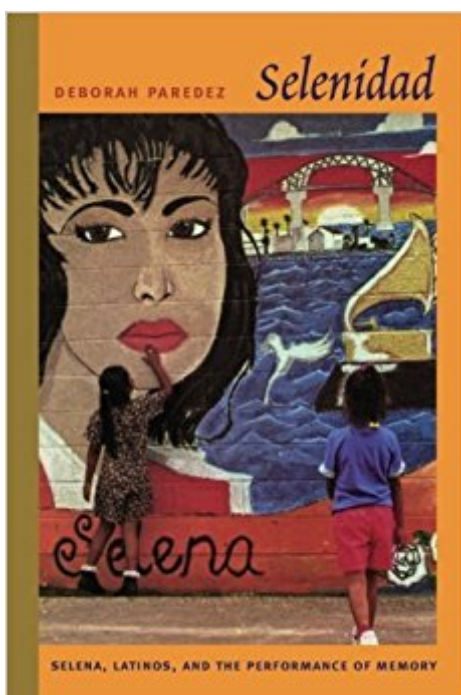


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Selenidad: Selena, Latinos, And The Performance Of Memory



Synopsis

An outpouring of memorial tributes and public expressions of grief followed the death of the Tejano recording artist Selena Quintanilla Páez in 1995. The Latina superstar was remembered and mourned in documentaries, magazines, websites, monuments, biographies, murals, look-alike contests, musicals, drag shows, and more. Deborah Paredez explores the significance and broader meanings of this posthumous celebration of Selena, which she labels “Selenidad.” She considers the performer’s career and emergence as an icon within the political and cultural transformations in the United States during the 1990s, a decade that witnessed a “Latin explosion” in culture and commerce alongside a resurgence of anti-immigrant discourse and policy. Paredez argues that Selena’s death galvanized Latina/o efforts to publicly mourn collective tragedies (such as the murders of young women along the U.S.-Mexico border) and to envision a brighter future. At the same time, reactions to the star’s death catalyzed political jockeying for the Latino vote and corporate attempts to corner the Latino market. Foregrounding the role of performance in the politics of remembering, Paredez unravels the cultural, political, and economic dynamics at work in specific commemorations of Selena. She analyzes Selena’s final concert, the controversy surrounding the memorial erected in the star’s hometown of Corpus Christi, and the political climate that served as the backdrop to the touring musicals *Selena Forever* and *Selena: A Musical Celebration of Life*. Paredez considers what “becoming Selena” meant to the young Latinas who auditioned for the biopic *Selena*, released in 1997, and she surveys a range of Latina/o queer engagements with Selena, including Latina lesbian readings of the star’s death scene and queer Selena drag. *Selenidad* is a provocative exploration of how commemorations of Selena reflected and changed Latinidad.

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Customer Reviews

"In this outstanding book, Deborah Paredez teaches us important lessons about the politics of Latinidad. She makes insightful connections between Selena's memorialization and contemporary issues including U.S. policy toward Latinos, the continued relevance of Texas's colonial and conquest history, the political economy of NAFTA, and even strategies for containing urban popular expression. Arlene D'Ávila, author of *Latinos, Inc.: The Marketing and Making of a People* "Selena, as Deborah Paredez compellingly shows, functions as a cultural hinge figure: issues pertaining to economics, ethnic identity, music, body language, sexuality, and politics are all negotiated around and through her body. More than that, Paredez demonstrates that the mourning around the star's death--the outpouring of grief by Latinos and the reluctant observance by mainstream audiences--enacts the troubled relationship of Latinos and the mainstream generally." Diana Taylor, author of *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*

"Selena, as Deborah Paredez compellingly shows, functions as a cultural hinge figure: issues pertaining to economics, ethnic identity, music, body language, sexuality, and politics are all negotiated around and through her body. More than that, Paredez demonstrates that the mourning around the star's death--the outpouring of grief by Latinos and the reluctant observance by mainstream audiences--enacts the troubled relationship of Latinos and the mainstream generally."--Diana Taylor, author of *The Archive and the Repertoire: Cultural Memory and Performance in the Americas*

Dr. Paredez takes a critical look at how Selena's tragic murder creates a public space for which Latinidad itself can negotiate its place in the larger American landscape. Selena's death facilitated the economic exploitation of the Latino/a, but also provided the fuel for which to decry such exploitation, abuse and discrimination. 'Selenidad' thus places Selena on a larger map and history of Latina/o struggles and harnesses Selena as a means to chart a course wherein the Latina/o can

truly 'crossover' into full visibility. This is not so much a book about Selena's life as it is about how her afterlife and the subjective act of remembering Selena has become a rich source of power and pride. I highly recommend it!

Deborah Paredez has rendered a huge tribute to the beloved memory of Selena by bringing us this fascinating new book, which is not about Selena per se, but about how Americans, in particular Latino/a Americans, understood and understand her career, presentation, artistic output, and, tragically, her horrific death, and now, her memory. It is a foray into sociology and cultural history, a meticulous deconstruction and reading of (selected) events and artefacts of Selena's life, work, and legacy both recorded and culturally propagated, among much else showing how they brought the US Latino/a community together in adulation, emulation, sadly mourning, and ultimately veneration. (Also, one of Dr. Paredez' five chapters is devoted to readings of Selena's life and story among the gay/lesbian community.) The Publisher's Review above is quite on point. While *-Selenidad-* deserves a critical appraisal here by the author's peers, i.e., qualified academics in the fields of Latino/a history and culture and feminist studies, I am neither, and post this review as merely a "Selena fan", whose admiration and sympathy for the martyred iconic performer and mesmerizing, charismatic soul having been conscripted by her work, story, and tragedy, now seeks everything he can learn about her. So, while in awe of the insightful, fascinating, and inspiring (to a Selena fan) study of Selena's reception presented here, I write now to other Selena fans who followed the keyword "Selena" here. I would recommend this book to all Selena fans who can deal with the the jargon and other apparatus of academic deconstructionism, or are willing to give such a try; perhaps you, as did I, had to learn Spanish to appreciate Selena as much as you do now, so rise again to the challenge. For a start, in her second chapter, Dr. Paredez, who holds an Associate Professorship of Theater and Dance at the University of Texas at Austin, scrutinizes two "numbers" from Selena's masterpiece February 1995 Astrodome concert (*Selena Live - The Last Concert*), the opening disco medley and the (closing) signature *-Como-la-Flor-*, with a knowledge of classical and flamenco dance interpreting Selena's every gesture and her understandings of its emotional and social meanings, as well as the social background behind the Motown songs and the statements she reads from them about the relationship between African-American and Latina/Latino communities at the time. She analyzes tiny details of the renowned "purple jumpsuit" Selena designed and wore for the occasion, revealing to us further than we could have imagined the precision, depth, and sure-fire instinct of Selena's self-knowledge. Dr. Paredez finds Selena's cultural, artistic, and intellectual roots in specific Mexican and Latino/a-American screen and musical idols of the twentieth century,

and draws thought-provoking comparisons between her tragic life story and those of other Latina icons who passed away prematurely, such as Eva Peron and Frida Kahlo. Many other brilliant and revealing analyses of diverse artifacts of Selena's work adorn *-Selenidad-*; I find this depth and breadth and incisiveness of analysis a great honor to Selena. Although Dr. Paredez concentrates her focus squarely on the Hispanic (and in the last chapter, gay/lesbian) community, Selena's appeal and legend continue to spread and deepen among every demographic. I invite the reader to peruse the comments/guestbooks of the larger Selena tribute web-sites, and consider the ongoing, daily submissions of kids, from lands far from the Rio Grande, who weren't even born when Selena was taken from us, who venerate her as the greatest, the most beautiful, the most beloved, the most talented/promising, watch "her" biopic every week or however much, and pledge her their eternal love. While perhaps many works remain to be written about the reception of Selena in the world at large, the specificity of Dr. Paredez's focus should not deter anyone. As *-Selenidad-* is neither biography nor journalistic telling of Selena's life and work, Dr. Paredez does not interview band members, family members, and so on, who have in the past been interviewed in all media at length, but does interview people involved with the two stage productions about Selena's live (circa 2000), young women who sought to "become Selena" in their imitation of her dress and style, and numerous Latinos and Latinas who found inspiration, self, and purpose in and after Selena's life. Her studies of these artifacts of tribute, including a chapter on the politics and other history of the *-Mirador-de-la-Flor-* monument in Corpus Christi ought fascinate anyone who has come under Selena's continuing spell. While the focus of the book is Americans, especially Latino/a Americans, and how they felt and continue to feel about Selena, such falls clearly under the rubric of the incipient field of "Selena Studies", which I think Dr. Paredez has launched with this publication, and anyone interested in Selena and ready to engage a full-depth-with-footnotes academic exploration of this corner (her reception among the Hispanic community) (and much more in passing) of her legacy would do well to obtain and read this volume, and accord it its place beside the CD's and DVD's, fan magazines and posters in that corner of their house where they keep Selena's memory alive.

Like the other reviewer, I came to Paredez and her book *Selenidad* not through the gateway of Latino studies, but rather as a fan, and that's where the book repays a lot of care and attention, since it is written, perhaps not so much with Selena in mind, nor even her body, but for the fans, and even against the fans to some extent. At any rate the fan is paramount in Paredez' extended account of Selena's fame that increased after death, and perhaps this approach makes special

sense in the case of our beloved Selena, for it was one of us who killed her. Paredez doesn't mince words, and that's part of the special appeal of her book. Sure, it's laden down with academic jargon (the "performance of memory" bit in the subtitle will forever date this book as belonging to a particular period of discourse when everything was performing this or that. Paredez shows how the fan is always more alert than the official historian, and how we must move beyond the official story to the world of fandom in order to come up with anything real about the subject of scrutiny. She gives us a detailed history of Selena's final concert, showing how Selena was herself "performing" at that time a supposed opening of Latino culture into the wide world of English, every bit as though she wasn't herself a fluent English speaker, in the name of the market that awaits the crossover artist. She goes further and debates whether or not the actual slayer of poor Selena was involved with her in some extra-management way, and how this played out in the legend that developed around her. That sort of yes/no/maybe shell game must have enraged Selena's family, but for Paredez and for other cultural scholars, the fan (and tabloid) speculation allowed for what she calls "scenes of the subjunctive," the what-if games we all play whenever a tragic event occurs, and adds a vivid drama of same-sex rebellion against heterosexual normativity no matter what the "real" story was between Selena and Chris or between Selena and Yolanda.

Great read, definitely changed my perspective of Selena and the 90's

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