

Latinas/os in Film and Television?

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By Susan Mendez

Another Oscar season has come and gone and for anyone interested in the representation of people of color in mainstream visual culture or the dramatic arts, it has been a disappointing season once again. This year, the talk was all about how *The Help* was the controversial film to watch. Yes, this movie did provide the only two African-American actors/actresses up for awards in this year's Oscar season, but the reality is that the roles that they played were ones of domestic servants. And the larger reality is that *The Help* was most likely the best choice for finding meaty, starring roles for these actresses. African-American actors and actresses have long dealt with the challenge of making stereotypical near racist roles and stories compelling and worthwhile. This problematic position just highlights the lack of interesting, complex roles for African-American actors and actresses due to the economic reality of supply and demand. Stereotypical stories of hardship are what people will pay to see; thus, they are what movie production companies will financially back. Recently, the backstory on the difficulties that George Lucas had in getting his movie *Red Tails* made became public knowledge as part of the publicity for this film. *Red Tails*, not the first movie to honor the Tuskegee Airmen and featuring a near-all African-American cast, still faced so many obstacles in production that not even having the name George Lucas attached to the project was enough to get investors. Finally, Lucas became the main financial backer himself. Yet, with all these very public and well-known problems facing the African-American community in getting proper representation in the mainstream visual culture or the dramatic arts, I cannot help but think that the Latina/o community has much work to do even to get to this public and problematic stage in the world of mainstream visual culture.

When I think of recent mainstream films that highlight the Latina/o experience in the United States, I come up with a very short list. This is possibly because I do not get to teach visual cultural texts often in my classes so the impetus to keep abreast of the latest films is not great in my work. Also, I live and work in a relatively small and not so-diverse town so even just flipping through the local news or arts paper will not keep me up-to-date on Latina/o film. The latest mainstream film related to the Latina/o experience that I can remember was the release of the action parody *Machete* (2010) with its very clear political commentary on the immigration issue. But other than that film, in the recent past, these are the films that I can recall: *Quinceañera*, *Angel Rodriguez*, *Washington Heights*, *Raising Victor Vargas*, *A Day Without a Mexican*, *El Cantante*, *Maid in Manhattan*, *Girlfight*, *Selena*, *Mi Vida Loca*, *Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada*, *Piñero*, *Lonestar*, *American Me*, *Mi Familia*, *Star Maps*, *Salsa*, *La Bamba*, *Born in East L.A.*, *Stand and Deliver*, *El Norte*, and *Zoot Suit*. These are the movies that I can remember either easily seeing in the theatres or getting a copy of at a local store; this is not meant to be a comprehensive list at all. But even in this sampling of mainstream films that highlight the Latina/o experience in the United States, one can see two patterns: the emphasis on the Chicana/o community in the southwest and the Dominican/Puerto Rican communities in the northeast and the general lack of commercial and/or critical success. The end result is a grouping of films that do not cover the diversity of the Latina/o community in the United States and that are not successful in any common measurable way. Yet, this discussion, this well-founded lament for complex and diverse roles and stories for the Latina/o community is not as public as it is for African-American community. Why is this so? Furthermore, few recent Oscar seasons have included Latina/o actors, actresses, or films that focus on the Latina/o experience in the United States, with the notable exception of Demián Bichir's Best Actor nomination this year for *A Better Life*. It seems that we as a community are behind in having these significant discussions, questions, and concerns brought into the public light. Independent film endeavors and projects are fantastic and worthwhile in getting more critical representations of the Latina/o community circulating, but it is important not to undervalue mainstream visual culture. This is

the arena in which various representations of the Latina/o community are easily proliferated and become accessible. This arena includes the world of television but even here, the number and variety of shows and roles that feature Latinas/os and their stories have been disappointing. Television shows such as *I Love Lucy*, *Chico and the Man*, *I Married Dora*, *Resurrection Boulevard*, *George Lopez*, *Cane*, and *Ugly Betty* have been pivotal in gaining representation for Latinas/os, but these stories, for the most part, do not stray far from familiar tales of exotic entertainment or hardship. The majority of the United States population learns of the different communities within this nation from the world of television and mainstream film. Therefore, the same questions and concerns that dominate the African-American community in the realm of visual culture need to have a central and public presence for the Latina/o community as well.

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Comments:

Mujeres Talk Moderator June 2, 2012 at 6:38 AM

Your blog essay is also a resource on Latina/o film and television programs. Has anyone written about *Resurrection Boulevard*? It was a fascinating drama that provided Elizabeth Peña with a meaty part.

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