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Remembering Selena in the Trump Era

By Caitlin Cruz



Selena. Photo: ©2005 Vincent Zuffante_Star File/Getty Images

There's this idea that every Latino loves Selena Quintanilla-Pérez. Or as we call her (because we're so close), *Selena*. This is, of course, a stereotype, but for me, it happens to be true. I really do love her. I bought a near-replica belt and corset for a Halloween tribute costume last year. The *Live! The Last Concert* CD is in my regular rotation, and I even waited in line outside Nordstrom so I could spend money I really didn't have on the Selena-MAC collaboration earlier this year. Selena was the woman I was imitating with each dance class I took and each bedazzled costume I squeezed myself into. Even when I barely knew much more about her than what Jennifer Lopez taught us in the 1997 movie, I wanted to be her.

Selena died 22 years ago today, after being shot by Yolanda Saldívar at a Days Inn in Corpus Christi, Texas. Every year on March 31 I think of her. March 31 has always been a day when I feel proud of being Chicana. But this year, it feels different. The vilification of Mexican-Americans in the Trump era requires a new and even more vigorous celebration of her life, the joy she brings us, and the contributions she made to our culture.



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My childhood was fairly normal and even idyllic. I grew up in Omaha, Nebraska, in a part of town where you can get away with not locking your doors. I went to a public school next to cornfields. People, for the most part, were kind.

But it was incredibly white. I was the only Latino kid in my elementary school, until my little sister joined me a few years later. In middle school, there were a few more of us; by high school there were a few dozen out of more than 2,500 students. Omaha was (and is) a segregated city, like many in the midwest. There weren't many families like ours. The only Latino people I knew had also been transferred from the same company in Arizona as my own father. It was in this period of isolation that I was given my first Selena CD. Her voice made me feel like maybe Nebraska could be home, if only in that room that I'd painted her (*our*) favorite shade of purple.

By the time I got to elementary school in 1998, Selena was waning in popularity. There had been the J.Lo movie, the crossover hits, and the front-page shooting that ended her short life. But most white kids just weren't interested in Selena, just like they weren't interested in the *bizcochitos* (wedding cookies popular in New Mexico, where my dad is from) that I brought to class on family-heritage day. Eventually I realized it was easier to not be myself. When you're 14, fitting in is more important than *cascarones* at holidays or talking about the Rosario Castellano story you discovered. It was easier to fade into a lack of culture than to try and maintain my own, so I learned all the words to Dixie Chicks and Britney Spears songs and saved Selena for when I could close the door to my purple room. Those moments were a reprieve in my quest to fit into a white world I didn't fully belong in.

As soon as high school ended, I left Nebraska. I moved back to Arizona for college, but also because I was tired of being Latino in name only. I was tired of people laughing at *cascarones*, and of people being confused by the number of crosses in our house and why my *abuela* calls me *mija*. But it turns out when you run away from a white enclave to a space filled with Latinos, you tend to stand out there too. It was like cultural whiplash. One of the first people I met at school was an even bigger Selena fan than me. I constantly felt like I was playing a game of cultural catch-up, where Selena was the only thing I had in common with the new people I was meeting. I used her as a starting point to make friends and learn more about the culture I had been sequestered from. Selena gave me hope.

On March 31, my college peers and I would remember her: One year, I played only her music and wore my brightest lipstick. Another, I built a small little altar in my apartment. I'd watch videos of her concerts and cry, then watch the J.Lo movie and cry some more. My last year of college was the last time I cried on the anniversary of her death, though. Now, I don't cry — I celebrate.

This year, I've spent a lot of time trying to figure out what the worth of a young person is, what the worth of a young brown person is, in this America. It's a question I've been contemplating with greater urgency since Mexican-Americans were called rapists on national television and there were zero repercussions. What is the worth of all the brown people in this country when the powers that be don't care about them? I need days like today, days that are meant to celebrate the joy of our culture, the joy of life, to remind me that we're all we've got.

So, today, I celebrate: I'm wearing Selena's fabulous makeup and know the sounds of *cumbia* will soothe me. The day will be narrated by the *Live! The Last Concert* album and I'll croon to my roommate as we walk to the theater in midtown: "*Como la flor (como la flor)/ con tanto amor (con tanto amor)/ Me diste tú (Me diste tú).*" I'll be wearing a sequined bustier Selena would love, and make donations to Texas-based charities. Today is for Chicanos — today is for all of us. Outlasting this administration requires taking a break once in a while. So take a break to the Tejano beats of Selena, and forget the president who insists on demonizing Latinos. We're all we got.

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