

Selena—Prophet, Profit, Princess

Canonizing the Commodity

KAREN ANIJAR

I write the myths in me, the myths I am, the myths I want to become.

-Gloria Anzaldúa

Selena was like a shooting star, flying in the night, one glimpse and you remember it for the rest of your life.

-Selena fan

On March 31, 1995, paramedics arrived at the scene of a homicide in a motel in Corpus Christi, Texas. A twenty-three-year-old woman lay dying from gunshot wounds. The setting was hauntingly reminiscent of black-and-white detective movies complete with the comely heroine-victim naming her killer with her dying breath. Richard Fredrickson, one of the paramedics who frantically but futilely tried to save the young woman's life, noticed that her right fist was clenched around something. "When I opened it," Fredrickson stated, "a ring fell out, a fourteen-karat gold and diamond ring covered with blood" ("Dying Selena" 1995, A4). The ring was a gift from the young woman's killer.

During the trial, which was filled with gripping, often gruesome testimony, the victim's family fought back tears as motel employees recounted each gory detail of the murder scene. The crime was so heinous that spectators in the courtroom renamed the accused "a witch," "*una maranna*" (a sow), and "a hag," and shouted "Put her to death," "Kill her," "Let her hang," and "Let her rot!" *Perry Mason, Matlock*, or any other television courtroom drama pales by comparison. The victim was described as a talented, charismatic, beautiful, and innocent child-woman, filled with love and life. The accused was identified over and over as a spurned lesbian lover, an embezzler, and a maniac. "It was more than a tragedy," said Edilberto Campos, "it was an assassination" (Turner and Reinert 1995). While one woman kissed a photo of the victim, a group of women held up posters and chanted, "Guilty! Guilty! Guilty!" Prayers were offered with the hope that the jury would find the accused guilty. One newspaper editorialist noted, "For many Mexican

Americans this was the trial of the century" (Russell 1995). When the verdict was read, the National Public Radio broadcast on *All Things Considered* noted that a mass of people had gathered in the streets near the court, and described the scene as "almost like a Cinco de Mayo parade." "I wanted to jump up and down and yell," said Ofelia Bradshaw, who was at the trial. "Happy? Yes, I'm happy." Other spectators at the trial were overjoyed, too. "Let her rot in prison! Thirty years in prison. She'll be an old hag when she gets out," shouted Denise Martinez, another courtroom spectator. Others could be heard yelling "*cien anos*" (a hundred years), and "the death penalty."

Meanwhile, in Corpus Christi, hundreds of jubilant people also "honked car horns," "flashed victory signs," and "held up posters" as the guilty verdict was announced (Pinkerton 1995). Chanting "*curable*," Spanish for guilty, people came from across Texas. The throng of spectators awaiting the verdict mixed with the downtown rush hour traffic to create a frenzied . . . celebratory reaction" (Zuniga and Dyer 1995, A39). On what would have been Selena's twenty-fourth birthday, three thousand people celebrated an Easter Mass "in memory of the gran muchacha del barrio Molina." "Is it a coincidence that we celebrate [her] birthday on the same day we celebrate the victory of Jesus over death?" Monsignor Michael Heras of Our Lady of Perpetual Health Catholic Church asked in his sermon. "I don't think so. Death was defied forever. That's what this day is about. Forever!" At the conclusion of the Mass, children released twenty-four doves-each representing a year of Selena's life (Mitchell 1995). The day she was shot was popularly renamed "Black Friday."

SELENA WHO?

Elvis, John Lennon, Kurt Cobain and Jerry Garcia . . . roll over: Selena is here to grant voice to the silenced and oppressed.

-Ilan Stavans

Media and popular accounts corroborate that Selena Quintanilla Perez was Tejano music's brightest hope for the future. Had she lived she might well have been the first international superstar to come out of the Tejano market. The first biography of the singer, a brief account that could be read in English or Spanish (by flipping the book

upside down), rose to the top of the *New York Times* best-seller list immediately following her death, where it stayed for a month. The New York-centered publishing world was undoubtedly surprised. Who—outside of Chicano/Latino communities—had ever heard of Selena, or Tejano music more generally? "Here comes a brown woman," said film maker (and fan) Lourdes Portillo, who described Selena as "very beautiful and very talented, taking up a space that had never been filled by someone else. She represented people that traditionally had not had a presence. I think that's her real importance" (Liner 1999).

Publisher, editor, and author Catherine Vasquez Revilla saw Selena's death as having a cultural significance far beyond the loss of a young entertainer. As he said, "The death of Selena Quintanilla Perez, while a great loss to the community, also brings recognition to Mexican Americans, and unity to Hispanics" (Liner 1999). Poet Sandra Cisneros—who says she was never a Selena fan—has a Selena keychain "because it was the first time I saw a Chicana on a keychain that wasn't Our Lady of Guadalupe" (Liner 1999).

Selena was a wife, a daughter, a singer, a fashion designer, and a business woman. She was a conglomerate in sequins and leather. She personified both sexuality and innocence. She was a contradiction in life, a conundrum in death. Framed as a Spanish language crossover singer to English, Selena was actually forced by her father to learn Spanish—even though her first language was English—because he thought "she could more easily find a following singing in Spanish" (Stavans 1995, 24). In death, however, she has become much more than a singer, her appeal going much deeper than the music. Her murder gave birth to a legend that, according to Virgilio Elizondo, transformed Selena into an instant cultural myth. "It is the people saying what she meant to us. ... In their testimonies, she is becoming more alive than she ever was in life" (Vara 1995).

But, as John Fiske reminds us, "people" is an abstraction: it "is not a stable . . . category; it cannot be identified and subjected to empirical study, for it does not exist in objective reality" (1989, 24). "The people," writes John Street, "are colored by whichever artist paints them" (1997, 152). The concepts of "the popular" and "the people" must be understood through "vibrant symbolic life and symbolic creativity of everyday activity and expression" (Willis 1990, 1), out of which "collective and individual identities" are

forged (6). "It implies living within the signs . . . engaging in the contradictory pleasures of fashion, style" (Street 1997, 161). As Dick Hebdige argues, we must identify the "messages inscribed in code on the glossy surfaces of style, to trace them out as maps of meaning" (1979,18), trying to re-present and comprehend the complicated way messages and meanings are constructed in the popular. Thus, Cisneros's Our Lady of Guadalupe statement is not far off the mark, especially given what transpired after Selena's death.

What magical qualities did this twenty-three-year-old have that could justify shrines, buildings, altars, parks, bronze statues, baby names, Catholic masses, and an official holiday (April 19) sanctioned by the governor of Texas in her honor, as well as the attribution of such divinely inspired qualities as the ability to heal the sick, keep young people off drugs, and encourage young people to stay in school?

SELENA THE ICON

According to Robert Karimi, it was raining in San Antonio the day Selena was shot. It was raining the day of the funeral as well.

At noon, hundreds packed the Cathedral. Many were wearing pink ribbons in her memory. A line formed afterwards, people formed the sign of the cross and kissed a poster at the front of the cathedral. . . . By Tuesday, Selena Etc., Selena's boutique on the 3700 block of Broadway Ave. had become a shrine to the Tejana star. Balloons. Flowers. Poems. Pictures. Art. All created their own mural on the walls of the boutique. Strangers, friends, and families came together. (Karimi 1995)

Narratives like this one and others from Selena fans help explain the transformation of Selena Quintanilla from singer to sacred object. Similar to explorations of the images of other cultural icons (such as Elvis Presley, Jim Morrison, Princess Diana, and Che Guevara), these narratives give us insight into the way in which public memory is transformed through representations, and how those representations possess the uncanny ability to construct and reconstruct realities. But are these images liberating, transformative, or do they recapitulate a rather static social and religious order? What

messages does Selena send? How are they marketed and mediated? How is Selena consumed as an object of veneration as well as exploitation? "We are in the process of mythifying Selena, getting away from the facts of her life and refining her image to the truth that people believe about her," said one fan. "She has become part of the pantheon of secular saints" (McLemore 1997, A1).

Selena's transformation from singer to Marian image (which was particularly ironic because she was a Jehovah's Witness) was far more than mere material transformation. It was perhaps a greater crossover hit than was anticipated for her in life. The news that followed her death reveals an insurgent educational process. The creation of Selena-Madonna has been an active and creative process conceived and constructed at the juncture between media culture, commodity culture, and the organizing and mobilizing principles emerging from '90s populist pronouncements.

Far too often, studies concerning news, entertainment, and lived experiences are reduced to cause-effect approaches or essentialized definitions of culture. It is difficult for observers grounded in modernist experience to comprehend the form-shaping but nonetheless undetermined ideology that is generated by electronic information and images. The media are never socialized monolithically, even in what is labeled a postmodern historical period. History does transform, but we are all not transformed in the same ways. The reading and writing of what constitutes reality is a terrain of struggle and negotiation. We live in a media culture "in which images, sounds and spectacles help produce the fabric of everyday life, dominating leisure time, shaping political views, and social behavior and providing the materials out of which people forge their identities" (Kellner 1995, 1). Everything that comes in contact with our incurably mediated eyes has differing meanings, interpretations, and degrees of significance in the discourses of the particular social groups that talk about what they see and hear. Different social groups use very distinctive languages for evaluating what goes on in politics, in education, in media, in religion, and in all other aspects of life.

The commercial canonization of Selena provides us with an example of a critical public pedagogy, an educational mechanism, that occurs outside of both school and church and explains issues of tremendous social and political significance. Selena, read as a curricular religious text and a pedagogical forum, is "not just an individual exercise but

a process that always takes place within a social context" (Grumet 1991, 76). "The problem after all is not with the voices that speak, but with the ears that cannot hear" (Casey 1995, 223), or with the eyes that privilege renders blind. So while Selena has become *una leyenda del pueblo* (a legend of the people), she is rarely discussed among members of the dominant American culture, even though a popular movie, several documentaries, and many books have been made about her life, murder, and the trial that ensued.

How Mexican Americans who canonize Selena understand her (as opposed to how they once understood her), how they create and re-create the trinity of the real body, the electronic mediated body of the dead rock star, and the object-commodity body, is an active reading of the text that gives voice to social and political positions through religious expression. Joe Nick Patoski has noted the saint-like status Selena achieved, with street murals honoring her and hundreds of Texas babies being named for her. He suggests that, for many of the crying fans at the courthouse when Selena's murderer was found guilty, "Selena had already evolved from a pop star into an icon of grief" (1995, 102)—an icon that has taken on supernatural, spiritual dimensions. As sociologist Robert Wuthnow observed, "Religion is deeply embedded in the broader social environment" (1989, 15). This suggests that religious symbols can be found outside the strictly "sacred" realm in a variety of social settings.

Selena's mortal body is dead. But transformed into an object of veneration her body informs and sustains a sense of agency among particular class fragments in the Tejano-Chicano-Mexican-American community.

During a recent trip to South Texas, I talked to a respectable old man who told me Selena had died because heaven was desperate for another cherub. Selena was "a celestial beauty," he sighed, "whose time on earth was spent helping the poor and unattended." In San Antonio, a mother of four has constructed an altar at home, with the dead singer's photograph surrounded by candles and flowers, just below the image of the Virgen de Guadalupe, Selena's holy predecessor among Mex-Americans. Amalia Gonzalez, a Spanish-language radio host, told a journalist that Selena had visited us "to unite all creeds and races!" And a young lady from Corpus Christi, one of Selena's passionate fans,

who spends a good portion of her days singing "selenatas," swears she has repeatedly seen Selena's ghost at night on her TV screen-once her set has been turned off. (Stavans 1995, 24)

The phantasmagorical Selena is not part of what was; Selena is not fossilized into memory. She takes on new life as part of a process in which her phantom presence is constantly becoming (provided she continues to sell). Selena's spirit walks the earth negotiating and inhabiting new spaces and places. Constantly resignified and rewritten, Selena becomes symbolic spiritual material that presents us with a critical language through which we can examine ideological and political impulses that are forged in the popular and represented in religious language.

This phenomenon in which a person becomes more powerful as a representation reminds us that we live in a world where signs, symbols, and images bombard our sensibilities at breakneck speed. The never-ending proliferation of messages and advertisements creates a situation (known as hyperreality) where the images become more real than reality itself. It is a world where images gather up into themselves the complexities and ambiguities of an event, where everything is a representation, and where the distinction between fact and fiction becomes irrelevant. The copy merges with the original, the image merges with that to which it refers, until there is no longer a distinction of any significance. It is at this point, suggests Jean Baudrillard, that culture becomes a "kind of deathly surplus in which we witness the death of imagination, the death of meaning, the death of aesthetics" (Elliot 1999, 165). With nothing new to consider, we recycle, pillage, and ransack the past to create something of interest.

What gives Selena particular purchase-value in media-saturated hyperreality is that she connects with a variety of other images and reference points cutting across time, space, and history. She becomes a postmodern political configuration, transformed from child into woman, woman into child, real body into ghostly body, real flesh into perfected illusion. She becomes a Mexican Madonna. Selena's spectral presence cuts deeply to the core of the heart of Texas, reproducing while also undermining the existing static social order. Selena's transformation into religious object uncovers populist, anarchical, and

even anticlerical elements in the "underground stream nourishing Marian apparitions and pilgrimages" (Doyle 1997, 171). Or, as one fan put it, "Selena gives us hope:'

RESIGNIFYING THE VIRGIN

Go anywhere on either side of the Mexico-United States border and you will find the Virgin of Guadalupe. She is on video store walls, in supermarkets, and even on the stark face of an electrical generating station. According to the United States Department of Commerce, there are 12.6 million people of Mexican descent in the United States. "Everywhere," note Jeanette Rodriguez and Virgilio Elizondo, "Our Lady of Guadalupe is known to them: a brown skinned woman surrounded by the sun cloaked in a blue mantle covered with stars, standing on a crescent moon held by an angel. She looks down, and the expression on her face is one of kindness, compassion and strength" (1994, xxv).

In the borderlands where the Virgin is constantly resignified, she is above all an ethnic sign. Indeed, as Alicia Gaspar de Alba points out, the Virgin of Guadalupe, known as the "empress of Mexico," has come to represent "the biological source of Chicano brotherhood (i.e., the Mexican motherland) and also constituted a symbol of indigenist resistance to spiritual colonization, transmuted by the goals of la Causa into a symbol of Chicano/a resistance to assimilation and territorial conquest" (1998, 47). Images of Madonna gather significance from the communities that she nourishes.

Selena as Tejana Madonna, marketed by corporations large and small, enters into a space where popular hunger for religious images of personal meaning, particularly in a time of crisis, is essential for any sense of personal and political agency. Jo Ann Zuniga describes how, on *Dia de los Muertos* (Day of the Dead), one fan decorated an altar with "framed photos of Selena Quintanilla Perez hugging family members," heart-shaped candles in Selena's favorite color (purple), and "Selena's flower of choice," white roses. She added marigolds—an Aztec symbol of death—and a sign that read "*Con Tu Adios Te Llevas Mi Corazon*" (your goodbye takes my heart). "This was the only way I could let go of the sadness I was feeling," the fan said (Zuniga 1995, A39).

WAS SHE REAL OR MEMOREX?

For Mexican Americans, Selena's success became their success. She inspired confidence and ethnic pride. The stage lights that shone on her also reached across to include Mexican Americans by highlighting their language, music, and culture. Her greatest gift was that her talent, beauty, and success empowered all Hispanics.

-Catherine Revilla-Vasquez

Selena's transfiguration into Marian phantasm is as complex and contradictory as Selena herself. Fans called her "*una mujer del pueblo*" (a woman of the people). She emerged out of a white suburban middle-class English-speaking environment (reconstructed as working class), and rose into the consciousness of Tejana-Latina culture. Her murder contributed to her being recast as a timeless cultural symbol. As Elisabeth Bronfen wrote:

[T]he death of a beautiful woman emerges as a requirement for a preservation of existing cultural norms and values. . . . Over her dead body, cultural norms are reconfigured or secured, whether because the sacrifice of the virtuous, innocent woman serves a social critique and transformation or because a sacrifice of the dangerous woman reestablishes an order that was momentarily suspended due to her presence. (1992, 181)

Selena thus was transformed from the body human into the original, "the quintessential tragic lover, beautiful princess, angel of mercy, and doting mother." Diana Taylor argues that Selena's "sudden uniqueness, her tragic magnitude, allowed us to forget for a moment that she was also very much the product of a long history of collective imaginings that have normalized heterosexuality, glorified maternity, fetishized youth and femininity, glamorized whiteness, eroticized imperialism, and promoted a discourse of volunteerism" (1999, 59). At the same time, her image fostered a creative, positive spiritual space reconstituting the Virgin and connecting her to a community of mothers, comrades, and sisters in a way that resisted its original naming and framing.

The struggle to control and to write metaphorically upon Selena's body remains a struggle among particular power formations at the intersection of globalizing imperialist

powers and local forces, a struggle that is waged in the hyperreal. Selena's body is rescripted in such a way that it negotiates a terrain where age, social class, gender, and ethnicity interanimate highlighting points of control, where political and cultural power are both applied and contested.

SITUATING SELENA

People want to touch something of her, to have an object that, in some way, makes her alive to them.

-David McLemore

Stephen Kline (1995, 1 I) argues that we find "meaning, comfort and solace" in our relationship with goods that are marketed and shaped by media representation and that take on importance and meaning beyond the original purchase-value of the object itself. Objects in a consumer culture are vested with symbolic significance. We define who we are by the objects we possess. This process, often called objectification, starts at a very young age. Ellen Seiter observes, "Consumer culture provides children with a shared repository of images, characters, plots, and themes: it provides the basis for small talk and play, and it does this on a national, even global scale." She concludes, "Massmarket commodities are woven into the social fabric of children's lives: they are seen on sleepovers, at show-and-tell in school, on the block or in the apartment building, on the T shirt" (1999, 297). In other words, if I am wearing Nike shoes, they are no longer just sneakers. They mean something, they symbolize something. If they did not, young people would not kill or be killed over them. The object becomes part of a narrative that is invented and reinvented, articulated and rearticulated, contingent on the speaker. As David McLemore writes, "Adoration makes for strong incentives for entrepreneurs to fill that need. Where there is demand, there will soon be supply" (1997, A1).

What is the difference between a Jesus shirt and a Selena shirt, or between *God: A Biography* and the various biographies about Selena? Jesus sells because he's really "big," and Selena sells for a similar reason. If none of these objects sold, if they were no longer "hot" or "big," they would no longer be marketed. Media scholar Stewart Hoover

argues that, "For religion to exist in contemporary life, it has to exist in the media and public spheres." To successfully spread the gospel, "marketing and PR principles rule the day" (Apodaca 1998, A1). To make sure that Selena is kept alive within the community, she too must be marketed and packaged in a particular fashion.

IMAGE CONTROL

Hours after the singer was shot by her assistant, Yolanda Saldivar, last March, the first signs of commercialism over Selena's death emerged, with hastily designed T-shirts hitting the market. Even Saldivar's query to police as to the whereabouts of her lawyer—"Where's Larry?"—during negotiations for her surrender, was emblazoned on shirts during her criminal trial.

-Toni Cantu

Who controls and markets the image is of consequence. Those who control the rights also control how the image is marketed, what they want the public to see, and what the public wants to see. The Catholic Church controls the pope's image, Graceland controls Elvis's image, and in Selena's case the family employs two law firms to monitor for unauthorized merchandise. "We spend a tremendous amount of time and money to block the exploiters," said Burt Quintanilla, a cousin who heads the marketing efforts for Q Productions, the family's production company. Since the murder, the volume of black-market trade in Selena-related material has exploded. "The exploitation of Selena strikes a raw nerve with us," Quintanilla continued. "She was family, and she was special to millions of people who saw her as a role model, someone who touched them. We don't want to see Selena reduced to a key chain" (McLemore 1997, A1). Unless, that is, the key chain is sold at Selena Etc., Selena's boutique. The shop launched her line of clothes and sells mementos of various sorts-including "perfume, dolls, commemorative magazines, posters, and T shirts"-that range in price from \$6 to \$350. "People seem to want anything that relates to Selena," said manager (and cousin) Debra Ramirez (McLemore 1997, A1).

MONEY CAN BUY ME LOVE

"Selena was very special to me," said Betty Sanchez, 30, as she bought a couple of Selena T-shirts and coffee mugs amid the aroma of nail polish and hairspray. "I took it very hard when Selena passed away."

-Quoted in Doreen Bowens

In the contemporary world, human beings are objectified, and Selena becomes an image on a T shirt, an objet d'art, a shrine, and a statue. But it is not just Selena. Everybody, everything, and every impulse—including religious impulses—are thrown into the increasingly intensified (all encompassing) marketplace of products. Reduced to combinations of objectifiable, commodifiable characteristics, people have particular symbolic (purchase) value. Each of these visible characteristics has value whose currency is determined by the most economically powerful. Mexicans, like any other group, are thereby signified as having a particular value in a capitalist marketplace: One fan gave voice in a personal interview to this phenomenon in this way:

Selena makes me proud. Proud not only of who I am and where I come from, but proud that such a beautiful and talented woman made all her dreams come true despite any barriers. . . . There was a scene in the movie when Selena came to California for the Grammys and she wanted to buy her friend a dress. They picked out a dress they liked, and asked the store employee if they could try it on. The store employee (who was an Anglo woman) replied she did not think Selena would be interested in it. And when Selena asked why, she replied "because it costs \$800." Later when the movie had finished and the audience was gathered outside of the theater, I overheard a group of Anglo people talking about that scene. They didn't feel it was a relevant scene in the movie and that it was overdramatized. What they don't and could not understand is that this happens all the time. I've experienced it and I have friends who have experienced it—our community has long been ignored.

How Mexicans, Mexican-Americans, Chicanos, Latinos, and "Hispanics" are named, defined, and objectified is of tremendous consequence to the Selena story. Lauraine

Miller describes one fan, "Veronica," who said that Selena had opened her eyes: "I was acting more American, and she made us realize our heritage was important" On the other hand, another fan responded that she didn't know "where Veronica lives, but, in the United States nobody ever lets you forget you are a Mexican-American" (1996, A1).

For those mourning her, she was a brave, astonishingly courageous Chicana, ambivalent about but never ashamed of her background. Selena drove her Porsche to the Wal-Mart. "You'd see her shopping at the mall," people in South Texas told me. "And you'd see her working at home. A real sweetheart." They like to recall how accessible she was—una de nosotros. . . . Had Selena been visited by the angel of death only a few years later, a very different story would have been told. She would have been an American Star, and her misfortune would not be useful today to highlight the reticence with which la frontera in particular, and Latino culture in general, is taken in by the rest of the country. (Stavans 1995, 24)

Selena symbolizes Mexican-American pride in a community under siege, particularly in California and the Southwest. There is a sense of community, breaking through layers of anomie in a mass-marketed religious celebration of iconography and identity. As one fan wrote to the *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, "She inspired me to return to my roots. . . . I have never been prouder to be a Mexican-American" (Burr 1996).

ILLEGAL ALIEN

Now Selena is a pantheistic deity in la frontera—everywhere you look, there she is: on TV screens and CDs, on book covers and calendars, on velvet slippers, T-shirts, lithographs, baseball hats, stickers, plastic bracelets, shampoos. . . . "Thanks to her, tejanos are being heard," a disc jockey from Houston told me. "She put us in the news—and on the front page of the New York Times." Meanwhile, many people north and south of the Rio Grande have been engaging in active prayer to Vergen Selena, their own Madonna, so that heaven above might send some miracles to la frontera: more dolares descending once the media craze is over, for instance; or a less condescending

attitude toward its idols while they are alive. Otherwise Mex-American youngsters might get the wrong message, thinking they will only be heard by Anglo ears after they are dead and buried.

-Ilan Stsvans

With the recent passage in California of legislation considered to be hostile to immigrants, the value of Mexicanness both in the symbolic and real political economy of the United States becomes quite clear. Certainly the sense of pride and solidarity that Selena has generated as a sign and as an object is of tremendous consequence given the frenetic anti-Mexican backlash in the United States. Ramón Gutiérrez argues that "caricatures, stereotypes and images, born of ignorance, fed by fantasy, shaped and distorted by the media and explained by folk aphorisms, are the currency of popular discourse. Whatever the genesis of these perceptions, distorted as they are, they shape the way middle-class Americans refract reflections of themselves onto the 'illegal aliens.' Those nonhuman creatures from another world called Mexico, who constantly threaten to invade sovereign United States space and destroy the essence of American life" (1996, 254).

In this environment, Selena's resignification as an object, as a source of pride in a community that continues to endure blatant racialized hatred in the United States, must be contextualized as a form of resistance to laws that some people see as frighteningly reminiscent of the laws of Nazi Germany. Holly Sklar, after recounting a series of horrendous anti-immigrant events, notes that "it is not far fetched to see the seeds of ethnic cleansing—the widely adopted euphemism for genocide in the former Yugoslavia—in the widespread support [for the California legislation]." She ponders "How easy it's been to roll back civil liberties with the excuse of fighting the racially based 'War on Drugs.' How easy it's become to spend more money on prisons and less on education. How easy it's been to re-label millions of children as illegitimate" (1995, 133).

In many ways, as awful as it may sound, Selena might have died just in time. For some, the image of the Virgen Selena is powerful, potent, political, transformative, and often transcending. Selena sustains a sense of *mestizaje* goodness, kindness, worthiness, and beauty. As one fifteen-year-old MexicanAmerican fan noted, "Selena touched me in

a way I can never explain fully in words. She was and is an inspiration to me to keep fighting and keep reaching for my dreams." Another female fan, as if addressing Selena in the afterlife, said that the singer had given her "hope that we could fulfill those promises you fought for, and the hope you gave us, helps us carry on." Finally, another fan asked, "Why did God create an angel who was so full of life then take her back so quickly?" She had found inspiration, she said, in Selena's words about never giving up on one's own dreams. "When I had heard that she had died I lost a little part of me as well. She was my inspiration, and mentor that I will never forget," she said. "Though her body died, her spirit and dreams keep on living, in all of us, in all Latinos."

History is not so much a product of the past, but a process constructed in the present by people for particular purposes. The selections, silences, gaps, and embellishments are always arbitrary. There are never uninterpreted experiences. History is not connected to the experiential, but reconstructed memory is. History is also a commodity. After her death, television airwaves were filled with images of shrines built to honor Selena, fans visiting her grave to be healed, and descriptions of Selena sightings in which the spirit offered encouragement and hope for the poor (Blosser 1995, 24-25). What became most venerated about Selena's life was her strong tie to the Tejano community and to her family, her innocence, her spirituality, and her life after death, not her skimpy costumes, her sensuality, or the scandals that surrounded her family life. In this process, public memory as transforming created a version of Selena whose life as lived became inconsequential. In many ways it is ironic, for Selena is better known today than she was at the peak of her career. Among those who accommodate the needs that Selena's new popularity has created is Jose Behar, the president of EMI Records Latin Division, the company that groomed Selena for stardom. "It is our responsibility," he said "to continue her legacy and to really bring to the forefront the beautiful gift she left us. . . . We can't change the tragedy. I wish we could but we can't. So we now have a responsibility to share her music with the world, which is what she wanted most" (Burr 1997, 9F).

Events have taken on new meaning to construct the present. Selena's life was appropriated for very important political exigencies within particular fragments of the Tejano community. Secularly sainted Selena shows a face that may not have existed in

real life, but it puts the community's best foot forward. As one fan stated, "She embodies everything a Hispanic woman should be" (Diaz 1999, A47). The events that began with the murder and continued through the trial, her burial, and the rescriptings of Selena's life and death are reconstructions that help secure particular identities, creating an ideal that enables her fans to negotiate and resist the present order of things. Selena represents an oppositional narrative that challenges dominant cultural histories and opinions, and in the process Selena's image is transformed for strategic purposes. In such a way, her life begins to make sense because of her death. Her death begins to make sense because of how her life has been constructed. In other words, the significance does not rest with the facts, but with the way the relationship between events and facts are created and re-created—strung like a pearl necklace—to create a whole image, a whole reality.

MARIAN IMAGES

She was a beautiful young lady and a person who loved everyone, especially children.
Selena is singing with the angels now.

-Selena fan

La Virgen de Guadalupe is venerated as the mother and the nurturer; she has endured pain and she is willing to serve (Nieto 1974, 37). Nevertheless, images of suffering are also appropriated and commodified in a hyperreal, intensified, capitalist world. Suffering is framed to appeal at visceral, emotional, and moral levels. As we have already noted, these images have values; however, their value is different across communities. Alba Garcia suggests that "for many Chicanos . . . these same values have been a source of solace and strength to fight racism and resist oppression by the dominant group. The dedication that many women have for their families-and many men's commitment to uphold their side of the bargain by hard work in the agricultural fields, brutal work in factories, and lowpaid, unskilled labor-has made it difficult for Chicana feminists to question these values. . . . Some Chicanas have not seen the advantages of challenging patriarchy, and others have been afraid to betray their communities by joining any feminist cause" (1989, 225).

Against this backdrop, Selena is framed in a particular fashion—both esoteric and prosaic—that parallels the Lady of Guadalupe. Her image is used to build community solidarity around something that transcends everything else, combining, reflecting, and manipulating the body human and the Marian body while bringing together differing dimensions of material and political positions. Forms of individual collective narratives surrounding the use of Marian imagery in connection with Selena's body are not disconnected from real political, economic, religious, or cultural life. This narrative genre of life histories, oral histories, and histories of community extends the scope of what constitutes legitimate knowledge to include those who have been politically, culturally, and economically excluded from the dominant culture, displacing the urge to categorize that is the gatekeeper of knowledge, and thus of interpretation "for anyone who has ever felt shunted aside" suggest Neal and Janice Gregory, "by someone who thought they were of a better class" (1997, 234). We could also include race or ethnicity. Selena, much like Elvis Presley, is an incredibly powerful symbol, and the imagery of the silent woman who embodies the suffering of the Mexican people provides a powerful counterpoint to Anglo domination and exploitation.

SELENA-ELVIS

Mark Gottdiener notes that the founders of the world's major religions are known principally by what they said. "Their words are enshrined in text," he notes. "Most American Christians are, perhaps, unaware that there are people who came to know Jesus not through the text or the discourse but through bodily actions" (1997, 190). As should be clear by now, many seem to have come to Selena in the same way. People seek to feel what it was she was feeling, they seek to re-create her feelings through themselves. In Gottdiener's words, "They seek to possess the abundance of material objects sacralized by [her] aura through commodification, and to be [her] through impersonation, or to embody the characteristics ascribed to her through what educators call modeling. Modeling what is understood as Selena's best characteristics is another form of veneration.' Little girls cling to their Selena dolls and dream of being just like her when they grow up. Twelve thousand young women flood the audition for the Selena movie in the hope that they will

be chosen as she was. Drag queens mimic Selena in shows all along the border, while Selena-designed clothes are sold at official Selena stores, Selena websites, and J.C. Penney's so schoolgirls can mimic Selena too.

The dead Elvis may be our other Jesus, since we "unabashedly and actively celebrate his commodification in a million material manifestations" (Gottdiener 1997, 191). Selena, however, is another Mary, a material girl, a different sort of Madonna, whose followers experience personal self-expression and liberation. Gottdiener maintains that Elvis as Jesus is a form of liberating religious expression experienced in a manner that Jesus cannot be: materially. This particular aspect, he argues, "is the powerful force behind the Dead Elvis phenomenon. Attaching oneself to the dead Elvis is an act of liberation from the constraints of most religions because it enables you to celebrate popular culture, secular ideas, commodity fetishism, eroticism, black white integration and most specifically Southern culture" (1997, 192). Selena liberates her followers in a similar way. She celebrates her people, she celebrates a secular form of Catholicism and a postmodern form of Chicanismo through the popular. Selena becomes an act of empowerment through a form of religious expression. She is a form of resistance challenging an increasingly hostile Anglo environment. Selena becomes an activity, an action, not just a substitute for action.

However, just because members of a marginalized group have adopted a distinct style or icon does not—cannot—mean that they "now articulate a coherent critical response to their own oppression" (Street 1997, 163). Once something is vested into the popular it may become not only an expression of defiance and resistance, but also a form of politicized management. The conditions, reasons, and pleasures of consumption are not equal for everyone. Culture and religion are never simply sources of meaning. They are processes that are invariably interactive. In other words, we produce culture, but we are also produced by it. Religious impulses in the popular work through affect that is "organized according to maps which direct people's investment in it and the world," thus involving "the generation of energy and passion, the construction of possibility" (Grossberg 1992, 79-80, 85). Selena becomes a way of experiencing feelings and passions, she provides solace and sustenance, and she reaches out to the other—in this case the Anglo other—in peace. Selena-worship is a way of maintaining a modicum of optimism

and possibility. Selena someday may be able to instill in her followers a sense of agency to resist increasingly oppressive forces, or she may be relegated to the dustbin of what might have been. But in either case, her significance will rest less in who she was, and more in what she was to the people who knew her.

REFERENCES

- Anzaldúa, Gloria. 1987. *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. San Francisco: Spinsters/Aunt Lute.
- Apodaca, Patrice. 1998. "Southland: Television's Bible Belt." *Los Angeles Times*, January 12, A1.
- Blosser, John. 1995. "Selens Reaches Out from the Grave." *National Enquirer*, August 22, 24-25.
- Bowens, Doreen C. 1999. "Visitors Mark Anniversary of Selena's Death." *Corpus Christi Caller-Times*, April 1.
- Bronfen, Elisabeth. 1992. *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic*. New York: Routledge.
- Burr, Ramiro. 1996. "Selena's Impact Still Felt" *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, March 31, 9F.
- Cantu, Toni. 1996. "Cashing in on Selens." *Hispanic* 9, 6 (June): 18-23.
- Casey, Kathleen. 1995. "New Narrative Research in Education:!" *Review of Research in Education* 21: 211-53.
- Diaz, Madeline Baro. 1999. "Fans Flooding Selens Museum to See Singer's Clothes, Personal Belongings." *Dallas Morning News*, June 27, A47.
- Doyle, Jacqueline. 1997. "Assumptions of the Virgin and Recent Chicana Writing." *Women's Studies* 26, 2: 171-202.
- "Dying Selens Held Bloody Ring." 1995. *Newsday*, October 14, A4.
- Elliot, Anthony. 1999. *The Mourning of John Lennon*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Ficke, John. 1989. *Understanding Popular Culture*. Boston: Unwin Hyman.
- Garcia, Alba. 1989. "The Development of Chicana Feminist Discourse, 1970-1980." *Gender and Society* 3, 2: 217-38.

- Gaspar de Alba, Alicia. 1998. *Chicano Art Inside/Outside the Master's House: Cultural Politics and the CARA Exhibit*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Gottdiener, Mark. 1997. "Dead Elvis as Other Jesus." In *In Search of Elvis: Music, Race, Art, Religion*, ed. Vernon Chadwick, 189-200. Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press.
- Gregory, Neal, and Janice Gregory. 1997. "When Elvis Died: Enshrining a Legend." In *In Search of Elvis: Music, Race, Art, Religion*, ed. Vernon Chadwick, 225-43. Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press.
- Grossberg, Lawrence. 1992. *We Gotta Get out of This Place: Popular Conservatism and Postmodern Culture*. New York: Routledge.
- Grumet, Madeleine R. 1991. "The Politics of Personal Knowledge." In *Stories Lives Tell: Narrative and Dialogue in Education*, ed. Carol Witherell and Ned Noddings, 67-77. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Gutiérrez, Ramón. 1996. "The Erotic Zone: Sexual Transgression on the U.S.Mexican Border." In *Mapping Multiculturalism*, ed. Avery F. Gordon and Christopher Newfield, 253-62. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Hebdige, Dick. 1979. *Subculture, the Meaning of Style*. London: Methuen.
- Karimi, Robert. 1995. "San Antonio Remembers Selena." *La Prensa de San Antonio*, April 7.
- Kellner, Douglas. 1995. *Media Culture: Cultural Studies, Identity, and Politics between the Modern and the Postmodern*. New York: Routledge.
- Kline, Stephen. 1995. *Out of the Garden: Toys, TV, and Children's Culture in the Age of Marketing*. London: Verso.
- Liner, Elaine. 1999. "Independent Film on Selena's Impact Airs on PBS." *Corpus Christi Caller-Times*, July 13.
- Maguire, Brendan, and Georgie Ann Weatherby. 1998. "The Secularization of Religion and Television Commercials." *Sociology of Religion* 59, 2 (summer): 171-78.
- McLemore, David. 1997. "Secular Sainthood: Movie Premiere Heightens Fans' Fascination with Anything Tied to Slain Singer Selena." *Dallas Morning News*, March 15, A1.
- Miller, Lauraine. 1996. "Pilgrims Remember Their Star: First Anniversary of Selena's Slaying." *Houston Chronicle*, April, A1.

- Mitchell, Rick. 1995. "In Life, She Was the Queen of Tejano Music. In Death, the 23-Year-Old Singer Is Becoming a Legend." *Houston Chronicle*, May 21, 6 (Texas Magazine).
- Nieto, Consuelo. 1974. "The Chicana and the Women's Rights Movement: A Perspective." *Civil Rights Digest* 6, 3: 36-42.
- Patoski, Joe Nick. 1995. "The Sweet Song of Justice." *Texas Monthly*, December, 102.
- Pinkerton, James. 1995. "Singing Selena's Praises." *Houston Chronicle*, October 24, A11.
- Revilla-Vasquez, Catherine. 1995. "Thank You Selena." *Hispanic* 8, 4 (May): 96.
- Rodriguez, Jeanette, and Virgilio P. Elizondo. 1994. *Our Lady of Guadalupe: Faith and Empowerment among Mexican-American Women*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Russell, Jeanne. 1995. "'Selena Trial' Stirs Hispanics' Passions." *Newsday*, October. 16: A8.
- Seiter, Ellen. 1999. "Children's Desires/Mothers' Dilemmas: The Social Contexts of Consumption." In *Children's Culture*, ed. H. Jenkins, 297-317. New York: New York University Press.
- Sklar, Holly. 1995. "The Dying American Dream: And the Snake Oil of Scapegoating." In *Eyes Right!: Challenging the Right Wing Backlash*, ed. Chip Bertlet, 113-34. Boston: South End Press.
- Stavans, Ilan. 1995. "Dreaming of You (Tejano Singer Selena)." *New Republic*, November 20, 24-26.
- Street, John. 1997. *Politics and Popular Culture*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Taylor, Diana. 1999. "Dancing with Diana: A Study in Hauntology." *TDR* 43, 1 (spring): 59-82.
- Turner, Allan, and Patsy Reinert. 1995. "Devoted Fans of Selena Arrive before Trial Starts." *Houston Chronicle*, October 9, A1.
- Vara, Richard. 1995. "Cultural Myth of Selena." *Houston Chronicle*, May 21, 1 (Texas Magazine).
- Willis, Paul E. 1990. *Common Culture: Symbolic Work at Play in the Everyday Cultures of the Young*. New York: Milton Keynes, Open University Press.

Wuthnow, Robert. 1989. *The Struggle for America's Soul: Evangelicals, Liberals, and Secularism*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: W. B. Eerdmans Publishing.

Zuniga, Jo Ann. 1995. "Selena Remembered in Day of Dead Altars." *Houston Chronicle* October 20, A39.

——, and R. A. Dyer. 1995. "Frenzied Fans Hail Verdict with Tears, Cheers." *Houston Chronicle*, October 24, A1.