

# Jennifer's Butt

**Frances Negrón-Muntaner**

The materiality of the body is not to be taken for granted, for it is acquired, constituted, through the development of morphology.

Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter*

True wealth and abundance are not on the highest or on the medium level, but only in the lower stratum.

Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*

I went to see the recent Gregory Nava movie *Selena* (1997), in a half-empty suburban theater in Philadelphia with about a dozen other solemn, mostly Puerto Rican families dressed up in their Sunday best; parents scolding *los niños* in a low voice, so they would eat popcorn, sit down, and shut up. The sight was unusual, even extraordinary, since one rarely sees Phila-Ricans outside of a few segregated neighborhoods, and much less in the bizarrely named middle-class suburb of Andorra. Once the movie began, unsure about what mystical forces had dragged me to that cushioned seat on a Sunday afternoon, I wondered why *los otros puertorriqueños* had also trekked so far from the streets of *el norte*, where people are more likely to follow La India, Olga Tañón, and Thalía than Selena, and bootleg video copies can be obtained easily from your neighborhood corner store at a cost of only \$9.00.

There is the possibility that we—as many others—were swept away by an intense necrophilia, momentarily followed by spasms of melancholia and sadness for the loss of a young life, a frequent occurrence in inner-city Latino-America. Unlike most Latino youths, who get killed after a drug deal has gone

sour or a bullet surprisingly arrives with their name on it, Selena has passed on to sainthood: not only for dying young, but for dying on the way to another, better place; the immigrant fantasies of the seamless plot known as the American Dream. But, even for those of us who no longer believed in a dream that slips away faster than welfare reform is enacted, Puerto Rican viewers were spared any psychic anxiety. On the one hand, the film affirmed that with hard work, talent, and a strong family, "we" can make it, too. On the other, the possible trepidation over not belonging to an ambitious, close-knit clan, over having raised ordinary kids or lacking the strength to push hard, was pacified by how Selena died: *los ricos también lloran*.

Yet, twenty minutes into *Selena*, a queer sense of dread began to overtake me. Like Quintanilla's big bus, the mimetic pact that generally binds spectator and biopic inexplicably broke down. Regardless of how hard I tried, I did not see Selena. I either saw Jennifer Lopez and Selena, phantasmagorically juxtaposed as if on a glass surface, or *simplemente* Jennifer. This mystifying state of mind seemed to have occurred not only in Selena's parents and producers while filming the reenactment of the Houston Astrodome concert, but in Selena's fans as well. "When I came into the stadium, the fans started screaming," recalls Lopez. "They were saying 'Selena!'" But they were saying "Jennifer," too."<sup>1</sup> This holy ghost effect was not, of course, an accident. Mark Sanchez, makeup artist for both Selena and Jennifer Lopez, takes the credit for altering Lopez's features to match Selena's: "Jennifer has a wider, flatter nose than Selena, almost like a boxer's. I had to contour Jennifer's to make it look narrower and larger. . . . As the makeup progressed, I was taken aback, and had to stop what I was doing. It was almost as if I had Selena in my makeup chair again."<sup>2</sup> Despite Mark's efforts, however, "Jennifer" continued to ring louder in my ears than "Selena." From the heavens above me, I heard voices ordering my removal to the lower depths of cultural criticism; away from the American dream, and into the flesh of unjustly denied discursive pleasures. Possessed, I began to write deliriously in the darkness.

### **Rear Endings: Jennifer Is the Medium**

In contrast with the other U.S.-born Puerto Rican actresses of the last four decades, Jennifer Lopez can play on the hyphen

and come out *al otro lado*. Embodying ideal “Latin” beauty (which Rosie Pères seemingly “fails” to do)—that is, neither too dark nor too light—the Puerto Rican label doesn’t seem to stick to her even in the white media. For example, a *People* magazine columnist referred to her ethnic background as “being of Puerto Rican . . . descent” (italics mine).<sup>3</sup> In a handful of other popular newspapers and magazine articles, she is simply a New York “native” and/or raised in the Bronx. While the “Bronx” is a loud enough cue for those in the know, it certainly doesn’t ring the same bell in Texas—or perhaps it does. Ironically, the only time during the *Selena* pre-release hype Lopez unequivocally became a *puertorriqueña* was when some Mexican-Americans protested her being cast as a Chicana: “While many of her fans of Mexican descent anxiously awaited the opening of the movie, some are angry that a Puerto Rican was cast as Selena.”<sup>4</sup>

The epic scale of *Selena*’s casting call has been compared to that of *Gone with the Wind*. The ironies of such a comparison aside, much was at stake in the making of *Selena*. No interested parties—Warner Brothers, the Quintanillas, or the Chicano producer and director—were going to chance blowing the movie’s possibilities of becoming the “official” celluloid story on Selena, the biggest Latino movie hit since *La Bamba*, and a moneymaker that would finally (once and for all) prove that the soon-to-be-largest minority in “America” will pay to see “themselves” on the big screen. The bottom line was that, as the hottest Latina actress in Hollywood at the time, Lopez was picked so she could deliver in the language every backer understood best: *dinero*, *mucho dinero*. (That she had performance experience and dance training probably helped, too).

Constantly quizzed by the media on the disapproval that met her being cast for the part, Lopez argued that she was well-suited to play Selena because they shared an ethnic identity as Latinas beyond their “national” identities. “I don’t think the actress who played her had to be Mexican-American because Selena was,” Lopez said. “Selena and I are both Latinas and both had the common experience of growing up Latina in this country. This was good enough.”<sup>5</sup>

Lopez’s defense points to interesting dystopias. While it is arguable that a Latino identity “exists” as a cultural formation across the United States, and that this identity has erased or displaced nationalist investments, it is also undeniable that

for those born and raised in major urban spaces with significant and diverse “Latino” communities, the construct, although not exhausting our complexity, has constitutive materiality. Selena’s career, for instance, is a good case study. In order to go beyond the *tejano* niche market, Selena expanded her repertoire to include Caribbean, South American, and pan-Latin American genres such as boleros, and later went on to record in English, incorporating New York Caribbean influences. In this marketing and audience-building trajectory, Selena went from being a Tejana (a territorialized “regional” identity) to being a Latina (an “ethnic minority”). “Latino,” in this case, does not refer to a cultural identity, but to a specifically American national currency for economic and political deal making; a technology to demand and deliver emotions, votes, markets, and resources on the same level as other racialized minorities.

Simultaneously, given the actual political economy of representation in Hollywood, Puerto Ricans, with less institutional clout, general population, and numbers on Hollywood’s home turf, need “Latino” a lot more than other “Latinos” (i.e., Chicanos and Cubans) need us. Consider that if Puerto Rican actors could only play Puerto Ricans, and not other “Latino” roles, Puerto Ricans would only be seen on the screen in secondary roles as criminals, prostitutes, and maids. Hence, Jennifer Lopez’s argument is both strategic and ironic. As a strategy, “Latino” expands Puerto Rican agency. Ironically, however, its deployment within this controversy only confirms that while “Latinos” are delivered and talked about as a cohesive identity and as a market, the groups so alluded to know that communities, alliances, and power structures are usually not “Latino,” but specifically Mexican-American, Cuban, and/or Puerto Rican.

Although the controversy did not go any deeper than these territorial *dime y directes*, and many who were disgruntled by the casting choice later admitted that “once we saw the trailers, we were happy,”<sup>6</sup> there was one site of Latina identification that Jennifer Lopez relentlessly pursued as overriding all other instances. “I’m all in favor of Latinos playing Latinos,” Lopez said, “but saying a Puerto Rican couldn’t play Selena, a Texas girl, is taking it a bit far. Selena looked like me. She was dark and she was, well, *curvy*”<sup>7</sup> (*italics mine*).

Jennifer Lopez’s close identification with Selena seemed not only based on their parallel crossover successes, but on a

common experience of having a similar build, a body generally considered abject by American standards of beauty and propriety. In fact, some writers have compared Selena's popularity among Mexican-Americans to the Virgin of Guadalupe's. "With her simple clothes and cinnamon skin, [Selena] looked exactly like the people. . . . She showed us just how beautiful we could be and she did it without dying her hair Fanta orange or wearing those oppressive blue contacts that make so many of us look like fallen angels—she was the gorgeous *chola morena* who never forgot her pueblo and we feel under her protection."<sup>8</sup> This pious site of identification between fan and star was not lost on director Gregory Nava, who had a significant part in casting Lopez. "If you're raised in this country, since childhood, you're given this image of beauty. And if you're *pocha*—Mexican-American—it's not you. So you're made to feel bad about the way you look or the way your body is, having big hips or whatever, from when you're a kid."

"Latino" cultural practices tend to be managed discursively by "serious" concepts such as class, language, religion, and family—the stuff of sociology and political activism. It was precisely the body, however, particularly the curves (or in less poetic Puerto Rican street language, the *culo*), that proved to be the most compelling way that Lopez and others found to speak about how "Latinas" are constituted as racialized bodies, what kind of cultural capital is associated with these bodies, and how the body surfaces as a site of pleasure, produced by intersections of power, but not entirely under its own control.

Although race was hardly mentioned in this debate over curves and rear ends, for any Caribbean interlocutor, references to this part of the human anatomy are often a way of speaking about Africa in(side) America. Not coincidentally, the major work on racism by a Puerto Rican author, Isabelo Zenón Cruz, is titled *Narciso descubre su trasero* (Narcissus discovers his rear end). And despite the fact that Selena was Chicana, an ethnicity not associated in the Caribbean popular imagination with big butts, she was definitely curvy. "Jennifer has the same measurements Selena had," said Julie Ramirez, Selena's seamstress.<sup>10</sup> In fact, Selena's butt was, from a Puerto Rican perspective, one of the elements that made her not specifically Chicana, but "Latina," and hence more easily embraced as one of our own.

## An Epistemology of the Butt

Marketing Selena to “Latino” audiences required that the cast, director, and producers be available to the Spanish-speaking media, which mostly caters to Spanish-dominant immigrants. This inevitably created the context for each key player to show their fluency in Spanish, and hence their “realness” in relation to national culture. During a special episode on *Cristina*, a popular Univisión talk show, the audience had a chance to discern whether these “Latinos” were “one of us” (Puerto Ricans or Mexicans), secondhand copies (Niuyoricans or Chicanos), or downright impostors (Americanos). Thus, while Jon Seda (also of Puerto Rican “descent”) could only begin his sentences in Spanish and then quickly had to switch to English, and Moctesuma Esparza spoke *bien mejicano*, Jennifer Lopez’s Spanish was classic Niuyorican. She spoke a second-generation, Bronx-inflected Spanish, with its distinctive twang, occasional English vocabulary and Spanish syntax. But, whatever the qualms any Puerto Rican language purist entertained while Jennifer spoke Spanish, these must have quickly withered away when the main question of the night finally arrived. As in other talk shows during the promotion of Selena, there came a moment during the interview when the question had to be posed to Jennifer Lopez: “¿Todo eso es tuyo?” (Is that body for real?) In other words, is that big butt yours or is it prosthetic? Although a fair question for many Hollywood actresses’ faces and breasts, Jennifer Lopez smiled as if she had been waiting a long time for this moment. She stood up, gave a 360 degree turn, patted her butt, and triumphantly sat down: “Todo es mío.” It’s all mine. But, like the Puerto Rican rapper Lisa M. warns the inexperienced suitor or *ligón*, “No invente, papito/que no va’ a tocar” (Don’t even think you’re going to have a piece of this!)

Jennifer Lopez’s need to speak about her own butt in interview after interview—before and after the movie’s release—can only constitute a keen awareness of her historical role as the next big bottom in the Puerto Rican cultural imaginary and our great avenger of Anglo analphobia. In the context of American popular magazines and “entertainment” sections of daily newspapers, however, Jennifer’s affirmation of her body simply read as a defense of another sensuality and alter/native standards of beauty. “Rita Hayworth (who was actually Rita Cansino) and Raquel Welch could only become stars after they

disguised themselves. Selena could be who she was and, as for me, for once, I could be proud of my big bottom. . . . In my movies, I've always had costume people looking at me a little weary and immediately fitting me out with things to hide my bottom. I know it. They didn't say, but I know it. With this film, it was different."<sup>11</sup>

As just and noble as the claim of diversifying the concept of beauty may be, I would take Jennifer's praise of the ass further, and propose it as a way of popularizing an "attitude" in relation to dominant culture, more like "kiss my ass" after having one's "ass kicked" for being Puerto Rican and/or Latino. As Freud put it, an invitation to view or (visually) caress the rear end expresses "defiance or defiant scorn, and this is in reality an act of tenderness that has been overtaken by repression."<sup>12</sup> As Bakhtin argued in his study on Rabelais, showing ass is also a sign of getting even. "The rump is the 'back of the face,' the 'face turned inside out.' The grotesque gesture of displaying the buttocks is still used in our day."<sup>13</sup> Jennifer's display was (at least) a triple sign: "showing ass" as a sign of identity and pride, "kiss my ass" as a form of revenge against a hostile cultural gaze, and "I'm going to kick your ass" vis-à-vis the economic exploitation implicated in racism. In Lopez's case, this third rear victory is evident in her current status as Hollywood's highest-paid Latina actress. No wonder she says, "I have a curvaceous Latin body . . . . I like to accentuate that."<sup>14</sup> So would I, all the way to the bank.

Constantly speaking about big rumps in the American media is also a way to "lower" the discussion away from the self-importance granted to celebritydo(o)m and the upper stratum of breasts, straight noses, blonde hair, and (white) faces. Despite Jennifer's relative victory and the Latino community's growing demographics, the big Latin behind is far from sitting easy. Dominant culture still obsessively prohibits its display and punishes transgressors. In one of Selena's last music videos, for example, included in a sixty-minute tape titled *Selena Remembered* (1996, produced by Abraham Quintanilla and José Behar of EMI Latino), she sings her number three hit single, "No me queda más," in a tight white sequined dress. Within the documentary, the actual music video is intercut with scenes from its making, including some "spontaneous" sequences of the production process. The viewer can see an awkward Selena walking under archways wearing what seems to be a white, see-through veil—or better

still, tail—cascading from her waist. A few minutes after the enigmatic garment makes its entrance, Selena speaks to the camera in a candid moment between takes, while several attendants undo her dress's hem. The mystery of the tail is revealed: "This is what happens when you gain weight before a video." Selena breaks down laughing and one might fancy her making fun of people who think a big butt is something to hide. Unfortunately, that was probably not the case.

According to journalist María Celeste Arrarás (but denied by Abraham Quintanilla), had Selena lived the dream, she would have done so with a surgically intervened body. Selena had already been caught in the crossover fire. As her success increasingly placed her in a mainstream—white—stage, Selena's insecurities about her body mounted. "She started watching her diet and keeping herself looking svelte . . . She drank gallons of water with lemon juice and she herself would massage her thighs in a circular pattern, believing this could help her to combat cellulite. She also saw herself as having a more than abundant *derriere*, not realizing that her voluptuousness was one of the characteristics her fans most adored about her."<sup>15</sup> Indeed. Yet, sometime after September of 1994, Arrarás adds that Selena actually did have liposuction surgery. The spanking gaze of puritan culture was breaking Selena down. Her growing attachment to the doctor that performed the surgery, Doctor Ricardo Martínez, also proved to be doubly treacherous. Not only did it represent Selena's flight from her voluptuous body, but a turning point in her relationship with Yolanda Saldivar. "Yolanda had to settle with tending to her friend and taking care of her after the [liposuction] operation, giving her massages to prevent air bubbles from forming under the skin. Yolanda was not at all happy that her friend was coming to depend more on Martínez and less on her. She was quite perceptive and immediately knew she was losing control of the situation."<sup>16</sup> While it is impossible to speculate whether Selena's destiny would have been different had she not met the doctor, narratively speaking, the operation was a fateful turning point.

Perhaps Jennifer Lopez was aware of this story's seductiveness, and as a talisman against death repeated a litany of complaints aimed at American bottomphobic attitudes. She loudly and publicly complained that costume fitters and producers suspiciously looked at her behind and mentally rehearsed different ways to hide it. "All the other movies I've



done [besides *Selena*], it always seemed like they're trying to hide it or they think I look fat. Or I'm not in the American tradition of beauty."<sup>17</sup> Given all the bad blood about this state of affairs, it seems fitting to ask: Why is a big butt so upsetting to American image gatekeepers?

A big culo does not only upset hegemonic (white) notions of beauty and good taste, it is a sign for the dark, incomprehensible excess of "Latino" and other African diaspora cultures. Excess of food (unrestrained), excess of shitting (dirty), and excess of sex (heathen) are its three vital signs. Like hegemonic white perceptions of Latinos, big butts are impractical and dangerous. A big Latin rear end is an invitation to pleasures construed as illicit by puritan ideologies, heteronormativity, and the medical establishment through the three deadly vectors of miscegenation, sodomy, and a high-fat diet. Unlike the functionality of breasts, big bottoms have no morals, no symbolic family function, and no use in reproduction. Or, in Simone de Beauvoir's classic words, "the buttocks are that part of the body with the fewest nerves, where the flesh seems an aimless fact."<sup>18</sup>

Of course, feminists and politically correct activists will complain that the exaltation of the big rear end is but another way of enslaving women to their bodies and linking Latinos to stereotypes of hypersexuality. In addition, there are *puertorriqueñas chumbas*, Latino men with the sex appeal of dirty dishes, and other erotogenic zones that should not be subsumed and ignored under the weight of the big butt. But what makes the ass a seductive trope is that nobody can quite take a culo seriously, and even when its deployment is meant to be offensive or political, its lowliness allows all implicated sides to ease out of the situation with a smile. Like the camel hump, the Puerto Rican butt suggests that bodies are made of something else besides language, even when we can only speak about them discursively, and that the gap between the materiality of language and flesh can never be totally bridged. Island-based writer Magali García Ramis, for instance, claims that Puerto Rican "identity" is not based on politics nor an exaggerated love for the *mono-estrellada* flag, but in the amount of excess fat we consume. "Un tun tun de grasa y fritangería recorre las venas borincanas, nos une, nos aúna, nos hermana por encima de la política y los políticos, los cultos y las religiones, la salsa y el rock, el matriarcado y el patriarcado."<sup>19</sup>

In other words, the rear end is where our Puerto Ricanness is safely stored.

Still, while starch and grease may bind some of us, Jennifer, who as we may recall grew up in the Bronx, has likely seen the effects of too much *arroz y habichuelas* on her fundamental commodity, and has found a distinctive American way of putting a stop to its overflowing traffic. "Unlike the real Selena, who jokes that she kept her curvy shape by eating pepperoni pizza, Lopez watches her diet and works out four times a week."<sup>20</sup>

Moderation is not unwarranted. Times have changed from the golden years of Puerto Rico's most notorious big butt, dancer and singer Iris Chacón. Ambiguity about the "rightness" of a woman being able to build a career on such a "low" attribute as her bottom even invaded one of the most celebratory genres of rump worship: salsa. In "Talento de televisión," a parody of Iris Chacón's rise to stardom due to the unanimous acceptance of her having a fabulous butt, Willie Colón—do I dare say Culón?—attempted to trivialize La Chacón's achievements by moralizing against her strategy: "No tiene talento pero es muy buenamosa" (She has no talent, but looks good). This moralization was premised on several other high/low dichotomies that include television as the site for unsophisticated pleasures, the trasero or rear end as a politically incorrect seduction, and a heterosexual universe in which men have "gran simpatía por su esplendor" (great sympathy for her splendor) and women "antipatía por la razón/de que su palanca fuera su cuerpo y no su valor" (antipathy because/she used her body and not her merit to climb up). Yet, even Willie had to concede that in the realm of television, or indeed any spectacle (including cinema), "talent" and "seduction" are difficult-to-sustain dichotomies, and that *un buen cuerpo* (a good-looking body) is not only *otra cosa* (something else) but also a *razón poderosa* (powerful reason) for making it. Furthermore, it is doubtful that talent is not needed to become a legend on the basis of your accumulated fatty tissue. How many big rear ends become songs, novels, popular wisdom, and the paradigm for a whole country's wet dreams and cultural self-representation? I say that it takes at least some "talent" to make the talented—Willie himself included?—pay attention to such a thing as your humble little culo.

The prominence of the Puerto Rican butt rests not only on popular musical genres but on several noted literary epistemological texts, including Edgardo Rodríguez Juliá's essays in *Una noche con Iris Chacón*<sup>21</sup> and Luis Rafael Sánchez's well-known novel *La Guaracha del Macho Camacho*,<sup>22</sup> with its refrain of "La vida es una cosa fenomenal/lo mismo pal de alante que pal de atrás" (Life is a fabulous thing/regardless if you're on top or bottom). In each case, sexuality is the discursive flow where the butt acquires its meaning and *raison d'être*. This framing is, however, limiting. Even in Puerto Rico, references to the butt have many other discursive uses. For example, when a social situation turns chaotic or out of control, we say that it became an *arroz con culo* (rice and butt) or that *se formó un culo* (it became an ass). If we are *groseros* with our mothers or helplessly ask what to do about any displaced object, we will be smilingly told to stick (blank) in our ass.

In the diaspora, the sexual epistemology of the butt gets even more complicated. Gay men may carry the bottom's fetishism to bed as a nostalgia for Condado fucks; nationalistic lesbians use their *culometros* to distinguish the *boricuas* from other too-close-to-call ethnicities; and many Puerto Rican women, who have and admire their Chacón bodies for their power over men and circumstances, roar as they are subjected to the everyday indignities of being told that they are fat, should get on a diet, or should sign up for the gym. Migrant life, with its characteristic economic and emotional instability, ultimately becomes a struggle to avoid ending up with *el culo al aire* (our butts exposed).

## **Enter Jennifer Lopez**

Enter Jennifer Lopez playing Selena and at last the Puerto Rican diaspora has a big culo to call our own, ending a long stretch of second-class citizenship in both the United States and Puerto Rico. Which doesn't mean that we have forgotten La Chacón. The myth of La Chacón lives on, specially in the Latino drag repertoire, but it is no secret that younger generations are growing up without anyone to fill her *tanga*. Perhaps no one can really replace La Chacón, a queen for a different era. And certainly not Jennifer Lopez, who is a "serious" actress and won't be seen flipping her rear end on Saturday nights in a cheesy television show. More to Willie Colón's liking, Jennifer is not on television, but on the big screen; she is

not “vulgar” and her claim to Latino fame is through a “modern-day saint in Spandex.”<sup>23</sup> Yet, Jennifer’s butt commands respect in its own right and style. A gay journalist and friend based in Miami confirmed my flickering appreciation—only based on images—with the following eyewitness account. “I saw Jennifer at a party with her husband, and I could not help but to stare at her butt. Her dress was so tight you needed a can opener to get it out. She looked glorious.”

In gendered terms, the big rear end acts both as an identification site for Latinas to reclaim their beauty and a “compensatory fantasy”<sup>24</sup> for a whole community. Insisting to write or talk about big butts is ultimately a response to the pain of being ignored, thought of as ugly, treated as low, yet surviving—even thriving—through a belly-down epistemology. The pain alluded to by Selena’s operation and Jennifer’s narcissism (in the Freudian sense) can be re-signified not as an “icono de la inclinación erótica del varón puertorriqueño”<sup>25</sup> (as an icon of the erotic inclinations of the Puerto Rican male) or as an exotic (racist) entertainment for American men, but as an inscription of a different sexual and cultural energy in *gringolandia*. Through Jennifer’s butt, the rear end becomes a more ample trope for cultural belonging, as one of the last bastions of Island-Puerto Rican specificity is re-defined, and more elitist signs such as language and place of birth are effectively challenged. In this second sense, Jennifer’s popularity among Puerto Ricans—including Islanders—underscores that our intimate relationship with “American” culture and capital is also a domestic affair. Different from La Chacón, Jennifer’s butt reaches our Puerto Rican living rooms through Blockbuster Video, funded by a Hollywood studio, speaking English, and playing a Tejana.

In defending his choice to sidestep the circumstances around Selena’s death, Gregory Nava said that *Selena* is about “celebrating the American dream.”<sup>26</sup> Ilan Stavans optimistically wrote that Latinos are confident that sooner or later “gringos will make room for Latino extroversion and sentimentality.”<sup>27</sup> Removed from the prophets’ words, and the chimeras of identity discourse and upward mobility, I joyously watched Jennifer’s Lopez’s quintessential Puerto Rican butt splashed on a suburban (white) screen, and humbly offer my testimony.

Thank you, Saint Selena, for allowing us the grace to see it.

## Notes

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FRANCES NEGRÓN-MUNTANER. Filmmaker, writer and critic. She holds an M.A. in Visual Anthropology and an M.F.A. in Film/Video from Temple University and is currently writing her dissertation in Comparative Literature at Rutgers University-New Brunswick. Among her film/video works are *Homeless Diaries* (1996), *Brincando el charco: Portrait of a Puerto Rican* (1994) and *AIDS in the Barrio* (1989, co-directed with Peter Biella). She has also edited two books, *Shouting in a Whisper: Latino Poets in Philadelphia* (Chile: Asterión Press, 1994), and *Puerto Rican Jam: Rethinking Nationalism and Colonialism* (with Ramón Grosfoguel, University of Minnesota Press, 1997). Her first collection of poetry, *Anatomy of a Smile and Other Poems*, is forthcoming from Third Woman Press (1997).