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"We're missing the Latino attorney or astronaut as the hero"[1]: Latinx Presence in Hollywood in the 20th and 21st Centuries

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Abstract: The article examines the Latinx presence throughout the history of American cinema and analyses the reasons for the mis- and underrepresentation of Latinos/as in Hollywood productions focusing on major stereotypes and politics of American government towards this ethnic group influencing their cinematic description. The final part discusses the recent works produced by Latinos/as and telling their stories in the twenty-first century to demonstrate that Latinos/as are the integral part of American society who want to be justly represented and have the possibility to speak in their own name.

Keywords: Latinx cinema, Hollywood, Latinx representation, stereotypes, diversity, racism

The 2002 documentary *The Bronze Screen: 100 Years of the Latino Image in Hollywood*, directed by Nancy De Los Santos, Susan Racho, and Alberto Dominguez, discusses the representation of Latinos/as in American movies in the 20th century. It focuses both on the cinematic descriptions and on the participation of Latinx[2] artists in the movie productions. As Luis Valdez, a famous Chicano playwright, movie director and a founder of El Teatro Campesino,[3] observes: "You've seen Latinos come and go in Hollywood" depending on the political situation in the U.S. The documentary ends with the statement that "the world is still all hungry for American dream and Hollywood has

1 Ben Lopez for Villafañe *Forbes*.

2 Latinx is an American English neologism and pan-ethnic gender-neutral label describing the U.S. population tracing their roots to Latin America and Spain. The gender-neutral (-x) suffix replaces the (-o/-a) ending of Latino and Latina typical of grammatical gender in Spanish. Its plural is Latinxs. In the U.S., the first uses of Latinx appeared more than a decade ago, but it was added to the English dictionary in 2018. However, only 23% of U.S. adults who self-identify as Hispanic or Latino have heard of the term, and just 3% say they use it to describe themselves, according to 2019 Pew Research Center. Words used for similar purposes include Latin@ and Latine (www.pewresearch.org and English Wikipedia).

3 Farmworkers' Theatre—a folk theater group founded by Luis Miguel Valdez in Delano in 1965 to publicize the cause of the United Farm Workers (UFW) and to assist the union in organizing farmworkers. In 1967 El Teatro Campesino left the UFW, moved to California (first to Del Rey, then to Fresno, finally to San Juan Bautista) and started to perform actos about Mexican culture and history for college students, professors, union organizers, and community activists, becoming an inspirational voice of the Chicano movement. During the 1970s, Luis Valdez experimented with various dramatic forms and took his theatre to Europe and Mexico. *Zoot Suit* (1978) became the first play by a Latino to be presented on Broadway. In 2000, Luis Valdez and El Teatro Campesino began an extended association with the San Diego Repertory Theater to develop and create new works for a growing multicultural audience, yet in 2006 it had returned to its roots as an ensemble theater company committed to generating social change through the arts, under the direction of Kinan Valdez (Castro 221-223, and elteatrocampesino.com/our-history).

to communicate that this dream belongs to all of us," still the voiceover bitterly adds that "it's never our [Latinos/as] time." Therefore, the documentary concludes that the future of Latin actresses and actors, as well as producers, in the 21st century will depend on the audience and support from the community, since "people from our community must do it [assure well-representation] for ourselves." Jennifer Lopez expressed a similar opinion in an interview for Latinx Now! about her 2019 movie *Hustlers* when she says: "I think we need to tell more of our stories. We have the power to change our reality."

Hence, in the third decade of the 21st century addressing the issue of Latinx position in Hollywood, we can ask the question—has the situation changed? Actually, not so much. In 2019 in *Forbes* magazine Veronica Villafañe published an article, "Number of Latinos in Hollywood Films Is Dismal. What Needs to Change?" in which she quotes a study from the USC Annenberg Inclusion Initiative, which analyzed 1,200 films from 2007 to 2018. According to the study: "Latino actors barely landed 4.5% of more than 47,000 speaking roles in the 100 top-grossing U.S. movies from each of the past 12 years and only 3% were leads or co-leads. The staggeringly low numbers are just as bad behind the camera, where Latino directors constituted 4% and producers just 3%" (Villafañe). Moreover, not only the underrepresentation of Latinos/as was dramatic, the portrayal of the Latinx population continues to be stereotypical and cliché. "Among the findings across 200 films from 2017 to 2018, 24% of all of Latino speaking characters were depicted as criminals (mostly gang members or drug dealers) and 13% were shown as poor or from low-income backgrounds. When it came to jobs on screen, the majority of Latino characters were portrayed as non-college educated individuals (construction workers, farmers, service personnel) with a meager number of highly educated professionals" (Villafañe).

Edward James Olmos makes similar observations in an *L.A. Times* article by Daniel Hernandez, entitled "Hollywood's Treatment of Latinos is an Open Wound. Healing it Requires a Reckoning." when he says: "White Hollywood does not want to tell the real stories of Latinos. Latinos are in a worse place now than in 1964 when [I] started in the business. Just because there are several successful Latino actors does not mean that Latinos are making it in Hollywood." Even though the number of Latinos/as involved in the movie business is constantly increasing, similarly to the number of movies or series, they are still hardly visible and appreciated in Hollywood. Moreover, Latinos/as say they encounter numerous obstacles in producing and viewing stories that reflect their experiences on the screen.

> U.S. Latinos in 2025 are expected to reach 20% of the population, according to census projections, meaning 1 in 5 Americans will identify as Latino in a handful of years. By 2045, a quarter of Americans are expected to be Latino. Yet study after study shows a vast gap between the number of Latinos represented in English-language Hollywood productions and their share of the population at large. USC's 2020 inclusion study of 1,300 popular films found that 4.9% of speaking roles in 2019 movies went to Hispanic or Latino actors. And UCLA's 2020 'Hollywood Diversity Report' found an underrepresentative 5% of the roles in scripted broadcast T.V. shows went to Latino actors in the 2018-19 season. (Hernandez)

Accordingly, Latino/a community undertook several actions. For example, Tanya Saracho founded Untitled Latinx Project, whose mission, as we can read on their webpage, is: "To increase Latinx representation in television, broadcast, cable, and streaming platforms through content created by Latinx writers," while their vision is: "an entertainment industry where Latinx content by Latinx creatives is the standard. Where Latinx people and their stories are represented authentically and in all their complexity." The group also released an open Letter to Hollywood to end Latino/a exclusion signed by 270 people from the movie business. In the Letter they write:

> We are incensed by the continued lack of Latinx representation in our industry, especially among the Black and Indigenous members of our community. Our stories are important, and our erasure onscreen contributes to the persistent prejudice that prevents real change in this country. This prejudice is not as overt as the one that keeps immigrant children in cages and separates families at the border, or as violent as the racism that is killing our Black, Brown, and Indigenous community members at the hands of police. But when we are onscreen, we're often relegated to stereotypes or villains.… By refusing to tell our stories AND by refusing to put us in charge of telling them—Hollywood power brokers are complicit in our exclusion. (Braxton)

As an example of racism and violence toward Latino/a population they point to is the mass killing in Walmart, El Paso, Texas, on Aug. 3, 2019, when a white man began shooting "intending to target Latino, specifically Mexican, people, according to a federal affidavit. Twenty-three people died, most of them Latino." The shooter was "a 21-year-old believer in the white supremacist conspiracy theory the "Great Replacement" (Hernandez). One year after the shooting, Democratic Representative from Texas and the chairman of Congressional Hispanic Caucus Joaquin Castro wrote an article to *Variety* in which he says:

> Today there is a dangerous nexus between the racist political rhetoric and the negative images of Latinos as criminals and invaders that Americans see on their screens. It's clear that many Americans have a fundamental misunderstanding of who Latinos are. Prejudice has existed in the United States for generations, but the image of our community created by film and television has done little to counter bigoted views, and too often has amplified them. I bet most studio executives are progressives, yet the industry is regressive. Hollywood looks like an America of yesteryear. You can draw a clear line from the pervasive lack of positive Latino representation on-screen to the rise in hate crimes against our communities, including in El Paso. In this moment of pandemic and protest, Hollywood needs to reckon with its systemic injustice and exclusion of our communities.

Subsequently, he decided to put political pressure on Hollywood. On September 24, 2020, the House Judiciary Committee on Diversity in America: The Representation of People of Color in the Media was held. Edward James Olmos, in his testimony, said: "We're talking about the single most important art form that humans have ever created. Nothing attacks the subconscious mind more. You sit down before a theater screen, a

dark room, with no peripheral vision. Everything goes into the subconscious, and it stays there" (Hernandez). He was also referring to El Paso shooting.

After the hearing, at the request of Rep. Castro and Rep. Carolyn B. Maloney (D-N.Y.), chair of the House Committee on Oversight and Reform, the nonpartisan Government Accountability Office agreed in October 2020 to initiate a report on "Latino hiring in entertainment industries, representation in management and the enforcement of federal equal opportunity laws and regulations by the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission and the Department of Labor" (Hernandez) with the purpose to use regulatory and political pressure on Hollywood. Moreover, members of the Congressional Hispanic Caucus and various other Latino/a organizations have been meeting informally with Hollywood executives about hiring and negative portrayals of Latinos/as. "We know what happens in D.C. affects entertainment, and how we're portrayed in entertainment is how we are treated in real life," said Brenda Castillo, head of the National Hispanic Media Coalition. "If we're not seen, then we don't exist, and then we're treated poorly. We're treated as noncitizens, as criminals and rapists, and that's why our children are in cages" (Hernandez).

Advocating for more Latino representation in the Hollywood Latinx community proposed numerous solutions. One of them is changing casting practices, including hiring Latino/a casting directors and auditioning and casting more Latinos /as in minor roles that can later lead to more significant opportunities – a strategy called building pipelines. Co-director of the 2012 breakout hit *Filly Brown*, Michael D. Olmos, a son of Edward James Olmos, said, "the industry [I have] pursued can often be a 'meritocracy,' but it is also a 'referral industry,' in which connections matter most of all. And making those connections can be tough." Thus, his father founded the Youth Cinema Project, which teaches multicultural children how to make their movies. "He wants to address the so-called "pipeline" issue at the earliest stage" (Hernandez). Accordingly, Flavio Morales, an executive vice president at the distribution and production company Endemol Shine Latino, argues that if more people of color work at every movie production stage: as grips, costume designers, camera operators, editors or production assistants, the pool of future directors and film pioneers naturally grows. "Look at the Blaxploitation movement," he said of the often-dismissed films. "We got line producers, writers, directors. We need our Blaxploitation movement, and we need our Roger Corman. How are we going to get better if we don't practice? We just need more things on the screen. More, more, more" (Hernandez).

Consequently, in this study, I am going to first analyze the Latino/a presence in American cinematography since its beginnings throughout the twentieth century, and then discuss several works produced by Latinos/as and telling their stories in the twenty-first century to demonstrate that Latinos/as are the integral part of American society who want to be justly represented and have the possibility to speak in their own name.

Latino/a history in Hollywood in the 20th century

In the beginning of Hollywood depiction of Latinos/as in the movies mainly was based on stereotypes associated with Mexican presence and relations in the U.S. Therefore, Mexican women were represented as treacherous, evil and unfaithful wives and

Mexican men as bad guys, dumb rapists of white women who cannot speak English (*Greaser's Gauntlet* 1908; *Tony the Greaser* 1911; *Bronco Billy and the Greasers* 1914; *The Gunfighter* 1917, etc.). Interestingly, similarly as in the case of 19th-century minstrel shows, many "Mexicans" at that time were played by white men whose faces were artificially darkened. At the same time, the term "greaser" became a synonym for a violent Hispanic on the screen. The appearance of a series of pseudo-documentaries about the Mexican Revolution that started in 1910 accentuated the image of Latin violence and primitivism on the screen (*Barbarous Mexico* 1913). *Viva Villa!* from 1934 in which Revolutionary hero Pancho Villa is depicted as animalistic and childish killer started another tradition of stereotypical Mexican men representation, namely the bandito (*bandido* in Spanish), a man with a thick Mexican accent, who wears a sombrero and poncho, and who represents the outlaw stories set in Mexico or near the border.

Probably the most famous depiction of the bandito character: Alfonso Bedoya in *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* (1948)

When Mexico and some Latin American countries decided to boycott movies that offended their people, President Woodrow Willson appealed to Hollywood producers: "Please be a little kinder to Mexicans" (*The Bronze Screen*). As a result, the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America signed an agreement that promised to avoid negative depictions of Latino/as. Subsequently, the 1920s witnessed the appearance of the "Latin lover"—a spicy sex symbol—played by Antonio Moreno, Ramon Novarro and Rudolf Valentino in the case of male roles and by Lupe Vélez and Dolores Del Rio in case of females (*The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* 1921, *The Spanish Dancer* 1923, *Scaramouche* 1923; *Ben-Hur* 1925; *The Gaucho* 1927; *Ramona* 1928). These actors and actresses were incredibly popular in silent movies where their accent was not a significant problem, yet the "talkies" brought a disaster to some of

them. While "true American men" could not be endangered by foreigners' speech, thus excluding Latino actors from major roles, the double standard benefited women. For example, Lupe Vélez made a smooth transition to sound cinema becoming one of the first successful Latina actresses in Hollywood. She was primarily cast in comedies, the series *Mexican Spitfire*, from which she got her nickname, being the most famous of the time and, as some claim, the work that paved the way for *I Love Lucy* TV show of the 1950s. Together with Dolores Del Rio they are considered Latina icons of Golden Age of Hollywood.

Since language was a problem in sound movies, yet the producers wanted the revenue from popular titles, some movies of the era had both English and Spanish versions, *Dracula* from 1931, directed by Tod Browning, being the best example. The movie made in Universal Studios in California had a Spanish version of *Drácula* with a Latino/a cast, shot at the exact location but at night during the graveyard shift to make production cheaper, which was a popular strategy at the time. English movies were shot during the day and Spanish-speaking at night.

Not only the accent and language were problematic in the first half of 20th century Hollywood, but also the depiction of borderland territory. The Warner Brothers' *Bordertown* (1935) not only again shows a Latino man, Johnny Ramirez, a looser and gambler, who cannot control his temper and violent outbursts, but also starts a tradition of locating Latinos/as in the U.S. in the East L.A. and Boyle Heights neighborhoods, where Ramirez once defeated by the white society retreats to be with his "own savage people." Thus, the movie sends a message that "you should not go beyond the borders of your tribe" and precisely defines where these borders are situated. Moreover, the irony is that the Ramirez character was played by a white actor, Paul Muni, who later was also cast in the 1939 film *Juárez*—a positive portrayal of Mexico and its heroic first president of indigenous origin, Benito Juárez, often praised as Abraham Lincoln of Mexico. As Greenfield and Cortés claim:

> the movie treats Mexico with considerable dignity as it relates Juárez's successful leadership of Mexico's victory over the French, including their puppet Emperor Maximilian. However, [it] also transforms Juárez into a metaphor for U.S. political democracy and a spokesman for growing American concerns about the spread of nazism and fascism. Pursued relentlessly by French troops, Juárez lugs a huge, cumbersome portrait of Abraham Lincoln, which he hangs dutifully on the wall at each stop. With French Emperor Napoleon III serving as an unsubtle surrogate for Adolf Hitler, Hollywood's Juárez intones anti-Hitlerian messages, sometimes in perfect Monroe Doctrine rhetoric: 'By what right, señores, do the great powers of Europe invade the lands of simple people... ?' (295)

Two things should be stressed here. Abraham Lincoln was never called Benito Juárez of the USA, and why did a white actor play the Mexican hero? "Lupe Velez once complained that she portrayed Chinese, Eskimos, Japanese, Indian squaws, Hindus, Swedes, Malays and Javanese, but rarely a Hispanic. Thus, false Latins often found the road to success easier than true Latins in the 1930's" (Woll).

Latinos/as' situation improved during the Second World War when Hollywood deprived of a European audience had to look for alternative markets, and the U.S., in

general, to secure its shores, had to maintain good relations with countries south of the border. This "Good Neighbor Policy" was characterized by two objectives: "1) to insure that nations in Latin America were joined in the Allied war effort and were not associated with the Axis or Communist sympathizers, and 2) to allow the U.S. access to Latin America as a source of raw materials and a market for goods, including films" (Falicov 245).

The shift from a historical pattern of the United States intervention in Latin American countries using military and manipulation was now replaced by a more soft power approach in which cultural productions played a significant role. For example, the "good will" tours throughout the Americas by famous actors and directors such as Orson Welles, Carmen Miranda, Rita Hayworth and Walt Disney were arranged by the Office of Inter-American Affairs (OIAA) which was the central agency to oversee international film industry relations.

Another strategy was to distance itself from the history of Hollywood films with an insensitive portrayal of Latin American characters. Subsequently, Hollywood studios were convinced to create a series of Latin-themed movies that would resonate favorably with Latin American audiences. Two organizations under the jurisdiction of the OIAA were used for that purpose—the Motion Pictures Division and the Motion Picture Society for the Americas (MPSA). This private society was financed by a congressional grant and consisted of Hollywood directors and producers who were reviewing scripts and material with inter-American content. It acted as a liaison between the State Department, War Production Board, Office of Price Administration, Hollywood Victory Committee, War Activities Committee, and other government agencies in order to facilitate the production of pictures with Latin American content, many of them in Spanish or Portuguese. As a result, "by February 1943, 30 films with Latin American themes or locales had been released, and 25 more were in production. By 1945, 84 films dealing with Latin American themes had been produced" (Falicov 249). Still, most productions were pure propaganda and functioned to maintain U.S. hegemony over the Western Hemisphere.

In the wartime era, Latinos were no longer bandits or ignorant peasants but appeared in various cinematic roles. Films also began to differentiate between South American settings, "allowing viewers to spend a *Weekend in Havana* and *That Night in Rio* (1941) or travel *Down Argentina Way* (1940)." However, according to some critics, the growing number of South American musical films which showed Hispanics singing and dancing to the latest samba rhythms replaced one stereotype with another. "Latin might no longer have been a bandit, but now he was holding a guitar and crooning the melodies of his native land. Many Latins worried that Hollywood had gone too far in its efforts to supplant earlier stereotypes" (Woll). Still, these romantic musical comedies introduced many new Latino actors and actresses. The best example could be Cuban-American Desi Arnaz or a Spanish-origin dancer Margarita Carmen Cansino who later became known as American Love Goddess Rita Hayworth. After several successful movies in which Rita Cansino played mostly exotic foreigners - an Argentinian girl in *Under the Pampas Moon* (1935), an Egyptian girl in *Charlie Chan in Egypt* (1935), a Russian dancer in *Paddy O'Day* (1935), or South American in *Only Angels Have Wings* (1939) and *The Strawberry Blonde* (1941) - Hollywood decided to

eliminate her ethnicity and de-Latinize her (*The Bronze Screen*). For that purpose, her hair was first dyed blond and then made famously red, and her surname was changed in 1937 to Hayworth since the original was "too ethnic." In this way, she became an "all-American glamour girl" and a wartime pin-up, "second only to Betty Grable in popularity" (McLean 8).

According to Woll, after the war, Hollywood lost its interest in the Latin extravaganza and focused more on the situation of Latinos/as in American society. An example can be *A Medal for Benny* (1945), a John Steinbeck tale about a Chicano war hero. The Chicanos were "portrayed as sensible and wise, while the Anglo community leaders were exposed as greedy and deceitful" (Woll). Consequently, several movies were made in the late 1940s and 1950s with the accurate and favorable representation of Latinos/as and their problems. Such productions worth mentioning here are John Ford's *The Fugitive* (1947) with almost the entire Mexican crew and symbolical depiction of anti-religious *cristada* (a war against Catholic Church in the 1920s in Mexico); *Border Incident* (1949) staring Ricardo Montalbán, a movie about the Border Patrol agents, the cruelty of human trafficking across the border, and Bracero Program showing Mexican laborers as honorable hard-working people, but exploited by the mishandlings in the program; *Viva Zapata!* (1952) directed by Elia Kazan with a screenplay written by John Steinbeck in which Marlon Brando stars a revolutionary Mexican hero Emiliano Zapata.

Furthermore, mentioned above, Desi Arnaz turned his Cuban nightclub singer and annoying husband Ricky Ricardo into one of television's most iconic characters in *I Love Lucy*, a CBS sitcom, which aired for six seasons (1951-1957) with a total of 180 half-hour episodes. The series followed the life of Lucy Ricardo (Lucille Ball), a young, middle-class housewife living in New York City, her husband Ricky and her best friends, Ethel and Fred Mertz ("A Brutally Honest History"). It was the most-watched show in the U.S. at that time, which won five Emmy Awards, and is still considered one of the most influential sitcoms in history. In 2012, it was voted the Best TV Show of All Time in a survey conducted by ABC News and *People* magazine (English Wikipedia). In 2021, Lucy's life and marriage was depicted in *Being the Ricardos,* where Lucy is played by Nicole Kidman and Desi Arnaz by Javier Bardem.

Moreover, the 1950s is the period when Puerto Rican José Ferrer becomes the first and till nowadays the only Latino to win an Academy Award for Best Actor for his lead role in *Cyrano de Bergerac* (1951). In 1953 Mexico-born Anthony Quinn won the supporting actor Oscar for *Viva Zapata!* and in 1957 for *Lust for Life*. Quinn was nominated in 1965 as lead actor in *Zorba the Greek* and in 1958 for *Wild Is the Wind*. It takes nearly 50 years for another Latino actor to win the Oscar when Puerto Rico-born Benicio del Toro wins in 2001 for his supporting role in *Traffic* ("A Brutally Honest History"). Alejandro González Iñárritu, in 2014, was the first Latino director to win Oscar for Best Picture for *Birdman*, and Guillermo del Toro was the second in 2017 for *The Shape of Water*. Both titles also won in the category of Best Director.

The first Latina to be nominated for her supporting role in *Imitation of Life* (1959) was Susan Kohner, a daughter of Mexico-born producer Paul Kohner and early sound star Lupita Tovar known for her performance in the Spanish-language version of *Dracula* (1931). In 1962 Puerto Rican actress Rita Moreno became the first Latina to

win an Oscar for her supporting role in a musical *West Side Story*, which is considered to be one of the greatest musicals of the time, won 10 Awards altogether and in which non-Latina Natalie Wood plays the central role of Maria ("A Brutally Honest History"). In 2021 Steven Spielberg made a remake of the musical, which despite the wide acclaim (winning 3 Golden Globes) and financial sucess, has been criticized by some critics for not bringing anything fresh to the story as it is, for example, observed in *New Yorker* Richard Brody's review:

> With the screenwriter Tony Kushner, Spielberg has attempted to fix the dubious aspects of the 1961 film, including its cavalier depiction of Puerto Rican characters and its stereotypes of a hardscrabble New York. But, instead of reconceiving the story, they've shored it up with flimsy new struts of sociology and psychology, along with slight dramatic rearrangements. They've made ill-conceived additions and misguided revisions. In the process, they've managed to subtract doubly from the original.… [T]he characters have no richer inner lives, cultural substance, or range of experience than they do in the first film.

Nonetheless, it took thirty years before Mercedes Ruehl won Oscar for the supporting actress role in 1992 for *The Fisher King*, yet she is not always counted as Latina, and another seventeen years till 2009, when Penelope Cruz, who is Spanish and not officially considered Latina, won the supporting actress Oscar for *Vicky Christina Barcelona*. In 2014, Lupita Nyong'o became the first Kenyan-Mexican to win an acting Oscar for her supporting role in *12 Years a Slave*. So far, four Latinas have been nominated for Academy Award for Best Actress, but none of them has won.

Moreover, the Sixties witnessed the appearance of the new western and with it the return of stereotypes about Latinos/as, namely the greaser, who is even more violent and bloodthirsty this time. In fact, in reaction to the African-American Civil Rights Movement, Mexicans became a replacement for all the vices that used to be attributed to Blacks before. The 1960 classic, *The Magnificent Seven*, can be an example of such a movie that allowed Anglos to demonstrate their superiority over Mexicans. Here we have seven famous American gunmen who rescue a poor Mexican village by wiping out an entire forty-man gang of vicious Mexican outlaws while losing only four of them. Another illustration of the lawless Mexican border and brutal, corrupt Mexicans can be found in 1969 *The Wild Bunch*. Both movies reinforced the pattern of going to Mexico when you are an escaping criminal or somebody looking for something illicit (sex, liquor, gambling etc.) (*The Bronze Screen*).

At the same time, the Sixties recognized ethnic differences among Latino/a population—the already mentioned *West Side Story* musical (1961) portrays Puerto Ricans in New York and has extraordinary Rita Moreno in the cast. Nevertheless, the central role of Maria is played by Natalie Wood, which is another outrageous, after *Juárez* (1939) and *Viva Zapata* (1952), example of Hollywood whitewashing. As Rita Moreno says in those times, "there was no Latina in the whole world with that star power to play the role." Furthermore, Raquel Welch adds that the message was that "for a star role you cannot be a Latina." Actually, Welch, a Latina of Bolivian descent, earned her popularity mostly starring in international productions. However, she recollects how when she played in *One Million Years B.C.* (1966), a British film, she was asked to

dye her hair blond. When she inquired why she was told that her role was of a "good girl and only the bad girl has dark hair." Additionally, Moreno, who won an Oscar for her performance as Anita, was not offered a decent role after that for seven years. She recalls that she was expected to play in other "gang movies" but of a lesser quality than *West Side Story*.

Generally, this type of movies became incredibly popular in the 1970s till early1990s when we see "a hardcore of Chicano gangs in films" and the bandito character transformed into the "urban greaser," and as Moreno says "placing the stereotypes of the [Latin] people in their [audience] minds" becoming "the self-perpetuating image" in the words of Luis Valdez (*The Bronze Screen*). On the whole, gangster movies are well-liked Hollywood productions, but the problem is that society judges gang films as they judge gangs. There is a kind of extraordinary fascination with gangs in American society, indisputably founded on the violent myth of the Wild West and gun culture. This fascination contains in itself a contradiction of both attraction to and repulsion of gang culture (the components of which are East L.A. *barrio*[4], guns, money, low-rider[5] cars, police chase, *cholos*[6] and hot women, violence, and revenge), and is probably one of the most frequently perpetrated negative stereotypes in American movies. The critics underline that it is all done for money while the "kids in prison get the instructions from watching gangs on the screen" (*The Bronze Screen*). The titles that should be cited here are *Boulevard Nights* (1979), *Colors* (1988) and *Mi Vida Loca* (1993) about a girls' gang with genuine gang members as actresses. Although the movie shows the effects of street gang violence on young women and their children, it still romanticizes and trivializes gang culture and friendships. Moreover, it confirms a negative stereotype of young Latinos/as as dangerous, drug-dealing, un-educated and incapable of thinking for themselves, and primarily welfare-dependent.

Contrary to these representations, in the late 1970s, Latinos began making their movies on an unprecedented scale to present their culture in their perspective and their own voice, so far not had heard in Hollywood. Luis Valdez said: "Hollywood doesn't accommodate any minority group. If you are a minority group you have to push, you have to fight, to climb a mountain. You can't feel sorry for yourself in this business, you have to be aggressive, you have to be positive and you have to compete." Accordingly, Valdez produced and directed several successful feature films—*Zoot Suit* (1981), nominated for Golden Globe Award for "Best Motion Picture—Musical or Comedy;" and *La Bamba* (1987), the Ritchie Valens' story, for Columbia Pictures. Gregory Nava directed *El Norte* (1983) about two Guatemalan refugees to the U.S., giving voice to Latino illegal immigrants. Cheech Marin took a comedic approach to immigration issues in his famous movie *Born in East L.A.* (1978), which is both a parody

4 A *barrio* is a neighborhood, a city district, or a ward in an urban area where Mexicans and Chicanos/as live (Castro 20).

5 The expression "low rider" is used to describe the car, the subculture, and the person who drives a vehicle that has been lowered rides very low and has been customized (Castro 142).

6 *Cholos*—in 1990s the urban youth, usually male between the ages of eleven or twelve and eighteen or nineteen who are distinguished by the clothes they wear, their speech, gestures, and a defiant street style. Although some may be gang members, some may be low-riders, or just Chicanos influenced by the cholo lifestyle (Castro 54).

about U.S. Border Patrol deportations of Latinos/as and a general social statement on immigration. He also played in a comic picture about low-rider culture in *Up in Smoke* (1978). In turn, Mexican farmworkers' experience was reflected in *!Alambrista! The Illegal* (1977) and *The Milagro Beanfield War* (1988). Edward James Olmos was the first Latino to direct a Hollywood movie about gangs from the Latino perspective—*American Me* (1992)—and as he described it did it for the kids—brown, black, white—to give them "a chance to make an educated choice whether they want this life or not." Finally, in 1995 Gregory Nava directed *Mi familia*, a multigenerational movie about a stereotypical Latino family in the U.S. but revealing all positive aspects of it and showing a stereotypical Latino male but "with a heart." The movie also wonderfully depicts Mexican culture and the syncretism of indigenous spiritualism (*curanderismo*, white owl appearing in the significant moments of Chucho's life) with Catholicism. Two years later, Nava directed *Selena* (1997), a film about a Queen of Tejano music killed by her friend and former manager that "catapulted Jennifer Lopez into international stardom" (*The Bronze Screen*). Still, not only her since the Nineties created a number of actors and actresses that would become world-famous stars—Salma Hayek, Edward James Olmos, Rosie Perez, Andy Garcia, Benicio del Toro, John Leguizamo and Antonio Banderas—the Latin lover of the 1990s.

Nonetheless, Hollywood in the 1990s maintained the tradition of whitewashing Latino characters, the most striking examples of the time being a film adaptation of Isabel Allende's novel about a Chilean family, *The House of Spirits* (1993), with Meryl Streep as Clara del Valle Trueba, Glenn Close as Férula Trueba, Jeremy Irons as Esteban Trueba, Winona Ryder as Blanca Trueba, Vanessa Redgrave as Nívea del Valle and only one native Spanish speaker, Antonio Banderas as Pedro Tercero García and the movie *Evita* (1996), with Madonna staring Evita Peron, Argentinian actress, politician, activist, and First Lady (latimes.com). In the Oscar-winning film *A Beautiful Mind* (2001), which depicts the life of math genius and Nobel laureate, John Forbes Nash, his wife, Alicia, is from El Salvador, but the movie made no mention of her ethnicity, and the part was played by Jennifer Connelly, a non-Latina, who won an Oscar for this role. Lisa Navarrete, spokeswoman for the National Council of La Raza, a civil rights organization that puts on the annual American Latino Media Arts Awards to promote the Latino image in entertainment, comments on that factual lapse as follows: "[this] omission robbed audiences of the image of a Hispanic professional who helped her husband re-emerge from his mental illness. 'They just changed it,' she said of the real Mrs. Nash. 'You'd think she's a Southern belle." The film's director, Ron Howard, refused to comment (Navarro).

Another continued convention has been casting Latinas in the roles of maids and household help, along with or even sometimes replacing Black women. Lupe Ontiveros' case, a widely recognized and acclaimed actress, who played a maid more than 150 times throughout her career, beginning with ABC's television series *Charlie's Angels* and most memorably in *As Good as It Gets* (1997), is the best illustration of this trend. She describes Hollywood and how it views Hispanics as follows: "It's their continued perspective of who we are. They don't know we're very much a part of this country and that we make up every part of this country." Moreover, to play a maid, she must put on an accent her family lost a generation ago. She herself was a Texas Women's

University graduate, where she majored in psychology and social work. Yet, she recollects: "When I go in there and speak perfect English, I don't get the part." Jeanine Basinger, chairwoman of the film studies department at Wesleyan University, adds: "It's not that some Hispanics are not maids. The issue is that not all Hispanic women are maids" (Navarro). Alternative striking illustration can be *Maid in Manhattan* (2002), in which Jennifer Lopez, already independent and successful in her career, plays a Latina woman who works as a maid in an expensive hotel, is a single mom (enforcing the idea that Latino men are absentee fathers/bad family men), and only finds success after she falls in love with a white man who "saves" her, which creates a distorted image for other Latinas.

Therefore, at the end of *The Bronze Screen* documentary, Latinos/as in Hollywood are saying, "We are tired of being portrayed as losers and hoodlums, as people who are not contributing to this country." They believe transformation is possible, but the hope for it lies in their own community. "It will change because people from our community will take it upon themselves to write the films and direct the films, and produce the films and tell their own truth instead of watching somebody else do it for them."

Latinos/as in 21st-Century Hollywood

The first of five demands included in the Latinx Letter to Hollywood declares: "*No Stories About Us Without Us*—….We need to be included in the telling of our own stories." The third compels: "*Represent All Aspects of Our Lives and Culture*.—….We are a diaspora from more than 20 different countries. We are more than just White Latinx and Mestizxs. We are Black and Indigenous. We are LGBTQIA. We are Undocumented. We are Disabled. We have different religious backgrounds and spiritual beliefs. We are more than our trauma. We write stories of joy, origin stories, genre stories, children's stories, and much more. We demand to be seen and heard in our entirety." The last one pronounces: "*Hire Us for Non-Latinx Projects*—We are able to write more than identity stories. In fact, our stories are also American stories, stories of resilience, of liberation, of hope. Stories of business owners chasing the American dream, little girls that one day will be president or work for NASA, war veterans, nurses, musical artists and fashionistas. Because we are steeped in the dominant culture, we speak at least two, if not more, cultural languages, well versed in yours as much as we are in ours. Our voices and our perspective will undoubtedly enhance yours and that of all Americans" (Braxton). Representative Joaquin Castro recently expressed a similar opinion: "Latino stories are universal, and more than capable of selling tickets and winning awards if told right. Hollywood has a civic duty to tell Latino stories—and by so doing, to take a stand against hate. The only question is whether Hollywood will finally give Latinos the opportunity to tell our stories." Subsequently, in the final part of my paper, I would like to analyze several movies made by/about the Latinx population in the last twenty years to examine if their stories are included and how universal they are. However, it needs to be emphasized that it is a subjective selection hence some issues or titles may have been omitted.

When we think about representing various aspects of Latinx life in the U.S., the topics that are often mentioned are related to their economic situation, issues

concerning migration and violence at the Border, and conflicts within the Latino/a family.

In 2002 the movie *Real Women Have Curves* directed by Patricia Cardoso and based on Josephina Lopez' play, was released. It is a story about relations between parents and children, being a working-class Mexican-American in the U.S. and a woman in a patriarchal culture. The movie's motto is that women should love who they are, their bodies, choices in life, and embrace themselves. According to the Sundance Institute, the film gives a voice to young women who are struggling to love themselves and find respect in the United States. The central protagonist—Ana Garcia (America Ferrera's first film appearance)—is a Californian Mexican-American adolescent who strives to match her dream of going to college (Columbia University) with her family's difficult economic situation. In this, she is supported by her grandfather and dad, but faces strong opposition from her mother, Carmen (Lupe Ontiveros), who believes that Ana should get married, have children and work in her sister's, Estela's, (Ingrid Oliu) East L.A. dress factory. Carmen also has very conservative views on female sexuality and body appearance, constantly warning Ana that she will never find a man if she does not lose weight. As a result, Ana rebels in a monumental scene when she undresses at work and encourages other women to do so and then they compare their "imperfect" bodies, bellies and cellulitis. This is one of the most liberating moments in the movie and articulation of body positive philosophy. Today *Real Women Have Curves* is considered the most important film of Latinx feminism, which reflects the experience of Latina women and labor exploitation of undocumented workers in America (Preciado).

A Day Without a Mexican (2004), directed by Sergio Arau, is based on the short 28-minute comedy (1998) by Yareli Arizmendi and Sergio Arau, which was so well received on different festivals, winning several important awards that the authors decided to make a full-feature movie of it. The origins of the idea and its title are in Pete Wilson's policies when he was running for re-election in California and pushing for Proposition 187[7]. Arizmendi recalls how she said to Arau then: "What California needs is a day without a Mexican!" And he adds:

> A DAY WITHOUT A MEXICAN was definitely the most provocative title choice and the decision to leave in the word 'Mexican' was very deliberate. We did this for historical reasons because the word 'Mexican' has become a pejorative word in our language, and I want to change that. Any Latino on the West Coast is presumed to be a 'Mexican' and we use comedy to toy with these perceptions and stereotypes in the film. (www.adaywithoutamexican.com)

7 California Proposition 187 (also known as Save Our State SOS) was a 1994 initiative to establish a state-run citizenship screening system and prohibit undocumented immigrants from using non-emergency health care, public education, and other services. It passed at a referendum on November 8, 1994, but the law was challenged in a legal suit the day after its passage and found unconstitutional by a federal district court on November 11. In 1999, Governor Gray Davis halted state appeals of this ruling. Governor Pete Wilson, a Republican, was a prominent supporter of Proposition 187, which ultimately became crucial to his re-election (en.wikipedia.org).

Though the comedy, the movie deals with a serious question of what an average Californian's life would be like on a day when a large part of California's population has disappeared. As a result, the state begins to deteriorate into economic, political and social chaos. Only then do people realize that their cooks, gardeners, policemen, nannies, farm and construction workers, waiters, teachers, etc. are of Mexican origin and are also a growing market of consumers in California. Hence, their return becomes a significant concern for the whole Californian community. In Arau's words: "How do you make the invisible visible? You take it away[.]" (www.adaywithoutamexican.com).

Bordertown 2007, directed by Gregory Nava and starring Jennifer Lopez and Antonio Banderas and Mexican *El Traspatio* (*Backyard*, 2009) directed by Carlos Carrera are two meaningful pictures that deal with the issue of violence against women at the US-Mexican border, namely Ciudad Juarez' femicides, and their relation to NAFTA, *maquiladoras*[8] and big business. Sabina Berman, a screenwriter for *El Traspatio*, describes the movie as follows: "It speaks of the wall of indifference and denial in Mexican society: There's a horrible problem, we can't solve it, let's change the subject" (Wilkinson). In fact, both these movies address femicide and attempt to analyze its reasons, but the Mexican picture provides more information about the life of the community and indigenous women, as well as shows how violence is structural and escalates in all patriarchal institutions—family, workplace, police force and justice system; how deeply it is rooted in the Mexican society. Both films have female protagonists who try to solve the mystery of the murders, yet the Hollywood production is more sensational, a thriller, rather than a work addressing social problem, and there is also a subplot of Lauren (Jennifer Lopez) having a crush on Alfonso Diaz (Antonio Banderas), which is odd taking into consideration the storyline, but entirely explicable bearing in mind Hollywood productions' audience. Nonetheless, both films vastly contribute to the discussion about violence against women, which is one of the most alarming issues at the US-Mexican border.

For me, another thought-provoking movie is *Girl in Progress* (2012), directed by Patricia Riggen, a typical coming-of-age story about mother-daughter relation, however its remarkable characteristic is that both the daughter and the mother have to grow up. A long tradition exists of Latino/a coming-of-age stories, with Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street* (1991) and Rudolfo Anaya's *Bless Me, Ultima* (1972) being the most famous Chicano/a examples. The latter has its film adaptation (2013), directed by Carl Franklin. Nevertheless, while Anaya's story is deeply rooted in Chicano/a culture full of religious influence and native spirituality, and the landscape of the American Southwest with the focus on the life of people in the countryside, *Girl in Progress* tells a more universal story and is not much centered in the Mexican culture. The mom, played by Eva Mendes, is not considerate and attentive to her daughter, which is why the kid is driven to grow up by herself, studying books and not wisely coping with the stories included in them. Her rites of passage include insulting her best friend, stealing money from her mother, manipulating another adult to buy her alcohol, and plans to lose her virginity with the school's playboy. She believes that

8 Assembly plants along the U.S.-Mexico border that appeared already in the mid-1960s, but their number increased dramatically after the implementation of The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994.

becoming an adult quickly will solve all her problems, only to learn that life is not fiction. Still, the mother also is far from behaving like a grown-up, responsible adult. She is having an affair with a married man and believes that he will leave his wife and well-to-do life for her, neglects home chores and recklessly acts at work which leads to a robbery. She is too preoccupied with herself to notice her daughter's problems. This lack of communication between the characters leads to a climax that promises a better future for them. Indeed, there are specific Latino/a markers in that story, yet the mother-daughter conflict and the adolescent problems discussed in the movie, are, for me, the evidence that "Latino stories are American stories."

In turn, *How to be a Latin Lover* (2017) is a contemporary satire of the Latin lover character so popular in Hollywood since Rudolph Valentino. However, this time the lover Maximo, played by Eugenio Derbez, is an ageing boyish playboy whose job for the last 25 years was to be a kept man by a rich old wife, Peggy. However, this flawless life ends abruptly when his wife, at her 80th birthday, replaces him with a younger man, a luxurious car dealer (Michael Cera). As, being entirely ignorant, Maximo signed a prenup, the consequences of which he realizes only now, he is left without home, money and any prospects at the same time. Hence, he shows up at the doorstep of his estranged sister, Sara (Salma Hayek), a widow with a nerdy, 10-year-old son, Hugo (Raphael Alejandro). Since Maximo as a child pledged never to work as hard as his father, in fact, his only job in life was to be a lover, which he practiced till perfection, so, instead of finding a decent job, which is Sara's suggestion, he again looks for a rich woman to keep him. He becomes interested in a wealthy grandmother (Raquel Welch) of one of Hugo's schoolmates, which leads to several funny slapsticks. Still, the movie is not only an excellent parody of one of the most recognizable stereotypes of Latino masculinity in Hollywood; it is a story about problematic family relations as well. Though not a perfect father figure, Maximo starts to occupy a significant role in Hugo's life, and the sibling dynamics between him and Sara is just magnificent. When the two argue in Spanish or discuss her romantic interest in a neighbor, both are at their comic best, and Hayek is the sexiest Latina when she dances salsa in her pyjamas. Moreover, the movie depicts the gender role reversal in a humoristic way—here women have money, and they seek for younger lovers, which is stressed by the character of Rick—Rob Lowe who has always played playboys in Hollywood and now is an elderly desperate gigolo. Finally, there is no promise of "redemption." At the end of the story, Maximo finds another rich woman to support him and even convinces her to give a job to his sister.

Conclusion

Latinos/as have been part of Hollywood since its beginning. Some of the stories they communicate are rooted in their culture, others are more universal, but all of them constitute a substantial segment of American culture, which is multicultural and global in its scope. As Moctesuma Esparza, a film producer, says: "Hollywood is the communicator of the American Dream to the world, and the world is all hungry for this American Dream, and as Hollywood communicates that this dream belongs to all of us, that we all participate equally in it that world is going to be impacted by that as well and we all gonna benefit from it" (*The Bronze Screen*). Hence, the Latinx legacy

to Hollywood is not only their contribution to the development of cinematography or the fact that they were legends and stars like Rita Hayworth, Anthony Quinn or Rita Moreno, but that they are full-fledged members of American society telling their stories and wanting them to be heard and recognized.

The best example can be the 2021 musical *In the Heights* directed by Jon M. Chu, which depicts a panorama of Latino/a characters representing the diversity of the Latinx community living in the New York *barrio* of Washington Heights. Here Cubans mix with Puerto-Ricans and Mexicans, and the central character Usnavi is from the Dominican Republic. However, they all have their version of the American Dream—*el sueño* in Spanish, or actually *suenito*, a little dream—that they wholeheartedly pursue. There are no gangs in their neighborhood, and no violence is presented, which is a romanticized vision, yet they are all hard-working, honest, dedicated to their community and values people who try to struggle with the gentrification of their home block. Some of them want to stay here, like Sony, a Dreamer whose *sueño* is to become a legal citizen, get a driving license and go to college. Some, like Vanessa, dream about getting out of the barrio, moving to Downtown New York and having a career ("One day I'll walk JFK and I'm gonna fly"), or like Usnavi, who at the beginning of the story wants to sell his shop, return to the Dominican Republic and re-open his father's beach bar. Finally, they both decide to stay and work in the barrio, fulfilling their *suenitos* here. Lastly, there is Kevin, the local businessman who has to sell his family business piece by piece to afford his daughter's, Nina's, Stanford tuition. He himself has not even finished high school but believes that his daughter is supposed to do it and fulfill his dream as the next generation. Nina, the local *estrella* (star), is beautiful and intelligent, and all the community rests their hopes on her success. She represents their dreams to change their lives and to get out. Nonetheless, after her first year at Stanford, where she meets with prejudice and stereotypes about Latinos/as, she is insecure about the rightness of her choice and wants to drop out. She reflects: "I'm the one who made it out but maybe I should stay home." At the same time, she realizes that she would let down not only her father but the whole community, which feels predominantly "powerless," which is wonderfully symbolized by 2003 blackout. Yet, when all the artificial lights go out and one of the vital members of the community—Abuela Claudia—dies, people arrange a vigil with candles for her and in this natural darkness they begin to see the stars. Ultimately, they grasp the meaning of Abuela's life maxim that dignity lies in small ways and beautiful things such as velvet gloves or embroidered napkins, and that "these little details tell the world, we are not invisible." Thus, they regain their "power" – the light is back.

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