# Latinx Media Today and Tomorrow: A Roundtable

Moderated and transcribed by Leslie L. Marsh and Rielle Navitski.

*The following conversation brings together four prominent scholars of Latinx Media: Frederick Aldama, Jillian Báez, Mary Beltrán, and Arcélia Gutiérrez, who offer their reflections on key trends in Latinx Media and representation, leading tastemakers and changemakers in the field, and predictions about the future of Latinx Media. This virtual roundtable originally took place on Zoom and was hosted by the Center for Latin American and Latinx Studies at Georgia State University in March 2022. The discussion aims to complement the chapters included in this textbook and provides points of departure for further study of Latinx Media.*

*This conversation has been edited for length and clarity.*

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**LESLIE MARSH:** Thank you all for being here today for a roundtable on Latinx media sponsored by the Center for Latin American Latinx Studies at Georgia State University in Atlanta, Georgia.

**What do you view as the key trends in Latinx media and representation today? This could encompass production trends, as well as more structural changes to film, radio/audio, TV and digital media.**

FREDERICK LUIS ALDAMA: Because of the grassroots efforts on the part of organizations like the [Latinx House](https://www.thelatinxhouse.org), [ALIP](https://www.latinxpolicy.org) [Alliance for Latinx Leadership and Policy], [La Lista](https://lalistatv.com), and others, that today we're seeing more Latino, Latina, Latinx [individuals] in the writers rooms, we’re seeing more showrunners, more exec[utive] producers, we’re seeing more more in those spaces in terms of the televisual media. But still not enough. So while we're about 19% of the population, we're still hovering anywhere between 2 and 3% representation across all media. So while I’m seeing more changes and also real vitality coming out of Afro-Latinx/Blatinx spaces in terms of storytelling, within TV and especially comics, when it comes to cinema, it’s almost like a complete wasteland from my perspective, still. And also, we just need more. So we are making a difference as scholars, as creatives, as [media] industry people, working together to make that difference. But the gatekeepers are still there and they’re still reproducing what I call in my latest volume, [*Latinx TV in the Twenty-First Century*](https://uapress.arizona.edu/book/latinx-tv-in-the-twenty-first-century) the white oculi [gaze]. We're still not being given that space for us to be telling *our* stories, and the complexity of those stories, the joys and pleasures as well as the frustrations and difficulties of our different journeys.

JILLIAN BAEZ: As I look at the media landscape today, I think, for me, what most defines that is that there is uneven development. So there has been a movement within the last fifteen to twenty years where I've seen that we've moved from severe under-representation, particularly in spaces like television, to something that's much more uneven. So what I mean by that is, we have moments where we're seeing some programming that is interesting, there’s some Latino talent both behind the camera and in front of it, but there's not necessarily sustainability there.

And so I think that it's a major inroad, but it's also a major challenge. I'm thinking about these developments both in the English-language media spaces, but also the Spanish-language media spaces, and I say this because Spanish language and bilingual media still remains a stronghold from an industry standpoint. A lot of the Spanish-language industry, especially television, has been growing, both broadcast television but also non-traditional forms like streaming platforms. At the same time, one of the things that concerns me is that when we look at entertainment media, a lot of the content is in the form of reboots. Especially in terms of the English-language landscape. I'm thinking of shows like *Charmed* [The CW, 2018-present] or *Roswell* [*Roswell, New Mexico*, The CW, 2019-present] that are spun now Latina, Latino, Latinx characters and sometimes storylines. Or, in the case of Spanish-language media, there's a lot of adaptations of telenovelas and sometimes there are creative conventions used in those reboots or in those adaptations, but what I want to emphasize here is that we really need more spaces for original programming. There are many, many talented writers and producers. Now we are in a moment where we've actually trained a lot of Latino students to produce this kind of work, both in news and entertainment content, but they're just not working. Not enough of them are working in real positions of power, where they have decision-making [authority]. So that, I think, continues to be an issue.

And then the other concern that I'm seeing is particularly in terms of the news landscape as it intersects with social media with the issue of disinformation. I'm thinking, of course, about the last two years of the pandemic and thinking about information about COVID being circulated on social media, particularly amongst Spanish-dominant Latino audiences. In the last couple of weeks there's been a lot of coverage of a new program on Sirius XM called *Los Americanos*, which is a conservative radio program. There's a bit of concern there, there have been a number of articles questioning, “Will this be the kind of space that will circulate disinformation as well?” So I bring this up because we are in sort of a strange moment where there are more spaces for Latino voices, but at the same time, it raises the larger issue of “What is the quality of that content?” and “What are the implications of the kind of content that's being produced?”

MARY BELTRAN: In terms of key developments that I see, I appreciate everything that Frederick and Jillian just said. I think those are things that I agree with as well.

Mary Beltran: We are seeing more Latinx media-makers and executives, especially in writers’ rooms, but the numbers are so much less than our [overall] numbers in the population. And as you all know, many of these [television] series are not lasting that long. So it can feel like one step forward, one step back all the time.

Some things that I see as key to progress have been the much more personal projects that we've seen get produced as series, like *Vida* [Starz, 2018-2020] or *Gentefied* [Netflix, 2020-2021] or certainly *Los Espookys* [HBO, 2019-present] that are breaking out of the family sitcom box a bit more in the last decade, and creating shows that have been critically acclaimed. Certainly in the 2000s *Ugly Betty* [ABC, 2006-2010] in particular, I would say, got critical attention. *George López* [ABC, 2002-2007] was successful and, I think, a really important show, but it wasn't noticed quite as much by the critics, maybe because it looked much more like something that had been seen before, even though I think I think there's much more there than just a family sitcom. But I think that to have someone like Tanya Saracho, who was an award-winning playwright before she was able to be the showrunner of *Vida*, I think, in some ways is showcasing more of the artistry of Latinx writers and producers than we'd seen in the past.

I’m also thinking of the sheer numbers of Latinx viewers that are out there in the potential viewing audiences for films, for TV shows, and so on. This is something that scholars of Latinx media have been saying forever is: we're growing, we're going to have more impact. But I think at this point, at almost 20% of the audience and at least 25% of the youth audience, that we have to be responded to. For the survival of networks, they must think of Latino viewers. And I'm talking about English-language networks and certainly Spanish language networks as well. I think it's going to be a matter of how they attempt to do that. We see certain types of strategies that might frustrate me more than please me, like seeing a show like *Charmed* just get remade with Latina actors in the roles and not much other focus on Latino cultures. We've seen attempted remakes of telenovelas that did not go well, that did not succeed like *Ugly Betty* and *Jane the Virgin* [The CW, 2014-2019] [did]. We’ve also seen Latino actors sprinkled into white-centric shows, with no attention to cultural background at all. Some of these things are not progressive, but they are different types of attempts that we're seeing on the part of networks to try to appeal to Latinos while still often trying to appeal to other audiences as well.

And I do think on the part of the broader audience, the diverse audience, that there's more openness, I think, to Latino/Latina protagonists and narratives. Even among non-Latino viewers, [there’s] more openness to Spanish and Spanglish on typically English-language networks [and channels], so the fact that a show like *Los Espookys*, which is in Spanish and subtitled, for that to have been distributed on HBO rather than HBO Latino I think was a real step that we wouldn't have seen a decade ago.

And so I think there are a number of things happening. There are a few Latinx executives, especially at the middle level, not at the higher level, the greenlighting level. But we’re getting in there where we were not before. Even now, there are still very few [Latinx] top level executives, but we’re closer. Those are some of the things that I see.

ARCELIA GUTIERREZ:

In terms of television programming, I think we're starting to see more of an embrace of racially diverse casting, multi-ethnic and multi-racial casting, and more attention to LGBTQIA+ representation. We can think of, for example, *Pose* [FX, 2018-2021], a groundbreaking television series that was inspired by the documentary *Paris is Burning* [Jennie Livingston, 1990]. This TV series really centers the experiences of Black and Black Latinx trans and gender non-conforming characters. That's something that we hadn't really seen on television before in this way. And Stephen Canals is one of the co-creators of the series as well.

And in terms of multi-ethnic and multi-racial casting, I draw a comparison to Latin American-oriented telenovelas. We can think of *La reina del sur* (The queen of the South, Telemundo/RTI/Antena 3, 2011, Netflix, 2019) and its very multinational, multi-ethnic casting strategy so that the series can travel globally. It's going to travel well in Mexico and Colombia, it's going to go to Spain [Mexico, Colombia, and Spain were the three countries involved in the co-production, and the story is set principally in Mexico and Spain], to parts of Africa, and it's going to be consumed well because of the casting practices. I think we're starting to see somewhat of a similar trend in Latinx television and the sense that we're getting this pan-ethnic, pan-racial casting that's very intentional. One example of that would be Amazon Prime's *With Love* (2021-present), which has this spectrum of ethnic and racial representation of *latinidad*. We can talk about if that’s actually a successful strategy or whether more culturally specific narratives are landing better, but it’s a strategy that I'm seeing.

Something else [to consider] is the short-lived renaissance of Latinx content on over-the-top media, or streamers. And I think their success has been mixed, largely due to the fact that Netflix and Hulu are predicated on the subscription model and growth has to come from [new] subscribers, and so I think that puts Latinx-oriented series in a predicament. I was reading an article about the cancellation of Netflix’s *The Babysitters’ Club* [2020-2021] and it mentions that Netflix already sees itself as having captured US-based subscribers, so growth isn't going to come from here, it's going to come from other parts of the world, and so I think that's negative for Latinx series that are seen as not traveling well. [We see] the demise of our stories because of that, because they're not going to attract [international] subscribers, or they're not marketed as universal stories, they're seen as more ethnically specific stories and therefore don't travel well.

The other negative trend would be the failure of network television shows that are Latinx-oriented. We don’t really have any, right? *The Baker and the Beauty* on ABC [2020] was canceled. Five episodes of *The Promised Land* (2022) aired on ABC and that was just moved to Hulu, so I think that’s a troublesome trend that we’re seeing.

Podcasting is going to be an area that’s going to help transform the industry, there’s going to be growth there. Right now we’re seeing a boom that I think will continue to grow over the next years. We can think of podcasts like [Locutora Radio](https://locatoraradio.com), which is hugely popular, and Spanish-language podcast [Radio Ambulante](https://radioambulante.org/en). [Futuro Studios](https://www.futuromediagroup.org/media-property/futuro-studios/) is becoming a powerhouse and producing podcasting content such as [Anything for Selena](https://www.wbur.org/podcasts/anythingforselena). They have a slate of diverse, pan-ethnically oriented podcasts that I think are going to be quite important.

Also, social media and digital media we sometimes forget about. The future trend, I think, is Generation Z, Tik Tok and the content they’re producing. How they’re engaging on the platform with this content, how it’s being received, and also issues with algorithms [and how they shape media consumption] are all part of the future of the trend of social media entertainment.

**RIELLE NAVITSKI:** **Who do you see as the most important change-makers and taste-makers in the field of Latinx media today?**

FREDERICK LUIS ALDAMA: There are a number of really important innovators that are still working and have the courage to continue to do the work of keeping the little path we have cleared [open], because it’s always kind of closing in on us. An interview I did recently with América Ferrera reminded me of this, and also Stephanie Beatriz reminded me of this. As Mary had mentioned and many of us had mentioned, when we are excited because instead of these little moments, we’re seeing, possibly, more of a *movement* toward [a greater] complexity spectrum [in media], you know, all of these things that we want. Yet in the end America, Stephanie, Peter Marietta, a friend of mine, you know, they still have to put food on the table. I mention this because sometimes there are things that are happening in the industry that we can't see. We need to be kind of mindful of where we as scholars see a step back [in terms of representation], but in actual material practice it's by necessity. Therefore, we need to start thinking about what happens, for instance in a reboot if, by necessity, that's the only space for re-inhabitation [by Latinx actors] for us. What can possibly happen in a *Party of Five* [ a reboot of the 1990s TV show of the same name with a Latinx cast, Freedom, 2020] that’s new and innovative and interesting? So I think that's also something really important for us to be asking. People like America and Stephanie Beatriz, Alex Rivera in cinema, Gigi Saul Guerrero and Michael Peña, and others, you know that they've kind of been backed into situations [where they were cast in stereotypical roles] because that's happening, that's the reality. Now it's a question of, “What are they able to do when they are backed into those situations?” One of the questions I asked Stephanie Beatriz was why, when she was brought on to *Modern Family*, does she accept to play an even more caricatured version [of the Latina “spitfire” stereotype] than Sofía Vergara’s Gloria and she was totally upfront and frank about it: “I had to pay my bills.”

So, I think that we need to see courage everywhere, is what I’m getting at. And, for those who are in these spaces, we also need to allow for a certain kind of grace of space in order for them to be able to do what they're doing in these media spaces.

JILLIAN BAEZ: I think we're in a moment, where there are many individuals, especially in the social media space. I want to echo some of Arcelia’s comments about what's happening on spaces like TikTok and emphasize that I think some of the most interesting work is done in the short form. Part of that is that it's easy to produce and circulate without having to go through these much bigger gatekeepers within media corporations. That’s how we're seeing a lot of folks sort of infiltrating into the system – even folks that are on bigger platforms like [Mitú](https://wearemitu.com) or, for example, on YouTube.

I would also emphasize here too that what is shaping this is that the Latino audience is a young audience. Mary pointed to this earlier at least a fourth of the overall audience demographic in this century is young.

Children's media has always been ahead, compared to adult programming, in terms of inclusion of Latinos and I think that we’re continuing to see that. As a trend it's something that we don't quite focus on - even as scholars, we tend to overlook it. But I want to just emphasize that, at the same time, there are bigger tastemakers who sometimes the industry might be listening to but audiences might have a more vexed relationship with.

One of the people that came to mind, as I was thinking through this question, is someone like Lin-Manuel Miranda. In the last few years we've seen a number of projects that he's done with really large media companies, for example, like Disney. I don't know how much agency he has - that's always unclear. How much agency do they have in terms of their creative work? I say this because he's someone who in many ways has some of the attention of these really, really top executives within industries and can make things happen that other creative folks cannot. But, at the same time, audiences have a bit of a frustrated relationship [with Miranda], depending on the project. Some more than others. I'm thinking, for example, about the response to *In the Heights* last year when the film adaptation was released [regarding the absence of Afro-Latinx actors in starring roles, despite the large Afro-Latinx population in New York City, where the film is set].

So, I think that it’s really important too, because there’s sometimes a tension between who becomes a tastemaker and is able to break through to the mainstream, in this case both theater and film. But, also, how does that land with Latino audiences? In this case, it's a good example of someone to whom I think people have very mixed responses.

MARY BELTRÁN: These are great people that have been mentioned already and I completely agree. I would add that I think that there are a number of performers who have now become writer-producers, or at least showrunners who are more symbolically in charge of projects. It’s kind of a mixed thing that these executive producers that are getting attention seem to have to first become celebrities in some other way. I don't know that that is the only way that people should have to be able to bring their creative projects forward, but I mean we can think of, in addition to America Ferrera [and] Tanya Saracho, Salma Hayek has also been a showrunner of some projects that have been successful. Fred Armisen also, in partnering with Ana Fabrega and Julio Torres. Armisen and Torres both came up through SNL actually, but they together are the EPs [executive producers] of *Los Espookys*.

Eva Longoria has actually also produced a number of important projects. I know she's one of the producers of the *Hot Cheetos* film that will be coming out [*Flamin’*, directed by Longoria in 2021].

I think that we're seeing these individuals, who maybe originally came in to act, seeing a need to use the status that they've gained to do more to put Latinx projects out there and Latinx stories. I think that they are some of the key change makers these days.

We could think of someone like Marta Fernández, who was the executive at Starz which greenlit *Vida* and also was working to try to nurture a few other Latinx projects at the same time. She moved from Starz, however, and *Vida* was canceled about a year later. We may gain champions and we may lose them as well.

I also want to call attention to Latino Public Broadcasting. Luis Ortiz is one of the executive staff there who plays a major role in working to nurture talented writer-producers who want to try to get funding assistance and perhaps to get their premieres on public television. Some of these media makers like independent filmmaker Cristina Ibarra - she had the film *Las Marthas* debut on public television - will continue to produce more and more ambitious kinds of projects, I would think. Luis Ortiz, at LPB [[Latino Public Broadcasting](https://lpbp.org)], is creating a launching pad for new media makers who want to make content about all different kinds of Latinx lives and cultures.

Christy Haubegger is an executive now at Warner Media who many, many years ago, founded [*Latina* magazine](https://latina.com) and then worked to become a film producer and then became an agent at CAA [[Creative Artists Agency](https://www.caa.com), an influential sports and entertainment talent agency] where she ultimately pushed them to create a list of writers of color and other media makers of color so that no one could ever say, “Oh, I didn't hire a Latinx writer, because I don't know that there are any.” Now there's this list and everyone can say, “Well, why didn't you go to the list?” She did that, and she also worked to create more avenues for staff writers, a kind of entry-level job in television, to create more avenues for people to get promoted to the mid-level and the executive producer level. So, she's been working from the inside to try to really push the industry to make changes that can make a difference. Now she's been hired by Warner Media to head some of their diversity efforts. Hopefully, she'll be able to have an effect there as well.

ARCELIA GUTIERREZ: One of the trends that I’m seeing currently is the rise of powerhouse Latina showrunners. Mary mentioned some of them: Tanya Saracho, the showrunner for Starz’s *Vida*, landed a deal with Universal Content Production – that’s part of the NBCUniversal conglomerate – and so I think we’re going to see programming coming in terms of television, but also podcasting. That’s part of that deal, so that’s an interesting development. Gloria Calderón Kellett, who’s known for *One Day at a Time* (Netflix, 2017-2019, Pop 2019-2020), landed an overall deal with Amazon. Linda Yvette Chávez, who’s one of the co-creators of *Gentefied*, is having a lot of crossover success, and now she’s going into film with the Hot Cheetos movie, so that’s a really interesting development. And I think we’re going to see the rise of Sierra Teller Ornelas, one of those showrunners for Peacock’s Rutherford Falls (2021-present). If you haven’t watched it, it’s this hilarious sitcom which really centers Native history and offers a very savvy critique of settler colonialism, so I highly recommend that you check it out.

**RIELLE NAVITSKI: What are your predictions about where Latinx media is going in the future?**

FREDERICK ALDAMA: What I’m excited personally, selfishly, about is we’re starting to see [exciting genre fare like] … *Los Espookys* is just off-the-hook awesome. So, if you haven’t seen it and watched it carefully, please go do that. It’s been mentioned a couple times by my amazing colleagues here. For all these incredible things that it’s doing – not just [favoring] the Spanish dominant but the trans-hemispheric [approach], the collapsing of Chile [the shooting location] with LA in and through a kind of queer goth paranormal *Ghostbuster* forms. There’s sci-fi, speculative fantasy and within that, what I’d love to see more of, because this is my thing, is superheroes. I love *Raising Dion* (Netflix, 2019-present). And I especially love the character, [who is] not even the sidekick, because Esperanza Jiménez is kind of Dion’s co-pilot. They’re “tweensters” and they're saving the world. I love that in *Star Girl* [DC Universe, 2020-present], even though it was a white protagonist-focused series, we got our Yolanda Montez [who plays the character of Wildcat], our Latina kick-ass, misfit boxer who gets a whole arc of her own within that space. I love that we've got in *The Umbrella Academy* [Netflix, 2019-present], especially season two where we finally get Diego [played by David Castañeda] getting a lot of air time and a lot of complexity. *Doom Patrol* [DC Universe/HBO Max, 2019-present] is another one where Diane Guerrero re-inhabits a white character from the comic book and does something really interesting with that. Of course, in the past, we had *Dark Angel* [starring Jessica Alba, Fox, 2000-2002]. We also have Rosario Dawson as Night Nurse [in several Marvel Cinematic Universe shows produced by Netflix]. For me, I would love to see us really push into the space of speculative storytelling.

JILLIAN BAEZ: I definitely see a continued push for more racial inclusivity within Latino representation. Here, I’m talking about more images and more stories that center Afro-Latino characters, that really foreground Blackness. But also indigeneity. We haven’t seen as much of a push for that, at least in media spaces. But I think that’s definitely something that already is happening on the ground level, that we will begin to hopefully see start to seep into production and representation.

These questions about the future are always so hard - I'm not a fortune teller. But, I do think that the future is now. It starts now. I think that demographic shifts are also going to play a role in some of the developments that we see in terms of Latino media. We’ve really emphasized, for example, the youth and the fact that they are so much of the audience.

I also want to emphasize thinking more about Central American stories. I think it's really important to emphasize that Salvadorans are now the third largest group in terms of Latinos in the US. Although we've seen some coverage of Salvadorans, I would say more so in terms of news media or every once in a while in terms of crime stories that are centered in Central America, particularly El Salvador and sometimes Guatemala. I think that we're going to see much more of a push for more representations from that particular part of the population that push back against the limited kind of border narratives, because really those are part of a larger border story now. But people really don’t know who Central Americans are or even realize how much of a second-generation population there is here now in the US. That's one of the shifts that we will begin to see. I don't know how long that will take, but definitely that's something where I feel like the seeds are in the ground right now.

MARY BELTRÁN: One thing that I was learning as I did research for my recent book *Latino TV: A History* [NYU Press, 2022] was that there was a real shift among the Latinx TV writing community from the 2000s compared to the 2010s. A few things have shifted. One is that we've had many more women begin to enter the industry and be quite successful. A few of them have been quite successful like Gloria Calderón Kellett and Tanya Saracho. The women that have worked on *Queen of the South* [USA Network, 2016-2021], the English language remake of *La reina del sur*.

Also, a few things that were part of the shift that we've seen is that for the first time we've had Latina and Latino writers get overall deals. An overall deal is basically an offer from a network or studio that is multi-year. So, it might be, for example, that they want them to create three different series for us over five years. It offers a kind of financial stability to creatives that they don't always have. It often allows them to hire other people to work with them. Sometimes it even allows them to have a deal where they can actually help someone else create a new show. It just depends on what kind of deal they have. But, Latino writers weren't getting those. Initially, it was only white writers and then a few African American writers. Now, finally some Latino writers and it's just turned out that women actually have gotten them more than men lately. What this does is, it encourages more community among the creatives. They don't have to compete in the same way. It’s not like ABC has their one Latino show so we're all going to compete to try to get that one. There’s a little more of an opportunity for veteran writers to support new writers.

And, we're seeing some professional support groups are being created. [Untitled Latinx Project](https://untitledlatinxproject.com), which I think Fede mentioned, was created by Tanya Saracho and Gloria Calderón Kellett and some other women that were working in the industry. They are now working to push the industry to be more inclusive, to “put their money where their mouth is” and saying they really care about Latino narratives on television. I’m sure there must be sometimes a fear of being seen as too much of an activist while you're working within the industry, because you might be seen as a troublemaker who should not be hired again. I think this kind of thing at least helps individuals working as professionals to focus on their career, but also focus on trying to make the industry better for all kinds of Latino narratives and professionals. I'm seeing some shift in that way.

But, there’s still a lot of frustration and a lot of effort that can get put in without sometimes a lot of payback. Latinos need to show that we will support Latino projects. This is something anyone who studies Latinx media has probably been saying for decades now, but it's still important. Yet, I know it's a little harder when it's a streaming media outlet that doesn't even release its figures, as has been the case for Netflix. I know that the people that worked on *One Day at A Time* were never given accurate statistics about who was watching the show as they were being told that their show might not get renewed when it was back on Netflix. There's still this issue of us needing to show that Latinos want to see Latino protagonists.

ARCELIA GUTIÉRREZ: I think for the future, something exciting is a renewed attention to systemic inequities and media industries broadly. I think Oscars So White and the Me Too movement opened up that discursive change. Before there was attention paid, but not as much. I think because of these movements, [these issues are] on the minds of a lot more people and seen as something that's important that we need to advocate for. That’s an important shift that's just happened within the last few years. And I tie that to the work that Congressperson Joaquin Castro is doing to hold various media industries accountable to Latinx inclusion, from public broadcasting to studios to television. My hope is that with changemakers in terms of policy, other activist organizations like the [National Hispanic Media Coalition](https://www.nhmc.org), NALIPA [[National Association of Latino Independent Producers](https://www.nalip.org)] that Frederick discussed. With the work of us viewers, us audiences, we can push industries to hold them accountable to the representation that we want and the inclusion that we deserve.

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***Mary Beltrán*** *is the Associate Director and former Founding Director of the Moody College of Communication’s Latino Media Arts & Studies Program. She is also an affiliate of the Department of Mexican American and Latina/o Studies and the Center for Women’s and Gender Studies. Dr. Beltran’s scholarship has explored such topics as the evolution of Latina/o film and television production and stardom since the 1920s, the implications of the rising visibility of mixed-race actors and characters, and strategies on the part of television networks to appeal to more diverse audiences. She is the author of* Latina/o Stars in US Eyes *(University of Illinois Press, 2009), co-editor, with Camilla Fojas, of* Mixed Race Hollywood *(New York University Press, 2008), and author of* Latino TV: A History *(New York University Press, January 2022).*

***Arcelia Gutiérrez*** *is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Film and Media Studies at the University of California, Irvine. She specializes in Latinx studies, media studies, media activism, and media industries. Her current book manuscript, tentatively titled Deploying Latinidad: The Politics of Contemporary Media Activism, traces how Latinx media activists have navigated processes of deregulation and neo-liberalization and the strategies they’ve used to push for the inclusion of Latinxs in television, film, and radio. Dr. Gutiérrez serves as the Co-Chair of the Society for Cinema and Media Studies’ Latino/a Caucus. She also served as curator of the Latin America exhibit for the “Unlocking the Airwaves: Revitalizing an Early Public and Educational Radio Collection” project, a comprehensive online collection of early educational public radio content from the National Association of Educational Broadcasters (NAEB).*

## Section IV: Key Creatives

This section offers brief profiles of the life and work of significant Latino/a/x media makers, such as directors, screenwriters, showrunners, and actors. These profiles are designed for classroom use in two capacities. First, they can be used as concise introductions to the work of individuals who are frequently studied in Latinx media courses. Second, they can serve as models for an assignment that uses the principles of open pedagogy. Rather than asking students to complete work that will only be read by the instructor and in some cases, by fellow students, open pedagogy guides students in creating informative resources for the public at large. These resources can be incorporated into open educational resources like this textbook or shared in other ways. We have included sample profiles by scholars that use both traditional academic sources and non-traditional sources, as well as examples of student-created profiles.

After reading a Key Creatives profile, students should be able to:

Give an overview of the individual’s background, formative experiences and collaborations

Give an overview of the individual’s professional trajectory, including key works, recurring themes or preoccupations, major shifts in approach or mode of production over time

Explain the significance of their work within Latinx media history and/or in relation to key issues or debates such as race, gender, sexuality, class, or politics

## SAMPLE PROFILE – TRADITIONAL ACADEMIC SOURCES

### Lourdes Portillo

*Rielle Navitski (University of Georgia)*

Lourdes Portillo is perhaps the most prominent filmmaker working at the intersection of documentary cinema and feminist politics, and between Latin America and the US. Her eclectic body of work takes a critical look at the human costs of political repression and global inequality, particularly in the US-Mexico border region. In two of the most impactful works of Portillo’s forty-year career, the courage of women in the face of unthinkable acts emerges as a persistent theme. Her Oscar-nominated feature *Las Madres: The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo* (1986), co-directed with Susana Muñoz, documents the activism of grieving mothers whose children became victims of forced disappearance during the “Dirty War” waged by Argentina’s military dictatorship between 1976 and 1983. *Señorita extraviada* (*Missing Young Woman*, 2001) investigates another series of devastating disappearances: the kidnapping, sexual assault, and presumed murder of hundreds of young women in Ciudad Juárez, just across the border from El Paso, Texas.

Other entries in Portillo’s filmography portray individual acts of violence that nonetheless reverberate in the US-Mexico borderlands and beyond. In *El diablo nunca duerme* (*The Devil Never Sleeps*, 1994), the mysterious death of Portillo’s uncle, a politician and real estate developer in her home state of Chihuahua, triggers an obsessive investigation into family secrets that also uncovers the corruption and ecological damage (namely, the draining of underground water reserves for agriculture) underlying the border region’s rapid economic growth. *Corpus: A Home Movie about Selena* (1999) depicts the murder of Tejana music idol Selena Quintanilla by the president of her fan club as both a sensationalized media event and a watershed moment for the visibility of Latina identity, communicated through public acts of mourning. Portillo’s films have also denounced the social toll of border enforcement in the video installation *This is Your Day/Hoy es Tu Día* (1995) and of drug trafficking in the documentary-fiction hybrid *Al más allá* (*Beyond the Beyond*, 2008). In the film, Portillo plays herself as a documentary filmmaker seeking to understand the impact of the narcotics trade in the Yucatán peninsula.

The very format of the text you are reading, the profile, tends to reinforce common ideas about the director as a lone genius. Yet Portillo herself has stressed the importance to her work of her longstanding collaborations with cinematographer Kyle Kibbe, sound recordist José Araújo and editor Vivien Hillgrove, as well the role of in-depth conversations with her crew in defining a film’s concept before shooting begins (Fregoso 2001: 27-28, 33-34; Torres 66; Martínez 25, 29). *The Devil Never Sleeps* even includes a moment where members of the film’s crew are revealed to be accompanying Portillo as she records a phone call with her uncle’s widow, who declined to be interviewed on camera. As these self-referential techniques suggests, Portillo’s films draw attention to the act of representation and the subjective, partial nature of knowledge, rather than presenting documentary as a straightforward truth.

Portillo identifies as Chicana—a term that indicates both Mexican-American origin and a political commitment to the liberation of the Mexican-American community—and as a lesbian, though her relationship to both those identities has evolved over time (Hidalgo-de la Riva 83, Velasco 247). Born in Chihuahua City in 1944, Portillo moved with her family to Los Angeles in the late 1950s and quickly felt the impacts of racial discrimination in her daily life (Hidalgo-de la Riva 79, Velasco 246). With film production taking place all around her, Portillo first ventured into the industry as a production assistant at the age of 21 and quickly came to feel she had found her calling (Torres 66, Martínez 25). However, Portillo “never thought [she] could fit into Hollywood” (Martínez 28) as a Chicana. She reflected in an interview, “It was the 1970s and if I went into the offices of the funders, or whomever was in charge, I’d probably look like their maid and they wouldn’t trust me with a million dollars [to make a film]” (Hidalgo-de la Riva 80-81). As a result, Portillo opted to relocate to San Francisco, where she joined the leftist filmmaking collective Cine Manifest and later earned an MFA in film from the San Francisco Art Institute (Fusco 22, Hidalgo-de la Riva 81). Working at a distance both from Hollywood and the critical mass of LA-based Chicano filmmakers that positioned themselves in opposition to it, Portillo cultivated a unique style of independent filmmaking (Hidalgo-de la Riva 80-82).

Portillo made her screen debut with *Después del terremoto* (*After the Earthquake*, 1979), a fictional, black-and-white short she co-directed with Nina Serrano. *After the Earthquake* is a portrait of a young woman named Irene (Vilma Coronado), who has fled Nicaragua in the aftermath of the 1976 earthquake that destroyed much of the nation’s capital Managua. The disaster fueled opposition to the dictatorship of Anastasio Somoza Debayle, who misappropriated international aid to enrich himself and cracked down on the leftist Sandinistas who sought to oust him from power. This group of dissidents is represented in the film by the character of Irene’s former fiancé Julio (Agnelo Guzmán), who has just arrived in the United States after being imprisoned and tortured. Irene is poised to choose between the individual choices privileged by American consumer culture—represented by her purchase of a television set early in the film—and a life with the idealistic Julio, whose idea of revolution does not seem to incorporate feminist values (Fregoso 1993: 96). The film’s open-ended structure deliberately offers no clear resolution to these tensions. Yet some viewers were skeptical of the way it seemed to privilege feminism over Nicaraguan nationalism and leftist politics (Fregoso 1993: 153)

<Fig. 16.1 here> *Irene (Vilma Coronado) signs paperwork to purchase a television on layaway, a symbolic act of financial independence and participation in US consumer culture, in* Después del terremoto*.*

As Ana Patricia Rodríguez points out, *After the Earthquake* was part of a broader trend in the work of Chicana writers and filmmakers who sought to express their solidarity with Central Americans fighting against the effects of colonialism and the Cold War—including the United States’ backing of right-wing dictatorships in the region and its funding of the *contras*, armed groups that sought to overthrow the Sandinistas who came to power in Nicaragua in 1979—but often erased the specifics of Central American experiences in the process (199-200). Portillo’s next film *Las Madres: The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo* also dealt with a human rights crisis in Latin America that led many Latinos living in the United States to speak up in solidarity: namely, the violence and torture perpetrated by Argentina’s military dictatorship, which was also aligned with the United States under its Cold War policy of suppressing socialism, no matter the human cost.

Working with the Argentine-born filmmaker Susana Muñoz, Portillo registered the harrowing testimonies of a group of mothers searching for answers about the fate of their children who, despite being branded as extremists and terrorists by the government, were merely idealistic young people seeking greater social equality. Despite suffering arrests, torture, and disappearances themselves, Las Madres became the most visible symbols of resistance to the military dictatorship. Largely unadorned in its style—it mostly consists of “talking head” interviews with the families of the disappeared—*Las Madres* exemplifies Portillo’s approach as she defined it in a 1998 interview: “rather than try to convey political oppression, economic oppression, I think what I’m trying to do is, I’m trying to touch people’s humanity with the humanity I’m trying to portray [. . . ] We want feelings and hope that, in creating this love and this feeling of humanity amongst the viewer, the ﬁlm creates compassion.” (Fregoso 2001: 28-29).

In an effort to recover from the emotionally difficult process of filming *Las Madres*, Portillo turned to the creation of *La Ofrenda: The Days of the Dead* (1988), which explores how death is often viewed in Mexican culture as an integral part of daily life rather than a threat to be feared (Martínez 27). The film documents the rituals surrounding the Day of the Dead, when deceased loved ones are believed to visit those left behind, both in Mexico and in Chicano communities. Following *La Ofrenda*, Portillo’s work has largely focused on the US-Mexico border region, though she has continued to explore shared struggles and social issues in the Americas, including the legacy of colonialization in *Columbus on Trial* (1992), a collaboration with the Latino sketch comedy collective Culture Clash, and the complexities of racial identity in Latin America and the Caribbean in *Mirrors of the Heart* (1993).

By contrast, *The Devil Never Sleeps*, one of Portillo’s best-known and critically acclaimed works, explores a topic close to home. The film attempts not only to unravel the mystery of the death of Portillo’s uncle Oscar Ruiz Almeida by gunshot wound—while it was ruled a suicide, some family members suspected murder—but also to sort through conflicting accounts of what he was like as a person. Ultimately, the film suggests that truth is always partial and knowledge subjective and incomplete. As rumors of business deals gone wrong, adultery (Ruiz Almeida remarried just two months after the death of his first wife), child abuse, and homosexuality fly, the film cuts between interviews with her uncle’s family and friends and footage of Mexican telenovelas whose emotional intensity, it’s suggested, is only slightly greater than the real-life drama. Highlighting the selective nature of any documentary account, the film’s compositions emphasize the intervention of media technologies, including the visible edges of television screens (a motif that reappears in *Missing Young Woman*) and reflections of the footage Portillo is reviewing in mirrored sunglasses.

<Fig. 16.2 here> *Portillo films herself reviewing footage in* The Devil Never Sleeps *in a sly commentary on filmic mediation*.

Like *The Devil Never Sleeps*, *Missing Young Woman* delves into a seemingly unsolvable mystery, in this case one of truly horrifying scope and proportions: the murders of hundreds of young women in Ciudad Juárez during the 1990s. As a result of police incompetence, corruption, and even involvement in the rape and murder of women, the killings continued, despite the arrest of the alleged killer, who supposedly paid accomplices to continue the murders while behind bars. *Missing Young Woman* is at once a chronicle of the flawed police investigation, an elegy for the disappeared—who were further dehumanized through the circulation of graphic imagery of their bodies (Portillo 254, Driver 221)—and a document of their family members’ desperate search for their loved ones.

The majority of the missing women were employed in **maquiladoras**—US-owned factories that sprung up after the North American Free Trade Agreement lifted US trade barriers to goods made in Mexico—signaling the deadly consequences that can accompany economic growth. As Portillo states in the film’s voiceover over dizzying time-lapse images of the city, “Juárez is the city of the future. As a model of globalization, Ciudad Juárez is spinning out of control.” Portillo’s denunciation of the deadly conditions created by Juárez’s status as a node of both legal and illicit commerce (in the form of drug trafficking) foreshadowed the tidal wave of violence unleashed by President Felipe Calderón’s frontal assault on organized crime beginning in 2006, which has not subsided as of this writing in 2022. *Missing Young Woman* became an organizing tool for families seeking justice in Mexico (Driver 221) and Portillo embraced the role of “human rights worker,” touring internationally with the film (Portillo 258-262). This work consumed her energies for several years.

<Fig. 16.3 here> Missing Young Woman *connects the murders and disappearances in Ciudad Juárez to the abuses of global capitalism, stressing the vulnerability of the largely female population of maquiladora workers such as the woman pictured here.*

Now in her late seventies, Portillo recently completed the animated short *State of Grace* (2020), which grapples with her cancer diagnosis while evoking the emotional strength she draws from her family and ancestors. Even as she delves into the violence that marks colonialism, capitalist exploitation, and even intimate family dynamics, Portillo illuminates the creativity, resilience, and activism of Latin American and Latinx communities and their transformative power.

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## SAMPLE PROFILE – TRADITIONAL ACADEMIC SOURCES

### **Alex Rivera**

*Sarah Wells (University of Wisconsin, Madison)*

Alex Rivera, the son of a Peruvian immigrant, has made films since 1995. His work ranges from shorts to feature-length documentary and fiction films, and moves beyond cinema in the traditional sense to include other screen media — webpages, memes, satirical trailers and music videos for activist campaigns (Schreiber; Aldama 380). He was one of the founders of the Latinx filmmaking distribution collective, SubCine, and his films have screened in top venues, including the Sundance and Berlin film festivals, Getty Museum and the Bilbao Guggenheim; in 2021, he was named a MacArthur “Genius” Fellow. He has also been artist-in-residence at various universities and at the National Day Laborer’s Organization (NDLON). His work is identified by three interwoven elements: first, a focus on immigrants and their labor; second, a multi-platform approach to screen media and solidarity, including engaging with diverse communities (activists, students, intellectuals, film critics); and third, an interest in satire or parody. Together, these elements constitute a project of “hacking” or remixing — or, as Rivera and several critics have put forth, a rasquache Latinx aesthetics (Decena, Rivera, and Gray; Castillo; Lozano). Rasquache describes how people irreverently produce art from daily life — for example, with cars or buildings—giving cheap or discarded materials new, creative uses.

Rivera often cites and distorts US media coverage and popular culture to highlight its anti-immigrant premises. He also frequently deploys what are called “operational images” (logistical images not intended for viewing) against themselves, to criticize practices of surveillance.

<Fig. 17.1 here> *X-ray surveillance footage of migrants, deployed in the documentary short* Visible Border.

<Fig. 17.2 here> *Surveillance footage from the U.S.-Mexico border in the opening sequence of* The Infiltrators.

In this context, Rivera draws on models from “hactivists,” especially Ricardo Domínguez, a conceptual artist, programmer, and activists focused on the US-Mexico border (Castillo 9-10). Similarly, Rivera frequently plays with or “hacks” genres, as in his spoof on industrial films, the web-based short “Why Cybraceros?” (1997). Anticipating his feature-length film Sleep Dealer (2008), Why Cybraceros? updates a promotional film by the Council of California Growers, Why Braceros? (1959) for the age of the internet. Instituted in 1942, the Bracero program was designed to fill a shortage of labor in the United States when many young men were fighting in the Second World War by hiring Mexican guestworkers temporarily. The same year, he released two other satirical shorts about the border, “Animaquiladora” (“the animation sweatshop”), which features vignettes spoofing negative portrayals of Latinx people, and a mock-trailer, “Día de la independencia” (1997), which parodies the alien invasion genre and its underlying xenophobia, as in the blockbuster Independence Day (Roland Emmerich, 1996).

Rivera’s first film, based in an undergraduate thesis, was the creative documentary Papapapá (1995). The title is a play on the similarly spelled words in Spanish for “potato” (papa) and “Dad” (papá): Rivera’s father is an immigrant from Peru, where the potato is a central crop. Highly experimental, Papapapá can be characterized as both an essay film (exploring the intersection of personal and political issues) and a “mockumentary” poking fun at traditional ethnographic documentary; it combines home video footage, talking head interviews, 16 mm experimental images, stop-motion animation, snippets of fake/satirical gameshows, audio recordings from the state department, and more (Carroll).

Rivera’s father went in search of better opportunities in the US, only to be disillusioned by the discrimination he faced here. Papa Rivera now remains connected to his fellow Latinx community only through the television screen, where he is filmed endlessly consuming telenovelas (Latin American soap operas). (Worth noting is that the film was made in a pre-Internet era.) The titular father has become a “couch potato” — a visual and verbal pun that works especially well for Spanish-English bilinguals like Rivera. The film interweaves the story of his father with the longer trajectory of the potato. An early product of globalization, potatoes originated in the Andes as a staple food central to the way of life of the Incas; subsequently, they were exported to Europe and later became a quintessentially “American” food — the potato chip.

*Papapapá* anticipates most of the major themes and strategies that will characterize Rivera’s future filmography. In 2003, Rivera released several short documentaries exploring different facets of immigration in a less experimental and less personal vein. All were commissioned by PBS’s Point of View (POV) documentary series and appeared both on television and various websites.

Three very short films comprise the Borders Trilogy. While different in style, viewed together they explore who or what gets to travel under global capitalism and current US policy. In Love on the Line, families and partners separated reunite on the border for moments of communion, to eat, talk, and kiss. Meanwhile, Container City continues Papapapá’s interest in global commodities by focusing on a shipping container facility in New Jersey, showing how objects are allowed to traffic more freely than human beings. The most disturbing of the three shorts is A Visible Border, which consists of a single, initially unclear, sequence of a black-and-white photographic negative. As the camera lens zooms out, we learn that the image was taken from real surveillance technology captured at the Mexico/Guatemala border; we begin to recognize these shapes as the ghostly outlines of bodies who are attempting to become part of the informal (“underground”) US economy. Rivera employs governmental surveillance technologies to reveal the violence experienced by workers attempting to immigrate.

A separate documentary released the same year, The Sixth Section (2003) tells the story of Grupo Unión, a solidarity network of Mexican immigrants. Rivera explores how this group of mostly undocumented men based in Newburgh, New York sustain links with their hometown of Boquerón (Puebla, Mexico). Their energy and conviction have enormous ramifications for the people of their hometown, including reshaping infrastructures — water treatment facilities, an ambulance, and a community center for sports. Demonstrating, like “Love on the Line,” how attachments transcend entrenched borders, the film underscores the growing autonomy of the group. Newburgh has become a flourishing, if partially hidden, “sixth section” — or additional jurisdiction of their hometown in Mexico. Towards the end of the film, we learn that this group is one of over 1,000 challenging ideas of “homeland,” “immigrant,” and “national economy.”

Migrant labor and virtual networks of solidarity are also key themes in Sleep Dealer (2008), Rivera’s most well-known film (co-written with David Riker). It is also his first, and thus far only, feature-length fiction film, and his only one exclusively in Spanish. Filmed mostly in Mexico with a transnational cast, it received the Alfred P. Sloan award for Best Film on Technology and Science at the Sundance Film Festival in 2008. Sleep Dealer is set in a world where water has become the new oil, rigidly controlled by corporations and security forces based in the US, and farming communities in Mexico are being devastated.

<Fig 17.3 here> *In the near-future world of the science fiction film* Sleep Dealer*, water in Mexico is policed by security forces working for multinational corporations*.

The physical border between the two nations is now impenetrable. Memo, a young man from the Oaxaca region, is forced to migrate to the border town of Tijuana to work in the infomaquiladoras, factories that exploit migrant labor through computerized technology and interfaces called nodes that allow the workers to manipulate robots on the US side of the border. In this way, the film invokes the phenomenon known as the maquiladoras—transnational factories often built along border regions to evade national tax laws and reduce tariffs and labor costs (Lyse Rivera.)

<Fig. 17.4 here> *The “infomaquiladoras” of* Sleep Dealer *draw on histories of the exploitation of Mexican manual laborers to create a dystopic future.*

<Fig. 17.5 here> *Detail shot of “connecting” through cyberbetic nodes in* Sleep Dealer.

On the way to Tijuana, Memo meets Luz, a blogger-journalist interested in capturing his story. Meanwhile, Rudy, the Chicanx drone pilot who has assassinated Memo’s father after mistaking him for an “aqua terrorist” (modeled on real-life social movements in Latin America, for example, in both Mexico and Bolivia) is searching for Memo and lands on his story through Luz’s virtual platform. The film charts Memo’s experience of debilitating work in the sleep dealers, his relationship with Luz, and the eventual uniting of Rudy, Memo, and Luz, who conspire together to strike back against water privatization.

Sleep Dealer tackles not only with the depiction of migrants but also the problem of visibility within science fiction [SF] itself. By imagining a Latin American “unskilled” worker in the role of SF protagonist, and by making Tijuana the center of the action, Rivera reworks the genre (Wells). Traditionally, SF requires large budgets to execute its characteristic special effects; facing low-budgets, filmmakers must devise creative solutions, including initial experiments with short films (Frelik) — as Rivera did with Why Cybraceros? Rivera and his crew also employed real Apache helicopter communication (available through public domain) to imagine the drones. In the decade or more since Sleep Dealer was released, the surveillance of the US-Mexico border has increased, making the film each year less an SF and more a documentary of our world — with its drones and militarized video games, man-made droughts, call centers located in India, a rigid border wall and workers who never “unplug.” After Sleep Dealer, Rivera continued to explore the relationship between humans, technology, and labor in his short, Robot Walks Into a Bar, (2014), which aired on PBS’ Futurestates series. Featuring an all-Latinx cast, Rivera approaches issues of automation and workplace obsolescence with an empathy for both the titular robot and the workers he displaces.

With his most recent feature film, the experimental documentary The Infiltrators (2019), — co-directed and co-authored with his partner, Latinx documentary filmmaker Cristina Ibarra — Rivera once again pursues his interest in practices of “disruption.” Like Sleep Dealer, this film examines groups who come together to reroute systems of control and oppression and create alternative communities. The Infiltrators won an Audience Award and the NEXT Innovator Prize at the Sundance Festival. It has been described as “docufiction” (Flores Ruiz), “docu-thriller” (Bugbee), and a “reverse heist” (Schindel). The film follows young DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) activists in the National Immigrant Youth Alliance (NIYA, an organization no longer active) from 2012 to 2016, in their plan to infiltrate a detention center to help detained immigrants by providing them with legal information and, at the same time, draw public attention to their cases. The activists chose a “model” detention facility, the Broward Transitional Center (Florida), run by a private corporation, which held immigrants not charged with crimes — counter to the claims of the then-Obama administration that only criminals were being deported.

While they originally conceived Infiltrators as a more traditional documentary (Schindel), the filmmakers lacked access to what took place within the detention center, sites notoriously opaque to filmmakers and the general public (Rossipal). Thus, they turned to reenactment — filming in a former mental institution and drawing on the activists’ memories through workshops (Flores Ruiz; Schindel) — to explain the infiltration strategies and to make them gripping and suspenseful. The filmmakers used contrasting strategies (lighting, framing, pacing, and camera work) to produce two parallel ways of presenting the present. The result is a new mode of documentary filmmaking that opposes what Rivera deems the “extractive” model: “producing narratives out of a process where filmmakers drop in and capture material and walk away” (Flores Ruiz). At one point in the film, one of the activist-infiltrators states in voiceover, “In every family I’ve been able to see my own family.” The Infiltrators suggests that together these activists are also developing a new, diverse family —inside and beyond the detention center, with the filmmakers themselves joining them. In positing new forms of community engagement in a transnational frame, Alex Rivera and his collaborators reimagine what Latinx screen media offers the world.

<Fig. 17.6 here>

*DACA activist Marco Saavedra protesting, as seen in* The Infiltrators

<Fig. 17.7 here>

*Actor Maynor Alvarado interprets Marco Saavedra in a recreated scene from the Broward Detention Center in* The Infiltrators

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## SAMPLE PROFILE – NON-TRADITIONAL SOURCES

### **Robert Rodriguez**

*Charles Ramírez Berg (University of Texas at Austin)*

Robert Rodriguez began filmmaking by making Mexican American children’s comedies. Growing up in San Antonio, Texas, he became consumed with making films in his early teens. Using his father’s VHS camera, he made dozens of short family comedies starring his nine brothers and sisters (Black). By the time he was accepted to the University of Texas at Austin, he had thousands of hours of movie writing, directing, shooting, and editing experience. Not surprisingly, the final project in his first film production class was another comedic Rodriguez family short, *Bedhead* (1990). It went on to win five Best Short Film awards, including one from the prestigious Black Maria Film Festival. (*Bedhead*, IMDb).

<Fig. 1 here>Bedhead *(1990): David (David Rodriguez) teases and torments his sister Rebecca (Rebecca Rodriguez).*

<Fig. 2 here> Bedhead *(1990): Rebecca summons special powers to turn the tables on David.*

Deciding to make a feature-length film next, Rodriguez raised $7,000 by volunteering for a month-long medical trial and spent the summer before his senior year shooting *El Mariachi*. It was filmed using a friend’s 16mm camera in Ciudad Acuña, across the Rio Grande from Del Rio, Texas, where a high school friend of his, Carlos Gallardo, lived. Carlos played the Mariachi and was the movie’s co-producer, assisting Robert by finding locations (a bar, a brothel, a jail, a ranch house), props (a pickup truck, a city bus, an antique bathtub), and getting his hometown buddies to play most of the parts. Robert did everything else: he wrote the script, lit, shot, sound recorded, and directed the film, then edited the footage into a finished feature (Rodriguez, *Rebel*).

<Fig. 3 here> El Mariachi *(1992): In a memorable chase scene, El Mariachi (Carlos Gallardo) escapes the bad guys by swinging from a hotel terrace onto a passing bus.*

His sensible if ambitious plan for *El Mariachi* was to sell it to one of the Spanish-language straight-to-video companies in Hollywood for $15,000, use that money to make a second film, then repeat the process. Making three back-to-back films single-handedly in this way would be his film school. But the scheme failed because *El Mariachi* was too good. While waiting for a response from the Spanish-language home video company, he dropped off a VHS copy of *Bedhead* containing a two-minute trailer for *El Mariachi* at International Creative Management (ICM), a top talent and literary agency. One of the agents watched the video, was intrigued, and asked to see *El Mariachi*. When he did, he was so impressed that he quickly signed Robert with ICM. In a matter of weeks, the agency had brokered a deal for Robert to direct two features for Columbia Pictures (Rodriguez, *Rebel*).

It was the beginning of a long and very active movie making career. And those two early films, *Bedhead* and *El Mariachi*, were early indicators of the two entertaining sides of Rodriguez’s creative output: light-hearted children’s comedy-adventures on the one hand and hard-hitting adult action flicks on the other. Looking at each group in turn is a useful way to appreciate his filmmaking output.

If you’ve ever sat on the floor to play with a four- or five-year-old, you know that the operative word for the session is “pretend.” Once the child says that, “real world” rules are suspended and anything imaginable is possible. What makes Rodriguez’s children’s films different from anybody else’s is his ability to access his five-year-old brain and pretend without limitations. Films like “The Misbehavers” episode in *Four Rooms* (1995), *Spy Kids* (2001) and its three sequels (2002, 2003, 2011), *The Adventures of Sharkboy and Lavagirl* (2005), *Shorts* (2009), and *We Can Be Heroes* (2020), are not only about kids who possess that boundless world view, they are written and directed by Rodriguez from that anything-is-possible perspective*.*

As opposed to most studio-produced children’s fare, which are made by adults trying to remember childhood, Rodriguez’s completely inhabit that worldview. If his kid flicks are often messier, noisier, and less-coherent than a typical family film, they truly do resemble a movie made by a post-toddler unaware of the rules of storytelling and moviemaking. They are more like, well, playing on the floor with a five-year-old—and that is part of their charm.

<Fig. 4 here> We Can Be Heroes *(2020): Robert Rodriguez collaborated with his sons Racer and Rebel and daughter Rhiannon to create a “pretend” story about the children of superheroes who possess their own superpowers.*

As for the full-tilt, hard-core action films, they are R-rated because they’re pushing the genre in new, unexpected directions. Films such as the Quentin Tarantino-scripted criminals-on-the-run-plus-vampire flick *From Dusk Till Dawn* (1996), the exploitation-movie celebration *Planet Terror* (2007), his violent and sexy collaborations with graphic novelist Frank Miller *Sin City* (2005) and its 2014 sequel, the explosive set-in-Mexico adventures *Desperado* (1995) and *Once Upon a Time in Mexico* (2003), the gritty revenge duo *Machete* (2010) and *Machete Kills* (2013), the manga-inspired *Alita: Battle Angel* (2018), and even his recent PG-rated *El Mariachi*-meets-*Star Wars* episode “The Tragedy” from *The Mandalorian* (2020) all operate on the basic premise driving the best action movies, namely the need to push familiar genre elements—fights, chases, rescues, shootouts, killings—beyond anything ever seen before.

Two more aspects of Rodriguez’s filmmaking deserve mention. First, his technological wizardry has made him a cinematic innovator. Along with George Lucas, he was one of the first filmmakers to switch to digital movie making in 2001. (Rodriguez, “Film Is Dead”). The adoption of high-definition digital video allowed him to set up his editing suite in his garage in Austin, Texas, and edit his films at home on his own—a move soon copied by other directors, beginning with his friend James Cameron (FULL SPEECH). Additional benefits of moving to digital technology were that it made his filmmaking process easier and cheaper. For example, his first released digital film, *Spy Kids 2: The Island of Lost Dreams* (2002) contained twice the number of special effects as the original for the same cost (Lee).

Digital also allowed him to make movies he couldn’t have made on film, such as *Sin City* (2005). Rodriguez admired Frank Miller’s graphic novel so much that he was determined to make a film that preserved the high-contrast black-and-white look of the book. He managed to capture the graphic novel’s distinctive look by shooting in digital with green screen technology, then refining those images with special effects post production (Rodriguez, *Sin City*). Furthermore, the artistic and financial success of *Sin City* was a major factor in shifting filmmaking towards more special effects-heavy films, from Zack Snyder’s historical epic *300* (2007) to the many superhero adventures that have followed.

<Fig 5 here>Sin City *(2005): To capture the look of Frank Miller’s graphic novel, Robert Rodriguez shot with digital cameras and perfected green screen technology, pioneering a new era of special effects moviemaking.*

Finally, one little-recognized facet of Rodriguez’s body of work, and one that makes him unique in film history, is his career-long dedication to teaching young—especially Latinx—filmmakers. By continually demystifying the process for the last 30 years, he has encouraged aspiring moviemakers to make their films. It started with the *El Mariachi* DVD. His director’s comments were entirely devoted to explaining—step by step, shot by shot—how he made the movie for $7,000 and telling wannabe directors that if he did it, they could too. That DVD also inaugurated a regular Rodriguez DVD feature, the “10-Minute Film School,” where he reveals how he solved trickly filmmaking problems. Other examples of his willingness to pull the curtain back to divulge his filmmaking process are his books such as *Rebel Without a Crew*, the diary of his making of *El Mariachi* that became a sort of DIY bible for beginning independent filmmakers (Rodriguez), and *Sin City: The Making of the Movie*, co-authored with Frank Miller, a detailed description of how he used green screen technology to bring Miller’s graphic novel to the screen (Miller and Rodriguez). In addition, there are his many online interviews, numerous appearances at film festivals, fan conventions, and conferences such as Comic-Con and South by Southwest.

His most recent and educationally ambitious filmmaking-teaching project was a series he developed for his cable channel El Rey. First of all, a word about his 2013 founding of El Rey, which was conceived of as the first Laxinx cable channel (Perren). Besides providing programming for a younger generation of Latinx viewers, Rodriguez has said that one of his main goals in creating the channel was to give budding Latinx filmmakers inspiration by providing them with a creative destination, somewhere they could send their work. (FULL SPEECH)

In 2018, he conceived of a youths-making-films series for El Rey. He selected five young filmmakers to support as they made their first feature films, holding them to the same constraints he had when he made *El Mariachi*—a $7,000 budget and a fourteen-day schedule. Their journey would be recorded by an El Rey film crew, forming the basis for a series titled “Rebel Without a Crew: The Series.” At the same time, Robert would join them and make his own $7,000 feature, *Red 11* (2019). On top of that, he produced a making-of documentary feature covering how he made *Red 11*. Both films premiered at SXSW in the spring of 2019 and the series aired on El Rey later that year. (Ramírez Berg)

<Fig. 6 here> *Robert Rodriguez at the premiere of “Rebel Without a Crew: The Series” and his $7,000 feature,* Red 11*, at South By Southwest, 2019. © Charles Ramírez Berg*

Contributing considerably to American film history, innovating the medium as he did, sharing his filmmaking knowledge with others, and never losing sight of his Mexican American identity, Robert Rodriguez is an inspirational example of a Latinx filmmaker.

***Charles Ramírez Berg****is the author of several books including*Latino Images in Film: Stereotypes, Subversion and Resistance and The Classical Mexican Cinema: The Poetics of the Exceptional Golden Age Films. *He has also written articles and book chapters on Latinos in US films, film history, and narratology, Mexican cinema, as well as entries for the*World Film Encyclopedia*,*The International Dictionary of Films and Filmmakers*, and*The Oxford Encyclopedia of Latinos and Latinas in the United States. Most recently he published a photo essay on Robert Rodriguez entitled “Robert Rodriguez: Teaching Creativity,” in Texas Studies in Literature and Language.

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## Aurora Guerrero

*Katie Morgan*

Aurora Guerrero, the daughter of two Mexican immigrants, began her journey by first studying her own community at UC Berkeley (Tribeca Film Institute). She looked into Chicano studies and psychology, graduating first with a Bachelor of Arts, and then later received a Master’s degree for filmmaking from Cal Arts (Tribeca Film Institute). Guerrero says a large inspiration for her own work was the writings of Chicana feminists Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherríe Moraga, who pushed her to pursue intersectional subjects of her films (Tribeca Film Institute). Her filmmaking work has ranged from short films to TV episodes to full-length films, with pieces of not only her identity as a Chicana, but also as a queer woman threading through these films. The first film Guerrero worked on was assisting Patricia Cardoso in her feminist Latinx film, *Real Women Have Curves* (2002)*,* a coming-of-age story featuring a plus-sized Latina who struggles with her future, family, and sexist societal pressures(Launius 16). Guerrero, along with co-founders Dalila Mendez, Maritza Alvarez and Claudia Mercado, created Womyn Image Makers (WIM), a collective that sought to embrace the community of filmmaking as well as the founders’ shared identities as Chicanas (Díaz-Sánchez 96). Guerrero directed the short film *Pura Lengua* (2005) through WIM, as well as *Viernes Girl* (2005), a short film featuring same-sex attraction between two Latinas (Díaz-Sánchez 96). The short follows the main character, a Latina woman, who is living with her brother, and deals with the antics of him bringing girls around to their house. Finally, on Friday (hence the name *Viernes Girl*), the girl her brother brought over sends him to get her horchata so she can spend time with his sister. The girls dance together in her room, laughing and joking that “she does know how to dance, like a true Salvadorean.” The short ends with the girls kissing and the brother throws the horchata against the wall in frustration. Throughout the dance scene, Guerrero uses close ups on the girls’ hands as they touch and share this moment, showing their fingers intertwined, touching each other’s waists and hips. Both short films debuted at the Sundance Film Festival, picking up attention from Sundance as well as Tribeca and Film Independent. The next time Guerrero debuted a film at the Sundance film festival, it was perhaps her most influential film to date, *Mosquita y Mari* (Díaz-Sánchez 96).

*Mosquita y Mari* (2012) is a full-length film which follows the relationship between two teenaged Latinas as they explore their same-sex attraction in a subtle, slow-burn romance. (Holden). The film delves into the uncertainty and exploration that comes with lesbian relationships, especially between young women who have never considered their own sexuality before (Díaz-Sánchez 98). The main character, Yoli (Fenessa Pineda), is a high school sophomore with nearly perfect grades and heavy pressure from her immigrant parents to succeed in school (Holden). She crosses paths with Mari (Venecia Troncoso), a troubled neighbor who is doing poorly in school, and offers to help her study. As their friendship blossoms, the girls become very close and share quite a few romantic moments with each other (Morales 72). *Mosquita y Mari* is set in the Southern Californian city of Huntington Park, whose Latinx population is 97.1% (Data USA), and the film features an entirely Latinx cast. The setting itself acts as a narrative device, as the girls claim the city as their own over the course of the movie, specifically making a hideaway of their own that they visit while they spend time together (Díaz-Sánchez 99). A theme throughout the film is the ability to have freedom and authority over one’s space, often referencing Mari’s desire to become a truck driver to have freedom of mobility, and the use of the bicycle as the girls ride around Huntington Park (Díaz-Sánchez 99-100).

Guerrero focuses on the subtle moments between Yoli and Mari, marked by unmet glances at each other, physical closeness, and moments of tension between the characters, without the two acting on their desire forwardly. This is a stark contrast between many other explorations of lesbian sexuality in which their attraction may be oversexualized or even facilitated for the male gaze (Alanis and Kompalic 85). *Mosquita y Mari* captures the intimacy that Guerrero herself confirms is based on her own experiences exploring her sexuality as a young Latina (Alanis and Kompalic 86).

Stylistically, the film creates a soft, emotional feeling to it using many techniques. Close ups on the girls’ hands are used frequently as they nervously fidget with things, work on homework together, and share intimate moments of physical touch. These shots give the audience clues as to how the characters are feeling as well as guide their focus along with the character’s. For example, while Mari stands in the mirror to change, the camera follows what can be inferred as Yoli’s gaze, creating an intimate feeling for the scene and giving the viewer insight as to her feelings about Mari. Another stylistic choice in *Mosquita y Mari* is the use of focus to draw the viewer’s eye and create specific feelings. In one scene, the two main characters talk at sunset with shallow focus on them, creating a soft, colorful effect with the lights behind them yet keeping the viewers’ attention on the characters. Many of these intimate moments are accompanied by warm, contemplative music that adds to the romantic, close feeling of these scenes.

*Mosquita y Mari* also explores class and financial struggle, as Mari and her family are poor and she often mentions struggles with money, specifically mentioning how this is made harder by her lack of citizenship. Toward the end of the film, Yoli walks in on Mari prostituting herself in order to support her family. This moment captures the desperation Mari feels as she uses the hideaway that she and Yoli created to keep her family financially afloat. Although it was Mari’s decision to allow this breach of both her body and her refuge from the world, she does this out of desperation. The build-up throughout the film of Yoli and Mari’s soft, subtle, mutually desired relationship is harshly contrasted with this invasion of the metaphorical and literal space as Mari sells her favors to the older man (Aldama 126).

*Mosquita y Mari* went on to be shown in over one hundred film festivals, and amassed many awards and nominations. Following the success of *Mosquita y Mari*,Guerrero directed an episode of *Queen Sugar* (2017), a TV series following a Black family struggling to navigate their futures and assets after a family tragedy, further solidifying Guerrero’s history of focusing on stories of people of color (Alanis and Kompalic 90). The episode centers around the romance and sexuality between the characters Violet (Tina Lifford) and Hollywood (Omar J. Dorsey).

Guerrero’s directing style for *Queen Sugar* had quite a few stylistic similarities to *Mosquita y Mari*, including use of shallow focus to draw the viewer’s attention and create an intimate, emotional feeling. Often the shots would be framed to have a lot of the background visible behind the characters, although out of focus. This episode, however, did not share the use of close ups on hands and other movements like *Mosquita y Mari* or *Viernes Girl*, highlighting the difference in the way Guerrero portrays heterosexual and lesbian intimacy.

Aurora Guerrero has also collaborated with Lin Manuel-Miranda to direct a short film for a song from the Hamilton Mixtape, *Andra Day: Burn* (2018). The short film follows a woman coping with her partner cheating on her.

Guerrero’s work provides an important, unrepresented perspective for the film community. The intersectionality of race, gender, sexuality, and class are all explored in her work, highlighting her own unique experience as a queer Chicana feminist, and drawing from the works of Anzaldúa and Moraga with themes of intersecting identities that build upon one another. Not only does she share the stories of Latinas, but queer Latinas, often intersecting with themes of class struggle and immigration status (Gopinath 12). Her portrayal of queer Latinas is romantic and not hypersexualized or centered toward the male gaze as many depictions of lesbian relationships in media are (Alanis and Kompalic 85) By centering her stories on mostly Latinx people and other people of color, Guerrero is able to exhibit intersectional stories and characters and provide representation to those who are usually extremely unrepresented in film.

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**Lin-Manuel Miranda**

*Grace Kennedy*

Lin-Manuel Miranda grew up in a predominantly Spanish-speaking, immigrant neighborhood in northern Manhattan in New York City. He was born to immigrant parents that moved from Puerto Rico to New York City in order to provide a new life and opportunities for their children. From a young age, Miranda experienced the isolation that is expressed by many first-generation Latinx individuals: a feeling of being different from his white, English-speaking classmates while also feeling separate from other Latinx children in his neighborhood and his family back in Puerto Rico. He grappled with these feelings throughout the majority of his teenage years (Norman 9-12).

Miranda began his career on the stage in musical theater. He began directing, writing, and acting in short plays and musicals while still in middle school, continuing to do so until he graduated from high school. He first got the idea for his first musical, *In the Heights*, while still in college, and he dedicated months of his time to creating the first rendition of the musical. He has described the process of developing the original version of the show, explaining that it really allowed him to better connect to his Latinx background and that the entire experience brought him closer to his cultural roots (Schwartz 10-13). After leaving college, Miranda began to develop the project more, bringing together a diverse set of writers, producers, and cast members to work on expanding the story and characters. The original cast consisted of a wide array of different first-generation Americans, many of whom had at least one parent coming from a Latin American country. Miranda and his writing partner, Quiara Alegría Hudes, fleshed out the story, explaining that they “wanted to give more realistic, rounded portrayals of Latinx characters” (Norman 25). *In the Heights* opened on Broadway in March of 2008, launching the beginning of a very successful career for Miranda. In the same year, he began working on his next project, a musical centered around one of the founding fathers, Alexander Hamilton. The release of *Hamilton* in 2015 was viewed as a revolutionary moment on Broadway because of its unique hip-hop approach—inspired by music Miranda listened to in his neighborhood growing up—as well as its diverse cast of characters, contributing to a “definite upward trend in the casting of minority actors” (Craft).

While he worked on a variety of small TV and film roles in addition to his musical theater work, Miranda’s major transition to the big screen was seen in 2021 with the release of the film adaptation of *In the Heights*. He also composed the music for several Disney movies, helped research and develop the story for Disney’s *Encanto*, and had his directorial debut with the Netflix original movie, *Tick, Tick... Boom!* (2021). Through all of the works done by Miranda—whether they be on the stage or on the big screen—one common theme that permeates is the discussion of immigration and the generational trauma that often comes with it. This can be observed in both *In the Heights* and *Encanto,* with both films discussing different implications of the aforementioned generational trauma.

*In the Heights (2021)* follows the lives of several different individuals in the Washington Heights neighborhood of New York City, focusing specifically on local bodega owner, Usnavi de la Vega (Anthony Ramos). Usnavi is the son of Dominican immigrants and has a dream to move to the Dominican Republic in order to better connect with his heritage. His story is intertwined with that of several other characters, all with their own dreams, motivations, and internal battles with their backgrounds. Nina Rosario (Leslie Grace) is both a first-generation American and a first-generation college student, grappling with the weight of being the “success story” for immigrants in the community. Sonny (Gregory Diaz IV) is Usnavi’s younger cousin who has a passion for social justice and desire for education and is held back by his immigration status. These stories all tie in together to display the unique experiences and struggles faced by different Latinx individuals.

Stylistically, the film pays homage to the original musical through its musical numbers involving massive dance scenes, shot using a series of crane shots and long shots to fully capture the entire cast within the frame. The camera movements in these musical scenes are set apart from the stage with their camera movements and framing; on a stage, one can only use stage movements and lighting to create the different movements and emphasis. In the film, the camera uses rapid movements and zooms to establish the high-energy, fast-paced nature of the neighborhood and match the energy of the soundtrack.

Miranda played the roles of actor, composer, producer, and writer for the film, though we will be focusing on his roles as writer and producer. While writing the script for the film, Miranda wanted to create a story that Latinx individuals could connect with while highlighting key issues such as immigration, the generational trauma that comes with immigration, and the gentrification faced by immigrant communities. Gabriela Cázares describes the story as an experience “written by a Latinx about the Latinx experience, specifically with respect to gentrification” (90). Like previously mentioned, the characters within the film are all either the children of immigrants or immigrants themselves. The story addresses the different manifestations of this trauma within the different characters. As mentioned before, Nina deals with the pressure and expectations as a first-generation student at a prestigious college while also struggling to fit in with her peers; her father (Jimmy Smits) unknowingly projects his expectations of a better life onto her by giving up everything he has in order for her to succeed, putting even greater pressure onto her as she tries to navigate the disconnect with her identity and community. Usnavi, having lost his parents at a young age, is left only with idealized stories of the Dominican Republic to remember them by; he spends his time dedicated to connecting with his parents and culture by hyperfixating on returning to where they had come from.

The discussion of gentrification arises in several instances throughout the story. The neighborhood *piragüero*, or shaved-ice vendor (Lin-Manuel Miranda), describes how he is being put out of business by the Mister Softee truck in the song “Piragua.” Nina’s father, Kevin, has a similar experience with a neighboring business owner looking to buy out his office with a large sum of money; Kevin caves and sells his business in order to pay for Nina’s tuition. In the song “96,000”, Usnavi describes that if he won the lottery, would be needed “just to save [his] ass from financial ruin.” All of these storylines address the issues faced in many immigrant communities: larger corporations will always come in and buy out local businesses, taking advantage of the financial desperation of lower income communities, or the prices in these areas will continue to rise until people can no longer afford to live there.

The other high-profile film Miranda worked on is the Disney-Pixar animated film, *Encanto.* The film is set in a fictional nation, inspired heavily by Colombia. The film’s producer, Clark Spencer, describes the choice of setting, stating “Colombia is really the crossroads of Latin America. The people are Spanish, they’re Black, they’re Indigenous … you can get everything you want and more from Latin America” (Rifkin). It follows the magical Madrigal family, made up of multiple generations of magic users, as they navigate complex familial relationships and expectations.

Miranda acted as a composer and story-contributor for the film; he worked very closely with the writers and producers to make the representation of the culture and dynamics as authentic as possible, keeping in mind the imaginary nature of the setting. He went on research exhibitions to Colombia in order to better understand the culture and create music that best fits the sounds and experiences of the country.

Despite being a children’s movie, *Encanto* really highlights the dangerous conditions that push communities to immigrate, the long-lasting trauma that comes from those experiences, and the impact that it has on future generations. The elder matriarch of the Madrigals, Abuela Alma (voiced by María Cecilia Botero), was forced to flee her original home with her three newborn babies and her husband as men ransacked their town, burning and destroying everything in their sight. In the process, Alma’s husband was killed, leaving her to raise her children alone in an unfamiliar area. This depiction in the film leaves the attackers very ambiguous, with no real identifying features really being shown. This deliberately allows viewers to project their own experiences with persecution onto the film.

The film discusses how Abuela Alma’s concerns have been projected onto her entire family. Alma cast out her own son Bruno (voiced by John Leguizamo) because his abilities weren’t conducive to her ideal, perfect family structure. She constantly isolates and excludes Mirabel (Stephanie Beatriz) because she lacks the gifts that are the identifying feature of their family, she projects her need for perfection onto Luisa (voiced by Jessica Darrow) until she breaks down from overworking herself, and forces Isabela (voiced by Diane Guerrero) into a life as the perfect child—similar to Nina from *In the Heights*—despite that not being the life she wants for herself.

Lin-Manuel Miranda, despite being relatively new to film, has already begun to make a name for himself and use his extensive platform to create content for Latinx viewers that allows them to see characters that share their appearances, experiences, and backgrounds while also discussing complex topics such as generational trauma and the lives of immigrants.

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## Gregory Nava

*Zayna Khan*

Gregory Nava is a widely known director and screenwriter of Mexican and Basque heritage who directed *El Norte, Selena, Mi Familia, Borderlands*, and other award-winning and nominated films (Raab 178). He grew up on the border of Mexico and the United States (West 26), alternating between living in San Diego and Tijuana on his grandfather’s ranch (Portillo and Harrington). The experiences he and his family went through because of where they are from influenced Nava’s work as he grew older. For example, he deals with the issue of deportation in the film *Mi Familia* because his grandfather was deported back to Mexico even though he was an American citizen (Portillo and Harrington). Another example are the hospital scenes in his work; he was very close to his Aunt Lucy and draws from his traumatic experience with her death in his films (Portillo and Harrington). In *El Norte* Rosa dies in a hospital, and in *Mi Familia*, Isabelle dies in childbirth. There is also the scene in *Selena* where she dies in the hospital after getting shot. Because Gregory Nava lived on the border, he saw the contrast between a first world city and a city filled with poverty. In addition, to finding inspiration in his family, his work was also influenced by the families he observed around him that lived on the border (West 26). In an interview by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Nava calls these experiences “powerful images” and implies that they are the reason why he has such good artistic capabilities when making films (Portillo and Harrington).

Nava was involved in film from an early age. His family shot many home movies (Portillo and Harrington), so Nava was often being recorded as a child. In high school he made a movie with his brother’s Bolex 8 mm camera named *The Day 100,000 People Vanished*. He then attended UC Berkeley for college (Portillo and Harrington), later transferring to UCLA film school, where he made his first film called *The Journal of Diego Rodríguez Silva* (Raab 178)*.* The film was about Spanish poet Federico García Lorca and played with the themes of betrayal because he was influenced by what was going on around him. There were betrayals during the student movements that were happening, and his uncle betrayed his grandfather by stealing his ranch (Portillo and Harrington). Nava shot the entire movie by himself; he was the only person in the film production crew. He also chose exactly where the film should be in Mexico because he had lived there for much of his life (Portillo and Harrington). *The Journal of Diego Rodriguez Silva* won the National Student Film Festival Drama Award in 1972. The next film Nava made got slightly more recognition and was shown at the Chicago Film Festival (Portillo and Harrington). It was called *The Confessions of Amans*. The film was about a scholar in medieval Spain, and it established his reputation as a credible filmmaker (Raab 178).

After the release of his first two movies, Nava got to work on a film focused on Latinos called *El Norte* (1983). Nava’s wife, Anna Thomas, helped him write the screenplay, but when he sent the script around, nobody wanted to work on it because there were no white people in the movie (Portillo and Harrington). *El Norte* follows two Mayan siblings from Guatemala as they go to Mexico and try to cross the border to America, and Nava was against adding a white hero to his film that would essentially “save” the siblings from their home country and bring them to the idyllic America because he didn’t want the story to be colonized (Barrera 233). Nava used a concept that he would later include in his more recent films as well, and he structured the story on Indigenous mythology. He took inspiration from the Popol Vuh, a Mayan text, in which a set of twins must go through trials before being able to achieve their goal. He also includes mythical and magical imagery as in a scene with the white butterflies in *El Norte*. Nava believed taking influences from myths would allow his work to strike his audience more emotionally (Barrera 233). *El Norte* includes the theme of family, which can be seen when Enrique (David Villalpando) must decide whether to stay with Rosa (Zaide Silvia Gutiérrez) in the hospital or go to Chicago in order to make money, and he eventually gives up his materialistic desires to stay with his sister.

Because Nava wanted Indigenous Mayans to be the main characters (even though the actors who play them are non-Indigenous Mexicans), the movie needed to include three languages: Quiché Mayan, Spanish, and English (Williams 57). Initially, Nava had to shelve the project when he couldn’t find anybody to finance his movie. However, eventually Lindsey Law, the vice president of American Playhouse (a venture of four public television stations that helped finance feature films in exchange for the rights to broadcast them on PBS), liked the script and Nava had enough money to continue making the film. The movie included around sixty speaking parts (Rosen 254). Similar to how he filmed *The Journal of Diego Rodriguez Silva* (Portillo and Harrington)*,* Nava chose locations all around Mexico. However, he did also film in the United States. *El Norte* premiered at the Telluride Film Festival, and it was rather successful, receiving many offers to distribute the movie in theaters (Rosen 254). While *El Norte* included three languages, Spanish was the only language used during plot development to cater to the Latinx audience more than Indigenous audiences or US viewers who only spoke English (Williams 59).

Nava’s next project was *Mi Familia* (1995), a movie that follows the Sánchez family from Mexico to America beginning around 1920 and ending in 1978 (Raab 182). Nava collaborated with the well-known producer and director Francis Ford Coppola, who helped him get a budget for the movie and a studio to accept the script. On the same film, Nava also worked with Ed Lachman, an Oscar-nominated cinematographer. Lachman then went on to work with Nava for his next two films, *Selena* and *Why do Fools Fall in Love*. Editor Nancy Richardson also first worked with Nava on *Mi Familia* and now cuts most of his films. When working on *Mi Familia*, Richardson had to change her editing style three times because the movie follows three generations that have their own distinct time periods (Portillo and Harrington).

Nava’s *Mi Familia* is a significant film because it not only increased the visibility of Chicanos, but also veered away from the negative stereotypes that are often associated with Latinos. Nava wasn’t the first director to try and change the perception Americans had of people of Hispanic heritage, but he did help popularize the inclusion of Indigenous mythology in films, referencing the Mayan, Aztec, and other pre-Columbian roots of many Chicanos (West 27). *Mi Familia* is often regarded as Nava’s response to social issues involving Chicanos and their struggle for rights and equality (Serrato 69). Additionally, people see *Mi Familia* as a representation of Nava’s own family, and in an interview, he stated that he made the narrator’s father strong, supportive, and loving to resemble his own father (Portillo and Harrington). One criticism of this film is that it forces Chicanos into a narrow definition because the family lives in East Los Angeles, which is famously known for having a high population of Mexican Americans. That region of California was also correlated with poverty and crime, so having the family live there seemed to perpetuate stereotypes. However, East Los Angeles was not portrayed how white people in America perceived it; the community shown in *Mi Familia* represents the Mexican American identity and authenticity. *Mi Familia* touches on the fact that much of the southwestern United States was once a part of Mexico. One of the characters in the movie is called El Californio, because he was born in Mexico. However, his birthplace is now called Los Angeles, playing with the idea that the people some Americans call illegal have more historical claim to the land than U.S. citizens. A constraint on Nava’s creative agency is that he had to be careful in what messages he conveyed because as one of the filmmakers to create popular Latinx films with large Chicano casts, he acted as an authority on the subject of Chicano identity, and it was very easy for him to do damage to the perception of Mexican Americans with his portrayal of them in his film. Therefore, it was important for him to stray from the then normalized negative stereotypes of impoverished, violent Latinos (Serrato 74-75).

One of Nava’s most recent films is *Bordertown* (2007), which is a thriller about the murders of many women working in American factories in a town called Juárez near the border. This film deals with the political issue of the influence of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) on Mexico and the social issue of the working conditions inside American-owned factories or **maquiladoras**. NAFTA allowed trade between the United States, Canada, and Mexico to happen without trade barriers like tariffs and quotas. However, this agreement negatively impacted workers because now that people could trade without limits, more factories were set up in Mexico with lower wages and no concern for the workers’ safety. In addition, most of the workers were women because companies found that they were more willing to accept lower wages. Women would work in the factories while passing through the cities near the border, hoping to be able to cross the border soon. These women were targeted by men and murdered (Monnet 200-206). Business owners in America benefited from the suffering going on in these factories because they were making money selling the products made in the factories. *Bordertown* focuses on the murders of women, an issue that was kept quiet for a long time because it was in the best interests of the Mexican government and US corporations. This led to Nava was receiving death threats; ultimately, he had to film the rest of the movie somewhere else (Raab 188).

A major shift within Nava’s film style as he filmed *El Norte*, *Mi Familia*,and *Bordertown* is how Chicanos were viewed in terms of “otherness” and “outsidedness” (Raab 179)*.* While Nava does develop his themes and style as he makes more films, he keeps certain aspects constant such as his use of mainly Latinx actors, the theme of family, and resisting the use of stereotypes (Agostinelli 47). In *El Norte* and *Mi Familia*, which were Nava’s earlier films, the Latinx characters are defined as the “others,” meaning they are shown as being different from the rest of the population. For example, in *El Norte,* Rosa speaks a different language from the other Latinos in the film, who only speak Spanish. In addition, a lot of mythical Mayan elements are associated with Rosa, marking her as different. In *Mi Familia*, the otherness that the Sánchez family experiences is less because while they are shown to be culturally different from those around them, they are also shown to have the same human attributes that everyone else has. In *Bordertown*, which is one of Nava’s much later works, the white owners of the factories are associated with this concept of otherness (Raab 190). Throughout all these films, Nava makes sure that most of the cast is Latinx and that he is portraying them in a positive light without making use of harmful stereotypes. In addition, family is a theme seen often in his films through the sibling bond between Rosa and Enrique and the support that the Sánchez family gives each other.

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## Danny Trejo

*Chris Borg*

Danny Trejo is an actor who has been working in the film industry since 1983. Trejo has dozens of acting credits as of 2021, according to his website [dannytrejo.com](https://dannytrejo.com/). More than anything, Trejo is known for his demeanor as “a stocky, long-haired, often mustachioed, craggy-faced American of Mexican descent covered in prison tattoos from his previous life as a violent offender” (Meeuf 117). As an actor, Trejo has worked with mostly action directors such as Michael Mann, Robert Rodriguez, Rob Zombie, and John Frankenheimer, among many others.

Born in Los Angeles in 1944 to Mexican American parents, Trejo’s adolescent years were marred with constant run-ins with law enforcement which started as young as when the actor was ten (Trejo 19). Trejo was moved around to five high schools in Los Angeles in a year (Trejo 20) and became known for his hot-headed temper and knack for fighting. Eventually, his involvement in crime such as dealing drugs and collecting debts (Trejo 74-75) landed him in jail multiple times, culminating with a final stint at Soledad State Prison prior to his release 1969 (Trejo 116). In 1968, his last year in prison, Trejo made the decision to sober up (Trejo 109). Trejo also completed a twelve-step rehab program and became a drug counselor for a local rehab program, something that he continues to volunteer for (Bowles).

Trejo did not begin acting until his late thirties and this new career path could be described as a massive coincidence. In prison, Trejo made a name for himself among inmates and guards as a competitive boxer (Trejo 73). It was these martial arts skills paired with Trejo’s threatening demeanor that gave him his first film acting role in the 1985 film *Runaway Train.* It was the film’s director, Andrei Konchalovsky, who took a liking to Trejo and offered him a role in the film as a prison boxer who has to fight Eric Roberts’ character. On top of an acting role, Trejo was also given the job of training Eric Roberts with his boxing skills (Trejo, 222). Following this role in *Runaway Train*, the former convict decided to pivot to a career in acting. Trejo was given his first speaking role in *Death Wish 4: The Crackdown* (1987) and continued to appreciate more and more minor acting roles each subsequent year. In the documentary *Inmate #1: The Rise of Danny Trejo*, Trejo remarks “I trained at San Quentin Drama Arts”, a tongue-in-cheek joke about the fact that he never had any professional acting lessons (Harvey).

Another key work in Danny Trejo’s filmography that harkens back to his earlier roles is the 1995 Michael Mann-directed film *Heat*. A blockbuster film like *Heat* is indicative of not only the action movies that Trejo chooses to act in but also his characters’ tendency to die violent deaths, akin to the roles played by actor Sean Bean. *Con Air* (1997), *Reindeer Games* (2000), *Anaconda* (1997), and *The Hidden* (1987) are just a few among the myriad of films where Trejo is slain. In *Heat*, Trejo plays a substantial role as a professional criminal who is part of a heist crew led by Neil McCauley (Robert De Niro). Trejo’s character (also named Trejo) as well as the two other members of the crew, Waingro (Kevin Gage) and Michael Cherrito (Tom Sizemore), are introduced to the audience separately during the first robbery sequence. This “differentiates the collective of mavericks from the unified groups of men in films by John Ford or Howard Hawks” and Trejo gives off a “don’t mess with me” criminal attitude (Rybin, 138). Trejo had complained that in his previous film, *Desperado* (1995) director Robert Rodriguez would not let him speak because in his role as Navajas because his face said more “than most actors can do with a page of dialogue” (VladTV), but in *Heat* that was not the case. When McCauley finds Trejo bloodied and dying, Trejo reveals Waingro’s betrayal of the other members of the crew before asking to be put out of his misery by McCauley. Michael Mann scholar Steven Rybin discusses how Mann and cinematographer Dante Spinotti utilize the empty spaces of the Los Angeles skyline at night. The skyline is enormous, intangible, and infinite in its possibilities (Rybin, 139). The execution of Trejo by McCauley is no different, as the camera cuts away to the LA skyline while the muzzle flash is seen and gunshot is heard. The overall quiet sound-mixing of the city, briefly interrupted by a loud noise is juxtaposed with a depiction of the city as vast, spread out, and atomizing to its residents (Rybin 137). The way that Mann depicts Los Angeles in *Heat* is a society where Danny Trejo’s character is still bound to the film archetypes of the past, just like Kevin Gage and Tom Sizemore’s characters are. But Trejo’s character name even suggests a sense of otherness compared to the two other members of the heist crew. Considering that his character name is “Trejo”, the same as his actual last name suggests that the actor “is playing himself when he takes on roles as career criminals” (Meeuf 125).

What makes Danny Trejo’s work significant as a Chicano actor is how the image of Latino machismo that the actor projects has shifted since he began acting in the eighties to the present day. Like many other character actors, the possible cult appeal could lie in Trejo’s embodiment of difference and otherness “emblematic of a recognizable, but personally distinct social position” (Thomas 3). Trejo’s rise to fame as an actor included him affirming many of the stereotypes that plague Latino men as hyper-masculine, violent criminals (Meeuf 117). In the book *Rebellious Bodies: Stardom, Citizenship, and the New Body Politics*, Russell Meeuf remarks how the characters that Trejo has portrayed in his film career also have changed as Latino visibility has increased in the past few decades (118). Since the mid-2000s, the roles Trejo has chosen depict his menacing, violent characters as figures that are compulsory in reforming whiteness as well as mocking outdated stereotypes (Meeuf 118-119). These critiques of how certain white Americans view the Latinx population are represented in films like *Machete* (2010) constitute “a joke about how silly violent Latino machismo is while simultaneously expressing a deep longing for such masculinities” (Meeuf 120).

2010’s *Machete* marks Trejo’s first leading role, given to him by his longtime collaborator, second cousin, and friend Robert Rodriguez. Rodriguez had worked with Trejo on six films before giving the actor top billing at the age of sixty-six. *Machete* is inspired by the hyperviolent “grindhouse” exploitation films of the 1970s, but this time helmed by a Latino protagonist. In the film, the titular ex-*Federale* agent Machete (Danny Trejo) is forced by businessman Michel Booth (Jeff Fahey) to assassinate Texas State Senator John McLaughlin (Robert De Niro), who is running on a protectionist re-election platform of deporting illegal immigrants. This ends up all being a false flag operation in which Machete is set up to botch the assassination attempt of McLaughlin as a way for the Senator to gain more support in the polls. Academic William Orchard notes that “scholars have viewed [*Machete*] as a fantasy response to the political persecution of Latin@s, one in which the film’s hero fulfills the wish for justice through spectacular acts of violence” (222) but the analysis of the film’s significance should be broader in scope. Machete’s actions in the film show a character of traditional heroism, masculinity, and rugged individualism (Orchard 226). He stands apart from the film’s depiction of a network to resettle illegal immigrants and elude oppressors such as Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). Machete’s rugged and old-fashioned character is less concerned with the plight of the migrants rather than his own predicament of being pursued by people who want him dead for attempting to assassinate, against his will, a politician who happens to hold strong anti-immigrant views.

Danny Trejo is a rare case of someone who has grown in star power even as he reached senior citizen status. His pride in his Chicano heritage also represents the shifting visibility of these identities as Hollywood has continued to progress to become a more inclusive space. One thing is for sure: with over a dozen projects in production, Danny Trejo is not going away any time soon.

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## Luis Valdez

*Andrew Phipps*

Luis Valdez is a Chicano playwright and director and is regarded as the father of Chicano theater. While best known for writing and directing the films *Zoot Suit* and *La Bamba,* Valdez has been involved in the film and theater industry since 1963 when he staged his first play. Through his work, Valdez has fought for the civil rights of Chicanos by rallying workers to fight for better working conditions and putting on display the struggles and discrimination felt by Chicanos in America.

Luis Valdez was born in Delano, California in 1940 to migrant farm worker parents from Mexico. Being the second child of a family of 12, Valdez began helping his parents in the fields at the age of six (D’Souza). In addition, his family moved frequently as they followed the seasonal harvests. Due to this, it comes as no surprise that later in his early adult life Valdez would focus on improving the lives of farmworkers through his work. Despite the struggles in his early life, he did well in school, taking a liking to performance early on, and eventually going on to produce his first full-length play, “The Shrunken Head of Pancho Villa,” while in college (Nelson 493).

After college, Valdez began his career in the San Francisco Mime Troupe, a theatre group that produces political satire. A farmworkers’ movement had risen up in California, with one of the most notable groups established being the National Farm Workers Association (NFWA). During his stay with the Troupe, Valdez formulated the idea of “a theatre group for the Valley,” however he recognized he “didn’t have the resources” (Bagby 73). After attending a march in the Delano Grape Strike on September 8, 1965, Valdez spoke with Dolores Huerta, the co-founder of the NFWA, about creating a farm workers theatre (Bagby 74). Huerta and Cesar Chávez, the other co-founder of the NFWA, encouraged Luis to return to Delano and after some test trials, El Teatro Campesino (The Farmworkers’ Theater) was formed later that year (Bagby 74-75).

El Teatro Campesino acted as the cultural arm of the NFWA, contesting inadequate working conditions, raising money for the strike, and gaining the union new members (Elam 3). In the beginning, performances were often improvisational, largely relying on physical comedy and expressive gestures and body movements (Elam 3). As the group grew, Valdez incorporated *mitos* (myths) and *corridos* (ballads) into the performances (Nelson 494). These elements emphasized the social justice struggle and served to affirm cultural consciousness or Chicanismo to their largely Chicano audiences (Elam 47; Nelson 494). These musical elements seen in the *corridos* of the plays would also be seen in Valdez’s later work such as *Zoot Suit* and *La Bamba*.

While at first, the members of El Teatro Campesino were seen as “*payasos*” (clowns), the theater quickly gained popularity and was effective at lifting the spirits of the strikers while focusing attention on the strike breakers (Valdez 38-39). In fact, the group became so popular that it would later break away from the NFWA and tour both the United States and Europe (Nelson 494). Along with this growth in popularity came a growth in influence. El Teatro Campesino managed to convince thousands of farm workers to join the strike and in 1970, along with the NFWA (now the UFW after merging with another labor group), would pressure agribusiness to sign the first union contract with farm workers in American history (Valdez 43).

Valdez would later begin breaking away from El Teatro Campesino in 1978 during the first production of the play *Zoot Suit*. Similar to the *corridos*, the play features music and singing.However, unlike his previous work in the *actos* (political skits), *mitos*, and *corridos* of El Teatro Campesino, *Zoot Suit* was based on extensive research into a historical event: the Sleepy Lagoon murder trial, an incident that drew attention to the police brutality, discrimination, and injustice felt by the Chicano community.The play broke box office records in Los Angeles theater and would go on to be one of the first Chicano plays to open on Broadway (Valdez and Huerta 11). As a result of *Zoot Suit*’s success, Valdez signed a deal with Universal Pictures, adapting the play into a film as its director.

While *Zoot Suit*’s content contrasted with Luis Valdez’s projects with El Teatro Campesino, thematically and stylistically the film is a culmination of his previous work, tackling issues of civil rights in the Chicano community. Aspects of the *actos, mitos,* and *corridos* can be seen throughout the film. The *acto* is seen in the film’s presentational style, as it presents the social ills and discrimination felt by the Chicano community in a sort of dramatized documentary (Valdez and Huerta 13-14). Meanwhile, the *mito* and *corrido* can both be seen in the character of El Pachuco (Edward James Olmos), who often breaks into song (those musically, these are not corridos) and exercises his “mythic” powers to freeze time. In addition, El Pachuco also invokes the image of an Aztec in the scene where he is stripped of his zoot suit (Valdez and Huerta 14-15; Galens 274).

The theme of civil rights and the cultural clash between Chicanos and the predominant Anglo culture is repeatedly shown in *Zoot Suit*. This is seen both in the content of the film, but also through the use of style. For instance, the baggy style of dress for which the film is named serves to draw a contrast between Chicano culture and the Anglo mainstream. A sensationalistic press treats the style as evidence of Chicanos’ disruptive and violent nature, ultimately leading to a mass arrest and a highly biased trial of the protagonist Hank Reyna (Daniel Valdez) and his friends (Galens 274-275). The absurdity of the discriminatory nature of the justice system is depicted by the sped-up footage of Hank and his friends standing and sitting as their names are mentioned as stipulated by the prosecuting attorney. The theme of cultural clash is depicted stylistically most often in the dance hall scenes, where the mise-en-scène and accelerated shot pace draw a contrast between Hank and his gang and white couples.

Following *Zoot Suit*, Valdez went on to write and direct the movie *La Bamba*. Unlike *Zoot Suit*, *La Bamba* was a commercial success. Like *Zoot Suit*, *La Bamba* incorporates music and dance, as it is based on the life of the Chicano rock ’n’ roll star Richard Valenzuela, known professionally as Ritchie Valens (Lou Diamond Philips). Once again, Valdez’s film draws attention to discrimination and the struggles of those in the Chicano community as we follow Ritchie Valens through his rags-to-riches tale. Throughout the film, Ritchie deals with discrimination in the film in the form of his white girlfriend Donna (Danielle von Zerneck)’s father, who opposes their being together on account of his race. Similar to *Zoot Suit*, the character of Ritchie’s half-brother Bob (Esai Morales) serves as a foil to the protagonist, embodying a symbol of Chicanismo that includes its negative side, akin to El Pachuco (Fregoso 41). This contrast between Ritchie and Bob also serves to critique assimilation into Anglo culture. Bob represents those who have retained their cultural identity or “Chicanismo,” and as a result have had their social mobility barred; on the other hand, Ritchie, who is largely assimilated, has greater social mobility (Fregoso 46). All the while, the film still reaffirms cultural consciousness of Chicanos, not unlike El Teatro Campesino, by showing how it was through Ritchie’s trip to Tijuana that he was able to discover the song “La Bamba,” which later topped the charts.

Stylistically, *La Bamba* is more subdued than *Zoot Suit*, with Valdez sticking to more conventional Hollywood technique. Despite this, the film still utilizes different stylistic choices to build upon its themes. For instance, the contrast between the good, assimilated Ritchie and the bad, *machista* Bob is seen in the stares Bob gets when he returns home, shown via **point-of-view** (POV) shots from Bob’s perspective and the POV shots as he gets into a fight during a concert. Ritchie’s struggle to make it in America as a musician is shown through his different performances with **eyeline matches** from members of the crowd and Ritchie and their evolution from playing around the campfire, to the garage, to big performances. The theme of cultural consciousness is built on during Bob and Ritchie’s trip to Tijuana, where Ritchie rediscovers his roots. An example of this is the contrast of the close-ups of the women at a brothel versus the close-ups of the band that catch Ritchie’s attention when they start playing the Mexican folk song “La Bamba*.*”

In short, Luis Valdez was (and still is) an influential member of the Chicano film and theater communities. Through his work in El Teatro Campesino, films, and plays he has managed to make strides in Chicano civil rights by bringing attention to issues of discrimination, injustice in the judicial system, and the importance of cultural consciousness in the Chicano community.

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