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## **The Malleable Latina: The Construction of Hispanic Womanhood in Hollywood**

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### **Abstract**

This research studies how Latinas have been characterized in Hollywood movies and television in the past twenty years, questioning who is able to portray Hispanic women, who gets to be considered a Hispanic woman in Hollywood, and what productions look for when casting a “Latina” character. Data analysis includes analysis of films with Latinas as the central characters and the roles Hispanic women play in films. I aim to trace how the perception of Latinas has changed over the past twenty years in film and television in order to highlight the lack of diversity in films and television and to turn the spotlight onto the need for the creation of more realistic stories for Hispanic women.

### **Keywords**

Latinas, Hollywood, Representation, Hispanic, Diversity

### **Peer Review**

This work has undergone a double-blind review by a minimum of two faculty members from institutions of higher learning from around the world. The faculty reviewers have expertise in disciplines closely related to those represented by this work. If possible, the work was also reviewed by undergraduates in collaboration with the faculty reviewers.

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## Introduction

We need more in art and entertainment that is reflective of the world that we live in. And there's just not enough reflection in it for women, for people of color. There's still a huge amount of stories that have yet to be told, and we need those voices to find those platforms so that they can share those experiences.

— America Ferrara<sup>1</sup>

After Gina Rodriguez became only the third Hispanic woman to win a Golden Globe, America Ferrara aptly expressed her frustration with the lack of Latina award winners in Hollywood's film and television industry. This lack of Latina award winners goes beyond the threshold of award shows and is, rather, reflective of the lack of representation of Hispanic women in Hollywood films and television. This study grapples with the underrepresentation and negative portrayal of people of color in Hollywood films and television, with a specific focus on Hispanic<sup>2</sup> women. Hispanic women represent several distinct and diverse communities and countries; Hispanic women can be Afro-Latina, or ethnically Hispanic and racially white, from North, Central, or South America, and from varied socio-cultural contexts and backgrounds. However, when it comes to mainstream Hollywood movies and shows, Hispanic women are often typecast primarily as the exotic beauty with a fiery personality. This archetype makes invisible the different lives and experiences of Hispanic women and excludes many young Hispanic girls from seeing women on screen who look or act like them. Across the data analysis associated with this research, I explored several key questions, such as: how are Latinas characterized in big Hollywood<sup>3</sup> films? Who fits into the ideal standard of a Latina? What are these productions looking for when casting a "Latina" character and do the actors even have to be ethnically Latina? These questions helped me decipher my research objectives which were analyzing what it means to be a Latina character in Hollywood productions, who looks like and gets to play the idealized Latina, and what is being left out of the narrative.

I selected this topic out of personal curiosity and a connection to this experience of wanting to see myself represented on screen. As a Women's and Gender Studies and Film and Screen Studies double major, I wanted to research something that satisfied my interest in studying women in film. I felt drawn to highlighting this representational issue of Hispanic women because my mother is a Hispanic woman from Puerto Rico; and growing up with a passion for film and television, I found that I was always looking for women in media whom I felt connected to or whom I could see as a representation of myself. As a child, I learned that I was either not Hispanic enough or not white enough to feel connected to mainstream actresses in the early 2000s, such as Jennifer Lopez or Jennifer Aniston.

Arguably, the three Hispanic actresses with the most success in Hollywood are Jennifer Lopez, Salma Hayek, and Sofia Vergara. Taken together, they portray a very particular type of Hispanic

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<sup>1</sup> Carolina Moreno, "America Ferrara Takes Hollywood's Lack of Diversity 'Extremely Personally,'" *Huffington Post*, March 3, 2015.

<sup>2</sup>By Hispanic, I mean anyone from Spanish-speaking ancestry, while I use Latino/a to refer to anyone of Latin American ancestry. I use these terms here to focus on the roles Spanish-speaking women play in film and on Hollywood's representation of the "spicy Latina" trope. Ex. I will not use Latina to refer to Penelope Cruz (given her Spanish origins), however I will use it to refer to a character with Latin American origins whom she plays.

<sup>3</sup>"Hollywood" refers to the bustling creative community composed of talented men and women who work both in front of and behind the camera to produce high-profile, commercially distributed theatrical films and television shows." (Hunt, 2019, 8)

woman who does not represent the true diversity of women’s lives, experiences, or beauty. Indeed, there is a very clear type of woman that casting directors look to hire when identifying stereotypically Hispanic roles for women. Because Hispanic women tend to be underrepresented throughout the film industry, it is important to note *how* exactly they are being represented on screen. Let’s compare the roles of Hispanic characters such as Catherine Zeta-Jones playing Elena Montero in *The Legend of Zorro* and the characters that Salma Hayek and Penelope Cruz play in the movie *Bandidas*: while Hayek and Cruz are Hispanic and Jones is not, the characters they play are all dark-haired beauties with sassy personalities, who fight against men all the whilst their bodies and sexuality are put on full display. It seems that Hollywood is trying to push a certain narrative of what a Latina is whether or not the actress playing the character is Latina. This “narrative” is not only the storyline that Latina characters are given but also the description of how they are portrayed through physical features and personality traits. The Annenberg Inclusion Initiative at the University of Southern California released a study in August 2019 which found:

Across the 100 top grossing movies from 2007-2018, only 3% of films featured leads or co-leads with Latino actors. Females represented 49% (n=17) of the leads or co-leads. However, 5 of those 17 roles went to one female actress (Cameron Diaz). Summing across protagonist types (leads, co-leads, actors driving ensemble casts), the most frequently hired Latino actors were Cameron Diaz, Jennifer Lopez, Eugenio Derbez, and Jessica Alba. Only 8 male and 2 female leads, co-leads, or members of an ensemble cast that were 45 years of age or older at the time of theatrical release. Both female leads were played by Jennifer Lopez. (Smith, 2019, 1)

While few Hispanic women have lead roles in Hollywood films, the Annenberg Inclusion Institute found that the industry relies on Cameron Diaz for a majority of the female roles played by Hispanics. Hispanic women continue to be portrayed in films under whitewashed lenses whereby their storylines, appearance, and character adhere to normative white standards. Whitewashing in film also occurs in the process of casting white people in roles written originally for people of color. Evelyn Nakano Glenn (2008) defines colorism as “the preference for and privilege of lighter skin and discrimination against those with darker skin . . . researchers have revealed that people’s judgments of other people are literally colored by skin tone, so that darker skinned individuals are viewed as less intelligent, trustworthy, and attractive than their lighter skinned counterparts” (Glenn, 2008, 281). Recognizing whitewashing and colorism helps us understand the lack of diverse representations of Hispanic women in film, as well as the problems this absence can help to perpetuate.

Based on critical race scholarship, this research studies examples of Hispanic casting, characters, and storylines in mainstream Hollywood television and film productions. I developed eight categories associated with the actresses based on heritage<sup>4</sup> and then compared these backgrounds to the roles they are cast as in various films. For purposes of simplicity, if an actress has a single parent of Hispanic descent, I labeled them “SP Hispanic”; if both of the actress’ parents are of Hispanic descent, they were labeled “BP Hispanic.” Similarly, I extended this categorization to describe the types of characters played by the actresses in film. For instance,

- BP Hispanic actresses who have always played Hispanic characters
- BP Hispanic actresses who have played both white and Hispanic characters
- BP Hispanic actresses who have played both Black and Hispanic characters

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<sup>4</sup> My use of the word heritage refers to the ethnic background make-up of the actresses used in the analysis: specifically, whether an actress has one parent or both who are Hispanic, as well as their additional racial background other than Hispanic. I want to clarify— the distinction made between actresses who have a single Hispanic parent opposed to both parents being Hispanic is not to imply others are more authentic than others, but rather to acknowledge how their racial backgrounds to compare to their roles in film.

- SP Hispanic actresses who have played both white and Hispanic characters
- SP Hispanic actresses who have played both Black and Hispanic characters
- SP Hispanic actresses who have played only white roles
- SP Hispanic actresses who have played only Black roles, and
- Actresses who are not Hispanic but have played Hispanic characters.

I created these categories from watching films and television with actresses who have Hispanic heritage and/or feature a character known to be a Hispanic woman. I identified a character as Hispanic if their name indicated Hispanic descent such as “Maria Alvarez,”<sup>5</sup> by indication of cultural characteristics such as food, music, traditions, festivities, and so forth, and if Hispanic heritage was explicitly specified in the show or film.

## Literature Review

Previous research that explores different representations of Latinas in film informs my own research. I found particularly helpful and informative research that documents the diversity of Latinos in Hollywood, how Hispanics are identified, the complexities of the Hispanic identity, how we understand the identification of race and ethnicity<sup>6</sup>, the importance of correlation between an actress’s own ethnicity and her character’s, and how Hispanic actresses conform to Hollywood’s ideal standards. Together these articles contribute to my research for a broader understanding of the work that needs to be done within the film industry to portray realistic standards and stories for Hispanic women.

The Pew Research Center contributed a great deal of information that helped develop my research, including information released by the U.S. Census bureau stating that “The U.S. Hispanic population reached a record 60.6 million in 2019” and “They are the country’s second largest racial or ethnic group, behind white non-Hispanics” (Noe-Bustamante, 2020). This is particularly helpful to recognize because, while they are the largest minority group, they are severely underrepresented in film and television. In a Pew Research Center article titled, “U.S. Hispanic population surpassed 60 million in 2019, but growth has slowed,” Luis Noe-Bustamante presents 6 key facts about the U.S. Latino population:

Population growth among U.S. Hispanics has slowed since the start of the decade. The states with the fastest Hispanic population growth tend to have a relatively small number of Hispanics – and are *not* in the South. Los Angeles County had more Hispanics than any other U.S. county, with 4.9 million in 2019. Latinos are among the youngest racial or ethnic groups in the U.S. but saw one of the largest increases in median age over the past decade. (Noe-Bustamante, 2020)

This research for the Pew Research Center highlights how prominent of an ethnic group Hispanics are in the country and how even with this slowdown in growth, they continue to grow faster than other ethnic groups. This is important to point out in conversation with the contrasting element of this group not having the proper recognition in popular media such as film and television.

In “Who is Hispanic” (also published by the Pew Research Center), Mark Hugo Lopez, Jens Manuel Krogstad and Jeffrey S. Passel navigate the conversation of who fits into the category of being

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<sup>5</sup> Maria Alvarez is Penelope Cruz’s character in the movie *Bandidas*.

<sup>6</sup> Whereas race is typically associated with the categorization of physical traits, ethnicity remains categorized through cultural differences. Most people today use ethnicity to identify where a person is from or the makeup of countries their family is connected to; and in this way, Wade says of ethnicity, “What does ethnicity mean? Banks collects a useful set of comments from anthropologists and concludes that ethnicity is ‘a collection of rather simplistic and obvious statements about boundaries, otherness, goals and achievements, being and identity, descent and classification, that has been constructed as much by the anthropologist as by the subject’ (Wade, 2010, 16).

Hispanic, as well as introducing discussions about the difference between the definition of Latino/a and Hispanic identities. Most research organizations such as the U.S. Census Bureau and the Pew Research Center classify Hispanic people based on whether or not they themselves identify as Hispanic. Self-identification practices contribute to population estimates in the United States; however, these classifications do not include questions such as ‘where were you born?’ ‘where are your parents from?’ ‘what language do you speak?’ or ‘what is your ethnic background?’ when assessing whether a person is Hispanic or not. In fact, even if someone is born in a Latin country and is of Hispanic descent with others identifying the person as Hispanic, the Census Bureau will not count the person as Hispanic if they do not self-report as such. This designation includes 20 Spanish-speaking nations from Latin America and Spain itself, but not Portugal or Portuguese-speaking Brazil. This information highlights the complexity and ambiguity of who gets to be identified as Hispanic and what it means to be Hispanic.

The Pew Research Center also published, “Afro-Latino: A deeply rooted identity among U.S. Hispanics” by Gustavo Lopez and Ana Gonzalez-Barrera, which offers a different perspective on Hispanic experiences. While focusing on a very specific group of Hispanics, this article illustrates another facet of Hispanic identity as multidimensional. Lopez and Gonzalez-Barrera found that “A Pew Research Center survey of Latino adults shows that one-quarter of all U.S. Latinos self-identify as Afro-Latino, Afro-Caribbean or of African descent with roots in Latin America” (Lopez and Gonzalez-Barrera, 2016). But the complexity of self-identification with race was a bit harder to establish conclusively; they state, “Afro-Latinos’ views of race are also unique. When asked directly about their race, only 18% of Afro-Latinos identified their race or one of their races as black. In fact, higher shares of Afro-Latinos identified as white alone or white in combination with another race (39%) or volunteered that their race or one of their races was Hispanic (24%). Only 9% identified as mixed race” (Lopez and Gonzalez-Barrera, 2016). Nonetheless, with nearly 25% of Hispanics identifying as Afro-Latina/o, there should be more representation of them in film and television.

“Latinos and Multiracial America” by Raúl Quiñones-Rosado discusses the complexities of Latinos in America being identified as a race versus an ethnicity when Latinos and/or Hispanics represent many different races and offer an array of skin color within the same community. Quiñones-Rosado strikes an important point when he highlights that this grey area of how Hispanics are identified can be harmful in politics, government and racial equity measures. He asserts, “an ambivalent national race policy that insists on dividing Latinos among multiple races and, then re-radicalizing more than half of this segment of the population as white would surely appear to foster the process of Latino assimilation” (Quiñones-Rosado, 2016, 9). Quiñones-Rosado documents the political significance of racial and ethnic identity, particularly in the case of Hispanics who may or may not be classified as part of the white majority in mainstream policy debates and perhaps more critically electoral polls. The invisibility of diverse Hispanic figures in the media mirrors their erasure politically as well. Policies fostering assimilation also erase the hybridity that Lourdes Martinez-Echazabal identifies. She examines the complex background of Hispanic people by sharing the history of the “Mestizaje,” or the historical mixing of nationalities and ethnic backgrounds within Latin America during European colonialism. The article, “Mestizaje and the Discourse of National/Cultural Identity in Latin America, 1845-1959” traces the effect of the introduction of the conquistadors in Latin America and how it shaped cultural identity within the Latino community. Her work illustrates the complex ways in which Hispanic backgrounds involve the mixing of different cultures. Martinez-Echazabal states, “Most recently, the concept of the mestizaje has come to play an important role in the recognition of the plurality of cultural identities in the region and, therefore, the hybrid constitution of the nation, as well as in the formation of a diaspora identity forged under the rubric of *lo hispano* or *lo latino*” (Martinez-Echazabal, 1998, 21). This scholarship further clarifies how the Latino/a identity



is shaped, and in turn illustrates how there is not a set-in-stone definition of what it means to be Hispanic. In fact, Hispanic identity today continues to be shaped by the historical mixing of multiple cultures and backgrounds, but U.S. policies misunderstand and erase the community by leading people to identify as white or Black, disregarding their Hispanic background.

The erasure of the Hispanic community through U.S. policy is directly seen in U.S. film. Research conducted at the University of Southern California by Dr. Stacy L. Smith, Marc Choueiti, Ariana Case Dr. Katherine Pieper, Hannah Clark, Karla Hernandez & Jacqueline Martinez, identified a major gap between the casting of Latino actors in film as leading actors versus Latinos within the U.S. population. Latinos are more often erased in movies rather than included, and when they are included in films, scholars suggest they tend to play stereotypical roles such as being poor, isolated and criminal (Smith, 2019, 5). Additionally, they argued that a large part of the reason why Latinos are not featured on camera is because not many Latinos are involved behind the camera as directors, producers or executives.

The “2019 Hollywood Diversity Report,” published by Dr. Darnell Hunt, Dr. Ana-Christina Ramon, Michael Tran, Debanjan Roychoudhury, Christina Chica and Alexandria Brown at the University of California Los Angeles, examined the current state of diversity in Hollywood films and television. The research focused on all areas of Hollywood, from actors, directors, and film crew to even the types of media American households engage with regularly. They found white people remained overrepresented among all top film roles in 2017, claiming 77 percent of the roles (slightly down from 78.1 percent in 2016), while constituting 60.4 percent of the U.S. population. All other groups remained underrepresented, including Latinos, whose share of film roles increased from 2.7 percent in 2016 to 5.2 percent in 2017 (Hunt, 2019, 21). In addition to this, only 1.3 out of 10 film directors are people of color, only 1.3 out of 10 film directors are women (Hunt, 2019, 29) and *fewer* than 1 out of 10 film writers are people of color (Hunt, 2019, 38).

Highlighting just how misrepresented the Afro-Latina population is in film and television, to the point that there is a misunderstanding of the complexity of the Hispanic identity and population, is Keara K. Goin’s, “Marginal Latinidad: Afro-Latinas and US film.” Goin argues that Afro-Latinas are rarely included in the portrayal and understanding of the Hispanic population of the United States because their identity is often “difficult to read,” “intentionally ambiguous” or completely erased or ignored within film and television. Goin focuses her study on the three Afro-Latina actresses who have held arguably the best careers in Hollywood: Rosario Dawson, Zoe Saldana, and Gina Torres. Through critical and textual analysis paired with analysis of comments made about the actresses on online forums like imdb.com, Amazon.com reviews and the comment sections on YouTube, Goin assesses that Dawson, Saldana, and Torres embody what she calls “marginal Latinidad.” This is understood as being people “who do not fit into a more normative construction of Latinidad” (Goin, 345, 2016). Goin elaborates on her meaning by explaining:

I conclude that the way Afro-Latina/o figures are understood ethnoracially in the U.S. is due to what I am calling “marginal Latinidad” or a type of Latino identity that does not align well with the ways U.S. mainstream media represent Latino/Hispanic figures. This popularly represented Latino/Hispanic identity, or what could be referred to as a “generic Latinidad,” creates a Latina/o type that is physically adherent to what Rodriguez (1997) calls the “Latin look”—characterized by tan/olive skin with dark hair and eyes—seems to acknowledge only the Spanish and indigenous heritages of US Latina/os. The result of this is an exclusion, or marginalization, of blackness within Latinidad. (Goin, 347, 2016)

Goin spotlights how Hollywood rarely makes opportunities to represent Afro-Latinas with how three of the largest Afro-Latina stars are cast in roles as characters who are most often of solely African descent. However, while the films themselves cause the erasure of these women’s Hispanic identities,

the knowledge of their ethnic background creates confusion and even frustration for the consumers of their films towards their authenticity to portray African American roles. This is especially true in the case of Zoe Saldana. Goin states that “Saldana has been cast as Black/African American in roughly half of her roles,” yet there was a great deal of backlash surrounding Saldana’s casting as African American singer-songwriter and civil rights activist Nina Simone in the upcoming biopic of her life. Many displeased commentators took to criticize how Saldana is “Black Hispanic” rather than African American, seemingly stripping her of the ability to identify with her African roots. This misunderstanding of Afro-Latina/os derives from the lack of representation for Afro-Latinidad in Hollywood. In addition to this, much of the current literature that is published about Latin identity covers Spanish and indigenous descent and lacks the inclusion of African descent. This has created a massive divide in what is represented and understood of Afro-Latina experiences.

Notably, several articles present alternative interpretations and critiques of audience responses to Hispanic women in Hollywood. “Mediating *Frida*: Negotiating Discourses of Latina/o Authenticity in Global Media Representations of Ethnic Identity” by Molina Guzman analyzes the discourses of Latina/o identity embedded in the movie *Frida* (2002), as well as the Latino news coverage about the film and an online chat stream about the film. Analyzing these different discourses shows how different communities interpret ethnic identity throughout the film. The film itself was the topic of many online debates over whom should be cast as the lead. The reasoning for why various actresses should or should not be considered often focused on the authenticity of their ethnic backgrounds and connection to Hispanic culture. Guzman iterates this by stating, “Because of the general pattern of Latina/o invisibility (Rodríguez, 1997), the few popular representations of Latina/o icons circulated through the mainstream media often evoke fierce debates over who has the right to represent them (Fusco, 1995). The questions under debate include who is Latina/o, what it means to be Latina/o, and who has the cultural authority to mediate Latinidad. (Guzman, 2006, 241). In addition to highlighting the importance of the authenticity of who is cast to represent Hispanic stories, Guzman also discusses how the iconic story of Frida Kahlo was manipulated to present in standard with the traditional portrayal of Latinas in Hollywood. She emphasizes, “Taymor’s decision to minimize Kahlo’s leftist politics and foreground Hayek’s body, beauty, and sexuality inevitably made Kahlo a more consumable figure for domestic and global audiences and simultaneously reified Hollywood’s familiar constructions of Latina femininity, hyper-sexuality, and domesticity” (Guzman, 2006, 241). Her work highlights how Hispanic characters and their stories are changed to better fit consumerism.

Priscilla Peña Ovalle also focuses on how Hollywood alters Latinas for consumerism. “Jennifer Lopez, Racial Mobility, and the New Urban/Latina Commodity” centers specifically on one Hispanic actress, Jennifer Lopez, who has also developed herself as a product not only for film but also the music industry to become a brand as well. Peña Ovalle explains that Lopez developed herself as a commodity for consumption by playing into the conventional stereotypes that aligned with Hollywood’s ideal standards. She states, “Lopez has crafted her multimedia and multi-demographic career to exploit all facets of the Hollywood Latina myth and claim both financial and cultural agency of her image as a brand” (Peña Ovalle, 126). Peña Ovalle spotlights how Lopez marketed herself as “urban” while concurrently playing into ideal beauty standards, such as lightening her hair to become more marketable according to Hollywood perceptions of Latinas. To further describe her theory, Peña Ovalle explains the tendency of actresses to conform their identities to the standards deemed acceptable by Hollywood’s fetishization of the Latina image: “representational Latina bodies oscillate between the normalcy of whiteness and the exoticism of blackness in visual culture. This in-betweenness demarcates the ambiguously racialized space that Latinas have been assigned in the hierarchy of visual representation, a representational space that Latinas have maneuvered within and around to maximize their careers in Hollywood” (Peña Ovalle, 2010, 127). I found this critique

valuable to my research on Hollywood's expectations for Hispanic women because Peña Ovalle highlights how some Hispanic women play into these expectations to gain success.

These articles inform my research, as well as offering different perspectives and approaches to viewing Hollywood's version of the Hispanic woman. Specifically, from the different scholarship I analyzed which focused on "Latinidad" in mass media, I identified topics such as: the underrepresentation of Latino/as behind screen; the malleability of the Latina body: hair, body, Spanish surnames; and the parameters of Latina authenticity coming from Latinas themselves. I argue these specific topics contribute to our understanding of Hollywood's fabrication of a slanted, false notion of Hispanic women's experiences. While all the reports and articles documented above helped me to develop my own research project, I suggest my research contributes something more to the analysis because it critiques the industry's creation of what it means to be Latina. Specifically, Hollywood's casting of light-skinned and dark-haired actresses in roles explicitly marked as Hispanic winds up reinforcing the association of specific bodies with Hispanic identity, while the limited roles of Hispanic characters in Hollywood films reinforce the association of this ethnic category with hypersexuality and criminality. Hollywood presents a one-type view of the very multidimensional experience of what it means to be a Hispanic woman, which then restricts Hispanic girls and women from seeing themselves represented on screen and plays into harmful stereotypes generated in white supremacist capitalist culture. This research seeks to highlight this problem with Hollywood's lens on Hispanic women.

## **Methodology**

For this research, I used feminist media analysis as my methodological tool for exploring the data. In feminist media analysis, one questions the messages that are being projected, keeping in mind how certain messages can hurt and oppress certain people. Linda Steiner clarifies in "Feminist Media Theory" that "it applies philosophies, concepts, and logics articulating feminist principles and concepts to media processes such as hiring, production, and distribution; to patterns of representation in news and entertainment across platforms; and to reception. Unlike theoretical approaches that hide their politics, feminist theorizing is explicitly political. It addresses power" (Steiner, 2014, 1). With Hispanic women already underrepresented in film, it is important to note how exactly they are being represented when they are included. I argue Hollywood pushes a certain narrative of what a Latina is, whether or not the actress playing the character is Hispanic. By using feminist media analysis to critique the portrayal of Hispanic women in film and television, I examine this situation through a feminist lens in order to create a more authentic understanding of how the content that is being produced informs Hispanic women's lives. In "The Feminist Practice of Content Analysis," Patricia Lina Leavy examines how important it is to analyze content through a feminist lens especially when it is about women themselves; indeed, she asserts that by having women analyze content about women, we develop more authentic representations and understandings of the content. She notes that much of our popular content is viewed through men's perspectives, even when the story is about a woman. Leavy suggests feminist researchers therefore approach content by asking questions such as: "whose point of view is represented in popular and commercial culture?", "How is difference represented in this culture?", "How are messages distributed to people within popular culture?", "Whose viewpoints are silenced or marginalized within particular cultural artifacts?" (Leavy, 2007, 223). I draw inspiration from Leavy's direction and ask similar questions as I look at how films portray characters who *are* Hispanic women, how Hispanic actresses themselves get cast, and what shapes their varied experiences within the film industry.



## Methods

To gather data for this research, I read scholarly articles and collected data from surveys and published research about diversity statistics. Additionally, I analyzed successful and mainstream movies and television that portray Latina characters from the last twenty years. In the films and television shows, I examined what characters Hispanic actresses were cast as, and I researched whether actresses who are ethnically Hispanic do or do not play Hispanic characters, and if they identify with their Latino heritage. I identified if the characters were Hispanic by indication of, but not limited to: the character's name, location of story, speech patterns, cultural artifacts and their parent's race/ethnicity. I determined if an actress is Hispanic by online databases, biographies and interviews. I watched and read interviews of Hispanic actresses explaining their struggle in Hollywood when pursuing Latina characters with specific attention paid to what they themselves looked like in comparison to the conventional standard of what casting directors expected for the characters.

I created eight identifying categories for classification and analytic purposes; these include:

- BP Hispanic actresses who have always played Hispanic characters,
- BP Hispanic actresses who have played both white and Hispanic characters,
- BP Hispanic actresses who have played both Black and Hispanic characters,
- SP Hispanic actresses who have played both white and Hispanic characters,
- SP Hispanic actresses who have played both Black and Hispanic characters,
- SP Hispanic actresses who have played only white roles,
- SP Hispanic actresses who have played only Black roles, and
- Actresses who are not Hispanic but have played Hispanic characters.

I then made a list of notable and successful Hispanic actresses within the last twenty years who currently have careers in Hollywood. This list includes actresses who are known as being Hispanic, such as Salma Hayek and Penelope Cruz, but I also included actresses such as Bella Thorne and Sara Paxton who are Hispanic by one of their parents, though most people may not be aware of their ethnic heritage because of the lack of media attention to their Hispanic background. In addition to lack of media coverage, there is a lack of roles that portray Hispanics that portray the racial diversity of Hispanic people, as well as the variety in their skin and hair tones, as we see in the roles of Thorne and Paxton. Based on this list of actresses, I watched several of their movies and researched roles they have played to determine the ethnicity of characters they have portrayed. Taken together, these methodological tools enabled me to critically examine the state of Hispanic women in Hollywood.

## Analysis

Diving into the underbelly of the beast of this problem, we find the people who are the puppeteers of Hollywood: the writers, directors, producers and casting directors. This is who is greatly responsible for what stories are told and how these replications of our world come to be. The lack of diversity in these fields is astonishing and is a considerable reason for the lack of diversity on screen. A study at the University of Southern California on "Latinos in Film: Erasure On Screen & Behind the Camera Across 1,200 Popular Movies" found that a total of 1,335 directors and co-directors were credited across the sample of 1,200 movies. Only 4% or 49 of these top jobs were filled by Latino helmers. Forty-eight of those directors were male and 1 was female (Smith, 2019, 6). One. One Latina out of the 1,335 directors from 2007 to 2018. That Latina is Patricia Riggen, who is known for directing the movies *Girl in Progress*, *The 33* and *Miracles From Heaven*. *Girl in Progress* and *The 33* both feature a Hispanic majority cast, while *Miracles From Heaven* features one Hispanic person. Of the 3,616 produced by credits, only 3% were held by Latinos. Seventy-eight of those credits were held by Latinos and 19 were held by Latinas; this is a gender ratio of 4 male producers to every 1 female (Smith, 2019, 6). In addition to this, the study includes that across the films with a credited casting director (1,185

of 1,200), 89% were white. Only 3% of the casting directors across the sample of 1,200 films were Latino (Smith, 2019, 6). There is no mention of any Latina casting directors. When the numbers are so low for Latinas behind the screen, it translates onto the screen. Actress Eva Longoria recalls her experience auditioning in the beginning of her career and what it was like in regards to the underrepresentation of people of color behind screen, “I didn’t speak Spanish [growing up]. I’m ninth generation. I mean, I’m as American as Apple pie. I’m very proud of my heritage. But I remember moving to L.A. and auditioning and not being Latin enough for certain roles. Some white male casting director was dictating what it meant to be Latin. He decided I needed an accent. He decided I should [have] darker-colored skin. **The gatekeepers are not usually people of color, so they don’t understand you should be looking for way more colors of the rainbow within that one ethnicity**” (Ryzik, 2016). The first step for increasing diversity is making sure that people of color have a role in how their stories get told. When the content creator is Hispanic then the number of Hispanics on screen is increased. When a Latino director was attached to a film, the percentage of Latino characters on screen increased from 4% to 13%. Similar increases were observed when a Latino producer worked on a movie—the percentage of Latino characters on screen climbed from 4% to 9%. Finally, when a Latino casting director was attached, the on-screen prevalence of Latino characters improved from 4% to 10% (Smith, 2019, 8). With the film industry being centered in Los Angeles and about 49% of the county’s population being Hispanic (Noe-Bustamante, 2020), there should be more opportunity for Hispanics to be hired for jobs behind and on screen. Not only is the inclusion of people of color on screen important to the development of the understanding of our world, but it’s wanted by audiences as well. The “Hollywood Diversity Report 2019” released that in 2017, films featuring majority-minority casts posted the highest median domestic box office (\$45.5 million). Meanwhile, films with casts that were from 41 percent to 50 percent minority were released in the most theaters, on average (2,880), and had the highest mean opening weekend rank (7.4). It is worth noting that films with casts that were less than 11 percent minority had the lowest median domestic box office and opening weekend rank in 2017 (Hunt, 2019, 52). The numbers prove that audiences want to see films with diverse cast members. People want to go see films where they can see someone like themselves represented. Not only is it beneficial for the audience, but it is proven to be especially beneficial to the profit of the industry as well. Median return on investment peaked for films with casts that were majority-minority in 2017 (1.9), followed closely by films with casts that were from 41 percent to 50 percent minority (1.8). By contrast, films with casts that were less than 11 percent minority had the lowest median return on investment in 2017 (Hunt, 2019, 51). When the more diverse films make more money than the films that are not, it is a direct sign from the consumers of what they want. With the Hispanic community being the largest minority group and the country’s second largest racial or ethnic group behind white non-Hispanics (Noe-Bustamante, 2020), investors and producers of the industry have a great opportunity to make profit from creating more original stories featuring Hispanic leads. People no longer want to see predictable plots and stereotyped characters; they want stories of ordinary people in extraordinary situations, characters they can relate to who are just as complex as they are themselves.

The majority of the roles behind camera are occupied by white men. The exception to this is in the role of casting directors, 81% of whom are women, but 89% of whom are white (Smith, 2019, 8). White men hold the majority of positions in the film industry, so the storylines of people of color are often constructed by white men’s ideas of people of color. Hispanic actresses *can* in some situations play non-Hispanic or ethnically ambiguous characters that don’t have specific notes on their ethnicity, for example, when a character’s name is something that doesn’t sound Hispanic like “Dot,” “Charlotte” or “Nancy.” Actresses like Jessica Alba and Selena Gomez can play white or Zoe Saldana can play Black characters; however, when the story is about a Hispanic woman, her ethnicity is often made known to the audience in exaggerated, stereotypical ways. Hollywood has a strong history of

having people of color play racist tropes, and for Hispanic women, they are usually portrayed as being the sexy exotic lover of the main character, maids, strippers, single moms and criminals. Their ethnicity is tied to being sexually promiscuous. Some of the most popular movies and television shows made between 2000 and 2020 that feature Latina characters and play into these tropes include:

*Traffic* (2000): Catherine Zeta-Jones plays a drug lord's wife (who is Hispanic by indication of her name, location and Zeta-Jones herself saying that the character was Hispanic in an interview).

*Blow* (2001): Penelope Cruz plays a drug lord's wife. The majority of the scenes she appears in are sexual.

*Maid in Manhattan* (2002): Jennifer Lopez plays a single mother and hotel maid

*Once Upon a Time in Mexico* (2003): Salma Hayek plays a damsel in distress and Eva Mendes plays the sexy agent partner of the leading man played by Johnny Depp.

*After Sunset* (2004): Salma Hayek plays the wife in a husband and wife thieving duo.

*Bandidas* (2006): Salma Hayek and Penelope Cruz play bandits who wear bustier corsets and get away by distracting men with their sex appeal.

*We Own the Night* (2007): Eva Mendes plays the leading man's girlfriend, but her character doesn't add much to the plot; she walks around in lingerie and is there for sex appeal.

*Vicky Christina Barcelona* (2008): Penelope Cruz plays the crazy ex-lover of a man who is seeing two women at once. Cruz's character also tries to kill one of the women.

*Modern family* (2009-2020): Sofia Vergara<sup>7</sup> plays the sexy younger wife of an older, rich man.

*Colombiana* (2011): Zoe Saldana plays a contract killer seeking revenge on the crime lord who killed her parents. While the story emphasizes her physical power, she does a lot of her fighting in booty shorts and skintight clothing which seems unnecessary.

*Girl in Progress* (2012): Eva Mendes plays an irresponsible single mom and maid.

*Savages* (2012): Salma Hayek plays a drug lord.

*Parker* (2013): Jennifer Lopez plays a thief who partners with another thief. She has a scene where she has to strip down to her underwear to prove she's not wearing a wire, and this is never required by any of the men in the movie.

*Devious Maids* (2013-2016): Eva Longoria is a "devious maid."

*Hot Pursuit* (2015): Sofia Vergara plays a drug cartel witness running from cops in tight dresses and heels.

*Zoolander 2* (2016): Penelope Cruz plays a secret agent, but her scenes are just focused on her body and looks.

*Cocaine Godmother* (2017): Catherine Zeta-Jones plays Drug Lord Griselda Blanco.

*Euphoria* (2019): Alexa Demie plays Maddy Perez, a hot-headed and highly sexualized cheerleader with an abusive boyfriend. She comes from a bad home situation, loves to pick fights with other women and has a montage scene in which she hooks up with a number of men.

*Hustlers* (2020): Jennifer Lopez plays a single mother, stripper and con artist who eventually gets caught and goes to jail.

Hispanic women being portrayed in Hollywood through tropes like the sexy exotic lover of the main character, maids, strippers, single moms and criminals is incredibly prominent. In her book *Latin Looks*, Clara Rodriguez expands on the Hollywood portrayal of Hispanic women by stating:

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<sup>7</sup> Sofia Vergara was named as the "World's highest paid actress with \$43 Million" (Berg, 2020) by *Forbes Magazine* on October 2, 2020, an amazing accomplishment and step forward for Hispanic women. However, it is important to note that Vergara has made a career and gained success by conforming to the stereotypical Latina trope.

Latinas have either been portrayed as frilly señoritas or volcanic temptresses, more recently with thick accents and aggressive sexual appetites. As in the case of women in general, lack of sexual control is their undoing and the reason they find themselves in their dilemmas. They are sexual beings who generally seem unable to resolve any issue or reach their goals without somehow having sex with a man. In essence, they are passive, feeble, unintelligent and dependent. Occasionally, there is a strong woman, but she is eventually subdued by a “real” man. (Rodriguez, 1994, 7)

With these tropes, regardless of whether or not the actresses are of Hispanic descent, there is a very specific look that Hollywood emphasizes when casting actresses to play Hispanic characters— dark hair, brown eyes, mostly olive- tan skin. All of the previously listed actresses have a similar body size and shape—curvy but still fitting into the idealized western standard of beauty being slim and fit. Actresses are chosen for the roles they play based on if they fit into the patriarchal, Eurocentric ideals of what that race or ethnicity looks like. If they do not quite fit into these standards then they are chosen to play characters with darker skin whom these roles consistently define as much lower in socioeconomic status. I gathered a list of some of the top billed actresses from the past 20 years and identified which roles they have played to create a better idea of this Hollywood vision (see Table 1).

**Table 1**

Hispanic Hollywood actresses divided into categories of ethnic/racial backgrounds according to the roles they have played

BP Hispanic actresses who always play Hispanic characters	Salma Hayek, Sofia Vergara, Penelope Cruz, Eva Mendes, Gina Rodriguez, Eva Longoria, Eva Mendes, Ana De Armas, Alexa Demie
BP Hispanic actresses who play both white and Hispanic characters	Jennifer Lopez
BP Hispanic actresses who play both Black and Hispanic characters	Zoe Saldana, Gina Torres
SP Hispanic actresses who play both white and Hispanic characters	Jessica Alba, Alexa Vega, Selena Gomez, Aubrey plaza, Victoria Justice
SP Hispanic actresses who play both Black and Hispanic characters	Rosario Dawson, Dascha Polanco
SP Hispanic actresses who play only white roles	Cameron Diaz, Bella Thorne, Sara Paxton
SP Hispanic actresses who play only Black roles	Tessa Thompson
Actresses who are <b>not</b> Hispanic but have played Hispanic characters	Catherine Zeta-Jones, Vanessa Hudgens, Ronni Hawk, Naomi Scott

With the underrepresentation of Hispanics in Hollywood, white non-Hispanic people should not be playing the roles of Hispanic characters. Hispanic people should have the opportunity for roles that are not the maid or criminal. Hispanic people come in all different races, sizes and walks of life but are portrayed as being one type of thing. This is a harmful and dangerous idea that is mass circulated by the industry and has a large effect on how we as a society view culture. Even with many great accomplishments that have been made in the representation of people of color in the past few years, there are not many Hollywood movies that feature dark-skinned Hispanics as lead characters. This is a result of the colorism in Hollywood that favors actors with lighter skin or more Eurocentric features to play leads. While a Pew Research Center survey of Latino adults shows that one-quarter of all U.S. Latinos self-identify as Afro-Latino, Afro-Caribbean or of African descent with roots in Latin America (Lopez, 2016), there is an immense lack in the portrayal of Afro-Latina characters on screen. In an interview, actress Gina Torres, who is Afro-Latina, discussed her experience with this issue: “when I became an actress, I quickly realized that ‘the world’ liked their Latinas to look Italian, not like me. So I wasn’t going up for Latina parts . . . Regardless of the fact that I spoke the language and understood the culture better, those weren’t the parts that I could take seriously. Suddenly I had to explain why I look the way I look” (Rodriguez, 2018). ‘Hispanic’ is more than just a box to check off. Hispanic identity cannot fit into a box because there is no one way to be, look, or act Hispanic. Someone who identifies as Latino/a and/or Hispanic can come from many parts of the world, have any color of skin and may or may not speak Spanish. There is no one way to be Hispanic, and this should be recognized.

In recognizing the many complexities of the Latino/a identity, I want to circle back to Cameron Diaz. Diaz is of Hispanic descent through her father, who is Cuban, and she has done interviews in which she has discussed her Hispanic heritage and culture. However, Diaz herself has never played a Hispanic character. Much of media relies on the narrative of what a Hispanic woman looks like, which leaves out women who look like Diaz. When casting actresses in films and television shows, casting directors are not looking for Hispanic identity and cultural knowledge but rather what the perception of a Hispanic woman has typically been. The Annenberg Inclusion Institute study found that a hefty amount of Hispanic representation in films relies on Diaz. While she is Hispanic and should not be excluded from the list, there is a point to be made that she has privilege in being able to conform to the ideal of white, Eurocentric beauty. And though she is Hispanic and has spoken about how proud she is of her heritage, which she deserves to be, Hollywood has erased her heritage through the lack of on-screen representation of it. That being said, Diaz holding so much of the representation goes to show that whitewashing and colorism are still rampant in Hollywood. We absolutely cannot discredit her Hispanic identity, in fact it needs to be embraced, but we also need to understand that because of racism and whitewashing, she doesn’t necessarily push the representational understanding of the diversity of Hispanic women. Hollywood has operated in a strict way for so long, but diversity and representation matter and, as long as there is a fight for change, it will come. Arguably, we have already begun to see such change through shifts in the Academy Awards Membership, which was 92% white and 75% male in 2015, and [in 2020] was 84% white and 68% male (Reign, 2020).

## **Conclusion**

“We live in a media oriented society, and because media often serves as an entertainment function, we may be lulled into passively accepting the images projected as mirrors of real life and of people (Wilson and Gutierrez, 1995). It is important for future media development and for our own quality of life that we constantly question and are cognizant of media image manipulation and the role of media in modern society” (Rodriguez, 1994, 10). As technology continues to advance exponentially



and we progress as a society, how we view and interact with media will grow as well. Media such as film and television are reflections of our stories and help shape our understanding of each other. It is important that everyone gets the opportunity to have their stories portrayed accurately and fairly. When there is only one narrative or type of character within the story to portray a whole group of people, it affects what our population thinks and, therefore, how we act towards each other. This could affect how we treat our neighbors or even how we vote. Whether we act with empathy hangs in the balance. If the portrayal of Hispanic women in film remains as it is now—the lower class, hot-headed and scandalous woman with olive skin, wavy dark hair and a slim, curvy body—this is how society will continue to misconceive Hispanic women. I agree fervently with Clara Rodriguez when she says, “Where are the undistinguished but nonetheless complex and interesting women who are not stereotypes? As Blanca Vasquez (1990) and other Latinas have asked, ‘Where am I?’ on these screens? Also, where are my sisters, my mother, my friends, the Latinas I know and respect? Why are the images consistently poor, why are alternative images absent?” (Rodriguez, 1994, 7). While my study largely categorizes what roles exist and who plays them, other scholars’ work can help us consider the harmful effects gaps in representation can have. If we are to progress into a society that values equality, then we need to have representational equality on screen. This means stories featuring darker-skinned Latinas, Latinas who don’t know Spanish too well, Latinas with blonde hair, Afro Latinas, Latinas with one parent of another ethnic background, gay Latinas, and Latinas who are the main character and get the same plots that the white women get to play. This means featuring lead characters who are Latina in films that aren’t necessarily about Hispanic-specific themes.

Recent movies and television shows featuring Hispanic leads that can be held as a standard for what accurate and uplifting representation should look like are as follows: *Brooklyn Nine Nine* (2013-), a comedic television show about the daily lives of cops in a police precinct. The show features two Latina leads, Melissa Fumero and Stephanie Beatriz, and has also featured Eva Longoria and Gina Rodriguez as guest stars. This show is an example of diverse representation in casting and how characters can be comedic while denying and challenging stereotypes. *Jane the Virgin* (2014-2019) is another television show with significant representation of Hispanic people, featuring a majority Hispanic cast. The show is about a hardworking woman, played by Gina Rodriguez, who is saving herself for marriage but has to deal with her life turning upside down when she finds out that a routine pap smear was mixed up with an artificial insemination. The show tackles issues such as immigration status, religion, grief and health concerns. Also featuring Rodriguez is the 2019 movie *Someone Great*; what I loved about this film is that the main characters include Black, Hispanic, and white actors and actresses, the majority of the cast are people of color, the storyline features queer love and while these identities were recognized, they weren’t stereotyped. It was refreshing to see a movie with a Latina lead and be able to enjoy the simple story of a girl having the support of her friends as she reflects on her past and manages grief. *Someone Great* represents the type of film and casting we need more of. My research focuses on both film and television because I felt as though with blockbuster movies alone, I couldn't find enough examples of Hispanic characters with enough dimension. Both audiences and Hollywood would benefit from greater inclusivity. Film and television are reflections of our culture, but they also have an influence on it. By questioning the discriminative representation of Hispanic women, we can call attention to the need for more diverse Latina characters with depth in Hollywood productions. The way that Hispanic women are portrayed on screen is still incredibly clichéd and negative, but the examples above show that there is a possibility for change.

With the technology we have that connects us to people all around the world, we have greater power to have our voices heard. Speaking out about what films do right and wrong on the internet on blogs or social media sites like Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, Reddit and TikTok can impact the thoughts of others who read the discussion and prompt more people to speak out as well. As seen with the debates that were fired up over the movie *Frida* (2002), which Molina Guzman’s research

addresses, conversation about how representation is important, makes an impact and sparks thought in many others. We can write to production companies and executive producers and tell them what was appreciated and what we would like to see more of. We can support independent filmmakers who are creating a greater variety of roles for Hispanic actresses and hiring actresses who speak to the racial diversity of Hispanic people. We can call for more Hispanic representation behind the camera in production jobs. Proper representation for Hispanic women is not only important for consumers of film, but it also has a huge advantage for the producers of film as well. “Hispanics are the largest minority group and the country’s second largest racial or ethnic group, behind white non-Hispanics” (Noe-Bustamante, 2020). This means the film industry has a huge amount of untapped potential for making profit from films that represent the Hispanic population. Yet there is genuine value in representation that expands far past the monetary aspects. Including more diverse and authentic roles for Hispanic women in film and television could cause little girls to see themselves represented on screen and realize they can achieve dreams that they never thought they could before.

Balance, accuracy, and fairness do not have to be at odds with artistic freedom, cost efficiency, or freedom of the press.

— Clara Rodriguez, *Latin Looks*

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