships in combination with connections to men (sometimes husbands) of the same political party opened the door to this wave of women. An ideological change to the left allowed the ascension of the female presidents and legislators that started to set the standard for other women in these levels of power. By analyzing and comparing two discourses given by Michelle Bachelet upon being elected in both of her terms, the strategies she uses to navigate the cultural expectations of a woman in a political position become evident. Instead of avoiding feminine aspects of her identity, she re-signifies them from a perceived debility to a strength of progress and modernity. Also, she uses her power to be able to propose changes that create opportunities for women in political power using career coalitions and helps other marginalized groups.

At the beginning, the first circumstance that precipitated the entrance of women in executive political power in Latin America was a connection to president husbands from the right; however, with time, a change to the left facilitated a succession of female presidents in the 21st Century. For example, Isabel Perón, the first female President of

Argentina in 1974, initially was vice president of her husband, Juan Perón, military ruler, and became president after his death. Violeta Chamorro, president of Nicaragua in 1990 married a man from a prominent family and entered in politics after the assassination of her husband, a journalist in opposition to the dictatorship of the Somoza family. Also, Mireya Moscoso, rightist president of Panamá in 1999, was the wife of ex-President Arnulfo Arias. These women broke the first barrier that excluded their gender from the presidency. After this, women made history again in the 21st Century when four became presidents at the same time in 2014 (Michelle Bachelet, Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, Laura Chinchilla and Dilma Rousseff). It is important to note that this group of women presidents represents a change in the valuation of other political ideas from the left and their experiences with dictatorships form part of their platform. For example, Michelle Bachelet, daughter of an Air Force general, was affected by the 1973 coup d'état by military general Augusto Pinochet in Chile. As a result, her father, Alberto Bachelet, was tortured and died in prison. In addition, both Michelle and her mother were tortured and exiled. This experience forms part of her politics and she joined the leftist Socialist Party of Chile that deposed Pinochet when she returned to her home country. In a similar way, the 1976 coup that removed Isabel Perón in Argentina affected the politics of Cristina Fernández de Kirchner who forms part of the Partido Justicialista (a division called Kirchnerismo, a category of populism from the left). Laura Chinchilla also forms part of a leftist party called the Partido Liberación Nacional in Costa Rica. Dilma Rousseff has a similar story to that of Michelle Bachelet because after the 1964 coup that displaced President João Goulart in Brazil, she joined a leftist group that fought against the 1964-1985 military dictatorship. During this time, she was captured, tortured, imprisoned, and

later became a leftist socialist president. In general, these women follow dictatorships and rightist governments, supporting administrations from the left and their personal experiences affect their convictions and political ideas.

This phenomenon of a turn to the left in Latin America is called the pink tide, a term coined by Larry Rohter, a reporter for the *New York Times* in Montevideo, to describe the change from the red tide (of communism) to the pink tide of this leftist turn with ties to democracy in the 21st Century. The impetus for this tendency started with the election of Hugo Chávez as president of Venezuela in 1998 and resulted in other left leaning governments in Latin America. This change was a response to the coups supported by the United States during the Cold War that created authoritarian regimes of rightist military dictatorships. Another result of the turn to the left was an increase in the elections of women. These female presidents were preceded by men that started this change to the left with democracy, but the women continue this government and open the door to other women and female politicians who promote equality. For example, in Chile, Michelle Bachelet was Minister of Health and Defense under Ricardo Lagos who guided the government to the left. Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, president of Argentina in 2007, was the First Lady of Néstor Kirchner, president in 2003, that was part of the leftist government. Dilma Rousseff, president of Brazil in 2011, served as Head of State for ex-president of a leftist government, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva. Therefore, in many cases, access of these women to positions of political power had ties to men that preceded them with leftist governments that permitted the opportunities of women that were oppressed and undervalued during the dictatorships of these countries. If male leaders formed the first “pink tide” that changed the tide from the right to the left, then this political shift

facilitated what I call the “pink surge” of women presidents that reach their peak, crashing down on the barriers that intend to wash away the discriminatory restrictions in order to advance the progressive and modern ideas that included women and everyone.

The outgrowth of female governments from leftist governments could be considered a reaction to the masculine dictatorships that preceded them; female presidents use their femininity as a source of resistance to these political predecessors. In the book *Masculine/Feminine* (1993), Nelly Richard analyzes the function of feminism under dictatorship in the case of Chile in particular in the 80s and 90s and concludes that the categories man/woman are malleable constructs instead of fixed categories. Richard describes how this idea functions during and after the dictatorship in transition to democracy. The feminist rhetoric that is opposed to dominant structures lends itself well to resistance to the dictatorship. Other female writers have raised their voices in response to the dictatorships in their countries and have written about the space for women in the resistance. For example, Luisa Valenzuela uses a feminist perspective to question the hierarchical structures of the dictatorship of Argentina in her works *Como en la guerra* (1977), *Cambio de armas* (1982) y *Cola de lagartija* (1983). Likewise, Diamela Eltit wrote during and after the dictatorship in Chile in a complicated publication industry due to censorship and her writing represents a feminist perspective during this time of dictatorship and the power of these female voices. In *Disappearing Acts: Spectacles of Gender and Nationalism in Argentina's "Dirty War"* (1997), Diana Taylor discusses the gender binary that exists where Argentina is feminine and fought for by men which creates a “bad script.” However, during this time of violence, a site of resistance exists in the theatre which exposes another gender and nationalism perspective in order to create

“better scripts.” Therefore, this demonstrates the extension of the voices of women who react to the dictatorships in these Latin American countries in the writings and artistic expressions creating counter narratives with the feminist rhetoric as a tool. Also, this phenomenon extends to the political sphere with the women presidents during the leftist tide. As a result of this, for example, Michelle Bachelet does not flee from feminine aspects even though they can result in a negative response in the political sphere. This reinforces the idea that women are not incompatible with politics, but rather they represent a resistance to the dictatorship with progressive changes contributing to the counter narratives about the role of women in society.

Studies exist about women in political power in Latin America; however, a study about the discourse of Michelle Bachelet offers an example (in her own words) of a female executive who navigates the male-dominated political sphere. In the book *Gender, Institutions, and Change in Bachelet's Chile* (2016), Georgina Waylen provides a summary of the sequence of studies about the intersection of gender and politics due to this movement of women presidents in Latin America. The stages of analysis include the role of women in politics and the effects on motherhood (Stevens, Chaney, Craske), the role of women in the transition to democracy from authoritarianism (Valenzuela, Alvarez, Schild), the movements of women for gender equality (Franceschet, Htun), the representation of women in elections (Hinojosa), the electoral quotas that require equality (Baldez), the role of women in the creation of policies (Alvarez), and finally Waylen recognizes a gap in the analysis of the leadership styles of women especially in executive power. Waylen decides to analyze Michelle Bachelet and her ability to create “gender friendly change” through an institutional analysis of gender. In “Renegotiating Political

Leadership: Michelle Bachelet's Rise to the Chilean Presidency" (2010), Franceschet and Thomas analyze the ability of Bachelet to create changes for women, arguing that it requires a contextual analysis because her capacity is affected by her reception. In a similar way, I analyze Bachelet through a gender lens and her role as an executive, but in the level of her discourse to reveal the strategies she uses to overcome institutional, cultural, and gender barriers. There are studies about women in political power (Chaney, 1979; Craske, 1999; Franceschet, 2005; Alvarez, 1990) and analyses about the discourse of women (Cameron, 1997; McElhinny, 1997; Talbot, 1998; Tannen, 1994; Wodak, 1997; Lazar, 2005), but I think that a practical case of the discourse of Bachelet, a woman in executive political power in Latin America, is useful because an analysis of her own words provides a perspective from a point of view surrounding her identity as a female executive and her femininity as a source of power.

Double Bind

By analyzing the discourse of Michelle Bachelet, one is able to see the expectations and difficulties that the President faces (because she has centuries of stigma that she has to overcome as a woman in the political sphere) and her response that challenges the preexisting stereotypes. María Alejandra Vitale explains exactly this problem that there is no precedent for women, and this represents "a challenge for the study of the presidential rhetoric, that has focused on the oratory practice of male presidents" and as a result, the masculine discourse is more successful than the discourse of women (62). For example, women must fulfill certain gender expectations that do not conform with the stereotypical expectations of presidents. According to Ruth Wodak, it is expected that the language of women is characterized by uncertainty, deference,

emotions, sensibility, and solidarity (1). Therefore, she must demonstrate certain characteristics in order to fulfill these expectations. However, the problem is that these qualities do not match the expectations of a leader (historically a man) in the political sphere. If a woman accepts the characteristics associated with women, she indicates that she is friendly and can sustain interpersonal relationships; however, at the same time she might show that she is weak and incompetent. On the other hand, if a woman exhibits characteristics of the language of men and, by extension, presidents (toughness, competitiveness, independence, competence, control) she risks the perception that she is not friendly. Due to this, there exists a double bind, a term coined by Gregory Bateson (1965) that explains the origins of schizophrenia in that the individual receives two opposite messages and orders, for women who exercise agency.

Given that the position of President historically belongs to men, women must overcome challenges that men do not have to face in the public sphere. Women must surmount many confines because according to Mary Talbot in *Language and Gender: An Introduction* (1998), “daring to address the public—whether orally or in writing—was damaging to a woman’s reputation for many centuries” (104). In *Women and Politics in Latin America* (1999), Nikki Craske also supports that there exists a binary that puts women traditionally in the private sphere and men in public; as a result, the social construct and the ideology of machismo/marianismo limits the possibilities in the particular context of Latin America. Bonnie McElhinny recognizes this dichotomy between the public and private in the level of discourse in “Ideologies of Public and Private Language in Sociolinguistics” and concludes that the terms are labels constructed by culture (127). The stereotypes and expectations that exist for men and women do not

consist of a natural relationship, but rather are the result of a social construct, but these constructions have effects on life. Therefore, according to Ruth Wodak, the gender inequality results from the naturalization of socioeconomic inequalities (4). In a similar way, Deborah Cameron, in “Theoretical Debates in Feminist Linguistics: Questions of Sex and Gender,” analyzes the characteristics, the social gender construct, the intersection of discourse and how they construct one another simultaneously. For example, she observes that “if a community identifies a particular speech style or genre as typical of women, it will also tend to see that style as indexical of what women are naturally like” (26). In society, there exists a predisposition to legitimize inequality with natural arguments about gender roles. However, Wodak, McElhinny and Cameron avoid an essentialist explanation because the development of gender does not depend on biological differences, but rather social, cultural, psychological, and linguistic processes. However, the deviation from the standard results in a negative response according to the relationships that already exist. Therefore, in order to navigate this terrain, Bachelet re-signifies the existing connections.

The act of challenging stereotypical expectations results in social and economic punishments. This phenomenon is especially prevalent for women in leadership positions. For example, there are certain characteristics necessary for effective leadership. However, these characteristics conform more with the qualities designated socially to men. Therefore, this penalizes women who show agency and the necessary characteristics for successful leaders. In her article, Julie Phelan and Laurie Rudman comment on this double standard when they write, “agentic women are evaluated less favorably than women who display a mix of agentic and communal qualities” (812). A man that displays

agency would be natural because it is appropriate according to the stereotypes and fulfills the social expectations of men. On the other hand, a woman in a leadership position should have the same characteristics as a leader. However, due to the social construct of the role and characteristics of women, she also must fulfill the qualities assigned to her gender. Therefore, Phelan and Rudman say that a possible solution is a mutual agreement because “women who temper their agentic qualities with stereotypically female qualities may be more successful at conveying their competence without risking backlash than those who do not” (812). Sometimes backlash and discrimination is not conscious, but rather the result of a social gender construct that is so prevalent and subconscious.

The discourse of Michelle Bachelet indicates that a delicate balance is required for women to overcome these obstacles that men do not face in power positions. Due to this double bind for women in political power, often Bachelet receives criticism for being too feminine because she focuses on issues related to women and other marginalized groups in an inclusive way. In the book *Negotiating Gendered Discourses* (2016), Jane Christie compares the campaigns and discourses of Michelle Bachelet and Cristina Fernández de Kirchner writing that these presidents take advantage of leadership frames from the maternal legacy of women’s rights organizations of the Agrupación de Familiares de Detenidos Desaparecidos (AFDD) in Chile and the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo in Argentina. Nikki Craske also makes the connection between the female presidents and the contributions of the community political movements of women in society that precede the presidents in *Women and Politics in Latin America* (1999). However, Christie concludes that the women “defined themselves according to stereotypical roles” (72). Other critics also analyze the maternal and feminine frame of

women in political power (Franceschet, Piscopo, Thomas, Vitale). For example, María Alejandra Vitale compares the discourses of Michelle Bachelet and Cristina Fernández de Kirchner and decides that Bachelet's discourse corresponds with the French concept of "ethos féminin" or "feminine style" and that of Fernández de Kirchner does not. Therefore, it is perceived that Bachelet uses feminine aspects in her discourse.

Some critics recognize the feminine aspects of Bachelet's discourse and have various reactions; however, I think that one can see this characteristic of her discourse as a strategy and part of her platform. Antonieta Gajardo criticizes the type of feminism ("good national femininity") that Bachelet uses in the slogans of her campaign and her discourse that evoke an image of a woman that seeks harmony between her roles as mother, wife, and worker. Farida Jalalzai, in her book *Women Presidents of Latin America: Beyond Family Ties?* (2016), also recognizes the feminine aspects that Bachelet uses in her campaign. However, instead of criticizing them, Jalalzai comments that this strategy runs risk that come from the double bind, but Bachelet uses these feminine qualities to redefine and re-signify stereotypes. As a result, Jalalzai asserts that the style of Bachelet is revolutionary (87). In fact, Luciana Panke and Sylvia Iasulaitis analyze the representation of Michelle Bachelet, in comparison with other Latin American presidents, during her campaign in 2014 and concludes that, with respect to gender equality, the campaign of Bachelet is the most dedicated to equality and uses fewer gender stereotypes. I think that Bachelet's discourse exemplifies a balance between "feminine" qualities and characteristics associated with leaders and presidents in order to navigate the cultural expectations and her use of pronouns in her discourse reveals this.

Combining Agency with Empathy

Christie sustains that Bachelet defines herself by gender stereotypes and puts herself in a maternal frame. However, I argue that her discourse is not limited to a simply feminine or maternal frame, but rather she uses a strategy that combines agency with empathy to navigate the expectations of a culture that judges based on stereotypes. Bachelet identifies herself with women because that forms part of her identity and in order to draw closer to other subordinate groups. However, she also develops aspects of her identity that do not fulfill the stereotypical gender roles of women. I agree with Jalalzai that Bachelet's strategy is revolutionary because she redefines the connections between femininity and weakness by incorporating a discourse that attaches empathy to modernity. Jalalzai writes that Bachelet's first campaign is more feminine while the second carries more masculine aspects to prove her capacity. However, this work analyzes her first congressional message (2006) in which she maintains a balance between empathy and agency with the use of the inclusive pronouns "we" and "I." In the first message of her second presidency (2014), she also combines agency and empathy with an exchange of the pronouns. However, there is an inversion because her use of "I" supports empathy and solidarity while the use of "we" demonstrates her capacity to call the people to action. I sustain that she does not sacrifice her agency for her empathy, but rather she combines them to navigate the cultural expectations strategically and re-signifies the existing notions that attribute weakness to femininity.

First Congressional Message (2006)

In 2006, Michelle Bachelet made history when she was inaugurated as the first female president of Chile and defeated Sebastián Piñera of the Conservative Alliance. Bachelet's presidency represents a continuation of the pink tide with a leftist government

after a coup d'état and dictatorship. In 1973, the coup (supported by the United States) deposed Salvador Allende and with this, the country did not have democracy for seventeen years because the military regime that assumed power believed that they were saving the country from the communist threat. However, in 1990 Augusto Pinochet, president of the military regime, lost and the transition to democracy began. Ricardo Lagos won the election of 2000 with a leftist government and named Michelle Bachelet as Health Minister. Later, in 2002, Bachelet became Defense Minister and these opportunities for the agnostic and divorced mother of three prepared her path to the presidency. Her campaign emphasized socioeconomic change, but her term brought resistance and difficulties with protests. In 2006, students complained about the price of education, copper miners held strikes and in 2007 protests erupted due to problems with the transportation system called Transantiago in the capital. During these cases of protests, the approval rating of Bachelet diminished and caused changes in the gender balance of her cabinet. However, at the end of her term, her approval rating increased during the global economic crisis of 2000 because Chile did not suffer as much as the rest of the region. With a brief summary of her campaign and time as president, I think that an analysis of the elements of her discourse in her first congressional message, after winning the election, shows her vision and goal entering her position. According to Peter Siavelis in "What it Takes to Win and What it Takes to Govern: Michelle Bachelet and the Concertación," her advantages during her campaign (the lack of a tie to political parties, her inclusive style, and her identity as a woman) became problems during her administration (14). She does not avoid aspects of her identity as a woman, but rather she combines them with her platform of change and reveals her desires to create gender

equality with her consensus style. However, her style resulted in challenges during her presidency because she faces expectations to maintain a balance between agency and empathy.

Bachelet's message to Congress in 2006 exudes inclusion which evinces her empathy. The discourse opens with an extensive list of members of the audience that she wants to mention in an inclusive way: "Estimadas senadoras y senadores...estimadas diputadas y diputados...chilenas y chilenos" (1). She uses both endings of the nouns in a gender inclusive way. In addition to the inclusion of everyone, the first part of her message is concerned with issues relating to women. At the beginning, she establishes a sense of exceptionality as Yanira Paz mentions when she writes that women presidents "are making history by being the first in occupying the highest magistracy in their countries and still being among the few in the world to be so" (673). Bachelet establishes her identity as a woman and praises her own ability to change the existing system. She mentions that she is a female president and is accompanied by ten female ministers and fifteen female deputy secretaries. As a result, she is making history because she declares, "here it is, as I promised during the campaign, the first government with parity of representation in all of our history" (1). She identifies as a woman without a doubt, but at the same time, she provides an example of how she has fought for equality proving that she is a president that fulfills her promises. In addition to this, the example of the first government with parity of representation supports her affirmation that, "I will say what I think, and I will do what I say" (2). In order to maintain a balance, Bachelet addresses 'feminine' issues because she fights for equality of representation and inclusion. However, at the same time, she exhibits the necessary qualities of a good leader who is

trustworthy and capable of fulfilling her promises: because of this she maintains a balance.

In Bachelet's message, her use of "I" establishes her identity as a woman when she pronounces, "here I am as a woman" (2) but she also continues with the use of an inclusive "we" in order to extend her inclusion in this group to the inclusion in other oppressed groups when she says, "today is the time to include in our development those citizens that suffer other types of exclusions. To this *we will dedicate ourselves*" (2). In what follows, she uses the inclusive "we" when she talks about her actions and the inclusion of other groups: "*we* have to work a lot. This is my calling" (6); "*we* will acquire 16 new mammogram machines..." (7); "*we* want more Chileans, especially young ones and women, to be able to have access to the job market" (8); "also *we* will advance in our fight against poverty" (9); "our job would not be complete if *we* do not concern ourselves with those Chileans excluded from music, arts, literature, or poetry" (12); "the cohesive Chile that *we* want to build also must recognize that there are many other inequalities and exclusions of which *we* have to take charge ourselves: the discrimination that disabled people suffer, immigrants, sexual minorities, the poorest people, the oldest people" (13). According to Nelly Richard in *Masculine/Feminine* (1993) the use of "we" is an important tactic for women because it is a gesture to create a "collective, fluid, and multiple subjectivity" (20). Michelle Bachelet's membership in the group of women extends itself to many other subordinate groups with the use of inclusive "we" in order to increase this idea of inclusion, union, and empathy.

This strategy with inclusive "we" helps Bachelet to empathize with other groups and therefore she gains more support, but the use of "I" exhibits her capacity as a leader.

Despite her socioeconomic status, Bachelet identifies herself as a member of a subordinate group: women. As a result, she relates to other groups that experience the same type of discrimination, and her discourse demonstrates that she does not tolerate it. She becomes a spokesperson and defender of these groups, but she also must maintain a balance between authority and femininity. In her discourse, she mixes her agentic qualities, in order to show her competence, with feminine qualities, in order to empathize with other disadvantaged groups. For example, she exemplifies her authority with a change in pronouns. Normally she uses “we” to include herself in other groups; however, in some instances she uses “I.” When she talks about discrimination, she asserts, “*I* want to be very clear: what we have seen in recent weeks is unacceptable. *I* will not tolerate vandalism, nor damages, nor intimidation of other people! *I* will apply the entire intensity of the law” (2). At the beginning, she uses “we” in order to commiserate with other groups, to identify herself as part of these groups and as subject of discrimination. However, in order to exercise her authority and present herself as competent of her position as president, she uses “I” to say that she will not tolerate discrimination and will do whatever is necessary to combat it.

In her discourse, Bachelet focuses on social issues like medical aid, education and poverty which risks the perception of her incapacity and weakness. Some researchers say that her discourse consists of feminine issues and that her style is more maternal, familiar, and empathetic. She presents herself in this way because it forms part of her identity and her leftist socialist platform and to fulfill the gender expectations. However, Michelle Lazar mentions the double standard that exists because, “while the preponderance of Bachelet’s style as she first campaigned for the presidency may be viewed as more

“feminine,” it should also be noted that this strategy ran risks; her opponents raised critiques that her greater empathy might not translate into competent and firm leadership” (64). This is a risk that does not exist for men. However, Bachelet recognizes the necessity of a balance between these characteristics. In fact, Lazar comments that “instead of backing away from an explicit “feminine” image, she highlighted this as a new benefit she brought to the table” (64). Instead of admitting that her style is more feminine, she claims that it is a modern style. She creates a new link between femininity, modernity, and progress. Bachelet runs the risk of adopting a ‘feminine’ style with the price of losing her authority as president. However, she transforms this potential weakness into a positive aspect because she gains support for her ability to relate to other subordinate groups. I propose that Bachelet does not cede her agency, but rather she must combine her agency with empathy to navigate the cultural expectations and her use of the pronouns “we” and “I” reveal this. I do not think that it is a concession, but rather is a strategy that responds to the human tendency to stereotype and categorize. She creates new links between femininity, modernity, and progress in a time of democracy after dictatorship. She uses a feminine frame (because it forms part of her identity and platform) as a source of resistance and progress, but she does not support gender stereotypes.

First Discourse to the Country (2014)

After the end of her presidency in 2010, Bachelet became the first director of the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, a group dedicated to gender equity around the world. In 2013 Bachelet presented herself as a candidate for the presidency again and defeated Evelyn Matthei, Minister of Labor and

Social Security of President Sebastián Piñera and candidate of the Independent Democratic Union. With a competition between two women, the campaigns were different with less emphasis on gender. Given that Bachelet ended her first presidency with a high level of approval, the question emerged about why she would want to risk a good reputation with the possibility of failure the second time. However, according to Georgina Waylen in *Gender, Institutions, and Change in Bachelet's Chile* (2016), Bachelet was not satisfied with her reforms and entered in her second campaign with the goal of continuing with long lasting reforms on taxes, education, and changes to the Constitution due to the legacy of the Pinochet dictatorship. Immediately after her election she started to implement legislative changes and was successful with tax reforms and she also responded to the student protests with reforms to the education system. In addition, she addressed the constitutional problem of the electoral system which created gender quotas. Bearing in mind the context and the differences between the two presidential terms, her discourse differs from her first message in 2006 because she enters with more confidence and experience. Again, she maintains a balance between her objectives which reflect her identity as a woman and her self-representation as a presidential leader. However, a comparison between her first discourse in 2006 and her first discourse in 2014 indicates a change because she uses the pronouns “I” and inclusive “we,” but in a different way. She uses “I” to talk about her own life and to empathize with other voters, but her use of “we” represents her call to action to all in the voice of a leader of a country that needs reform.

Bachelet made history her first time in office as the first woman president of her country. She increased the number of women in politics and raised awareness of

problems of gender equality. Therefore, the political terrain of her second presidency is different than the first because she has impacted the structure and normalized the role of women in the political sphere. The fact that there had been two women nominated to the presidency affirms this change. In her first discourse to the country in 2014, the president also uses an inclusive and informal aperture with “amigas y amigos” (“female and male friends”) (1). She describes her vision for a fair, modern, tolerant, and inclusive country in a similar way to her first discourse. In contrast to her first time when she uses “I” to show her agency and share what she is going to do for the country with the rejection of inequality, this time, she uses “I” to share her own experiences and empathize with the problems of the people of her country. For example, she repeats four times, “I know first-hand...” (2) in order to talk about her experience with public education, the fight for a free country, her experience as a doctor and as a mom. Each time she uses “I,” her own experience reveals her capacity to face a topic or a problem that she wants to reform in her presidency. For example, she says that she is “the daughter of public education” (2) because she wants to respond to the student protests about education and she wants to change the system with free public education. She talks about the fight for a free country because in her own experience she lived during a dictatorship, and she wants to propose changes to the Constitution during her administration. Also, she mentions, “I am a doctor, and I was Minister of Health” (2) because she wants to improve the health system for marginalized people. Finally, she tells that she understands “the worries of the women who are heads of their houses” (2) because she is a mom that also wants quality education for her sons. Her use of “I” shows her capacity to understand the problems of the people

because she also experiences these issues and in order to reinforce her desire to change and reform with her power.

After creating empathy, Bachelet uses “we” to unite the country under a shared mission. She declares, “I am going to be the president of all male and female Chileans” (3) in order to share and reaffirm her identity and personal mission to serve in an inclusive way. However, after this affirmation, she uses the “we” form exclusively and repeats the phrase “Only together we can...” (3) three times. It is a mission that requires the involvement of everyone to increase participation, give voice to everyone to emphasize that it is a democratic government, and also to face inequality. In addition to this unification and call to inclusion and action of everyone, the use of “we” calls attention to the urgency of the situation. Therefore, she announces, “*we* will start now,” “*we* will start in the first 100 days these duties that can no longer wait,” “*we* should start now,” “*we* can get a move on this,” and she repeats the expression “*we* have urgency” four times. Bachelet has limited time as president in her second term with only four years. She enters the presidency with an agenda to finish what she had started in her first administration, and she does not want to waste time. As a result, her use of “we” creates a sense of pressure for not only Bachelet, but also the duty of everyone in the country that shares the same worries about education, taxes, and the Constitution as she does.

The Personal + the Political

The first time in office and during her first campaign in 2006, she must demonstrate her capacity explicitly, but the second time, she has already proven her ability to be a leader. In fact, when she left her first presidency, she had an approval rating of eighty percent which is unprecedented (Stevenson). In this process, she creates

new links between femininity, modernity and progress. She does not avoid sharing her identity as a woman or a mother in order to create empathy, but neither does she depend on this part of her identity. Instead of resigning herself to stereotypes, I argue that she uses a feminine and maternal frame to break the barrier between the public and the private by defining herself in her own words in her discourses as a woman, a mother, and a capable leader. For example, according to Linda Stevenson, the aspects of her identity make possible her capacity to propose gender equality because “not only was she literally representing women, fulfilling the descriptive ideal of feminine identity politics of a woman’s being more sensitive to women’s needs/demands, but also she had the potential to fulfill the ideal of gender-equity (feminist) identity politics substantively as she joined in battles for women’s rights and gender equity in connection with her combined political identities” (131). As Carol Hanisch describes in her essay “The Personal is Political” (1969) as part of the Women’s Liberation Movement (WLM) of New York, these issues of the oppression of women and the relegation of their problems to the personal and private sphere are, in fact, political and deserve recognition in the public sphere. Personal problems carry a connotation of weakness and that they belong in therapy, but instead of being considered personal, Hanisch affirms that they are political problems that have consequences and solutions in the collective level. It is important to note that the feminine and maternal frame of Bachelet is based on the sharing of her personal life because it consists of part of her identity but should not be considered a weakness nor a limitation to her leadership capacity.

In general, Bachelet incorporates aspects of her personal life and her identity as a woman in her discourse as a strategy to navigate the cultural expectations. Instead of

avoiding these parts of her identity, she re-signifies the stereotypes associated with women to transform femininity from a weakness to a strength. For example, when the term “cariño-cracia” (“care-ocracy”) emerged to describe her way of governing, she responds and criticizes that “her opponents were using the term to try to discredit her as weak” (Stevenson 131). Instead of denying that she governs with empathy, she criticizes that this is not a weakness. Bachelet maintains a balance between femininity and agency to navigate the cultural expectations. She accesses power by a combination of agency and empathy, but once in power, she uses her position to change the structure and create more equality between men and women in political power. As a result, she increases the examples of women in power so that she can change the stereotypes and she becomes a model for other women that aspire to political positions. She provides more patterns of how to navigate the double bind that men do not face. Over time and with more examples of women in political power, it becomes more difficult to generalize and the stereotypes become less rooted.

Since the end of her second presidency, Bachelet has continued her fight for personal causes related to her experiences by becoming the first executive director of the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women. Following the patterns of the other case studies and polit-identivists in this project, Bachelet also targets the next generation and has become more open about sharing personal information as a strategy to connect to other women at a time when personal stories and social media accounts are attractive and craved by the younger generation. For example, the basic information about Bachelet’s childhood and experiences with her father being tortured and she and her mother being detained and then having to flee the country can be found

in most biographical accounts about Bachelet. However, the interview Bachelet records for the *Awake at Night* podcast with Melissa Fleming gives intimate details and insight into her childhood. With the distance of time from the period where the events took place and from her presidency, this can be seen as an indication of Bachelet's metamorphosis into her second public life. The focus is on aspects of her personal life told using her own words as opposed to her accomplishments and work to help the audience understand her motivations and the reasons her life took the path that it did. As a result, the impact that her parents had on her and the principles they instilled in her to value human life become evident. In addition, Bachelet's examples parallel those of Dolores Huerta in their abilities to see counter-narratives when it came to gender roles. Bachelet comments, "my mother was really a progressive woman, if I may say, for that time...she told me, 'Look Michelle, you don't need to be a mother. And you don't need to get married necessarily and be a mother and have children. You have to do in life what you think you want to do'" (8:44). Ultimately, the examples from both Huerta and Bachelet's mothers resulted in two women in the public eye giving speeches and providing examples of women who defy gender expectations.

Aspirational Mirroring

The cases of Huerta and Bachelet show the inter-generational impact that did and can occur as their parents' involvement in activism and social justice led them to pursue these careers and power positions so that they then influence not only their own children but the next generation of young girls which is a common characteristic of the politicians. Many of Huerta's eleven children became activists in their own rights and Bachelet discusses in the podcast a similar strategy of involving her own daughter.

Bachelet describes, “So then came the election so I went with my daughter, my small daughter, to vote and I said to her, ‘Look, never forget this because this is a very important moment in the history of Chile. It is the first time that we’re going to vote to restore democracy.’ And she was small. Well, now she is a feminist and very active” (29). Both Huerta and Bachelet recognize the impact their mothers had on them and continue to instill in their daughters the value of human life and the need to act on their beliefs contributing to what I call vertical career coalitions and aspirational mirroring.

In general, the introduction of women in executive political power has consequences on the policies that result, especially those that have to do with representation and the rights of women. Some investigators have analyzed the correlation between the pink tide, the increase of women presidents, and gender equality policies. Marike Blofield, Christina Ewig, and Jennifer Piscopo in “The Reactive Left: Gender Equality and the Latin American Pink Tide” (2017) analyze the effects of the pink tide and see an opportunity for equality. They conclude that, in general, there is evidence of a “reactive left” because the pink tide has mixed effects on gender equality. However, with women specifically, the correlation is direct, and they introduce proposals that promote the rights of women. According to an article from *Americas Quarterly*, Emilie Sweigart reports that in Latin America “from 1995 to January 2019, women increased their presence in national legislatures from 13.7% to 30.7%. By mid-2019, women held 28.5% of the region’s cabinet positions.” Also, the female presidents started to change the policies for women. Some fulfilled their promises and others did not. However, what the article argues is that Michelle Bachelet was more successful. For example, Rouseff and Bachelet made promises about abortion, but “only Bachelet made it happen” (Sweigart).

Also, the women presidents created more positions for other women and Fernández de Kirchner named three, Rousseff and Chinchilla designated nine, but “no one bested Bachelet, who kicked off her presidency with the first-ever gender-parity cabinet in Latin America” (Sweigart). In “The Bachelet Effect on Gender-Equity Policies” (2012), Linda Stevenson recognizes the contributions of Bachelet to gender equality and how she appointed many women to her government.

One example of the impact of Bachelet’s policies on an individual’s life is the example of Daniela Vega, a trans actor who will be discussed in the third chapter. In Vega’s autobiography she mentions Bachelet and the way in which the program she implemented for trans people to have access to a psychologist and to be able to begin the process of transitioning including all of the support they need for free, transformed her life as she was able to see other people like her for the first time. Vega writes, “Admiré la presidenta y tenía muchas ganas de conocerla desde ese día que fui al consultorio a conocer a personas trans por primera vez en mi vida gracias al programa que ella impulsó. Es curioso como un pequeño gesto del poder puede influir en tantas vidas” [I admired the President, and I was excited to meet her since the day I went to the doctor’s office to meet trans people for the first time in my life thanks to the program that she implemented. It’s interesting how a small gesture of power can influence so many lives] (Vega 51). Additionally, like many other women in this study, Bachelet uses social media as a tool for advocacy describing herself in her bio as “Chief / Alta Comisionada de las ONU para los Derechos Humanos. Expresidenta de Chile. #StandUp4HumanRights” (accessed 7/20/21) and makes posts about human and trans rights. It is obvious that Bachelet uses her platform, the power that she gained through her presidencies, her

personal stories, and everything at her disposal to effect change and influence the next generation to aspire to political power and use their influence to fight for human rights.

Sonia Sotomayor

Sonia Sotomayor is known for making history by becoming the first Latina Justice of the Supreme Court, nominated by President Obama in 2009. Yet, in her memoir *My Beloved World* (2013), the story she chooses to tell is of her life growing up in the Bronx, her struggles with diabetes, the death of her father, her difficult relationship with her mother, and her journey through Ivy league institutions navigating comments questioning her place there due to affirmative action. The book does not even cover her later life or her appointment to the Supreme Court. She uses her work and her accomplishments as a way to draw readers in, but the story she chooses to tell is about her experiences earlier in life. Sotomayor acknowledges that her background does not naturally lead her to aspire to this influential position, yet she shares that this is what actually propelled her and set her apart. In her autobiography she writes that her childhood in the Bronx contributed to her success in law school and “gave [her] the confidence that came of recognizing [her] personal background as something better than a disadvantage to be overcome” (212). In the preface to her book, she tells that this work was born out of questions from people who wanted to know about her past, her childhood and her happiness and the way she got to where she is today so her purpose in writing her story is to make it accessible. She obtains influence in public office through conventional access, yet from this place of power, chooses to tell her personal stories, attributing her success to her background to create role models for future generations. For this reason, she has also written children’s books about her life story with this audience in mind.

Autobiography

The history-making Supreme Court Justice began her life in the Bronx, New York in 1954 when she was born to Puerto Rican parents. The career success and accomplishments of Sotomayor are very well known; however, it was not until the publication of her autobiography in 2013 that intimate and previously unknown details about her personal life came to light. Sotomayor's initial success is linked to an extraordinary accomplishment and as a result she becomes well known in the public eye. However, from this place of success, she uses her platform and following as an opportunity to share about her personal life and reveals the ways in which her early life and background led her to this place of prominence. Autobiography becomes a medium through which she shares about her past and what she calls her "darker experiences" when she writes, "Until this book I have not spoken publicly about some of my darker experiences growing up, and I would not have considered myself unqualifiedly happy as a child. Ultimately, though, I realized I did have some sources of deep happiness, and these bred in me an optimism that proved stronger than any adversity" (preface). Her published autobiography offers Sotomayor a way to describe and understand, using her own words, her early life experiences and the impact they had on her path. Not only does this allow a space for self-reflection but also a means to offer her story to others to see the ways in which she achieved success in the public/political sphere coming from a background that on paper does not typically propel people to success.

For example, some of the "darker experiences" Sotomayor reveals in her book are that she was diagnosed with diabetes at age seven and lost her father a few years later at age nine. Not only does she use the medium of autobiography to reveal these personal

aspects of her life for the first time, but she also re-signifies these experiences as not a disadvantage to be overcome, but a contribution to her success when she writes, “The challenges I have faced—among them material poverty, chronic illness, and being raised by a single mother—are not uncommon, but neither have they kept me from uncommon achievements” (preface). Despite the fact that Sotomayor recognizes that her obstacles are not uncommon, what is unordinary is that an accomplished politician in the public eye shares this information. These autobiographical accounts and sharing of personal stories is atypical for people in her position especially at the time which is revealed in Sotomayor’s admission, “I have ventured to write more intimately about my personal life than is customary for a member of the Supreme Court, and with that candor comes a measure of vulnerability” (preface). This type of revelation of intimate details is not typical for members of the Supreme Court. However, Sotomayor writes her autobiography at a time when people are interested in personal lives and personal stories and because she recognizes the potential of her story to impact and inspire others who face similar challenges. What becomes evident through the following case study of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez is that this social acceptability of sharing personal information for politicians is shifting as this strategy to share personal information and break down the barrier between the public and the private becomes more prominent.

Sotomayor’s example becomes a pre-cursor to Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez’s rise to political power and the acceptability of sharing personal information earlier on. One key to Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez’s ability to dictate her own story from the start of her career is her use of media to talk back to criticism and set the false stories about herself straight quickly and in her own words. What becomes evident in an article by Terri Towner and

Rosalee Clawson called “A Wise Latina or a Baffled Rookie? Media Coverage of Justice Sonia Sotomayor’s Ascent to the Bench” (2016), is that Sonia Sotomayor became a victim to media coverage of her and was not able to control what was said about her or react in her own words to discredit misrepresentations of herself in the way that Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez does through her use of social media. In the article, the researchers examine newspaper coverage of the Supreme Court confirmation process and argue that “Sotomayor’s status as a “double minority” was salient to journalists and influenced media coverage. In other words, the intersection of Sotomayor’s ethnicity and gender shaped the way in which journalists reacted to her ascendance to the High Court” (316). Paralleling the example of Michelle Bachelet, Sotomayor faces a double bind being a Latina woman in political power who has to navigate expectations of her race and gender that do not correlate to qualities expected of people in political power and ultimately result in stereotyping and criticism. This same phenomenon becomes evident in the case of Sotomayor when, according to her autobiography, the press “downplayed her intellectual abilities, devoted more negative attention to her judicial temperament, and suggested she would struggle to adjust to her new role” (316). Michelle Bachelet as well as Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez face similar accusations, criticism, and challenges as women in political office and I argue that a key to their strategy to address these issues is through first-person accounts and the ability to share their personal stories in their own words to combat misinterpretation. In fact, the authors of this article state that “Compared with members of the elected branches of government, justices spend much less time pursuing media strategies to shape their news coverage” (317). For this reason, I believe that this is a major motive for which these women choose to publish autobiographies and

children's books and use social media and interviews to challenge dominant narratives about themselves and others like them using their own words and personal stories to legitimize their experiences as a means for activism and advocacy for others.

Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez uses this strategy of attack against false information about herself from the outset of her campaign and time in office; however, it is not until later in her career that Sonia Sotomayor shares her story through autobiography and once this happens, she continually expands her methods to disperse her story through various avenues such as children's and young adult books. In her autobiography, Sotomayor directly addresses and recognizes the fact that many aspects of her experiences were kept secret: "Very few of my friends were aware of my being a type 1 diabetic and completely dependent on insulin shots. I would have said that I was being politely discreet, but the truth is my secrecy was a deeply ingrained habit. I was averse to any revelations that might have seemed a play for pity" (274). Sotomayor's admission of her secrecy as a habit to maintain social acceptability allows us to see a generational difference in relation to not only public figures refraining from telling personal information with the counterexample of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez but also the social acceptability shift in talking about medical conditions or disabilities. For example, Sotomayor reveals a shift toward people being interested in personal stories when she writes, "Many people, predictably, have asked about the law, the Court, and my journey as a judge. But many more, to my surprise, have asked about my personal story, curious to know how I had managed and been shaped by various circumstances in my early life, especially the ones that didn't naturally promise success" (preface). These questions from her audience allow her to see an interest in her life and due to this she recognizes a need for examples and

stories like her own. Therefore, she is empowered to write her stories down in a vulnerable way for a larger purpose. Sotomayor discovers that the reason that people want to hear her personal story is because they have similar experiences: “Underlying all these questions was a sense that my life’s story touches people because it resonates with their own circumstances” (preface). Therefore, a main purpose for her sharing her story through autobiography is to make her story accessible.

Targeting the Next Generation

This realization that her experiences might resonate with others was also a major impetus for her strategy to target the next generation through her publication of young adult and children’s books, which is a common strategy of aspirational mirroring among the polit-identivists. Sotomayor directly verbalizes the tactic used by the polit-identivists in this study to use their platform in politics to share personal stories for a greater purpose in inspiring the next generation: “Having caught people’s attention in this way, I’ve thought long and hard about what lessons my life might hold for others, young people especially” (preface). As a result of publishing her autobiography, it was the broken barrier that offered a floodgate of her story to be disseminated to as wide of an audience as possible. Therefore, she published a young adult version of her story titled, *The Beloved World of Sonia Sotomayor* (2018) as well as children’s books, *Turning Pages* (2018), *Just Ask! Be Different, Be Brave, Be You* (2019), and *Just Help! How to Build a Better World* (2022) all published in both Spanish and English.

In addition to the publication of the children’s books written by Sotomayor, there are also books written about her by other authors and a comparison of Sotomayor’s *Turning Pages* with the book written by Jonah Winter called *Sonia Sotomayor: A Judge*

Grows in the Bronx/ La juez que creció en el Bronx (2009) reveals a vast difference of the depiction of Sotomayor from an outside perspective as opposed to her own words. The theme of Sotomayor's authored children's book is about the power of words. Following her explicit purpose in writing her autobiography to offer hope, her children's books show readers that the world is full of promise and possibility by explaining the ways in which words and books shaped her life. For Sotomayor, the books she read played a similar role in inspiring her to achieve extraordinary success as she hopes her story will be to other young people. She writes, "books were a time machine, inspiring me to imagine what I would be when I grew up" (14). In a similar way, Sotomayor hopes that her story will allow young Latinas to be able to imagine a future as a woman in the Supreme Court or in positions of public office and power. Another reason that Sotomayor shares her story is because she wants to allow others to see themselves reflected in her own story the same way that she says that she was able to see herself when she read about Puerto Rico. She writes, "Reading had long taught me about the world outside, but now I was seeing in books a reflection of the lives led by my own family. Books were mirrors of my very own universe" (24). This is an example of what I call aspirational mirroring where Sotomayor offers her story as a way to allow others to see aspects of themselves reflected meanwhile offering a counternarrative and alternative possibilities that people from similar backgrounds and circumstances may not see otherwise. Overall, Sotomayor's version of her life story in children's book form reflects her explicit intentions in her autobiography in inspiring the next generation with her own story.

On the other hand, in the children's book written about Sotomayor, the focus and representation of Sotomayor is different. In fact, the inside cover describes, "Justice

Sotomayor didn't have a lot growing up, but she had what she needed—her mother's love, a will to learn, and her own determination. With bravery she became the person she wanted to be. With hard work she succeeded" (inside cover). This narrative casts Sotomayor as underprivileged and disadvantaged by her circumstances but able to overcome through determination, will, and hard work. In many ways, the book depicts Sotomayor's difference from others. For example, when Sotomayor starts college at one of the very best in America because her grades were so good, she focuses on her feeling of being out of place: "But Princeton, well, Princeton was not the Bronx. Where were the subways? Where was the merengue music? Where were the people who looked like her?" (18). In addition, in this story, Sotomayor felt out of place economically from her classmates as well who "vacationed in Europe" or "went skiing over Christmas break" while she read. Due to this, "suddenly, Sonia was aware of being poor, of being Latina, of feeling inferior" (21). This narrative creates a tie between Latinidad, inferiority, and poverty. While Sotomayor discusses challenges she faced, she recasts these perceived disadvantages as advantages, cluing her reader in to her epistemic advantage or her ability to navigate multiple worlds. Overall, this children's story told from an outsider perspective emphasizes Sotomayor's otherness in a way that Sotomayor does not highlight herself. This emphasis on her difference is made evident by the illustrations and graphics that depict Sotomayor and her family. There is a stark contrast between the physical appearance of Sotomayor in her version and the version written about her. In her version, she and her family appear to have light skin and lighter, smooth, and wavy hair. The book not only includes illustrations of her and her family but also photographs. However, in the children's book written about her, Sotomayor and her mother's skin tone

and hair color are noticeably darker. There is a contrast in representation between Sotomayor's own version of her story in her own words and with her own photographs and a version of her story from an outside source. This further emphasizes the importance and power of autobiography and of being able to use one's own words to write one's own story.

In Sotomayor's other children's book titled *Just Ask! Be Different, Be Brave, Be You* (2019), she uses an aspect of her personal life experience in being diagnosed as a type 1 diabetic at the age of seven to relate to and give a platform to other people with disabilities, targeting an audience of children to educate them on a plethora of disabilities that both kids and adults have. The motivation for this book stemmed from her own experiences as a child giving herself insulin shots and noticing other kids being curious but never asking about it and fearing what they thought of her. The main message of the story is that difference is good and that if someone is different from you and you are curious, just ask about it so that they can share about their own story in their own words. In addition, in Sotomayor's adult biography *My Beloved World* (2013), she talks about how this part of herself, her diabetes, was a secret for so long and that people who were close to her did not even know. She articulates, "the secrecy wasn't simply in my nature. When I was young, disabilities and illness of all sorts were governed by a code of silence" (275). Sotomayor's autobiography is the space she uses to reveal this kept secret about herself for the first time and a recognition of a problem and a culture of secrecy about disabilities and illness. Therefore, years later, with the publication of her children's story, this is her attempt to combat this issue and signifies a generational shift and a social acceptability of talking about disability that she contributes to by publishing her

children's book and attempting to instill in children a new culture of talking openly about a disability or difference and having open conversations and asking others about their difference. In fact, Sotomayor resignifies disabilities such as diabetes, asthma, using a wheelchair, blindness, deafness, dyslexia, autism, stuttering, Tourette's, ADHD, allergies, and down syndrome as "unique powers" and ends her book by calling kids to action with the rhetorical question, "What will you do with your powers?" (29).

Sotomayor explicitly expresses her purpose in writing her autobiography and young adult and children's books sharing her personal story to inspire and offer hope. She asserts, "Most essentially, my purpose in writing is to make my hopeful example accessible" (preface) and "People who live in difficult circumstances need to know that happy endings are possible" (preface). However, Sotomayor often offers a rhetoric of hope, happiness, and the American dream. While the sharing of her story is important as a way to increase examples of Latinas in prominence and power and offer counternarratives and possibilities for other young Latinas to aspire to political power, the rhetoric of hope, happiness, and hard work often falls into neoliberal rhetoric without addressing or challenging the systematic and social forces and factors that contribute to these disadvantages and disproportional representation.

Sonia Sotomayor becomes an example of what I call a polit-identivist and reflects a similar pattern to other women in this study. She begins her career overcoming challenges and odds in secret to make history in her political career. In fact, Sotomayor admits her involvement in politics and navigating this public sphere when she writes, "I had always thought my career would be devoted to principles that transcended politics, but the fact is there would have been no way to the federal bench except through such

political channels” (218). She becomes Supreme Court Justice through the traditional means and avenues of advancement in the political sphere. Yet from this place of influence, once she has garnered success, she uses aspects of her background and identity (revealed for the first time in her autobiography) to become an activist and advocate for causes related to her such as explicitly inspiring the next generation to similar careers to alter the disproportional representation of Latinx individuals in the Supreme Court and public office.

Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez

The polit-identivists mentioned thus far have begun to pave the way for future generations like Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, the youngest woman to serve in the United States Congress by defeating the 10-term incumbent Joe Crowley, to be able to incorporate personal expression into the process of accessing political positions. Leading up to her election, Ocasio-Cortez participated in the filming of the documentary on Netflix called *Knock Down the House* (2019). This film chronicles her journey as part of a grassroots campaign that recruited outsider candidates to run against established politicians. The opening scene starts with Ocasio-Cortez getting ready, putting on makeup, and commenting on the difference of the expectations for men and women’s appearance when running for office. She is aware of the standard protocol and expectations of entering this institution and space. Throughout her campaigning she does express herself in a more personal way than is precedented for typical candidates; yet there still exists this level of recognition that there are certain requirements for entrance. After her election, on the other hand, there is even more of a space for personal

expression as she goes through a metamorphosis and enters a second public life expressed through her social media accounts.

In an interview titled “Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez - Bringing Moral Courage to American Politics” (2018) with Trevor Noah, the host of the satirical news program *The Daily Show*, she explains, “I am honest and authentic. I’m not trying to not be who I am to get you to like me” (10:00). A generational shift is starting where future Latinx elected officials may not have to sacrifice or hide aspects of themselves to be elected and Ocasio-Cortez continues to push for this change from within her power position through her use of social media and personal autobiographical accounts. Through the analysis of both primary sources of her first person accounts (documentary, social media, interviews, videos) as well as secondary sources that talk about Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, what becomes evident is that the discussion surrounding her hits on various categories such as the use of personal stories, creating career coalitions, social media adeptness, activism, celebrity status, beauty, breaking stereotypes, targeting the next generation with aspirational mirroring, and messages such as be yourself and I’m just like you that contribute to her characterization and personal and public persona. These characteristics highlighted in the case of AOC share similarities with the other case studies in this project and the repetitions reveal similar ways of accessing power and success as well as strategies of resistance from within. I argue that she is an example of a polit-identivist because she gains prominence in the political sphere and uses her platform to share her personal story to the point where aspects of her identity become integral to her advocacy and activism.

Additionally, in this chapter I will look at the generational progression that is occurring where, over time, it is becoming easier for political figures to incorporate their personal stories into their process of campaigning and accessing political positions. In particular, it is important to note that these figures are targeting a young audience with their personal stories. For example, Sonia Sotomayor has written a version of her autobiography, in both Spanish and English, for an adolescent audience called *The Beloved World of Sonia Sotomayor* (2018) as well as two stories for a child audience called *Turning Pages: My Life Story* (2018) and *Just Ask!: Be Different, Be Brave, Be You* (2019). Also, there are two children's books written about Dolores Huerta called *Dolores Huerta: A Hero to Migrant Workers* (2012) and *Side by Side: The Story of Dolores Huerta and César Chávez* (2010). Finally, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez has a book aimed at a younger audience written about her called *The ABCs of AOC* (2019). This is a strategy being used to create role models for future generations by making counternarratives visible with the rhetoric that people with similar backgrounds can aspire to similar accomplishments.

Similar to the stories of Dolores Huerta, Michelle Bachelet, and Sonia Sotomayor, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's early life contributed to her future career and political activism. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, commonly referred to by her initials AOC, was born in the Bronx, New York in 1989 to a father born and raised in the Bronx and a mother who grew up in Puerto Rico. However, when she was young her family decided to move to a small house in Yorktown, a suburb of New York City, because her parents wanted their children to have better opportunities. Due to this, AOC saw the disparity in opportunities that was dependent on zip codes and as a result of this early experience, this

has become a part of both her campaigning and advocacy in Congress for an increase in minimum wage, federal jobs guarantees, advocating for people in poverty, or for affordable housing, for example. Later, she attended Boston University to study medicine but after studying in Western Africa, she returned to the United States and changed her major to international relations and economics, focusing on public policy. Upon graduation, she had accrued a lot of student loan debt and began working at a restaurant and bar to pay back this debt which contributes to her advocacy in policies for free public college education. Another aspect of her personal story that contributed to her future career and advocacy was the passing of her father due to cancer when she was in college and the medical and funeral expenses that she and her mother had to work to pay in order to keep their home. This led to her fight for universal health care and her statement that “no one should be too poor to live in the United States” in an interview with late-night host Stephen Colbert. The culmination of all of these aspects of her personal life coming together and influencing her platform and advocacy was when her brother nominated her on the Justice Democrats website as a candidate to run for public office and she was chosen out of many applicants. For example, according to the book *Who is Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez?* “when Brand New Congress and Justice Democrats read about Alex, she seemed perfect. She was a young Latina, she worked in the restaurant industry, and she understood how hard it was to struggle with student debt. She had worked for Sanders’s campaign. Alex was comfortable with social media and able to explain her ideas clearly” (27-28). As a result, she ran against Representative Joe Crowley in New York’s Fourteenth Congressional district in 2018 and won at 28 years old, becoming the youngest woman elected to Congress. Overnight, she became a celebrity.

Power in the Personal

One important aspect of AOC's career and rise to prominence and political celebrity status is the use of her personal stories and the way in which she uses the power of first-person accounts to talk back and disrupt or address misrepresentations and misconceptions about her. The 2019 *Netflix* documentary *Knock Down the House* follows the lives of four women (Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Amy Vilela, Cori Bush, and Paula Jean Swearengin) who decide to campaign for public office without political experience or corporate funding. The documentary gives access into the personal life of AOC opening with her getting ready, putting on make-up, and talking about decisions she has to make as a woman presenting herself to the world in politics. Through this documentary, the audience is able to see the behind the scenes and origin story of the woman who eventually made history and she is able to represent herself in her own words, dictating her own story. This is a tactic that AOC continually uses as she has become a Congresswoman and has been a polarizing figure, receiving criticism from both the Democrats and Republicans. However, she has also become a role model and has garnered many strong supporters and followers. I argue that a reason for this is the way in which she takes her own story into her own hands through first-person accounts and does not shy away from sharing aspects of her personal life in order to relate to others and recast criticism as an advantage.

In the documentary, AOC gives access to her personal life and the way in which she campaigned, turning aspects of her story into a platform for advocacy. For example, she talks about her experience in hospitality as the audience sees a clip of her bartending and she discusses how she is used to being on her feet for 18 hours a day and navigating

how to deal with difficult or rude customers. She talks about how she is running a grassroots campaign, going door to door, and how she is prepared for this because in her job she talks to people all day. She also casts herself as an ordinary American, stating that everyday Americans should be represented by someone like her when they show clips of her as a kid playing the piano and give an anecdote of her deciding to run away as a kid. Then, at her Yorktown home she talks about going to a public high school where no one looked like her and how her mom cleaned houses in exchange for her SAT lessons. Additionally, she created a campaign video that went viral because she is depicted as an everyday woman underdog. She also talks back in the interviews she does such as on the Late Night with Seth Meyers called “Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez Responds to Fox News’ Weird Obsession with Her” and discusses the way in which her experience as a working person just a year ago in a restaurant sets her apart in Congress and allows her to see through nonsensical things that occur. Again, her personal story and background are cast as advantages in her new career. In the interview she also talks back and is able to address the way in which attacks against her lead to false information of what she calls the “Fox News lunacy” (4:33). For example, she talks about a conversation she had with a fellow Congressman who asked her if she received ten million dollars from *Netflix* because they were believing this false information about her uncritically and she is able to address it in her interview.

The book *AOC: The Fearless Rise and Powerful Resonance of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez* (2020) compiles the stories of many individuals who have been affected by AOC and relate to her in different personal ways. In the same way that AOC uses her personal stories as a platform for power and change, the writers in this book offer their

own stories and second-hand accounts of how AOC has affected them in order to support her and continue this cycle of sharing personal stories as a platform for power to others. The book gives evidence of the ways in which AOC uses the strategy discussed in this project by sharing aspects of her personal life in order to relate to others and recast what are perceived as disadvantages as advantages. For example, Patricia Reynoso in “The First Latina to...” discusses aspects of her personal identity tied to those of AOC to paint her as a relatable representative and a role model for not shying away from background and history when she writes, “But for me, a Latina who has built a career in mostly white spaces and who’s seen many Latina “firsts”—but always from Latinas who didn’t share the rest of my life circumstances—AOC’s win felt personal. Here was someone who painted her background as an advantage rather than as a sordid secret that had to be buried, the way I’d buried mine my whole career in the beauty industry” (42). Like Sonia Sotomayor, AOC recasts perceived disadvantages that result from her background as advantages and offers a counter-narrative that has inspired someone else to do the same.

Reynoso became editor of Condé Nast’s *Glam Belleza Latina* magazine and talks about the work she did in this capacity: “and as a fellow Latina, I’d consider how I’d speak to them (English? Spanish? Spanglish?) and how I’d get them to share stories that would help me (and my readers) find a piece of myself in them. I understood and loved my privileged position of holding these women, especially those who weren’t household names, up to the spotlight. I relished talking to those Latinas breaking barriers in their respective fields, outside of entertainment, the many Latina “firsts”. From education to politics to business, I was always excited to meet Latinas whom I could not only consider role models, but who would hold up a mirror to my own professional experience”

(Reynoso 51). She offers an example of what I call aspirational mirroring and the strategy to use one's place of power to share personal stories so that others see themselves reflected as well as a counter narrative as a way to see alternative possibilities. As Reynoso further discusses her own story what becomes evident is the ways in which she uses the same strategies discussed in this project of creating career coalitions and using personal stories and lives to help others see themselves reflected.

Similar to Reynoso's strategy to use her power position to highlight other women and create career coalitions, according to Natalia Sylvester in "In No Uncertain Terms," AOC uses her platform to both change people's perception and spotlight others when she writes, "There are those who'd say that AOC is giving voice to the voiceless, but I disagree. Undocumented immigrants and asylum seekers have a voice, but there are too many people unwilling to listen. Rather than speak for anyone, Ocasio-Cortez has, time and again, used her power and position to amplify their voices. She's taken up and held space so that others may join her in it" (Sylvester 78). This is a strategy used often by the women in this study by gaining power and then using their platform to amplify the voices and stories of others because they recognize the power in standing together as opposed to standing alone and using the strategy of story stacking. In addition to creating career coalitions and bringing other people into the spotlight, another important aspect of a polit-identivist is the way in which they use their experiences to relate to others and legitimizes their platform for power. A polit-identivist does not shy away from sharing about their background and struggles and this is made obvious in Carmen Rita Wong's article "Latinas are So Money" when she writes, "AOC has spoken often and eloquently about her family's financial struggles. This direct experience of financial inequality

combined with a college degree in international relations and economics means that she is not intimidated by the world of money” (Wong 113). AOC’s direct experience of financial struggle becomes a legitimizing factor for her advocacy and fight for economic equality and justice.

In a similar vein, AOC’s personal student loan debt becomes a resource for her advocacy as Wong describes, “AOC brings no shame in talking about her money, especially if it helps to normalize the burden of debt. She was paying her bill in public and on the record, making the point that it is time to challenge and change the status quo” (Wong 116). Her personal struggles as a student facing loan debt become a public act to portray AOC as a normal, everyday citizen who is proud of decreasing her debt incrementally and sets her apart from other older, wealthier Congressmembers, making her more accessible and human. Similarly, in the article “The Democratic Socialism of AOC,” Nathan J. Robinson talks about the humanity of the young Congresswoman when he writes, “her socialism is about elevating ordinary people, and as part of that, she has also foregrounded her own ordinariness. She has shown a willingness to expose her human side, whether by dancing outside her office or having fun with a penguin or getting licked by a dog...If I can do it, so can you” (Robinson 162). What becomes evident in this polit-identivist is the way in which the personal becomes tied to the political. For example, in the same article Robinson notices that “AOC, when asked about the formation of her politics, talks about her personal experiences as the child of working-class parents, and her awareness of other people’s economic struggles during the Great Recession...her political values were informed by what she had witnessed during her own upbringing, including her family’s financial struggles after the death of her

father” (Robinson 149). The personal is integrally tied to the political as Pedro A Regalado in “‘Pa’lante!’: The Long History of Puerto Rican Activism in New York City” argues that AOC’s background contributes to her political engagement and is built upon Latinx political activism in New York City: “Ocasio-Cortez’s heritage matters... She built upon the long history of Latinx political activism in New York, and her victory provides a formula for how the democratic party can re-energize itself” (Regalado 54). Overall, what both the primary sources of AOC’s own voice as well as the secondary sources of people inspired by her exemplify is that she does not shy away from personal aspects but rather uses them to her advantage to legitimize her causes or relate to others and create counternarratives to garner the power to change the status quo.

Social Media

One main method in which AOC takes her story into her own hands, talks back addressing misrepresentations, and sets herself apart in her career is through her adept use of social media. A primary reason in which she was chosen to run out of many candidates was because of her ability to communicate through social media. From there, her competence was solidified through her campaign video going viral, leading to her celebrity status and later another one of her videos from college went viral as a way to tear her down but she turned it into a strength in her relatability, garnering more followers. Despite the fact that she receives so much criticism from both sides of the aisle, I argue that a reason why she has such a large following of supporters is because through her use of social media she is able to tell her own story in her own words and her followers have access to her side of the story that often directly contradicts the criticism she receives. Unlike women in the public eye in the past such as Dolores Huerta,

Michelle Bachelet, and Sonia Sotomayor, she does not have to remain silent, simply take the criticism, and force her audience and followers to wonder what the truth is. She has the power to address it and she consistently does. She models for her followers and for young girls the ways in which they can also raise their own voices and take their stories into their own hands.

Her initial spotlight in the public eye occurred when she posted a campaign video that went viral on May 30, 2018. In the video, AOC is shown as an ordinary, working-class woman. Like the start of the *Netflix* documentary, the two-minute video opens with AOC getting ready, putting on make-up in a small bathroom with a voice over stating, “Women like me aren’t supposed to run for office” (0:13). She casts herself as an everyday woman who is fighting for a position in a space not created for her. Next, she discusses her background while the video displays images of her and her parents describing her Puerto Rican and South Bronx roots, establishing her legitimacy to represent the district she is campaigning for. Next, she is out on the streets interacting with people, taking the subway and describing herself as “An educator, an organizer, a working-class New Yorker” (0:27) talking about her work experience with expectant mothers, waiting tables, and organizing classrooms. She discloses that her plan was never to go into politics, yet she feels like she has to do something because the current elected official, Joe Crowley, does not help working families like hers. She states, “It’s time to fight for a New York that working families can afford” (1:08). She casts this competition as a race of people versus money and then contrasts herself with the other candidate who “doesn’t send his kids to our schools, doesn’t drink our water or breathe our air” (1:33). She uses her personal life as fodder to gain legitimacy as a representative for the people

living in the district. She is one of them and her competitor is not. In a tweet describing the video, AOC asserts that the entire video was home-made. She wrote it and included her family and her actual home in the shooting. On the first day alone, she had 300,000 views.

Campaign videos and the use of social media such as this contributed to her election to Congress, and after infiltrating a political sphere not designed for her in the first place, she continues this trend of sharing and making a space traditionally unknown to the public very open and accessible. According to Andrea González-Ramírez in “Women Like Me Aren’t Supposed to Run for Office,” AOC’s sharing on social media set herself apart as she continued to share about her real struggles and concerns. For example, in the transition time between election and her first paycheck in Congress there was a three-month gap, and she talks about the worries of not being able to pay rent or find a home. González-Ramírez writes, “This display of honesty, combined with her meticulous documenting of her day-to-day life as a congresswoman-elect on social media, gave her supporters an unprecedented level of access into the halls of power” (37). Unlike other members of Congress, AOC is a working-class member who has to figure out logistics such as paying rent and waiting for a paycheck that are not common concerns for other older, wealthier members. One important impact of this direct access to new spaces is that AOC’s followers are able to see new possibilities for themselves that they may never have had access to before in the way that her example offers a counternarrative and what I call aspirational mirroring. According to Mariana Atencio in the article “AOC the Influencer,” “with the exception of the inevitable haters and trolls, most people follow influencers for aspirational, positive, reliable, and relatable content”

(Atencio 126). As identified by Atencio, an aspect of the rationale for following someone is often for aspirational content and as noted in this study, one way in which these women seek to inspire change is by targeting the next generation and offering their personal stories as an example to young girls so that they can see both aspects of themselves reflected as well as new possibility for potential futures through what I call aspirational mirroring. The impact of AOC's use of social media is evinced in González-Ramírez's comment, "Her Twitter and Instagram feeds became obsession worthy, and suddenly young women across the country began wondering whether they could run for office and win, too" (González-Ramírez 37). Her story plants seeds of ideas in young girls to see possibilities they would not have access to seeing in the halls of Congress if it were not for AOC's sharing on social media.

With this platform, following, and obsession, also comes plenty of criticism. However, AOC on multiple occasions has used social media as a resource to change perceptions about her, set the record straight, and shift discussions. According to Atencio, social media has become a source to help followers and constituents get a picture of who a politician is: "As a journalist, I check most politicians' latest posts to learn more about them and their agendas. Whether it's an article they share or a photo of them at work, all of it offers insight into their persona, priorities, the laws they are working to pass, and their interactions with constituents" (Atencio 129). Therefore, the ability to master this self-representation has become increasingly important for politicians and AOC's savvy use of social media has become evident considering she has even given fellow Congressmembers a Twitter course with tips about what to do and what not to do, casting her as an expert of the field. Her mastery has been evidenced with the case of the viral

dancing video. When her critics anonymously posted a video of her dancing in college as a way to mock her and demean her, what was intended as an embarrassing video with the goal of knocking her down, actually became an example of the way in which she knows how to spin situations to her advantage casting her critics as the silly ones. The plan to take her down backfired and made her even more likeable and relatable. For example, Patton Oswalt, American stand-up comedian, tweeted sarcastically, “Well, @AOC is officially done. She’ll never recover from the world seeing her... (watches video) ...dancing adorably and having fun with her friends in high school?” (Twitter). AOC even responds with her own video of her dancing into her office in Congress to the song “War (What is it good for?)” and shaking her finger to the lyrics “absolutely nothing,” laughing and clearly not phased or embarrassed by the video, criticism, or attacks.

Another criticism commonly faced by social media users when it comes to activism or advocacy is the discussion about virtual or digital activism not having real world impact. Often this form of activism has been criticized as being called “clicktivism” because it does not result in real world action but often remains in the digital realm and followers are placated into believing that liking or clicking on something on their phones is enough and can replace action. However, AOC combines her work in Congress with her social media posts and Atencio comments, “At just 30 years old, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez is elevating the agenda on social media and rewriting the traditional rules of governance with every post. Her impact makes it clear that representation matters and that the present is female. She is not waiting for anybody to fix what she believes to be wrong with the system. She is doing it herself, and that’s a powerful message at a time when lots of politicians just keep pandering to women and

minority issues” (Atencio 125). Further, Atencio addresses the criticism of clicktivism when she writes, “However, AOC, who was an activist before running for office, makes sure that her social media goes together with actual civic participation” (Atencio 127). AOC uses her platform to directly call out issues and injustices she sees and has experienced in her life, uses her platform to raise awareness and support, and then acts on these convictions by working in Congress for policy change. A primary example of this was when she attended the 2021 Met Gala wearing the couture “Tax the Rich” dress. She uses her social media platform and celebrity status access to events such as this to advocate for a cause and policy change she works to enact through her political power position. She combines her dissent with her success and celebrity status garnered through her career and savvy social media use.

Celebrity Status + Beauty Bind

One direct result of AOC’s social media use and the virality of her videos was that she became a celebrity because her win shocked people and her use of media made her recognizable. In this spotlight she has received a lot of criticism as a female politician who does not fit the age, gender, race, or economic status mold of other Congressmembers, and whose appearance has been critiqued and focused on often in both positive and negative ways. AOC is an example that bridges the gap between the polit-identivists of this chapter and the attractivists of the next because she uses similar strategies and tactics found in both groups of women. Her personal background and fight as an underdog as well as her use of social media and relatability led to her meteoric rise and recognizability and from there she has used this platform and spotlight to her advantage to fight for change. She directly addresses and calls out issues that her

standpoint allows her to see, and she recasts the criticism of her beauty, womanhood, and appearance as an advantage.

One example of the positive aspect of her appearance can be found in the testimonies of women in the book *AOC: The Fearless Rise and Powerful Resonance of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez* many of whom describe the ways in which her appearance made her stand out and made her relatable because the women were able to see themselves reflected in her. For example, Patricia Reynoso writes, “Her lipstick was the first thing that I noticed...Paired with her Latina-girl hoops, prominent yet unpainted brows, barely made-up eyes, and sheets of glossy dark hair, the effect was more millennial Nuyorican actress than political powerhouse” (40). Reynoso describes her as a “millennial Nuyorican actress” and points out the color of her lips, brows, eyes, hair as well as her accessories with hoops all of which categorize AOC as a “Latina-girl” making her appearance relatable to this writer. Similarly, Lynda Lopez in “Introduction: The Meaning of AOC” describes what attracted her to AOC when she writes, “From the beginning, there was something that intrigued me about Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez—her stunning win over the ten-term incumbent New York congressman and the policy positions that were blowing people’s minds with a progressivism we hadn’t seen from a political newcomer in a while, to be sure. But it was looking at her Westchester Avenue district office address and seeing her apply red lipstick in the small bathroom of her Bronx apartment in the documentary *Knock Down the House*, that drew me in a different way. There was some innate understanding there; something that made me want to root for her. It felt not just familiar, it felt as if it validated my being. It made me think of all the women I knew who came before...the ones who went out into the world without

privilege or a leg up and raised all of us daughters to go out in that world, steeled by their strength and lessons in self-reliance; the ones who taught us to survive so that the next generation could thrive” (Lynda Lopez 2). Lopez mentions her political accomplishments and stunning feat but what really set AOC apart in this writer’s eyes was the relatability of her address, and again her red lipstick. Andrea González-Ramírez also identifies the lipstick and hoops as important aspects of AOC’s appearance and persona when she writes, “She was dressed head-to-toe in white, with bright red lipstick and gold hoops hanging from her ears, in a classic Boricua look that would make women in Puerto Rico and beyond very proud” (37). AOC’s appearance and look are a touchpoint of relatability for other women and an example of aspirational mirroring because her lipstick and hoop earrings allow other women to see parts of themselves reflected while also offering an alternative image of themselves as politicians.

Patricia Reynoso even discusses the influence and buying power attached to AOC’s platform and lipstick when she writes, “For the media, AOC was a content machine that kept on giving. Every angle was covered—from the signature lipstick (which sold out minutes after she tweeted that it was Stila Stay All Day Liquid Lipstick in the shade Beso)...” (41). What becomes evident through the writings of these women is that AOC’s appearance is a powerful connector that contributes to what I call aspirational mirroring. These women see aspects of themselves reflected in the red lipstick and gold hoops as well as revolutionary possibilities for people like them since AOC became the youngest woman to be elected to Congress. For example, Carmen Rita Wong connects herself to AOC through aspects of her appearance and is able to relate to how white men reacted to AOC talking about economic issues when she writes, “Like

AOC now, I was instantly assumed to be dumb, to lack authority or knowledge because I was a brown woman with a funny name who wore lipstick (and, yes, hoops!)” (Wong 110). Another aspect of this beauty and look is its relation to power and how her look not only connects her to others and makes her relatable, but it is also seen as a power move. For example, Erin Aubry Kaplan in “The Center Will Not Hold. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez Is Counting On It” writes, “I love the red lipstick—it’s as cheerily visceral a rejoinder to the naysayers as the dancing, an acknowledgement of AOC’s self-confidence and style, not to mention her sense of play. It is power” (92). Nearly every single writer that contributed to the discussion on AOC mentioned aspects of her appearance, particularly the red lipstick and gold hoops, that become a way for AOC to identify with the Latina look and simultaneously with other Latinas that embrace a similar look instead of shying away from it in order to avoid stereotyping. Instead, she wears it with pride and forces others to change their perspectives and associations. As Sylvester states, “As a working-class woman of color, AOC’s willingness to speak—and embrace—the language of the working-class immigrant families she represents is game changing. It is arguably one of the main reasons she got elected, and now that she has power, she is changing our perception not just of what a powerful Latina looks and sounds like, but of the people whose interests are being served in the White House” (77). She is not visibly changing what a Latina looks like but rather using this image and changing the associations often attributed to her appearance.

“Be yourself” and “She’s just like me” Messages

Another aspect that is common among the women in this study and the polit-identivists in this chapter is that they send similar messages targeted at similar audiences.

In many cases, as evidenced by the children's books that they publish and which are published about them, the polit-identivists target a younger generation often sending a message about being themselves in order to provide role models and empower young girls to not sacrifice parts of themselves to comply with mainstream culture contributing to fugen time-release activism where they hope that the impact of their activism will occur in future generations over a long-term time period. In addition, they use their personal experiences as fodder to recast their challenges that come from their backgrounds not as disadvantages to be overcome but as an impetus for their success. Oftentimes, this 'be yourself' message falls short because it does not always identify the structures or the source of what causes them to be pressured to not be themselves nor does it challenge these structures. However, AOC provides an example of the combination of sending this 'be yourself' message alongside an identification of root issues such as misogyny, racism, classism, and prejudice that she directly identifies, calls out, and works to change.

For example, Jennine Capó Crucet is a Cuban American novelist who faced backlash and controversy in response to a question-and-answer session she did at Georgia Southern University for her book *Make Your Home Among Strangers* (2015). Her book is about a first-generation Cuban American girl navigating a majority white elite college. In her campus talk Capó Crucet discussed white privilege and some students responded by publicly burning her book. Therefore, in Capó Crucet's "An Open Letter to Congresswoman Ocasio-Cortez," she finds a deep resonance between AOC's story and her own experiences which causes her to reflect on the structures and forces that made her feel like she had to 'tone it down' for the sake of not disturbing the peace and getting

by. The phrase that brings this realization up for Capó Crucet is “doing the Latina thing” which became prominent when a Fox News reporter used the term to discredit and diminish AOC. In response, AOC took to twitter and talked back typing, “If by ‘the Latina thing,’ she means I actually do the work instead of just talking about it, then yeah, I’m doing ‘the Latina thing’” (Capó Crucet 16). Capó Crucet describes AOC’s tactic and bravery of addressing criticism against her through social media when she writes, “you did something I didn’t have the guts to do back then: you defined for yourself what ‘the Latina thing’ meant, turned it into a rallying cry” (16). Again, AOC recasts and resignifies what others intend to tear her down as a strength in the same way that she handled the dancing video. This becomes evident when the phrase ‘the Latina thing’ brings to memory Capó Crucet’s own experiences in graduate school where a classmate of hers told her that she did not know how to help her because she was clearly just doing ‘the Latina thing’ in her writing. This experience and resonance with AOC’s story and her talking back through social media causes Capó Crucet to bring back this memory and recast it in a new light using AOC’s definition of ‘the Latina thing’ as a way to assert oneself. Capó Crucet writes, addressing AOC in her open letter, “You are doing the Latina thing and staying true to yourself; you won the primary by being yourself, not by ‘toning it down’—the message I got again and again. I was conditioned away from being myself, having been the only one of me in a room so many times before. My training in predominantly white spaces told me to mute who I was, not embrace it...” (Capó Crucet 20). Whereas in the past, Capó Crucet had taken this criticism to heart and had tried to ‘tone it down’ to fit in or to try to mute herself, she now recognizes the forces that conditioned ‘being herself’ out of her. She describes her initial reaction to AOC debating

Joe Crowley and saw her openly being fierce, angry, talking with her hands, banging her fists on the table, and yelling and Capó Crucet found herself instinctively warning AOC in her head to keep it under control and then suddenly recognized where this conditioned response to not be herself had come from: “but I also instantly recognized this response as my conditioning from grad school, where these things were trained out of me, where I was reprogrammed in a way that actually took away my power while purporting to give me access to power—power that, through my voice, I’d already had” (Capó Crucet 20). Inspired by AOC’s experiences, Capó Crucet directly addresses and calls out the forces that told her not to be herself.

In addition to the ‘be yourself’ message commonly purported by the women in this study, another frequent response to the strategy of sharing personal stories to relate to and inspire others like them to political power by the polit-identivists is the ‘she’s just like me’ message in which many people grab hold of various aspects of her story, experiences, and identity which garners her relatability and success as a politician and influencer. Oftentimes, the particular aspect that people gravitate towards overlaps in the case of AOC’s appearance with her red lipstick and hoop earrings. However, what the book *AOC: The Fearless Rise and Powerful Resonance of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez* reveals is that each contributor to the book found a specific connection between their own lives and hers which led them to support her. For example, Natalia Sylvester in “In No Uncertain Terms” describes how she relates to AOC’s imperfect Spanish being used on TV: “...the first time I heard AOC speak Spanish on national television, I experienced pride, horror, shame, joy, and relief all in the time it took her to form one sentence...her accent, laced with the most subtle traces of English, reminded me of my own” (Sylvester

72). Carmen Rita Wong who was a Latina working in the world of economics and money relates to how white men reacted to AOC talking about money: “Like AOC now, I was instantly assumed to be dumb, to lack authority or knowledge because I was a brown woman with a funny name who wore lipstick (and, yes, hoops!)” (Wong 110). Wong goes on to say that she does not always agree with everything AOC says or does; however, she still supports her because what matters is that she represents people like her in power: “This is about understanding how revolutionary it is to have someone who looks like us, who shares our history and our expansive underrepresented culture, speaking to power. And money—boring, scary money—is key to leveling the playing field. AOC knows that” (Wong 120). Prisca Dorcas Mojica Rodriguez finds resonance with AOC in “On Being an Indignant Brown Girl” when she recognizes a resemblance in the way they talk back: “Questioning mega-powerful men in the ways AOC does is powerful because she looks like me. She and I are both indignant brown girls” (Rodriguez 169). And María Cristina González Noguera in “The Hustle” relates to AOC in a way no one else does: “But of everything that spoke to me about Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, the thing that connected perhaps most of all had nothing to do with politics. I immediately noticed the bond she seems to have with her mother” (Noguera 190). In each case, these women find a different similarity and resonance that affects their attachment to not only AOC’s story and life but also lead them to want to support her career and politics.

Not only do these connections ranging from AOC’s appearance to her relationship with her mother cause all of these people to support her and follow her despite potential differences in other aspects of her work and persona, it also results in a deep emotional

and relational connection that these individuals feel toward her. As mentioned by a few writers, these connections result in a protectiveness of AOC. For example, Jennine Capó Crucet writes, “I think I get so instinctually protective of you, sitting there asking the smartest questions, because (a) that’s how I was raised and (b) I know that feeling too: I was almost always the only Latina in my classes in college...” (14). Similarly, Prisca Dorcas Mojica Rodriguez describes protective feelings for AOC when she receives criticism: “The day I saw Trump publicly disrespect AOC and tweet racist vitriol, I suddenly felt a need to protect her...AOC needs to be protected because AOC is all the women who dare to believe they are the most brilliant person in a room, even when the room is full of men” (170). These people have no personal interaction or connection with AOC; however, by sharing aspects of her personal life, story, and experiences using her platform, AOC creates bonds and connections that elicit emotional responses in individuals who have never met her. The key to these links and relationships are AOC’s first-person accounts where she takes her story into her own hands and meticulously shares aspects of her daily life as an ordinary woman in a space not designed for her in Congress bringing others like her into these places not previously accessed. As a result, her followers feel as if they are like her, they have a stake in what happens to her, they belong, they are a part of what is going on, and need to defend her and this access she affords them.

Double Bind + Breaking Stereotypes

As exemplified by the polit-identivists in this study such as Dolores Huerta, Michelle Bachelet, and Sonia Sotomayor, due to the nature of their careers in politics, these individuals face challenges and double binds as not only women but women of

color in a white, male-dominated sphere of power. They face criticism and backlash due to the outside expectations of women needing to possess certain qualities, yet when these women exert power like what is socially accepted as a man they are perceived negatively and as a threat. As seen in the example of Michelle Bachelet, she uses a strategy and tactic to combine agentic and feminine aspects and re-signify and re-cast them as characteristics of power and progress. What becomes an integral part of this strategy is the use of personal stories and aspects of identity to legitimize these characteristics as integral to their platform and politics. Keegan Michael Key, in the preface to the book *AOC: The Fearless Rise and Powerful Resonance of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez*, describes her as a “Latina policy-making millennial forging a new path in politics” (xi). From the very beginning of her campaigning and time in elected office, AOC faces and navigates criticism and exemplifies how she is seeking to not only not play by the rules but to change them.

These women in the political sphere face a double bind of needing to display certain qualities of strength in order to be considered fit for their positions of power. However, on the other hand they are also expected to act like women, showing a more maternal, gentle, relational side. It is evident that AOC faces criticism when she displays qualities socially constructed to be attached to men. For example, Lynda Lopez describes this double bind when she writes, “AOC is exerting the same power as a man—and a woman who governs like a man is a perceived threat, around whom all manner of negative narrative can spring” (Lopez 9). As a result of attempting to fulfil the expectations of a person in political power and with influence, AOC is seen as a threat and many negative narratives have resulted. One such example of the negative narratives

that have resulted from this are explained by Erin Aubry Kaplan making a correlation between AOC's personal identification and MABA shirts: "AOC calls herself black and Puerto Rican, which is refreshing and important...Her embrace of color is doubtless a big reason why the right resents her so deeply, why there are MABA shirts (Make Alexandria a Bartender Again, featuring AOC with a pinched, unappealing face)..." (Kaplan 90).

An aspect of her identity becomes fodder for criticism and depicting her in a negative, unflattering way. Rebecca Traister in "The Imagined Threat of a Woman Who Governs Like a Man" describes this phenomenon in a different way: "What the reaction to Ocasio-Cortez makes undeniable is that if and when women gain enough power to start behaving, in a political sphere, as men have for so long, they will be viewed with fright and discomfort" (Traister 67). In addition to seeing her as a threat, she is viewed with fear and discomfort. This perceived threat results in a negative depiction of her spread by her critics and opponents to which she responds by talking back, using her own first-person narratives, and for which she garners many like-minded supporters and followers who feel the need to protect her.

In addition to coming up against these negative perceptions of her due to her efforts to navigate this double bind, AOC also comes up against staggering statistics that represent disproportional representation. As a result, AOC and the other women in this chapter utilize the strategies of the polit-identivists to combat this disproportional representation by sending messages that challenge the status quo and re-signify perceived weaknesses or outsider status as advantages to inspire others, provide a spotlight and platform for others to join them and open the door wider for the next generation. In Andrea González-Ramírez's article "Women Like Me Aren't Supposed to Run for

Office,” she describes the disproportional representation in Congress and highlights a slight shift when she writes, “Before the 2018 mid-term election—which brought an unprecedented number of women and people of color to Washington—the 115th Congress was among the oldest of any in recent history. The average age for lawmakers was 58 in the House and 62 in the Senate, while the U.S. median age is 37 years old. And there was barely any racial or ethnic diversity on Capitol Hill. At the time, the body was roughly 78 percent white and 80 percent male... Working-class Americans also did not see themselves represented: the median net worth for House members was 900,000, and for senators it was 3.2 million as of 2015. The net wealth for the average American household, on the other hand, was roughly 80,000” (González-Ramírez 34). What becomes evident is that someone like AOC is not highly represented in this demographic; yet Erin Aubry Kaplan states that she is exactly what is needed describing AOC’s characteristics that show a direct contrast and opposition to what is currently and previously overwhelmingly represented in Congress: “Ocasio-Cortez made us remember who we are because of who she is: she’s not simply a person worthy of being elected—bright, informed, empathetic, people oriented. She comprises all the demographics we need to see more of in government right now: female, Latina, of color, young, concerned about climate change ...” (Kaplan 86). In her eyes, the fact that AOC’s personal background is actually the opposite is cast as an exciting change and an advantage that makes her relatable.

AOC’s opposite demographic descriptors are an indication of the way in which she has come into Congress following an atypical path. In many of the writings about AOC, a common trend is describing her difference from others as a positive advantage.

For example, Tracey Ross in “A Just Society” writes, “while socialism and poverty are two words that don’t seem to have a place in American politics Ocasio-Cortez’s meteoric rise is due in large part to not following the typical politician playbook” (Ross 96). Ross attributes her meteoric rise to actually diverging from the strategies commonly used by politicians. One such example of a strategy she uses to set herself apart is her use of social media. In fact, Mariana Atencio writes, “At just 30 years old, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez is elevating the agenda on social media and rewriting the traditional rules of governance with every post” (Atencio 125). AOC uses social media as a tool to change and challenge the status quo in politics. Again, Nathan J. Robinson in “The Democratic Socialism of AOC” describes how AOC is set apart because she creates her own alternative path when he writes, “That willingness to radically question common assumptions, and challenge prevailing orthodoxies, is just as important a part of AOC’s socialism as any economic theory... These are bold departures from the political norm, and they show that AOC’s socialism is not just a new label but an authentic new kind of radicalism” (Robinson 155). AOC’s platform, identity, and background greatly contrast other representatives and she offers an alternative option that many see as an exciting change.

This departure from the norm cast as an advantage in many ways leads AOC to challenge and break stereotypes and re-signify perceived weaknesses as strengths. For example, much the same as the strategy of Michelle Bachelet in her two Congressional messages after being elected President, AOC uses personal stories in order to connect with her audience and garner support by aligning with everyday people. Nathan J. Robinson writes, “Democratic socialism, for Ocasio-Cortez, is not just about economics

but about a willingness to get out in the streets, to march alongside activists, and to position herself on the side of the people rather than fellow politicians” (156). It becomes evident by AOC’s actions, her rejection of PAC funding, her open critique of the functioning and lack of oversight of the government that she is a representative of and for people like her and that she is on their side as Prisca Dorcas Mojica Rodriguez writes, “a woman who defends herself and those who need her advocacy, who doesn’t function to defend or uphold white supremacy and the patriarchy, is powerful” (167). She is not on the side of white supremacy and the patriarchy and her actions back up this statement. Rodriguez makes clear the double bind that women in power and in particular political power face, writing, “What AOC has said and done is not spectacular for a straight white cis man, but extraordinary for a woman of color” (169). AOC’s example and story makes it evident that despite the fact that this position was not made with her in mind, she was able to obtain this position by sharing her personal stories and experiences, relating to those she represents, and garnering their support. Rodriguez identifies exactly what AOC had to overcome to obtain this position when she writes, “AOC dares to not seek approval; rather, she seeks justice. Women like this exist despite the socialization of girlhood/womanhood which teaches and rewards meekness and deference. Women like this exist despite constantly being told to simmer down and ‘stay in their lanes.’ Women like this cannot be contained” (Rodriguez 168). AOC’s story offers a counternarrative to young girls teaching that characteristics in opposition to “meekness and deference” can be rewarded.

Targeting the Next Generation

In addition to sharing her story and experiences through various first-person accounts including the documentary, social media, and interviews, another way in which AOC and other polit-identivists in this chapter bolster counternarratives is through the publishing of children's and young adult books. As a result, AOC becomes an example and a role model for young girls to see an example of success that does not conform to the meek and deferent girl or woman that is socially acceptable in order to inspire young girls to aspire to political power. One example is a children's book written by Krystal Quiles and Jamia Wilson called *The ABC's of AOC: Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez from A to Z* (2019) which uses words such as advocate, Bronx, Congress, democracy, education, feminist, grassroots, human rights, immigration, jobs, knowledge, Latinx, media, nonconformist, opponents, protests, Queens, revolutionary, science. Teamwork, underdog, visionary, Washington DC, xenophobia, youth, and zeal to describe the youngest Congresswoman. Many of these words reflect common trends and discussions surrounding AOC and, in the introduction, the authors highlight the fact that she is targeting the next generation and challenging the status quo writing, "Whether people agree with her or not, her courage, fresh ideas, and outspokenness make an impression, and they may just be changing the rules of politics for the next generation of leaders" (introduction). In addition, her story is used to incite action in the young readers by stating, "As you gain insight into AOC and her story, maybe you'll discover ways in which you can use your unique voice to plant seeds of change in your community today and in the future" (introduction). This follows what I call aspirational mirroring in which AOC is presented as an example using descriptors to help young girls see parts of their

story reflected as well as providing an aspirational aspect by highlighting her accomplishments and encouraging them to see this as a possibility for themselves.

AOC herself recognizes the importance of children and the impact they can have on the future. According to Andrea González-Ramírez, “In 2012, at 22, she launched Brook Avenue Press, a children’s literature publisher that sought to portray the Bronx in a positive way” (González-Ramírez 29). Children’s books are seen as powerful tools to affect change. Erin Aubry Kaplan also recognizes the power of AOC as a role model and her impact on young people writing, “She reminds us all, especially women, of that feeling that simply being young and emergent is force enough to change the world, or enough to have a shot at changing it. We all need to see the world change, we all need to channel AOC, not just young folk most adept at social media. Though admittedly, it’s the millennials and generations Zers who are most in need of a blueprint and a beacon” (Kaplan 92). The perception of youth being a disadvantage in a political power position such as Congress is disbanded and recast as a force for change. Nathan J. Robinson describes this force and AOC’s role in it writing, “She is part of an ascendant movement that challenges Washington orthodoxy and offers a kind of proud working-class left politics that hasn’t been seen in Congress for many years. She has made it clear that she is in congress to create very specific kinds of social change.” (Robinson 145). Similarly, Mariana Atencio describes the work AOC is doing as, “...she is creating a path for a new generation of lawmakers” (Atencio 127). Additionally, Carmen Rita Wong also discusses the targeting of the next generation: “My strongest hope is that many more of us, like AOC, turn the halls of government and finance less pale and less male. May we make the changes that make this nation more fair and shift the burden from resting so heavily on us

and our families. I hope to be raising my pom-poms for more rebel-rousing Latinas. Maybe it will be you” (Wong 121). Wong describes the intended hope and outcome of this specific targeting and like the children’s books has a call to action making this hope specific to the reader. It is clear that AOC’s youth is transformed into an advantage and a way to relate to and inspire the next generation in the hopes of offering a new path that will shift the demographics in political power.

What becomes evident through studies and accounts of these writers is that there is evidence of a perceived shift and that AOC and the preceding examples in this chapter are connected to this change. Not only are more young people voting but there is also a shift toward socialism, and I argue that the impact of these women is that they are contributing to a more progressive upcoming generation. According to Mariana Atencio in “AOC the Influencer,” “Over the last five years, we have seen a 20 percent increase in 18-to 29-year-olds voting. More high-profile politicians are shifting their strategies to incorporate youth” (Atencio 128). These results reflect evidence of the strategies used by AOC and the other polit-identivists in this chapter to use their platform and success to share personal stories and experiences on social media to inspire the next generation to see alternative possibilities for themselves and to obtain political power. In addition, according to Erin Aubry Kaplan’s article there is evidence that AOC is part of a shift toward the acceptance of socialism writing, “the lack of a living connection to the real fruits of American promise is having consequences, chiefly that an acceptance of socialism is rising among the young. A frequently cited Harvard poll illustrates that young people are embracing democratic socialism more and more, tacking more and more left on practically every issue. AOC is part of this shift” (Kaplan 92). Nathan J.

Robinson cites a similar shift toward socialism writing, “The majority of young people today are more sympathetic to socialism than capitalism, and 70 percent say they would vote for a socialist. This turn is remarkable; for many years, the “socialist” label was seen as political suicide” (Robinson 146). These statistics provide evidence of the impact that AOC is having on the next generation.

These discussions on socialism and environmental justice are not new. However, AOC’s savvy use of social media and her celebrity status bring these policies, messages, and agendas to the main stage and her youth and relatability due to her not shying away from sharing her personal stories result in great influence over both her contemporaries and the next generation. AOC herself can be seen as a result of the influence of her predecessors and the polit-identivists that came before her such as Dolores Huerta who uses her platform and accomplishments to talk to young people and tells them to take credit for what they do and to ask to be recognized because she did not do that in her youth. The impact of this message can be seen in AOC as María Cristina González Noguera describes these qualities in AOC: “Thankfully, you don’t see it as much in the younger generations—that kind of humility that leads you to ask for less than you deserve—and I noticed that immediately about AOC. (Noguera 187). AOC does not ‘stay in her lane’, ‘tone it down’, or ‘ask for less than she deserves’ and her example and her story are impacting her contemporaries and young people and shifting discussions bolstering a progressive upcoming generation. AOC represents a new wave of young politicians who are social media savvy, and she uses her position to share with her followers what Congress and the system are like from the inside. Young people care about personal lives and want to see “behind the scenes” and she knows this, she grew up

sharing about her life, and she gives her audience what they want. These things and this information that people were not privy to before because most Congressmembers do not use social media like the younger generation, become public through her social media use. She seems to be changing and reshaping the rules of politics.

Conclusion

These polit-identivists follow the patterns laid out in the introduction of this project. First, they each gain access to politics through conventional means such as elections. Dolores Huerta uses her relationships to men such as César Chávez to garner access to power positions within the UFW. Michelle Bachelet capitalizes on her relationship to her father, a former general of the Chilean Air Force to access the Presidency. Sonia Sotomayor is elected to the Supreme Court by Barack Obama. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez joins a committee to overturn incumbent Joe Crowley and wins the election.

Then each individual garners an audience through their successes and accomplishments. For example, Dolores Huerta is retroactively seen as a hero now despite being a scandalous and sidelined figure in the past. Michelle Bachelet garnered support through her Presidency and even won the election for a second term as President. Sonia Sotomayor became the first Latina Supreme Court Justice and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez became the youngest Congresswoman.

Once they have garnered attention, they then share personal stories that are painful and describe struggles and difficulties fitting in. In Dolores Huerta's documentary, she describes the sacrifices she made in raising her children as well as

being sidelined from power and criticized as an unmarried single mother. In a podcast, Michelle Bachelet discusses the difficulties of navigating political power as a woman and her experiences growing up in a dictatorship, losing her father, and being detained and tortured with her mother. In Sonia Sotomayor's autobiography she expounds upon her struggles with diabetes, losing her father, and growing up with a low socioeconomic status. In Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's *Netflix* documentary and through her social media accounts, she describes the struggles of being a young working-class person with student debt and familial obligations.

In each case, tied to the sharing of personal stories there is also an instance of metamorphosis and entering a second public life that is less conformist. For example, when Dolores Huerta is not elected as the new President of the UFW despite being the co-founder and leader, she starts her own foundation and begins advocating for women's rights, publishes her documentary and re-writes her own story and narrative not as the sidekick of César Chávez, but asserts that she was the one who coined the term "Sí, se puede." In Michelle Bachelet's second presidency she does not have to prove herself as much as a capable leader and with distance later opens up on a podcast about her personal life and traumatic experiences with imprisonment and dictatorships. Sonia Sotomayor uses her autobiography as a platform to share openly about her diabetes and private life which had been a secret throughout her career. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez uses social media to open the door to the public about the innerworkings of Congress that people like her and her followers normally would never have access to.

Finally, these women use their platforms for advocacy, activism, and targeting the next generation. Dolores Huerta creates intergenerational career coalitions with her

daughters and young girls by using her story and the sexism she experienced. Michelle Bachelet similarly talks about inspiring her own daughter who is now involved in activism. Sonia Sotomayor writes children and young adult books about her own story and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez inspires young people to vote and offers the possibility of entering into politics using aspirational mirroring.

Therefore, this chapter consists of case studies using textual analysis of first-person autobiographical accounts of prominent Latin/x American public and political figures who begin their careers following conventional means to obtain their power positions and from this place of influence, share personal stories as an impetus for activism and causes related to their personal experiences. In addition to the autobiographical accounts, a trend in the examples includes the publication of children's versions of their stories and targeting the next generation. The chapter displays a generational progression from Dolores Huerta fighting for workers' rights beginning in the 1960s to Sonia Sotomayor making history as the first Latina Supreme Court Justice in the early 2000s to Michelle Bachelet serving two terms as President of Chile between 2006 and 2018 to Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez drawing national attention with her election to the House of Representatives in 2018. Despite the fact that these women worked during different decades, and even in different countries, there exist parallels in the ways in which they combine their personal lives with their political and social justice work. For example, in each case, as the women furthered their careers, the more they began to share about their personal lives. They use similar tactics to share their stories in various autobiographical capacities from books to documentaries to social media accounts. What this chapter argues is that a certain level of achievement or success in their careers is a

pathway to opening up about their personal stories and using this as a stimulus for activism targeting the next generation with the intention of encouraging them to aspire to similar careers and offer counter narratives to their perceived potential.

These representatives become what I call “polit-identivists” by gaining political prominence and then turning their careers into a platform to be activists and advocate for the younger generation by using their identities and personal stories. Through the use of their children’s books and projects targeting young people, they explicitly desire to inspire the next generation; however, they sometimes fall short in actually addressing the root issues that cause themselves and others like them to feel like underdogs in the first place. What becomes evident by analyzing the generational progression is the way that advocacy becomes more prominent from the onset of the newer generation’s career and that there is greater awareness and recognition of the root issues that hinder Latin/x American individuals from aspiring to political careers as well as a direct fight against these issues.

Chapter Two

Actractivists: Celebrity Status Turns Activist Apparatus

In Chapter Two I will turn my focus on actors who use the platform and attention garnered by their careers to become activists, or more precisely what I call “actractivists.” In Chapter One, I have investigated “polit-identivists,” public and political figures who, once they attain their power positions, interweave their personal stories with their accomplishments to provide role models for the next generation to aspire to these positions. This is in an effort to alter the representation of both women and Latin/x American people in political office considering the ratio of people in the population to representation in power positions is disproportional. One key strategy that the women in Chapter One use to encourage the next generation to see what potential and possibilities they have is to share their personal stories through autobiographies and first-person accounts. In Chapter Two, I will analyze the parallels that exist between the “polit-identivists” in Chapter One, who work to bridge the gap and fight for increased representation in the political arena, and these “actractivists” in Chapter Two who use similar strategies to increase and alter depictions in another realm of influence where representation does not reflect reality. Like the political domain, another sphere where women have felt excluded is the film industry (both in front of and behind the camera) and the intersection of not only being a woman, but also being a Latin/x American woman compounds this exclusion.

The genesis of this project stemmed from an interest in autobiographies and YouTube vlogging and the way in which Latin/x Americans share their stories and garner influence. I began by searching for autobiographies written by Latinxs and I discovered a

trend in the use of this medium by prominent and famous figures, many of whom were actors. I was not solely interested in their acting careers; in fact, I often read their autobiographies before investigating their roles or the reasons they were famous. As I began reading their first-person accounts, I started noticing patterns and undertones of advocacy resulting from their personal experiences. In the era of social networking sites, when one wants to know more about a person, investigating their social media accounts provides valuable insight into their lives and self-representation. Therefore, a vital component of the case studies entails the use of the women's social media in which the undertones of advocacy became more prominent and vocalized, solidifying an aspect of their public persona as an activist.

In order to increase the volume of voices, I searched for other famous Latin/x American women who were using similar strategies such as gaining celebrity status, writing autobiographies, using social media for movements and advocacy, and targeting a youth audience. As a result, the purpose of each case study is to gather various sources of first-person accounts, from autobiographies to interviews to social media accounts, to understand the social persona of these celebrity Latin/x American actors and how that is related to activism. The focus is not fully on their acting careers and roles, but rather on the public personae they cultivate due to the platform they build resulting from their work. The case studies are combined and divided into sections signaled by sub-headings that begin with a group of women such as Rita Moreno, Jennifer Lopez, and Salma Hayek who were pre-cursors to this form of activism in that they initially called for change in subtle ways that were more acceptable at the time that their careers began and whose activism can be seen to transform over time. Another grouping consists of the next

generation of groundbreakers of Latinx individuals in the United States such as America Ferrera, Diane Guerrero, and Gina Rodriguez whose career trajectories display a form of resistance from the outset of their work and has strengthened and solidified to the point that they work actively to bring others in and influence the following generation.

Paralleling the work of the US Latinx groundbreakers, the next grouping represents Latin American actors such as Yalitza Aparicio Martínez and María Mercedes Coroy who use similar strategies and tactics as the US Latinx actors to garner attention from their roles in order to advocate for social justice causes. The last grouping recognizes the labor of trans “actractivists” such as Daniela Vega and Indya Moore and the ways in which they advocate for causes related to their identities. Overall, these individuals were chosen in order to show the contributions, similarities, and differences of the strategies of various groupings of women attempting to combat a common and pervasive issue of under and misrepresentation across generations and geographic and cultural borders.

Chapter Two begins with the identification of the common struggle faced by Latin/x American women in the film and television industry related to a lack of representation and stereotyping to depict a driving force and motivation that the following case studies of actors are actively fighting against. The various groupings of actors show parallels that exist in their strategies to fight against stereotyping and alter representation and I draw out the ways in which their strategies overlap as well as build on one another. What can be observed as the volume of case studies and voices increases is a form of activism in this common struggle that I call “actractivism” where the actors draw an audience in using their celebrity clout to then turn their platform into activism to influence the next generation and form coalitions to help others like themselves

struggling with similar challenges. This chapter characterizes this form of “actractivism” through individual examples that are grouped in ways that show similar strategies being used repeatedly by different generations in different geographical locations to identify a current phenomenon so that it can lay the groundwork for the study of future generations of Latin/x American actors who will build off and continue this form of “actractivism” used by the women in this investigation or alter it as new strategies and ideas emerge to combat underrepresentation and misrepresentation.

In order to investigate these assertions and identify the strategy of these actractivists, this chapter uses case studies of actors from both the United States and Latin America to show the ways in which women from various locations and backgrounds use similar strategies across hemispheres and geographic boundaries. Each case study gives a brief biographical background of the person and then delves deeper into the ways that they represent and identify themselves using their own words. For this reason, their analysis consists of a variety of sources from first-person perspectives such as interviews, autobiographies, and YouTube videos in which the actractivists tell their own story. In addition to these first-person representations, I also analyze the way in which they represent themselves on social media in order to understand what message they are trying to send and to whom. The use of digital ethnography, from blogs to video diaries to social media posts or stories, allows access to the lives of these women in their real-world environment and enables a peek into the lives of these actractivists without physically needing to be in the same place in a way that is quick and is continually updating. The combination of both their personal stories (told in their own words) as well as their social media give insight into the reasons and motivations for why they send certain messages

or why they are involved in the activism and movements they are involved in. Their strategies for change become clearer through this investigation of multiple cases.

The Struggle for Inclusive Representation

Many critics have written about the lack of representation or misrepresentation of Latinx and Latin American women in film. For example, as Frances Negrón-Muntaner explains in “The Gang’s Not All Here,” “in the relatively rare instances when Latinos appear, they tend to embody the same stereotypes first visualized in cinema in the 1900s: criminals, domestic servants, sexual objects, and comic relief” (107). Despite the fact that recently many people from all backgrounds have celebrated perceived booms in representation in politics, television, and internet markets, many critical voices are wary of this celebration. Jillian Báez, Professor of Media Culture who did a study of 39 Latina women’s reactions to representation in film in the book *In Search of Belonging: Latinas, Media and Citizenship* (2018), agrees with Arlene Dávila, author of *Contemporary Latina/o Media: Production, Circulation, Politics* (2014), that increased, commodified representation of *Latinidad* actually masks marginalized realities of Latinx people. It should be noted that the term *Latinidad* has been seen as a problematic categorization by Black and Indigenous Latinx people who have used social media campaigns to “cancel” or stop the use of the term because of its tilt toward whiteness. What Báez’s study also demonstrates is that media actually becomes a gauge to measure status and belonging. Nilda Flores-Gonzalez’s book *Citizens but Not Americans: Race and Belonging Among Latino Millennials* (2017) mirrors Báez’s connection between media representation and belonging and Flores-Gonzalez concludes that Latinx people feel excluded and disconnected from an American identity despite U.S. citizenship.

Similarly, in *Latina/o Stars in U.S. Eyes* (2009), Mary C. Beltrán shows that participation and visibility on screen does not equate to genuine progress in representation to show a greater reflection of the reality and diversity of the Latinx population in the United States because oftentimes access results in stereotyping and this access is even restricted by the individuals who are able to pass as white. In the collection of essays called *Chicano and Film: Essays on Chicano Representation and Resistance* (1992) edited by Chon Noriega, the authors (Antonio Rios-Bustamante, Kathleen Newman, Charles Ramírez Berg) make analogous assertions about Latino representation in the 20th century. For example, it mentions critics being wary of the so-called ‘Decade of the Hispanic’ where “Chicano representation appeared to undergo a dramatic change, at least in terms of the relative increase of roles and recognition for Latino actors” (xvi). These essays from the decade prior also contribute to the idea that this boom is somewhat of a myth since this is an issue discussed from decade to decade. Each decade perceives an increase and positive change in representation; however, the fact that these booms are criticized in the 1990s and again in the 2000s and again in the following decades highlights the fact that this is an ongoing issue that requires continual progress.

Despite hesitancy to celebrate the seeming success of increased representation, many critics offer ideas for possible strategies to mitigate this issue. For example, in Frances Negrón-Muntaner’s report called “The Latino Media Gap” (2014), the author posits that a possible strategy to combat invisibility and stereotypical representation is increased opportunities for Latinx individuals in directing and producing positions with decision-making power. Additionally, the report demonstrates the power and advocacy effectiveness of the use of the internet and digital tools. In the same way, in *Latinos Inc.*

(2001), Arlene Dávila points out that the internet, social media, and online communities bolster opportunities for more diverse self-representation. Cristina Beltrán also contributes the potential for progress in representation to new technologies and social media with the capacity to voice and protest through nonconformist visibility in “No Papers, No Fear” (2014). Furthermore, Jillian Báez makes the connection between representation and belonging and identifies that the issue is seeing Latinx people and their interaction with the media from a consumer standpoint and therefore urges us to treat Latinx individuals as citizens and visibility should reflect this shift. Therefore, all of these scholars point to the internet and social media as possible avenues for change to combat stereotyping and misrepresentation and indicate roles in decision-making power positions as important to this change. In this chapter I will show the ways in which the activists use these tools, such as digital and social media and directing and producing positions, in an effort to initiate these changes.

Another warning that Dávila makes in *Latinos Inc.* is against a similar issue of Latinx identity based on consumerism to the point where Latinxs are only seen as individuals who are valued for their consumer potential because this will not serve communities of color. She emphasizes the dangers of minority community’s willingness to erase parts of history in exchange for credibility from industries. In the work *The Un/Making of Latina/o Citizenship: Culture, Politics, and Aesthetics* (2014), Eliza Rodriguez y Gibson and Ellie D. Hernández also discuss the contradiction between the simultaneous marginalization and visibility of Latinx people but tie this phenomenon to neoliberalism. Their work looks optimistically at how Latinx artists, writers, and scholars respond to this narrative and the processes of creating a new kind of citizenship through

un/making identities. Overall, what these critical investigations reveal is an issue with representation that has spanned many decades and an unease with celebrating seeming successes in representation that do not fully solve the root issues of stereotyping and misrepresentation. However, there exists a consistent trend in ideas for progress related to media, the idea of representation and belonging that are tied to this resource, and a shift in women's role and agency in the production of this media. The case studies in this chapter reveal that many of the women use these ideas highlighted as solutions by the critics, such as using social media and moving into production roles, to access platforms, increase representation, and create counter-narratives. I argue that these women combine dissent with success by gaining access to mainstream and consumer realms to then work from within to change representation or the rules of access and bring others in.

Actractivism

In much of the scholarship that analyzes mainstream media, popular culture, social media, celebrity activism, and even some of these women in particular, the focus tends to be on criticizing their activism as being commodified, falling short of real change, and not being considered activism at all. Much of the scholarship related to these topics and subjects discusses the term 'feminism' as a flexible, constantly changing term that has evolved, expanded, and oftentimes contradicted previous and contemporaneous iterations and associations related to the word. Therefore, it is excessively limiting to stake specific and definitive claims about what constitutes feminism or make boundaries around what is considered feminism and what is not since it should be an open concept, able to be re-defined over time. It is similarly problematic to discuss and define activism.

The term 'feminism' adapts to emerging ideas relevant to the times considering the different qualifiers to the term such as online feminism, hood feminism, marketplace feminism, popular feminism, post-feminism, and neoliberal feminism. Some of these iterations are used to differentiate different types of feminisms or critique such as the case of Mikki Kendall's term hood feminism. As a result, it is logical that the rise of neoliberalism would have an impact on ideas and would influence different reiterations of feminism and the way we think of and construct what it means to be a feminist or even what gender and sexuality are socially constructed to mean in this neoliberal era and during a time when media is a pervasive source of identity formation, belonging, and citizenship. I understand neoliberalism to be characterized by a shift to deregulation, privatization, withdrawal of the state from social aid, with a free-market capital system and marked by a reliance on capital-enhancing, self-reliant, self-governing, autonomous individuals who are valued for their work, entrepreneurialism, and for being productive citizens that contribute to the market economy (Harvey 2). This shift to neoliberal thinking as both an economic system and a social ideology I believe is the underlying force and impetus that has contributed to the emergence of both post- and popular feminism which have adapted to promote these similar qualities that create a good neoliberal citizen in a free-market capitalist system and has been displayed, solidified, and advanced through the media. Various authors examine post-feminism (Rosalind Gill, Jess Butler, Simidele Dosekun, Amy Shields Dobson) and have discussed three different ways it has been viewed: as an epistemological or political position, a historical shift, or backlash. Gill describes post-feminism as played out on women's bodies and perpetuated in the media to the point where there is a shift from objectification to subjectification;

self-surveillance, monitoring, and discipline are prominent; it centers on individualism, choice, and empowerment; the trend of a makeover paradigm prevails; ideas of natural sexual difference emerge; there is a marked sexualization of culture; and there is an emphasis on consumerism and the commodification of difference. Similarly, Amy Shields Dobson describes the post-feminist girl as confident, strong, capable, and fun-loving, and she focuses on how girls are positioned as in need of protection and surveillance. This discussion and scholarship about the term “feminism” and the various iterations that have expanded the definition reflects a similar phenomenon to the expansion of the term activism to encompass “actractivism.”

Post-feminism sees itself as moving beyond and contrasting with the idea of this previous form of “old feminism,” seen as harsh, negative, and policing women and not permitting them the indulgences of traditional femininity. The dominant feeling is that feminism is a thing of the past, we have moved beyond a need for political activism and instead settle on a consumer-based cultural activism. Influenced by the neoliberal rhetoric of the good citizen who is independent, autonomous, and self-reliant, post-feminism supports the idea that we have the “freedom” to return to normatively feminine interests and this is an empowering choice. However, where this type of feminism diverges from previous versions is that it does not change or challenge structures, it simply re-signifies associations and the issues that now seem to be common sense and a thing of the past that we no longer need to fight for, become more covert and hidden without being resolved.

In a similar vein, another area of study and critique revolves around the term popular feminism. In both cases of post- and popular feminism, the media has played a prominent role in displaying these two emergent iterations of feminism whose qualities

have been facilitated by the visibility of the media to promote the underlying neoliberal logic for these manifestations of feminism. In other words, the media has allowed the neoliberal agenda of individualism, self-reliance, self-governing, and capital-enhancing autonomy to be internalized into the female body and put on display to the point where girls and women equate visibility and purchasing to power. Therefore, visibility becomes the end instead of the means to advocate for power and equality and serves neoliberal ideologies well in that the visibility of popular feminism makes other versions of feminism invisible or harder to find. This is detrimental to other versions of feminism and helpful to neoliberalism because popular feminism does not challenge neoliberal structures whereas other versions do, so that the more popular 'popular feminism' gets, the more ideas that challenge neoliberalism disappear. The main text that has informed my understanding of popular feminism is Sarah Banet-Weiser's *Empowered* in which she discusses the emergence of popular feminism and the response of popular misogyny. Banet-Weiser describes a form of feminism characterized by its extreme visibility that is powered by a rhetoric of empowerment and is safe to support because it is not threatening or challenging to heteronormative femininity. The rise of popular feminism then results in a backlash and intensification of popular misogyny. Other texts (Zobl & Druke, Favaro, Rottenberg, Zeisler) have given further examples of how these ideas surrounding popular feminism have played out and can be seen in the media. I understand popular feminism to be a form of feminism that has emerged in the neoliberal era characterized by its extreme visibility (which hinges on commercial media) and a rhetoric of empowerment. This form mainly serves white, middle class, cis gendered, heterosexual women who are seeking more privilege and is also a type that is safe to exist within

neoliberalism because it does not contest work culture or traditional performances of heteronormative femininity and masculinity. This is a main reason it has become so popular and also because an impetus for its rise was through the publicity of celebrities such as Emma Watson who became the UN Women Goodwill Ambassador in 2014 with her He for She Campaign including men and boys as partners for women's rights and Beyoncé who performed at the 2014 VMAs with the word "FEMINIST" lit up behind her, because they are in the public eye, risk backlash on their careers, and so settle for a more palatable form of feminism that is less likely to offend or disrupt. Visibility and, therefore, media are important to it but with popular feminism it ends there with purchasing feminism. The goal is not social change or equality, but rather solving the problem of women being left out and having low self-confidence by telling them to be a good neoliberal citizen and overcome these feelings and judgments without questioning or challenging the structures or systems that made her feel self-conscious or oppressed in the first place. It is not disruptive to capitalism or mainstream politics and serves neoliberalism, being driven by empowering women to become a better economic subject able to govern herself with a can-do, entrepreneurial spirit of gumption and resilience and where her goods are self-esteem, confidence, and competence.

The term "activism" can be seen to follow a similar pattern to the term "feminism" and this chapter demonstrates the flexibility and evolving nature of the term "activism" especially in relation to neoliberalism. The form of activism discussed in this chapter—what I call aactivism—I believe can be seen as a re-iteration of the term "activism" that has adapted to emerging and relevant ideas to the times as well as the rise of neoliberalism. There is a risk of dismissing the aactivism employed by the women

in this chapter in a similar way to how post- and popular feminism are analyzed in a critical way as always being insufficient in reaching the goals of feminism. The lives, stories, and activism of the women in this chapter can be criticized and seen as examples and cautionary tales of what not to do to bring about radical, immediate change. However, by putting them in a box and dismissing their stories and their work as “selling out” and solely seeking a profit, what is missed is an analysis of what is causing them to “sell out” in the first place, what issues and problems they are facing now that have persisted from the past, what strategies for change they are using now, what impact their form of activism is actually having on the upcoming generation, and what associations are being made between *Latinidad* and activism (more precisely activism).

In this chapter I will look at actors (Rita Moreno, Jennifer Lopez, Salma Hayek, America Ferrera, Diane Guerrero, Gina Rodriguez, Yalitza Aparicio Martínez, María Mercedes Coroy, Daniela Vega, Indya Moore) who use the mainstream film and television industry to gain attention. Once they have this interest and following, I argue that they use autobiographies, social media presence, interviews, and first-person accounts to tell their stories and fight for causes such as increased representation in the film industry, immigration reform, and changing beauty standards among others. In this chapter I show how, as cultural cultivators, their personal stories are infiltrating and changing the film industry because they fight for roles for Latina, Indigenous, and trans people that increase counter narratives and attempt to break down stereotypical representation. They become what I call “activists,” attracting viewers with acting careers and celebrity clout, using their platform to question the institutions, processes, and protocols that gave them this access and following, and becoming activists for

personal causes. In contrast to more traditional definitions of activism, the attractiveness of the women may often not be considered activism due to the fact that it is facilitated online and through mainstream neoliberal culture that does not result in direct vigorous action or a radical, oppositional stance. However, the term activism is an open and evolving concept that is altered and changed over time as new mediums and ideas emerge. Therefore, the term attractiveness offers a new avenue to identify more accurately a form of activism used in mainstream culture by powerful and popular actors that has adapted to the increased use of internet technology and the pervasiveness of neoliberal ideologies. The attractiveness of the women in this chapter exemplifies a strategy and trend of addressing issues of representation through infiltrating the industry and working from within for change. Additionally, their original roles and success as actors are turning into opportunities for becoming directors and producers who then have more power over the stories that they create and perpetuate.

In the following case studies, I am looking at women who have made their way to the center of mainstream media. They are cognizant of these representation issues and use their platform to attempt to change these trends using strategies that I call “aspirational mirroring,” targeting young people and providing them with representation so that they can see themselves reflected while simultaneously offering counter-narratives and possibilities they may not have had access to before and “career coalitions,” creating networks and connections and using their platform to launch others in their careers so that the cycle continues with exponential growth. They use social media and their success to enter into producing roles to alter negative mainstream stereotypes, provide counter-narratives, increase Latin/x American representation, and advocate for various causes

related to their personal lives. Although questioning and altering structures may be their explicit intentions, sometimes however, they bolster neoliberal discourses and commodify *Latinidad*, sometimes without recognizing it because this neoliberal rhetoric is so pervasive, and it often operates below conscious level. Other times, however, they use and exploit this pervasive ideology to their advantage and to get by. All of these examples are important to study in order to identify the impact that neoliberal ideas and agendas, that attempt to discipline and shape *Latinidad*, have on these influential actors and therefore their followers and the upcoming generations. Overall, the influence of these women is creating the idea that a part of one's Latinx identity is to be an "activist" (what I would call an actractivist) which can sometimes become commodified or not go beyond the digital realm. It should be noted that the choice of women who are at the center of mainstream media has resulted in a particular representation of *Latinidad*, skewed more towards brownness or lighter skinned individuals, that does not fully encompass the racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity that the term should represent. This is symptomatic of a larger issue in the associations of *Latinidad* with a white skew and erasure of Black or Indigenous Latinxs, for example.

Pre-cursors to Actractivism: Actors Who Paved the Way

Rita Moreno

Rita Moreno, an actor who moved to New York from Puerto Rico at the age of five in 1936, is most known for her role as Anita in *West Side Story* (1961) and is one of the few artists (and only Latina) to have won all four major annual American entertainment awards (Emmy, Grammy, Oscar, Tony). Simply knowing her career trajectory and list of accolades, the general public would not be able to guess that most of

her life she was a product of the manipulation of other people—they shaped her into a certain mold and identity. For example, on screen she was a sexy spitfire but in her personal life she was submissive and easily manipulated by her mother making her into a baby doll and telling her what her dreams were, producers changing her name, men sexually and psychologically abusing her, and her husband controlling her. The reality of Moreno's situation behind her successful career was made known in 2014 when she published an autobiography called *Rita Moreno: A Memoir* in which she chronicles her journey from Puerto Rico to New York to Broadway to the big screen and the Hollywood scene. She tells her own story in her own words and how she came to be the person she is today by overcoming these imposed forces that were overshadowed and overlooked due to her career success. Despite her unprecedented accomplishments, her story details the struggles of typecasting, stereotyping, and discrimination she experienced navigating Hollywood, a competitive work environment, and a social life. Her main message is perseverance and later in life she describes finally being able to assert herself through this book to disclose secrets about the industry and her true feelings about her roles and relationships.

Autobiography + Documentary

Her story clearly reveals what forms of activism and resistance were acceptable or possible for women at different points in time and for whom. She reveals that she was not happy with her roles or her relationships but, at the time (1950s), it was difficult to resist or challenge these forces. Her disclosure and case allow us to see how the same challenges she faced then still exist today. Yet her story also allows us to compare her case to other women from later generations and recognize that there are different forms

and strategies of resistance today that did not necessarily exist or were not successful, acceptable, or possible previously. There are far more examples and stories that have been shared and are accessible today so that women do not feel so alone and are more prepared and confident to challenge sexism, racism, and discrimination due to the strategy of what I call story stacking made more easily accessible through the internet and social media.

Moreno's memoir came about when Tony Tacone at the Berkeley Repertory Theater convinced her to star in an autobiographical play called *Life Without Makeup* (2011), in which Moreno starred as herself and through which she realized, "I enjoyed the honest sharing with my audience, and learned that when the rusty hinges were freed, the door swung wide open, and their stories poured out to let me know that I was not alone" (285). Her comment exemplifies story stacking in that her initial sharing of her story opened the door for others to share with her their own experiences and stack them onto hers, ultimately helping her, and others like her, realize that they are not the only ones to face the problems and challenges they have encountered. For this reason, she decided to publish her autobiography to permit this catharsis, this experience of freedom in sharing one's story with others, for an even wider audience. The fact that she is writing this book many years later is evidence that in this recent period, women are able to successfully resist in this way, through autobiography and speaking out about issues they did not feel comfortable addressing in the past and the publication of her autobiography is also an indication of her metamorphosis and entering her second public life after. She has achieved her initial success through a more conventional route and she now has the freedom to share more intimate, vulnerable, and personal stories.

Moreno became famous for being a sexy spitfire, yet at the time it was not socially acceptable to talk about sex or to have sex outside of marriage—it would have been a scandal. Therefore, her imposed stereotypical identity and representation on screen was not socially acceptable in her private life. Her book exposes, during a current period of time where it is more appropriate and acceptable to talk about sex, sexual abuse, and discrimination, what was happening then. Her autobiography precedes the virality of the “Me Too” movement that took fire in 2017 and her efforts continue after this flood of other stories with a documentary called *Rita Moreno: Just a Girl Who Decided to Go for It* (2021). In revisiting events that happened fifty years ago, what her story emphasizes now is that her struggles of the past still persist today, and she wants to play a part in stopping these perpetual cycles by sharing her story. It took her a long time to be forthcoming with her story and this suggests that she is comfortable doing that in a time where she feels like her story will be heard. What is striking about the documentary is that there are parallels between Rita Moreno sharing her own story and talking about being raped by her agent during filming when simultaneously the story about Brett Kavanaugh and sexual misconduct accusations came out in the press during his Supreme Court confirmation hearings, underscoring the perpetual nature of these issues. In both her autobiography and documentary, she offers to pull back the veil to Hollywood and reveals the seedy underbelly of the sexual abuse, forced dating, discrimination within the industry, and her version of the truth behind famous stars. Her autobiography allows her to do this work in a way that may not have been possible previously and many other activists are using a similar strategy to resist and speak up about issues.

Beauty Bind

One common characteristic found in the stories of the actractivists is that they share about their struggles with beauty or some aspect of their physical appearance and identities that makes them feel othered. This beauty bind and struggle is exacerbated by their careers on screen, yet their storytelling is relatable to other women and girls of similar backgrounds who are able to see their own struggles and insecurities reflected. Ultimately these struggles with beauty lead them to send a similar message to their audience about being themselves and beauty often becomes a factor in their advocacy. As Moreno tells her story, along the way the reader sees the process of her own awakening to discrimination, racial stereotyping, and asserting her own identity and self-worth. A recurring theme throughout her story is the low self-confidence she felt and her insecurities about beauty. Much of this stems from her relationship with her mother and the high expectations she placed on her to perform, leading her to believe that she had to work for her beauty by using make-up because “[she] knew how much [she] relied on Maybelline and other Woolworth’s cosmetics to create [her] beauty. In [her] mind, [she] never looked better than okay, but [she] knew [she] could “doll up” well and present a glamorous image if [she] worked on it” (84). On top of these pressures, she also felt the cultural inundation of blond beauties and “[she] learned that [she] was the wrong race, that light skin was better than dark skin” (Moreno 37). Initially, Moreno admits that she made sacrifices in order to enter and access the roles she sought to elevate her status, fame, career, and success.

For example, to book her first agent she made herself look like a Spanish Elizabeth Taylor by wearing paler makeup, straightening her hair, and getting rid of her “Puerto Rican kinks” (Moreno 64). As a result, for her first many roles and introduction

to the industry, she was typecast as the universal ethnic and Indian maiden. However, at the time, she comments, “Did any of this strike me at the time as racial stereotyping? I was eighteen wearing a sarong and ensconced on a tropical island set with stars on location in Hawaii. What do you think? It was paradise. And I was having the time of my life” (Moreno 96). Yet, as her story progresses the reader sees how her perspective about her roles changes as she becomes more aware of “a barely veiled sexist slant: that girls should be captured, writhing, and either enjoy submitting or kick till the bitter end” (Moreno 111). However, at the time, Moreno recognizes that she had to make a choice between working in these degrading roles or taking a stand and ending her career because “there was no other way for [her] to go than for those sexy, ethnic roles. If [she] didn’t want to do that, if [she] wanted to concentrate on principles rather than on getting work, [she] would never have made another film, and [she] never would have been on television” (Moreno 152). With comments such as these, it is tempting to dismiss her as selling out for fame, but this dismissal is problematic because it also minimizes or does not recognize beauty standards and the work she did to master them, to read and understand the rules of the game, and to be able to compete in Hollywood which demands attractiveness which was achieved with a very particular set of physical qualities. It is also important to acknowledge the legitimate costs and sacrifices of turning down roles as well as look at what has come out of her work because she was able to achieve success and the strategies of resistance she has used since then to make her story known, open the door for other women, and call out this discrimination and stereotyping.

Activism

One turning point for Moreno occurred through her relationship with Marlon Brando, an actor and film director who was also an activist in the civil rights and Native American rights movements. On screen she played the naïve, hot spitfire but, in reality, she was a hardworking actor. One thing Brando helped her realize was that she was carrying some of the characteristics of her demeaned characters into her personal life, dressing how she thought she should dress, wearing a lot of makeup, and holding a very low opinion of herself. In her autobiography, Moreno attributes an increase in self-esteem to Brando despite the fact that their relationship was complicated by strife, insecurity, obsession, and emotional turmoil that ultimately led to an attempted suicide for Moreno. This contradiction exemplifies the ways in which she was manipulated to attribute self-worth to her standing and relationship with Brando without recognizing a dramatic power imbalance and the unhealthiness of their relationship. Another repercussion of her relationship with Brando was an increase in political awareness because he introduced her to social justice movements.

This consciousness was even more solidified when she landed the part of Anita in *West Side Story*, which depicts a struggle for control over territory in New York City between gangs of white and Puerto Rican teenagers. In one particular scene, Anita is harassed by the Jets, the white gang, and experienced what she describes as “that incredible, amazing, magical thing that happens sometimes when you’re acting, and you have the opportunity to play a part so close to your heart: you pass through the membrane separating your stage self from your real self. For a time, at least, you are one person” (Moreno 183). Her role as Anita altered many aspects of her life because, after winning the Oscar, she began to involve herself in sit-ins, marches, and political movements,

seeing herself as part of the bigger picture and “someone who was now a public figure, [she] had the capacity to help others, or at the very least raise awareness” (Moreno 193). Additionally, her success led her to take a stand in the roles she played. She vowed to never take demeaning roles again which resulted in a sacrifice in her career because her fame did not actually bring her opportunities for better parts as she had anticipated. This fight that was ignited then, and the responsibility she felt due to her position, continues today with her involvement in various causes as evidenced on her social media and in the roles she plays and the films and shows she is producing.

Despite the fact that her role in *West Side Story* was a turning point for her, Moreno still recognizes issues with the movie in that they used makeup to paint the Puerto Rican actors the same color and that Natalie Wood, a white-skinned actor, was chosen to play the lead, María (a Puerto Rican immigrant). Rita Moreno is also an executive producer of and actor in the Steven Spielberg directed 2021 remake of *West Side Story*, in which the cast, unlike in the original version from sixty years past where white actors wore brown makeup, consists exclusively of performers of Hispanic backgrounds playing Hispanic characters. According to an interview with Steven Spielberg in *Vanity Fair*, “20 of the 33 Puerto Rican characters are specifically Puerto Rican or of Puerto Rican descent” (Spielberg, “A First Look”). In addition, Moreno stars in the 2017-2020 Cuban American family remake of the sitcom *One Day at a Time* (1975-1984) as Lydia, the grandmother, mother, and matriarch of the family, which addresses issues such as immigration, sexism, racism, homophobia, gender identity, and mental illness to name a few. Ultimately, despite its popularity and success, this show was canceled from *Netflix* after three seasons then picked up by *Pop TV*, a cable channel,

for one more season due to the uproar by critics and its Latinx and queer fan community who felt themselves represented on the show and then dismissed after a few seasons. According to Jason Ruiz, an associate professor at Notre Dame, in a *New York Times* article, this case constitutes "...a huge loss" and contributes to a "desert of Latino representation in English on TV" (Morales). This example illustrates a brief instance of increased representation that can be seen as a way to placate diverse representation quotas but results in eventual harmful discouragement and active erasure as opposed to indifference or ignoring of Latinx stories and representation.

Initially, Moreno built her fame on demeaning roles that took a toll on her self-esteem and affected the way she viewed herself. Yet over time, and through new roles that gave her the chance to represent herself on screen, she began to awaken to the discrimination she faced. These experiences ultimately led her to take a stand and refuse roles, which was a financial sacrifice. In the end, she moved into producing roles which allowed her to alter stereotypical representation and wrote a book about her life story exposing and discussing these issues to a wide audience so that they would not feel alone and would be encouraged to challenge the same recurring issues that she faced in the past and that still exist today. Her case can be seen as a pre-cursor to the activists because at the height of her career in the past she did not speak out about the discrimination, stereotyping, and sexism she was facing. Yet recently, in the past ten years she has gone through a metamorphosis and entered a second public life where she has used her platform to share her past stories, speak out about these issues, publish an autobiography, and produce shows where she does call out these issues and contributes to the storytelling that helps others feel less alone and more confident to speak and act out.

Jennifer Lopez

In many ways the work of Rita Moreno throughout her entire life and career has helped pave the way for the current generation of Latinx actors to be able to play roles that represent their lives and themselves without having to play the demeaning roles and make the sacrifices she had to make to build her career. Another precursor to the current generation of activists is Jennifer Lopez, who broke into the industry with great impact, becoming an icon and helping other Latinas to expand their ideas of what is possible. She paved the way for Latinas in many new and unexpected frontiers from music to dance to acting, to inspiring the creation of the Google image search with her plunging green Versace dress in 2000, to being the first person to sing in Spanish on *American Idol*, and to starting the trend of celebrity judging panels on reality shows.

Autobiography

In the same year that Rita Moreno published her autobiography, Jennifer Lopez issued her own book entitled *True Love* (2014), offering a diary of the year she went on her first world tour and explaining how her music is autobiographical and chronicles her life story. By taking the reader through the set list on her tour, Lopez reveals her life story and journey to self-discovery, commenting, “at some point along the way, I was no longer Jennifer from the Bronx, I was becoming Jennifer Lopez, the conglomerate. Now I was J.Lo ‘the brand’” (Jennifer Lopez 64). This specific comment epitomizes the effects and influence of neoliberal ideas about production, beauty, economic gain, and hard work imposed on the female body where she is expected to do it all and use everything at her disposal from her identity to her background to her career for advertising and economic gain. Coinciding with Rita Moreno, a common theme in Lopez’s story is her low self-

esteem and overcoming this to discover who she really is by what she would call fighting for and loving herself. A turning point for her was her time on *American Idol* when, “for the first time, people were seeing the real [her]—not the ‘[her]’ fabricated by tabloids and magazines—and they liked what they saw” (Lopez 126). This helped her realize how low her self-confidence had plummeted. The key to what Lopez describes as her liberation, identity, and finding herself was being able to take her story into her own hands so that the audience had access to her own words and self-representation as opposed to the image imposed on her by the media and tabloids. This example indicates the power of autobiography and first-person storytelling that is a common strategy discovered and used by the women in this project.

Targeting the Next Generation

This realization about herself and her own worth caused her to want to help others. Rita Moreno had a similar reaction after she had become a mother, was refusing to take demeaning roles, and wanted to foster creativity in her daughter to be able to express herself. As a result, she merged her new role as a mother with her work, launching herself into new children’s shows, helping kids learn to read on the educational shows *The Electric Company* and *Sesame Street*. There is currently a children’s story written about her life called *A Girl Named Rosita: The Story of Rita Moreno: Actor, Singer, Dancer, Trailblazer!* (2020) illustrating the life of a “little girl who—despite humble beginnings and Hollywood’s prejudices—danced, sang, and acted her way right to the top!” (Denise and Espinosa 1). When Lopez had the epiphany that she needed to love herself, she went directly into producer mode wanting to create a kids’ program or TV show to teach young girls to love themselves. This is a trend among many of the

attractivists: they experience this epiphany or breakthrough in their own lives and want to help the next generation to prevent them from facing the same challenges. They use a strategy of what I call aspirational mirroring and career coalitions.

Lopez practices this with her own daughter who performed with her at the 2020 Super Bowl, singing the song “Let’s get Loud,” a song from her 1999 album *On the 6*. In the Super Bowl performance, Lopez’s daughter Emme emerges from a metallic cage along with a choir of girls in white to sing this song with her mother, wearing a Puerto Rican flag, which was seen by many as a criticism of ICE, Immigration and Customs Enforcement, for keeping children in cages at the border. In 2022, Lopez performed again with Emme on stage at the Blue Diamond Gala at the Los Angeles Dodgers Stadium where she reinforced this be yourself and love yourself message with her fourteen-year-old by introducing Emme to the stage using they/them pronouns.

In addition, she is sending the message to all young girls to use their own voices, be proud of who they are, and to live their lives the way they want. In many ways, her message and story fall into the traps and allure of the demands of neoliberalism to create a strong, independent, hardworking, self-sustaining woman. However, Lopez takes advantage of these messages and uses them to her benefit. This ‘be yourself’ message can also be seen as her way of sharing with young girls about their epistemic advantage and encouraging them to use it. In her career, she is put into a box of beauty and stereotypical sexiness of the hot Latina. She does not completely eschew this but uses it and creates her own narrative so that she is in control and the result is massive economic success. Throughout her autobiography, Lopez comments on how her low self-esteem and seeking approval of others actually propelled her career and made her work harder to be a

perfectionist. Yet despite her success, she realized she was not in control of her own life and story and then began to take charge by flipping the script to the point where her message about loving herself turned into a book, a tour, and her music, further commodifying her supposed weaknesses and insecurities and becoming a successful neoliberal citizen.

Activism

Similar to Rita Moreno, it is tempting to write Jennifer Lopez off as having made sacrifices for success. Unlike Moreno, who explicitly calls out and challenges discrimination and the abuse of the industry later in her life, Lopez does not eschew certain roles. She does not directly challenge or question structures or systems, especially early in her career. Instead, she flips the script and uses these roles to assert her own agency mixing mainstream neoliberal messages with small acts of subversion and resistance creating a hybrid mainstream attractiveness. For example, many of her performances are marked by girls dancing like guys with hip hop moves, crotch grabs, exuding toughness and fight. For one of her performances, she wanted the audience to feel like they were at a club in Havana in the forties, but with a twist because she writes, “it’s always the girls in the sexy costumes, doing the dances for the guys, right? Well, I wanted the guys to be the eye candy in *my Club*” (Jennifer Lopez 214). While Moreno refuses roles, Lopez accepts them even when it elicits controversy and backlash such as her performance at the Super Bowl in 2020. Both Lopez and Shakira received criticism for their acceptance of the performance and for not joining in solidarity with Colin Kaepernick, an NFL player who knelt during the national anthem to protest police brutality and racial inequality in the United States. Lopez recognizes the sacrifice that not

participating would cause for her career and refuses to make that sacrifice. In the end it should be noted that her choices have made her a multi-millionaire which differentiates her from some of the other women who have chosen, as Moreno would say, “principles over getting work” (Moreno 152). Not directly rejecting roles or opportunities can be seen as a contributing factor to her wealth as well as a hindrance to her work being considered activism. However, as her performance at the Super Bowl displays, she receives criticism for her acceptance and for not including people of color in her performance, but also makes a statement about a broken immigration system. Her story and career can be seen as a pre-cursor to the atractiveists in this study who have benefitted from seeing her success, representation, and access in various realms of mainstream media, expanding their ideas of possibilities for themselves, because of her aspirational mirroring, and offering an example of a hybrid form of atractiveism.

Documentary

As this project asserts, many of the women in this study follow similar patterns to garner success, share personal stories, and take opportunities to project their own voices to set the story straight, re-write narratives, and respond to criticism through social media platforms to share their own side of their stories. Initially, it seemed as if Jennifer Lopez diverged from the other examples in this dissertation considering she does not always directly call out discrimination and stereotyping but rather uses more subtle, subversive methods to get a message across as well as avoid economic sacrifices. However, with the release of the 2022 *Netflix* documentary called *Halftime*, her case more closely parallels the other examples and exemplifies the trends and patterns outlined in this project. In this way, these patterns can be seen as predictors in many cases such as the example of

Yalitza Aparicio Martínez, whose case study will follow in this chapter, starting a YouTube channel later in her career to share aspects of her personal life. In each case, the women ultimately end up using some sort of first-person autobiographical accounts even if that means it is not in autobiographical book form.

On June 14, 2022, the *Netflix* documentary releases with the caption, “global superstar Jennifer Lopez reflects on her multifaceted career and the pressure of life in the spotlight in this intimate documentary.” Following the patterns of the other women in this study, later in her career, Jennifer Lopez chooses to use documentary as a way to use her own voice to not only share about her experiences but to also explain and illuminate a controversial topic related to her choices and actions: the halftime performance at Superbowl 54. Additionally, the rhetoric of Jennifer Lopez in her interviews highlights many of the characteristics of the messaging of the attractivists. For example, in the opening of the film as the viewer sees clips of her preparing for her performance, Lopez articulates in a voice over, “My whole life I’ve been battling, battling to be heard. To be seen. To be taken seriously. And now I have this incredible opportunity to show the world who I am. How do I represent all of the things that matter to me? The world is listening. What am I gonna say?” (2:02). What becomes evident by her comment is that her performance at the Super Bowl is not solely a job or an economic opportunity, but it is a way for her to advocate and to raise her voice for causes and matters that are important to her. She carries the weight and burden of representation, and she is cognizant of that. She is aware that representation is important considering she offers an example of career coalitions and aspirational mirroring and the impact that Rita Moreno had on her as a role model early in her career. She describes growing up with a love of

musicals and mentions *West Side Story* as her favorite. She comments, “I always looked up to Rita Moreno. Seeing someone like me up there was so rare. I wanted to be like her. I wanted to be on that stage too” (4:04). Her comment about the importance of aspirational mirroring reflects the sentiment of many of the women in this study in that their ability to see themselves reflected in some way allowed them to see possibilities for themselves that they did not otherwise have access to and which were so rare. Yet, over time we are able to see that these examples have increased, and the impact is growth in representation and a cycle of, as the stories stack, more and more young girls will know of this possibility and pursue it with the hope of increased representation proportional to the population and Jennifer Lopez is contributing to this story stacking and aspirational mirroring by sharing her own stories through social media, autobiographies, and documentaries.

Another common experience and struggle among the women in this chapter is the struggle for roles that are not demeaning, and which break with stereotypes. Many of the women describe starting out in stereotypical roles in order to work and get jobs, yet many of them have a breakthrough in playing a character that they relate to and then that empower them to seek and demand better roles and ultimately many move into directing and producing roles in order to increase opportunities for better characters. Lopez describes this struggle of getting desirable roles and comments on concessions she made in order to work: “As a young performer, every job that I got I did because there were so many in between that I didn’t get. Good roles for women of color were very limited, but I just kept grinding and believing that somehow, someday, I would get that shot” (21). For Lopez, this breakout role was in the movie *Selena* (1997) which led to her rise to stardom

and, as a reporter quotes in the documentary, “You have broken the financial barrier for Latina actresses. You’re making a million dollars a picture, breaking a cultural barrier in Hollywood” (22:30). In many ways Lopez is a groundbreaker for many Latina actors.

Yet this rise to stardom also brought with it a lot of criticism and tabloid publicity that she was not able to call out and address in her own words until much later in her career. Lopez explains, “No matter what I achieved their appetite to cover my personal life overshadowed everything that was happening in my career” (25:16). A common trend among all of the women in this study is that once they have garnered success there is an increased interest in the personal aspects of their lives. In the past, at the time Lopez rose to fame, social media and the sharing of personal parts of celebrity lives was not common. In contrast, the women who are in these careers today have the power and ability to talk back and have a platform to share their sides of the story which often ultimately result in less ridicule and criticism because they are able to address rumors directly. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez is a perfect example of talking back to critics through her social media platform. However, Lopez did not have any form or outlet to address criticism at the time and this resulted in tabloid bullying and a false image that Lopez feels did not represent herself.

Later she similarly describes this issue in her career and the roles she plays when she discusses the movie *Hustlers* (2019) and a shift to a production role. She explains, “When I got *Hustlers* it was exciting. It was gritty. It had substance. That’s something that I fought for in my career...this is a film about women who had limited options and had to make hard choices. These characters remind me of women I knew growing up in the Bronx” (5:30). Lopez is excited for a role where she is able to simultaneously see

herself reflected as well as offer a form of mirroring to her audience in a way she believes “has substance” and this is a unifying factor and desire among the women for roles that they believe resonate with themselves and others like them. This example also demonstrates the trajectory of the attractivists of affecting this cycle by moving into production roles. Lopez was a producer on this film with a set entirely composed of women and she describes this phenomenon and cycle in the documentary saying, “Hollywood is run by men. They have ideas about what’s gonna sell and what’s not gonna sell and we’re trying to change that. As a producer, one of my goals is to make movies that entertain people but that also have something to say” (6:55). Lopez follows the pattern of turning her career success into power positions with the ability to alter the narrative and bring others into these careers to perpetuate similar cycles in others’ careers.

In the documentary it becomes evident that, over time, Lopez makes a shift, paralleling what I call a metamorphosis and second public life and her performance at the halftime show reflects this shift. For example, the documentary shows a clip of Jennifer Lopez in an interview in 2014 with Hoda Kotb who comments on the fact that Lopez’s songs are all about love. Lopez comments jokingly, “Some people write about politics and social issues and—[laughs]...No, thank you” (14:31). However, fast forward to 2019 and Lopez reflects on this comment she made in the past and goes on to describe the opportunity she has with her Super Bowl performance to say something bigger. She says, “I’m not into politics. I’m not that person, but I was living in a United States that I didn’t recognize. I was afraid for my kids, for their future...The cages. The image of the cages for me...I couldn’t believe what I was watching...you don’t rip a child from their

parents. There's just certain things as a human being you don't do. What is my message and what do I stand for? It made me realize that I have a responsibility to not be quiet, to not...just leave the politics to everybody else" (15:00). As Lopez makes these comments that contrast previous interviews she has done, the documentary shows clips of images of the border and immigrant children in cages with a voice over of Donald Trump talking about immigrants. The documentary gives an insider look into the planning for the performance and Lopez describes the vision of the little girls that join her on stage and the message that she hopes to send to and about the next generation: "Hundreds of girls in light cages. A choir of little girls on the field singing. What you want, a feeling of these Latinos in cages, and you can't keep us there. We won't...we won't have that. The concept is this next generation is not going to be suppressed in the way that we were...we have to be subtle with our message because people don't want to be hit over the fucking head with it" (40:42). This quote represents a prime example of the attractiveness described in this chapter. An explicit goal is to help the next generation and prevent perpetual cycles of the same challenges she faced growing up, yet her acts of subversion are more subtle representing an intermediary form of activism.

Lopez's description of her strategy of presenting her message about immigration epitomizes the strategy used in many of these case studies: they combine dissent with success. She explains, "This is a dark subject matter, but we can get the message across in a beautiful way, where it's soft, and it can be received then maybe more people get the message" (42:28). This sort of comment can be seen as falling short and would be criticized as not being considered activism or being critiqued in a similar way to popular feminism that makes the stance more palatable and less powerful; however, this

combination of a softer message presented on such a large scale (because she has garnered success and has the large platform of the Super Bowl), exposing millions of people to an issue they may otherwise ignore or not have access to, should not be dismissed because these instances come together throughout all of these case studies with a similar message that gets reiterated, making it harder to ignore in total. The documentary even reveals that the day before the Super Bowl, the highest authority of the NFL saw the plans for her performance and made it clear that she cannot use the cages in her show. However, Lopez does not waver. She asserts, “For me, this isn’t about politics. This is about human rights. I’m facing the biggest crossroads of my life, you know, to be able to perform on the world’s biggest stage. But to take out the cages and sacrifice what I believe in would be like never being there at all...the Super Bowl is tomorrow and we’re not changing anything” (1:18). It becomes clear through the documentary that her halftime show to her is not just a performance and she had to fight for her message to be a part of the show. When she comes up against regulatory forces about her performance, she does not back down from this message. Talking to the NFL representative on the phone she emphasizes, “I’m trying to give you something with substance, not just us out there shaking our fucking asses and fucking belly dancing. I want something real, something that’s gonna make a statement, that’s gonna say we belong here and that we have something to offer. That’s what I want to do and that’s what I’m trying to do. I can’t do it if you guys keep pressing us for fucking seconds and minutes, and we’re fighting” (1:11). Lopez’s goal for the performance is a message about belonging and human rights and she refuses to be thwarted in this mission. She uses her stage and platform as a performer to voice it.

She even reads the mission statement for her performance. Initially, her being chosen to perform alongside Shakira was an insult considering typically a single artist is chosen to perform the halftime show and is allowed to invite guest performers if desired, so the choice of two women appeared to send the message that they needed two Latinas to do the job that one artist historically has done. However, Lopez makes the best out of the situation and twists this into a message with her mission statement: “This year’s Super Bowl halftime show is a statement to a divided country, declaring the importance of kindness, inclusivity, and compassion. A reminder that we are always stronger, always better when we do things together! Shakira and Jennifer together for the first time in Miami to craft a powerhouse performance that does just that. Not just two strong women, but two Latinas performing at the Super Bowl halftime show showing we are all limitless!” (16:16). Her activism represents an intermediary form considering she does not call into question the “American Dream” but rather her message is of unity and working together and allowing anyone to pursue the American Dream through hard work; yet, she does not completely shy away from making a statement and calling out existing systems, structures, and leaders that are perpetuating discrimination and injustice and she uses her platform to do it.

The end of the documentary exemplifies another pattern of the activists in that activism and advocacy are typically an explicit part of their public persona. As the documentary wraps up, across the black screen in white lettering is a list of Lopez’s accomplishments including her awards, albums, sales, and the launch of an organization called Limitless Labs. The screen cuts to clips of Lopez sitting with a group of women and the owner of Goldman Sachs talking about her organization. Her message aligns with

a common message of the actractivists about the strategy of career coalitions and using one's platform to boost the careers of others when she says, "When you're that person...when you realize over and over you're, like, the only woman in the room or you're the only Latina, what it made me think is that maybe I was the first Latina woman to be in that room, but I wasn't gonna be the last" (1:32). The culmination of her entire documentary is focused on advocacy and ends with the program put in place describing, "One year after launching a partnership with Goldman Sachs to support female entrepreneurship, Jennifer Lopez's Limitless Labs entered into partnerships with Grameen America to enable over \$14 billion of investments for low-income Latina entrepreneurs by 2030" (1:32). Overall, Lopez's case follows many of the patterns shared among the actractivists by turning her career as not just an actor but a dancer and singer and global icon into a platform for activism, moving into production roles to offer counter-narratives, using aspirational mirroring, and creating career coalitions. The fact that the documentary ends with the accomplishment of her organization indicates a primary concern for Lopez at this point in her career being supporting and advocating for other women in business.

Salma Hayek

In a similar vein to both Rita Moreno and Jennifer Lopez, Salma Hayek, a Mexican born American actor who entered the Hollywood scene in the 1990s, struggles with and speaks out about similar issues of abuse, low self-esteem, and being sexualized in the industry. Whereas Moreno and Lopez write about their humble beginnings and struggles to work hard to achieve the American dream, Hayek, in contrast, came from a wealthy family. After becoming a celebrity in popular Mexican telenovelas, Hayek

decided to move to the United States where, despite her economic advantages, she nevertheless struggled like Moreno and Lopez to get prominent roles, or to avoid being typecast as a sexual object. Moreno and Lopez move into production roles after they have achieved their success; however, because of her capital, Hayek was able to open her own production companies called Ventanarosa and Ventanazul, which were contributing factors to her success. For example, Hayek starred in and produced the movie *Frida* (2002), a biographical account of the Mexican artist Frida Kahlo, which won Academy Awards and was celebrated (and critiqued) for bringing Latina representation to the big screen but also put her in a vulnerable position of abuse with Harvey Weinstein. In addition, she executive produced the American comedy-drama series based on the Colombian telenovela *Yo soy Betty, la fea*, translated as *Ugly Betty* (2006-2010), winning many awards such as two Golden Globes, a Peabody Award, and ALMA (American Latino Media Arts) Awards. Hayek's ability to own a production company boosted her career and offered opportunities to other actors, such as America Ferrera, to play roles that break with stereotypical representation forming what I call career coalitions by using her power and platform to bring others in and boost their careers.

Paralleling Rita Moreno's admission in her autobiography, Salma Hayek also talks about the discrimination and abuse she faced in the industry. For example, in an article for *The Guardian*, Hayek discusses her initial job search and the rejection she faced when she comments, "I had studio heads say to me, 'You could have been the biggest star in America, but you were born in the wrong country. You can never be a leading lady, because we can't take the risk of you opening your mouth and people thinking of their maids'" ("Salma Hayek"). As a result, the first roles she played put her

in the box of the stereotypical sexy Latina in, for example, *Desperado* (1995), *Wild West* (1999), and *From Dusk Till Dawn* (1996) in which she has a famous strip-tease scene dancing seductively with a python in a bar packed with men that forced her to overcome a fear of snakes in order to keep the role and pay her rent despite the fact that the scene was not in the original script. In many recent interviews, Hayek comments on the stereotypical nature of her roles; however, with her own production company she has the power to create new content and counter-narratives to tell a different story with, for example, *Frida*, which she passionately wanted to bring to life “to show [her] native Mexico in a way that combated stereotypes” (Hayek, “Harvey Weinstein”) and in the case of *Puss in Boots* (2011), she comments that she was hired *for* her accent, as opposed to how she typically could not get roles *because of* her accent.

First-Person Stories

Rita Moreno uses her autobiography as a place to expose the sexual abuse she faced in her career and Salma Hayek unveils similar mistreatment but through a different medium than publishing an autobiography. She wrote an article published by the *New York Times* about Harvey Weinstein and joined the social media movement #MeToo. In December 2017, the *New York Times* published Hayek’s article titled “Harvey Weinstein is My Monster Too” in which she describes the way she had been made to feel like a nobody (reflecting similar self-confidence and low self-esteem issues expressed by both Rita Moreno and Jennifer Lopez) and how hearing other women’s stories of their abuse forced her to face details she had tried to ignore. Ironically, it was her film *Frida*, which she hoped to be a liberating character from the stereotypical ones she had played previously, that brought her into contact with Weinstein and what she describes as his

demands, his manipulation, and his rage. Driving to the core of her insecurities, Weinstein told Hayek he was going to shut down the movie because “the only thing [she] had going for [her] was [her] sex appeal and that there was none of that in this movie” (Hayek, “Harvey Weinstein”). In many ways, Hayek is criticized and written off for her roles; yet her article reveals that despite her efforts to stray from being a sex object, she was relentlessly asked by Weinstein “for more skin, for more sex” (Hayek, “Harvey Weinstein”) and forced to do a sex scene with another woman (Ashley Judd) and full-frontal nudity before the filming of which she describes violently crying and throwing up, feeling she had no option to say no. According to an interview Hayek did with *NBC News*, the reason she had such an adverse reaction to this scene was not related to being naked with another woman but because she would be naked with Judd “for Harvey Weinstein” (Siemaszko) and that is what sickened her. In the end, with the success of the movie, she felt like she had gone to war with Harvey and won, but she comments, “why do so many of us, as female artists, have to go to war to tell our stories when we have so much to offer? Why do we have to fight tooth and nail to maintain our dignity?” (Hayek, “Harvey Weinstein”). Like both Moreno and Lopez who talk about low self-esteem, Hayek struggled with these insecurities and fears for years until she was able to tell her story and offer others with similar experiences the comfort of knowing they are not alone, and she finally decided to tell her story after other women shared theirs in the #MeToo movement. Hayek tersely sums up the shift today that allows women to come out with their stories when she writes, “women are talking today because, in this new era, we finally can” (Hayek, “Harvey Weinstein”). Resembling Rita Moreno’s story, Hayek’s allows us to see what forms of activism have become possible and effective post-#MeToo

in the era of social media sharing and the accumulation of voices which increases power and legitimacy through story stacking.

In “Constructing Race, Ethnicity, and Gender as Mainstream Global Commodities,” Isabel Molina-Guzmán criticizes Hayek and the ways in which she “mobilizes stories of xenophobia, racism, and racial discrimination to reinforce the authenticity of her status as a U.S. based Latina cultural producer” (144). In many ways, Hayek uses her personal stories and experiences as a commodity to further her career. She controls the narrative on her identity and at different times aligns herself with different groups in order to boost her career, image, and belonging. In some cases, she says she is Mexican to access Latin American groups and belonging, sometimes she circulates narratives to allow her to be a member of U.S. *Latinidad*, and other times she draws on her Spanish descent to create a space, a gap for her production that others cannot occupy. She becomes a sort of chameleon, using autobiographical stories of discrimination to solidify and authenticate her status and membership in Latinx groups. Therefore, she attributes her success to her ability to overcome discrimination. In correlation with the ideal neoliberal citizen, she overcomes her disadvantage by becoming a producer of her own company, opening the doors to Latina and Latin American actors. She was not getting the opportunities she wanted for roles, so she took matters into her own hands and created her own production company. However, her *New York Times* article reveals that this choice to produce *Frida* was wrought with complications and abuse in order for her to complete the movie. Molina-Guzmán recognizes the need to nuance her criticism of Hayek because although Hayek “participates in the symbolic colonization of *Latinidad* through the reproduction of

dominant norms that homogenize Latina/o identity as gendered, racialized, foreign, exotic, and consumable,” Hayek also simultaneously “destabilizes dominant media discourses about *Latinidad* by demanding increased visibility and more complex stories that symbolically rupture or fragment the commodification of difference” (Molina-Guzmán 137). Molina-Guzmán’s critique suggests that Hayek cannot be seen as either a complete sell-out, or a complete activist, but rather exists somewhere in between like many of the other activists in this study. These activists have created a new space for their form of activism that should not be immediately written off because their activism is not radical and does not completely eschew, attack, or topple dominant systems and structures, but rather works within the structures to incrementally change and shift with a hybrid form of mainstream activism.

Hayek is initially placed in a box of being the stereotypical sexy Latina. At the beginning of her career, she took advantage of her qualities and beauty in order to access roles. She is criticized for selling out and staking claims to identities to fit the mold in mainstream media. Ultimately, her production company allowed her to expand her career. Yet despite her success, she feels she is still reduced to a Mexican woman with an accent who is the victim of manipulation and abuse by powerful men such as Weinstein and whose success is belittled due to the fact that she married a rich man, Francois-Henri Pinault, a French billionaire, and has a life and success that dominant culture insinuates she does not deserve. For example, in *Town and Country Magazine*, she comments, “a lot of people are very shocked that I married who I married. And some people are even intimidated now by me...but it’s another way of showing racism. They can’t believe this Mexican ended up in the life she has, and they’re uncomfortable around me” (Day).

Hayek has often been involved in controversy over the comments she makes such as her confrontation in 2017 with Jessica Williams, a Black American actor and comedian, during a Sundance Film Festival luncheon when Williams reportedly “delivered the A-listers a free lesson in intersectional feminism” (Dry) and discusses the use of the word ‘victim’ after Hayek made a comment about core identity as a human and not falling to victimization. Hayek draws on the generational gap between herself and younger actors when she addresses Williams, “Baby, I’m Mexican and Arab...I’m from another generation, baby, when this was not even a possibility” (Dry). This conversation and controversy turned into a conflict between two competing groups fighting within horizontal hierarchies for what seem to be limited resources and opportunities.

According to Arcelia Gutiérrez in “Situating Representation as a Form of Erasure: #OscarsSoWhite, Black Twitter, and Latinx Twitter,” this type of conflict between what she refers to as “competing ethnoracialized counterpublics” (1) is common. In her study, she uses Twitter to analyze Latinx discourse revolving around the #OscarsSoWhite movement, which calls out the white-dominated Oscar nominations and lack of diversity, and the resulting conflicts revolving around the anti-Blackness of non-Black Latinx comments and Tweets, in particular, that erase the existence of Black Latinxs. What ultimately occurs is comparison, competition, and conflict between groups who use “whataboutisms” (15), operate on a Black-white binary, and the focus shifts from structural change that challenges white supremacy to horizontal competitions between groups. In her conclusion Gutiérrez asserts that there is “potential to shift the discursive underpinning from competition to dialogue, thereby critiquing anti-Blackness, whiteness and power and engaging in solidarity” (14). Hayek’s more recent controversy revolving

around feminism and victimization reveals a generation gap between women such as Rita Moreno and Jennifer Lopez who paved the way and worked in a time of expansion of roles for Latinxs in the media. In the beginning of their careers, they were not able to play the roles that eschewed stereotypes like they desired, but rather had to play those roles to garner success and then have the ability to turn down roles, move into production positions, and alter the narratives. However, they are often involved in controversy and conflict, criticized, and called out today for a lack of understanding by groups that are trying to build racial coalition and solidarity due to this shift toward dialogue instead of competition. The stories of these pre-cursors are important to study to see the path they paved for the following generations, the issues that have persisted from the past, and the new strategies being used in following generations to alter these issues.

Groundbreakers in Atractivism: Solidifying a Path for the Next Generation

America Ferrera

One such example of changes in opportunities for roles due to changing times and the efforts of the women who paved the way is the career of America Ferrera, an actor, producer, and director born in California in 1984 to Honduran parents and known for her roles in *Real Women Have Curves* (2002), *Ugly Betty* (2006), *How to Train your Dragon* (2010), and *Superstore* (2015). As a result of these changes in opportunities for less stereotypical roles, a new era of activism has emerged. Whereas the previous generation of actors were able to use autobiographical accounts through writing books to share their stories and expose challenges and abuse they faced during a time when it is easier and more socially acceptable, the next generation has been able to build upon this by also producing autobiographies as well as extending their storytelling to social media,

becoming activists whose social media accounts are popularized and populated due to their successful careers. Consequently, their personal lives and public persona become deeply entrenched with their activism—a major function of their social media is for advocating for causes. As opposed to the previously mentioned actors who started their careers with demeaning roles, America Ferrera discusses similar struggles; yet from the beginning, she refused to take these roles. Both Rita Moreno (as Anita in *West Side Story*) and Salma Hayek (as Frida in *Frida Kahlo*) had similar moments in their careers where they finally landed a role for a character that they felt represented themselves, in contrast to the roles they had previously played, and this moment was a turning point for them. They had to pass through many roles before this turn; however, America Ferrera acknowledges that she was lucky because right from the outset of her career she caught her break with Ana in *Real Women Have Curves* (2002) in which she played a normal, overweight, Latina girl like herself which broke with many of the typical conventions of the beautiful Latina stereotyped by Hollywood. Starting her career with this role empowered her to turn down stereotypical typecasting in the future. Salma Hayek paved the way for Ferrera's next big role as Betty on *Ugly Betty* (2006), in which again she plays a stereotype-breaking quirky Mexican American woman who wears adult braces and unusual clothes working in the fashion industry, because Hayek utilized her own production company to create this role and opportunity contributing to career coalitions.

Activism

In many ways, Ferrera's roles on screen form part of her activism and fight for changing representation. Due to her success, she has moved into producing roles in which she is able to control the story and produce content and opportunities for other actors to

not have to make the same sacrifices that Moreno, Lopez, and Hayek had to make, for example. However, her work does not end there. Her career on screen has become a launching pad for other causes that Ferrera has organized and advocated for in her personal life.

For example, she was the opening speaker for the Women’s March on Washington in 2017, she is actively involved in getting Latinos to vote through her involvement with Voto Latino, she spoke at the Families Belong Together protest in 2018 to object the administration’s family separation and detention policies, she participated in the #MeToo campaign and was a founding member of the Time’s Up legal defense fund to support victims of sexual harassment as a response to the Harvey Weinstein case; she has created her own organizations and movements such as “I Will Harness” and “She Se Puede” (now called “Poderistas”) on Instagram to openly talk about issues within the industry, she has moved into producing and directing roles on the Netflix show *Gentefied* (2020), featuring a Mexican-American family fighting against gentrification for their neighborhood and restaurant, and *Superstore* (2015), highlighting a group of quirky co-workers at a big-box store, and she uses first-person narratives and aggregates other voices to amplify their stories with her published book *American Like Me* (2018) to open doors for other people and for the next generation to come by creating stories and images that allow them to see themselves represented. She contributes to what I call aspirational mirroring because she pursues and creates opportunities where young people can see themselves reflected, sometimes for the first time, but also in new ways where their possibilities, which may have seemed limited before, become clearer and broader.

First-Person Stories

One important aspect of her activism is the way in which she uses her own personal stories to help others (following a similar trend to other women in this chapter). For example, in a 2019 TED Talk entitled “My Identity is a Superpower—Not an Obstacle,” her exposition reflects much of what is included in her book and reveals the struggles she has faced because of her appearance, background, and identity. Like many other influencers in this neoliberal era who send messages about “being yourself,” she encourages others to not see their identities as a hindrance. However, in contrast to others who use this message without identifying what forces would tell her not to be herself in the first place, Ferrera directly calls out the systems and structures and the industry that cause herself and others like her to feel and think this way. For example, as a kid she had a dream to be an actor, yet everyone around her told her that was not possible for a girl like her. Ferrera discusses, however, that growing up as an American she believed the competing mainstream messages that told her that her possibilities were endless if she worked hard. With *Real Women Have Curves* (2002), she had her first breakthrough, and like Moreno with *West Side Story* (1961), she believed that things would change, and she would not be asked to play “chola number two,” a slang term referring to a young, tough, Latina of Mexican descent with connections to a gang, any longer. However, nothing changed, and it took four years for her to get her role on *Ugly Betty* (2006), which was a huge success, but there was another eight-year gap for another Latina led show.

Her story also includes many examples of her speaking up/talking back to people in the industry, which is different from, for example, Rita Moreno and Salma Hayek who did not really speak out about their discomfort or discontent in the industry until much later in their careers. For example, Ferrera talked back to the casting woman that said she

should sound more Latina (when she is a Latina, and she does not speak with broken or heavily accented English) and she reprimanded her agent and told him what roles she wanted to have and what roles she would not settle for. When her agent told her she was unrealistic, she fired him. She exhibits more agency than Rita Moreno because it is a different time under different structural and cultural conditions, and she has had more examples of women resisting than Moreno when she was acting and auditioning. At the start of her career, Ferrera continually heard the same message that her identity was an obstacle to be overcome. As a result, and as revealed in the TED Talk she does called “My Identity is a Superpower,” she started staying out of the sun, straightening her hair, and losing weight like Moreno, Lopez, and many others did. Initially, this took a toll on her self-esteem and caused her to believe that her failures were her fault until she realized “that [she] was never actually asking the system to change. [She] was asking it to let [her] in, and those aren’t the same thing. [She] couldn’t change what a system believed about [her], while [she] believed what the system believed about [her]...[she] believed that it wasn’t possible for [her] to exist in [her] dream as [she] was. [She] went about trying to make herself invisible” (Ferrera, “My Identity is a Superpower”). In the end, Ferrera concludes that she has to stop resisting who she is and that her identity is not her obstacle, it is what should propel her because she looks like what actually exists in the world. She directly calls out the system for trying to create a new reality and resisting the one that already exists by admitting that she was drawn into this beauty game, she attempted to alter her appearance to participate and compete, but ultimately hopes to shift this by telling her story and calling out these issues for young girls to recognize and not feel pressured to uphold.

Instead of telling others to just be themselves, Ferrera directly addresses and calls out issues in the industry. In an interview with Trevor Noah, she comments, “We should be able to walk into places as our whole selves. We shouldn’t have to strip away pieces of ourselves to be accepted in these mainstream spaces” (“America Ferrera-Standing”). She articulates that she should not have to make sacrifices to be invited to the table and she uses her celebrity status and success to try to change the narrative of stereotypical representation by producing shows and creating more opportunities for different representation. Her message is that her identity is actually her superpower. What sets her apart and makes her different—the parts of her that do not fit the mold—is what she is trying to encourage in others. At the same time, her stance and activism have costs and sacrifices in that she turned down many roles that had stereotypical representation which resulted in economic loss. She also recognizes that she had become a part of perpetuating the system because “it is possible to be the person who genuinely wants to see change while also being the person whose actions keep things the way they are” (Ferrera, “My Identity is a Superpower”) when she would straighten her hair, try to lose weight, and stay out of the sun. Eventually she realized that she should not try to make herself invisible and that not getting roles was not her fault. Those were lies that she believed for a long time, but by sharing her realization and story, she helps younger girls come to this conclusion sooner than she did because her celebrity status, social media presence, and influence give her a platform and access to an audience that will likely listen to her.

America Ferrera seems to be the start of a new generation of women who refuse roles and use their social media for activist causes. Many of the following individuals in this work directly recognize and acknowledge that mainstream arenas lack diverse

representation and often require sacrifices for entry. Ferrera identifies exactly what Arlene Dávila discusses in a talk given in 2016 at the U.S. Latinx Arts Futures Symposium. Dávila comments on moments of boom for Latinx culture that have been celebrated. Despite this perception, these seeming successes simply show how mainstreamed the stories have become and how assimilation is not threatened through this: they merely become part of the “kool-aid” where individual parts (Latinx people) are dissolved into one entity (a homogeneous community) and therefore lose personal distinction and recognizability. She maintains that there is an inherent sacrifice in mainstream acceptance which limits the possibility for there to be the ability to access the cultural markets while remaining recognizable as Latinx. Although she does not see an easy solution, she affirms that the answer is not to leave out identity, race, gender, and background to embrace a white market. The end of her talk is a call to action where she exhorts Latinxs to not avoid, or cautiously approach, race, explaining that there is a lot of work to do before Latinx people are welcome to enter and participate in mainstream cultural spheres without having to make identity sacrifices to get there. America Ferrera recognizes this issue and is using her platform to share this message on a talk show, she is moving into directing and producing roles where she has the power to create the content (for example, she directed and produced for the recent *Netflix* show *Gentefied* [2020]), she has founded an organization called I Will Harness to amplify marginalized voices and she has published a book called *American Like Me* (2018) to tell first-person stories from her own perspective as well as other “American stories like hers” to highlight other

voices who have not been able to tell that part of their story before due to the phenomenon discussed by Arlene Dávila of a sacrifice of parts of one's identity for mainstream access.

Diane Guerrero

Diane Guerrero, born in 1986 in New Jersey to Colombian parents and best known for her roles in *Orange is the New Black* (2013), *Netflix's* most-watched and longest-running show that chronicles the lives of women in a minimum security federal prison as well as an ICE detention center, *Jane the Virgin* (2014), a satirical Venezuelan telenovela comedy-drama, and *Superior Donuts* (2017), a sitcom depicting the struggles of a donut shop in Chicago, uses similar strategies as America Ferrera to resist injustice by sharing her personal stories through both her writing and her social media activity. Again, a major function of her social media accounts is for the purpose of activism to the point where her activism is mixed with both her public persona and her personal life, further solidifying, and offering the example to young girls, that part of being Latina is being a social justice “activist.”

Autobiography

Like many of the other women in this project, Guerrero published an autobiography called *In the Country We Love: My Family Divided* (2016) after achieving her initial success and access to an audience. In her book she describes the difficulties of growing up with parents who were immigrants and the struggles she faced living in anxiety about their citizenship. The culmination of her fears was solidified when she describes the disappearance and deportation of her parents and brother to Colombia by

ICE (U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement) when she was 14 and the way in which she fell through the cracks in a broken system because she continued to live in the United States without them and was never checked on by the United States government. Resembling Lopez, her story sends the message about what is possible for other women and girls like her in that she was able to achieve great success despite her family's struggles due to her hard work, solidifying neoliberal messages about the "American Dream." Additionally, she published a version of her story for a youth audience called *My Family Divided: One Girl's Journey of Home, Loss, and Hope* (2018), following the trend of the other women in this study who have a youth target audience for their stories. In this youth version, she discusses how growing up she clung fervently to the few representations of herself on television and how she wants more for kids who are craving these kinds of stories like she did as a child.

Targeting the Next Generation + Be Yourself Message

With the platform she gained through her acting career, she uses this same audience to share her story and advocate for changes in these broken structures and systems that were detrimental to her family. Consequently, she offers her story to other girls and young people facing similar situations so that they know that they are not alone. Her story is not rare but access to representations or published versions of her story are. For example, in Ferrera's book *American Like Me*, Guerrero shares, "So now I'm doing whatever I can. I wrote a book about my life and did a middle grade version of it so younger kids can read it. I visit colleges and schools and talk to young people about loving themselves and being proud of where they came from—even if it doesn't look like what they see on tv" (Ferrera, *American Like Me* 95). Her main message to young kids

and especially girls is analogous to the messages of the other actors in this study about loving themselves and being themselves. This access to the film and television industry has given her a platform to share her personal story, increasing the counternarratives and aspirational mirroring for a young audience to see themselves represented on TV with the hope of making them feel less alone and has given her more opportunities for activism and advocacy about immigration and changing the narratives that are perpetuated through television and film.

Social Media + Activism

In addition to her writing, Guerrero's presence on social media is used to both share her story and advocate for causes related to her. For example, she volunteers and is an ambassador for the Immigration Legal Resource Center and she educates people about issues in the immigrant community. She is also a board member for Mi Familia Vota, a national nonprofit organization that engages communities in social justice. In many ways, the women in this study are connected and work with one another forming career coalitions. For example, Diane Guerrero has worked with Ferrera's organization and movement She Se Puede (now called @poderistas) and was highlighted with the caption "she se puede...write a book about survival after family separation" (@dianeguerrero).

In Guerrero's Instagram bio she identifies herself as an "intersectional mujerista" and there is a link to sign a petition to free all children in ICE family jails. There are also times when she uses her platform for a form of commodity activism, for example with advocating for voting using a picture of her in a sweatshirt that reads "voter" and telling her followers where they can buy the sweatshirt.

Again, at this point it can be tempting to write her off as selling out or cheapening her activism because of the economic aspect. According to Sarah Banet-Weiser's *Empowered* (2018), however, Guerrero's form of activism could be considered popular feminism which has emerged in the neoliberal era and is characterized by extreme visibility and a rhetoric of empowerment and visibility to the point where purchasing feminism becomes the end as opposed to social change or equality. The criticism would be that this form of activism is not disruptive to capitalism or mainstream politics and serves neoliberalism, being driven by empowering women to become a better economic subject able to govern herself with a can-do, entrepreneurial spirit of gumption and resilience and where her goods are self-esteem, confidence, and competence. However, I think the work of Diane Guerrero falls somewhere in between. She does not completely eschew or topple the existent structures, but rather works within them and uses them to her advantage to undermine them. She combines her dissent with success. This form of activism can be seen as an important gateway and transitional place to future generations and their activism because she maintains prominence by existing in the middle and combining commodity activism with more radical stances over time and to a larger audience.

Gina Rodriguez

Gina Rodriguez, an American actor who grew up in Chicago with Puerto Rican parents and most known for her performance in the series *Jane the Virgin* (2014), follows a similar acting-to-activism pattern to that of Ferrera and Guerrero of gaining access to an audience through her acting career and then becoming actively involved in advocating for representation and women's rights through her roles, producing opportunities, social

media presence, and interviews. Unlike the women who started their careers in previous generations (Rita Moreno, Salma Hayek, Jennifer Lopez), Rodriguez did not have to go through the phase of accepting demeaning roles in order to gain success. She began her acting career later in life and did not catch her big break until her late twenties, starring as the titular protagonist in *Jane the Virgin* (2014), which is based on the Venezuelan telenovela and chronicles the dramatic story of a Venezuelan multi-generational family living in Miami.

Targeting the Next Generation

The show became very popular with a mainstream audience and received praise for its “approach to Latinx representation, sex positivity and strong female leads” according to an article in the *HuffPost* (Aviles “The Impact”) and was described as “TVs easiest show to love” according to an article in the *New York Times* (Lyons “‘Jane the Virgin’ Ended”). Therefore, instead of discussing the challenges and issues of being typecast in demeaning roles, Rodriguez talks about seeking more diversity on screen and more diverse stories. Her story also follows a similar trend of the other women who, once they garnered their success, moved into producing roles in order to alter the existing narratives and create more opportunities for the younger generation to not have to start in degrading, stereotypical roles. For example, Rodriguez owns the production company I Can & I Will Productions which develops projects centered around the Latinx community. In an *Entertainment Weekly* interview, she describes the vision and goal of her company when she notes, “When I started I Can and I Will Productions it was in the effort of putting new faces, unheard, unseen, in front of and behind the camera. It’s very important to me and I think I Can and I Will’s efforts are always to bring

underrepresented groups in front of and behind the camera including women and I knew that that was where I was able to create the change that I wanted to see in the world” (“Gina Rodriguez & Tess Romero” 2:10-2:30). Her comments offer an example of what I call career coalitions because she uses her success and access to boost the careers of others. One such example is that she is a producer on the Disney + series *Diary of a Future President* which is aimed at a younger generation and offers the image/idea/possibility of a Cuban American girl becoming President of the United States. In an interview with *Access Hollywood*, Rodriguez comments, “I always had the goal to create content that would help change the landscape of our culture and media. I always had the desire and the draw towards the next generation and for me it’s important to create art for them” (“Gina Rodriguez & Tess Romero” :19-:35). She has used her platform and her fame for “actractivism,” advocating for immigration rights, women’s rights, education, and alternative ideas about beauty and body issues. She talks in high schools and colleges to younger students and is a member of the Hispanic Scholarship Fund Board of Directors which is the United States’ biggest non-profit organization that supports Hispanic American higher education.

Social Media + Activism

Resembling Diane Guerrero’s “voter” sweatshirt and social media presences for social justice, Rodriguez’s actractivism is prevalent on her social media accounts and sometimes falls into the category of commodity activism. For example, in 2015 she was part of a “Be Good to Each Other Campaign” for bullying prevention for which she partnered with CustomInk to create “celebri-tees.”

Another example is her involvement with a Naja lingerie line to help women and the environment by employing single mothers and creating lingerie for women of all shapes and sizes and encouraging body confidence. She also partnered with Clinique for an empowerment campaign called #DifferenceMaker in which she talks about school and turning education into empowerment by saying, “my life’s purpose is to free someone from those invisible shackles. I go and I talk to high school students, grammar school students. I go to universities and talk. We need people to say, listen, I know what you’re going through. I know what you went through. I went through it, too, and it sucks” (“Clinique Difference”).

Again, this form of activism is criticized for falling short of real social justice in that it makes buyers believe that one can be an activist and make a difference through their purchases (shirts, lingerie, makeup) and often lacks the recognition or calling out of the structures and forces that cause women to not feel confident about their bodies. Apart from the use of her social media for commodity activism, she also uses her accounts to bring awareness to various campaigns, movements, and issues she wants to address. Many of her Instagram posts have been related to voting, Black Lives Matter, and Latinx equality. She also started the hashtag #movementmondays in which she highlights actors and actors of color who are often overlooked, and she attributes this idea to stemming from the #OscarsSoWhite movement. This can be seen as a “whataboutism” and desiring to be included, overshadowing, or undermining the original purpose for the movement. On the other hand, her #movementmondays posts can also be seen as an example of career coalitions and using her platform to boost the careers of others. One example is a post she made in 2017 about Aimee Carrero, a Dominican actor, who is the voice of

Disney's first Latina fairy tale princess, Elena of Avalor, which also demonstrates her focus on the younger generation. Comparable to Isabel Molina-Guzmán's comment about Salma Hayek simultaneously contributing to the symbolic colonization of *Latinidad* while also destabilizing dominant narratives, Rodriguez likewise exists in a tension between activism that falls short and creates competition between horizontal hierarchies, and activism that contributes to increased representation and counter-narratives.

Rodriguez has garnered great success yet has been involved in instances of controversy resulting in the accusation that she is anti-Black. Despite the fact that she has used her social media accounts for “actractivism,” it has also gotten her into trouble. For example, she received criticism for both Instagram posts and tweets about being anti-Black when she sang the N-word in a rap song (The Fugees' “Ready or Not”) and then received further criticism for her apology. Furthermore, she has also been accused of “pitting Black and Latinx actresses against one another, and of shutting down conversations about the specific struggles Black actresses face” (Garcia Lawler). This accusation stems from an interview she did with co-star Yara Shahidi for the movie *Small Foot* (2018), when the interviewer asked Yara how she felt about being a role model to Black women and Rodriguez interrupted and corrected that she is a role model to “so many women” (“Gina Rodriguez & Yara Shahidi”). The case against her and further evidence of the accusation that she is anti-Black was fueled by a Tweet in 2018: “Marvel and DC are killing it in inclusion and women, but where are the Latinos?! Asking for a friend...” (@HereIsGina). Critics pointed out that Afro-Latinxs, Zoe Saldana and Tessa Thompson, have starred in Marvel films and that Rodriguez did not celebrate the success of *Black Panther*. This controversy and conflict reflect the findings in Arcelia Gutiérrez's

article about the #OscarsSoWhite and the ways in which non-black Latinxs rely “on a discourse of invisibility, a critique of Black hypervisibility in media activism, and the notion of a white-and-Black racial binary that allegedly marginalizes the struggles and needs of Latinxs to legitimize its demands for inclusion in Hollywood” (14). As a result, comments such as these invisibilize Black Latinx individuals.

Rodriguez rose to fame being able to play roles that did not fall into stereotypes because the previous generation of women such as Rita Moreno, Jennifer Lopez, and Salma Hayek spoke out, resisted this, and have paved the way for her career. She is now using her platform to move into production roles and forming career coalitions to boost the careers of other women. For example, she is producing the show *Diary of a Future President* (2020) in which a young, upcoming star, Tess Romero, will begin her career in a role that offers a new narrative and story to young girls about their possibilities. Her goal is to change the media landscape and empower the next generation, but she is not free from prejudice, horizontal hierarchies, and competition as opposed to coalition and solidarity and as Gutiérrez notes in her article, she is being called out by both Latinx and Black Twitter. This example illustrates a cycle of career coalitions where women use their platform and power to produce and create and boost the careers of others who then have the capacity to continue the cycle and alter representation and stereotyping.

Not for Western Girls Only: Transnational Atractivism in Latin America

Yalitza Aparicio Martínez

In addition to the previously mentioned women who have followed a similar path of gaining influence through their acting careers and then moving into producing roles

and using their social media for activism in the United States, a parallel pattern exists for women outside of the United States. For example, Yalitza Aparicio Martínez, born in 1993 in Mexico to a Mixtec father and a Trique mother, became famous for her role in Alfonso Cuarón's *Roma* (2018), a film that received many awards as well as criticism for the depiction of Aparicio as a Mixtec housekeeper for a middle-class family in Mexico. After the debut of the film, Aparicio became the first Indigenous American woman and the second Mexican woman (after Salma Hayek) to receive a best Actress Oscar nomination. Following her success in this film, she received many other nominations for awards and has appeared in multiple magazines (*Time*, *Vanity Fair*, *Vogue México*). As a result of her fame, she has since used her platform to advocate for Indigenous representation and offers counter stories to the existing dominant narrative where Indigenous and female voices are excluded.

Social Media + Activism

Additionally, due to this role, she has gained a large following considering her Instagram account has over 2 million followers. What is also evident from her social media is her aspirational mirroring on the platform she has created through this following where she posts letters and artwork from her fans who thank her for allowing them to see themselves represented and they feel as if she has given them a voice. Similar to the younger generation of Latinx actors in the United States, a main function of Aparicio's social media is for the purpose of "aactivism." Her main message to her followers is to be themselves, for example with the caption: "se trata de 'hacerle llegar al resto de las comunidades este mensaje de que no tenemos que negar nuestros orígenes, no tenemos que negar quienes somos para ser aceptados en la sociedad porque simplemente la

sociedad también se debe de adaptar a esta diversidad que tenemos” [It’s about getting to the rest of the communities this message that we do not have to deny our origins, we do not have to deny who we are to be accepted in society because society simply should also adapt to the diversity that we have] (@yalitzaapariciomtz). Fittingly, and in line with this neoliberal message, this comment is attached to a campaign that she does with Dior perfume using the hashtag #diorstandswithwomen, commodifying her attractiveness.

As Dosekun Simidele articulates in “For Western Girls Only? Post-Feminism as Transnational Culture” (2015), the impacts of post-feminism, which emphasizes that women are beyond feminism and no longer need to fight for change because they are already “free,” are not exclusive to Western girls but have been sold across borders and have been globalized. In this section, I will analyze how post-feminism, commodity activism, and attractiveness have been transnationalized and spread across borders. Matching the social media influencers/actors in the United States, Aparicio’s attractiveness gets mixed with commodities and purchasing products which has the effect that her activism appears less serious or is cheapened due to the economic aspect. Yalitza has gained this fan base through her acting career yet uses her influence to advocate for others like her and was named UNESCO Goodwill Ambassador for Indigenous Peoples. She also advocates for women and recognizes identity and visibility issues, openly discussing them in visits to universities and in interviews to proliferate counter stories to the existing dominant narrative where Indigenous and female voices and representation are excluded.

First-Person Stories

Another common tactic that the women in this study use to further their advocacy is through their personal stories that go beyond their social media accounts. For many of the other women, they choose to publish autobiographies and disclose personal information about their lives that is not found elsewhere. Aparicio has not yet published an autobiography, but she is not lacking in the first-person strategy. Instead of publishing a book, she has chosen to begin a *YouTube* channel “Yalitza Aparicio” in which she creates videos and, like her social media, a main function is for activism with interviews with other activists (“5 mujeres que admiro” [5 Women that I Admire], “Hablemos del Caso Narvarte” [Let’s Talk about the Narvarte Case] the murder of five people in Mexico City which authorities have been accused of not investigating properly, “Hablemos de la educación” [Let’s Talk about Education], “el mapa de feminicidios” [Map of Feminicides], “el renacer de la industria” [The Rebirth of the Industry]). She also creates videos to give a look into her country, community, and culture (“El arte del huipil” [The art of Huipil], “en bici por Tlaxiaco” [Biking Through Tlaxiaco], “Las cemitas de Tlaxiaco” [The Bread Rolls of Tlaxiaco]). Additionally, mixed in with these videos are the typical vlogs of her baking (“Rosca de reyes casera con mi hermano” [King’s Wreath with my Brother]) or videos about who dresses her and who does her hair and makeup (“Quién me viste?” [Who Dresses Me?], “Quién me peina y me maquila?” [Who does my Hair and Makeup?]). Her channel includes a combination of both social justice and advocacy and daily, more superficial, aspects of her life as an actor. I think the diversity of her YouTube videos is representative of the in-betweenness and mixture involved with attractivism that merges activism with the occasional superficiality of their personal lives as celebrities. She uses her influence, following, and personal story as currency in a

current neoliberal culture where people consume videos and stories of other people's lives that they admire and want to be like, or simply want to know more about because that person's life is different from their own.

Targeting the Next Generation

Like the other women in this chapter, Yalitzá has an intended audience of the younger generation whom she hopes to encourage to be themselves and to not face the same discrimination she has faced. In one of her videos, "Al otro lado del miedo: Un encuentro con Juan Daniel de 'Ya no estoy aquí', [On the Other Side of Fear: An Encounter with Juan Daniel from 'I'm no Longer Here']," Yalitzá answers a question about what dream was born after her acting experience saying,

“[S]iempre he querido ser educadora y transmitir los mensajes a los niños.

Transmitirles mi conocimiento porque es lo que considero lo más valioso que tiene un maestro, poder compartir lo que sabes con sus alumnos. Ok bueno ahora tengo esta plataforma que es más grande que no solamente voy a estar frente veinte niños sino frente a muchas personas y puedo compartirles las cosas que yo siento y pienso y eso no implica que voy a obligar que sea lo mismo como yo pero que los puedo motivar. Así que es eso, darles visibilidad a las personas, motivarlas y decirles claro que se puede y no importa si vas a ser la primera persona que rompa el esquema. Disfruta el hecho de ser la primera. No pasa nada porque vienen más personas y muchas personas nos damos cuenta de lo importante que somos para esas vidas.”

[I have always wanted to be an educator and transmit messages to children. To transmit my knowledge because that is what I consider to be the most valuable thing that a teacher has the power to share-what you know with your students. Ok good, now I have this platform that is bigger than I'm not just in front of twenty kids but rather in front of many people and I can share with them things that I feel and think and this does not imply that I am going to make them be the same as me but that I can motivate them, give them visibility, motivate them and say to them of course you can and it doesn't matter if you will be the first person to break the mold. Enjoy the fact that you are the first. It doesn't matter because more people are coming, and many people realize how important we are in these lives.]

(Aparicio, "Al otro lado" 19:54-20:59)

Aparicio's vision and goal for the next generation correlates to the other actors in this study in that they are all using comparable strategies to try to inspire them and alter the industry and the narratives being produced and perpetuated. Resembling some of the other women in the study who have determined that they will no longer accept or take roles that are demeaning and have suffered the financial consequences of that choice, Yalitza has not had any roles since her breakout one in *Roma*. In the same *YouTube* video with Juan Daniel, an actor, musician, and dancer who has been compared to Aparicio because he starred in the film *Ya no estoy aquí* without prior formal experience, Yalitza describes the role she wants to play next as "un personaje con cierto impacto y algún mensaje porque me gusta mucho el activismo y tocar muchos temas sociales. Algún contrato tiene que tener este enfoque." [A character with certain impact and a certain message because I really like activism and touching on many social topics. Any contract

has to have this focus] (Aparicio, “Al otro lado” 15:00). Her activism is so important to her that she will not settle for a role that does not fulfill these requirements and so far, she has come up empty-handed.

María Mercedes Coroy

Another rising star in Latin America who shares a similar story and career trajectory as Yalitza Aparicio is María Mercedes Coroy, a Guatemalan actor known for her roles in the films *Ixcanul* (2015), *Bel Canto* (2018), and *La Llorona* (2019). She had her breakthrough role as María, a young Indigenous girl who is promised in marriage to the foreman of the plantation her family works on as a type of business deal, in the film *Ixcanul*, directed by Jayro Bustamante which depicts Mayan language and culture with strong female characters. It is a movie that differs from others in the Guatemalan theater in a country where racism is strong and the representation of Mayan culture is uncommon. The catalyst for her career in a role that diverges from stereotypical representation resembles other women in this study such as America Ferrera and Yalitza Aparicio and in contrast to Rita Moreno who did not get a role such as this until later in her career. However, in all cases, these roles become turning points in their careers and affect their trajectory with the decision to be discriminatory in choosing and accepting roles. *Ixcanul* was a success globally and Coroy made history by becoming the first Indigenous woman in Guatemala to appear on the cover of a fashion magazine. However, according to Sharrah Lane in the article “*Ixcanul* (2015) and the Cycle of Extractivist Cultural Consumption as Embodied in Indigenous Adolescent Female Subjects in Contemporary Latin American Aesthetics,” the acclaim the film received and María Mercedes Coroy’s appearance on the cover can be considered a perpetuation of the

positionality of Indigeneity as existing perpetually in the past and as a good for consumption. However, in this case study I argue that María Mercedes Coroy's attractivism falls somewhere in between in that it does not completely reify this positionality and cycle but rather that the actor is working against these forces by using her platform as leverage. Her real life diverges from her character's life who represents hope and possibility for futurity but is ultimately powerless as an Indigenous female. María Mercedes Coroy's Indigeneity is what she uses as a platform to advocate for increased representation and change. The difference between the 2016 and 2021 issues of *Look Magazine*, that feature her, may indicate progress or a shift.

Activism

Since the film's success and her rise to becoming a national celebrity, Coroy has spoken in interviews about discrimination, racism, machismo, and issues of representation. For example, in an interview with *Remezcla*, Coroy says, "And with this film we're able to see what the issues of our times are and more importantly, what it is that we can do to go forward to fix them" (Coroy, "The Star of *Ixcánul*"). In the same interview, when asked about *Ixcánul*'s anti-machismo and anti-racist message, she talks about the importance of speaking about these issues at this current time and how this is not an isolated, local issue, but exists across the world with her comment: "I really feel like this is a great time to really take a look at these issues that are so rampant in Guatemala but also in the rest of Latin America. I believe that we shouldn't be machistas and we shouldn't be racist: we are only one. The world is one. Latin America is one. The country is one. We shouldn't have those sorts of divisions within us. At different times I've experienced that myself. We should strive to be more community-oriented,

encouraging empathy from one another” (Coroy, “The Star of *Ixcanul*”). She uses her influence through her fame with the movie to speak about these issues and makes clear her hopes of changing things for the future.

Targeting the Next Generation

Coinciding with the other actractivists in this study, María Mercedes Coroy also has a young target audience and a vision for the future. She has not published a children’s book, yet, but there is a website called *Latinitas Magazine*, which has the mission of “empowering all girls to innovate through media and technology” and provides media and technology programs for girls. One program they have is a blog page “by and for Latina teens 13 and up” and is described as “a strong voice for Latina youth” that is created to allow teen reporters to create their own blogs and discussions. One blog by Jazmin Lopez, titled “María Mercedes Coroy: Actress of *Ixcanul* and Activist for Indigenous Rights,” discusses the career of Coroy and how she has been an advocate for Indigenous equality and justice after the premiere of the movie. In fact, Lopez writes, “If it wasn’t for Coroy’s bravery and honesty about injustices, then who knows when the global community would be having this pressing conversation about indigenous rights” (Jazmin Lopez). This title and blog are very revealing of how Coroy is received by a youth audience: she has become known for her activism, and it is an integral part of both her identity and career. This also reveals the ways in which younger generations identify and define activism as what I would call actractivism.

Unlike many of the women in this study who have published autobiographies following their success, Coroy has not written a book about her life, yet. However, one way that she has used her platform and celebrity status to share personal stories and

advocate for causes related to her is through her social media accounts. She uses her Instagram account, for example, as another way to advocate for causes, organizations, and movements. A major function of her social media is for activism and some causes that she repeatedly supports are against breast cancer with @juntosporlacura. She also partners with Nútreme to advocate for malnutrition of children in Guatemala.

Beauty + Clothing + Be Yourself Message

Mixed in with her activism are also personal and seemingly more superficial aspects of being a celebrity such as her clothing for premieres. However, she also uses her clothing as a way to share about both her culture and other Indigenous regions. Lane comments on the appearance of Coroy on the cover of *Look Magazine* peeking out of plants and wearing traditional clothing and concludes that “Coroy is culturally proscribed from actively participating in modernity” (26) and that, “as an Indigenous woman, Coroy is always already placed into a subaltern position and unable to achieve modernity in the sphere of cultural production due to the colonial division of racial labor that permeates social and cultural spheres both in Guatemala and on a global scale” (26). However, based on Coroy’s own self-representation in her autobiographical accounts and social media, I would argue that she is participating in modernity and is merging both her traditional appearance with modern technology and representation. For example, one of her posts, as shown in figure 23, shows a picture of her in a traditional dress with the caption: “tal vez muchos no sepan, pero en cada lugar que tengo la oportunidad de presentarme he escogido trajes de distintas regiones para poder mostrar un poco de mi país al mundo” [Maybe many don’t know, but in each place that I have the opportunity to present myself I have chosen outfits from different regions to be able to show a little of

my country to the world] (@mariamercedescoroy). Although these outfits contrast with some of the more modern-styled depictions of her, it is clear from her posts that these are choices that she makes to represent different clothing styles from different regions in her country as a form of raising awareness. In figure 24, for example, she is pictured at the premiere of *La Llorona* in Venice in a traditional dress and the caption tells her fans that they were right in guessing that her dress is from Xela (Quetzaltenango).

The vast majority of the clothing she is wearing on her Instagram page is traditional with the exception of a photo taken when she was working with @femaleclassproject, “a visual journal of intimate female portraits...an ongoing artistic collaboration between women featuring the rising creative female class” (Cohen) and wearing a modern black outfit as depicted in figure 25. In the following interview for that photo shoot, Coroy discusses both her favorite piece of clothing (“the typical costume from a region in Guatemala called Patzún; mainly because the “huipil” (a straight slipover one-piece garment) has the Mayan calendar embroidered in it and its beauty is enhanced by a wide range of color threads and details”), and the wardrobe choices she makes. Coroy comments, “I will not cease to be who I am just because I decide on wearing pants every now and then. Certain instances in life, like filming and being on the road, have forced me to turn to different wardrobe choices in order to fulfill my comfort and climate needs, but that will never constitute a significant change in who I am and where I come from” (Cohen). Her choice of clothing communicates her pride in where she is from and the Indigenous regions of her home country. Coroy seems to understand clothing as an indication of who one is and becomes a way for her to continue to “be herself” despite changes in her career and circumstances.

She also appears on the cover of *Look Magazine*, a Guatemalan fashion magazine, in both the April 2016 issue, after her role in *Ixcanul*, and the December 2021 issue. As Lane points out in her article, in the 2016 issue, “th[e] stylized use of natural landscape places her back in the same static obscurity and past-tense existence that the film [*Ixcanul*] itself decries as the effect of dominant cultural repression of Indigenous peoples” (26). However, on the 2021 cover, shown in figure 26, Coroy is still wearing traditional clothing as she does in her day-to-day life, or at least as is represented on her social media, yet the staging is different and reflects a merging or a combination of both traditional and modern aspects which is more in line with Coroy’s own self representation. I think this change reflects the way that Coroy has used her platform and influence to merge both traditional aspects and modernity and is legitimizing this merge to the point where the media and *Look Magazine* in particular are adopting this representation instead of imposing an image that places Indigeneity always in the past. In the 2016 interview, Coroy talks about her mission and message. She attributes her ability to not fear these roles to her parents and her mother teaching her to be independent and fight for equality. For example, she explains, “Mi trabajo es hacerle ver a las mujeres y hombres, que sin importar el género o cultura, todos valemos igual...mi trabajo ahora es romper las barreras y dejar el mensaje a las mujeres que sí se puede soñar, que no tengan miedo y que alcen la voz” [My job is to make men and women see that gender or culture don’t matter, we all have equal value...my job now is to break the barriers and leave the message to women that yes she can dream and that she does not have fear and that she can raise her voice] (“María Mercedes Coroy” 92). Throughout the article, she describes what she does and her message, as work. Her message parallels many of the other

actractivists in her desire to encourage, motivate, and empower other women and girls to dream and act raise their voices.

Career Coalitions

The work Coroy describes having to do is not get more roles, but rather to work towards equality, and she has made connections and is working with other women in this study such as Yalitza Aparicio as well as Rigoberta Menchú, a Guatemalan human rights activist and Nobel Peace Prize winner, and Letty Teleguario, a Guatemalan politician and Indigenous rights activist. Many of these women are interconnected and are forming career coalitions by working together with other women with similar goals. On social media, tags and connections broaden a person's following and these women use their own platform to highlight other women and help them create their own platforms. The change in representation on the two issues of *Look Magazine* may indicate that change is being made. An example of a horizontal career coalition that highlights these women joining forces and how each individual story is interconnected to form a web of various cases that highlight similar issues across countries, borders, and cultures is the fact that Yalitza Aparicio did a video with María Mercedes Coroy on her YouTube page called "Una plática con María Mercedes Coroy actriz de 'La Llorona'" [A Chat with María Mercedes Coroy Actress from 'La Llorona']. In this video, the actractivists discuss their career trajectories, their roles, and the impact they hope to have due to their influence. From the outset of the video, Yalitza introduces María and brings up the fact that she is Indigenous and that, despite common misconceptions, there are Indigenous communities in places other than just Mexico, considering María is from Guatemala. This reminder is in an attempt to raise awareness and break stereotypes.

In discussing María's role in *Ixcánul*, Yalitza touches on ideas that mirror post-feminism in that a common way to think regarding the rights of women or their status in society is that everything has changed and is good now, that we are beyond a need for fighting for change. Yet she comments on how this film makes the audience realize that this way of thinking is erroneous and an illusion because these issues of the repression of women still persist. In fact, this illusion is shattered when María comments on the fact that following the premiere of the movie she was criticized and called a "chica porno" ("Una Plática" 6:00) as well as solicited for sex in public due to the expectations and judgments of a traditional, catholic, machista culture in response to scenes in the film in which she seduces a young man she is involved with behind a bar while betrothed to another man, ultimately becoming pregnant and attempting an abortion. In the video, the two women also discuss clothing and the ways in which they have to carefully weigh decisions about how to represent such a vast and diverse group of people. María explains that initially she began wearing clothing that represented each of the different regions of Guatemala to showcase the diversity of her country and culture until one day she decided to wear a designer and that this choice does not make her any less Indigenous. The women also discuss what it means to them to be Indigenous and the ways in which society puts limits on their potential. They emphasize that the stereotypes of Indigenous women as existing to have children or serve their brothers and fathers or become housemaids have been imposed and that they can overcome these barriers by loving themselves and doing what they love. In many ways the women are fighting to increase diverse representation, yet their rhetoric still bolsters the neoliberal idea of 'be yourself' or 'love yourself' and overcoming disadvantages through hard work. This example

bolsters the assertion that atractivism has traveled across borders and is not for “Western girls only.” As with each woman in this study, there is a cost to their success and influence. They receive criticism and have to defend their choices.

Despite the diversity of the stories of the women in this chapter, what has become evident is a pattern in their strategies in that they garner influence in their career, use their platform for advocacy on social media, often write autobiographies or share first-person accounts of their stories, target a younger generation, and make connections with other women. When I first began this project, Yalitza did not have a YouTube channel and only recently did she post this video with María Mercedes Coroy. As time goes on, evidence of these patterns has only increased to the point where it may be possible to predict the trajectories of these women as well as other women who have breakout roles and will follow similar patterns. Over time, and as examples increase, these patterns become more legitimized and internalized by young Latin/x American women as a way to resist and act as a *Latina* that uses everything at her disposal for this form of “atractivism” to the point where there will be not only horizontal career coalitions but also vertical, inter-generational career coalition cycles.

Not for Cis Girls Only: Transing Atractivism

Daniela Vega

Another example of these career coalition connections made between Latin American actors and activists is Daniela Vega, a Chilean actor and singer most known for her performance in the Academy Award winning movie *A Fantastic Woman* (2017), who appears with Yalitza Aparicio at a movie premiere. The caption of this photo on Yalitza’s

Instagram says, “que honor haber contado con la gran @dani.vega.h quien a través de estos años a sido un gran ejemplo de lucha constante. Sigamos dándole visibilidad a la diversidad que tenemos en el mundo, sigamos siendo #MujeresFantásticas #equidaddegénero” [What an honor to be able to rely on the great @dani.vega.h who through the years has been a great example of constant fight. Let’s continue giving visibility to the diversity we have in the world, let’s continue being #FantasticWomen #genderequality] (@yalitzaapariciomtz).

Autobiography

Vega made history by becoming the first trans person to present at the Academy Awards and her role in *A Fantastic Woman* was her breakout moment as an actor. This film depicts the life of Marina, played by Vega, a trans woman living in Chile who faces abuse and attacks from the family of an older man she is romantically involved with after his sudden death. The film is largely representative of Vega’s own experiences as a trans person because the director, Sebastián Lelio, spent two years talking to and working with Daniela to research for the film prior to making the movie and prior to Daniela even knowing that she would play the lead, Marina. This is one detail that Vega reveals in the autobiography she wrote in 2019 called *Rebeldía, Resistencia, Amor*, which mirrors the trend of the other activists in this study who use their platform to share their stories within a dominant culture that others their experiences. From the platform she garners with the success of *A Fantastic Woman*, she uses it to publish a book to talk about discrimination and visibility issues for the trans community in Chile.

Daniela’s story chronicles the span of her entire life from feeling othered from a young age to becoming a star on the big screen. As a child, Daniela describes herself as

very timid and trying to make herself invisible because she knew from the start that she had a secret that she had to keep and protect in order to survive, feeling like she was the problem. One recurring theme in the stories of the women in this study is feeling alone because they did not know what their possibilities were as kids and that is one fundamental reason for which they target the younger generation. Daniela's story mirrors these sentiments as well as a commitment to helping younger trans kids not feel so alone. It is difficult for someone to dream when they do not even know what the possibilities are: "¿Cómo iba a decir 'soy una niña' si todo el medio que me rodeaba, toda la gente que conocía, toda la cultura, la sociedad, me gritaba en la cara que eso era imposible?" [How was I going to say 'I'm a girl' if the environment that surrounded me, all the people I knew, all of culture, society, yelled in my face that that was impossible?] (Vega 27). For her, a major resource she had to understand something she felt, but had never heard anyone talk about, was television. However, she received mixed messages comparing and contrasting what she saw in the media and television with what she saw in real life. For example, at the time she was growing up "la fuerza para explicar delincuencia, adicciones y perversión, era que se trataba de hombres que se creían mujeres" [the force to explain delinquency, addiction, and perversion, was that it had to do with men that believed they were women] and the general conclusion that she was taught was that trans people are circus animals that will end up living on the street (Vega 37). Yet, she writes, "nunca pude asimilar que una de las posibilidades fuera terminar en la calle, como terminan muchas personas trans porque se les niegan oportunidades, porque las marginan y no aceptan su sola existencia" [I could never assimilate that one of the possibilities was to end up in the street, the way that many trans people ended up because they were denied

opportunities, because they were marginalized and their mere existence was not accepted] (Vega 40). In contrast with what she saw and heard in her life, on the other hand, television allowed her to see beyond her situation, her community, and her country to see how “en otros lugares una podía ser de cualquier color y estilo y tener emociones válidas. No censurables o prohibidas” [in other places once could be whatever color and style and have valid emotions. Not censurable or prohibited] (Vega 42). The television and the media played a large role in helping her see possibilities for herself and now that she has become an actor, she hopes that she will be able to help other trans kids through sharing her story and aspirational mirroring.

In addition to the role that television played in helping her understand herself, another valuable resource to her growth was a program put in place by, then President of Chile, Michele Bachelet. During her first presidency, Bachelet created a pilot plan for trans people to see a psychologist and be able to start the physical transition with hormones for free. What Daniela benefitted from the most in this program was the ability to see and connect with other people with similar experiences. However, after Bachelet’s presidency ended, so did the program. Later in life, Vega had the opportunity to meet Bachelet when she was invited to commemorate women’s day. Daniela discusses the impact that Bachelet had on her life with her comments about the leader: “Admiré la presidenta y tenía muchas ganas de conocerla desde ese día que fui al consultorio a conocer a personas trans por primera vez en mi vida gracias al programa que ella impulsó. Es curioso como un pequeño gesto del poder puede influir en tantas vidas” [I admired the President and really wanted to meet her since that day that I went to the doctor’s office to meet trans people for the first time in my life thanks to the program that

she launched. It's interesting how a small gesture of power can influence so many lives] (Vega 51). The same impact that Bachelet's use of power had on her life, she hopes to make on others' lives through telling her story.

After her success with *A Fantastic Woman*, she comments that there was a lot of interest in her story with audiences wanting to know about her personal life, especially details she did not want to share. The costs of her celebrity status and advocacy from a place in the spotlight become evident. Daniela explains that she does not shy away from prominence because she had an opportunity to send a message to other boys and girls and fight “para que los niños del futuro no sean rechazados como sucedió con nosotros” [so that children in the future are not rejected as we were] (Vega 35). In addition, when she is asked how she feels about being the first trans actor, she feels bittersweet knowing that many have come before her and have suffered and made her path a little bit easier: “esto de ser la primera colonizada, poniendo banderas en lugares imposibles me resulta contradictorio: me honra tanto como me duele” [this of being the first colonized, putting flags in impossible places seems contradictory to me: it honors me as much as it hurts me] (Vega 44). She continues to work knowing that with her appearance on screen “abría una luz de esperanza a las nuevas generaciones de niños y niñas trans. Tal vez, pensé puedo ser para algunos el referente que nunca tuve mientras viví con el pecho apretado sin saber por qué era así” [I turned on a light of hope to the new generations of trans girls and boys. Maybe, I thought I can be for them the example that I never had while I lived with a tight chest without knowing why I was that way] (Vega 47). Daniela's mission and goal of paying it forward matches the other women in this study who write children's books and hope to offer young people examples that they did not have growing up

because they believe that this is the key to changing what they see as current issues by influencing the way that young people see themselves and others.

Social Media + Activism

In many ways, Daniela uses her platform to advocate for trans representation by using her Instagram to advocate for causes like #DiaInternacionalde laVisibilidadTrans and giving interviews and speeches about trans rights. Making another connection and career coalition with a woman in this study, she does an interview with Yalitzá Aparicio for *Remezcla Magazine* in which she describes this phenomenon in current culture of fighting for increased representation of different groups of people and using personal stories for activism when she comments, “What’s new is this phenomenon of sharing what’s happening. But indigenous women, trans women, women who choose to not have kids — all of us have been here for a long time. What’s happening is that we’ve been denied the ability to tell our stories for them to be validated. It’s not that there’s anything new but what’s new is that there are voices now being heard and there are eager ears open to listening to them” (Aparicio and Vega). The message is not new, but the audience is more receptive to the message than ever which represents a shift in the current cultural moment and the current generation. Vega contributes to the increasing examples of stories with the goal that future generations have access to many more stories and examples than she had and that it will be a more common example creating an audience that is even more open and receptive to listening to and acknowledging a diversity of stories and experiences.

On the outside, her story and career follow the patterns of the other women in this study who both consider themselves activists and are considered in magazines and by

their followers as activists. However, in her autobiography, Daniela directly rejects this title for herself. She explains that she has denied this because her activism is her art and “el tema de representar a otros, de ser activista, me queda grande. No pretendo nada más que hablar de lo que he visto y siento...no soy bandera de ninguna lucha, pero sé a alguien le puede servir mi testimonio...por eso no soy activista, y porque tomar ese rol no solo me distraería de mi camino, sino que también me haría creer que mi pequeña lucha es más grande de lo que creo. Y el ego hay que mantenerlo a raya” [the topic of representing others, of being an activist, seems big to me. I do not hope to do anything more than talk about what I have seen and felt...I am not a flag for any fight, but I know that my testimony can serve someone...because of that I am not an activist, and because taking that role is bigger than I think I am. And one must keep their ego in check] (Vega 29). In her account she describes an activist as someone who has a conscious attitude and fights for everyone, dedicating their lives to changing the world. Daniela’s comments emphasize my use of the term *actractivism* to describe the form of activism these women utilize. As this study hopes to portray, activism can encompass more than the traditional understanding of the word. Her comments hint at the fact that this form of *actractivism* is different from radical forms of activism in that it is particular to the individual and instead of fighting for everyone, she is fighting certain fights pertaining to her experiences. Activism seems to exist in this dichotomy between either falling into the traps of neoliberalism, commodification, and more superficial associations and on the other hand radicalism. However, through the work of these women in this study, including Daniela Vega, their *actractivism* falls somewhere in the middle: using their

career, influence, and success as a platform to share their personal stories with the goal of helping the next generation not have to face the same struggles they have faced.

Despite the fact that Daniela would not consider herself an activist, her story and trajectory mirror the strategies that other women in similar positions have used to advocate for causes, in her case trans representation and rights. Despite her success, Daniela's rise to fame has also had many costs: "hoy miro el presente, y veo todos los costos que tuve que pagar para estar aquí. Los pagaría de nuevo, para que nadie más los pague" [today I look at the present, and I see all of the costs that I had to pay to be here. I would pay them again so that nobody else pays them] (Vega 60). For example, one cost of her spotlight and attention is that it resulted in people prying into her personal life, publishing her birth certificate, and her legal name—a dead name that she says does not represent herself—going viral. In a similar vein, people ask her about transitioning and surgery with such personal and vulgar questions that are simply not appropriate. Another example that diminishes what should have been a celebration of her success was that after the release of *A Fantastic Woman*, the press's main question was about her co-star kissing a trans person: "las primeras preguntas de la prensa chilena rondaron en torno al morbo de lo que a ellos les parecía noticioso: Cómo Francisco Reyes besa a una actriz transexual?" [the first questions of the Chilean press revolved around the fascination that they thought was newsworthy: How did Francisco Reyes kiss a transsexual actress?] (Vega 3). This questioning takes the focus off of the film and Daniela, diminishing her accomplishment and turning a romantic act into a public controversy that others and villainizes her. There is still a price she has to pay despite the fact that she has had great success and has proven her talent as an actor.

Indya Moore

Paralleling the struggles of Daniela Vega as a trans actor in Latin America, Indya Moore has become a well-known American actor and model who grew up in the Bronx and is most known for their role as Angel Evangelista in the show *Pose*, a drama series depicting African American and Latin American New York drag ball culture in the 1980s and 1990s where LGBTQ and gender-nonconforming people compete for prizes with various performances. The show has the largest cast of trans actors for a scripted network series. Indya Moore also became the first trans person to be featured on the cover of the US version of *Elle Magazine*. However, unlike Vega who published an autobiography in which she asserts that she is not an activist, Moore uses their social media as a way to advocate and educate their audience and followers about issues related to their community. One similarity between Moore and many of the other activists is that they started a production company called Beetlefruit Media which is described as a platform for stories about disenfranchised groups. This is comparable to Salma Hayek, Gina Rodriguez, and America Ferrera who started their own production companies in order to give opportunities to new actors and create counter-narratives. An example of a counter-narrative that Moore's fame creates is that the actor identifies as a non-binary black trans femme with the pronouns they/them. However, in an *Elle Magazine* article, the journalist uses the pronouns she/her, noting that "Indya is nonbinary and prefers to use "they" and "them," but is also navigating how that works in a society that has long oriented around cisgender or binary trans identities. Most people around Indya use "she," which Indya says is fine to use throughout this story" (Moore, "Moore Just Wants to be Free"). This pronoun use can create confusion for a culture and society that largely functions and

understands people in binary, cisgender terms and it can produce controversy over Moore being seen as, or identified as, a woman despite being nonbinary. Yet their example and position as a public figure broadcasts an alternative story and narrative that is underrepresented.

Social Media + Activism

Another trend among the younger generation of aactivists in this chapter, and that Indya Moore implements, is that a main function of their Instagram account is for activism. They have over one million followers and their bio pleads, (as of January 2021), “TRANS YOUTH ARE UNDER ATTACK. PLEASE HELP PROTECT TRANS YOUTH! PLEASE VISIT THE LINK IN MY BIO TO HELP!!!!” (@indyamoore). Moore follows the trend of the other aactivists in this study in their use of social media with a target audience of the younger generation in an effort to help them through issues they themselves faced. These actions and efforts also reinforce to their audience that a part of being a Latinx person involves/includes being an activist and using everything at their disposal (personal stories, career, connections) for causes related to themselves. For example, many of their posts are pedantic in that they explain the way that terms should or should not be used when referring to, or interacting with, their community. A few examples include posts called “9 Terms and Phrases to Avoid (to Protect and Respect Trans and Queer People),” “How to Acknowledge Trans People,” and “Some Ways to Be a Good Trans Ally” (November 17, 2020) (figures 31 and 32). Some other causes they advocate for on their Instagram include voting (especially during the Trump-Biden election of 2020), police brutality of Black trans women, the Stonewall Protests, and saving a non-binary artist’s life by donating bone marrow. Similar to the feelings Daniela

Vega discusses about being asked about her body, Moore makes a post asking people to stop asking them about their body modification, stating, “DO NOT ASK ME ABOUT MY TRANSITION IF YOU ARE NOT A TRANS PERSON WHO NEEDS SUPPORT” (@indyamoore). In many ways, Moore uses everything at their disposal to advocate and raise awareness about the trans community. Even fashion or Santa Claus take on political dimensions when, for example, Moore launched TranSanta in the winter of 2020, a social media campaign to give presents to trans youth who are homeless or in foster care which stems from their own experiences (figure 33). Moore makes a statement that they are attempting to “Trans Santa” to help young trans people feel loved and cared for during the holiday season. Many of their public displays are about educating people with the goal of change for the next generation and improving their experience so that they do not have to face the same obstacles they did.

The type of labor Moore is involved in that combines their career, personal life, and social media presence can be taxing and take a toll on their emotional, mental, and physical health. In an interview with *Elle Magazine*, the writer thanks Moore for “being forever a teacher, for doing the exhausting work of explaining her radical perspective that her sex organs have nothing to do with whether she can be considered a ‘biological woman.’ Off set, she is on the ground, showing up at every premiere or award show that she can attend, representing an image of a proud trans woman of color, of Haitian, Dominican, and Puerto Rican descent” (Moore, “Moore Just Wants to be Free”). An example that exemplifies the dual helpful/harmful nature of social media and the repercussions of the work they do in the spotlight is that in one post Moore writes that they have to step away from social media because they received backlash and negativity

from followers because they put up a boundary. They explain, “I am overwhelmed by the negative and transphobic reactions to me placing a boundary about being asked about my body” (@indyamoore). Both their interviews and social media accounts give insight into their personal life and challenges they faced growing up in the foster care system when their parents expressed transphobic sentiment. The writer of the magazine article writes that it took Moore over six hours to share their entire story from entering the foster care system to meeting the first trans woman they had ever met (*Pose* cast member Dominique Jackson), to living with a foster parent who was a trans woman that let Moore use hormone replacement, to feeling validated on social media for pictures they had posted, to accepting a Facebook invitation from strangers and being sex trafficked, to a police record, to time in prison, to a suicide attempt, to a viral YouTube video, to a modeling career, to acting on *Pose*. A major trend throughout their story is the role that social media played as a safe space where their community of fans supported and accepted them. They see social media as extremely important, commenting, “I knew I had a chance to teach the world something that would help more people to be safe” (Moore, “Moore Just Wants to be Free”) and their public image “almost as a political act. Getting to appear in Louis Vuitton’s campaign and represent the brand at Paris Fashion Week was downright revolutionary” (Moore, “Moore Just Wants to be Free”). Their role on *Pose* even helped them regain a relationship with their mother who is back in their life because the show allowed their mother to gain insight into the trans world that she previously was not able to comprehend.

Beauty + Breaking Stereotypes

Another striking feature about Moore's Instagram in addition to their educational advocacy posts would be pictures of themselves and their body with little clothing. In an interview with *L'Officiel*, Moore discusses the role and importance of fashion in that it can be powerful because "trans bodies are always under surveillance and scrutiny, especially when we show skin, and that outfit takes back the power dynamic. I feel like that about fashion. I feel like that about us having the autonomy to express ourselves. I'm nonbinary but I don't really talk about it that much. I don't feel like people really are there yet for understanding it, which I don't mind, but I also acknowledge the way people see me as a woman. And because I'm seen as a woman, a cis woman or binary presenting, people are going to hold me up to those same standards that women are held up to" (Moore, "Indya Moore Brews"). Moore understands that society does not understand their identity, yet, but that is something they hope to change and create a shift in understanding using their career, spotlight, and social media.

Their interview with *L'Officiel* reveals a reason for exposing skin as being an attempt to dismantle and reverse the power dynamic of women's bodies being sexualized. Moore comments, "femininity is conceptualized as a mating call, and that's a problem. Part of me dismantling that [sexualization] is expressing my femininity in ways that are complementary to me, because expressing myself with clothes or without them, especially when I'm expressing myself with little clothes, I'm reversing the power dynamic to me...my body isn't meant for men. It's meant for me...I'm reversing that sense of entitlement from them to me through fashion" (Moore, "Indya Moore Brews"). Moore uses everything as a statement, as a way to topple and alter conceptions about themselves and others like them. One comment they make for *Elle Magazine* reveals the

way that Indya views both themselves and their platform as a duty to enact change. Moore comments that when people have everyday conversations they think, “What could they possibly be talking about? How are we not talking about deconstructing white supremacy right now? How are we not trying to save trans people?... I don’t know who I am outside of someone who’s just trying to be free and find safety for myself and others” (Moore, “Indya Moore Just Wants to be Free”). For Moore, their identity as a non-binary trans person is so linked to both their career as an actor and model and their activism: they cannot be separated.

Conclusion

Mainstream Activism Creates Accessible Activism

Despite the diverse set of movements that the activists in this chapter are involved in, many of the women use similar strategies to advocate for different (or similar) causes, such as using social media, publishing autobiographies and first-person accounts, targeting a younger generation as their audience to create aspirational mirroring where young people see both themselves reflected as well as future possibilities, and creating career coalitions to highlight and launch others who will continue this cycle. What becomes evident through analyzing each of their cases individually is the interconnectedness of the problems they face and the issues that they fight against. In much of the scholarship that analyzes mainstream media, popular culture, social media, celebrity activism, and even some of these women in particular, the focus tends to be on criticizing their activism as being commodified, falling short of real change, and not being considered activism at all. Much of the scholarship related to these topics and subjects discusses the term ‘feminism’ as a flexible, constantly changing term that has

evolved, expanded, and oftentimes contradicted previous and contemporaneous iterations and associations related to the word. Therefore, it is excessively limiting to stake specific and definitive claims about what constitutes feminism or make boundaries around what is considered feminism and what is not since it should be an open concept, able to be re-defined over time. It is similarly problematic to discuss and define activism.

Even though women from previous generations such as Rita Moreno, Jennifer Lopez, and Salma Hayek would not typically be considered or seen as activists due to the fact that their work does not always directly challenge or call out issues in the industry, their stories are important to study in conjunction with the other women in this chapter because they reveal ways in which the industry has changed since their time as well as the issues that still persist. Their small acts of resistance, that may not be recognized as activism, by definition, have had an impact that is noticeable in the stories of the following generation. Not only do the women form horizontal career coalitions within their own time period by making connections with other prominent women in acting and working together for common causes, but they are also forming inter-generational career coalition cycles of networked career boosts by using their platform to invest in the following generation and initiating or launching them further in their careers and giving them opportunities to do the same for others. Not only are they hurdle hoppers for their own sakes, but they are hurdle hinderers for others. For example, Salma Hayek has been criticized for the creation of her own production company due to the fact that it is seen as a self-serving way to boost her own career because she has used the company to create roles for herself. However, her investment in this company led to a breakout role for America Ferrera who now has a platform with which she directly calls out and works to

alter existing structures in the industry. Yalitza Aparicio brought María Mercedes Coroy as a guest on her YouTube channel to talk about their stories and activism and the two of them also have formed career coalitions with Daniela Vega and Letty Teleguario. In a similar vein, Gina Rodriguez has been involved in controversy and the perception of her advocacy has been questioned due to this controversy. It is important to study where her comments and actions have fallen short and have created horizontal hierarchies, division, and competition, as well as the ways in which she has turned her platform into directing and producing roles such as the Disney + show *Diary of a Future President* and the ways in which she is creating opportunities for an up-and-coming young actor, Tess Romero. Therefore, the cycle can continue due to this inter-generational career coalition and, in a few years, we will be able to analyze this young girl's career trajectory and the impact that she will potentially have. Romero will have far more examples of Latin/x American actors being represented in film as well as first-person accounts that offer aspirational mirroring than Gina Rodriguez did growing up (as well as the example of the mistakes and controversy Rodriguez has been involved in) due to the work and accessibility of the stories of these attractivists.

The women in this chapter, through their utilization of their mainstream access and successful careers, are garnering attention and a platform, but are using it to advocate for various causes. As a result, they are contributing to the next generation's perception of what it means to be *Latina* and the connection between "activism" and this open and evolving concept of *Latinidad*. In the eyes of the current generation, activism is not often displayed as a political act to bring about radical change through sit-ins, marches, walk-outs, protesting, or boycotting. Rather, many times, young people's only interactions with

activism come from social media influencers buying, wearing, and posting a picture in a shirt that says “vote” or “feminist.” However, I believe the women in this chapter exist somewhere in between these two different depictions that fall under the umbrella of “activism.” They are mixing commodity and celebrity activism with instances of calling out and challenging the existing structures creating a hybrid activism. America Ferrera posts pictures in clothes that say vote and talks about fashion alongside democracy. She also speaks out about underrepresentation, canvasses, and helps people vote for the first time. It is necessary to hold both examples simultaneously in our hands to see the bigger picture of activism as opposed to ruling one of them out for the sake of the other, seeing only the celebrity and commodity, but not the affect or action. In addition, social media activism is not relegated to solely hashtags and movements against sexual abuse and violence. What is emerging is an online community of interconnected individuals who can see examples of people facing similar issues and can join their voices together, sometimes for online advocacy and to raise awareness, and sometimes for action and real-world change.

In some cases, the women in this study, through their use of activism fall short in real-world impact and use neoliberal rhetoric without identifying the real issues or problems that make them feel discouraged, different, unequal, or repressed in the first place. However, in other cases (due to the horizontal and inter-generational career coalition examples, aspirational mirroring that allows them to see themselves and their possibilities, and the fact that their path has been paved by previous generations of hurdle hoppers and hinderers who may have had to make more sacrifices before initiating any change) some women directly call out issues in the industry and structures in place and

are actively fighting for action and change using all of the resources at their disposal including mainstream media access. In many ways, activism in general can be aided by the internet and social media since it allows quick access and responses and can reach many people in a short amount of time. It also enables a participatory culture in which ordinary people can raise their voices in what feels like a safe environment and are able to share and see experiences that make them feel less alone which creates a different form of intimacy. An example would be the #MeToo movement which (although it had been started by Tarana Burke years before on Myspace) blew up overnight when actor Alyssa Milano used it on Twitter. This social media platform facilitated quick access to mass amounts of people who were able to participate and share intimate details of their lives to relate to others and to raise consciousness of this ubiquitous issue. However, this example also illustrates a drawback of this type of feminist activism in that these popular sorts of internet movements can make other forms invisible as well as take the focus off the real issue since it becomes more about the celebrity or the affect of the social media user. For example, the fact that this movement was started by a civil rights activist from the Bronx was overshadowed by this white celebrity and the focus was put more on her and the famous man she was calling out. These drawbacks are important to notice and work toward changing; yet this should not cause us to dismiss this form of activism completely.

For the women in my study, they are not free from the pervasiveness of post- and popular feminism logics or the draws of neoliberalism. Sometimes, their activism can be seen as a sort of brand that is influenced by, and integrated into, their identities which is also deeply tied to their work and careers in this neoliberal moment in which

production and use of every aspect and emotion of their personal lives becomes capital to create intimacy with their audience, to sell their brand, advance their career, and is key to becoming a good, hard-working, independent, self-governed neoliberal citizen. In some cases, economic or career success and notoriety results in a platform to share their personal stories and advocate to bring others like them into these systems and structures that have typically excluded them. In other cases, this economic success is an end in itself and their attractiveness becomes a part of their brand to further their careers and success. These processes complicate and factor into the activism of these women who fight against exclusion with a recurring message of helping girls like them see themselves represented and be empowered to aspire to the same success and access they have had and/or to just be themselves and embrace every part of their identities (not making sacrifices for inclusion). This is in line with the post/pop feminist and neoliberal idea of empowerment but becomes problematic when it fails to identify what they are empowering their audience to do and their primary message is that girls can empower themselves through their purchases, appearance, visibility, or simply their hard work and ability to overcome their adversity. This effectively bolsters neoliberalism and does nothing to overcome systematic exclusion because it does not identify or challenge the root of what excludes them in the first place.

In some cases, there are ruptures where the women offer alternative narratives to the dominant (Diane Guerrero sharing immigration experiences), or where their activism has the aim of equal rights and social justice or questions the existing structures that exclude them (America Ferrera on representation), or they call for collective action (hashtags, signing petitions, creating organizations) and these are important to identify. In

the particular case of the Latin/x American actors, for example, their activism is about making a rupture or break from what is stereotypically considered to characterize Latinas in the media as the hot spitfire, sex object, or the immigrant maid, for example, and broadcasting alternative narratives so young girls like them can see both themselves reflected and recognize possibilities with aspirational mirroring. However, it is also pertinent to recognize the instances where these women's activism uses the neoliberal, post-feminist logic of empowerment, how this plays out in the case of bodies that are nonwhite, immigrant, indigenous, or otherwise non-normative, and the messages that are perpetuated through their social media to their young girl target audience who are trying to figure out what it means to be *Latina* (a social construct with in-flux connotations and which is being shaped and formed by various influences such as celebrities, politicians, the news, and social media).

This is the crux for the contribution to the discussion around commodity or hashtag activism by looking at how these forms of activism (which are complicated and/or facilitated by the neoliberal market economy and social media) are being adopted and used by a group of women who are attempting to raise their voices and advocate for changes in representation and inclusion to inspire and so that younger girls do not have to face the same barriers they did, and/or are using these forms of activism as a brand (marketed through the media) to further their careers and compete or get by in the neoliberal market economy. Both are occurring simultaneously in many cases and ultimately these processes (made possible and displayed in the media) are contributing to young girl's and women's identity formation and the current construction of what it means to be *Latina*. Since *Latinidad* is an open and evolving concept that changes and is

defined by its current associations, one perception of the term is that it is outdated, flawed, and whitewashed which has resulted in an internet and hashtag movement to cancel the word (#LatinidadIsCancelled). The driving force and spark for this cancelation comes from Black and Indigenous people initially responding to “Hispanic Heritage Month” who are not able to see themselves represented in the current definition and have been overlooked and excluded from power that is afforded to lighter skinned or white passing Latinxs. It should be noted that the individuals in this chapter include women who were chosen because they have risen to prominent positions in mainstream media and the majority of them have lighter skin which reinforces the notion that the most popular Latinx celebrities are not Black or Indigenous, for example. One solution to combat the erasure is a movement to delete the term or reject it as many feel like it has rejected them as opposed to an alternative task of changing existing meanings and associations of *Latinidad* that exclude or invisibilize many individuals.

My project looks at how the highlighted women are attempting to advocate for and represent a group that is so heterogeneous, yet clustered (which often creates controversy, ex: not Latina, Mexican, authentic etc. enough), how *Latinidad* is being bought and sold in this neoliberal market economy, how Latinx and Latin American celebrities and social media influencers are transmitters of this neoliberal message, and how actractivist is a part of this identity package and brand being formed by these women and distributed in the media as a component of what it means to be Latina. In other words, it seems like a part of what it means to be Latina is being an activist, or an expansion of the term activist to actractivist to describe their work more accurately.

In *Rebel Girls: Youth Activism and Social Change across the Americas* (2011), Jessica K. Taft interviews 75 girl activists and identifies the power and strategies of young women's effective movements in social justice. What her study illustrates is that there is a dichotomy between girlhood, associated with innocence and superficiality, versus activism, associated with confidence and independence. For the girl activists, this double bind results in a dissociation from girlhood. In the examples used here, on the other hand, the activists are not rejecting girlhood or womanhood, but rather are transforming associations with beauty, fame, and celebrity status to serve their activist purposes, creating a hybrid activism that is accessible through social media. Often, associations with beauty are seen as more superficial which can result in an underestimation or a masking of intelligence. The women in this study have made their way to the center of mainstream media and celebrity status often because of their beauty and ability to garner roles and attention through their attractiveness. However, their beauty and attractiveness should not be considered a sacrifice for success, but rather an adept understanding of the rules and beauty standards of Hollywood and a strategy to access influence in order to use it to their advantage (for wealth and prestige or social justice and change). As a result of their garnered influence, they then have the ability and capacity to alter associations relating *Latinidad* to beauty. They have the power to re-define and cultivate attractiveness on their own terms to their followers through their social media, autobiographies, and first-person accounts because they have control over their own self-representation. In these spaces, they are no longer limited to, or directly subject to, the stereotypes imposed on them by the roles they seek in Hollywood.

The struggle exemplified in this chapter to use beauty to one's advantage (because it is a requirement of the industry) without being branded as superficial or trivial, is not new. This tension is evinced in the case of Dolores del R  o, the first major Latin American star to crossover from Mexican film to Hollywood in the 1920s and 1930s. According to Linda B. Hall's biography *Dolores del R  o: Beauty in Light and Shade* (2020), the career of del R  o "established a new phenotype for female beauty in Hollywood—a dark-haired, dark-eyed, dark-skinned ideal" (1). She paved the way for the women in this chapter and altered the beauty standards expected and required for access to Hollywood. Hall recognizes that del R  o's beauty is "sometimes seen as making her a victim and a commodity, but her beauty, charm, talent, and energy gave her enormous power to shape her own fate as well" (4-5). In fact, Hall argues that del R  o's power came specifically from her beauty in addition to her celebrity status. For example, she found that roles were being created for her because of her beauty instead of losing parts because of her appearance and background. Even though beauty is often associated with sexual attractiveness, these examples offer alternative associations relating beauty to power. Similar to del R  o, who shifted beauty expectations from the blond-haired, blue-eyed white women prominent in Hollywood, as I argue throughout this chapter, one new association the activists are creating is a link between *Latinidad* (which is associated with beauty due to the platform they garner through their fame and influence) and activism. Beauty may be the means to access their position, yet it is not the end, and becomes a pathway to power, influence, and attempts at change. What is necessary now is for the activists in this study, who have made their way into the center of mainstream media because they share a similar beauty aesthetic (or have made changes to

achieve this appearance) that is commonly accepted as the Latina look with a tilt toward lighter skin, to use their platform to speak out, raise awareness, and address the issue of a lack of representation of other skin colors. They have the potential for this advocacy; however, a limitation of their activism is that it is largely dependent on their own experiences which create legitimacy for their causes. It is difficult to see beyond one's own worries and challenges to prioritize or urgently address those of others.

In Amy Shields Dobson's book *Postfeminist Digital Cultures: Femininity, Social Media, and Self-Representation* (2015), the author urges in the first sentence to "take girls and young women seriously as media and cultural producers" (1). She highlights the ways that the concerns and posts of girls and women are often seen as trivial, cringeworthy, risky, dangerous, and weak. However, she emphasizes that these examples that appear frivolous are important because they reveal evidence of the impact of post-feminism and that their expressions in the media are mechanisms for survival and getting by to not be crushed by the world that supplies girls and women with demands to be confident and overcome judgment. For example, she argues that girls are seen as active media producers and users but are judged and critiqued improperly because they are seen as vain and driven by insecurities and trivialities. In contrast, Shields Dobson argues that these representations show the contradictory pressures girls face in the post-feminist digital culture where they have to navigate messages and pressures to be "heterosexy," marked by visual appearance that reinforces current notions of feminine gender performativity and appealing to the male gaze, but not sexualized; confident, independent, authentic, and transparent, but not narcissistic; visible and exposed in specific and conditional ways, but not destroyed by feelings of judgment. The reason

young girls and women use social media platforms to make posts is because they have been promised that exposure and visibility equates to power. For many girls, this is an empty promise. For the women in this study, they face similar pressures and impossible expectations expressed in this book but with the added layer of differences in race, ethnicity, and culture. However, due to their status and position accessed through their careers and fame, their visibility affords power and influence because of their platform as evidenced by examples of impact and change made by these women and their career coalitions. Their status does, however, bear many costs since they have increased visibility and are exposed to criticism. Shields Dobson pushes critics to slow down and not judge but rather to criticize as well as empathize. At the conclusion, Shields Dobson discusses future research and opportunities to study the surveillance and regulation of young girls, the costs of visibility and self-exposure, and the profit their visibility produces for others. This chapter analyzes each of these aspects looking through a specific lens of famous Latin/x American women and the costs and benefits of their visibility.

These women who are exposing problems and issues related to themselves and advocating for change and equality are bringing these messages to a mainstream audience due to their access and success in careers in film and television. As a result of these platforms, they have earned the right to share and have an audience who will listen to them. In this cultural moment, young people's lives are largely affected by the influencers they follow and the information they seek out and allow onto their feed. Young girls are more likely to follow the women who appear on their favorite shows on *Netflix* and consider the messages they send through their captions and hashtags on

Instagram than they are to read a scholarly article about feminist activism. The discourse these influential women are choosing to disseminate through social media and their autobiographies is about equality, agency, and inclusion which helps bridge the gap between academia and pop culture, making these ideas more accessible to a wider demographic. Additionally, these messages are very personal, tying the women's identities to their causes which seems to bolster the legitimacy of their experiences and activism. Therefore, audiences are exposed to these messages through the shows and videos they watch, the accounts they follow on social media, and the people they read about in articles and interviews which helps create a more progressive upcoming generation that is more socially aware, empathetic, and in touch with issues and ideas related to themselves and others. This study hopes to lay the groundwork for future investigation of following generations of activists who will build off the activism of this generation and continue the inter-generational career coalition cycles so that eventually this term either becomes associated with real-world change and social justice brought about by these online movements, or another iteration of "activism" emerges which more accurately describes it as opposed to the current stigmatization of celebrity or mainstream activism as less scholarly, less serious, inadequate, or completely commodified.

Chapter Three

Aesthetivists: Beauty Norm Becomes Empowerment Platform

As evidenced in the previous chapters, women have been excluded from public spaces and have worked to infiltrate them, gain power, and then use their influence to share their stories in order to advocate for the inclusion and representation of others like them. Whereas in the political sphere and Hollywood where access to these institutions traditionally requires a sacrifice of self or a separation between personal identity and work, YouTube, an American video-sharing site founded in California, alters this dynamic to where identity is deeply tied to success and a new type of career or social media influencing and vlogging, or video logging. Although it seems like a platform open to everyone and where the free expression of identity is supported, the ability to gain a following and “success” depends on many factors that do not naturally lend themselves to marginalized groups and often result in a masking of identity. In this chapter I will investigate the theories of Sarah Banet-Weiser (popular feminism), Rosalind Gill (postfeminism), and Catherine Rottenberg (neoliberal feminism), who discuss the intersection of feminism, activism, media, and capitalism. In *Empowered: Popular Feminism and Popular Misogyny* (2018), Sarah Banet-Weiser uses the term “popular feminism” to describe the way in which feminist discourses are circulated on social media distinguishing it from academic or other types of feminisms. Further, she argues that this type of feminism is intertwined with popular misogyny and the fact that it is more visible makes other forms of feminism that critique hierarchy or capitalism more obscure. Consequently, it typically becomes a rhetoric used by white, middle-class, cis-gendered, and heterosexual women and does not challenge the existing structure. What

this project seeks to investigate is the way in which Latinx and Latin American women use this type of discourse on YouTube and whether it functions in a similar way or creates new avenues that distinguish it from popular feminism.

In *Gender and the Media* (2007), Rosalind Gill discusses the positives and pitfalls of “postfeminism” by analyzing the relationship between feminism and the media and how it is changing over time, defining it as an epistemological shift, a historical transformation, and a backlash against feminism, therefore introducing a new way to look at it as postfeminism-sensibility. In *Commodity Activism: Cultural Resistance in Neoliberal Times* (2012), Roopali Mukherjee and Sarah Banet-Weiser discuss the ways that celebrities use the media to challenge beauty standards, build communities, and raise awareness for global problems. This creates a tie between consumerism and activism which I also identify in the examples in this chapter. What the authors recognize is a tension and contradictions in trying to decide what counts as politics or activism or whether participation in these activities really produces change. In *Authentic TM: The Politics and Ambivalence in a Brand Culture* (2012), Banet-Weiser uses the term “politics of ambivalence” to complicate the idea of authenticity in this digital age where the performance of unfiltered, authentic identity is fodder for economic gain. As a result, identity can become obfuscated by ulterior motives. I analyze how this can complicate the representation of true identity and the effectiveness of activism.

Another tendency that often results from the YouTube platform is the use of a neoliberal feminist discourse that bolsters a rhetoric of empowerment for women to become entrepreneurs and their own bosses. In *The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism* (2018), Catherine Rottenberg argues that neoliberal feminism is replacing liberal feminism in the

United States and this places the framing in individualistic terms. As a result, women must orient themselves towards finding a personal and happy work-family balance. This is a type of discourse I recognize in this chapter and for this reason many women write self-help and inspirational books marketed as autobiographies and memoirs that bolster this rhetoric to embrace who they are and turn their personal passions into successful careers. Again, the criticism revolves around the exclusion of low income or marginalized women. However, in my project I look at how YouTube and social media alters this dynamic by creating a platform that is more accessible to underrepresented groups. Of course, it is necessary to take into consideration what type of women are initially able to access success in this sphere, yet I want to look at the strategies they use to open the door for others and expand their viewers ideas for what is possible.

In this chapter I will look at the tactics of various Latinx and Latin American women to infiltrate this YouTube platform, gain a following, and use their influence to share personal stories and for advocacy. Although it seems like an open platform that would facilitate the representation of true identity, the economic aspect tied to personal branding complicates this. The YouTubers themselves become literal brand names who attach their identities and daily lives to the image and products they are selling and advertising. They become what I call “aesthetivists” who gain a following through their cosmetic, aesthetic, and beauty advertising, or other more surface level methods, to earn the right to be heard and often share personal stories, Latinx and Latin American life experiences, or to advocate for causes related to them. They have to navigate how much of their identity and background to include right away in order to become successful and gain followers. The question becomes how long do they have to sell their brand with

beauty, aesthetics, cosmetic products, or comedy before they have the freedom to talk about what they want? And when this opportunity comes, do they break down the barrier and share about their personal lives and are they able to go through a metamorphosis and enter a second public life?

A trend that becomes evident is the use of a type of feminist discourse that bolsters a rhetoric of empowerment for women to become entrepreneurs and their own bosses. For this reason, many women write self-help memoirs that encourage other women and young girls to embrace who they are and turn their personal passions into successful careers. However, the viewers who are drawn into the marketing ploys are also simultaneously exposed to the life experiences of Latinx and Latin American individuals and over time there is more opportunity to share more deeply personal stories once the initial success is reached and there is a stronger relationship between viewer and vlogger, entering into what I term a second public life that does not adhere as closely to the rules of initial access of the same content they created to garner their original audience. Autobiography is expanded to the digital realm and there is an underlying push for consciousness intertwined with the superficial found in everyday lives. YouTube offers a platform to present personal stories in an accessible way which increases consciousness of other narratives and counter stories. The mixture of superficial consumerism and vulnerable expositions of life experiences allows for representation of different types of stories that many viewers and mainstream audiences might not typically have access to in their everyday lives, contributing to an intermediary form of what I call aestheticism. Therefore, in the following case studies of Latin/x American Youtubers, I will identify the strategies they use to share their stories and advocate for others like them and the

ways in which these strategies overlap and differ from the attractivists and politic-identivists of this project.

Lele Pons

Lele Pons, a Venezuelan American with long blonde hair who is known for being the first to reach 1 billion loops on Vine, a platform for seven second looping video clips, and has expanded to YouTube with slapstick comedy skits, sends the message that people should not have to sacrifice who they are. Although she is not explicitly a beauty YouTube vlogger as are the other case studies in this section, she parallels the other examples in that she exhibits a similar trajectory of her career in garnering fame through a more surface level tactic (in this case comedy instead of beauty products) to later, once she has achieved a certain level of success, open up about her personal life and struggles and share in a vulnerable way as a means to help others who have similar difficulties. Additionally, her comedy content often reflects beauty standards as she satirizes different aspects of Latina beauty culture. She has published a novel she terms “fictional memoir” called *Surviving High School* (2016) in which she writes, “I believe it was my wild upbringing plus my verbal disadvantages that led me to be the performer and one-of-a-kind weirdo with a heart of gold that I am today” (4) and encourages readers to believe in their “YOU-ness” that is special and should be celebrated. Her comments about you-ness and her upbringing align with the be yourself messages and personal storytelling that are evident in many of the case studies in the previous chapters. Lele Pons is someone who became hugely popular on Vine representing topics such as her struggles in high school. As she has grown in fame and began her YouTube channel, she creates videos about topics relating to Latinx experiences, but she does it in a comedic way often playing on

stereotypes. She initially faces restrictions on personal expression due to this level of fame and the critical nature of the internet, but her success still sends a message to viewers about possibilities and limitations. Later in her career, once she has garnered immense success, she enters into a second public life where she no longer shies away from revealing aspects of her personal life in her YouTube docuseries “The Secret Life of Lele Pons.” Her achievements seem to portray that it is possible for a Latina to “make it” on YouTube, but it is worth noting and discussing what type of Latina (young, blonde, able to pass as white) is capable of this initial success to break the barrier so that Latinxs can enter this YouTube internet space with success as well as what type of Latina is limited in her ability to advocate for other Latina women. Yet, on the other hand, the combination of her Anglo appearance and her videos in Spanish about Latinx culture challenge the pre-existing stereotypes of what a Latina is “supposed to look like.”

In this section, I will use three main sources to analyze the ways in which Lele Pons can be considered an “aesthetivist” and how her example aligns with the other Youtubers in this Chapter as well as how she uses similar strategies of the polit-identivists and actractivists of the previous two chapters. The first source is the YouTube video content she creates, the second is the fictional memoir she wrote, and the third is a docu-series she filmed called “The Secret Life of Lele Pons” on YouTube. Through the analysis of these first-person accounts, I will characterize different aspects and concerns of the aesthetivists and the ways in which they are communicated through these autobiographical accounts. The main topics I will look at include social media, activism, aspirational mirroring, the use of personal stories, celebrity status, beauty, breaking

stereotypes, and the ‘be yourself’ message which I argue are characteristic of the aesthetivists in this chapter.

YouTube Videos

Although Pons shot to fame through her comedic vine videos which consist of seven-second-long, looping video clips, after the termination of this social media site, she continued her content creation career on the video platform YouTube. In 2016 she published her first video titled “Keeping up with the Powerpuff Girls” in which she and other former viners create a parody of the cartoon network children’s show. Since then she has continued to create short comedic parody videos, often satirizing the Latinx experience. For example, there are currently twenty videos in which the word Latino/Latina/Hispanic are used in the title of the video, or which include some aspect of Latinx culture. Some examples include: “Crazy Latina Girlfriend,” “Latino Hunger Games,” “Training to be a Latina,” “I’m a Telenovela Villain,” “Miss Latina,” “Spanish Soap Opera,” or “My Big Fat Hispanic Family.” Her videos satirize the Latinx experience and present it in a comical and oftentimes stereotypical way while simultaneously hinting at aspects of the Latinx experience, exposing a wide audience to a culture and experience that might be outside of their own.

One video which epitomizes the way in which Pons portrays this tactic of satirizing the Latinx experience while simultaneously exposing the audience to cultural aspects is the video “Training to be a Latina” in which Pons acts as a guide to her non-Latina friend, Hannah, who is about to go on a date with a Latino guy she is interested in. Initially, the friend complains about her plight and how she needs to learn to be a Latina before her date. Pons starts to say, “Lucky for you I’m a...” when she gets interrupted by

her friend who asks, “Know anyone who can help me?” In an exasperated huff, Lele takes her by the arm and starts to train her. In this instance we see an example of the way in which Pons’s appearance as a light skinned, blond girl is assumed to not be Latina because she does not fit in the typical mold of the brown-skinned, dark-haired Latina girl. In this instance, she plays upon this stereotype and subverts the typical expectations by asserting herself as a blond-haired, light-skinned Latina. Next, the training of the friend begins with dance lessons. Hannah displays her dancing skills in order for the hired dancing instructor to assess her and it is obvious that she has no rhythm and flails her arms and legs around. Then, the instructor steps in and teaches her how to salsa, a dance associated with Latin culture, but which is a combination of Cuban dances such as Pachanga, rumba, and mambo as well as American dances such as swing and tap popularized in New York City in the 1960s. This comedic video presents the dance in a stereotypical way but also exposes an audience to a type of dance with which they may not be familiar.

In the second training session for Hannah, Pons introduces her to three of her Latina friends, one of which introduces a Latino guy. Pons tells Hannah that they are going to teach her how to “treat boys like a true Latina” and proceeds to give her examples of role-playing between each of the girls in different scenarios. In one case the girl flirts with the guy speaking nonsense in Spanish. In this case they play on the fact that the language sounds very romantic and Pons tells Hannah that you have to act like you are in a telenovela with a lot of passion. The next scenario represents “what all Latinas do when a man disrespects them” and there is a montage of Pons explaining to Hannah all the best ways to slap. Again, in this scenario, the skit plays on stereotypes and

typical tropes depicted in telenovelas. Yet, when Hannah gets a chance to try, instead of doing the stereotypical telenovela slap, she winds up and punches him in the face. The final lesson in this segment comments on the stereotypical infidelity of Latino men and the way in which the girlfriend has to check his phone in order to make sure he has not been unfaithful. This plays on the stereotype of the unfaithful, machista Latino man who treats women with disrespect.

The next segment of the video plays on the stereotypes of the Spanish language. In this lesson, they practice with Hannah and teach her how to roll her Rs. Additionally, they give her sassy phrases to repeat in Spanish in order to practice her pronunciation. Each time she repeats the sentences with a very American accent, and she ends the sentence with a prolonged rolled R yell. Again, the video exaggerates and creates a caricature of Spanish language and culture, yet simultaneously reveals legitimate aspects of the culture such as the pronunciation of the letter R. Next, they get her ready for the date by dressing her and doing her hair and make-up. These clips play on the beauty expectations of Latina women with stereotypical aspects of appearance such as bright red lipstick as well as clips where they put her in a low-cut shirt and stuff her bra. They finally reveal her date-ready look as she turns in slow motion with mariachi music in the background where her hair is very voluminous, and she has tissue sticking out of her shirt. In stereotypical telenovela fashion the video ends with Pons taking Hannah to her date only to find out that Hannah has a date with Pons's boyfriend. The video ends with Hannah fleeing the scene, Pons chasing and tackling her and the boyfriend just walking away. As is obvious from this example, in many ways Pons satirizes and uses stereotypes to her advantage in comedic ways to create content and attract viewers. Many of her early

videos consist of similar examples of presenting Latina culture in a stereotypic way in order to satirize it. Meanwhile, similar to the example of her exasperation at the suggestion that she is not Latina, her appearance also breaks certain stereotypes as she calls out and ridicules certain behavior.

In addition to satirizing the Latinx experience, Pons also humorizes and critiques YouTube culture in itself. Pons's channel and original content differs significantly from much of the typical video content created by YouTubers. Whereas many of the creators of videos film their own personal, day-to-day lives, Pons, until later in her career when she goes through a metamorphosis and enters a second public life, creates fictional content that often makes fun of these types of videos. A major trend in YouTube is the filming of people's relationships, engagements, weddings, and family/home life. However, instead of sharing direct access to her true personal life, Pons creates fictional content that mimics these real-life experiences of other vloggers. As a result, it becomes difficult to tell what is real and true and what is not. For example, Pons does a series of videos with a particular guy with titles such as "Check Out Our New House," "We Have Big News!" "Are We Having a Boy or a Girl?!", "We're Married," and "Going on Our Honeymoon!!" with content that is stereotypical of YouTube vloggers sharing about their real, personal lives. However, these videos do not reflect content that is a look inside the real life of Pons, instead they consist of videos mocking and making fun of other vloggers who do share about these personal aspects of their lives on the platform of YouTube. As a result, Pons differs from many other Youtubers in this chapter in that she originally did not garner fame by sharing explicitly about her personal life; instead, she satirized and hid anything personal. When I initially started my investigations, Pons did not share

anything of her personal life in her content creation; however, over time this has changed as she began by publishing a “fictional memoir” which was inspired by her true life yet fictionalized. As a result, it was impossible to tell what was true and what was fictional. However, in the summer of 2020, Pons filmed a docu-series for her YouTube channel in which, for the first time, she recorded content of her personal life and delved into many struggles that she has faced and kept hidden. Over time, all of the women in this study take this turn towards what is personal and intimate, breaking down the barrier between the private and public sphere, asserting their first-person politics, and opening up about their personal lives with a similar mission to help others like them. They go through a metamorphosis and emerge in a second public life. Their first public life follows more strictly the conventions and the typical pathway to success. But once this level of achievement is gained, they begin to share vulnerable expositions of their private lives and struggles. They use strategies such as aspirational mirroring to help others both see themselves reflected as well as possibilities for the future.

Autobiography

In the year 2015, Lele Pons’s following on vine grew from five thousand followers to more than ten million within the year. The following year, in 2016, Pons capitalized on her fame and spotlight to work with #1 *New York Times* bestselling author Melissa de la Cruz to write *Surviving High School: Do it for the Vine*. Consistent with the strategies of both the polit-identivists and actractivists of this project, Pons follows a parallel pattern of gaining fame and then using her platform to share about her personal life through autobiography. However, Pons’s approach involves a twist in that she would not call her book an autobiography per se but rather a “fictional memoir” in which the

story opens with “A Note About This Book” signed by Pons and de la Cruz in which they clarify, “This is a novel, and the character ‘Lele Pons’ is based on the real Lele Pons (but is not her, exactly), and the stories in this book were *inspired* by Lele’s life and her Vines (but the story is made up). This is not a memoir. It’s a fictional memoir, if such a thing can exist. Why not?” (1). This strategy can be seen as a way for Lele to protect herself from scrutiny and criticism that often plagues internet superstars. As a result, it becomes impossible to tell what is fact and what is fiction in a similar way in which this becomes difficult based on her YouTube videos and content. She mixes fact and fiction to create a personality and persona, but uses platforms that typically present personal, real-life stories such as YouTube vlogging and autobiography. Yet, she adeptly uses these platforms to obtain success while simultaneously insulating and protecting herself by not explicitly revealing too much. Although we cannot parse out and differentiate fact from fiction in her autobiography, we can use what she has written to identify the strategies she uses and the message she intends to send to her target audience.

Targeting the Next Generation + Aspirational Mirroring

As has been previously discussed in the first two chapters of this project, one strategy that both the polit-identivists and actractivists use is that they garner success and a following and use their influence to share personal stories and target the next generation with children’s and young adult books to offer them examples and role models to aspire to possibilities they may not have known existed for themselves. In a similar vein, Pons uses this strategy when she writes her fictional memoir. For example, it is evident that the younger generation is her intended audience considering the inside cover of her book describes, “Speaking to the next generation of teens—digitally savvy and connected yet

still facing the same universal teenage issues: rejection, loyalty, popularity, and, um, *why* is it that our iPhones can survive a car crash but break when we place them on the coffee table? Lele shows us with zest, enthusiasm, and self-deprecating silliness that the kids are all right” (inside cover). Within this description it is evident that she is targeting young people and attempting to offer an example of how to navigate a digitally connected world while simultaneously trying to survive very timeless and common problems that young people face in their day-to-day lives.

From the outset of the story, Lele casts herself as an outsider and someone who did not fit in with her peers. It becomes evident that she is trying to speak to and help others who have had similar experiences not fitting in, feeling alone, or othered due to, for example, language differences. Pons writes, “So, if I have to be an outcast I might as well document my misadventures and heartbreaks—maybe that way all the other outcasts out there won’t feel so alone.” (66). Like the other women in this study who use their personal stories as fodder to help others like themselves, Lele identifies herself as an outsider using examples, such as her inability to communicate, as a way to help others with similar situations. Like Sonia Sotomayor who writes a children’s version of her autobiography and explicitly shares that what others may have perceived as disadvantages such as her diabetes or her socio-economic background actually turned out to be what propelled her to success, Pons attributes her differences to her fame. She writes, “I believe it was my wild upbringing plus my verbal disadvantages that led me to be the performer and one-of-a-kind weirdo with a heart of gold that I am today” (4). Her quirkiness and struggles inspired the seven-second videos that she created for Vine and ultimately led to a career in entertainment.

Later, Pons more explicitly states the way in which she hopes to help a specific audience of individuals who are like her to see more possibilities for themselves when she writes, “If anyone, these are the people I’ve been making Vines for, young girls who need someone to relate to, to tell them everything’s going to be okay because life is actually really funny and not as scary as it seems” (108). Pons is targeting young girls and offering her example as a way for them to relate and be able to see themselves reflected as well as new possibilities which is what I call aspirational mirroring. Yet, Pons is honest about the intimidation of this process and tactic and how she herself doubts if she is a good role model or mature enough to hold this responsibility, writing, “Am I a mentor now? I can barely get my own life together, how am I supposed to be a voice of wisdom for young girls? I’m too weird to be a role model! What if I can’t handle the responsibility?” (109). Her comments here represent the pressures and burdens that come with representation for so many people in the media and with platforms. There is a certain expectation and labor involved in this representation that can often have harmful effects on those in the spotlight.

Be Yourself Message

Not only does Pons target the younger generation which is in line with the other case studies of the project, she also similarly sends a message to her young audience encouraging them to be themselves. As discussed in the introduction, this message can often fall into the traps of neoliberalism in that it can result in women trying to obtain this status through purchases, consumerism, and discourse that does not go beyond surface level understandings or address the root issues of what forces are suggesting that she should not be herself in the first place. On the other hand, in some cases this message can

be seen as a way to help others recognize their epistemic advantage and their ability to both know and master two different cultures/realms in order to work the system and use their identity to their own advantage. In the example of Lele Pons in her book, she often uses this ‘be yourself’ message without directly identifying or calling out the structures that cause her to feel like she cannot be herself in the first place. Yet, the analysis of the ways in which she subverts stereotypes can be a way to express and explain her epistemic advantage to her audience.

In the prologue to her fictional memoir, Pons talks about a “unique essence” and the importance of one’s “YOU-ness” as a way to send this ‘be yourself’ message to her readers. She discusses the importance of this essence and then throughout her story, offers examples of the ways in which she asserts herself and takes pride in being herself. For example, Pons writes in the prologue, “See, every human being (and most animals, I find) have their own unique essence, an essence comprised of deeply rooted qualities that make them who they are...my point is: I believe that YOU-ness is something very special, no matter who you are, and it ought to be celebrated” (3). She goes on to explain that what gives her “Lele essence” has to do with her personal background as an immigrant from Venezuela at the age of five and her struggles with language: “For as long as I can remember, language has been a struggle for me. Words didn’t come to me as a child, so I used my body to communicate...Now take all of that and add immigrating to the United States, and you have a potential disaster on your hands. I knew nothing about American culture, and my differences paralyzed me with anxiety. For comfort and peace of mind, I turned to entertainment. I found I was embraced by my peers for being physically dramatic and, well, funny. I found that I knew how to make people laugh, and

so I held on to that as a life raft in the sea of the most confusing and alienating time in my life” (4). According to Lele, she turned what others may have perceived as a weakness into the key to her success of finding ways to fit in and garner attention through entertainment and to use it to her advantage.

Not only does Pons offer her own example as a way to help others see themselves reflected and offer alternative ideas about what is possible for someone like her, but she then encourages others to do the same. She writes, “I encourage you to think about the life events and circumstances that have made you truly YOU, and to celebrate every single part of yourself—the strong, the weak, the good, the bad, and the ugly—because each part contributes to making you special and AMAZING. Trust me” (3). She gives her life as an example of a success story of using her unique qualities to gain fame and success and invites her target audience of other young girls to do the same. Yet, what becomes confusing is the way in which she talks about being herself and embracing her uniqueness when in reality, she writes a fictional memoir to avoid scrutiny and criticism by claiming that aspects are fictionalized and creating fictional skits and slapstick comedy on her YouTube channel. At this point in her career, she has not gone through a metamorphosis or entered a second public life. Throughout the rest of the book, Pons gives examples of how she asserts herself and re-iterates the ‘be yourself’ message. For example, when she has a confrontation with her high school nemesis, Yvette, and explains, “My problem with you is that you’re a freak and you don’t belong here. I don’t like when girls like you come around thinking you’re special and can just be whoever you want to be” and Lele responds, “But I can be whoever I want to be. That doesn’t mean I’m special, that means I’m human. Anyone can be whoever they want to be. It’s

just that not everyone realizes it” (35). Again, the message is that everyone should just be themselves and forces such as a high school bully should not stop them from that. Later, Pons and Yvette realize that they have a lot in common and become friends and the situation turns into an example of two Latina girls in a predominantly white high school environment fighting for what seem to be limited resources and opportunities, but eventually realizing that they have been fighting the wrong enemy.

Another example in which Pons solidifies this ‘be yourself’ message and as a response to what Arlene Dávila claims is an inherent sacrifice to mainstream access of sacrificing self. Pons writes, “Guys prefer mild mannered ladies with easy faces to look at who will cook them dinner and tie their shoes. Well, I won’t have it! I can be me and still desirable right? I can slay hearts of men everywhere and influence girls to respect and honor me, even fear me. In other words, I can become popular without sacrificing my individuality, I know I can, all I have to do is tell the world that I am her and I am taking over, no more miss nice guy, no more target of ridicule!” (50). This is the way in which Pons describes herself before her fame and what prompts her decision to start taking matters into her own hands and start making Vine videos. She decides to get a make-over and change her appearance, yet insists that she is still herself writing, “I’ve decided to stop feeling bad for myself. I’m going to get a makeover and prove to everyone that I can be the cool girl. But I’m not going to stop being myself” (51). In essence, she is stating that who she is not related to her appearance. As she begins to garner success, again she uses the idea of ‘being herself’ as a key to her success stating, “I don’t know what I’m doing right (besides being myself), but I have another million followers now and ten million loops!” (107). And finally, once she has obtained unprecedented success, the idea

of being herself is primary once again: “I’ve always been this person, so it feels strange that all of a sudden people approve of who I am” (120). Throughout her entire story, from the beginning, describing herself as an outcast and her differences due to language and her immigration, to the end, in which she has become an internet star, the main message of ‘be yourself’ persists and parallels the other examples of women both in this chapter and throughout the other chapters, adding to the idea and examples of Latina women attempting to help the next generation of young girls to navigate white, male-dominated, American culture by using aspects of their personal identity to their advantage. In some cases the women directly call out the forces that make them feel like they cannot be themselves in the first place and sometimes they do not; yet the message is consistent in each case, revealing an underlying force that is causing them to feel like they cannot be themselves in the first place and either a conscious or subconscious knowledge of this. Typically a conscious awareness of this grows over time as the women garner more success and are connected to other women or have other examples. The women in this study contribute to the story stacking which will help the next generation be aware of and be able to directly call out the forces of discrimination, stereotyping, classism, sexism, beauty standards for example, that make them feel like they cannot be themselves in the first place.

Social Media + Celebrity Status

Another common tactic and similar pattern characteristic of the case studies in both this chapter and this entire project is the use of social media tied to celebrity status. In the case of the polit-identivists, the examples represent a pattern of successful careers, followed by the use of social media that elevates and popularizes the individual. With the

attractivists, the women garner a celebrity status through their acting careers and then begin to use social media for advocacy and as a way to share their personal lives. However, in the case of the aesthetivists, social media is often inherent in the rise of the women to fame and the result of their social media use is a celebrity status. In the case of Lele Pons, she discusses in her book the role of social media, in this case the now defunct but once high-profile Vine, and the way that it launched her into the public eye and resulted in a career intertwined with social media and celebrity influence. For example, Pons describes Vine as both a way to document her life as well as a way to escape and transcend her circumstances. Her initial encounter with the social media platform of Vine is described in a way similar to someone meeting a significant other for the first time. Pons describes, “When Lucy, a BFF from St. Anne’s, showed me her Vine account, I felt an instant connection. It was the first social media platform I had ever encountered that seemed to be about genuine self-expression versus only the blind desperation for social validation” (16). She describes having an “instant connection” with the platform and being able to genuinely express herself which solicit ideas about a deep relationship and bond typically used to describe human-to-human relationships. Similarly, Pons continues, “Vine wasn’t just a way to express myself, it was the outlet I had been waiting for my whole life” (17). This was a relationship she “had been waiting for [her] whole life” which is a similar expression used again to describe typical human-to-human relationships.

In addition to the deep connection Pons felt right away to the social media platform, she also follows a similar pattern of the other case studies of seeing the platform as a way to express herself and speak out in a way she had not previously been

able to do, by sharing aspects of herself. For example, she describes her collection of videos as a diary of her life and a way to broadcast her personal experiences.

Additionally, Vine is described as her means to connect with the world and raise her voice: “For as long as I can remember, whenever I struggled with words, I used images to tell a story. I used physical communication. When I discovered Vine, I found the medium through which I would finally be able to communicate fully with the world around me, to share my thoughts and concerns with anyone who might want to listen. I finally had a voice, and I was hooked” (17). In this instance, Pons describes what I think is the mass appeal of social media sites such as Vine. She offers the idea that she is freely able to express herself in a way that is very accessible to many types of people (anyone with a smart phone or access to the internet) and as a way to have a voice and be heard. The primary reason she has such a large following is because she has people who want to know more about her and to have a similar life to her own; they see some resonance of themselves in her and see the way in which she navigates her own struggles, and they desire to be more like her. Yet she is sending them the message to be themselves which can seem contradictory.

Despite her seeming success and aspirational story of an ordinary high school girl rising to sudden fame and prominence, Pons also discusses the drawbacks and costs of this fame as well as a discussion of a whole new world representative of a new frontier of social media and influencer careers. To start, Pons emphasizes, “I wasn’t looking to gain a following. Really, I wasn’t!” (17). According to Pons the idea of becoming a star was not something she had dreamed of or even knew was possible. She was on the forefront of this movement, whereas today it is more common for ordinary people on social media

to go viral and gain massive followings that they turn into entertainment careers. However, at the time, this was not something she knew as a possibility for herself. One contributing factor to her lightning rise to fame is an example of what I call a career coalition. Pons writes, “Oh, and after Cameron Díaz shared ‘3 Ways to Tell if a Person is Latin,’ I jumped from six thousand followers to six hundred thousand” (91). In this case Cameron Díaz, a famous American actor, producer, and entrepreneur, relates to Lele Pons because she is another Latina who does not encapsulate the stereotypical Latin look considering they are both light-skinned, blonde women. As a result of Díaz using her platform to bolster the career of a young girl with a similar appearance and background, Pons rises to fame.

Due to her increased following, Pons begins to get attention from people in the entertainment industry who want to capitalize on her success and commodify her following. In her book Pons writes, “I kept getting phone calls about unfamiliar words like deals and sponsorships and representation and brand image...am I going to need a manager? Who knew having a following could be so complicated? Ooh, I like the sound of that: a following...it’s like I’m a cult leader” (91). Initially, Pons gets inducted into a whole new world and is excited about it. Instead of a teenage girl filming comedy videos with her friends and posting them to the internet for her classmates to see, she rapidly becomes the possessor of a valuable commodity that others want to capitalize on. She gives us an inside look at what it would be like to go viral and obtain star status in a very short amount of time. At first, Pons, like many other young people, is excited about the attention, the potential, the big dreams, and this interest surrounding her. However, over time, she begins to articulate the costs of this status and attention. She writes, “Is this

what being popular is like? Being surrounded by people without having anyone to really talk to? Everyone knows your name, but no one cares to know anything more than that? And why? Just because I got in shape, lost my braces, and posted some wacky videos on the internet?” (120). What Pons is addressing is the seeming superficiality of her outward appearance that garnered her attention but really meant nothing to her since it hinders people from really knowing her. This book that she has written can be seen as a response to this process of obtaining celebrity status but feeling alone and unknown because she is able to use her own words to peel back the image and expose herself in her own way.

Docu-series

When I first began investigating Lele Pons, I believed her to be an outlier in that she did not directly use her personal experiences as a way to share her story with the purpose of advocacy as is the pattern with the other case studies in this project. Initially, I had theorized that her videos never get to the personal level seen in other YouTubers due to her level of internet popularity because there are pressures to not upset her fans. For example, in a *Washington Post* article called “Tiptoeing on Social Media’s Tightrope,” Sarah Ellison attributes Pons’s ability to maintain celebrity status to her inoffensiveness: “She has lasted and outlasted other social media personalities because she does nothing to subvert the expectations of her fans and nothing to offend.” Instead of being an influencer she wants to be an entertainer and her skits are born from her experiences, but they are never too personal because of the nature of the criticism a person can receive on the internet. In fact, she was criticized in the media for this lack of personal sharing which is so common among YouTube vloggers and social media users as evidenced by the other polit-identivists and actractivists in this study. In the *Washington Post* article, Ellison

mentions that despite being an immigrant, none of Pons's videos address this and Lele answers the question, "Would you ever discuss Trump's rhetoric about Latinos?" with "I would never—like, honestly, social media scares me to the point that I'd just rather be private and talk about it with my friends." This diverges from the examples of the other women in this study who do use their platforms for activism and to become influencers for causes related to them. She uses her platform for entertainment more than influence as the *Washington Post* article describes her aims: "She wants to be an entertainer and cringes when she's called an influencer." As a result, I believed her to be divergent from the other examples in this study; however, over time and once she was more established in her career, Pons opens up on a docu-series, breaking the barrier between her private and public life and turns her experience into mental health activism, fully following the trends and patterns of the other case studies in this project and exemplifying what I call a metamorphosis and entering a second public life.

In the summer of 2020, Pons filmed and published a 5-episode docu-series to her YouTube channel, the title of which is "The Secret Life of Lele Pons" with a very abrupt change from her typical slapstick comedy content to a true-to-life behind the scenes look at not only her day-to-day life, as is typical of YouTube vlogging content, but delves into a plethora of mental health issues that she has hidden throughout her career. The cover image of the docu-series depicts a split face of Lele Pons: one half of her face shows her glamorized with make-up and her hair done and her typical appearance on the internet while the other half of her face in black and white lacks make-up and represents her appearance as she interviews in the videos, emphasizing the contrast between her double identity life. As a result, her case study follows the example of other polit-identivists and

attractivists who have garnered success and a following which allowed them the space and the voice to share about their personal struggles as a way to relate to their audience and advocate for others like themselves. In a similar vein to Sonia Sotomayor who kept her diabetes a secret for a long time throughout her career but then shared about it for the first time in her autobiography and became an advocate for young people with differences and disabilities by publishing her children's book, Pons follows a similar pattern when she finally opens up and reveals her struggles. The 5-episode docu-series covers topics such as "I have severe OCD," "My dad is gay," "I have Tourette's," "The internet hates me," and "I'm my own worst enemy" in which Pons divulges her mental health issues and films sessions with her therapist working through and developing strategies to cope with her struggles.

Similar to many of the women in this study, Pons discloses that her purpose in filming this docu-series is that she wants to take her story into her own hands, find the good in her struggles, and help others with similar circumstances. The first episode of her docu-series called "I have severe OCD" includes the description of the video: "It's no secret Lele Pons is one of the most successful social media icons with over 40 million followers and considered an internet trailblazer for her contributions to various platforms. Known for her unfiltered videos, candid humor and crazy stunts, Lele's storytelling arch takes a more serious tone as she opens up to the world with her deepest secret. Through access to private moments, emotional interviews and never seen before footage, Lele reveals her life-long struggle with OCD among other mental health conditions and doesn't shy away from the most intimate details of her battle." As the description depicts, this series of videos exists in stark contrast to her typical content of parody videos and for

the first time her audience gets a glimpse of her real life and not her fake relationship vlogs, her comedy skits, or even her ‘fictional memoir’. In the video, Pons describes what it is like to live with OCD, Tourette’s, ADHD, and depression, and the ways in which these struggles contributed to her vine videos and career. Like some of the other case studies, her struggles and disadvantages are sometimes cast in a way that they contributed to her success. For example, due to her OCD, she describes often filming the physical comedy stunts over and over so many times until they got it right almost to the detriment of her health considering the stunts were often painful as she would get hit with objects, trip, or fall into water. Yet, this attention to detail and seeking perfection led to the virality of her videos. She also attributes her obsession with Vine and her ability to continually create content as a way to distract her from her OCD.

Although her mental health struggles may have contributed to or impacted her ability to create Vine video content which has propelled her into the spotlight, Pons is also very honest about the drawbacks, sacrifices, and costs of living with these mental health issues the severity of which is compounded by her fame. In the second video of the docu-series called “My dad is gay,” Pons learns that her dad is gay at a young age and simultaneously deals with her mental health conditions, her parents divorcing, and her aspirations of a professional career in music. At the age of ten she began seeing a therapist and describes how her mental health converged with this new-found information about her father’s sexuality when she blurted out impulsively at her small Catholic school that her dad was gay in her school presentation. In a conversation with her therapist, Pons talks about her decision to go public about her mental health struggles, saying, “I was ready to go public because I’m not ashamed of it. I try to find the good in my OCD and

inspire people.” As the video continues, the viewer gets to see more in depth the ways in which her struggles with OCD, Tourette’s, ADHD, and depression affect her. In many ways she is very dependent upon her family members because they describe her as lacking executive functioning which means she often forgets to do important daily activities: “like forgetting to shave. Forgetting to say bye and thank you” which outsiders equate to her acting like a diva or a privileged celebrity. However, Pons desires to counter these misconceptions through the publishing of her docu-series in order for her audience to see the seriousness of her struggles. For example, in one segment they show Lele living at a facility where she has her own apartment and learns basic life skills such as cooking and learning how to independently care for herself.

In many ways, Lele Pons is a great example of what I call an aesthetivists in the way in which her advocacy and activism exist in an intermediary way. It does not completely fall to neoliberal, mainstream commodification, but it also does not completely eschew it. The fact that she films this docu-series in which she takes the story into her own hands and shares about her very serious struggles with mental health with a very mainstream audience exposes people to experiences that may be different from their own. It allows the chance for the audience to empathize with her struggles as well as offers a counter narrative and enables people with similar struggles to see themselves represented. However, on the other hand, in many ways, her description and analysis of her own struggles and her strategies to face them can be seen as falling short of addressing root issues. For example, in the fourth video of the docu-series called “I’m my own worst enemy,” Pons talks about her OCD as something to overcome through hard work. Her rhetoric in this video describing her mental health issues in many ways falls

into the neoliberal rhetoric of the need to become a productive citizen who overcomes personal struggles through hard work.

The video “The Internet Hates Me” begins with Lele in front of the camera crying, very stripped down from her typical appearance, wearing no make-up and her hair in a natural, wavy state. She describes herself in tears as someone who has always been an easy target and who will not defend herself or respond to criticism or bullying. She explains, “and you can say ‘I’m not this’ and ‘she’s ugly,’ and ‘she is not funny,’ and ‘she is a Latina,’ ‘she is this, she is that’ because you know what? Lele Pons is not gonna respond to you. You can literally throw rocks at her, and she’s not gonna say anything to you” (0:30). This quote is very revealing of the insecurities that Pons has held throughout her life related to beauty, to comedy, and to her identity as a Latina girl. In addition, her description of herself as not able to defend herself lines up with the criticism of her in the *Washington Post* article as not someone who is going to speak out as an influencer in response to, for example, Trump’s rhetoric. Yet, after this analysis of herself as not able to defend herself, she describes her attitude and the necessity to “Be strong. Because a lot of people are going through worse things than I am” (:45). She even describes her motivation to be strong despite criticism because, “I need to set an example to these people that are suffering and are getting bullied and I want to show them that it’s okay and I don’t want to give up, even though I do” (1:00). Her comments show the costs and impossible burdens of being a role model and representative for other people because of her platform and influence.

In the next segment of the video, Lele is lying on a couch talking to the camera about her meetings with her doctor, Dr. Katia Moritz; she fidgets and her eyes twitch as

she talks about the tics she struggles with and her fear of ruining her career. Observing Pons fidgeting on the couch greatly contrasts with the woman photographed for magazine covers or in her internet videos and gives the impression that it is hard to imagine how she is capable of such a feat. As Lele and her parents discuss her Tourette's with her doctor, Pons describes that she is not ashamed that she has Tourette's but of her inability to control them and how her depression medication could be causing an increase in her tics. Ultimately, Pons determines that she would rather have Tourette's than struggle with depression and ultimately weighs her options as she struggles with various, concurrent mental health issues. In contrast to her meetings with therapists discussing her mental health struggles, the next segment of the video exemplifies Lele's buzzing career and a typical day of glam, photo shoots, filming, and recording for podcasts. Another segment of the video discusses the internet comments that she receives and the way in which these comments take a toll on Lele especially as someone with OCD and her compulsive need to check comments or her inability to move on from them. Lele comments that the criticism is repetitive and what bothers her are the comments about her using her Latinaness for fame. She discloses, "I don't like that people hate on me for being proud of being who I am...Why is it so bad for me to love being who I am? And love being Latina? What my parents always taught me was to never forget who you are and where you come from" (24:17). She breaks down crying about the difficulties of being hated by people on the internet and gives her audience an inside view to be able to empathize with what it might feel like to be in her situation and to have suicidal thoughts because she is unable to handle the hate. In order to help others understand, she talks about the fact that she is human and these comments affect her.

The video ends with a change in perspective from the real, deep emotional turmoil that she feels over the negative comments that she receives to a perspective that she needs to overcome these feelings. In this conversation she is having with her manager, he responds to her having suicidal thoughts that, “What you can’t do is put yourself in a position where you let all those people that love you down, right? You gotta always think about how many people you let down. And that’s way more people. And then you let the haters win” (27:17). Instead of encouraging her about her own intrinsic value as a human being, the motivation for living becomes overcoming her own struggles so that she does not let others down. The conversation then turns into a neoliberal rhetoric of overcoming through self-improvement to ultimately become a productive citizen when she comments: “It’s crazy how I can have so many people against me, so many haters, and at the end of the day, I get better and I have achieved what I wanted, I’m still achieving what I want, y’know? That’s something I want. I also teach my fans, people that do love me, is that: look at me right now. I go through shit, but I’m so strong, and I want to be strong for them to move on” (28). The video begins and ends with a rhetoric of overcoming one’s struggles through hard work with the ultimate goal and achievement of being a productive person who obtains success. Therefore, on one hand she opens up about her struggles and exposes her audience to real-life mental health issues, but also ultimately falls into the traps of the neoliberal citizen who overcomes personal struggles to be a productive citizen and sends this message to her audience that in order to be valuable, they must also overcome their struggles and achieve success publicly. Her example reveals the impossible burdens placed on young people in the public eye who feel the

pressures to overcome their challenges and circumstances in order to get by and survive in the current neoliberal cultural moment.

In a similar vein to her second public life and metamorphosis revealed in the release of her docu-series in 2020, since then there has been a shift in her social media content as well. For example, in two different posts in April and May of 2022, Pons posts unfiltered, unflattering pictures of the cellulite on her legs. In the caption of her first post she exhorts, “Embrace your cellulite. Exposing myself! I’ve always been super insecure when it comes to my cellulite! I try to hide it as much as I can and edit them out...but today I’m not gonna do it! This is my natural self. Who cares if others judge...Embrace who you are and be confident. Muestra tu cellulitis. ¡Exponiéndome! ¡Siempre he sido super insegura cuando se trata de mi celulitis! Trato de ocultarlo tanto como puedo en las fotos. ¡Pero hoy no lo haré! Esta soy yo natural. A quién le importa si los demás juzgan...Acéptate y ten confianza” (@lelepons). Following a similar message of ‘be yourself,’ Pons has made posts revealing the behind the scenes or real-life unfiltered version of her glamorous appearance.

Overall, Lele Pons is an example of what I call an aesthetivist because she gains a following through her rise to fame with her Vine videos, breaking stereotypes as a proclaimed Latina who does not fit into the typical mold of the Latina aesthetic and then uses her platform to, over time, share her personal stories and advocate for mental health issues. As evidenced by the women in this study, a major message being sent to their target audience of the next generation is that a part of what it means to be Latina is to be yourself and to use aspects of your personal story and identity for activism and advocacy. In the case of Lele Pons, she initially starts her career filtering her personal stories

through slapstick comedy videos, next she publishes a fictional memoir mixing her personal anecdotes with fictional aspects in an attempt to protect herself from scrutiny, to finally filming a docu-series in which she opens up about her mental health issues in a very vulnerable and unprecedented way for her public persona. At the end of the fourth episode of her docu-series called “The internet hates me,” Pons opens up about her background as an immigrant and follows the trends of the other women in that they cast their background as an advantage: “I came to America as a political refugee, and I always wanted to go back home, but I couldn’t. But my family did tell me: ‘Always be proud of one thing: of where you come from. Being Venezuelan, being Latina, always shout it out. Be proud of it. Y’know? Because a lot of people have turned on my mom and my dad for who they are, and I’ve learned to be proud of it, to use it to my advantage” (28:44). Pons’s statement epitomizes the perspective of the polit-identivists, the attractivists, and the aesthetivists and their message to be yourself and use aspects of your identity to reach other people, help them see themselves reflected, and to survive and compete in the current neoliberal culture.

Dulce Candy

Dulce Candy, a YouTube beauty vlogger who started her YouTube channel after returning from deployment in Iraq where she wore a uniform and could not wear makeup, mostly creates content about her daily life with skincare, makeup, and fashion tutorials. Within these fun and light videos, she also includes brief moments where she shares her personal story and background in the videos “Draw My Life: Dulce Candy” (2013), which depicts her journey crossing the border from Mexico, and “When People Say I’m Not Mexican Enough” (2016). In this video, she responds to critics by saying, “Why do

you feel I'm not worthy enough to represent my community because of my level of Spanish? That has to change. We have to go outside the stereotype. This is a conversation that needs to be had. A lot of us are being put into a box and need to fit a specific mold. I don't let these comments affect who I am...I'm not the only one reading your comments. Other young people are who don't feel secure in who they are yet" (12:10). Her comments touch on many common aspects shared by the women in this project such as stereotypes, finding their voices, using their platforms for advocacy, and helping the next generation. Dulce Candy draws viewers in with cosmetics, aesthetics, and fashion but there seems to be more space and opportunity to talk about herself and her personal experiences after this level of success has been gained. She is now building her recognizability as a Latina woman through sharing her personal story by publishing the book *The Sweet Life* (2015), an autobiographical self-help book about turning her struggles into opportunities and inspiring her readers to do the same, creating videos in Spanish, and getting involved in politics and immigration activism.

In this section I will use two first-person sources to analyze how Dulce Candy's example represents the qualities of an aesthetivist. The first part will consist of an analysis of YouTube videos from her channel to map the progression of starting with solely beauty content in which she offers hair and make-up tutorials to videos in which she opens up about her personal experiences and even activism. Eventually, her YouTube channel also maps her metamorphosis and entering a second public life when she stops her original channel called "Dulce Candy" and starts a second channel called "Sweet Soul by Dulce Candy," essentially re-inventing herself. Over time, her beauty platform is used to advocate for causes related to her personal story and struggles. In the second part,

I will analyze Dulce Candy's autobiography and the ways in which her book and message address similar concerns in line with the other polit-identivists, actractivists, and aesthetivists in this project.

YouTube Videos

In contrast to Lele Pons who satirizes the typical content created by YouTube vloggers, Dulce Candy follows a more typical pattern of content creation. In July 2008, Dulce Candy filmed and published her first YouTube video called "MaryKay The Berries Look!!!! using mineral eyeshadows" in which she reviews a make-up product on the market and where half her face is cut off and the viewer is unable to see the eye make-up she is discussing. Her video quality and production transforms drastically over time. Her first videos all revolve around make-up, skincare, hair, and clothing, yet there are brief moments where she changes the pattern with, for example, the video titled "DulceCandy87 in Iraq" (September 5, 2008) with a 36-second clip of Dulce in her military uniform carrying a gun and joking around with men in her unit. Additionally, akin to Lele Pons who has many YouTube videos in which she addresses the Latinx experience, Dulce recorded a video called "Hispanic/Latina Game" (September 5, 2008) where she answers questions such as "When was the last time you were in Mexico?," "What part of Mexico are you from?," and self-identifies as Mexican, talking about her experiences as a Mexican American, incorporating words in Spanish and naming it as her first language, giving anecdotes of her citizenship interview, and her experiences at checkpoints traveling to Mexico and getting stuck in the border. She draws viewers in with her make-up content, but simultaneously shares about her experiences as a Mexican American, following a similar pattern to the aesthetivists in this chapter.

For nearly five years, Dulce Candy continued to film and publish hair, make-up, fashion, and beauty tutorials on her YouTube site; however, intermixed in these videos were brief instances where she broke down the barrier and introduced topics that were more personal such as the video called “Fierce Soldier” (July 1, 2009), “VLOG: Self-Esteem” (July 17, 2009), and “Why So Much Controversy?” (December 26, 2009). Over time, she begins to incorporate more and more her own experiences into her beauty content, exposing a wide audience of over one million people to her Latinx experience living in the United States. In April 2013, Candy publishes a video with the title “Draw My Life: Dulce Candy” where for the first time she describes in depth her experiences as an immigrant from Mexico who crossed the border with her family at a young age. This video contrasts her other video content because it is more serious and personal than the make-up and hair tutorials where she mimics the style of celebrities in magazines. On a large whiteboard, Dulce Candy begins to depict her life experiences through drawings as her voice narrates her story. She describes her experiences coming to the United States when her family had to jump fences, cross rivers, run from “la migra,” live in a trailer park, and how her dad worked in the fields. In addition to these experiences with immigration, Dulce Candy also talks about her insecurities as a young girl revolving around appearance and beauty. She describes being jealous of her sisters who had straight hair in contrast to her curly hair and hairy arms. This content is different from her typical videos but the followers she has who normally come to her channel for beauty advice also get her story and a glimpse of a life that offers an example of the Latinx experience in the United States. What becomes evident among the case studies in this project is that these women attract viewers and an audience through their careers. In this case, the

aesthetivists attract attention through beauty platforms; however, with time, they begin to share about their personal lives and garner even more influence. This video about Candy's personal life has nearly 2 million views. This number far surpasses the number of views of her other videos around this time in her career. For example, the next video she posted called "DIY: Avocado Seed Facial Cleanser (EASY)" (April 30, 2013) has 629,976 views. It becomes evident that her audience is craving this type of content that breaks the barrier between her public persona and her private life.

After this look into her personal life, Candy continues with her typical beauty content garnering views in the 200-300 thousand range. However, it becomes apparent that in any video in which she is describing aspects of her personal life, her number of views spikes dramatically with, for example, "My Oral Hygiene + How I Keep a White Smile" (July 18, 2013) with 3.5 million views or "Dulce Candy's Closet: Organizing My Clothes" (August 17, 2013) with 1.5 million views or "My Plastic Surgery Story by Dulce Candy" (November 4, 2013) with 2.5 million views. Even though these topics of videos still consist of beauty and appearance aspects, a pattern becomes evident that the content related to her personal experiences garners more attention than her videos recreating celebrity looks, for example. This pattern continues as Candy films and publishes more videos until her channel begins to transition to Dulce Candy herself becoming a brand when she begins to sell her own products and further incorporate her identity as a Mexican American woman into her brand. For example, in May 2014, she starts creating content in Spanish with the video "My First Spanish video!! Maquillaje Estilo A Khloe Kardashian" and increases her viewership. In addition, in 2015, she publishes her first book and uploads a video in which she advertises for her book and

introduces her new website in the video “The Sweet Life: Book + Website Reveal,” further solidifying her brand. In July of 2015, she records a series of videos to advertise for her book and her channel takes a more personal turn after this. For the first time, she records a video with her husband, breaking another barrier between her public and personal life, and later records a video going to the fair with her son.

After the publication of her book, the focus of her channel takes a turn more towards her personal life. In November 2015 she records a video called “My Story” introducing herself and her brand with “My name is Dulce Candy and I have a YouTube channel where I like to focus on beauty, fashion, and finding happiness” (0:06). She begins with her immigration story from Mexico at the age of six talking about fulfilling her dreams in the United States, then transitions to her experience in the military and wearing a uniform for 15 months which created in her a desire to start her YouTube channel with an online community. Paralleling the other polit-identivists, atractivevists, and aesthetivists, she explicitly sends the ‘be yourself’ message to her audience when she describes her desire to “Inspire people not just by being Mexican but by just being myself, by being a human being, and being the person that I am” (0:49). The next segment of the video transitions to viewer testimonials in which they have clips of young women talking about the way in which they relate to the content that Candy creates on her YouTube channel and one young girl comments on the fact that Dulce Candy is Latin and is an inspiration to her. Finally, Dulce Candy talks about her role as an influencer and the power she has to use her platform for a message that she desires to share. She even describes very clearly her process of becoming an influencer. In her assessment, “When I really found who I was and my own voice I started to make a deeper connection with the

audience and then brands started to approach me” (2:20). This video epitomizes the patterns and trends found in the cases of the aesthetivists who garner attention through cosmetic and aesthetic practices, create a platform that they use to share their personal stories with an audience who is influenced by their lives and actions and are able to either see themselves reflected or are exposed to life experiences that are different from their own.

With this platform that Dulce has created, she begins to open up more about her personal life combining beauty content with a personal brand that focuses more on herself. As a result, she discloses more about her own struggles and begins to advocate following a similar pattern to the other case studies in this project. For example, in March 2016, she films a video called “When People Say I’m Not Mexican Enough...,” which contrasts her typical beauty content and where she addresses criticism directly and gets at a root issue of her need to proclaim the message to ‘be yourself.’ In this video, she responds to negative comments from viewers responding to an Instagram picture she took as well as insecurities she has about speaking Spanish. This video reflects in many ways the episode of Lele Pons’s docu-series in which she discusses the negative comments she receives from viewers on the internet and the toll this takes on her. Both Pons and Dulce Candy are hurt by similar criticism that is related to their identities as Latinas. For example, Dulce Candy talks about an interview she did on a Spanish language network and how she did half of the interview in Spanish and then switched to English. As a result, she received negative comments from Latina women who she felt were judging her for who they think a Latina should be. In response, Dulce Candy calls for change and a need to go beyond stereotypes. She questions, “Why do you feel I’m not worthy enough

to represent my community because of my level of Spanish? That has to change. We have to go outside the stereotype. This is a conversation that needs to be had. A lot of us are being put in a box and need to fit a specific mold” (12). On a platform where she typically records videos mimicking celebrity make-up, she uses her influence to talk about issues common among Mexican Americans in regard to language insecurities and navigating two worlds, cultures, and languages. At the end, she focuses on the next generation of young people who she targets with her message when she calls out the critics: “I don’t let these comments affect who I am...I’m not the only one reading your comments. Other young people are who don’t feel secure in who they are yet” (12:10). Candy acknowledges that she is targeting a young generation of girls and wants to bring this issue to light in order to prevent young girls from having to face similar struggles that she has, paralleling the strategies of other polit-identivists, actractivists, and aesthetivists.

Around the same time in which Dulce Candy records her video addressing stereotypes and criticism about language, she also gets involved in other campaigns, using her story and experiences to advocate for others. For example, she was featured in an article for the website “Proud to be Mexican” in which she is described as transforming “from illegal immigrant to military veteran, entrepreneur, writer and YouTube Beauty Guru” and all of the events in between. At the end of the article, they reference a video in which Dulce Candy poses a question to the GOP Candidates at the 7th Republican primary debate. Initially, she identifies herself as “a YouTube creator who immigrated to the United States from Mexico when I was a little girl. Since then, I am proud to say that I served in the armed forces in Iraq, became a citizen, and I am now an entrepreneur” (0:23). She then poses a question: “There are many immigrants who

contribute positively to the American economy, but some of the comments in the campaign make us question our place in this country. If America does not seem like a welcoming place for immigrant entrepreneurs, will the American economy suffer?"

These questions reflect Dulce Candy's own experiences as an immigrant who has become an entrepreneur and she uses her platform to get involved in and ask questions that her experiences and standpoint allow her to ask.

However, according to an article for *Bustle* by April Siese called "Jeb Bush Has the Funniest GOP Debate Quote" (Jan 28, 2016), the response of Jeb Bush, American politician and former governor of Florida, to Dulce Candy's question reflects the ways in which her example of "aesthetivism" can easily be dismissed due to the fact that her platform is beauty. According to the article, the funny quote that the title refers to is the fact that he called the social media platform "the YouTube." However, the article further explains that when Bush had the opportunity to respond to her question and talk about a pathway to citizenship, he "chose to awkwardly compliment her" (Siese). In his response, Bush states, "That beautiful young woman who's an entrepreneur who served in the military, first of all, is deserving of our respect for service in the military and the fact that she's an entrepreneur...Dulce Candy—a pretty cool name, actually—that is now an entrepreneur over at the YouTube is part of that American spirit, and we should celebrate it as conservatives" (Siese). Bush opens his response with a comment about Candy's beauty and appearance as well as her name without responding to her question about immigrant entrepreneurs and their relationship to the economy. Dulce Candy uses beauty and fashion as a way to gain followers and express herself. However, she uses her

platform to talk about her story and her life experiences which offers a view of the Latinx experience in the United States, and she also uses it to speak about immigration.

After the publication of her book, her channel changes more to a focus on her personal brand and less about the beauty content she started with. For example, she starts a mini-series called “Café con Dulce” in which she does a chat-show format about personal topics and her own opinions with videos like: “Why I Left My House at 18,” “My Husband and I Have Different Religious Beliefs,” and “I don’t just want to exist”. She also creates more vlogs containing content about buying a new home, vacationing in Mexico, her top books, her morning routine, her experiences in therapy, her IVF journey, ways to journal and discover your spirituality, how to manifest your dream life, and how to be a girl boss. It transforms into a lifestyle vlog more than a beauty and make-up tutorial channel as Dulce Candy herself becomes a brand and she creates content that reflects what holds the attention of her audience. Ultimately, in April 2021, Dulce Candy records her last video for this channel called “Why I am Quitting My YouTube Channel with 2 MILLION SUBSCRIBERS” in which she announces the end of her YouTube channel “Dulce Candy” and the creation of a new YouTube channel called “Sweet Soul” which reflects the noticed shift from her original content of beauty to a lifestyle channel. This shift represents a common trend of what I call a metamorphosis and entrance into a second public life. In the video Dulce explicitly defines this change that, after thirteen years and now as a thirty-three-year-old woman, her passions have shifted, and she ultimately wants to work to help women with self-confidence and self-esteem with videos about her spiritual journey. Some examples of videos include, “5 EASY Ways to Build Your Self-Confidence + Getting the Courage to Change Careers at Any Age!” (April 16,

2021), “Let’s talk spirituality + Revealing my truth!” (June 13, 2021), and “My Evolution Journey: Starting a Yoga Practice & Going Plant-based” (December 7, 2021). Her example ultimately represents the trends of the aesthetivists of garnering success through beauty careers in order to shift towards sharing first-person stories, breaking down the barrier between the public and the private.

Autobiography

Even though Dulce Candy initiated her career as a YouTube beauty vlogger, she follows a similar pattern to other polit-identivists, actractivists, and aesthetivists because once she garners attention and an audience, she then decides to publish an autobiography in which she offers more information about her background and personal life with the aim of reaching, inspiring, and helping other women who relate to her experiences. In 2015, Dulce Candy published the book called *The Sweet Life: Find Passion, Embrace Fear, and Create Success on Your Own Terms*. In this section, I will analyze the ways in which the story Dulce Candy reveals in her memoir outlines aspects and trends common among the aesthetivists in this chapter including patterns such as using personal stories, beauty, branding, celebrity status, a be yourself message, and targeting the next generation. The inside cover of the memoir touches on each of these aspects: “But before she became a style icon and a role model to young women all over the country, Dulce struggled to make her way in the world. Having emigrated from Mexico to the United States with her family when she was six years old, Dulce battled depression and low self-esteem as a teenager and eventually enlisted in the army in an attempt to turn her life around” (personal stories, targeting the next generation), “It was there, on the battlefield of Iraq, that she finally uncovered and embraced her true passion—fashion and beauty—

and gained the confidence to move on from her past, follow her dream, and launch what would become her wildly successful brand” (beauty, branding), “Part memoir, part manifesto, *The Sweet Life* is a fun, inspirational guide for any woman who wants to find success and happiness without compromising who she is” (be yourself message). Her autobiography becomes a way for her to take her story into her own hands and use her experiences to help and inspire others.

Personal Stories (“My Not-So-Sweet Early Years”)

A common trend among the case studies of this project is that each woman garners success in a different realm of influence and with the following they accrue, they share personal stories with their audience and break down the barrier between their public careers and their private lives, asserting their own version of first-person politics. Despite the fact that the premise of YouTube vlogging typically involves a look into the personal lives of the filmmakers, a common claim among the aesthetivists in this project is that there is much more to them than what viewers see in their videos and that their autobiographies are the place where more personal information is revealed. For example, in the opening of Dulce Candy’s memoir, she writes, “If you’ve watched my channel, you know a little about my past...that’s the gist of it, but it’s far from the whole story” (1). In this case, she is referring to what I identified in the previous section in my analysis of her YouTube videos where there are brief moments and videos such as “Draw My Life” in which she tells more about her story growing up and her experiences crossing the border. However, in her memoir she chronicles and details these life experiences in the chapter titled “My Not-So-Sweet Early Years,” describing her experiences and fear crossing the border, her father working in the fields of a farm for 22 years, and her experiences with depression.

Intertwined with the use of personal stories is also a common message among the women that their personal experiences, which they often describe as challenging or a struggle, should not be seen as weaknesses but rather as strengths that set them apart and make them unique in their ability to overcome their disadvantages and garner public success. For example, in the introduction to her book, she relates herself to her audience and then attributes her struggles in high school as an impetus to her joining the military and ultimately beginning her successful career: “Just like so many of us, I went through some tough times, the toughest of which were in high school as you’ll soon find out, joining the military after graduating was a transformative experience. It set me on a path that would eventually shape me into the woman I am today. A woman who knows her strengths yet learns from her weaknesses. A woman who is her own boss yet still understands the power of teamwork. A woman who came out on top despite the odds” (viii). In the case of Sonia Sotomayor, she explicitly attributes her background and challenges growing up ultimately to her success. In a similar way, Dulce Candy attributes her challenges and background to her success.

Beauty (“Beauty from the Inside Out”)

For the aesthetivists in this chapter, beauty becomes a platform that they use to garner success to be able to open up and share their personal stories in an attempt to advocate for and help others. Dulce Candy follows this pattern considering for thirteen years she filmed and uploaded YouTube videos to her channel of over 2 million followers with content such as make-up, hair tutorials, and skin care routines. It is obvious from her YouTube channel content that beauty plays a major role in her life; however, her memoir reveals more about what is behind the make-up and the motivating factors for her videos

in the chapter, “Beauty from the Inside Out.” For example, Dulce Candy describes the role make-up played as a young girl when she felt insecure about her appearance as different from others: “Since I was thirteen years old, I’d relied on makeup and fashion—heavily done-up eyes, super glossy lips, tight jeans, and revealing tops—to mask what I really felt inside; insecure, unworthy, and most definitely not beautiful. Makeup was my armor, the only thing separating me from even more rejection and pain” (33). In contrast, during her time in the military, she was stripped of all of these masks and sends the message to her audience that this time of no makeup was liberating for her, emphasizing that appearance and makeup is not the most important thing. Yet being stripped of it allowed her to feel like she no longer needed it and her use of makeup transformed from a way to cover up the hurt beneath to an art form: “Though I no longer *needed* makeup to make me feel whole, I still *missed* it the way a ballerina might miss the barre or a painter her watercolors. All of a sudden, makeup became a means of self-expression, a creative outlet” (35). This experience ultimately led her to YouTube where she began to record videos experimenting with different make-up products and reviewing them.

In many ways, her experiences in the military led her to a career in beauty and her personal experiences become intertwined with her public career as is a trend among many of the aesthetivists. As someone who started on YouTube in 2008, the idea of beauty and fashion becoming a career was not a possibility for Dulce Candy to be able to imagine despite how increasingly common it is today. At the time, it was a hobby and a creative escape from her work in the military; yet even then she was garnering attention and a reputation: “I had no way of knowing this at the time, but all of that practicing in Iraq was laying the groundwork for what would become my life’s calling. As I said, I never

thought my love for makeup could translate into a career, but even in the middle of Iraq I was gaining a reputation for being a fashionista. And while plenty of people didn't take me seriously (some even made fun of me) for my interest in what they saw as a frivolous activity, others recognized my passion for what it was—a key part of who I am” (37-38). This quote reflects a key pattern of the women in this dissertation. They form a platform and a career out of seemingly trivial and unimportant aspects of life but use it to relate to others because of the way that it is intertwined with their identities. Their power becomes more potent as they share more about themselves.

This pattern becomes more evident when Dulce Candy returns from the military and attempts to start a new career as a Mary Kay saleswoman. Ultimately, she fails at selling the makeup and ends up with \$600 worth of product that she is unable to sell. At this point, mention of YouTube enters the story, and the reader gets a glimpse of what it was like in 2008. Dulce describes it as a place where people watch random videos and the only celebrities are people who have one video that goes viral, “It wasn't a place where people went to make money or launch a brand, but beauty tutorials had already started catching on...unlike a magazine, you could actually watch real people doing their makeup and hair...I loved how natural and conversational the people in the videos were. Most of these videos were made by regular girls just like me...there was no fancy editing or camerawork or designed sets, so you connected to the people in the videos. They weren't trying to make money or sell you something, and they didn't work for anyone but themselves so they could just be who they were” (50). As is evident from her description, YouTube has changed significantly since the time Dulce Candy began using and creating on YouTube. Yet what appealed to Dulce Candy at the time still persists today as the

motivators for what draws viewers into YouTube and the power of these aesthetivists in that they are self-made, everyday women who the audience can relate to.

After Dulce Candy's failure with the Mary Kay products, in the summer of 2008 she published her first YouTube video. According to her account, her first video was a failure because her voice was shaking and she received negative comments and immediately took it down. However, she practiced and tried again with the first YouTube video described in the previous section "Mary Kay, The Berries Look!" and since then has continued to record and publish videos that have changed and transformed over time. She has built a career in the beauty industry and in the chapter of her book "Beauty from the Inside Out" she reflects on the role of beauty and its potential for power. In the opening of the chapter, she makes the bold claim, "But even if you're not in the beauty industry, or if you're not all that into fashion and style and don't like wearing a lot of makeup, beauty is still critical to your success" (175). Here Dulce creates a tie between beauty and success and ultimately ties this success to delving into inner beauty and discovering what exists beneath the surface. She uses a surface level product, makeup, to claim that what is really important goes beyond surface level. This message about beauty ultimately ties to the typical 'be yourself' message common among the case studies in this project. Further, Dulce Candy connects her ability to see her inner beauty to being herself and a role model for others: "How could I put myself in front of millions of people every day and talk about beauty when, deep inside, I didn't believe I was beautiful? How could I be a role model to the young women and girls who looked to me for advice if I wasn't truly proud of myself?" (177). Ultimately, beauty becomes tied to identity, power, and success especially when Dulce continues the chapter offering

strategies for her readers to not only embrace their inner beauty but also, “I want to spend some time talking about how feeling beautiful can prepare you to take on the world” (177). According to Dulce Candy, beauty and makeup go way beyond the superficial and even becomes linked to success, power, and taking on the world.

Brand (“From Boot Camp to Beauty Guru: How the army transformed my life and led me to discover my passion”)

Dulce Candy dedicates a chapter of her book to a discussion around her process of building her brand. As with other aesthetivists and YouTube users, their careers are ultimately built around them becoming a brand and selling products related to themselves. For this reason, they share a common trend with the polit-identivists and attractivists in that identity becomes integral to their careers and success. In this chapter, it is 2010 and Dulce has been producing YouTube videos for two years at which point her number of subscribers has grown to 500,000 people. She has had a lot of success with ads and has made more money than she had imagined possible turning beauty into an online career. At this point, however, she describes her desire for more and to continue growing. Dulce describes learning a valuable lesson when her obsession with expanding leads her away from her initial brand and image. As she compared herself with other successful women, she saw that many of them had closets filled with designer clothes and she began accepting offers for high end products. Yet what Dulce learned is that she initially began making videos using affordable drugstore makeup she could buy with her military salary, and she had “lost sight of the fact that [she] had built [her] brand on being relatable and featuring accessible products” (64). So when she sponsored an expensive makeup set that cost \$125, her viewers had no interest and she went back to her original content creation,

further identifying and solidifying her brand and encouraging her readers to stay true to themselves and not alter their brand due to comparison.

The next section of Dulce Candy's brand chapter also reflects a common concern of the case studies in this chapter which revolves around the idea of authenticity. In the section called "Real People Respond to Real People," Dulce Candy encourages her readers to be authentic in order to garner success. She also sends the message that authenticity is an important part of being yourself and that this is easier than being someone else. In the section called "Building Your Brand," Dulce Candy describes the strange process of she herself becoming a brand on the up-and-coming platform of YouTube. She ultimately equates the way that advertisers brand products to the way in which we market ourselves in order to identify what we are all about quickly. For example, she writes, "Most of us think of a brand as something invented by advertisers or something that requires constant attention and curating. It's a strange feeling to think that your life is marketable and monetizable...if there was no brand, I'd never be able to distinguish between products; the brand helps me identify what I want quickly. The same is true of people" (73). Dulce Candy proceeds to outline how one can build their brand by identifying five parts to the process: 1) know what makes you different, 2) craft your pitch, 3) don't hide your mistakes, 4) protect your brand, 5) create a buzz. In the first section, she correlates brand building to self-esteem and identity, stating, "Your brand is the total sum of who you are—embrace all of the things that make you into a unique individual and incorporate them into your brand" (75). In her estimation, brand building goes far beyond monetary concerns to envelop aspects of someone's entire identity. Dulce Candy even includes the key words she uses to describe her brand: "My words

include ‘Latina,’ ‘beauty and fashion authority,’ ‘motivational,’ ‘mother,’ and ‘veteran.’ These words have helped me navigate the direction I’d like to steer my brand and remind me of the different facets that I represent and the types of people I’d like to reach” (74). She continues to give very practical advice about brand building including specific strategies and practices to use when giving a pitch or talking about your accomplishments. Similar to the other women in this study who encourage their audience to use everything at their disposal to their advantage and turn their personal experiences into action and activism, Dulce Candy advises, “Use these powerful platforms to push your own agenda” (79) such as the cases where the women use their platforms for activism. It becomes evident through the information Dulce Candy shares in her memoir that a part of her brand involves influencing and helping other women aspire to similar careers and accomplishments and Dulce Candy wants to aid this process by giving her readers access to very practical insider information about how to specifically build a brand and become an influencer. This follows the pattern of other polit-identivists and attractivists in attempting to form career coalitions by using their platforms to open the door and bring others like them into the careers or spheres of influence that they have.

Be Yourself Message + Targeting the Next Generation (“Be Genuine: In a sea of others, there’s only one you”)

Reading Dulce Candy’s autobiography, it becomes evident that a main message she is imparting to her target audience of young girls and women like herself is to be themselves and be authentic. Throughout the book, Dulce Candy explicitly mentions this idea on many occasions to emphasize the importance of overcoming insecurities and embracing every aspect of one’s identity. The introduction of the book begins with the

author's name and the way in which she embraces a key aspect of her identity: "'Dulce Candy'—the name my very imaginative parents gave me—translates to 'sweet candy' in Spanish. Sure, it gets a few giggles now and again, but I wouldn't change it for the world. I consider my name a constant reminder to never lose sight of the sweet things in my life" (vii). Ultimately her unique name becomes a platform for her business and the title of her book *The Sweet Life* and legitimizes the fact that this name is not a stage name, but one her parents gave to her and breaks down the barrier between her success and celebrity status and her message that her YouTube channel reflects her authentic self. Her comment about her name is reflective of criticism she might receive as a beauty vlogger as being seen as trivial or silly; yet she turns her beauty platform into a successful career. Despite the fact that she starts the book with a discussion of her name and her image is on the front cover, Dulce makes it clear that another aspect of her purpose is her audience of people like her who she wants to inspire to be themselves: "But let's get something straight: *The Sweet Life* is a book about *you*. Sure, my name may be on it, and there's lots of personal stuff about me and the lessons I've learned over the course of my life within its pages, but I wrote this book to help you find happiness and success. My goal is not only to give you real-life tools for tackling the roadblocks you're bound to encounter on your journey but also to help you see that the strength you need to get through them in one piece has been inside you all along" (x). Dulce makes it clear that her purpose is to help other women, but similar to her 'be yourself' message, it falls short in directly addressing the forces that make her and others like her unable to be themselves in the first place. Instead, she can be seen to fall into the traps of the neoliberal ideology that it is one's own responsibility to overcome challenges by finding strength within themselves.

Yet simultaneously, she offers an example of possibilities and practical strategies for other women to access a space she has garnered influence in because she wants to bring others in and offer strategies to navigate a neoliberal culture, identifying the rules of the game and successfully accessing and navigating the platform of YouTube. Therefore, her aestheticism offers an intermediary form of activism between the extremes of radicalism and commodity activism that does not result in any real-world change.

Throughout her book, Dulce Candy sends the message over and over about genuineness, authenticity, and being yourself. She discloses that these were things that she struggled with growing up different from others, yet she wants her audience to learn from her experiences and encourages them to follow a different path and learn the lessons she learned earlier in life than she did. She writes, “In the end, I decided to share my story because I hope that the next few paragraphs might serve as a cautionary tale to anyone who has gotten so wrapped up in fitting in or being liked by others that she has forgotten what it’s like to love herself” (20). The message to love oneself mirrors the overall message of being yourself that Candy is attempting to inspire in her audience. YouTube becomes an ideal platform for Dulce Candy to further her message because the premise of the platform and YouTube vlogging is often about filming oneself in one’s natural environment or home in an ordinary, everyday way. Dulce Candy often attributes success to authenticity with statements and advice for aspiring businesswomen such as: “The people who make it big on YouTube are the ones who are the most authentic” (67), “Being someone else is exhausting. It takes a ton of mental energy to worry about whether someone will like you as you are. Being yourself? Now that’s easy” (69), “Remember to be yourself. You can’t define your brand based on a vision of what you

think you should be but, rather, of what you are” (74), “It’s when you are your most authentic self that you attract the people and situations that work for you. It’s when you are true to yourself that the types of people you want to work with, or be friends with, come your way” (78), “Being genuine means showing other people who you are, as you really are” (85), “By being myself, and using beauty to connect with real people, I can make a difference—and it’s an honor to be able to parlay my job into something more meaningful” (88). Repeatedly, Dulce Candy sends this message about authenticity and being yourself, which is ultimately reflected frequently throughout this project. It ultimately begs the question of why? Dulce Candy does not directly call out the forces that might make her feel like she needs to be someone else in the same way that America Ferrera identifies discrimination or stereotyping in interviews she does, for example. However, by sharing her personal experiences the audience gets an idea of where her insecurities stem from at a young age immigrating to the United States and struggling with depression related to her appearance and bullying and the strategies she uses to garner success and turn her interests into a successful career. Over time, she begins to share more of her personal experiences and quickly learns that personal content that she creates garners the most viewers.

Bethany Mota

Bethany Mota, a YouTuber from California of Mexican and Portuguese descent, also follows a similar trend to Bethany Mota of attracting viewers by sharing videos about clothing and makeup hauls. She first started creating videos in 2009 at the age of thirteen about her clothing purchases, outfit ideas, makeup and hair tutorials, and do-it-yourself projects. She gained a following of about 10 million followers by 2015 and

combined her cosmetic videos with personal ones about her experiences with bullying, creating a platform for herself. Once she gained popularity, she began having more opportunities such as creating a clothing line with the brand Aéropostale, competing on the television show *Dancing with the Stars*, and was interviewed often and asked about her background and multiethnic heritage. She even appeared on the cover of *Latina Magazine*. Her YouTube success and fame has given her the opportunity to talk about her identity and background as well as get involved in activism such as participating in Unity Day for anti-bullying. She also had the opportunity to interview former President Barack Obama asking him questions representing her followers about college, cyberbullying, censorship in China, and even his favorite superpower. Her access to this space came from her content about fashion and makeup; however, this became a platform for her to address and advocate for issues such as bullying.

Following a similar trend of the other YouTubers who have published autobiographies, she wrote a memoir called *Make Your Mind Up* (2017) where she opens up about her personal life and tells readers things she has never talked about on YouTube. In this section, I will use two first-person sources to analyze how Bethany Mota's example represents the qualities of an aesthetivist. The first part will consist of an analysis of YouTube videos from her channel to map the progression of starting with solely beauty content in which she offers hair and make-up tutorials to videos in which she discloses personal experiences and participates in bullying advocacy. Over time, her beauty platform is used to advocate for causes related to her personal story and struggles. In the second part, I will analyze Bethany Mota's memoir and the ways in which her book and message address similar concerns in line with the other polit-identivists,

attractivists, and aesthetivists in this project. In an interview with *Latina Media Ventures* on Latina.com, Mota talks about the differences between her memoir and her videos: “In my videos, I like to talk about things that are personal...but with the book it’s a whole other level of being personal because I talk about some things that I have never even spoken about before.” It seems strange that there could be anything left to tell that viewers would not know about from watching her YouTube channel but that is a consistent trend with these aesthetivists choosing to write memoirs and autobiographies and using that as a space to share even more personal information that cannot be found on the internet.

YouTube Videos

In June of 2009, at the age of thirteen, Bethany Mota filmed her first YouTube video. Since then, she has built an entire career and personal brand name around her life and cosmetic content. Her original YouTube page called “Bethany Mota” as of January 2022 has 9.62 million subscribers. In 2011 she started a second YouTube page called “Bethany’s life” where she records video logs of her daily life and which has 1.98 million subscribers. Like Dulce Candy, Bethany Mota’s first video displays a sharp contrast between where she started and where her career and video content is today. Initially, Mota began filming and creating beauty video content. Her first video was called “First Video :) Mac and Sephora Haul” in which she films herself talking about and reviewing different makeup products. Her first few videos contain similar content with makeup reviews and then she begins giving tutorials for different hairstyles. The following year, she starts to reveal more of her personal life in her videos with room tours and a video with the gifts she got for Christmas. Later, she films instructional DIY videos in which

she helps her viewers create different Halloween costumes or their own crop tops. She caters her content to her intended audience of young school-age girls like herself using popular teenage brands, relatable content such as school dances and back to school hair and outfits. Similar to the patterns of other aesthetivists, her personal content that takes a look into her life becomes the most popular and successful videos. For example, Mota writes in her book, “I make a lot of videos I know my viewers will want—like Q&A videos and room tours—that get a great response online. But every now and then, I want to post something different to mix it up, like a travel video where I’ve gotten to film some beautiful outdoor landscapes. The result is still positive, but I know even before I post it that it’s not going to get the same response as other videos do” (20). Even though Bethany does not reveal the personal story and experience aspect as the key to this phenomenon, what becomes evident is that viewers desire a look into her personal life. In fact, in her book, Mota writes, “A lot of viewers comment that they wanted to see more bloopers, that they wanted to get to know me for me—and not just my tutorials or beauty tips” (38). Despite the fact that her content may appear superficial and frivolous, she builds a platform and following around this type of content creation and over time begins to open up more about her personal life, giving her audience a glimpse into her experiences as a young Latina girl.

Paralleling the example of Dulce Candy, Bethany Mota also films a video with the same title called “Draw My Life” in which she reveals more about her personal life, experiences, and struggles not seen previously within her beauty content. On May 8, 2013, Bethany films her version of the video following a YouTube trend in which she uses a whiteboard to draw out and describe her background and personal experiences

growing up while her voiceover describes what she is drawing and what she experienced. In this eleven-minute video, Bethany's upbeat voice describes all the stages of her life up until this point as a seventeen-year-old girl. She begins by describing her birth in California to her family including her mom, dad, and her older sister. The description of her childhood is very idyllic involving vacations, trips to Disneyworld, and fun times with her big family in California. Next, she describes in detail what it was like for her as a kid who was originally homeschooled but then started public school in the middle of her third-grade year. The tone of her video takes a turn as she draws out and describes her shyness, lack of friends, bullying, anxiety, and depression. At this point she had isolated herself and returned to homeschooling being afraid to leave her house.

She seems to open up in a way not seen before in her previous beauty content and gives her audience a way to relate to her as a young girl who did not fit in with girls her age. The next part of her video explains what helped her through her anxiety and depression when she found a beauty community through watching YouTube videos of other young girls recording themselves and uploading videos. She became so enthralled by seeing other girls her age that she started making her own videos and since then lists all of the accomplishments that have resulted from this beauty platform. At the very end of her video, she sends this message to her viewers: "Remember. Stay positive, live in the moment, work hard, be kind, and stay strong. You are wonderful" (11:30). As evidenced by this video, Bethany's example follows many of the patterns of the aesthetivists in this chapter. She garners attention through her beauty and cosmetic content, and then uses her platform to disclose her personal experiences in order to influence and attempt to help young girls like her imparting a positive be yourself message that can be criticized for

falling to the prevailing neoliberal rhetoric of the strong, independent, hardworking citizen. However, I argue that she exhibits an intermediary form of aestheticism that falls in between because this message operates in a different way coming from a young Latina girl trying to help others compete, survive, and get by in the current cultural moment. She also offers evidence, an example, and instructions for other girls of a common strategy used to compete and get by. This video is the first instance in which Bethany reveals information about her personal life and experiences and from there, her content changes and opens up more in this direction. Her content turns more personal as her videos become less about makeup reviews and more about her lifestyle and daily life including her relationships and even the creation of a vlogging YouTube channel called “Bethany’s Life.” Despite the fact that her video called “Draw My Life” reveals more about her personal experiences, after reading her memoir, it becomes apparent that this video only scratches the surface when it comes to her sharing of her personal experiences and the memoir becomes the repository for her most personal story.

On October 17, 2016, Bethany posted the video called “I HAVE A SECRET!!!! Make Your Mind Up | Book Trailer” in which there is a dramatized and artistic introduction to her new autobiographical book. The “Draw My Life” video and the subsequent publication of her memoir seem to be a turning point in the career of Mota and reflect the ways in which she begins to follow the patterns and use similar strategies of the aesthetivists. The book trailer opens with a woman riding through the desert on a motorcycle, arriving at a house in ruins with a blue light coming from a corner. Bethany, in her biker outfit, walks up to the blue light radiating from her book and as she touches it light explodes and she is transported to a school hallway where in the distance a group of

girls are picking on and bullying a little girl with her back to us. The bullying girls are making fun of the fact that their victim has holes in her shoes, they call her ugly, and they shove her books out of her hands and walk away. It becomes apparent that the little girl is a younger version of Bethany when the adult version goes up to the little girl and helps her pick up her books, giving her a copy of her memoir. When the little girl asks what it is, older Bethany responds, “It’s your book. You’re going to write it one day” (4:30). In the trailer to her book, Mota offers an explicit example of what I call aspirational mirroring in that she targets the younger generation and attempts to offer the young girl, who is actually herself, a new possibility for her future. The girl is able to see herself reflected, literally, as well as a new potential for her future that she was not able to imagine on her own. As a young girl, Bethany did not know of a YouTube career as a possibility; however, the fact that so many young girls have access to her YouTube channel as well as her autobiography gives them the opportunity to see possibilities for themselves that they would not otherwise have the ability to imagine. Mota’s YouTube channel reflects the patterns of the aesthetivists of garnering success and an audience through cosmetic and aesthetic content and then sharing their personal experiences and turning their platform into a way to help others like themselves.

Autobiography

In 2017, Bethany Mota published her first book called *Make Your Mind Up: My Guide to Finding Your Own Style, Life, and Motivation!* which is a memoir/ self-help guide and whose format reflects her YouTube content. The book has a very clear target audience of young girls in that the book consists of the convergence of a magazine, blog post, YouTube channel, and Instagram page. The pages are wide and glossy with two

columns of text, mirroring the format of a magazine article, in which Bethany shares information about her personal experiences and life. Within the five chapters (“Getting Motivated,” “Getting Healthy,” “Getting Gorgeous,” “Getting Social,” and “Getting Chill”), Bethany provides little blurbs, like blog posts, in which she inserts personal anecdotes such as her most embarrassing moments or random facts about herself. Nearly every page includes an image of Bethany posing as if for an Instagram picture, or a step-by-step make-up tutorial for different eyeshadow looks, or different outfits to wear to a business meeting. Some pages even include recipes for Bethany’s favorite acai bowl, for example. The information is very practical and visual, just like YouTube content especially in the way in which seemingly very disparate information and images are combined. For example, in one section, Bethany discusses her experiences on the television show *Dancing with the Stars* and navigating doing interviews on television and struggling to be vulnerable while rigorously training and exerting her body. Then on the next page of the book she lists a step by step on how to do a plank and a DIY workout beauty survival kit. I think this is an apt example of the aesthetivists who combine seemingly surface level matters of beauty and cosmetics with personal and often vulnerable expositions of life experiences. In this next section, I will identify the ways in which Mota’s memoir reflects similar patterns and messages of the aesthetivists.

Personal Stories

One prominent characteristic of the aesthetivists is that personal stories become primary sources of relatability in that they allow the women to draw viewers in to be able to share their experiences. Like the other polit-identivists, atractivevists, and aesthetivists, Mota uses the introduction to her autobiography to open up about her struggles which is a

common pattern among the rhetoric of the case studies in this project. For example, on the inside cover of her book, it describes the challenges she faced prior to becoming the influencer she is today: “But before Bethany found her #MotaFam online, life wasn’t looking so great. After being intensely bullied in school, the already shy Bethany retreated further into herself, suffering from crippling anxiety and a lack of self-confidence she just couldn’t shake. Whether she’s writing about growing up on a dairy farm in small-town Los Baños, California, figuring out how to overcome struggles and find her voice, or finally breaking out of her shell and having to forge her own positive path, *Make Your Mind Up* is more than just a heartwarming memoir or lifestyle guide—it’s a portrait of Bethany’s life, exactly how she lives it” (inside cover). Her personal stories and struggles in contrast to her bubbly YouTube persona become important in the telling of her story to create a level of intimacy and relatability with her audience and fans. This pattern reflects similar examples of other women in this study in that their autobiographies offer examples of various struggles and circumstances that the women overcome to achieve success and notoriety.

The bulk of this aspect of Mota’s story and sharing of her difficulties is contained in the introduction to her book called “Messy Little Me” in which she lays out her life journey up until this point. The subtitles of this section (Keeping it Moving, Painfully Shy, Bullied by My Peers, Going at it Alone, When Anxiety Seeped In, Finding My Voice, Now, Confidently Me) highlight the most important parts of her story and reflect the information she shared in her YouTube video called “Draw My Life” but in a way that goes more in-depth and has a more serious tone than her light-hearted video. The introduction is by far the most serious part of her entire book touching on subjects such as

bullying, anxiety, depression, and the death of a family member; yet even in this section there are still light-hearted anecdotes with little blog-style blurbs and titles like “Random Me Fact: I’m a Leftie” and “My Secret Weird Fears.” The introduction to her book includes similar patterns to the other case studies in this chapter in that she discusses her journey through hardship and offers ideas and ways to navigate and overcome these circumstances to achieve success and she wants to give very practical and helpful tips for other girls with similar circumstances to be able to do the same and see themselves reflected in addition to new possibilities for themselves through aspirational mirroring. For example, Mota writes, “I would love to tell you a story. It’s about how when I was little, I didn’t have a voice...I was so shy and scared to speak up, some people thought I was mute...since then I’ve finally found my voice, and now I get to share my ideas in ways I only dreamed of as a child” (viii). First, she highlights her background having parents from different countries and self-identifies as being different. For example, she describes what it was like to live in a large Portuguese community in Los Baños since her dad is from Portugal and how they would go to *festas*, or parties. Mota writes, “I was proud to be a part of that community, which felt like a big, extended family” (xii). Her discussion of her background may be brief, and she may focus on more superficial, lighthearted things such as make-up and hair; however, she draws viewers and an audience in with her cosmetic content and then either offers girls like her a way to see themselves reflected or girls with different backgrounds a way to see and empathize with experiences different from their own.

For example, later in the book in her chapter about friends, Mota talks about peer pressure and then gives a blog-style blurb about spending time with her Gram and

learning from her life experiences. This seems like a common and easily relatable subject of spending time with a grandparent. However, what Bethany later reveals is, “the thing is, my grandma only speaks Portuguese, and so I’ve never had a full conversation with her” (133). Due to her personal experiences and sharing, the audience is able to either relate to their own language gaps and struggles communicating with family members or are exposed to experiences different from their own. They may have never even considered it a possibility to have a grandparent that speaks a different language. Additionally, Bethany later describes a conversation with her dad about this language gap, writing, “At one point, I asked my dad why he never taught me how to speak Portuguese, and he explained how he was picked on as a kid for speaking the language. Of course, that was a really long time ago and just my dad’s experience. (Other people might have a very different one!) but it’s why he was afraid my sister and I would get teased, too. (That explains a lot about why parents do things sometimes—even if it may not make sense at the time, it’s because of something they themselves have experienced)” (133). Not only does Bethany share a personal anecdote that can be very relatable to many other young Latina girls who struggle with language barriers, she does it in a way that is very personal and accessible to an audience that is apt to listen and able to relate to her experiences or see for the first time what it might be like to have a language barrier among family members and a very understanding response to her dad’s decision or the confusing decisions of parents in many other situations.

In the next section of her introduction, Bethany shares very personal and relatable experiences as a young girl feeling left out at school and by kids her age. She does not shy away from talking about harder things such as anxiety and depression which allows

girls like her to see themselves reflected in her experiences and she also offers practical advice and ways in which she navigates these situations. For example, Bethany describes her initial struggles with feeling othered when she started public school for the first time: “There I was, an awkward little kid—who, by the way, had just started wearing glasses for the very first time—starting school in the middle of the school year, among kids who’d been going to school together for years. Talk about feeling out of place!” (xiv). Her experiences are easy to relate to no matter what sort of background someone has. Yet as she goes into more detail about the progression of the bullying she experienced by someone she knew creating a fake myspace account in her name to make embarrassing and mean comments about her, the reader sees more in depth the toll this took on the young girl and her resulting struggles with anxiety and depression. Bethany describes and explains what it is like to have a panic attack and how her anxiety manifested and affected her life: “I know now that I was suffering a panic attack. After that day, I avoided stores and supermarkets for five months because I’d get so anxious being around a lot of people that I’d feel like I was about to pass out...and finally, even being in my house, I began to have issues with eating. I got so anxious that I wasn’t able to put food in my mouth for fear of what would happen if I tried to swallow” (xxii). Bethany’s anxiety has very real effects on her health and life and she shares her personal experiences while simultaneously offering hope that she no longer struggles with these same issues as she did when she was younger. A seemingly superficial book in the format of a light-hearted beauty magazine article simultaneously mixes with serious and vulnerable stories of bullying and mental health issues, emphasizing the intermediary form of aestheticism that exists somewhere in the middle combining dissent with success.

Ironically, what helped her with her anxiety that was caused by internet bullying was creating internet videos and connecting to an online beauty community. A main message of Bethany's story to her young girl audience and to readers is that despite the fact that what she does seems to have a very superficial and inconsequential appearance, she should be taken seriously because there are very real, human, and serious aspects intertwined with what appears to be skin-deep beauty and cosmetic videos and content. Mota writes, "When I was younger, the bullying was happening to me; but I was able to turn it into something positive for me: I started my YouTube channel as a way to escape and look where I am now. You can choose to make the most out of any situation. Your thoughts and feelings are in your hands. You are the holder of your own happiness" (167). Mota's message falls into the traps of the neoliberal idea of overcoming hard circumstances independently and through hard work or a positive attitude. She is not able to fully address the root issues that cause someone to not feel like they can be themselves in the first place. Yet, sharing her stories allows her wide audience to see themselves reflected and join a community to feel less alone and othered.

Throughout Mota's book she describes the ways in which YouTube transformed her life. For example, she describes her discovery of YouTube and her initial use of it as a timewaster and a way to avoid the real world which gave her anxiety. However, she also describes the potential power she saw in it: "I watched a few beauty videos made by girls my age. And you know how when you watch one video on a certain topic, all the related ones come up? That's how I discovered that there was a ton of beauty and fashion content on YouTube. I wasn't even into beauty or fashion at the time, but the videos were so simple and real, I found them calming and distracting in a good way. More than that,

though, I was drawn to the idea that all these girls around the world were being creative and making something. With each new video I'd watch, I kept thinking about how amazing it was that each girl had posted this video for herself—no one posted it for her, and no one told her to do it. She posted it all on her own. And I loved that, together these videos were all part of a larger whole—an entire community. And each girl was offering something important. So I just kept watching more and more. And then I started thinking about filming videos for myself" (xxiii). Bethany here describes perfectly the appeal to young girls of the beauty community, where each individual is contributing to a larger whole and building something with greater meaning outside of themselves, which is an idea that I call story stacking. The conglomeration of stories and the community built is more powerful together than each story is alone and YouTube fosters this type of virtual community.

What seems very superficial with beauty and hair becomes something much larger and connected with a network of girls with the power to express themselves and ultimately turn this creative outlet into a business and career. For example, Bethany describes the phenomenon of being patronized and underestimated because of the seeming superficiality of her beauty content: "When I first started posting to YouTube, people would say, 'Aw, that's cute, you make videos,' in a tone that implied they weren't taking me seriously. Now people ask me how they can pursue a career online" (2). Bethany has turned her cosmetic platform into a career and uses her book as a way to help others have an example for how to follow a similar process of internet careers. She offers a new example and possibility for a YouTube career.

Celebrity Status + Career Coalitions

Bethany Mota's memoir becomes an important guide to other young girls who want to aspire to a similar career because they've been inspired by her strategy of aspirational mirroring. In her story, Bethany describes the way in which she garnered success and celebrity status and a desire to help others by offering her book with very practical advice. Mota explicitly describes her motivation for publishing her book: "Now I want to share my story and hopefully inspire you to live the life you want to live..." (viii). This reflects a similar rhetoric of the aesthetivists, polit-identivists, and actractivists in desiring to target the next generation with aspirational mirroring through their personal stories. Bethany describes filming her very first video and being shocked by how many views she got. She continues to make more videos consistently and her views and subscribers grow gradually and substantially. She further describes in detail what she did to grow her channel, writing, "I began to get very engaged with the YouTube community and would respond to anyone who commented on my videos. Then I started using Twitter to connect with people and it all expanded from there" (xxvi). Similar to the other women who have achieved celebrity status, many of them write in their autobiographies that they never expected or intended to garner fame through their work because many of them did not have examples before them to know that this type of career and success was possible. Bethany writes, "I didn't expect my viewership to skyrocket; I didn't even know it was possible. Being successful at YouTube was never my intention. I just had fun making the first video and I knew I wanted to keep doing it—not for views, not for followers, but because I wanted to keep creating things. There was something so beautiful to me about having an idea and making it come to life, all on my own" (xxvi). Bethany did not have any previous examples of popular Latina YouTubers when she started recording videos

as a thirteen-year-old in 2009, yet this is a main motivation for writing her memoir and offering her story as a way to give young girls an example for a possibility that she herself could not imagine at their age.

In addition to the new possibilities Bethany creates with her story and aspirational mirroring, she also talks about the way in which her YouTube channel forms a community and connects her to people around the world as well as creates a way for her followers to connect to one another. YouTube content creators and influencers have created a new form of internet intimacy and relationships. Bethany describes her relationship with her fans and sees them as friends, even giving them a group and community name, creating a collective application of the first-person using her last name. She calls them her Motavators: “My social media friends are just as important to me as the friends I see in person. Just because a friendship starts on the internet, doesn’t mean it isn’t a real bond. And I know this because of the community that has grown around me: my Motavators. I never expected that a group of people who started out as my audience could grow to become my friends. More than that actually: it feels like we’re family (138). What Bethany describes in these internet relationships contributes to her success and following because she creates very strong bonds with her viewers and for this reason, she has such a big impact and influence, garnering nearly 10 million followers who she communicates with regularly through her internet videos. In addition to the connection Bethany feels with her virtual followers, she also talks about the horizontal relationships that form as her followers connect with one another: “It’s not just the connection I have with my viewers that excites me; it’s also the connections they make with each other. I’ll see them interact on Twitter and post photos of themselves, and over time actual

friendships have even formed through my channel...that is what encourages me to make more videos: to keep our community strong” (139). What appears to be a superficial beauty channel creates real relationships and connects young girls with others who are like them and share interests and experiences, making them feel less and less alone.

Be Yourself Message

A common characteristic among the women in this study from the polit-identivists to the actractivists to the aesthetivists is a similar message imparted to a younger audience encouraging them to be themselves. This message is often coupled with a neoliberal rhetoric in which the influencer uses her personal experiences and struggles as a way to connect to her audience and then offer advice for how to turn their struggles into success. In some cases, the women directly address and call out the structures, systems, and institutions that are making her and others like her feel like they cannot be themselves in the first place. In other cases, the calling out aspect is either more subtle or nonexistent. In the case of Bethany Mota, she follows this trend and her ‘be yourself’ message is evident in many cases throughout her memoir/ self-help book. However, I believe that her example and stories expose the audience to an identity and experience different from their own and what it is like to be a young Latina girl and Mota’s aesthetivism is a subtle way to address these forces that make her feel othered despite the fact that she does not directly make this connection. The front cover of the book offers the first instance of Bethany Mota’s ‘be yourself’ message in that the subtitle of the book reads, “My Guide to Finding Your Own Style, Life, and Motavation!” A main message Mota is sending with this title is that she is here to help other young girls find out who they are and pursue this goal of ‘being yourself.’ According to Mota, the

aspects of identity are found in style, life, and her play on words using her last name, motivation. The main title of the book, “Make Your Mind Up” also contributes to her ‘be yourself’ and neoliberal messaging as Mota explains how she overcame her circumstances through hard work and willpower: “But the only way I got here was by making my mind up about who I wanted to be. Then, I used sheer motivation by overcoming some difficult experiences, facing my fears, and putting my authentic self out there” (viii). Mota attributes her success to her own personal ability to overcome her circumstance through ‘sheer motivation’ and the key to it all is just being herself.

In a way, she is sending a message to the young girls who follow her about how to use their epistemic advantage to their advantage by asserting themselves, embracing their backgrounds, identities, and differences, and not sacrificing these parts of themselves to fit in, yet she fails to draw direct connections between her feeling alone and left out to discrimination or stereotyping. For example, Mota opens up about her shyness as a young girl and how she felt like she was typecast as being shy and did not know how to move past that label. As a result, she attributes a change in herself to sheer will, writing, “As I began to ask myself why I was shy to begin with I realized my biggest fear was that someone would think I was stupid...but I didn’t like how much I was isolating myself, so I came up with a plan: I decided I would *make* myself more outgoing...but it wasn’t working; I wasn’t fitting in or feeling better about myself...I was being the most outgoing one in the room, so I should be happier, right? Wrong. Faking it was exhausting! I wasn’t expressing that side in the most authentic, Bethany way possible. I wanted to be me—the silly, real, goofy, natural me—more than anything. I just needed to figure out how” (xvi). It appears that Bethany’s initial attempt is to conform to the world and what appears to be

the route to fitting in; however, what she discovers and reinforces as the solution is the need to be herself, reinforcing to her young girl audience that there is power in their epistemic advantage, in their ability to navigate multiple worlds and that instead of shying away from what makes them different they should embrace it and use it.

For Bethany, the key to unlocking this epistemic advantage is the power she garners through YouTube to fully embrace her identity and therefore she has written her memoir/ self-help book as a guide with practical advice to help other young girls be able to do the same and the ‘be yourself’ message prevails throughout her book. For example, when Bethany writes about her struggles with bullying, anxiety, and depression, what initially started her journey was questioning ‘being herself’ after someone made a fake Myspace page in her name when she writes, “Whoever had made that page about me had ripped a hole in how I felt about myself...I wasn’t sure if being myself was good enough anymore” (xviii). She attributes this challenge to her success in that this pushed her to start filming her own videos that ultimately led to a successful career. Mota describes her video making as a self-discovery process and her form of learning how to ‘be herself.’ She writes, “The first year of making videos, I felt so empowered. After going through some tough years where I felt like I didn’t have control, I now had all of the control. And that’s what I loved most about it. I could really express myself through editing, the music choices I made, and what I said; I could really make it me...in a way I was discovering myself through the videos I made...YouTube helped me become the person I was meant to become” (xxvii). The way that Mota narrates her story, it sends a message to her audience that reinforces the ‘be yourself’ message because she ties her personal self-

expression to her YouTube channel to her successful career. Ironically, a virtual platform is the way that she identifies what she considers her genuine, authentic self.

For this reason, I believe that she has garnered such success because the premise and platform of her channel is about being unique and herself and she imparts a common message to her audience and offers her life as an example to help young girls navigate and teach them how to be themselves. She writes, “having my own channel allowed me to take what was swirling in my brain and present it to the world the way only I could—or that you could, or that anyone could! The idea that each of us has something distinctive to offer inspired and propelled me” (2). This is where her DIY content comes from: her desire to stand out and be unique from other store-bought or unoriginal products. It seems strange to use a model or example in order to be yourself—it appears to be a contradictory message because Bethany’s platform and message is about being unique with her DIY products, yet the reason that young girls watch her videos is because they want to be like her. Mota encourages them to be themselves by following her and reading her memoir and using her tips and example. She encourages her readers to follow her example of not fitting in and embracing their epistemic advantage: “I don’t know if you ever feel like I did, but I used to worry so much about fitting in—in school, with friends, with other people’s expectations of me. Now, I find more power in un-fitting-in. I see ‘different’ as a positive characteristic—and embracing your difference and sharing your talents with the world may be the first step to becoming who you’re supposed to be. Be happy. Work hard. Be kind. Stay strong” (207). In this way, she offers her life as an example of aspirational mirroring by giving aspects of herself that are relatable while simultaneously allowing her audience to see possibilities for themselves

that they had never thought of before. Mota hints at the epistemic advantage yet combines this with a neoliberal message about being a strong, independent, hard-working girl. As a result, she follows the patterns of the aesthetivists who exist somewhere in between the binary of completely rejecting neoliberal structures or completely embracing them.

Activism

Even though Bethany Mota's direct calling out and rejection of neoliberal forces and structures that perpetuate discrimination, misunderstanding, and stereotyping is not as prominent as some of the other polit-identivists, actractivists, and aesthetivists, she still follows the pattern of turning her platform and success into some form of activism, what I call aesthetivism. Additionally, her personal stories and experiences become fodder for the causes she supports and a legitimizing factor in her advocacy. For example, in Mota's memoir she opens up and describes in depth the bullying she faced as a young girl through the internet as well as in school. At the time, her way of addressing the bullying was by internalizing it and the result was anxiety, depression, suicidal thoughts, and isolation. She used the internet and YouTube as a way to escape and distract herself from her reality. However, once she has achieved success, a platform, and following, she shares her personal stories and experiences in her memoir and offers her example to other young girls who may be able to relate with similar experiences. In addition, she also uses her platform and opportunities to get involved in activism for anti-bullying causes. For example, on the back cover of her book, Mota is recognized for a list of achievements: "hailed by *Time* magazine as one of the 'most influential teens in the world,' Mota interviewed president Barack Obama, toured the globe speaking and performing in front

of sold-out audiences, fronted campaigns for both UNICEF and PACER National Bullying Prevention Center, was a finalist on season nineteen of *Dancing with the Stars*, released her own mobile game, and was featured on the covers of numerous international and domestic magazines” (back cover). As a part of this list and a part of her self-identification, her involvement with anti-bullying organizations is prominent. Additionally, like Mota, many of the aesthetivists attribute their personal struggles to their success such as the example of Mota ascribing her online bullying to her career success: “eventually the painful experiences of that day and those that followed would come to shape me and help me become a stronger person—I just didn’t know it yet” (xviii) and “Ultimately, I’m grateful for my bullying experience. It was the hardest thing I’ve ever gone through, but it is what helped me break out of my shell...I doubted myself a lot growing up, and I spent a lot of time trying to change who I was, rather than living my life the way I wanted to live it” (xxvii). Overcoming struggles related to personal, vulnerable past experiences are attached to ultimate career success.

As with other case studies in this project, I argue that what becomes apparent through these women’s messages to a younger generation of teenage girls is that a part of what it means to be a Latina is that she is an activist and advocates for causes related to her personal life and experiences. In Mota’s first chapter of her book called “Getting Motavated” there is a section with a subtitle of “Motavation Inspiration” in which she clearly sends a message to her audience about getting involved in activism by listing what she has been involved in as an example. She writes, “If you are contributing to your community or helping others in the world, it will light a fire within you that will motivate you in powerful ways. So think about how your strengths can serve a bigger purpose.

That could mean learning another language that could help someone on your travels, or it could mean using the knowledge you have to educate people at your local school about an issue that's important to you. For instance, I worked with UNICEF on their back-to-school campaign to help kids who didn't have basic school supplies. I also worked with PACER's national bullying prevention center, speaking to high schools and middle schools to advocate against bullying. Working with both of these organizations has been a dream come true because they work toward goals I am also passionate about. By serving them, I get to act on my own passions" (42). It is evident that Mota offers herself as an example for young Latina girls to connect what they 'are passionate about' relating to their personal experiences to a project bigger than themselves with the aim of contributing to what I call fugen (future generation) time-release activism. She hopes to offer her story as an example that will ultimately influence the next generation to advocate for similar issues related to bullying, stereotyping, representation, and discrimination.

Similar to the other case studies, Mota's anti-bullying activism becomes part of her public identity since descriptions of her in magazine articles and in interviews connect her with her activism and causes. For example, in 2016, Bethany filmed a video to support Unity Day for PACER's National Bullying Prevention Center in which she talks about her personal experiences as a young girl being bullied and again, in this video, attributes her experiences to her success and how it helped her grow and made her stronger. On the website's descriptions of her, she is described as a "YouTube superstar who knows firsthand the pain and feelings of isolation that came with being targeted by bullying" (PACER.org). Additionally in an NBC News article called "Teen Icon Bethany

Mota's Inspiring Anti-Bullying Message," Mota is described as "the 19-year-old daughter of a Mexican mom and Portuguese dad who has also turned her personal experiences as a victim of bullying into a crusade to help other young people" (Nbcnews.com). This description perfectly describes the trends of the aesthetivists who combine personal stories with activists causes. In the video segment of this article, Bethany's caption title is "Million-dollar Mota" and the video depicts her on a trip to Mexico with an interviewer asking her about her Latino heritage. This video plays up her Latinidad and connects it to her anti-bullying message. In Mota's own personal writings, she never connects her Latinidad or multiethnic identity to her bullying. Yet, she becomes a voice and role model for the anti-bullying cause and message, and this becomes integrally tied to her identity. The 'be yourself' aspect of her identity and message is also evident with an interview with her dad who says, "she's just being herself and putting it out there for everybody to see" (1:55). The video ends with Mota being called a 'multicultural role model' and reinforcing this message with, "That's who you are. I definitely would love to kind of push that out to my audience to embrace where they come from and to embrace their roots" (2:30). Her activism, be yourself message, and multiethnic heritage become intertwined in her public persona and identity. Additionally, these aspects of her persona and identity are reinforced in an interview she does with former President Barack Obama, further solidifying activism as part of her brand. In 2015, Mota had the opportunity to interview the former President alongside two other YouTube stars, Hank Green and GloZell. In the segment, Mota asks the former President about bullying prevention because this is part of her brand, advocating for a cause related to her personal experiences.

Beauty

Another factor that plays prominently in the platform of the aesthetivists as well as the polit-identivists and actractivists is the role of beauty. In the case of Mota, the beauty tie is evident in that her platform is built on make-up tutorials, hairstyles, clothing, and skincare. Yet, in each instance of the aesthetivists, beauty, as described by the women themselves, is about more than their appearance. As I argue, a main strategy of the aesthetivists is attracting viewers with beauty and cosmetic products and content to then be able to turn their platform into something that goes beyond themselves and to advocate for others like them. For example, a main criticism of these women is that they alter or sacrifice aspects of themselves in order to garner mainstream success and influence and are therefore often written off as having sold themselves and not having real impact. However, I argue that these women have an epistemic advantage and therefore know the patterns and requirements of multiple worlds and are therefore more readily able to navigate them in order to achieve success. For instance, it should be noted that traditionally beauty standards prefer and propel women who are lighter skinned and blonde, for instance. In the case of this chapter, Lele Pons breaks the stereotypical expectations of a Venezuelan woman in that she has long blonde hair, and she garners success. Additionally, it should be noted that on both the cover of Dulce Candy's book and Bethany Mota's memoir, the hair of both women has an uncharacteristically lighter blonde tint than their normal hair color. As a result, this could be interpreted as these women's alteration of their appearance to fit a beauty mold to garner success. On the other hand, this could also be seen as a savvy and insightful way for the women to navigate the market to garner success. These women, who are self-starters and who have

built an entire career from scratch around cosmetics, are beauty experts and know how to navigate the beauty standards and industry to garner success. They have access to multiple worlds and use their knowledge to achieve economic success.

Within Mota's memoir, beauty plays a prominent role in her story of transformation through the sharing of her personal experiences. For example, in the introduction, Mota describes her early life and childhood revealing that makeup and beauty were not always a natural proclivity of hers: "You wouldn't know it by looking at my style now that I post on my Insta feed, but I was a total tomboy as a kid. I'd wear a tank top and little shorts, and my hair was a really short bob with choppy bangs my mom cut for me herself" (x). Therefore, her story becomes one of transformation as she goes through bullying, and she attributes this to an impetus for change. When she describes in detail what it was like to be bullied on the internet, beauty and appearance play a prominent role and are deeply tied to her feelings of self-worth and identity. She writes, "whoever had made that page about me had ripped a hole in how I felt about myself. Up until that point, I had never thought about physical appearance. But now I couldn't help but overanalyze everything they posted. I found it hard to differentiate my truth from the harsh words on Myspace, I started to wonder: Am I fat? Am I ugly? For the first time in my life, I began to contemplate my weight and wonder if I needed makeup...the site made me self-conscious about every aspect of my appearance, from the style of my hair to the polish of my toes" (xviii). As a result of this initial questioning that is very relatable to many young girls growing up in a digital age with access to so many other young girls and women to compare themselves to, Bethany turns her biggest insecurities into something she has the power to control by creating her own video content. The same

things that made her feel insecure, she started recording videos about such as makeup, hairstyles, nail polish, and recipes. When she first discovered YouTube videos, she was so drawn in by the power that young girls had to control their own stories and became hooked by the community aspect built around beauty: “I first discovered YouTube two years earlier...then I watched a few beauty videos made by girls my age. And you know how when you watch one video on a certain topic, all the related ones come up? That’s how I discovered that there was a ton of beauty and fashion content on YouTube. I wasn’t even into beauty or fashion at the time, but the videos were so simple and real, I found them calming and distracting in a good way. More than that, though, I was drawn to the idea that all these girls around the world were being creative and making something. With each new video I’d watch, I kept thinking about how amazing it was that each girl had posted this video for herself—no one posted it for her, and none told her to do it. She posited it all on her own. And I loved that, together these videos were all part of a larger whole—an entire community. And each girl was offering something important. So, I just kept watching more and more. And then I started thinking about filming videos for myself” (xxiii). She describes the strategy of story stacking of many people contributing their stories to create a larger story that is bigger than each individual one and the power of this strategy. As a result, her experiences with beauty unlocking a whole new world for her caused her to want to help other young girls.

Mota’s memoir reflects this beauty content intertwined with her personal life experiences. In her book she gives very practical and personal ideas: what to wear to work with a picture of an outfit and different options coupled with a talk on fear and overcoming it, tips for how to make glasses look good, recipes for green smoothies, hair

styles for work, how to pick a dress for work, how to get confident for a meeting, getting over creativity blocks, making a DIY journal, getting over procrastination, workout tips, workout wear, eating healthy with salad recipes and a DIY berry lip stain, naming specific brands of clothing. Her beauty content is spread throughout her entire book with little excerpts of light-hearted content oftentimes among deeper and more difficult personal stories and experiences. Yet still she devotes an entire chapter to beauty called “Getting Gorgeous.” What a reader may expect in the beauty chapter is more of the beauty content she offers throughout the entire book. However, within Mota’s specific chapter on beauty, Mota sends an alternative message about beauty going beyond appearance. To Mota, beauty is a form of power that one exerts and is directly tied to her ‘be yourself’ message. For example, the opening of this chapter includes this description: “We tell our stories through our personal style and beauty. It’s a form of self-expression. And what’s cool is that no one else decides what we choose to wear or how we do our makeup and hair. It’s all up to us, and it’s just so very personal. And honestly, my style can be summed up in just a few words: I love to feel like me” (89). According to Bethany beauty is deeply tied to her ‘be yourself’ message and is a way for her to have control and power over herself and her own story and self-representation, similar to the power that one has when writing their own story through autobiography. Beauty becomes autobiographical in this way.

In this section of the book, Mota begins talking about style and the ways in which she uses her style as a way to be unique and different from others. Then she follows the style chapter with one called “Beauty” in which she defines beauty in this way: “Beauty to me isn’t just about makeup anymore. Beauty really begins with what we put into our

bodies” (107). As a result, Mota connects beauty to not only her appearance but also her eating and workout habits. Throughout the book she offers very cosmetic and appearance-based content with step-by-step makeup tutorials using images and specific products as well as clothing suggestions and ideas. Yet, in the chapter on beauty, she seems to go outside the box and attribute beauty to wellness. In a blog-style blurb captioned “Beauty from the inside out,” Mota writes, “By eating right, I end up with radiant skin, fewer blemishes, and an overall happy glow that is reflected on my face” (107) in which she proceeds to create a list of dos and don’ts for eating in order to have beautiful skin. Whereas the reader might expect an explanation the title of which is “Beauty from the Inside Out” to involve an aspect of one’s personality, characteristics, or inner beauty, Mota alters this expectation and attributes beauty to healthy eating that results in unblemished skin. Throughout her book, Mota offers some conflicting messages on beauty in that at one point she attributes her motivation for eating healthy not to appearance but rather to health, then later attributes taking care of her health to beauty: “It’s as simple as this: if you take care of yourself, you are beautiful” (50). And in her chapter on beauty, she initially describes beauty in a nuanced way as tricks to eat well and control your acne and then proceeds to, in painstaking detail, describe her skincare routine at night, in the morning, her process for applying foundation, her brow makeup, three different eye shadow looks, a matte lip tutorial, and three makeup routine looks. In some ways Bethany reflects beauty in a very literal manner and in others she nuances what it means, overall reinforcing the idea that she and the other aesthetivists exist in in-between states, not able to be categorized in binary terms or on any extremes.

Yuya

The tendency of using beauty as a platform for an intermediary form of activism is also present in the Mexican beauty vlogger Mariand Castrejón Castañeda, also known as Yuya. She creates videos in Spanish covering topics such as hair, makeup, and fashion. She grew up in the house of her aunt living and sharing a bed with her mom but left her house at eighteen. In 2016 she participated with other female YouTube creators in the United Nations Sustainable Development Action Campaign which brings together storytellers, mobilizers and creators to target young girls with the rhetoric of gender equality. She hopes to empower women and girls and advocates for using social media as a platform for women to launch businesses and be their own bosses. Yuya has also published two books titled *Los secretos de Yuya* (2015) and *Las confesiones de Yuya* (2016) following this trend of gaining a following through beauty, then using personal stories to advocate for a cause which contributes to the cultivation of the YouTuber's personal brand.

In this section, I will use the first-person sources of Yuya's YouTube video content and published books. In the first section, the analysis of her YouTube content will investigate the trends and progression of her changing creations over time from beauty tip videos to more lifestyle blogs. In the second part, I will analyze the publication of her two books where, over time, she reveals aspects of her personal life breaking down the barrier between public beauty content creation and her own experiences. What becomes evident is that Yuya follows similar content creation patterns and trends to the other aesthetivists in this chapter displaying the similarities and differences between Latina beauty Youtubers in the United States and Mexico.

YouTube Videos

Following a similar timeline to Bethany Mota, Yuya filmed and uploaded her first YouTube video in July of 2010. Over the course of 12 years, since her first video, Yuya has filmed and uploaded nearly 700 videos and amassed a following of nearly 25 million subscribers. Like the other aesthetivists of this chapter, Yuya's videos display a stark contrast from her very first video called "peinados fáciles y lindos" [Easy and pretty hairstyles] (2010) to her latest video "Regresé y esta es mi nueva vida! Esto me sucede ahora" [I'm back and this is my new life! This is what's going on now] (2021). Initially, Yuya films simple instructional and tutorial style videos revolving around beauty content from make-up to hair to costume ideas and styles. Similar to the patterns of Bethany Mota, Yuya's content follows a similar trajectory. She begins with beauty, hair, and make-up guides and elaborates into more DIY content with costume and recipe ideas. Next, she delves into more personal and advice content with videos about first date and relationship advice. She also begins to notice the patterns that Mota notices in that her content related to her personal life garners more views and therefore she records brother tags, interviewing her brother in a video, incorporating aspects of her own life and relationships. Over time her YouTube channel turns into more of a place to house lifestyle content as opposed to beauty and makeup tutorials. In 2017, she begins to create vlogs, or video logs, in which she records content from her day. She uses the hashtag #JuntoAYuya to amass these types of videos in one place.

What becomes evident by her most popular videos is that the content is all related to some aspect of her personal life. By using a sorting feature called "most popular" on her YouTube channel, the videos are ordered by largest number of views. What this sorting reveals is that her most popular videos often diverge from the typical beauty

content with videos such as “Conoce mi voz real,” [Know my real voice] “Un día con Yuya,” [A day with Yuya] “Voy a ser mamá,” [I’m going to be a mom] and “Mi experiencia con la copa menstrual” [My experience with the menstrual cup] receiving the most views. For example, her most popular video with 53 million views is called “Conoce mi voz real.” In all of her videos, Yuya talks in a very energetic, fast-paced, higher pitched voice that sounds nearly cartoonish. Her manner of speaking is very unique and draws attention, contributing to her success as a YouTube content creator. Therefore, following the noticed trend among the aesthetivists in this chapter, the most successful content the women are able to create has to do with breaking down the barrier between the public and the private. All of these women learn over time and therefore adapt into creating more personal content because they recognize this pattern. Therefore, it is not surprising that her most popular video teases that she is about to break down a perceived barrier between her public persona and YouTube voice and personality to reveal that viewers’ inclination that it is impossible for someone to have such an animated, fast talking, and high-pitched voice in real life, is correct. However, what the video ultimately reveals is that what her audience hears in her videos is her real, true voice. This serves to reinforce the YouTubers’ assertions that what they see in videos is the reality of their lives.

The other popular videos on this list follow a similar pattern of breaking down the barrier between the public and private with more lifestyle videos such as her first vlog where she brings the camera along for her day as opposed to more of an interview style where she sits in front of her camera and talks to it or demonstrates to the audience how to do a hair or make-up look or DIY project. Following a strong YouTube trend of

sharing about pregnancy and birth videos, another one of Yuya's most popular content is her pregnancy announcement in the video "¡Estoy embarazada, Voy a ser mamá! Carta a mi Mar" [I'm pregnant, I'm going to be a mom! A Letter to my Mar] This video also reveals a contrast between Yuya's first videos and her most recent videos where her content has shifted to be more artsy with stop motion animation and reels. In this video in which she reveals her pregnancy, she creates a reel in which she writes and recites a letter to her baby mashing together clips of her life story, career, and growth as a YouTuber. She explains to her unborn daughter, Mar, "Te dejo este video como una carta, como una foto o como un momento, para que algún día puedas ver que desde tu primer latido mamá te ama y te acompaña" [I leave you this video as a letter, as a photo or a moment so that someday you can see that from your first heartbeat mom loves you and is with you] (2:49). As Yuya reads this letter to her daughter, the images on the screen show her with her pregnant belly exposed on the beach with the father of the baby talking and laughing and a collage of polaroid pictures detailing and documenting her growing pregnant stomach with the pregnancy test and sonograms. Overall, this list of popular videos reveals a pattern and trend among viewers of a desire to watch content related to the personal lives of the YouTubers and that, over time, the aesthetivists notice this trend and adapt to the changing attention of their audiences.

Another trend that can be noticed among Yuya's content both on YouTube and her published books is the idea of secrecy and drawing viewers and readers in by enticing them with some sort of secret or insider information. For example, with her most popular video, "Conoce mi voz real," the title leads the viewer to believe that this video will reveal something new and personal and real that has not been shown before on her

videos. As a result, viewers want to hear her real voice as opposed to the cartoony one they hear in her videos. However, viewers will be disappointed when they realize that the video title is just a teaser and her ‘real’ voice is the one they have heard all along. Another series of videos whose titles attract the viewer with a controversial or unexpected title are the videos, “Me voy de YouTube?” [Am I leaving YouTube?] and “Ahora qué pasará con Yuya?” [Now what will happen with Yuya?] in which, using these titles, Yuya makes it seem like something big is going to change and that she is leaving YouTube and moving on to do something else. There is an element of the unknown, mystery, and suspense to these titles. Yet, the content of the videos reveals that ultimately Yuya is not leaving YouTube. These videos came out a few weeks apart in March and April of 2014 and she has not stopped making videos since then. Additionally, leading up to the video in which Yuya announced her pregnancy, there are many instances where the titles of her videos address the question of pregnancy either of her viewers suspecting and guessing she is pregnant and her title teasing about her addressing it but the video ultimately revealing that she is not pregnant. The use of secrets and eye-catching titles is a strategy that Yuya uses to draw viewers in and get them to watch her content or read her books.

Autobiographies

This strategy of attracting viewers with secrets, mystery, and gossip is also used in the titles of Yuya’s two published books. The first book appropriately called *Los secretos de Yuya* [Yuya’s Secrets], published in 2015, uses the tactic of secrets to draw viewers in to buy the book and believe that the content inside will reveal secret, personal information about the YouTuber that cannot be found on the internet. A common

assumption might be that the secrets referred to in the title have to do with Yuya's personal life, yet the subtitle and content reveal that the secrets she is referring to have to do with hair and make-up tips, not her personal life. The titles of Yuya's books seem to follow the same trend of the other aesthetivists in this chapter in that they use their platform on YouTube to publish autobiographical books related to their personal experiences as a means to empower and help young girls like themselves. Yuya's book even follows a very similar format to Bethany Mota's in its mashup of an autobiography with a YouTube channel, Instagram page, and magazine article. The pages are glossy like a magazine and have many graphics, cartoons, and Instagram-like selfies of Yuya. And the written content is formatted like a beauty magazine, breaking things down into steps. For example, the content of Yuya's *Los secretos* includes hair tutorials, make-up dos and don'ts, manicure tips, and guides for what beauty tools to buy. Bethany Mota's book contains similar content; however, she also incorporates personal anecdotes and stories about her own life into this content. Yuya's first book falls short in this aspect and does not deliver on what its title seems to promise in revealing Yuya's secrets. On the surface, her example seems to follow the patterns of the other aesthetivists; however, delving below the surface of her eye-catching titles, her content does not seem to deliver on the promise of revealing juicy secrets and personal aspects of her life.

Using Personal Stories

Yet, what is lacking in the first book and in her empty titles on YouTube is ultimately fulfilled in her second book released in 2016 called *Las confesiones de Yuya* [Yuya's Confessions], in which she finally picks up on the patterns that the attention of her viewers is drawn to her personal life and she delivers on this demand in which,

similar to Mota, she combines the self-help content with anecdotes and stories from her personal life. The back cover of her book describes this trend: “yo sé que les encanta que les cuente cositas de mi vida... así que escribí este libro para compartir mis experiencias y confesarles secretitos que nadie sabe... cuando lean este libro quiero que sientan que una amiga las entiende y las escucha, como si estuviéramos tomando un café juntas! ¡Recuerden que lo único que necesitan para ser felices es ser ustedes mismas!” [I know that you love that I tell you little things about my life... so I wrote this book to share my experiences and to confess to you little secrets that nobody knows... when you read this book I want you to feel like a friend understands and listens to you, as if we were getting coffee together! Remember that the only thing that you need to be happy is to be yourselves!] (back cover). This statement reveals many of the patterns of the aesthetivists following a similar pattern of catering to the desires of their audience to see more of their personal lives and the message they choose to share about the importance of being yourself. Instead of the focus being on beauty content, the topic of this book is more relational and anecdotal with the subtitle of the book being, “mis mejores consejos para superar problemitas de amor, amigos, familia y autoestima” [my best advice to overcome little problems of love, friends, family and self-esteem] (front cover). Whereas her first book is more seriously about beauty and make-up and giving realistic and straightforward advice, her second book follows the trend of the other aesthetivists as she opens up about her personal life. This change represents what I call a metamorphosis and entering a second public life. For example, Yuya expresses the cathartic feeling of opening up, writing, “fue increíble contarte cositas de mi vida que tenía guardadas y confesar tantas más” [It was incredible to tell you little things about my life that I had hidden and confess

so much more] (3). In addition, she describes her book as being based on her experiences when she writes, “Lo que me encanta de este libro es que todos los consejos que les doy están basados en mis experiencias” [What I like about this book is that all of the advice that I give you is based on my experiences] (10). The use of personal stories is a common trend among aesthetivists, especially after they have garnered attention and a following and often enter into a second public life where they are able to share more openly about their lives and struggles.

Las confesiones de Yuya, is all about relationship how-tos. She offers many dos and don'ts for every stage of a relationship: flirting, dating online, long distance dating, kissing, introducing a significant other to parents, when to say I love you, and what to do in a breakup to name a few. The formatting of this book mirrors that of her other book as well as the format of Bethany Mota's because it is a combination of a magazine article, YouTube channel, and Instagram page; yet in this book she also offers personal stories about her relationship experiences. In order to relate to her audience, she writes about her own heartbreak experiences: “A mí me pasó con un niño que me cortó así, de la nada; yo pensé que todo estaba cool, que nos la pasábamos chido pero de un día para otro me tronó y la verdad fue muy difícil. Lloré mucho en esa etapa pero me sirvió para aprender, sabes?” [That happened to me with a boy that broke up with me like that, out of nowhere; I thought that we were cool, that we were getting along well but one day he dumped me and to be honest it was very difficult. I cried a lot at the time, but it helped me learn, you know?] (126). She uses this anecdote to relate to her young girl audience and ends with the tagline ‘you know’ to make her book seem like an informal conversation with one's best friend. In addition to her dating relationship struggles, Yuya also provides stories

from her childhood to relate to her readers providing examples of her personality quirks and her experiences at school. For example, she writes, “lo que yo tenía era que hablaba mucho, o sea demasiado. A mí me sacaban del salón, así de: <<Yuya, para afuera>>, pero de verdad era algo que yo no podía controlar; se me salía la lengua o yo no sé qué pasaba, de verdad” [What my problem was was that I talked a lot, or more like too much. They used to kick me out of the salon, like “Yuya, out”, but it really was something that I couldn’t control; my tongue would get away from me or I don’t know what would happen, honestly] (173). Ultimately, she turns this experience of her difficulties in school to a characteristic that helped her succeed in her future career as a YouTube personality where her uniqueness stems from her speed-talking video content.

Another very relatable topic that Yuya shares about in her book is her experiences relating to her parents. For example, in two different YouTube videos (“Preguntas a mi mamá-embarazo/ me fui de la casa” [Questions for my mom-pregnancy/ I left home] and “Por esto me fui tan joven de mi casa te lo platico todo” [That’s why I left home at such a young age-I’ll tell you everything], Yuya talks about leaving her house at a young age to move in with her aunt; therefore, alluding to some difficulties with her own parents. In her book, Yuya delves more into this experience of her parents separating when she was very young and difficulties in her relationships with her parents. Ultimately, it becomes evident how much love she has for her parents and her mother in particular and she even attributes her ability to succeed to her mom: “Mi mamá es mi mayor amiga; me tocó una mamá hermosa, hermosa, hermosa, hermosa! Siempre nos ha dado mucha libertad para hacer lo que queramos” [My mom is my best friend; I was given a beautiful, beautiful, beautiful, beautiful mom! She has always given us a lot of freedom to do what we want]

(200). In this section of her book, she offers very relatable and practical advice related to families such as how to get along with siblings, sharing her own experiences with her older brother who now helps her with her YouTube videos, but she confesses that as kids they fought often and she recalls a story of when he wrapped her in a sheet and carried her around the house. She also offers a section about relating to her parents including tips for how to earn their trust and respect and make your mom your best friend like she has done and which becomes evident in her YouTube video content with videos such as “Te amo mamá!,” [I love you Mom!] “El tag de la mamá,” [Mom tag] and “Preguntas a mi mamá” [Questions for my mom]. Ultimately, her book provides very relatable content to other young girls who inevitably experience familial relationships and who aspire to have close relationships with their family members in a similar way to Yuya and who may have to overcome challenges such as parent separation or disagreements that make them leave home. Her personal stories and experiences overcoming challenges validate her advice.

Be Yourself Message

Like the other aesthetivists in this chapter as well as the polit-identivists and attractivists throughout this project, Yuya’s rhetoric in both of her books bolsters the be yourself message proliferated in all of the case studies. For example, the first evidence of this common message can even be found in Yuya’s first book, *Los secretos de Yuya*, in which she writes, “Estoy feliz de haber compartido con ustedes mis tips y secretos de belleza para que todas se vean lindas y guapas, sacándole provecho a sus rasgos bonitos como unos ojazos increíbles o unos labios de envidia. Y no me digan que no tienen nada, porque sí, todos tenemos ese <<algo>> que nos hace especiales y diferentes, ese-no-sé-

qué-que-qué-sé-yo; el chiste es encontrarlo y hacer que se note” [I’m happy to have shared with you my tips and beauty secrets so that you can all look pretty and beautiful, taking advantage of your pretty features like incredibly big beautiful eyes or enviable lips. And don’t tell me that you don’t have anything, because yes, we all have this ‘something’ that makes us special and different, this I-don’t-know what-what-do-I-know; the fun thing is finding it and making others notice] (140). Yuya’s message to be yourself is summed up in her long-hyphenated phrase which gets to the heart of the be yourself message. It can be compared to the French saying, “je ne sais quoi” in which it is very difficult to actually define because it is a quality that is beyond definition but is ultimately good and desirable. It is a quality everyone wants to obtain; yet it exists because it is difficult to grasp due to its uniqueness and this is a quality that all of these women aspire to foster in young girls. For the women in this chapter, this be yourself message becomes bound to beauty in that they emphasize that the key to this desired quality, this “je ne sais quoi” exists in one’s inner beauty as Yuya describes at the end of her first book, “Y, sí, la belleza es interior, está en aceptar y ser tú misma siempre, pero tampoco se debe subestimar el poder que un labial de color potente, unas pestañas postizas o un corte de pelo bárbaro pueden hacer para que te sientas guapísima y segura de ti misma” [And, yes, beauty is on the inside, it’s in accepting and being yourself always, but you shouldn’t underestimate the power that a potent lipstick, some fake eyelashes, and an amazing haircut can have to make you feel super beautiful and sure of yourself] (140). Yuya’s be yourself message becomes intertwined with the beauty content she espouses in her first book which offers practical hair and make-up tips and advice. This quote epitomizes the in-betweenness of the women of this study. They combine both

superficial things such as hair and makeup with deeper commentary related to advocating for causes and trying to help the next generation identify and use their epistemic advantage.

In Yuya's second book *Las confesiones de Yuya*, the be yourself message is similarly present from start to finish. For example, on the back cover of the book, she writes, "recuerden que lo único que necesitan para ser felices, es ser ustedes mismas!" [remember that the only thing you need to be happy is to be yourselves!] (back cover). Here, the be yourself message becomes attached to happiness and unlike her first book where this message is tied to beauty, in this statement, being yourself is the ultimate goal and the only necessary ingredient. Yet throughout this book, instead of a beauty attachment, the be yourself message is applied to dating and relationships. After offering tips for relationships and flirting, Yuya summarizes, "pero creo que, al final, lo que a mí me ha funcionado siempre es ser yo misma. Sí, sé que todo mundo dice eso y seguro ahorita te queda viendo esta página con cara de, o sea Yuya, ¿qué onda? ¿Cómo es eso de ser tú misma? Pero es bastante sencillo: ser tú misma es ser transparente, no tratar de aparentar lo que no eres y básicamente disfrutar de tu vida" [But I think, in the end, what has always worked best for me is being myself. Yes, I know that everyone says that and I'm sure right now you're looking at this page with a face like, really Yuya? What's this about being yourself? But it's that simple: being yourself is being transparent, not trying to appear like what you aren't and just enjoying your life] (21). I think the way in which Yuya narrates this be yourself message by including the rhetorical question of her pictured reader is very interesting and revealing of the way in which combining a be yourself message with a very practical and detailed guide of exactly how Yuya lives her

life and handles these situations can seem contradictory and confusing. Yuya offers insight and instructions for what to do based on her own experiences and personality yet sends the message that each individual should just be herself.

Throughout her second book, she reinforces this be yourself message. She writes, “100% auténtica: La persona que te quiera debe aceptarte como eres, con lo bueno y lo malo; si no, mejor *bye*” [100% authentic: The person that loves you should accept you as you are, with the good and the bad; if not, bye] (45). Authenticity is her key piece of advice in dating relationships, and she counsels not to change for a relationship. Similarly, she writes, “Siempre recuerda, guapura, que vienes a esta vida con lo que tienes, así que valora todo y da gracias por ser tan afortunada; sal y muestrales a las personas lo feliz que eres, así, tal cual, ¡con lo que te tocó! Una chica con seguridad se nota en todos lados, así, que no te escondas” [Always remember, beautiful, that you come to this life with what you have, so appreciate everything and give thanks for being so fortunate; go out and show everyone how happy you are, with what you’re given! Everyone notices a confident girl, so don’t hide yourself] (214). Yuya urges her readers to embrace their own personal unique qualities that are natural and inherent and to share that with others. This message continues when she writes, “Lo que quiero decirte es que la confianza en ti misma es la llave secreta para abrir mil puertas; no dudes nunca de todo lo que puedes hacer. Si no confías en ti, los demás tampoco la harán. Haz lo que quieras hacer y no te importe nunca lo que digan los demás” [What I want to tell you is that self-confidence is the secret key to opening a thousand doors; don’t ever doubt what you can do. If you don’t trust yourself, no one else will. Do what you want to do and never care about what everyone else says] (231). In other words, Yuya asserts explicitly that the

secret key to unlocking any door is self-confidence and truly embracing one's own unique qualities. Finally, she tells, "Lo padre de este mundo es que hay muchas personas, muchos rostros, mucha variedad, pues. Y dentro de esa variedad, lo que tú tienes es único, así que quiérete y disfruta ser quién eres" [The cool thing about this world is that there are so many people, so many faces, a lot of variety. And inside of all this variety, what you have is unique, so love yourself and enjoy who you are] (223). Overall, a common, pervasive message throughout Yuya's book is this be yourself message. This seems to be her most important and re-iterated message, yet simultaneously a fall back and catch all in case her personal advice does not work for someone else creating a confusing contradiction in that she offers specific advice to be like her yet encourages young girls, her target audience, to be themselves and embrace their unique qualities. Overall, Yuya's example follows similar patterns to the other aesthetivists in the United States but in the context of Mexico and involving a Spanish speaking audience.

The means for these "aesthetivists" of gaining a following is through cosmetics, beauty, comedy, or advertising tactics which bolster a brand image. This consumerist process complicates the sharing of their personal lives and the reception of their messages as activism, yet the times they break down the barrier and share personal stories, there is a conscious effort to illuminate the issues of visibility and stereotyping and encourage viewers, readers, and subscribers to not sacrifice their identities and backgrounds but to feel empowered to embrace that part of themselves and turn it into a career. Their personal experiences become their platform for advocacy where identity is deeply tied to their activism.

Conclusion

Latin/x American Women's Mainstream Infiltration Bolsters Progressive, Digitally Connected Generation

Historically, women have been marginalized and left out of public spheres yet have consistently fought for inclusion and representation often working within the confines of the structures to gain a foothold in order to subvert the restrictions and limitations imposed on them. One platform that has facilitated the increasing volume of their voices is the use of (social) media which unites and amplifies their stories and experiences with the potential to create powerful movements. In a similar way, what these chapters demonstrate is that Latinx and Latin American women have used a similar strategy to make their voices heard in response to exclusion, misrepresentation, discrimination, stereotyping, and underrepresentation. A pattern emerges where the politicians, actresses, and social media influencers gain access to a public space (politics, Hollywood, YouTube) following the typical rules or pathway to gain access (elections, auditions, beauty advertising) and then work within the institutions to gain an audience. With this following, they then choose to use their personal experiences, by writing autobiographies or sharing their stories through social media, as a platform for activism and to advocate for the rights, equality, inclusion, and representation of others like them. Chapter One analyzes the case studies of the “polit-identivists,” the public figures and politicians who have dedicated their lives to public and political service, yet their activism becomes personal as they share about their identity and personal lives to leverage their influence encouraging young people to aspire to these careers. They become role models for the next generation to know their possibilities for raising their

voices and obtaining decision making power positions with the potential for policies and change in the interest of underrepresented groups. The “actractivists” in Chapter Two use the celebrity status they garner through their acting careers to not only increase representation of Latinx and Latin American people on screen but also as a platform for activism. They use their personal stories and social media presence to talk about issues and problems they face and the work they are doing to not only increase representation but alter it and produce shows and movies that feature and give opportunities to others with similar backgrounds. In Chapter Three, the “aesthetivists,” or the Latinx and Latin American YouTubers, initially gain a following by using aesthetics and beauty advertising. Although the main focus may be cosmetic, the premise of this emerging career is creating a brand around one’s identity. As a result, their personal stories become integral, increasing awareness, and making counter narratives about Latinx and Latin American life experiences more accessible to an audience that may not typically have access to these stories in their everyday lives otherwise.

From these three chapters looking at the strategies for representation that Latinx and Latin American women (politicians, actresses, and YouTubers) use to combine their careers, influence, and following in the media with activist causes, it becomes evident that in many cases personal stories are tied to advocacy. When something is deeply tied to one’s identity, it becomes more than simply a job or career and this type of advocacy is a form of work that carries an emotional weight. With so many cases of activism being initiated and organized by the individuals who are affected by these issues being advocated for, the burden is multiplied where those affected are the ones who not only bear the weight of discrimination but also the effort and work it takes to organize and

advocate. Although it should be shared work, it seems that the most successful and well-received advocacy is that which comes from a member of the group being discriminated against. Additionally, there have been cases where the efforts of people outside of the affected group have attempted to advocate and have received backlash. For example, *American Dirt* (2020), a fiction novel about a Mexican mother who flees to the United States with her son and written by Jeanine Cummins, a self-professed white-identifying U.S. woman who only asserted ties to her Puerto Rican grandmother once criticism mounted, exemplifies backlash for a perceived misidentification between ethnicity and advocacy.

This case reinforces my overall observations about how deeply tied identity can be to activism. Personal stories and experiences are what create the platform for their advocacy. As a result, success or controversy hinges on identity. Therefore, legitimacy and the ability to successfully (or non-controversially) advocate for a group depends on that individual being accepted as part of the group they are advocating for. The controversial figures are the ones who try to advocate or empathize but are not seen as fulfilling the right criteria to represent the community they advocate for and as a result are either criticized for making identity sacrifices or, for example, not being Mexican enough, Latina enough, white enough, etc., as we see with the comments and concerns with, for example, Lele Pons, Dulce Candy, and Jeanine Cummins. How do we bridge the gap between this cognitive need and desire for people outside of the group to help bear the burden of advocacy and the occurrence where activism of those not directly affected or those of a different background often results in backlash? What this project argues is that all of these cases and all of these voices, from the most successful to the

most controversial, are worth looking into and studying because each one gives insight into this cultural moment, the strategies being employed for inclusion by Latinx and Latin American women, and the reactions they elicit.

These women who are exposing problems and issues related to themselves and advocating for change, representation, and equality are bringing these messages to a mainstream audience due to their access and success in careers in politics, television, and YouTube. As a result of these platforms, they have earned the right to share and have an audience who will listen to them. In this cultural moment, our lives are largely affected by the influencers we follow and the information we seek out and allow onto our feed. Young people are more likely to follow the women who appear on their favorite shows on *Netflix* and consider the messages they send through their captions and hashtags on Instagram than they are to read a scholarly article about feminist activism. The discourse these influential women are choosing to disseminate through social media and their autobiographies is about equality, agency, inclusion, and representation which helps bridge the gap between academia and pop culture making these ideas more accessible to a wider demographic. Additionally, these messages are very personal tying their identities to their causes which seems to bolster the legitimacy of their experiences and activism. Therefore, audiences are exposed to these messages through the shows and videos they watch, the accounts they follow on social media, and the people they read about in articles and interviews which helps create a progressive upcoming generation that is more socially aware, empathetic, and in touch with issues and ideas related to themselves and others.

In this digital age, identity is bound to media presence and these influential women are sending messages to the younger generation about what it means to be Latina, in what ways she can raise her voice and resist, and how she can use her identity to get by and compete in the market. They have discovered that a successful means to advocate and be heard is through their personal stories and for this reason have created autobiographies, self-help books, children's/young adult books, social media accounts and movements, YouTube videos, interviews, and documentaries to impart a common message about identity and access because this current cultural moment calls for and responds to first-person accounts that legitimize activism. I argue that these women are active agents contributing to the open and evolving concept of *Latinidad* as a lived experience and what these examples reveal are the impossible burdens, contradictory messages, and pressures placed on Latin/x American girls and women to represent difference as well as conform to the dominant ideals of a competitive neoliberal market economy where a good Latina citizen is an entrepreneur who leverages her *Latinidad*, *identidad*, and activism for economic success.

Sometimes these women challenge the dominant structures that oppress and exclude; sometimes they commodify *Latinidad* and activism becomes a brand. Yet both the ruptures (which challenge) and the resignations (which reveal the mechanisms that are producing these forms of activism that fall short of their potential for social action) allow us to understand, identify, and therefore strategize ways to continue to resist and break barriers that exclude, ultimately expanding and re-articulating what it means to be a (social media) activist by observing the ways these Latin/x American women use their influence and social media, characterizing a form of intermediary activism. The

accumulation of these stories and their accessibility through digital media as a “story stacking” effect should be understood as a diversity of voices that nevertheless decries in unison the persistence of structural oppression across differences of place, age, career. My project illuminates the connections between seemingly disparate experience by showing how digital media becomes a repository for their first-person accounts that register the scale of discrimination, stereotyping, and exclusion of Latin/x American women and reveal their strategies of resistance.

Even though these women use the ‘be yourself’ motto that can bolster the neoliberal agenda, their activist work sometimes challenges individualist approaches and has the potential for structural change. Other times, they intend to exploit the neoliberal structures for the benefit of themselves and the next generations by going along to enter and garner influence to then work against the grain from within. Overall, it is pertinent to investigate and interrogate the cause of their concerns over ‘being yourself’ and the impetus for the proliferation of this empowerment and inclusion message. The platform of social media has powerful possibilities for advocating for change and allows for these complicated questions about self-identification and labeling to be played out when the women are able to amass many like-minded individuals with similar experiences and similar goals who can act and share within their own realm of influence and accrue even more people and impact. Social media offers a platform and a proven successful space for the expression of political position, yet it is also inevitably tied to one’s chosen portrayal of public identity, so the result is a form of articulating first-person politics. The Latin/x American women in my study see this potential for activism in our current cultural moment of media communication and are taking advantage of this effective tactic across

generations, borders, careers, and backgrounds to not only garner followers but share personal experiences to advocate for causes related to them. Together, one story, one share, one like at a time, they are offering strategies to navigate white, male, hierarchical, neoliberal culture not designed to propel them to success, are inviting others to share their experiences as well, and are creating a web of interconnected instances that create a larger story of misrepresentation, exclusion, and discrimination that is more powerful than each story alone.

This project intervenes in the fields of Latinx and Latin American cultural production, media studies, gender and women's studies, celebrity and pop culture studies, and activist studies. In Latin/x American popular culture and celebrity studies a certain critical corpus contends that there is an inherent sacrifice of identity and background for those who achieve prominence and success in the public eye. This study argues that the use of first-person storytelling and the proliferation of autobiographies (due to their platforms and followings) in which the background of these celebrities is not only shared and made public but is also attributed to their success, counters the perceived loss of identity for access and success. This project likewise seeks to nuance the critical stance in gender and women's studies that activism requires real-world action and a break and radical resistance to mainstream culture. In this dissertation, the compilation of case studies demonstrates an intermediary form of activism that is often digital and which neither fully embraces nor completely rejects mainstream neoliberal culture, but rather exists somewhere in the middle, through an infiltration of industries to work from within, combining dissent with success. My dissertation seeks to lay the groundwork for the study of future generations of Latin/x American politicians, actors, and YouTubers who

will build upon and continue these strategies of resistance and forms of activism practiced by the women in this investigation or alter them as new strategies and ideas emerge to combat erasure, stereotyping, under and misrepresentation, and discrimination.

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inspiring words expressed by Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez were recorded forever in my heart. I had the honor to meet this strong, talented, and brave woman that works day after day to improve social conditions in her country. Thanks to our meeting, we were able to listen to each other and share our points of view about people who work from home. Thanks to @aoc and her incredible team for opening the doors of your offices in Washington D.C. to me!]" *Instagram*, 26 Feb, 2020, <https://www.instagram.com/p/B9Ca29ajtM9/>.

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---. "#orgullodeidentidad. Repost @elle_mexico: @yalitzaapariciomtztz protagoniza la iniciativa #diorstandswithwomen de @diorparfums junto a otras mujeres que a través de su trabajo transforman al mundo, como Charlize Theron y Cara Delevingne. Para Yalitza, se trata de 'hacerle llegar al resto de las comunidades este mensaje de que no tenemos que negar nuestros orígenes, no tenemos que negar quiénes somos para ser aceptados en la sociedad porque simplemente la sociedad también se debe de adaptar a esta diversidad que tenemos'. #CHINUP [@yalitzaapariciomtztz leads the initiative #diorstandswithwomen from @diorparfums along with other women that through their work transform the world, like Charlize Theron, Cara Delevigne. For Yalitza, it's about 'getting to the rest of the communities this message that we don't have to deny our backgrounds, we don't have to deny who we are to be accepted in society because simply society should also adapt to the diversity we have.' #CHINUP] *Instagram*, 21 Sept. 2020, https://www.instagram.com/p/CFaV4cYjOP_/.

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Very content and thankful for the reception from the public! I'll keep telling you all.]” *Instagram*, 1 Sept. 2019, <https://www.instagram.com/p/B14dN2AAGvu/>.

---. “En este caminar, he conocido muchas personas que han sido inspiración en lo personal y profesional. Hoy tuve el privilegio de compartir con 3 mujeres [@yalitzaapariciomtz](#) [@rigobertamenchu](#) [@letty_teleuario](#) que con sus vidas, me motivan a seguir adelante, luchando por mis sueños y creyendo que todos los días podemos crecer y ser mejores cuando unimos fuerzas, trabajando en lo que nos hace felices, pero también aportando para lograr cambios de mentalidad en una sociedad donde todos buscamos igualdad. [On this trip, I have met many people that have been both personal and professional inspiration. Today I had the privilege to share with 3 women [@yalitzaapariciomtz](#) [@rigobertamenchu](#) [@letty_teleuario](#) who with their lives, motivate me to keep going, fighting for my dreams and believing that each day we can grow and be better when we combine forces, working at what makes us happy, but also working to change minds in a society where we are all seeking equality.]” *Instagram*, 15 Jan 2021.

---. “Es un gusto compartirles esta entrevista que me hicieron para este lindo proyecto, [@femaleclassproject](#) de Lia Cohen. Gracias a todo el equipo por su talento y por hacerme sentir muy bien durante la sesión de fotos con Carmen Maldonado. [It’s a pleasure to share with you this interview that I did for this beautiful project, [@femaleclassproject](#) by Lia Cohen. Thanks to the whole team for your talent and for making me feel so good during the photo session with Carmen Maldonado]” *Instagram*, 29 Nov. 2018, <https://www.instagram.com/p/Bqx-zc5B2rs/>.

---. “¿Sabías que en Guatemala uno de cada dos niños sufre de desnutrición crónica infantil (DCI)? Es momento de informarnos, apoyarnos y de involucrarnos. Ingresa a www.nutreme.org y entérate de cómo puedes apoyar. [Did you know that in Guatemala one in every two kids suffers from chronic child malnutrition? It’s time to inform ourselves, help ourselves, and get ourselves involved. Go to www.nutreme.org and find out how you can help]” *Instagram*, 14 Sept. 2019, <https://www.instagram.com/p/B2ZwTxygL9i/>.

---. “Tal vez muchos no sepan, pero en cada lugar que tengo la oportunidad de presentarme he escogido trajes de distintas regiones para poder mostrar un poco de mi país al mundo. Soy de Santa María de Jesús, Sacatepequez, pero ya he usado, como se han dado cuenta, además de mis trajes, otros que representan mucho para mi y que porto con mucho cariño y respeto, así como este de la foto que es de Palín, Escuintla, de donde me siento también parte. Podrían adivinar cuál usaré hoy en la Premiere de [@lalloronapelicula](#)? ¡Tenía muchas ganas de usarlo, ya lo verán! [Maybe many don’t know, but in each place that I have the opportunity to present myself I have chosen outfits from different regions to be

able to show a little of my country to the world. I'm from Santa María de Jesús, Sacatepequez, but I've already worn, as you all have realized, in addition to my own, others that mean a lot to me and that I wear with great affection and respect, such as the one in this photo that is from Palín, Escuintla, where I feel a part of too. Can you guess which one I will wear today at the Premier of @lalloronapelicula? I was so excited to wear it, you all will see!]" *Instagram*, 1 Sept. 2019, <https://www.instagram.com/p/B13OHmiACBs/>.

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---. "Una edición y una portada sin precedentes, fuerte y audaz al igual que su protagonista María Mercedes Coroy. Una de las actrices más versátiles y talentosas de Latinoamérica, María Mercedes se ha convertido en uno de los nombres más importantes dentro de la industria del cine y ha puesto nuestro país en alto en los festivales de cine más importantes a través de todo el mundo. La serenidad y la fuerza de una mujer orgullosa de sus raíces indígenas, la musa del director Jayro Bustamante se convirtió en una de las ediciones favoritas de nuestras lectoras en una de nuestras mejores portadas. [An unprecedented edition and front cover, strong and audacious like its protagonist María Mercedes Coroy. One of the most versatile and talented actresses from Latin America, María Mercedes has become one of the most important names in the film industry and has put our country in the spotlight at the most important film festivals throughout the world. The serenity and force of a woman proud of her indigenous roots, the muse of director Jayro Bustamante became one of the favorite editions of our readers and one of our favorite covers]" *Instagram*, 12 Dec. 2020, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CItWrUTD1rZ/>.

Mercedes Coroy, María. "En este caminar, he conocido muchas personas que han sido inspiración en lo personal y profesional. Hoy tuve el privilegio de compartir con 3 mujeres @yalitzaapariciomtz @rigobertamencho @letty_teleuario que con sus vidas, me motivan a seguir adelante, luchando por mis sueños y creyendo que todos los días podemos crecer y ser mejores cuando unimos fuerzas, trabajando en lo que nos hace felices, pero también aportando para lograr cambios de mentalidad en una sociedad donde todos buscamos igualdad. [On this trip, I have met many people that have been both personal and professional inspiration. Today I had the privilege to share with 3 women @yalitzaapariciomtz @rigobertamencho @letty_teleuario who with their lives, motivate me to keep going, fighting for my dreams and believing that each day we can grow and be better when we combine forces, working at what makes us happy, but also working to change minds in a society where we are all seeking equality.]" *Instagram*, 15 Jan 2021.

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https://openstates.org/find_your_legislator/ Knowing who represents us in Congress is important but so many of the terrible laws and policies that impact our lives originate at the state and local level.” *Instagram*, 17 Jan. 2021.

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Exponiéndome! Siempre he sido super insegura cuando se trata de mi celulitis! Trato de ocultarlo tanto como puedo en las fotos. Pero hoy no lo haré! Esta soy yo natural. A quién le importa si los demás juzgan... Acéptate y ten confianza.” *Instagram*, 21 Apr. 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/p/Ccn0wRaOu0q/>.

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Rodriguez, Gina. "#movementmondays. Aimee Carrero is a Dominican Actress. Carrero was born in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic and grew up in Miami, Florida (you can find her in the youtube sketch "Shit Miami Girls Say...and guys"). While studying International Relations at Florida International University, she aspired to be a lawyer. But, before she started filling out law school applications, she hopped on a plane to Los Angeles. Carrero has appeared on a lot of shows since then including: Level Up, Blue Lagoon: The Awakening, Lincoln Heights, Men of a Certain Age, The Middle, Greek, Baby Daddy, and The Americans. In 2012, Carrero made her off-broadway debut in Atlantic Theater Company's world premiere play, What Rhymes with America. Since 2014, Carrero has starred in Freeform sitcom Young & Hungry, alongside Emily Osment. In 2015, it was announced that Carrero will be providing the voice of Elena, Disney's first Latina fairy tale princess for the Disney Channel series Elena of Avalor. The animated series premiered in July 2016, quickly became television's #1 series for Girls age 2-11 in the U.S. and is honored with a National Hispanic Media Coalition Award and an Annie Award nomination. It will be going into its 3rd season this year. Carrero told Popsugar on landing the role, "For me, it's like one of the most amazing things to ever happen to me, because I think growing up, you want to see yourself represented in stories and you want to see your culture highlighted. I think this has been something people have been wanting for a long time." *Instagram*, 24 Jul. 2017, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BW8IBgfAJpH/>.

---. "#MovementMondays Daniela Vega is a Chilean actress and singer. This breakout star of the award winning Chilean film *A Fantastic Woman* (*Una Mujer Fantástica*) made history last night by becoming the first openly transgender person to ever present at the Academy Awards. Taking the stage, Vega said, "Thank you so much for this moment," Vega said, "I want to invite you to open your hearts and your feelings to feel the reality, to feel love. Can you feel it?" *A Fantastic Woman* is a film about a trans woman mourning the death of her partner. Vega makes it clear to *The Guardian*, along with its emotional charge, *A Fantastic Woman* also has a strong political agenda with regard to trans identity. "The film wants you to question where you stand in society." Before *A Fantastic Woman*, Vega had appeared in plays, various music videos, and in the Chilean feature, *La Visita* (*The Guest*) about a transwoman at her father's wake. But it wasn't her initial experiences that led to her being cast. Sebastian Lelio and co-

writer Gonzalo Maza had been working on their script but realized they didn't know any trans people in Chile. They needed a consultant and someone suggested Vega – shortly after she was offered the lead role. In lots of ways, her character Marina, became her. As for the Oscars, and whether the Academy is ready for a trans drama starring a trans actress, “the world is ready, not just the Academy.” Last night, *A Fantastic Woman* became the first Chilean film to win for Best Foreign Language at the Academy Awards. Vega has multiple projects in store for the future – including a contract to write a book, a one-woman stage show, and other projects in TV and film. I cannot wait to see what is next for this talented beauty!” *Instagram*, 5 Mar. 2018, <https://www.instagram.com/p/Bf9dbMMH2mZ/>.

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