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Prejudice and racism about Hispanics in the American Media

Pedro A. González, Jr.

Saint Thomas University

October 8, 2013

## Abstract

The portrayal of Hispanics in American film and television has focused traditionally on negative stereotypes of the worst values and traditions of the Spanish-speaking communities in the country, with a racist and prejudiced misrepresented focus, a sample of the superficiality and hatred by some in the media industry. Recent examples show that our theory is not so far from reality as we all do want.

Keywords: Hispanic, Marginalization, Racism, Immigrants, Media Stereotypes.

### Negative Latino Portrayals in the American Media

In our experience the negative portrayal of Latinos in the Media (Rodríguez, 1997: 13, 18, 32), has been constant since the invention of cinema and television in America. As Elizabeth Crespo (2000) notes in a comment about the book by Clara E. Rodríguez, *Latin Looks – Images of Latinas and Latinos in the US Media* (1997):

“The major theme that runs throughout *Latin Looks* is the under representation and misrepresentation of Latinos... Moreover, this under representation has increased over time... The vast majority if this were about crime, immigration, affirmative action and welfare, themes that reinforce the assumption that Latinos pose problems for Anglo Society. Even when Latinos appear in the news they do so very infrequently as experts, authorities or Newsmakers...”

The examples that follow show some historic samples of personification of minority stereotypes (La Pierre, 1999) in Urban America or as family folks, like the bongo player, “hot-tempered, English-garbling Cuban bandleader Ricky Ricardo (Desi Arnaz) had an Anglo wife (Lucille Ball)”. (Cortes, 1987).

#### **Video Reference:**

**Arnaz, Desiderio (n.d) Ricky Spelling Lesson. *I Love Lucy*. Retrieved video from YouTube**

**<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IPy9-zVEhVY>** (Zachary, 2007).

Another example of this negative portrayal is Carmen Miranda with her Brazilian *Baiana* (Cantarino, 2010) style as:

“Her oversexed images as the exotic, fiery Latina wearing outrageous costumes, dancing sexily and leaning at men... instead of embracing the costumes of their cultural meaning, US Hollywood executives pushed the costumes towards an

outlandish, flashy, goofy exaggeration that was more a racial joke than a tribute to Brazilian culture” (Genereux, 2007)

**Video Reference:**

**Miranda, Carmen (1941). *Weekend in Havana*. Retrieved video from YouTube**

**<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H1KmUV7jaag>** (Gabriele, 2007)

In addition, an example is the famous *Scarface* 1983 movie (IMDb) with Al Pacino the story of:

“How a Cuban thug shot his way to the top of the Miami drug world... It speaks volumes about the alienation that black and Latino kids still feel that Tony, for all his over-the-top antics, maybe more real, more relatable to them than, say, a boy scout like Barack Obama” (Ocaña, 2008).

**Video Reference:**

**Pacino, Al. 1983). *Scarface*. Say Hello to My Little Friend. Movie Clip. Retrieved video from YouTube:**

**[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a\\_z4IuxAqpE&list=PLC3BC3C6032A00E39](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a_z4IuxAqpE&list=PLC3BC3C6032A00E39)**

(Movieclips, 2011).

### Negative Stereotypes of Latinos in Film and Television

As our own experience and recent studies have shown portrayal of Latinos in American motion pictures and television are still scarce revealing “a succession of abusive stereotypes and denigrating distortions”. (Treviño, 1985)

He also reflects that:

“Mexican bandit type (Latino youthful gang members have emerged in film as updated, modern variants of the Mexican bandit type), Latin lover, most often

Mexican men, as weak, sleepy peons... What these stereotypes of the greasy bandit, the Latin lover, the dumb peon, and the Mexican spitfire all have in common is that they reduce to a one-sided, superficial and exaggerated depiction the real variety and depth and complexity of a struggling people. Significantly, the underlying social issues affecting Latino life in the United States have seldom been addressed in Hollywood films, and hardly ever have Latinos have been portrayed as people in control of their lives, capable of standing up for their rights, or having an interest in their own future.” (Treviño, 1985)

The “Bandido”[bandit], the harlot, the male buffoon, the female clown, the Latin lover, and the dark lady, these have been the defining, and demeaning, images of Latinos in U.S. cinema for more than a century (Ramírez-Berg, 2002). Our next example includes one of those ‘harlot/dark lady: Selma Hayek, irritated by the stereotyping that landed her in most of her parts all about her sex appeal, not an actress, but just “the exotic, Mexican babe in the tight dress” (Scott, 2002).

She said about that:

“People in this town [Hollywood] know Mexicans only as maids ... and they don’t hesitate to tell you that when they’re making a movie ... I remember going to audition for a sci-fi film and the studio being aghast at the idea of a Mexican in space ... One casting director even told me I should take advantage of my middle-eastern sounding name and pretend I was Lebanese.” (Scott, 2002:47).

Of course, other authors reflect the advance of the Latino women on film (Ramírez -Berg, 2002: 250) almost impossible to consider 20 years ago, like in other ethnic immigrations like, the Jewish, Irish or Italian origins. When they are ‘assimilated’

(Rodríguez, 2000) into the mainstream: the “melting pot effect” (Jarrahi, 2007) reached a social equilibrium fading the stereotype effect as a by-product of assimilation. (Ramírez-Berg, 2002: 26).

**Video Reference:**

**Hayek, Selma (1966). *From Dusk till Dawn*. Table Dance Clip. Retrieved video from**

**YouTube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UYxxgvA8rIM> (Mankingse, 2009).**

**Influence in the New Generations**

The negative influence of the media –television, cinema and internet could expand these negative stereotypes (Tam, 2004), because on average, children ages 2-5 spend 32 hours a week in front of a TV—watching television, DVDs, DVR and videos, and using a game console. Kids ages 6-11 spend about 28 hours a week in front of the TV. The vast majority of this viewing (97%) is of live TV...” (McDonough, 2009)

Influence on new generations and the repetition of stereotypes make people believe the negative images, characters, and stories they commonly encounter in news, television, film, and radio programming: “People exposed to negative entertainment or news narratives about Latinos and/or immigrants hold the most unfavorable and hostile views about both groups.” (Barreto, Manzano & Segura, 2012).

It’s a long road ahead, but efforts have been made like the 80 minute film “Latinos Beyond Reel”, distributed by Media Education Foundation, to universities, high schools and libraries in more than 40 states across the country. Edwin Pagan, the cinematographer said: “People’s lives can be changed for better or worse, and we need to make a stand for better stories to be made about our communities, and take charge of the reigns to make our own stories... We need to get positions of power and not become complacent.” (Puga, 2013).

The impact of the growing influence of advertising dollars in all aspects of the media makes a decisive influence in children (Santa Ana, 2002) and the media giants' hyper commercialization of U.S. culture and social life with corporate values and logic, which "carpet bombs" everyone, in particular children and youth. (McChesney, 2000)

**Video Reference:**

**Picker, Miguel & Pagán, Edwin (2013). *Latinos beyond Reel*. Official Trailer 2012.**

**Retrieved video from YouTube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HLuZZE5G3uU>**

(LatinosBeyondReel, 2012).

How Advertising Promotes the Worst

The media owner, publicity, fuel on the stereotypes of Latinos capitalizing in that 'dark' part of American culture, as professor William A. Nericcio at San Diego State University, said in the New York Times: "Stereotypes are the baseline. They are a given; they are not going anywhere". (in Vega, 2011)

Of course, that this extended to advertising and the contradiction in the publicity market oriented to Hispanics, who as an immigrant community with a hunger for democracy and consume "Publicity Turns consumption into a substitute for democracy..." (Berger, 1972).

All around us these 'Latino-esque hallucinations' (Nericcio 2007: 29), appear in newspapers, magazines, movies, television, among other forms of print and Media with a "physical and figure violence: blows on metal (*typtein*), blows on paper (*typewriting*), blows on flesh (*stereotyping*)" (Nericcio 2007: 123)

"*Tex(t)-Hex* studies the "drift" of these image forms *across* various media -from photography into feature films, from advertising into the novel, from television into public policy. Like some ungodly, miscegenated fusion of the "visual

unconscious," and the "political unconscious", these walking billboards acts as almost-sentient and ambulatory prosthetics". (Nericcio 2007:29)

One example comes to mind when Taco Bell accused of insensitivity for their controversial advertising \$200 million dollar campaigns, like the ad, featuring basketball star Shaquille O'Neal "insulting and insensitive to people with dystonia, a debilitating neurological disorder. The adverts featured the basketball star eating tacos with his neck cocked sideways." (Egan, 1988)

The Taco campaign with a Chihuahua character name "Gidget the Sassy" accused as being "a thinly veiled culture stereotype." (McEachern, 2009) Of course, that's from good intentions using multicultural or ethnic marketing strategies, anybody could end:

"Offending the intended audience mainly due to the assumptions one makes. And when looked at in that frame, Gidget was postulated to be a success because she's a dog from Mexico. But in order to be truly triumphant, there has to be something more than a geographical connection between an audience and a product".

(Massasri, 2007)

### **Video Reference:**

**Gidget (1997) *Yo Quiero Taco Bell*. Retrieved video from YouTube:**

**<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M8sZ1DWsAHE>** (Charlieg007879, 2006)

Racism against Latinos: more than ever?

An example is the event on last July in New York, but I considered best to read the declaration from two elected federal officials, about the barrage of hate speech on social media by racist commenters. They assume that singer Marc Anthony, born in New York to Puerto Rican parents, was born in a foreign place, in the wake of his performance of "God Bless



America" at the Baseball All-Star Game.

“Washington, DC - July 19, 2013 - Congressman Jose E. Serrano and Senator Jose M. Serrano denounced the ongoing... “Marc Anthony is a great American who performed at the All Star Game and has suffered unspeakable attacks on social media from outright racists ever since," said Congressman Serrano. "I denounce these racist comments and postings in the strongest possible terms. I feel sick to think that people would direct hate speech at a performer of any kind chosen to sing a patriotic song at a nationally televised event. Our nation should welcome all those who would sing its praises--literally or figuratively. The real unpatriotic actions are those taken by these social media racists. They do not represent the true America." (Lanham: Federal Information & News Dispatch, Inc., 2013)

**Video Reference:**

**Gordo y la Flaca, El [The Fat and the Skinny] (2013) Marc Anthony se defendió de las críticas por cantar 'God Bless America' [Marc Anthony Defends Itself about the critics for singing ‘God Bless America’]. *Univisión*. Retrieved video from YouTube (In Spanish): <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6ZyRG3HgMHE> (Univision, 2013)**

Presentation of actors and journalists

What follows is a selection of different segments of interviews with important Latino personalities in the American Media. Journalist Soledad O’Brien (Emmy Awarded on Television; Distinguished Visiting Fellow by Harvard Graduate School of Education) from CNN; well known actor Esai Morales; award winning anchor and journalist Michelle Valles, NBC4 of Southern California and the actors Jimmy Smits (Emmy, Screen Actors Guild, Golden Globe, Saturn awarded on Television) and Cheech Marin (Alma awarded).

Their personal experiences and struggles for the advance of the Hispanic representation in the media and first of all, for a positive image, real and more presented in the news focus on the importance of making our presence by hearing with the necessary Latino voices) and fighting against “their absence from mainstream American Media” (Domínguez, 2013).

“The four top American networks (ABC, CBS, NBC, and CNN) broadcast over 12,000 separate stories on their evening news programs in 2004. However, exactly 118, less than 1% of these stories addressed Latino issues (when U.S. Latinos or Latino immigrants are the subjects of the news story). Since U.S. Latinos comprise 15% of the total United States population (47million people), then the nation's understanding of Latinos from network news programs is wholly inadequate. This ratio has not changed to date; it has not changed in the last fifteen years... Moreover, the news about Latinos is not only scarce, but it frequently misrepresents this heterogeneous people. Two or three times a week an often mangled message is broadcast to millions of American network news viewers—who tend to accept them as trustworthy and accurate”. (Santa Ana, (2013)

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(HBO, 2010)

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**<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xmzhQcU7NVg>** (Michelle Valles, 2011)

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**Marin, Cheech (2010, May 29) *Cheech Marin on being Chicano*. Retrieved video from**

**YouTube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-UspTIU9-8k>** (Oregelfilms. 2010)

### Conclusions

Finally, in my opinion history of American media such as television, cinema and now the Internet proved that the image of the Hispanic or Latino continues to be a crucial topic within our society. Missing much in culture, in the recognition that we are a nation of immigrants entitled to be equal under the law, but above all, a collective effort for a better quality in the media is imperative and only achieved through responsibility and education: ¡Adelante!

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