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More than Just an Image:
Pop Culture Representations of Latinxs and the Immigration Debate

In the United States, Latinxs are the fastest growing demographic. According to the latest census data, they make up 17% of the population (roughly fifty-four million people). This growing population has raised concerns and fears among many Americans and has reignited the debate over immigration—an issue that 10% of Americans believed to be the most important problem facing the nation in 2006.¹ While this demographic growth and interest in immigration is relatively recent, Latinxs have had a role in popular culture since the time of Hollywood Westerns. The exact details have changed with the times, but the underlying nature of these representations has remained the same. The representation of Latinxs in popular culture in the United States has been overwhelmingly negative and has created as well as reproduced harmful stereotypes, which in turn have had a negative impact on public discourse regarding immigration.

Many issues are brought up in the debate over Latinx immigration, mostly centering around issues of economics and social group politics. However, one topic that is not often discussed in this debate is the way in which media portrayals of Latinxs affects public opinion on the issue of immigration. While the relationship between the media and public opinion has not been widely commented on regarding this specific topic, there has been research done on the ways in which media depictions affect public opinion and discourse. One of the most prominent analysis on this subject comes from cultural theorist Stuart Hall, who spoke of the ways in which representation plays a

¹ Ted Brader, Nicholas A. Valentino, and Elizabeth Suhay, “What Triggers Public Opposition to Immigration? Anxiety, Group Cues, and Immigration Threat,” *Midwest Political Science Association* 52, no. 4 (2008): 959.

major role in the social meaning making process.² According to Hall, the process of representation is not separate from reality, it is a part of it, and thus we come to understand the world partly through this meaning making process.³ Essentially, Hall argues that our worldview is framed by the images that we see and, in turn, the way we understand the images that we see, is affected by our worldview.

Expounding on the ways in which the process of representation creates social meaning, Maria Sturken and Lisa Cartwright utilize Foucauldian ideas to show how this meaning making process is related to social power relations. The process of meaning making through representation involves an image that is created by someone—encoding meaning—and others looking at the image—decoding meaning. This looking is the gaze, the “context in which looking practices are engaged” and, Sturken and Cartwright argue, it plays a role in “establish[ing] relationships of power.”⁴ The gaze is tied to social power relations because it occurs, “through a relationship of subjects defined within and through the discourses of institutions,” and this discourse is framed through social systems of power which, “define how things are understood and spoken about (and, by implication, represented in images) in a given society.”⁵ In other words, when one looks at an image, they do so within a certain social context of power relations between and among individuals and groups; this plays a role into the meaning that is created through this act of looking. Sturken and Cartwright connect this meaning making process as evidence of Foucault’s claim that modern power is more productive than destructive, as

² “Stuart Hall-Representation & The Media 1of4.” YouTube video, 14:54. Posted by “PBRStrtGng.” June 23, 2011.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright, “Modernity: Spectatorship, Power, and Knowledge,” in *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture*, 104, 111, Oxford University Press, 2009.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 104-105.

it “produces knowledge and it produces particular kinds of citizens and subjects.”⁶ This production, however, is not beneficial when it leads to the creation of media stereotypes of marginalized groups.

One example of the ways in which representation and the gaze create social meaning within a particular power dynamic that negatively affects a marginalized group is the treatment of African Americans in the media and the creation of the “Welfare Queen” myth. This myth can trace its roots back to the time of slavery, when, in order to justify to dehumanization of African Americans, stereotypes characterized Black women as bad mothers with the Mammy and Jezebel tropes. The Mammy was an asexual domestic figure who neglected her own children in favor of taking care of White families while the Jezebel was a hypersexualized woman.⁷ Another stereotype, which was more specific to Black men, was The Coon, who was characterized as lazy, foolish, and irresponsible.⁸ These stereotypes were—and, to some extent, still are—very prevalent in society and were depicted throughout different forms of popular culture and media and they fed into blatantly racist policies and attitudes. During the 1960’s, neoliberals pushed for greater privatization and free market policies and railed against public welfare spending. One of the major reasons that this political movement was successful was the creation and promulgation of the stereotype of the “Welfare Queen.” This stereotype was created in part due to the efforts of politicians like Secretary of Labor Daniel Patrick Moynihan and President Ronald Reagan, who spoke of myths of urban

⁶ *Ibid.*, 109.

⁷ Ange-Marie Hancock, “Political Culture and the Public Identity of the ‘Welfare Queen,’” in *The Politics of Disgust: The Public Identity of the Welfare Queen*, 26, New York University Press, 2004.

⁸ Brittany Lewis, “Spectatorship, Power & the Oppositional Gaze: Reviewing, Analyzing, and Critiquing the Gaze,” presentation, WGST-380-01 *Screening Sex*, Augustana College, Rock Island, IL, December 4, 2014.

Black women who became rich by taking advantage of the welfare system, having a lot of children and not working.⁹ These efforts served to not only scapegoat Black women, but also to push a political agenda. The effects of this remain today. The “Welfare Queen” stereotype is still very prevalent throughout pop culture and in the minds of many Americans and it is still used to demonize welfare and welfare recipients. This is perhaps the most famous example of the ways in which media representations can create meaningful images that have an effect on political discourse. I argue that the same thing has been done with representation of Latinxs and the debate over immigration.

Before getting into some of the specifics of how the media represents Latinxs, it is important to clarify who Latinxs really are. There are about twenty countries that are considered a part of Latin America, including Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Mexico, Peru, Puerto Rico, and Venezuela.¹⁰ These countries have roughly six hundred million people and a large diversity of cultures, histories, races, socioeconomic classes, religions, and languages. According to the latest census data, 17% of the United States population (roughly fifty-four million people) identify as either Hispanic or Latinx, tracing their heritage back to one or more of these diverse Latin American countries. Despite the fact that there exists a great diversity among those considered to be Latinxs, the media and popular culture in the United States overwhelmingly represents this group through a very narrow set of stereotypes.

In the media and popular culture, some of the most prominent stereotypes of Latinxs are: the macho man, the “Latin Lover,” the sexy spitfire, the violent urban gang

⁹ Hancock, 51.

¹⁰ Different sources count different countries as part of Latin America or not. Some include all countries in Central America, South America, and the Caribbean plus Mexico while others include only countries whose predominant language is Spanish.

member and drug dealer, the recently-arrived and heavily-accented illegal immigrant, the domestic maid, the manual laborer, the urban welfare mother, and the sassy sidekick.¹¹ These stereotypes—which are often nothing more than one-dimensional caricatures—are attributed to anyone considered Latinx, regardless of their actual cultural background.¹² Carlos E. Cortés, in his examination of film representations of Chicanas, notes that most representations conflate countries of origin or generalize all Latinxs as being from one country, namely Mexico or Puerto Rico, regardless of the whether or not this is true.¹³

Another noteworthy aspect of these stereotypes is that they all portray characteristics often deemed to be inappropriate by mainstream society—they are poor, uneducated, violent, and hypersexualized. As Angharad N. Valdivia explains in her discussion of the spitfire stereotype, it is not that the stereotype is itself inherently negative, some can find positive attributes in this and other stereotypes; however, generally speaking these stereotypes embody characteristics that are considered to be negative and, since they are the only types of representations of Latinxs repeated in the media, these stereotypes and their negative characteristics become associated with all Latinxs.¹⁴ With this in mind, in this analysis, I will focus on three broad categories of Latinx media representations: Latinxs as violent, Latinxs as hot-blooded and hypersexual, and Latinxs as immigrants.

¹¹ Angharad N. Valdivia, “Stereotype or Transgression? Rosie Perez in Hollywood Film,” *The Sociological Quarterly* 39, no. 3 (1998): 395.

¹² Ediberto, Román, “Who Exactly is Living *La Vida Loca*?: The Legal and Political Consequences of Latino-Latina Ethnic and Racial Stereotypes in Film and Other Media,” *The Journal of Gender, Race & Justice* 4J (2000): 42.

¹³ Carlos E. Cortés, “Chicanas in Film: History of an Image,” in *Chicano Cinema: Research, Reviews, and Resources*, 124-125. Binghamton, NY: Bilingual, 1985.

¹⁴ Valdivia, 396.

The first stereotype which is worth examining is the stereotype of Latinxs, especially men, as violent. Using Cortés's description of the four phases of Chicana representation in films, it is clear to see that this trend has been prominent since early silent Westerns.¹⁵ In those early Westerns, prominent from 1900 to 1930, Mexican and Mexican-American men were portrayed as banditos and greasers, criminals who often attempted to seduce innocent White women. In these films, White men would save the White women from the Mexican villains.¹⁶ This remained the dominant portrayal of Latinx men until Westerns as a genre diminished in popularity. However, the idea that Latinxs are inherently violent remained alive in the genre of urban violence films.¹⁷ These films often center around inner-city gangs and feature Latinx men as gang members and drug dealers, constantly at war with rival gangs and the police and just as often as abusive towards the women in their lives. Even when they are featured in "good guy" roles as police officers, they tend to be portrayed as more violent than their White counterparts.¹⁸ One example of this representation is the musical *West Side Story*. This story, based on the Shakespearean classic *Romeo and Juliet*, is about the gang-crossed lovers Tony and Maria, who fall in love despite the fact that they are associated with rival gangs. Maria, who is Puerto Rican, has family and friends who belong to the gang, including her brother Bernardo, who is involved in multiple violent fights, including one that ends in his death. Although the film is a musical and much tamer than many other films, it does show the ways in which Latinx men are represented as violent. Other films which play to this stereotype include *Scarface*, *Carlito's Way*, and *Blood In Blood Out*.¹⁹

¹⁵Cortés, 126.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 126-128.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 134.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 135.

A second representation that has been very prominent in popular culture is the stereotype of Latinxs as hot-blooded and hypersexual. This stereotype has been applied to both men and women, who are construed as the macho “Latin Lover” and the sexy spitfire, respectively. The characterization of Latinx men as the macho “Latin Lover” is prominent and is not distinct from their characterization as violent. However, it has been women’s characterization of this stereotype that has been the most ubiquitous, presumably due to the intersection of gender as well as ethnicity. In the early Western films, Latinx women seemed to exist solely as the sexual conquests of White men.²⁰ When they started getting more prominent roles, Latinx women were often characterized either as hypersexual and ditzy or as strong-willed prostitutes.²¹ In the modern roles, the strong-willed prostitute has been transformed into the sexy spitfire. Valdivia analyzed actress Rosie Perez, who has often been cast in this role in movies like *Do the Right Thing* and *White Men Can’t Jump*. Valdivia notes how Perez’s wardrobe, manner of speaking and behaving (including the common trope of over-sexualized dancing), as well as her relationships all contributed to the way in which this stereotype is constructed.²² A more contemporary example of this representation is the character of Gloria in the television show “Modern Family.” Gloria, married to a man considerably older than her, has a skin-tight wardrobe and a feisty personality, and mainly due to her thick accent, is often portrayed as less intelligent than the other characters—thus fulfilling all of the elements of the spitfire stereotype.

¹⁹ Román, 42-46.

²⁰ Cortés, 128.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 128-131.

²² Valdivia, 398-402.

Finally, the third media representation which is worth discussing is the stereotype of Latinxs as immigrants. This view characterizes all Latinxs as being low-skilled workers who have recently immigrated and have heavy accents and little understanding of English. Furthermore, they are represented as having crossed the border illegally. Another interesting aspect of this representation is that they are characterized simultaneously as being lazy immigrants who “mooch” off the system and as hard-working and “noble” immigrants. These immigrants work in fields or in the domestic sphere, most prominently as gardeners if they are men or maids or nannies if they are women. It is interesting to note, that these are the types of jobs that were held by slaves prior to emancipation. Yajaira M. Padilla connects these domestic immigrant workers to broader ideas of the feminization of international labor and the global U.S. dominance of the Other.²³ Padilla focuses on the Latinx maid, who, she says, is a representation that conveys the message that the best way to solve the problem of immigrants is to “incorporate [them]—in a non-threatening manner” into American life.²⁴ The “domestic,” as Padilla calls her, can be either a Mammy-like figure, asexual and willing to do anything for the White family who she works for, or a spitfire, hot-blooded and hypersexual. Sometimes, she can occupy a mix of the two, as seen in the character of Rosario in “Will & Grace.” Rosario physically embodies the Mammy figure but her feisty personality is reminiscent of the spitfire. Padilla argues that, ultimately, the character of Rosario symbolizes the ways in which the Latinx immigrant can be seen

²³ Padilla, Yajaira M. “Domesticating Rosario: Conflicting Representations of the Latina Maid in U.S. Media.” *Arizona Journal of Hispanic Cultural Studies* 13 (2009): 41-43.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 44.

as feisty, but ultimately is always “tamed’ back into her rightful place—always in uniform and affirming the status quo.”²⁵

In examining these representations, it is clear to see that they all contribute to a particular view of Latinxs. However, it is important to understand how this view contributes to public opinion, discourse, and policy of one of the most highly contested issues of the day—immigration. Ediberto Román summarize that these representations have three main effects: they “reinforce society’s perception or label of Latinas and Latinos as ‘outsider,’ ‘foreigner,’ or ‘other...in turn foster[ing] individual and institutionalized hatred and violence”; they “marginalize the group and silence discourse on issues of importance to the group”; and “attributes a discrediting quality to the victim, which the victim struggles against but may eventually internalize as part of his or her self-image.”²⁶ In essence, these negative representations of Latinxs promulgate harmful stereotypes, further divide Latinxs as outsiders and foreigners, and marginalize them and cause them to internalize stereotypes. Mainstream America thus tends to view Latinx as outsiders who are inferior and who are a potential threat.²⁷ This viewpoint frames much of the discourse over immigration.

Ted Brader, Nicholas A. Valentino, and Elizabeth Suhay examined the factors that trigger public opposition to immigration. They found that much of the public discourse in the media and by politicians is framed around, “the economic and cultural threat [that] immigration poses to Americans.”²⁸ The majority of the public tends to

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 49.

²⁶ Román, 41.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 50.

oppose immigration.²⁹ This discourse is primarily centered around Latinx immigrants, as there seems to be a distinction between them and “good immigrants” from Europe.³⁰ Brader et al. found that much of this fear of immigration was based on stereotypes, “of low-skilled Hispanic laborers,” and that these concerns were more likely to prompt political action, including supporting anti-immigration and English-only measures and contacting their Representatives to “send anti-immigration messages.”³¹ It does not seem too far of a stretch to see how representations of Latinxs as violent, hot-blooded, hypersexualized, and as illegal and ignorant immigrants is related to these concerns over immigration. One of the most interesting findings that Brader et al. discussed was how the emotional anti-immigration stance of their subjects diminished after they were exposed to aspects that undermined the traditional stereotypes of Latinxs.³² Given how important and noteworthy the current debate over immigration is, it is important to consider the ways in which media representations frame public opinion, discourse, and policy. The media is full of negative representation of Latinxs, which causes a negative impact on views over immigration.

²⁸ Brader, Ted, Nicholas A. Valentino, and Elizabeth Suhay. “What Triggers Public Opposition to Immigration? Anxiety, Group Cues, and Immigration Threat.” *Midwest Political Science Association* 52, no. 4 (2008): 960.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 961.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*, 970; 975.

³² *Ibid.*, 975-976.

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