

“NOT WHITE ENOUGH”: HISPANIC AMERICANS, STEREOTYPES,
AND 20TH CENTURY HOLLYWOOD FILM

by

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to Anthony Quinn, Katy Jurado, Dolores del Río, Rita Hayworth, and every other Hispanic actor who was told they weren't "white enough."

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I. INTRODUCTION

Film is a powerful lens through which to view the world and always reflects the society and historical moment in which it is made. During World War II, war film attendance became a patriotic duty in the United States. During the Cold War, actors and filmmakers in Hollywood who were suspected of having communist ties were blacklisted, and the films that were made during said blacklist reflected the paranoia and anger Hollywood filmmakers felt towards and against the House Un-American Activities Committee. In his book *History on Film/Film on History: Concepts, Theories, and Practice*, historian Robert A. Rosenstone argues that film can be just as academically significant as history itself, writing that history as it is taught today is an amalgamation of lectures, dates, documents, and essays written by people with biases, opinions, and feelings all their own who are constantly contradicting each other.¹ Scholarly disciplines and art both reckon with the past imperfectly, and each has its place in our understanding of history. Film can be a way to witness worlds of the past that no longer exist in their fullest form. More so, to many people in today's world, film is the only way they will ever be able to view those worlds. As Rosenstone writes,

Each day it becomes clearer to even the most academic of historians that the visual media are the chief conveyor of public history in our culture. That for every person who reads a book on a historical topic about which a film has been made...many millions of people are likely to encounter that same past on the screen. Rather than dismissing such work...it seems more judicious to admit that we live in a world shaped, even in its historical consciousness, by the visual media, and to investigate how exactly films work to create a historical world.²

People flock to movies to be entertained, yes, but also to feel represented in society and

¹ Robert A. Rosenstone, *History on Film/Film on History: Concepts, Theories, and Practice* (Great Britain: Pearson Education Limited, 2006), 1.

² Rosenstone, *History on Film/Film on History*, 12.

culture. The United States' troubled history with race relations can be traced through a cinematic lens. In the early days of Hollywood, white actors often portrayed minority characters, such as Warner Baxter as the Cisco Kid in *In Old Arizona* (1928)³ or Douglas Fairbanks as Don Diego Vega in *The Mark of Zorro* (1920).⁴ At the same time, Mexicans and Mexican Americans faced harsh racial discrimination due to an increase in immigration to the U.S. and the fallout from the Mexican Revolution. Books like Neil Foley's *The White Scourge: Mexicans, Blacks, and Poor Whites in Texas Cotton Culture* have aided in detailing the shifting racial paradigms that occurred during the 1910s and 1920s when Mexican immigrants were trying to escape the violence of the Mexican Revolution in search of stability.⁵ Reflected in the films of the time is white Hollywood's attempt to commercialize Mexican and Mexican American culture for a new growing audience of racially mixed moviegoers.

I have chosen to spotlight the Cold War 1950s and the Chicano Movement-influenced 1980s, because American films produced in those contexts show a shift in the representation of Hispanics. Moreover, the 1950s and the 1980s best represent the emergence of Hispanics in the film industry.

That emergence was partially aided by the U.S. Popular Front, a coalition of predominantly left-leaning artists of the 1940s and 1950s who condemned fascism and embraced some aspects of communism. They sought to use film to condemn racism and equate it with fascism. The blacklisting of some American filmmakers allowed them to

³ *In Old Arizona*, directed by Irving Cummings and Raoul Walsh (1928: Fox Film Corporation), Vudu.

⁴ *The Mark of Zorro*, directed by Fred Niblo (1920: United Artists), Paramount Plus.

⁵ Neil Foley, *The White Scourge: Mexicans, Blacks, and Poor Whites in Texas Cotton Culture*. (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997).

take bigger risks with more politically charged films like *Salt of the Earth* (1954). Later in the 1980s, the Chicano Movement would lead to a much more prominent Hispanic presence in Hollywood, as a new generation of Hispanic filmmakers attempted to condemn deep-seated stereotypes and tell their own stories on the big screen. The work of the Popular Front and the rise of unions helped Hispanics begin to develop their own voices in American film. Later, the effects of the Chicano Movement in the 1960s and 1970s brought new, outspoken Hispanic voices behind the camera in the 1980s and allowed them more freedom than ever to make films for a growing Hispanic demographic.

This thesis builds on the work of cultural historians and film historians who have studied the subject, particularly Frederick Luis Aldama and Christopher González in their book *Reel Latinxs: Representation in U.S. Film and TV*, a comprehensive look at Hispanic representation in popular culture throughout the past hundred years.⁶ My own contribution to the literature is the analysis of a selection of key films and their significance in the context of the shifting racial paradigms of the United States in the twentieth century.

Throughout this thesis, I will use the term “Hispanic” as all-encompassing, so as to include anyone with roots from a Spanish-speaking community. I will use specific self-identifying terms when necessary, such as Chicano, Tejano, or Latinx. Chicanos are Americans of Mexican descent, Tejanos are Texans of Mexican descent, and Latinx is a gender-neutral alternative term to Latino or Latina that describes someone of Latin American descent. These terms will be essential when describing specific moments of

⁶ Frederick Luis Aldama and Christopher González, *Reel Latinxs: Representation in U.S. Film and TV* (University of Arizona Press, 2019).

exclusion and inclusion.

I document a pattern of Hispanic discrimination in Hollywood throughout the Cold War by identifying a series of Hispanic stereotypes that have been perpetuated in modern times by their frequent usage in film and television. I argue that Hispanic representation in American film in the 1950s largely through negative stereotypes coincided with the marginalization of Hispanics from the industry, while Hispanic representation in American film in the 1980s was influenced largely by the Chicano Movement and the new generation of more outspoken Hispanic filmmakers who emerged from it.

Negative depictions of Hispanics in American film have to come from somewhere. Uncovering the roots of Hispanic stereotypes is crucial to understanding why film studios chose to portray certain Hispanic characters in the ways that they did, and how stereotypes have fueled discrimination in Hollywood in front of and behind the camera. In his book *Tree of Hate: Propaganda and Prejudices Affecting United States Relations with the Hispanic World*, historian Philip Wayne Powell points the finger at the Black Legend and the influence that Hispanophobia has had on American education and culture, particularly when it comes to stereotypes. He writes:

The stereotyped Spaniard as portrayed in our schoolbooks, popular literature, movies and television, is usually a swarthy fellow with black, pointed beard, morion, and wicked Toledo blade. He is, of course, treacherous, lecherous, cruel, greedy, and thoroughly bigoted. Sometimes he takes the form of a cowed, grim-visaged Inquisitor. In more recent times, and with somewhat better humor, he has appeared as a kind of slippery, mildly sinister, donjuanesque gigolo. But whatever the guise, he is most likely to be cast as foil for the Nordic ego.⁷

⁷ Philip Wayne Powell, *Tree of Hate: Propaganda and Prejudices Affecting United States Relations with the Hispanic World* (New York: Basic Books, 1971), 6.

Rampant anti-Spanish propaganda perpetuated largely by Dutch and English rivals painted Spanish explorers as monsters, rapists, thieves, and murderers in a campaign that became known as the Black Legend. While a significant part of these accusations was at least partially true, the other European cultures who sought to conquer the New World were just as cruel to the indigenous people. It is an unfortunate truth that there were no heroes coming from Europe to conquer. Powell argues that this Black Legend has never actually disappeared from culture, and traces of it can be found in modern popular culture in the form of persistent Hispanic stereotypes in film and television. The use of these stereotypes, particularly in American culture, range from purposeful or accidental condescension to hateful intent, and they can be found in virtually every aspect of American society.⁸ My focus here will be on the presence and use of these stereotypes throughout popular culture, particularly film and television.

Hispanic stereotypes largely began in North America with the Black Legend, and they have persisted ever since. Apart from the stock Spanish villain that Powell laid out in detail, he also mentions the stereotype of the Spanish friar, a figure who was somewhat modeled after historian and friar Bartolomé de las Casas, one of the biggest champions of indigenous freedom whose 1552 book *A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies* was a powerful element in shaping the Black Legend.⁹ The stereotypical friar is noble, somewhat naïve, and instrumental in revealing how villainous and sadistic the “bad” Spaniards have been.¹⁰ This trope continues in popular culture to this day with characters like Father Felipe in *The Mask of Zorro* (1998), whose sole purpose in the film is to hide

⁸ Powell, *Tree of Hate*, 4.

⁹ Powell, *Tree of Hate*, 7.

¹⁰ Powell, *Tree of Hate*, 7.

Zorro from the vengeful Spanish Dons who want him dead,¹¹ or Father Gabriel in *The Mission* (1986), a Spanish Jesuit whose actions are somehow more noble than the invading Portuguese who seek to subjugate the Native Guarani just as Gabriel himself had already done.¹² For the most part, this particular stereotype does not rear its head very often in popular culture anymore, but there are still many that do. They have existed in popular film since the medium's inception, and they continue to influence Hispanic cultures' perception in a negative light to this day.

In his essay "Stereotyping and Resistance: A Crash Course on Hollywood's Latino Imagery," film historian Charles Ramírez Berg describes five common Hispanic stereotypes that have been a part of film history and American culture for over a hundred years. Each of them boasts numerous examples in film and represents a negative portrayal of Hispanic cultures directly related to early forms of Hispanophobia. They are the bandido, the harlot, the buffoon, the Latin lover, and the dark lady.¹³

The bandido is typically a Mexican bandit or otherwise shifty individual, often draped in a poncho with a large sombrero or a bushy mustache. The bandido is one-dimensional, abrasive, dangerous, treacherous, and often a foil for noble white American heroes. This stereotype was prevalent mostly in American westerns in the twentieth century, such as the feared bandit leader Calvera, who is played by Polish Jewish character actor Eli Wallach in brownface makeup in *The Magnificent Seven* (1960),¹⁴ or the Mexican bandits encountered by

¹¹ *The Mask of Zorro*, directed by Martin Campbell (1998: TriStar Pictures), Blu-ray.

¹² *The Mission*, directed by Roland Joffé (1986: Goldcrest Films), Vudu.

¹³ Charles Ramírez Berg, "Stereotyping and Resistance: A Crash Course on Hollywood's Latino Imagery," in *The Future of Latino Independent Media: A NALIP Sourcebook*, ed. Chon A. Noriega (Los Angeles: UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center, 2000), 3-9.

¹⁴ *The Magnificent Seven*, directed by John Sturges (1960: United Artists), Blu-ray.

Humphrey Bogart and Tim Holt in *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* (1948) whose leader Gold Hat famously declared “I don’t have to show you any stinkin’ badges!”¹⁵ The bandido served as the perfect stereotypical villain of the American western. He was representative of the other; the dark evil unknown of the untamed West that clean-shaven, wholesome American silver screen stars like John Wayne, Gene Autry, or Gary Cooper had come to destroy in order to make the frontier safe for American families.

Once the popularity of westerns gradually declined, the bandido evolved into a sort of Hispanic gangster.¹⁶ The gangster stereotype contained echoes of the bandido: abrasiveness, intensity, a flagrant disrespect of any authority aside from his own. Orson Welles brought this stereotype to life in his 1958 noir thriller *Touch of Evil*, which features secondary villains like Mexican gangster Joe Grandi, played by an actor in brownface, and his ruthless right hand Pancho.¹⁷ We see this stereotype continue beyond the cultural front and the Cold War with the now iconic Cuban gangster character of Tony Montana, the anti-heroic protagonist of *Scarface* (1983). Montana, played by Oscar-winning actor Al Pacino in brownface makeup, is a Cuban immigrant who embraces and perverts the so-called American dream by becoming a feared drug kingpin in Miami.¹⁸ Just to hammer the concept home, in one scene Montana aggressively declares himself “the bad guy” in a crowded restaurant, yelling:

What you lookin' at? You all a bunch of fuckin' assholes. You know why? You don't have the guts to be what you wanna be? You need people like me. You need people like me so you can point your fuckin' fingers and say, "That's the bad guy." So... what that make you? Good? You're not good. You just know how to hide, how to lie. Me, I don't have that problem. Me, I always tell the truth. Even when I lie. So say good night to the bad guy! Come on. The last time you gonna see a bad guy like this again, let me

¹⁵ *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*, directed by John Huston (1948: Warner Bros), Blu-ray.

¹⁶ Berg. “Stereotyping and Resistance,” 5.

¹⁷ *Touch of Evil*, directed by Orson Welles (1958: Universal-International), Vudu.

¹⁸ *Scarface*, directed by Brian de Palma (1983: Universal Pictures), Blu-ray.

tell you. Come on. Make way for the bad guy. There's a bad guy comin' through!
Better get outta his way!¹⁹

While unintentionally hilarious it may be, this segment of dialogue reinforces the stereotype of the loud, aggressive, Hispanic gangster. Years later, Edward James Olmos would attempt to reclaim this particular stereotype in his 1992 directorial debut *American Me*, a film about a prominent Chicano gangster who leaves prison and starts to see the error of his ways.²⁰ In the film, Olmos brings an emotional resonance to the characters that, in another filmmaker's hands, could be perceived as stereotypical. The film received praise for its realistic depiction of Mexican Mafia culture and three-dimensional Chicano characters. Edward James Olmos would be a driving force in the growing Chicano film movement in the 1980s.

Taking it back to the American western, the next common stereotype is the harlot. The harlot is reserved largely for a female character who is, as Berg put it, "a slave to her passions."²¹ She is sex personified, and never much more than that. The harlot is a walking, talking nymphomaniac who lures innocent white heroes to her bed and steals their innocence, either with her body or with a weapon of some kind.²² We see the harlot in *Touch of Evil* as well in the character of Mexican brothel owner Tana, played by white German actress Marlene Dietrich.²³ Interestingly, Fred Zinnemann's western classic *High Noon* (1952) went out of its way to subvert expectations when it came to stereotypes, particularly with the character of Helen Ramirez. Ramirez was played by Mexican actress Katy Jurado, who became known for her strong-willed, largely independent characters at a time when minority

¹⁹ *Scarface*.

²⁰ *American Me*, directed by Edward James Olmos (1992: Universal Pictures), DVD.

²¹ Berg, "Stereotyping and Resistance," 6.

²² Berg, "Stereotyping and Resistance," 6.

²³ *Touch of Evil*.

actors were not treated as fairly as they should have been. In *High Noon*, Ramirez is a former harlot who once seduced and bedded Marshal Will Kane, played by Gary Cooper. But in the time since her affair with Kane, she has taken inventory of her life and realized this is not the path she wants to be on. So, she leaves the town of Hadleyville just as Kane faces his probable death, content in her decision to make her life her own going forward. She declares, “Kane will be a dead man in half an hour and nobody's gonna do anything about it. And when he dies, this town dies too. I can feel it. I am all alone in the world. I have to make a living. So I'm going someplace else. That's all.”²⁴ Jurado’s performance went a long way towards giving Hispanic actresses bigger and more substantial roles in Hollywood productions, such as Puerto Rican actress Rita Moreno in *West Side Story* (1961)²⁵ and Mexican actress Elsa Cárdenas in *Giant* (1956).²⁶

That takes us to the next stereotype, the buffoon. Comic relief can always be a welcome addition to any production, provided it is not at the expense of the character’s dignity. The buffoon features exaggerated characteristics such as a thick accent and ignorance of American customs. A prime example of a pop culture icon who fully embraced many aspects of the buffoon for comedy’s sake would be Desi Arnaz, who utilized stereotypes for his portrayal of devoted husband Ricky Ricardo on the hit sitcom *I Love Lucy*, which ran for six seasons from 1951 to 1957. Desi Arnaz was a Cuban-American actor who, along with his real-life wife Lucille Ball, famously broke barriers for interracial relationships on television, among other landmarks. But Ricky Ricardo’s accent and behavior was always the butt of a

²⁴ *High Noon*, directed by Fred Zinnemann (1952: United Artists), DVD.

²⁵ *West Side Story*, directed by Robert Wise and Jerome Robbins (1961: United Artists), Blu-ray.

²⁶ *Giant*, directed by George Stevens (1956: Warner Bros), Prime Video.

joke, though most of the time the joke came from his wife Lucy and was fairly good-natured. Still, Arnaz's efforts did not go unnoticed by American culture. Having a Hispanic lead in a sitcom in the 1950s who was Cuban-American and not hiding his accent was a huge win for Hispanic representation on screen.²⁷ Although, while Arnaz did manage to pass as white, many of his contemporaries could not. Arnaz's success could be at least partially contributed to his complexion, which extended him a bit of white privilege.²⁸ Still, his pronounced accent reminded audiences every week that while Arnaz may look white, in their eyes, he was not. Frederick Luis Aldama and Christopher González describe how significant it was to American culture that Arnaz did not suppress his accent:

Latinxs had to fit a certain *look*, and they also had to sound "white." Other sorts of accents were deemed acceptable... This became entrenched in the minds and expectations of moviegoing audiences. Yet there was also that swing of the pendulum to the exaggerated *sound* presence. Think of Latinxs like Ricardo Montalban in cinema and Desi Arnaz on TV in the 1950s. Both of these men in particular had very pronounced Spanish accents, and Arnaz even incorporated a running gag where Lucy, and notably only Lucy, teased him about his accent.²⁹

These days, perhaps the best known perpetuator of the female buffoon stereotype, a counterpart to the male version,³⁰ is Sofia Vergara's ditzy but gorgeous Colombian stepmother Gloria Delgado-Pritchett on the hit sitcom *Modern Family*. *Modern Family* ran for eleven seasons from 2009 to 2020, and Gloria was continuously the butt of familiar jokes that have been around forever. Her Colombian accent, her sexuality, her status as the attractive, younger wife of Jay Pritchett, all of it was the source of comedy throughout the show's long

²⁷ Aldama and González, *Reel Latinxs*, 37.

²⁸ William Garcia-Medina, "White Latino Racism on the Rise: It's Time for a Serious Conversation on Euro-Diasporic Whiteness," *LatinoRebels.com*, 2015, accessed March 20, 2023, <https://www.latinorebels.com/2015/12/21/white-latino-racism-on-the-rise-its-time-for-a-serious-conversation-on-euro-diasporic-whiteness/>.

²⁹ Aldama and González, *Reel Latinxs*, 37.

³⁰ Berg, "Stereotyping and Resistance," 7.

and successful run. But Vergara was in on the joke, which signifies that Gloria may be less of a female buffoon and more of a reclamation of that stereotype. In an interview with *Hola! USA* magazine, Vergara explained where Gloria came from after she was accused of exaggerating her accent:

Gloria's character is inspired by my mom and my aunt. They are both Latina women who grew up in Colombia, like me. They love color, prints and shoes ... It upsets me when Latinos complain about Gloria. I am grateful for the opportunity because the gringos have let me in with this strong accent I have. Eight years ago, nobody had an accent like this on television.³¹

At one point in the series, Sofia Vergara was able to bring a bit of strength to Gloria in a scene from a season six episode titled “Queer Eyes, Full Hearts.” In the scene, she laments how difficult it is to be a Spanish-speaking person in a predominantly white culture, saying:

Do you know how frustrating it is to have to translate everything in my head before I say it? To have people laugh in my face because I’m struggling to find the words? You should try talking in my shoes for one mile...Do you even know how smart I am in Spanish? Of course you don’t. For once, it would be nice to speak to someone in my own language in my own home.³²

Next on the list of common stereotypes, we have the Latin lover. The original Latin lover was Rudolph Valentino, an Italian actor who became one of the first pop culture sex symbols in the 1920s. His charismatic screen presence and sexual otherness earned him the nickname “The Latin Lover” by various Hollywood moguls who sought to capitalize on him.³³ The Latin lover is typically a Hispanic male, or at least a non-Anglo-looking male, whose sole purpose is to seduce white women with his smoldering presence, untamed passion, and

³¹ Carey Purcell, “Sofia Vergara defends 'Modern Family' character after Latinos complain about Gloria,” *Mic.com*, 2017, accessed March 2, 2023, <https://www.mic.com/articles/166833/sof-a-vergara-defends-modern-family-character-after-latinos-complain-about-gloria>.

³² Juan Bernal, “Queer Eyes, Full Hearts (Excerpt),” YouTube video, 1:11, January 11, 2015.

³³ Berg, “Stereotyping and Resistance,” 8.

adventurous, bordering on wild, personality. Valentino was the first to inhabit this stereotype in films like *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* (1921)³⁴ and *The Sheik* (1921).³⁵ After his untimely death in 1926, his moniker lived on in characters like Puss in Boots from the successful *Shrek* franchise. First appearing in *Shrek 2* (2004) and voiced by Spanish character actor Antonio Banderas, Puss in Boots was a one-note character who used his romantic accent and adventurous personality to his advantage, even proclaiming to the character of Princess Fiona after she mistakes him for her husband Shrek, “For you, baby, I could be.”³⁶ It is played for laughs, but it perpetuates the stereotype nonetheless. Staying in the realm of modern animation, the beloved iconic space ranger Buzz Lightyear briefly becomes a Latin lover in *Toy Story 3* (2010) when he is accidentally switched to Spanish mode. Buzz in Spanish mode walks around like a Flamenco dancer and wants only to seduce the cowgirl toy Jessie with his now smoldering, Latin charm.³⁷ Even the music that accompanies his exaggerated dialogue is itself exaggerated. In television, a good example would be the foreign exchange student Fez from the hit sitcom *That ‘70s Show*. Fez, whose real name and country of origin is never revealed, is constantly hitting on every woman he sees, has an exaggerated Spanish accent, and has no other defining character traits beyond an irrational love of candy. With the character returning for the Netflix sequel series *That ‘90s Show*, many fans voiced their concern about actor Wilmer Valderrama bringing back the character’s exaggerated accent as well.³⁸ He ultimately did bring the accent back, despite fan outcry.

³⁴ *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*, directed by Rex Ingram (1921: Metro Pictures), Prime Video.

³⁵ *The Sheik*, directed by George Melford (1921: Paramount Pictures), Vudu.

³⁶ *Shrek 2*, directed by Andrew Adamson, Kelly Asbury, Conrad Vernon (2004: DreamWorks), Blu-ray.

³⁷ *Toy Story 3*, directed by Lee Unkrich (2010: Walt Disney Pictures), Blu-ray.

³⁸ Jorge Rodriguez-Jimenez, “Accent or No Accent: Internet Has Thoughts on Wilmer

That brings us to the last common stereotype, the dark lady. The dark lady is the female version of the Latin lover and possesses the exact opposite type of personality. The dark lady is often reserved, often wealthy or otherwise well-off, and nigh unattainable to aroused American protagonists, but not always.³⁹ Mexican actress Dolores del Río, who was billed in her early career as the female Valentino, portrayed the dark lady in many of her films in the 1930s and 1940s. Her 1933 hit *Flying Down to Rio* sees del Río portraying the seductive and flirtatious Belinha, whom Gene Raymond's character Roger falls in love with but ultimately cannot have due to her engagement to another man.⁴⁰ Bringing it back to *High Noon*, Katy Jurado's character of Helen Ramirez can also be considered a dark lady during the events of the film. She is no longer reflective of the harlot and has agency and independence by the time she decides to leave Hadleyville and her many potential suitors behind.⁴¹

All five of these stereotypes exist to pigeonhole Hispanic actors and characters into preexisting categories that make them secondary to white actors and characters. They were developed and perpetuated by a consistently racist Hollywood system that sought to keep Hispanic actors from reaching their full potential as performers and cultural icons. When the Golden Age of Hollywood came to an end with the birth of the Hollywood blacklist in 1947 and a new culture of inclusion emerged in the wake of independent filmmakers becoming largely free from studio interference in the 1960s and 1970s, these stereotypes began to be questioned. Not erased, just questioned. But it was enough to get

Valderrama Bringing Back Fez's Accent," Remezcla.com, 2022, accessed March 3, 2022, <https://remezcla.com/film/wilmer-valderrama-fez-accent-that-90s-show-debate/>.

³⁹ Berg, "Stereotyping and Resistance," 9.

⁴⁰ *Flying Down to Rio*, directed by Thornton Freeland (1933: RKO Pictures), Vudu.

⁴¹ *High Noon*.

the ball rolling in ways that would change the landscape of Hollywood forever.

In my first chapter, using the films *Salt of the Earth* (1954), *Touch of Evil* (1958), and *Viva Zapata!* (1952) as primary texts, I will argue that during the Cold War and Hollywood blacklist, film studios and filmmakers deployed the use of ethnic stereotypes to minimize proper Hispanic representation. I will also briefly touch on the contributions of the Popular Front and its artists in overlapping communist ideologies with racial discrimination in America. They brought labor politics into popular culture by getting jobs in the radio and film industries, and some of the films produced during this time directly reflect their influence on Hollywood.⁴²

In my second chapter, using the films *Zoot Suit* (1981), *Stand and Deliver* (1988), *La Bamba* (1987), and *Born in East L.A.* (1987) as primary texts, I argue that the Chicano Movement influenced a new wave of Hispanic filmmakers to take control of their own stories and develop films that humanized Hispanics, while reclaiming certain stereotypes. In the 1980s, Hispanic filmmakers mined their own plethora of true stories first and made films that told their stories far more accurately and realistically than they had been told in the past.

⁴² Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (London: Verso, 1997), 85.

II. COLD WAR HOLLYWOOD AND ANTI-HISPANIC DISCRIMINATION

After World War II, the United States' relationship with the Soviet Union deteriorated rapidly. Though the two nations had allied against Nazi Germany, tensions grew as more American politicians turned again to fears of an increase in global communism, while Soviet leaders had their own reasons to distrust the American government. Soviet Communism, many Americans believed, was a totalitarian menace and represented a mounting potential threat to the American people. Out of growing fear of possible communist or Nazi conspiracies to overthrow the American government, Congress had formed the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) in 1938 to investigate possible subversive infiltration in the government and persecute anyone in a position of influence in the United States who was suspected of having communist ties, loyalties, or even sympathies.

One such victim of that first wave was Mexican actress Dolores del Río, one of the first internationally recognized Hispanic movie stars to emerge from early Hollywood. Born Maria de los Dolores Asunsolo y López -Negrete, del Río had risen to fame in 1925 after being discovered in Mexico. In her own words, from an interview she did in 1978 while promoting her final film, *The Children of Sanchez*, del Río describes how she wound up in the film industry:

In Mexico City, at a party, I met an American director by the name of Edwin Carewe. He saw me and he said, 'You could be the female Valentino.' This was 1925 and Valentino was, you know, the greatest star in Hollywood. He said, "He represents the Latin male on the screen, and I think that you could be the female Valentino." So I was very much intrigued and thought it would be fun and exciting to come over and spend a month here, work in a picture and return to Mexico City. And I never did return for sixteen years.⁴³

⁴³ Alan Eichler, "Dolores Del Río, Anthony Quinn – 1978 TV Interview," YouTube video, 38:38, March 26, 2021.

Edwin Carewe felt del Río inhabited the Hispanic stereotype of a female Latin lover, which would later evolve into that of the dark lady. Her summoning to Hollywood had nothing to do with her skill as an actress. It was based entirely off her looks and the potential she had as a “female Valentino.” She was, however, a highly skilled actress. Once sound was introduced in film, her career took off with mega hits like *Bird of Paradise* (1932)⁴⁴ and *Flying Down to Rio* (1933). She soon caught the eye of filmmaking titan Orson Welles, just as he was preparing his magnum opus *Citizen Kane* (1941).⁴⁵ Welles intended to helm a project for del Río, but it never came to fruition. His constant affairs and general disrespect towards their relationship led her to leave him via a telegram that he never bothered to answer.⁴⁶

Thanks to her public relationship with Welles, del Río’s star had risen substantially. But it all came crashing down when she was invited to a screening of the unfinished 1932 political film *Que Viva Mexico* directed by Soviet avant-garde filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein.⁴⁷ Del Río’s attendance at this screening made her guilty by association when the film was accused of being a tool to promote communism in California.⁴⁸ It did not help del Río’s case that many of the famous faces she associated with were either publicly accused or suspected of promoting communism, such as Charlie Chaplin, Frida Kahlo, Diego Rivera, and Orson Welles.⁴⁹ Dolores del Río returned to

⁴⁴ *Bird of Paradise*, directed by King Vidor (1932: RKO Pictures), Vudu.

⁴⁵ *Citizen Kane*, directed by Orson Welles (1941: RKO Pictures), Blu-ray.

⁴⁶ Noel de Souza, “Forgotten Hollywood: Dolores Del Río,” Golden Globes.com, Hollywood Foreign Press Association, September 16, 2020, <https://www.goldenglobes.com/articles/forgotten-hollywood-dolores-del-rio>.

⁴⁷ *Que Viva Mexico*, directed by Sergei Eisenstein (1932: Mosfilm).

⁴⁸ de Souza, “Forgotten Hollywood: Dolores Del Río.”

⁴⁹ Aldama and González, *Reel Latinxs*, 37.

Mexico and enjoyed a second wind as an actress, free of American political turmoil.⁵⁰ In her own words, “I wanted to go the way of the art. Stop being a star and become an actress, and that I could only do in Mexico, not in a country that was not mine and I did not know.”⁵¹

In their book, Aldama and González argue that Dolores del Río was forced out of Hollywood because the introduction of sound in film revealed to audiences that she had a Spanish accent which made her stand out, and not in a good way. As they put it, “When a Latinx actor crosses the line of being ‘too Latinx,’ it becomes a distraction and makes Hollywood hesitate.”⁵² In Mexico, Dolores del Río’s accent was not a detriment to her career, nor did it make her stand out. She had to rely on her talents as an actress for that, and she enjoyed a “second career,” as she called it, until her death in 1978. HUAC would return to Hollywood in just a few short years to continue to weed out suspected communists in the film industry.⁵³

Orson Welles, like many other left-leaning filmmakers of the time, used his films to help promote his anti-fascist beliefs that went hand in hand with the sort of communist leanings that HUAC was trying to squash. He was never shy about who he was targeting with his films. *Citizen Kane* was a clear attack on newspaper mogul William Randolph Hearst, whom Welles compared to Adolf Hitler in his controversial artistic fight against fascism.⁵⁴ In his films and radio dramas, he often incorporated race into his anti-fascist agenda. When he performed his own adaptation of Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* as

⁵⁰ Aldama and González, *Reel Latinxs*, 37.

⁵¹ de Souza, “Forgotten Hollywood: Dolores Del Río.”

⁵² Aldama and González, *Reel Latinxs*, 36.

⁵³ Eichler, “Dolores Del Río, Anthony Quinn – 1978 TV Interview.”

⁵⁴ Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 376.

a radio drama, he moved the setting from the African Congo to a Latin American jungle and turned the imperialist slant in the story into one between civilization and fascism.⁵⁵

The Popular Front in the United States was a radical social movement in the early twentieth century that embraced communist tendencies as well as anti-fascist ideologies.⁵⁶ The artists who were part of the Popular Front saw racism in America as an extension of global fascism, and they did what they could to point out the absurdities with their art. Welles himself considered racists and fascists to be one and the same:

We still hear it said that race prejudice has always existed in the world, that it flourished before fascism, that to call a man a fascist because he discriminates against another man on account of race is an improper use of the term. I agree that fascism is a strong word...but I think that history itself has widened the meaning of the word. I think that long after the last governments that dare to call themselves fascist have been swept off the face of civilization, the word “fascism” will live in our language as a word for race hate.⁵⁷

The Popular Front helped to spotlight the hypocrisy of American racism in the films that the Popular Front filmmakers produced. The willingness of the Popular Front to bring American race relations into the cinematic limelight encouraged HUAC and other communist-hating politicians to equate racial inclusivity with communist infiltration, which was hardly the intention of the Popular Front to begin with.

After World War II, HUAC’s influence rose again. In 1947, HUAC turned its sights on Hollywood, where screenwriters, actors, producers, and directors had gained a reputation as free-thinkers, idealists, and anti-capitalists, largely in part to the increasing number of production unions that were willing to go to bat for every film worker on every level, from actors and writers to editors and cinematographers. Representatives

⁵⁵ Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 376.

⁵⁶ Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 4.

⁵⁷ Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 395.

engaged in an ideological assault on Hollywood, helping to spark film executives to fire any filmmakers with communist ties, or alleged communist ties, in a campaign that became known as the Hollywood blacklist. Over a span of nine days in 1947, HUAC, chaired by New Jersey Representative J. Parnell Thomas, subpoenaed forty-one witnesses to testify about their alleged communist leanings. Some were deemed friendly, as in cooperative. As long as they named names of other suspected communists and continued to cooperate with the investigation, their lives remained mostly unimpeded. The unfriendly ones, such as screenwriters John Howard Lawson and Dalton Trumbo, were convicted of contempt of congress and sentenced to prison time as an incentive for others to come forward and cooperate.⁵⁸ Even when they were released after their time served, they could no longer work in Hollywood publicly. They had been blacklisted.

Filmmakers did not take to this HUAC invasion lightly. The Hollywood Ten, a group of writers, directors, and producers who refused to name names to HUAC and were arrested for contempt of Congress in 1948, attempted to continue to make movies under various aliases, such as 1953's *Roman Holiday* and 1956's *The Brave One*, both of which Dalton Trumbo wrote under the alias Robert Rich.⁵⁹ In response, several other staunchly anti-communist filmmakers led a campaign to make films that championed what they projected as American ideals. They sought to condemn behavior or ideas that were considered to be communist in nature, including cowardice and disloyalty. Such anticommunist filmmakers sought to take a position at the forefront of anti-communist cultural movements, appealing to moviegoers and their wallets along the way. The result

⁵⁸ Glenn Frankel, *High Noon: The Hollywood Blacklist and the Making of an American Classic* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017), 117.

⁵⁹ Bruce Cook, *Dalton Trumbo* (London, UK: Two Roads, 1977), 332.

was a new Hollywood surrounded by fear, paranoia, and an emphasis on American ideals that was reinforced and highlighted in the films that were made. Films that appeared to emphasize anti-American or pro-communist sentiments were considered dangerous by HUAC and singled out as candidates for blacklisting.

One such film was 1954's *Salt of the Earth*, a dramatization of the real life 1951 strike against the Empire Zinc Company from the point of view of the miners and their families. Many of the actual miners were cast as characters in the film. In 1953, Donald Jackson, representative from California, addressed HUAC in order to convince them to blacklist the film and all involved. He made up a scene in the film that featured two police officers arresting an American miner of Mexican descent and pistol-whipping the miner's young son.⁶⁰ This scene does not exist in the film, but it was enough to convince HUAC to launch a full investigation into possible communist subversion via this pro-union film about real New Mexican families dealing with real problems. The film's suppression only fueled the film's underground popularity. A 1953 review of the film by *Variety* Magazine wastes no time in singling out the film's connection to the ongoing blacklist for its readers, pointing out that the film's director, Herbert J. Biberman, was one of the Hollywood Ten, then referred to as the Unfriendly Ten due to their unwillingness to name names for HUAC.⁶¹ The review, written by an unnamed staff writer from Hollywood's premiere trade magazine, emphasizes Rosaura Revueeltas's strong performance while also reminding the reader that she is a Mexican actress.⁶² Since

⁶⁰ Ellen R Baker, *On Strike and On Film: Mexican American Families and Blacklisted Filmmakers in Cold War America* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 223.

⁶¹ "Salt of the Earth," *Variety*, December 31, 1953.

⁶² "Salt of the Earth," *Variety*, December 31, 1953.

its inception in 1905, *Variety* has been the most influential and respected source of entertainment news in and around Hollywood. It is therefore safe to assume that this review may have had more influence than other publications in Hollywood at the time, particularly with the opening line, “*Salt of the Earth* is a good, highly dramatic and emotion-charged piece of work that tells its story straight. It is, however, a propaganda picture which belongs in union halls rather than theatres.”⁶³

Ellen R. Baker’s 2007 book *On Strike and On Film: Mexican American Families and Blacklisted Filmmakers in Cold War America* delves into the history behind the real strike that influenced the film and details the development of *Salt of the Earth*, as well as the backlash it received as allegedly anti-American. The film itself never once tries to hide its pro-union stance or anti-discrimination goals. It begins with a voiceover by our protagonist, Esperanza Quintero, a miner’s wife played by Rosaura Revueeltas. She laments about the change she is forced to endure at the hands of the mining company that effectively owns her life and the lives of everyone she knows:

In these arroyos, my great-grandfather raised cattle before the Anglos ever came. Our roots go deep in this place, deeper than the pines, deeper than the mine shafts. This is my village. When I was a child, it was called San Marcos. The Anglos changed the name to Zinc Town. Zinc Town, New Mexico, USA. This is our home. The house is not ours. But the flowers...the flowers are ours.⁶⁴

The opening narration is paired with shots of crowded cemeteries and desert homes, drawing the audience into the same mindset that Esperanza Quintero lives in at all times. *Salt of the Earth* manages to avoid Hispanic stereotypes entirely. The New Mexican characters in the film are largely hardworking, honest, desperate, and determined to make

⁶³ “Salt of the Earth,” *Variety*, December 31, 1953.

⁶⁴ *Salt of the Earth*, directed by Herbert J. Biberman (1954: Independent Productions), Prime Video.

things better for themselves by forming a union, effectively spitting in the face of Delaware Zinc Inc. Additionally, the film's feminist perspective makes it one of the more progressive films of the 1950s. This concept is cemented by the scene where the miners hold a vote to determine whether the women of the movement should picket in their place, as any miner who tries to picket will immediately be arrested, and none of the women of the community are allowed to work as miners.⁶⁵ While the motion does eventually carry, it is Esperanza's husband Ramón who protests the hardest. Ramón says before his fellow picketers and their wives:

And what will happen when the cops come and beat our women up? Are we going to stand there and watch them? No. We'll take over anyway and we'll be right back where we started, only worse. Even more humiliated. Brothers, brothers, I beg you, don't allow this.⁶⁶

Ramón's plea is met with a smattering of light applause, but ultimately the motion carries after Estella Quintero, Ramón and Esperanza's grown daughter, demands an equal vote for the women of the movement, since they are deciding something for the women to do. This plea is met with thunderous applause from the women in the meeting. Community leader Sal Ruiz uses some legal trickery to allow the women to vote, thus carrying the motion for women to lead the picketing in the men's place.⁶⁷ Esperanza votes for this, but Ramón does not. It drives a wedge between them.

No doubt this blatant "all for one and one for all" system of voting stuck in HUAC's throat as a potential communist subversion. In fact, as part of his diatribe to have the production shut down, Representative Donald Jackson accused the film's

⁶⁵ *Salt of the Earth*.

⁶⁶ *Salt of the Earth*

⁶⁷ *Salt of the Earth*.

independent production company, Independent Productions Corporation (IPC), of producing a film that was deliberately attempting to aid the Soviet Union in damaging the United States' reputation and image in Latin America.⁶⁸ Efforts to sabotage *Salt of the Earth's* production stretched into the extraordinary and the unbelievable. Accusations with absolutely zero basis in fact were tossed around and widely believed. For example, labor columnist Victor Riesel went after the production hard after he was fed inside information by Screen Actors Guild (SAG) P.R. Director E.T. "Buck" Harris. Riesel connected the production to possible atomic spying, he accused it of threatening the stability of the nation's zinc mines, and he even said the film's very existence would hamper the American effort in the Korean War.⁶⁹ The film does not shy away from its pushback of anti-union sentiment, and all who oppose the union are written as villains. At the core of the pushback from Hollywood studios and Washington politicians was the plain truth that *Salt of the Earth* was an independent production about New Mexican families fighting for their right to unionize and thus survive. That is all the film is, but it represented so much more to those who saw it as a threat. It sparked a rise in independent productions in the eyes of studios and it represented a fight against very real oppression in the eyes of politicians.

For the past seven decades, *Salt of the Earth* has been consistently praised as one of the few largely successful independently funded films to emerge from blacklist era Hollywood. The film was a unified effort between blacklisted Hollywood filmmakers and oppressed New Mexican miners who were being denied their civil rights and right to

⁶⁸ James J. Lorence, "The Suppression of 'Salt of the Earth' in Midwest America: The Underside of Cold War Culture in Detroit and Chicago," *Film History* 10, no. 3 (1998), 347.

⁶⁹ Lorence, "The Suppression of 'Salt of the Earth,'" 347.

unionize.⁷⁰ *Salt of the Earth* was developed to be both an assault on the blacklist itself as well as the political forces that allowed it to go as far as it had.⁷¹ Independent films that were “real stories about real working people”⁷² had the chance to shatter the conventions of Hollywood and show other potential filmmakers how to make something of their own without the constraints of typical studio contracts.⁷³ Regrettably, with studio money comes the security of distribution, something that the *Salt of the Earth* production sorely lacked and would ultimately cost the film its chance at success. Of course, being blacklisted almost immediately by HUAC did not help matters either. However, what *Salt of the Earth* ultimately proved was that making a film outside of the usual Hollywood channels was possible, but not if you wanted people to see it. Still, the vision of independently produced, anti-discriminatory films had been somewhat achieved. A door had been opened for filmmakers without formally established connections, and that door would open a bit wider every decade until indie filmmaking giants like Richard Linklater, Quentin Tarantino, and Robert Rodriguez would kick it down in the 1990s, when independent productions and filmmakers truly came into their own. But *Salt of the Earth* was not the norm. Studios largely called the shots on every production that came out of Hollywood for most of the twentieth century. A desire to maintain a certain status quo hampered progress on the screen and reinforced Hispanic stereotypes constantly and consistently. One film that showcases this desire is Orson Welles’s *Touch of Evil* (1958).

Touch of Evil is a film noir that takes place in a U.S.-Mexico border town called

⁷⁰ Baker, *On Strike and On Film*, 3

⁷¹ Baker, *On Strike and On Film*, 3

⁷² Baker, *On Strike and On Film*, 3

⁷³ Baker, *On Strike and On Film*, 3

Los Robles and touches on themes of racial injustice, police corruption, and gang violence along the border. The film is loosely based on the 1956 novel *Badge of Evil*, which was co-written by Robert Allison Wade and H. Bill Miller under the single pseudonym Whit Masterson. In the novel, the protagonist is an American district attorney named Mitch Holt, but when Orson Welles decided to adapt it to film, he changed the hero to a Mexican special prosecutor named Miguel “Mike” Vargas. To play Vargas, the studio cast white actor Charlton Heston and had him made up in brownface makeup so he could convincingly masquerade as a Mexican national. The studio then cast white actress Janet Leigh as the love interest, Mike’s wife Susan Vargas. Welles later came on board as director once Heston and Leigh had already been cast. The decision to create an interracial marriage from scratch, where none existed in the novel, seemed deliberate on the part of Orson Welles, who appeared to be challenging the cinematic censorship board known as the Hays Office.

The Hays Code, or the Motion Picture Production Code, was first implemented in 1930, after it was decided in 1915 that films were not protected as free speech under the First Amendment.⁷⁴ Hollywood opted to create its own censorship code, and they hired former Postmaster General Will H. Hays to lead it. It was the predecessor to the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) and the modern film rating system that all American films must use (PG-13, R, etc.). However, in the Golden Age of Hollywood, the Hays Code condemned what they considered to be morally wrong, such as nudity, profanity, positive portrayals of crime, disrespect of religion or law, and most heinously,

⁷⁴ MasterClass, “The Hays Code Explained: History of Hollywood’s Hays Code,” MasterClass.com, September 2, 2021, accessed February 1, 2023, <https://www.masterclass.com/articles/hays-code-explained>.

depictions of homosexuality (which they called sexual perversion) and interracial relationships (which they called miscegenation.)⁷⁵ Every film that went through a major American studio between 1930 and 1960 had to pass through the Hays Code, resulting in waves of censorship through thirty years of American film that largely erased moral ambiguity, homosexual representation, and interracial relationships. While the Supreme Court did reverse their decision in 1952 and films were granted free speech protection under the First Amendment, the Hays Code did still hold significant power in Hollywood until it was gradually phased out due to a lack of sway over foreign cinema, the rapid rise of television, and consistent pushback from within Hollywood.⁷⁶ The ultimate nail in the coffin for the Hays Code was the monstrous success of the horror film *Psycho* (1960),⁷⁷ which director Alfred Hitchcock financed entirely out of his own pocket and without the approval of the Hays Code. The film's resulting success proved that the time of mass censorship in Hollywood was over. But in 1958, when Orson Welles wanted an interracial relationship in *Touch of Evil*, it was easier for him to cast a white man as his Mexican hero than to do battle with the Hays Code. The Hays Office had very little faith in the average moviegoer, whom they felt was highly susceptible to suggestion. If moviegoers saw something the Hays Office considered reprehensible, like murder or homosexual behavior, on screen, then surely they would emulate that behavior offscreen.⁷⁸ They even went so far as to insist that couples on screen be seen sleeping in

⁷⁵ MasterClass, "The Hays Code Explained."

⁷⁶ MasterClass, "The Hays Code Explained."

⁷⁷ *Psycho*, directed by Alfred Hitchcock (1960: Paramount Pictures), 4K Ultra.

⁷⁸ Gerald Gardner, *The Censorship Papers: Movie Censorship Letters from the Hays Office 1934 to 1968* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1987), xxi.

separate twin beds in the same room.⁷⁹ Ironically, the Hays Code had a vastly different effect on the filmmakers whose work it was attempting to edit substantially. Directors like Alfred Hitchcock, Billy Wilder, John Huston, and Orson Welles worked night and day to bring realism and truth to their work. The Hays Code was not impenetrable, however. If the studios greased the right wheels, the Hays Office was willing to overlook a bit of swearing or miscegenation, such as Clark Gable's iconic line, "Frankly, my dear, I don't give a damn," from *Gone with the Wind* (1939).⁸⁰ In the 1930s, the word "damn" was still fairly offensive and prohibited by the Hays Office, but producer David O. Selznick left it in anyway, resulting in a \$5,000 fine for the company and a lot more publicity for the film itself. The relationship between Mike Vargas and his wife Susan is supposed to be interracial in the film, but since both actors are white, it seems like some sort of loophole that Welles exploited. It may have been out of Orson Welles's power to cast anyone but a white man in the lead role. Charlton Heston was a bankable, successful movie star that Universal-International could rely on to put audiences in seats, and Welles did the best he could to make Heston's character a noble and heroic one. After all, Mike Vargas is a man of principle, honor, and dignity. Welles also challenged stereotypes with the character of Manolo Sanchez, played by character actor Victor Millan. Sanchez is a migrant worker who is framed for a recent bombing, and it is Captain Quinlan's planting of evidence on Sanchez that inspires Mike Vargas to investigate Quinlan for corruption.⁸¹ Knowing what the audience knows of Quinlan's character, the confession he later gets out of Sanchez is very likely coerced. Sanchez is also a noble, heroic character and helps provide a

⁷⁹ Gardner, *The Censorship Papers*, xxi.

⁸⁰ *Gone with the Wind*, directed by Victor Fleming (1939: MGM), Blu-ray.

⁸¹ *Touch of Evil*.

well-rounded, multi-dimensional cast for Welles's film.

While Welles may have championed some inclusion with *Touch of Evil*, the film is still built on a foundation of Hispanic stereotypes and inappropriate casting, from Charlton Heston's turn as Miguel Vargas to German-American actress Marlene Dietrich's performance as Mexican prostitute Tana, a clear example of the harlot stereotype.⁸² The character who is introduced to the audience as Pancho, whose real name is never said aloud, fits the bandido stereotype to a T. He is a one-dimensional flunky for Mexican gangster Joe Grandi. Pancho represents the secondary bandido variant; an inner-city gang member who often populates crime thrillers.⁸³ Grandi himself, who is portrayed by Armenian-American actor Akim Tamiroff, has exaggerated facial features, particularly around his nose and mouth.⁸⁴ Throughout *Touch of Evil*, we are treated to a Mexican landscape that is chock full of corruption and debauchery. It reflects a stereotypical depiction of the country itself, which in real life is made up of all sorts of races and ethnicities. Orson Welles himself said as much in a memo he sent to Universal Studios after they had reedited the finished film without his consent. Welles wrote:

Pancho and Grandi will impress themselves as the significant figures. In other words, we have established a middle-aged gangster and his young henchman, and beyond that, a general, rather vague impression of Mexicans of all different ages and types obviously bearing no special meaning in the story.⁸⁵

Touch of Evil was a box office success and remains critically acclaimed to this day. A review from 1958 by *New York Times* film critic Howard Thompson points out the film's

⁸² *Touch of Evil*.

⁸³ Berg, "Stereotyping and Resistance," 6.

⁸⁴ *Touch of Evil*.

⁸⁵ Jonathan Rosenbaum, Orson Welles, and Peter Bogdanovich, "Orson Welles' Memo to Universal: '*Touch of Evil*,'" *Film Quarterly* 46, no. 1 (1992), 5-6.

leery nature as a positive and foresees its longevity as an effective thriller.⁸⁶ Whatever Welles's intentions may have been with the film, it still reinforces these stereotypes and further pigeonholes Hispanic performers into playing the stereotypes instead of attempting to overcome them. One actor who sought to rise above perceived stereotypes and bring respect to the characters he played was Academy Award winner Anthony Quinn.

Anthony Quinn reluctantly became one of the faces of Hispanic representation in Hollywood during the twentieth century. He was born Miguel Antonio Rodolfo Quinn Oaxaca in the town of Chihuahua, Mexico on April 21, 1915. He was Irish on his mother's side and Mexican on his father's side, but he always saw himself as more Mexican than Irish, according to his 1972 autobiography *The Original Sin*.⁸⁷ Quinn's Irish heritage kept him from being fully accepted by the Mexican community, while he attributed his hot temper and "ethnic look" to his Mexican heritage. A newspaper article in the early 1970s claimed that Quinn's father was an Irish adventurer, and his mother was an Aztec princess, to which Quinn said, "I guess that's what Paramount Pictures publicity wanted you to feel. They didn't think it was romantic enough for my mother to be plain Mexican."⁸⁸ Despite a successful career that saw him take home two Academy Awards for his performances in *Viva Zapata!* (1952) and *Lust for Life* (1956), Quinn never stopped feeling excluded from Hollywood and the elite crowd therein, even when

⁸⁶ Howard Thompson, "Touch of Evil; Orson Welles Is Triple Threat in Thriller," *The New York Times* (New York, NY), May 22, 1958, accessed April 8, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/1958/05/22/archives/screen-touch-of-evil-orson-welles-is-triple-threat-in-thriller.html>.

⁸⁷ Anthony Quinn, *The Original Sin: A Self-Portrait by Anthony Quinn* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1972), 11.

⁸⁸ Quinn, *The Original Sin*, 11.

he married Katherine DeMille, the daughter of acclaimed filmmaker Cecil B. DeMille. In fact, he felt DeMille resented his Mexican heritage and was partially responsible for holding him back from obtaining a more diverse palate of roles. He had been pigeonholed into playing ethnic antiheroes, most of whom were not Hispanic but Italian, Greek, French, and any other nationality that producers felt Quinn looked like he could represent. He was an outsider, a rebel with a cause, and he wanted above all to earn the acceptance and admiration of all who had looked down on his family for generations. On the other side, he wanted the Hispanic community to recognize his and his parents' struggle for that acceptance. But that was easier said than done. In 2000, when Quinn was eighty-five-years-old, he did an interview with *New York Times* journalist Dave Kehr and expressed his honesty and disbelief at being awarded the Hispanic Heritage Award, saying, "It's a little late, but better late than never. I've only barely been accepted by that community."⁸⁹ In an interview Quinn did in 1976 with British interviewer Allan Hargreaves, he reflects on his lifelong struggle with his racial identity and with the prejudices of others:

I remember once coming home from school. On the way home from school...I had been picked on because at the time my name was Anthony Quinn...and we were living in a Mexican neighborhood because my mother was Mexican. I never knew where I belonged, whether I belonged with the Irish kids or the Mexican kids, you see? And the Mexican kids, they called me 'a terrible mick' and the micks called me a 'spic,' and I didn't know from any of that. I just wanted to belong to something.⁹⁰

⁸⁹ Dave Kehr, "A Role Model With a Hefty Collection of Roles," *The New York Times* (New York, NY), September 7, 2000, accessed January 2, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2000/09/07/movies/a-role-model-with-a-hefty-collection-of-roles.html>.

⁹⁰ ThamesTV, "Anthony Quinn | Studio Interview | Today | 1976," YouTube video, 22:07, August 9, 2017.

Quinn is the first of only three Hispanic actors to win Best Supporting Actor at the Academy Awards, and that first win came from a divisive film in which Quinn was passed over in favor of a bigger, whiter name. *Viva Zapata!* (1952) tells the true story of Mexican revolutionary hero Emiliano Zapata, who led the peasants of Mexico in rebellion against several dictatorships, particularly that of Porfirio Díaz and Victoriano Huerta in the early 1900s.⁹¹ Zapata's actions led to his death in an ambush in 1919. When the time came to produce a film based on Zapata's exploits, 20th Century Fox opted to cast white actor Marlon Brando as Emiliano Zapata and Anthony Quinn as Emiliano's brother Eufemio. Brando was the more bankable star. Screenwriter John Steinbeck wanted the film to succeed at the box office and was willing to sacrifice authenticity and proper representation to get it.⁹² Steinbeck also made Emiliano Zapata illiterate and insisted his love interest Soldadera be depicted with, in his words, "a kind of savage animal beauty."⁹³ Quinn was disappointed in not being cast as Emiliano, as he felt his dark complexion all but guaranteed him the role. While Quinn's ethnically ambiguous look made him unique in Hollywood at the time, he still wanted to play Hispanic characters above all others, particularly the role of Emiliano Zapata, which he coveted.⁹⁴ Quinn's parents were revolutionaries who actually fought alongside Zapata's contemporary Pancho Villa against Díaz and later Huerta.⁹⁵ Quinn had a personal investment in wanting this story told correctly, and having a white actor like Brando portray a Mexican revolutionary hero whose influence is still felt in Mexico today was

⁹¹ *Viva Zapata!*, directed by Elia Kazan (1952: 20th Century Fox), Vudu.

⁹² Aldama and González, *Reel Latinxs*, 33.

⁹³ Aldama and González, *Reel Latinxs*, 33.

⁹⁴ Aldama and González, *Reel Latinxs*, 33.

⁹⁵ Quinn, *The Original Sin*, 32.

unacceptable. However, Anthony Quinn solved problems his own way, and Brando, being a bit of an oddball himself, was irked because he thought Quinn felt he was the better actor.

While the contracts had already been written up by the studio, Quinn and Brando still felt the need to settle this among themselves in an informal competition. The argument was settled by, of all things, a literal pissing contest. Marlon Brando and Anthony Quinn stood at the bank of the Rio Grande and declared that whoever could urinate into the river the furthest would be declared the winner and would play Emiliano Zapata.⁹⁶ Brando won the contest and retained the lead role, while Quinn took all of his resentment, insecurities, and family history, and poured them into his performance as Eufemio Zapata. While an ego-fueled urination contest in no way constituted a binding legal contract, and Brando's pulling out as a result of said contest would never have been met with any sort of studio approval, the very existence of the contest between Brando and Quinn shows how ego-driven both men were in regard to their respective crafts. Quinn would win the first of his two Academy Awards for this performance. Brando would be nominated, but lose to Gary Cooper for his performance in *High Noon* (1952).

Today, most of what is written about *Viva Zapata!* takes aim at its thinly veiled Cold War politics, particularly its socialist themes and director Elia Kazan's decision to name names to HUAC, which cost him his standing in the Hollywood community for a time.⁹⁷ Emiliano Zapata was a leader chosen by his people to defend them against a

⁹⁶ Debradita Sur, "The 10 Wildest Marlon Brando Stories," Far Out Magazine, July 2021, accessed October 17, 2022, <https://faroutmagazine.co.uk/the-10-wildest-marlon-brando-stories/>.

⁹⁷ Jonathan M. Schoenwald, "Rewriting Revolution: The Origins, Production and Reception of 'Viva Zapata!'" *Film History* 8, no. 2 (1996), 110.

tyrannical government. Turning his story into a probable blockbuster during the height of the Hollywood blacklist and HUAC hearings was a bizarre choice, and one of the chief reasons MGM sold the film rights to Twentieth Century Fox in 1947.⁹⁸

Brando's casting as Emiliano Zapata turns the respected historical figure into a caricature of a Mexican, complete with a big bushy mustache and a wide sombrero. Had it been Quinn, the look would have been at least realistic and somewhat respectful considering that Zapata himself was dark-skinned. But on Brando, it becomes, at the very least, disrespectful. Who can be blamed for this decision? Largely John Steinbeck as the screenwriter and Elia Kazan as the director, but surely some blame lies with the studio. Ticket sales come before authenticity. People's lives are not always as cinematic as we would like them to be. A certain degree of artistic license is always taken by filmmakers when adapting historical figures' lives into film. It comes down to an issue of proper representation. Marlon Brando, while a talented and chameleonic actor, was born in Nebraska and has a mixed European ancestry, largely German, Dutch, and French Huguenot.⁹⁹ Anthony Quinn is of Mexican and Irish descent, and his family has a direct connection to Zapata's revolution. Giving Quinn the role he coveted simply would have made more sense. Just two years after *Viva Zapata!*, an independent production embraces authentic Hispanic representation with *Salt of the Earth*. In fact, casting Quinn as Emiliano Zapata would have only benefited the picture's realism and longevity, and might have encouraged other studios to embrace proper representation at an earlier stage

⁹⁸ Schoenwald, "Rewriting Revolution," 111.

⁹⁹ Jon C. Hopwood and Pedro Borges, "Marlon Brando – Biography," IMDb, Amazon.com, accessed January 31, 2022, https://www.imdb.com/name/nm0000008/bio/?ref_=nm_ql_1.

in cinematic history. Granted, there was no way of knowing that seventy years later, the landscape of Hollywood would view this kind of whitewashing as unacceptable. Still, when you have nuanced Hispanic representation in films from the same era, such as Mexican actress Katy Jurado's role in *High Noon* and many of the actors in *Salt of the Earth*, it makes one wonder if some form of studio-led racism was the driving force behind Anthony Quinn getting passed over in favor of Marlon Brando. After all, it was exceedingly rare that executives would even bother pursuing authenticity when it came to racial identity in the films they produced in this era.¹⁰⁰ Quinn may have taken the ethnically ambiguous yet financially prudent roles that came his way, but he was vocal about wanting to play characters that matched his own sense of self. The rise of Hispanic filmmakers in Hollywood, and more Hispanic voices openly protesting discrimination and stereotypes, would again change the landscape of global storytelling for the better.

¹⁰⁰ Aldama and González, *Reel Latinxs*, 33.

III. THE AFTEREFFECTS OF THE CHICANO MOVEMENT

The 1980s saw the rise of a national interest in Hispanic stories, partly thanks to more Hispanic filmmakers rising in mainstream Hollywood. Many of these filmmakers were influenced by the Chicano Movement, in which many Hispanic Americans, particularly Mexican Americans, were actively fighting structural racism in the United States. The cultural consciousness that was now being awakened in the United States thanks to the Chicano Movement meant Hispanic filmmakers now felt more ready and willing to address stereotypes and other societal struggles in their films. The emergence of filmmakers like Ramón Menéndez, Luis Valdez, Cheech Marin, and Gregory Nava meant that more accurate representation was becoming the norm in Hollywood, but negative stereotypes continued with popular and successful films like *Scarface* (1983) and *Highlander* (1986).¹⁰¹ Despite continued setbacks, the rising Hispanic stars at this time, both behind the camera and in front of it, fought to ensure that proper representation in Hollywood would continue to thrive and, hopefully one day, eclipse the stereotypes that had been there since film began. *Time* Magazine predicted the 1980s would be “The Hispanic Decade” in a 1978 issue, and they were correct thanks in part to the films that were being released by mainstream and independent studios reflecting a national change in cinematic perception.¹⁰² If nothing else, this was an opportunity for Hispanic filmmakers to reclaim common stereotypes and provide substance to Hispanic characters and stories.

This Hispanic stereotype reclamation of the 1980s really began with Luis

¹⁰¹ *Highlander*, directed by Russell Mulcahy (1986: EMI Films), Blu-ray.

¹⁰² Aldama and González, *Reel Latinxs*, 20.

Valdez's 1981 drama *Zoot Suit*. Valdez has often been referred to as the father of Chicano film. As a second-generation immigrant whose parents were migrant workers from Mexico, he grew up moving from field to field in California and developed an interest in the theater from an early age. He founded the Chicano theater company El Teatro Campesino in 1965 in an effort to use theater as a tool to achieve better wages and unionization for farmworkers.¹⁰³ Valdez became the first Chicano artist to have a play presented on the Broadway stage when he wrote and produced *Zoot Suit* in 1978. In 1980, the success of the play allowed Valdez to have complete creative control over the film adaptation, which he finished in six months to critical acclaim.¹⁰⁴ The film is a semi-fictionalized recount of the Zoot Suit Riots that occurred in 1943, where minorities wearing zoot suits were stripped and beaten by white sailors in Los Angeles.¹⁰⁵ Much of the violence of the Zoot Suit Riots was aimed at Hispanic youth, as well as other minorities, and would help inspire the growing Chicano Movement.¹⁰⁶

Zoot Suit follows a young Chicano named Henry Reyna, who is constantly at battle with his conscience, who takes the form of El Pachuco, an exaggerated zoot suiter who gives Henry advice when he needs it most.¹⁰⁷ The film depicts the Sleepy Lagoon murder case and portrays Hispanics in far more positive ways than they had often been

¹⁰³ Gregg Barrios and Luis Valdez, "Zoot Suit: The Man, the Myth, Still Lives (A Conversation With Luis Valdez)," *Bilingual Review / La Revista Bilingüe* 10, no. 2/3 (1983), 159.

¹⁰⁴ Barrios and Valdez, "Zoot Suit: The Man, the Myth, Still Lives," 159.

¹⁰⁵ Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 33.

¹⁰⁶ Ian F. Haney López, "Protest, Repression, and Race: Legal Violence and the Chicano Movement," *University of Pennsylvania Law Review* 150, no. 1 (2001), 206.

¹⁰⁷ *Zoot Suit*, directed by Luis Valdez (1981: Universal Pictures), Vudu.

shown on film in the past,¹⁰⁸ as we saw in *Touch of Evil* and *Viva Zapata!* Like many Chicano-led films of the 1980s, *Zoot Suit* has its roots in historical truth, but it reframes the narrative at hand with a Chicano perspective, as opposed to the largely white perspective these stories have taken in the past. *Zoot Suit* also attempts to reclaim the bandido/gangster stereotype, depicting its zoot suit-wearing hero as a multi-dimensional character constantly at war with his own conscience. Now that Hispanic filmmakers were able and willing to take charge of their own stories on film, they went first for true Hispanic American stories that were rooted in American history. It was crucial that audiences see themselves on the screen. Otherwise, what was the point? Telling their own stories in their own way, which had only been done a handful of times before in Hollywood, gave Hispanic filmmakers an opportunity to control their own narratives. We saw this happen with *Salt of the Earth*, but that was an independent production that was made without the aid of major Hollywood studios. Films like *Stand and Deliver*, *La Bamba*, *American Me*, and *Zoot Suit* all deal with true events and were able to secure major Hollywood funding. *Zoot Suit* is rooted in American history. Largely unpleasant history, but history, nonetheless.

The contributions of Edward James Olmos to Hispanic cinema cannot be overstated. He appeared in many Chicano Movement-inspired films of the 1980s, such as *Zoot Suit*, *The Ballad of Gregorio Cortez*, and *Stand and Deliver*. Into the 1990s, he directed and starred in *American Me*, a Chicano gangster drama that attempted to reclaim the bandido/gangster stereotype through the means of intense, sometimes hard to watch,

¹⁰⁸ Rosa Linda Fregoso, "The Representation of Cultural Identity in 'Zoot Suit' (1981)," *Theory and Society* 22, no. 5 (1993), 665.

scenes of violence that received critical acclaim for their realism.¹⁰⁹ Through his films and social activism, Edward James Olmos inadvertently became the face of Chicano cinema in the 1980s. But Olmos did not avoid stereotypes in his films. He tended to include them or attempt to reshape them. Do Hispanic filmmakers have more of an obligation to avoid stereotypes, considering they likely understand the damage they can do more than a white director would? Aldama and González think there is no easy answer, and film, like most things in culture, is widely subjective. The problem is rooted in a lack of availability for Hispanic roles outside of stereotypes:

In effect, they overrepresent because there are not more films to consider. When audiences see white actors as white characters involved in crime, drug dealing, prostitution, and prison, they are not then convinced that all whites are these sorts of criminals precisely because audiences see whites in a myriad of roles. If Latinxs appeared in hundreds and thousands of films per year in all manner of roles, then we wouldn't be talking about this issue.¹¹⁰

Olmos's most notable contribution to Chicano cinema is his turn in the 1988 biopic *Stand and Deliver*, in which Olmos portrays real-life calculus teacher Jaime Escalante.

Escalante was a teacher at James A. Garfield High School in East Los Angeles, a predominantly Hispanic area of the city. During his time at Garfield High, Escalante completely revolutionized the school's math program and successfully taught advanced calculus to students who were deemed unteachable or lost causes by other teachers. He effectively rescued these students' futures and gave them a useful life skill. Edward James Olmos earned an Academy Award nomination for his performance as Escalante, becoming one of the few Hispanic men to be recognized by the Academy in that category.

¹⁰⁹ *American Me*.

¹¹⁰ Aldama and González, *Reel Latinxs*, 50-51.

Stand and Deliver, directed by Ramón Menéndez, succeeds in promoting a realistic depiction of Hispanic high school students in East L.A. During the film's opening credits, Jaime Escalante drives past a large mural that reads "We are not a minority."¹¹¹ The film brings you into the world of East L.A. immediately; a world that is alien even to Escalante at first. He is able to relate to his students partly because of his own heritage, but also because you get the sense that he has been down this road too, particularly when he goes off on the investigators from the Educational Testing Service when the passing students are accused of cheating on the advanced placement test. Escalante accuses the investigators of racism and says this investigation never would have happened if the students had been white kids from Beverly Hills.¹¹² He is initially hired to teach computer science, but finds out on his first day that the school does not receive enough funding to purchase computers. So, he teaches remedial math instead. His class is comprised entirely of Hispanic students, many of whom would rather be anywhere else and have no problem expressing it. Some of them are wearing gang colors and openly threaten him. But he sees something in the students that no other teacher sees. He calls it *ganas*. (that is, "resolve").¹¹³ By treating them like human beings with dreams and feelings, and not giving up on them, Escalante is able to reach them and inspire them to learn highly advanced calculus. But he warns them that life will not be as kind as he is:

There will be no free rides, no excuses. You already have two strikes against you: your name and your complexion. Because of those two strikes, there are some people in this world who will assume that you know less than you do. Math is the great equalizer. When you go for a job, the person giving you that job will not want to hear your problems; ergo, neither do I. You're going to work harder here than you've ever worked anywhere else. And the only thing I ask from you is

¹¹¹ *Stand and Deliver*, directed by Ramón Menéndez (1988: Warner Bros), DVD.

¹¹² *Stand and Deliver*.

¹¹³ *Stand and Deliver*.

ganas. Desire.¹¹⁴

Stand and Deliver reclaims the bandido/gangster stereotype as well with the character of Angel Guzman, played by Filipino and part Native American character actor Lou Diamond Phillips. Angel is one of the wannabe gangsters who threatens Escalante, but over the course of the film, he embraces Escalante's philosophy of *ganas*. In one scene, he takes Escalante aside and requests two math textbooks. One for the classroom and one at home, so he will not be seen carrying a textbook around. He cannot afford to look intelligent in front of the other gangsters, but he really does want to better himself.¹¹⁵ In the end, Angel scores a perfect five out of five on the advanced placement calculus exam.

Lou Diamond Phillips would also portray Chicano rock and roll icon Ritchie Valens in the 1987 biopic *La Bamba*. *La Bamba*, also directed by Luis Valdez, tells the story of how Valens went from a poor farmhand to one of the forefathers of rock and roll. Valens was on his way to becoming a global superstar before his untimely death in the infamous plane crash that also claimed the lives of Buddy Holly and The Big Bopper in 1959. Valens was just seventeen years old. The film is ultimately a tragedy due to its inevitable ending, but Valdez embraces the carefree way that Valens chose to live once he became a star, as well as his contributions to pop culture.¹¹⁶ His biggest hit, "La Bamba," was a Mexican folk song that Valens transformed into a rock and roll song in 1958, bringing Mexican culture onto the mainstream music charts. History would repeat itself in 1987 when Chicano rock band Los Lobos' cover of "La Bamba" that they developed for the film also topped the pop music charts. The film version of Ritchie

¹¹⁴ *Stand and Deliver*.

¹¹⁵ *Stand and Deliver*.

¹¹⁶ *La Bamba*, directed by Luis Valdez (1987: Columbia Pictures), DVD.

Valens could fall into the Latin lover stereotype easily, due to his identity as a rock star. But Valdez chooses to focus on Ritchie's budding relationship with his girlfriend Donna and his rocky relationship with his troubled half-brother Roberto Morales.¹¹⁷

Casting Lou Diamond Phillips as the Chicano Ritchie Valens did create some controversy. The argument was essentially that Phillips had a dark enough complexion to play Valens,¹¹⁸ which is just about the reverse of what studios said about Anthony Quinn in the 1950s. Plus, if Luis Valdez, the de facto father of the Chicano film movement, felt that Phillips embodied the role enough to cast him in it, who is anyone else to challenge that?¹¹⁹ Yet again, Aldama and González take on this concept, in which they condemn what they call ambiguous ethnicity:

Because of the diversity in our looks, ancestry, and linguistic register, Latinxs are cast as ambiguously ethnic. We can sometimes play an Italian or a Middle Eastern characters, or sometimes a Greek or Native American. Isn't this a bit beyond the pale? Beyond laughable? It's acting *and* representation that matter. There are real-world implications from such casting decisions. Latinxs benefit from this sliding ethnicity on the screen, and yet they have historically been erased by actors of other ethnicities in much the same way.¹²⁰

Representation is important. Seeing yourself represented on the big screen can have a galvanizing effect on your self-esteem, your life decisions, and your place in the world. I have witnessed that firsthand with my own family and I have felt it myself at times. If an actor resembles a certain race or nationality that they do not actually belong to or represent, I do not think that they should play characters of that race. Anthony Quinn felt the same, and he tried many times to play Hispanic characters only to be consistently cast

¹¹⁷ *La Bamba*.

¹¹⁸ Aldama and González, *Reel Latinxs*, 43.

¹¹⁹ Aldama and González, *Reel Latinxs*, 43.

¹²⁰ Aldama and González, *Reel Latinxs*, 43.

as dark-skinned Italians and Greeks just to name a few. As good as Lou Diamond Phillips's performance as Ritchie Valens was, I can understand some of the outcry from Chicanos for the sake of proper onscreen representation. This exact thing would happen again in 1997 with *Selena* and the casting of Puerto Rican popstar Jennifer Lopez as the Tejano popstar Selena Quintanilla-Pérez.

Also in 1987, comedian Cheech Marin released his directorial debut *Born in East L.A.*, a satirical comedy about a Chicano American mechanic who accidentally gets deported to Mexico when he leaves his wallet at home. Cheech came to prominence as one half of the stoner comedy duo Cheech & Chong in the 1970s. After he fell out with Tommy Chong, Cheech signed on to make his first solo project, which evolved into a parody of border culture and a biting satire of border patrol agents and coyotes (individuals who smuggle illegal immigrants across the border). The film's title comes from a parody song released by Cheech & Chong in 1985. "Born in East L.A." has the same rhythm as Bruce Springsteen's hit single "Born in the U.S.A.," but the lyrics tell the story of a Mexican-American man who is falsely accused of being an illegal immigrant and deported to Mexico. The film meant a lot to the Chicano community. In an article recounting his time on the movie, one of the unnamed cultural consultants on the film praised Cheech's ability to balance his brand of zany, Hispanic humor with the serious topic of immigration and the consequences therein.¹²¹

Cheech's character, Rudy Robles, is a bit of a doofus. He is a mechanic who

¹²¹ Rubén Funkahuatl Guevara, George Lipsitz, and Josh Kun, "Born in East L.A.: The Movie," in *Confessions of a Radical Chicano Doo-Wop Singer*, 1st ed., 138–46. University of California Press, 2018, 138.

wears a hat that reads “No Cerveza, No Trabajo.”¹²² In Mexico, when he joins a band to make enough money to pay Jimmy the coyote to smuggle him across the border, he names his band “Rudy and the New Huevos Rancheros.”¹²³ *Born in East L.A.* is a comedy film first and a social satire second, but Cheech still finds time to include moments like a white American tourist screaming “Don’t touch me! I’m an American citizen!”¹²⁴ when Rudy accidentally bumps into him at the border. With this film, Cheech Marin attempts to reclaim or refute the stereotype of the buffoon. Rudy is a dolt who barely speaks Spanish and attempts to cross the border in full view of Border Patrol while the “Mexican Hat Dance” plays.¹²⁵ But he also develops very real feelings for a waitress named Dolores and gives up his place in the coyote’s truck so a woman can be with her husband. He actively fights to be recognized as a human being, and by the film’s end, he’s fighting for every illegal immigrant to be recognized as a human being. Even the parody song “Born in East L.A.” acts as a sort of Chicano victory anthem as it plays over the end credits.¹²⁶

With the end of the 1980s, Hispanic representation behind the camera and in front of it was at an all-time high. Valdez, Menéndez, and Marin, as well as Hispanic stars like Edward James Olmos and again, Cheech Marin, broke through the cultural barrier and introduced American moviegoers to Hispanic stories that were not loaded with offensive stereotypes or white actors in brownface makeup. In the 1990s, filmmakers like Robert Rodriguez would continue the trend set by his 80s contemporaries with his 1992 action

¹²² *Born in East L.A.*, directed by Cheech Marin (1987: Universal Pictures), DVD.

¹²³ *Born in East L.A.*

¹²⁴ *Born in East L.A.*

¹²⁵ *Born in East L.A.*

¹²⁶ *Born in East L.A.*

thriller *El Mariachi*, which stars unknown Hispanic actors and features a script entirely in Spanish.¹²⁷ The film was a phenomenal box office smash, created a franchise, and established Rodriguez as a major player in the independent film scene. In 1997, Mexican American director Gregory Nava would achieve great success with his 1997 biopic *Selena*, which stars Jennifer Lopez as Tejano music sensation Selena Quintanilla-Pérez, one of the most iconic Hispanic musicians of all time.¹²⁸ *Selena* was a box office success and has since achieved cult success as well. Despite obvious success for Hispanic filmmakers and Hispanic-led films, it was still obvious to studio insiders that Hispanics were still being underrepresented as a demographic.

In 1999, the Tomas Rivera Policy Institute prepared a study ordered by the Screen Actors Guild, titled “Missing in Action: Latinos In and Out of Hollywood.” This study attempted to identify why Hispanics are traditionally underrepresented in film and television. The study identifies the tumultuous relationship between studio executives and Hispanic filmmakers, with studio execs citing old stereotypes and a lack of cultural knowledge as major reasons behind exclusionary practices in Hollywood.¹²⁹ As of 1998, the study revealed that Hispanics appeared only 2.6% of the time during prime time television and only 3.7% of the time during daytime serials, and almost always in minor roles despite making up over 10% of the population at the time.¹³⁰ The study surveyed over five hundred Hispanic volunteers to determine how some Hispanic people choose

¹²⁷ *El Mariachi*, directed by Robert Rodriguez (1992: Columbia Pictures), DVD.

¹²⁸ *Selena*, directed by Gregory Nava (1997: Warner Bros), DVD.

¹²⁹ Harry P. Pachon, Louis DeSipio, Rodolfo O. de la Garza, and Chon A. Noriega, “Missing in Action: Latinos In and Out of Hollywood; A Study by the Tomas Rivera Policy Institute,” in *The Future of Latino Independent Media: A NALIP Sourcebook*, ed. Chon A. Noriega (Los Angeles: UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center, 2000), 15.

¹³⁰ Pachon, DeSipio, de la Garza, and Noriega, “Missing in Action,” 15.

which movies to see, and the results indicated that race and representation onscreen absolutely played a factor:

Latinos are more likely to see films that star Latino actors or actresses than they are to see films that are equally popular but that do not star Latinos. While Latinos do not acknowledge the importance of ethnicity in their movie choices, there may be a relationship in the viewers' minds between films that star Latinos or focus on the Latino community and films that present Latinos in a positive light. While Latinos do not place ethnicity at the top of the list of reasons to see a film, it clearly plays a role.¹³¹

Hispanic actors who are part of the Screen Actors Guild (SAG) discussed how their ethnicity had become somewhat of a hindrance for their careers. One unidentified actor said the studios "weed you out because you have Z's on the end of your name."¹³²

Another was told that they had been pigeonholed in Hollywood because of their name and they were considering changing it to something whiter, just like Rita Hayworth did.¹³³ Rita Hayworth was a famous American actress and pinup girl who was told by the studios to whiten herself up as much as possible. She was born Margarita Carmen Cansino to a Spanish father and Irish American mother. Much like Dolores del Río, she was discovered in Mexico in 1935 by Winfield Sheehan, the head of the Fox Film Corporation, who signed her under the name Rita Cansino.¹³⁴ As her star began to rise, Fox did not renew her contract because they felt she was too ethnic-looking. She was told she would have more success as an actress if she abandoned her Spanish looks. She changed her last name to Hayworth, her mother's maiden name, dyed her hair bright red, and most alarmingly, she underwent two years of painful electrolysis treatments to

¹³¹ Pachon, DeSipio, de la Garza, and Noriega, "Missing in Action," 17.

¹³² Pachon, DeSipio, de la Garza, and Noriega, "Missing in Action," 35.

¹³³ Pachon, DeSipio, de la Garza, and Noriega, "Missing in Action," 35.

¹³⁴ Priscilla Peña Ovalle, *Dance and the Hollywood Latina: Race, Sex, and Stardom* (Rutgers University Press, 2011), 75.

rearrange her hairline and restructure her face.¹³⁵ Now, as Rita Hayworth, she became a superstar and was cast in a much wider variety of roles since she could now convincingly pass as a white actress. But it cost Hayworth her identity and possibly her health. She was diagnosed with early onset Alzheimer's in 1980, after two decades of misdiagnosis, and was dead seven years later.

Ultimately, the SAG study showed that Hispanic actors are consistently more likely to be cast in supporting roles over lead roles than black or white actors are.¹³⁶ The data gathered over the six-year study was provided by the production companies employing these actors.

¹³⁵ Ovalle, *Dance and the Hollywood Latina*, 76.

¹³⁶ Pachon, DeSipio, de la Garza, and Noriega, "Missing in Action," 49.

CONCLUSION

In the time since the SAG study, the Hispanic market has only grown more significant to Hollywood. The atmosphere of Hollywood has become far more inclusive than it has in the past, not just for Hispanic filmmakers but for all historically marginalized groups. However, stereotypes still continue to this day, as we saw with Gloria on *Modern Family* and in films like *Puss in Boots: The Last Wish*, the sequel to *Puss in Boots* that came out at the end of 2022 and still featured the Latin lover stereotype at work, though the character had grown more three-dimensional since his 2004 debut.¹³⁷ Many of the studio executives cited in the 1999 SAG study are still running those same studios or have personally appointed their successors. A good example that shows the consistent racially biased thinking of studio executives is the 2000 Oscar-winning crime thriller *Traffic*.

In 2000, director Steven Soderbergh teamed with screenwriter Stephen Gaghan to develop a feature-length remake of the 1998 British Channel 4 miniseries *Traffik*, which wove together three fictional stories about the illegal drug trade in the United Kingdom from the perspectives of dealers, users, and politicians. Soderbergh's film would move the action to the United States and would weave together three stories about the drug trade between the United States and Mexico, focusing on a Mexican state police officer who is caught in a cartel war in Tijuana, a conservative Ohio judge taking over the War on Drugs just as he learns his daughter is addicted to cocaine, and two DEA agents who bust a powerful drug lord in San Diego just as his wife learns what her husband's real

¹³⁷ *Puss in Boots: The Last Wish*, directed by Joel Crawford (2022: DreamWorks), Peacock.

business is.¹³⁸

Traffic would be a considerable box office success and would be nominated for five Academy Awards, winning four. Puerto Rican actor Benicio del Toro would win a Best Supporting Actor award for his portrayal of Mexican police officer Javier Rodriguez, making him one of only eight Hispanic actors to win an Academy Award alongside José Ferrer, Anthony Quinn, Rita Moreno, Penélope Cruz, Javier Bardem, Lupita Nyong'o, and Ariana DeBose. While del Toro's performance garnered consistent praise from critics and moviegoers alike, there were also those who saw *Traffic* as insincere and part of the problem.

Steven Soderbergh, who acted as his own cinematographer under the pseudonym Peter Andrews, used different color filters in his camera to let the audience know what part of the world the action was taking place in. He used no color for the scenes in San Diego, he used blue for the scenes in Cincinnati, and he used yellow for the scenes in Mexico.¹³⁹ The decision to film the Mexico scenes through a yellow filter caused an unfortunate ripple effect throughout future Hollywood projects, where scenes that take place in Mexico are often shown through a similarly colored lens. While it may seem harmless, the filter paints Mexico as an otherworldly hellscape when compared to the “normal-looking” American side of the border. In a 2001 article in *Journal of the Southwest*, historian Andrew G. Wood describes this precise problem:

Yet while *Traffic* generally has been praised for its complexity and social realism, it subtly portrays Mexico largely as an ill-fated land with little hope. With the Tijuana scenes photographed with a gritty yellow frontier look, viewers are taken across the border into a stereotypic cinemascap filled with drug lords,

¹³⁸ *Traffic*, directed by Steven Soderbergh (2000: USA Films), DVD.

¹³⁹ *Traffic*.

paramilitary men, corrupt police, whores, and madonnas.¹⁴⁰

Soderbergh's painting of Mexico as the villain in the War on Drugs is detrimental to the American perception of the country. It gives the impression that Mexico is populated entirely by cartel soldiers, corrupt cops, and junkies, while the United States has complex, morally gray players in the same war. Therefore, the humanity of Mexican citizens gets left out of the equation, and the audience is led to believe that all Mexicans are somehow involved in cartel business, apart from del Toro's Javier Rodriguez and the intimidating, tattooed handyman with a heart of gold.¹⁴¹ Perpetuating these negative stereotypes only fuels the fires of misrepresentation that have been burning since Hollywood first cast a white actor in the role of a Hispanic character. The yellow filter would later be used to great effect in popular crime series such as AMC's *Breaking Bad*.¹⁴²

Inclusion has become more of a priority over the past twenty years in Hollywood's creative output, such as blockbuster films *Coco* (2017)¹⁴³ and *Encanto* (2021),¹⁴⁴ both of which heavily featured Mexican and Colombian culture respectively, as well as fully Hispanic voice casts. *Coco* does feature a host of stereotypes. For example, two of the major characters, Hector and Ernesto, are feuding mariachis and Hector is constantly trying to cheat his way across the border into the land of the living, a

¹⁴⁰ Andrew G. Wood, "How Would You Like an El Camino? U.S. Perceptions of Mexico in Two Recent Hollywood Films," *Journal of the Southwest* 43, no. 4 (2001), 760.

¹⁴¹ Wood, "How Would You like an El Camino?," 761.

¹⁴² *Breaking Bad*, season 2, episode 7, "Negro y Azul," directed by Felix Alcalá, written by John Shiban, featuring Bryan Cranston, Aaron Paul, and Dean Norris, aired April 19, 2009, in broadcast syndication, AMC, Blu-Ray.

¹⁴³ *Coco*, directed by Lee Unkrich (2017: Walt Disney Pictures), 4K Ultra.

¹⁴⁴ *Encanto*, directed by Byron Howard and Jared Bush (2021: Walt Disney Pictures), Disney Plus.

scene which has echoes of Cheech Marin in *Born in East L.A.*¹⁴⁵ Having a Mexican-American screenwriter and an all-Hispanic main cast does make the film more accessible and good-natured, though Adrian Molina could be influenced even subconsciously by the dominant stereotypes. There is an argument for the film being yet another insensitive depiction of Hispanic cultures. In the end, it is ultimately subjective.

There are also still films like *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012), a blockbuster superhero film that cast white English actor Tom Hardy as the traditionally Mexican comic book villain Bane.¹⁴⁶ It remains a long road ahead and there are no easy answers on how to dismantle stereotypes or consistently champion inclusion. The desire to maintain the status quo that led to films like *Touch of Evil* and *Viva Zapata!* is still very prevalent in Hollywood and modern film culture. As we saw in the 1980s, the desire to punch through that status quo and take charge of our own cinematic destinies is there too. The two are constantly at war with one another, resulting in a “one step forward, two steps back” approach in modern popular culture. Progress is consistently held back by films and filmmakers that fuel negative stereotypes like *Traffic*’s yellow lens filter and *The Mask of Zorro*’s Anthony Hopkins wearing a thin black mustache and calling himself a Spanish Don. Those two films are not that old. Tom Hardy’s Bane was met with critical disdain just eleven years ago. Today, we have more opportunities for inclusion onscreen than ever before, and without the union solidarity showcased by *Salt of the Earth*, the Popular Front’s vision for racial harmony that resulted in *Touch of Evil*, or the Chicano Movement’s fight for equality that resulted in feel-good true story films like *Stand and*

¹⁴⁵ *Coco*.

¹⁴⁶ *The Dark Knight Rises*, directed by Christopher Nolan (2012: Warner Bros), Blu-ray.

Deliver and *La Bamba*, it is very possible that those opportunities would not exist.

Representation has always mattered on and off the screen. In a country made up of so many different cultures as the United States, members of every single one of those cultures deserve to see themselves represented without bias, hatred, or disdain. Film has the power to do that for everybody, and it has been a long road for Hispanic representation without stereotypes. A film like *Touch of Evil* plays with stereotypes but also highlights the actions of a noble Mexican narcotics cop. A film like *Stand and Deliver* has characters who are wannabe gangsters, but it also celebrates the actions of a real-life Hispanic teacher who helped them better themselves. These films are more than just entertainment. They create opinion. They are tools that can be used to raise consciousness or to spread bias. They are the way we, as a society, see ourselves. It all winds up reflecting the nature of American society through the lens of film. The best we can do is hope we end up on the right side of that lens and not be a statistic that a historian a hundred years from now looks back on as an example of wrongdoing.

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