LATINO IMAGES IN FILM

STEREOTYPES, SUBVERSION, & RESISTANCE

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2002

UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS PRESS
AUSTIN
A CRASH COURSE ON HOLLYWOOD'S LATINO IMAGERY

The history of Latino images in U.S. cinema is in large measure a paean of six basic stereotypes: el bandido, the harlot, the male buffoon, the female clown, the Latin lover, and the dark lady. Sometimes the stereotypes were combined, sometimes they were altered superficially, but their core defining—and demeaning—characteristics have remained consistent for more than a century and are still evident today. But there have also been exceptions to this rule: studio-made films that went against the stereotyping grain, stars who managed to portray Latinos with integrity despite a filmmaking system heavily reliant on stereotyping, and, more recently, a growing number of Latino filmmakers who began consciously breaking with the stereotyping paradigm of classical Hollywood.

This chapter provides a broad overview of Latino images in mainstream Hollywood film, delineating the main currents of representation, beginning with Hollywood’s sadly routine stereotyping. I then discuss instances of resistance within the Hollywood paradigm, by non-Latino filmmakers to show that the history of Latino representation has not been entirely one-sided, something I will pick up on later in the book, in the chapter on John Ford’s Westerns.

Our starting point is an introduction to the narrative and cultural logic of Hollywood’s filmmaking and storytelling paradigm, the narrative context necessary to fully appreciate Hollywood’s Latino imagery, in both its predominantly denigrating and occasionally more positive aspects.

A CRASH COURSE ON HOLLYWOOD'S LATINO IMAGERY

The stereotyping of U.S. Latinos and Latin Americans, and the defamatory stereotyping of many other socially marginalized groups (gays, Native Americans, African Americans, Asians and Asian Americans, the working class, the poor, immigrants, women, and so forth), is largely a result of entrenched Hollywood storytelling conventions. If one of the distinguishing features of the Hollywood cinema is its goal-oriented protagonist, we can say with a high degree of certainty that, sociologically speaking, that goal-driven hero will be a white, handsome, middle-aged, upper-middle-class, heterosexual, Protestant, Anglo-Saxon male.

This great white hero is the sun around which the film narrative revolves, and the rationale of a typical Hollywood story is to illustrate how moral, resourceful, brave, intelligent—in a word, superior—he is. It follows that the rest of the characters must necessarily be shown to be inferior in various ways and to varying degrees. In order to prop the protagonist up, characters of cultural/ethnic/racial/class backgrounds different from the hero’s are therefore generally assigned sundry minor roles: villains, sidekicks, temptresses, the “other man.” Their main function is to provide opportunities for the protagonist to display his absolute moral, physical, and intellectual preeminence.

The standard Hollywood story featuring this WASP male hero is, as I’ve said earlier, a formulaic narrative that proceeds from equilibrium (a tranquil status quo) to disruption (a threat to the status quo) to the ultimate restoration of the status quo (the Hollywood happy ending). Looking at this narrative framework culturally, however, one sees it in a slightly different light. The status quo posited in the movies as the best of all worlds is one that is safe, peaceful, and prosperous. But it is also one that is white, upper-middle-class, Protestant, English-speaking, one that conforms to Anglo norms of beauty, health, intelligence, and so forth. This WASP way of life is asserted as a norm worth fighting for, as what must be regained if the film is to deliver its happy ending. In such a scheme, not just Latinos but all people of color represent an inherent threat to the status quo simply because they are markedly different from the established WASP norm.
THE SIX LATINO STEREOTYPES

The following Latino stereotypes exist within this moviemaking paradigm, and are part of its storytelling conventions; they are the most commonly seen Latino stereotypes that have appeared in the first century of Hollywood cinema.

El Bandido

This stereotypical character is, most familiarly, the Mexican bandit in countless ‘Westerns and adventure films. His roots go back to the villains of the silent “greaser” films (for example, Broncho Billy and the Greaser, 1914) but his appearance continues in a long list of Westerns and adventure films (for instance, the two guides who betray Indiana Jones at the beginning of Raiders of the Lost Ark [1979], and the demented antagonist [Manuel Ojeda] who pursues Joan Wilder [Kathleen Turner] in Romancing the Stone [1984]). El bandido is dirty and unkempt, usually displaying an unshaven face, missing teeth, and disheveled, oily hair. Scars and scowls complete the easily recognizable image. Behaviorally, he is vicious, cruel, treacherous, shifty, and dishonest; psychologically, he is irrational, overly emotional, and quick to resort to violence. His inability to speak English or his speaking English with a heavy Spanish accent is Hollywood’s way of signaling his feeble intellect, a lack of brainpower that makes it impossible for him to plan or strategize successfully.

Though the Western genre is far past its heyday, el bandido lives on in contemporary Hollywood films in two incarnations. The first is the Latin American gangster/drug runner, such as Andy Garcia’s sadistic Cuban-American gangster in Eight Million Ways to Die (1986), Al Pacino’s mobster in Scarface (1983), and Joaquim de Almeida in both Clear and Present Danger (1994) and Desperado (1995). He is slicker, of course, and he has traded in his black hat for a white suit, his tired horse for a glitzy car, but he still ruthlessly pursues his vulgar cravings—for money, power, and sexual pleasure—and routinely employs vicious and illegal means to obtain them.

A second bandido variant, as discussed in the preceding chapter, is the inner-city gang member seen in numerous urban thrillers and crime dramas. If the story takes place in New York, he is the volatile Puerto Rican (the toughs in The Young Savages [1961] and Badge 373 [1973]); if in Southern California, he is the East L.A. homeboy (the gang mem-
Angel (Andy Garcia) warning Sarah (Rosanna Arquette) that being disloyal to him can be lethal in 8 Million Ways to Die (1986). Though the external details have changed—he is well groomed and impeccably dressed—behaviorally Angel remains essentially the same familiar vicious, violent, criminal bandido. (Photo courtesy of Luis Reyes Archives)

bers in Colors [1988], the two hoods who taunt D-FENS [Michael Douglas] in Falling Down [1993]). As I’ve argued in Chapter 2, both the drug runner and the East L.A. gangsta make only superficial changes to the external details of the stereotype; at their core these characters are the same inarticulate, violent, and pathologically dangerous bandidos.
The Harlot

The female stereotype corresponding to el bandido is a stock figure in the American cinema, particularly in Westerns. Like the bandit, she is a secondary character, lusty and hot-tempered. Doc Holliday’s woman, Chihuahua (Linda Darnell), in John Ford’s My Darling Clementine (1946) is an archetypal example of this type. Without a man she is a leaf in the wind, so when Doc (Victor Mature) is out of town, she fixes her amorous attentions on Wyatt Earp (Henry Fonda). When Earp, decent WASP hero that he is, ignores her flirtations, she responds the only way she can: by helping a cardsharp cheat Earp during a poker game to get even.

Since the harlot is a slave to her passions, her conduct is simplistically attributed to her inherent nymphomania. In true stereotypical fashion we are never provided with any deeper motivation for her actions—she is basically a sex machine innately lusting for a white male. A notable recent example is the character of Angelica (Jacqueline Obradors) in Six Days, Seven Nights (1998). She is the traveling companion of a small-time airplane pilot, Quinn Harris (Harrison Ford), and obviously romantically involved with him. But as soon as he leaves her at an island resort on some business, she has no qualms about sleeping with the nearest available Anglo, Frank Martin (David Schwimmer). Angelica is an interesting example of a stereotyping blend, exhibiting characteristics of the harlot and the female buffoon, and I will discuss her and the film in more detail below.

The Male Buffoon

Serving as second-banana comic relief, classic male buffoons from television include Pancho (Leo Carrillo) in “The Cisco Kid,” Sergeant Garcia in Walt Disney’s “Zorro” series, Ricky Ricardo (Desi Arnaz) in “I Love Lucy.” In films, the classic example is Chris-Pin Martin’s sidekick character, Gordito, in the Cisco Kid series (The Cisco Kid [1931], Return of the Cisco Kid [1939], Viva Cisco Kid [1940], Lucky Cisco Kid [1940], The Gay Caballero [1940], Cisco Kid and the Lady [1940], Romance of the Rio Grande [1941], Ride on Vaquero [1941]). What is funny about this character, what audiences are given to laugh at, are the...
very characteristics that separate him from Hollywood's vision of the WASP American mainstream. For example, he is simpleminded (the bumbling antics of Gordito or Sergeant Garcia), he cannot master standard English (Gordito's trademark phrase, "I tink," "I think"), in the film versions of the Cisco Kid; Leo Carillo's "Let's went, Ciscot" in the television series; and Ricky's "Lucy, you got some 'plainin' to do!"), and he childishly regresses into emotionality (Ricky's explosions into Spanish).

In the 1980s the Mexican comic actor and director Alfonso Arau (Like Water for Chocolate [1992]; A Walk in the Clouds [1995]) played two roles based on this type: the romance novel–reading Colombian gangster in Romancing the Stone (1983) and the bandit leader El Guapo in The Three Amigos! (1986). Are these male buffoon stereotypes? One thing in their favor as nonstereotypes is that at the very least, a Latino is playing a Latin character. Another is that Arau is obviously throwing himself into these roles with great gusto. It could be argued that these are parodies of the stereotype, and healthy in breaking down stereotypical representations. But another view might question whether any use of such an oft-repeated and well-known comic stereotype—given the history of Latino images in Hollywood film—can exist without in some ways serving to reinforce it.

One way to check for stereotypes in a case like this is to perform what I call the "stereotype commutation test." Try to substitute another ethnicity into the role being analyzed. If the part can be played just as well as another ethnic, national, or, for that matter, gender group, then it is probably not a stereotype, but rather a stock comic or dramatic type (the jealous husband, the flirtatious wife, the deceptive best friend, and so forth). If no other ethnicity can be readily substituted for the role, then chances are that it relies on specific stereotypical traits of a particular cultural group to make its comedic or dramatic impact. In these roles played by Arau, the former is specifically a Colombian drug runner, the latter a Mexican bandit, and it is impossible to replace those parts with any other ethnicity. Arau's drug kingpin in Romancing the Stone plays on the typical Colombian drug lord, a modern variant of the bandido stereotype, and the joke is that he reads romance novels. Similarly in The Three Amigos! the joke is that a familiar stereotype of countless Westerns—(stereo)typically crude and ignorant—knows the word "plethora" and can use it in a sentence. Both cases, it seems to me, rely on recognition of the stereotype to get their laughs. In essence, it's simply Hollywood making an old stereotype fresh again by making him a comic version of classic screen banditos.

The Female Clown

The female clown is the comic counterpart of the Latino male buffoon and, like the harlot, exemplifies a common device that the Hollywood narrative employs to neutralize the screen Latina's sexuality. This is a necessary requirement because the hero must have a reason to reject the Latina in favor of the Anglo woman, thereby maintaining the WASP status quo. For that to occur, the Latina's sexual allure must somehow be negated. Generally, her character is sullied (she is made promiscuous and criminal, as is the case with the harlot stereotype) or ridiculed (portrayed as sexually "easy" or simply silly and comical, as with the female buffoon).

This is exactly what happens in Six Days, Seven Nights. The romance that Quinn, Harrison Ford's scruffy and ultimately noble and heroic pilot, has with the WASP leading lady, Robin Monroe (Anne Heche), perfectly conforms with Hollywood's storytelling logic. It also illustrates how Hollywood narratives, through the romances they depict, often en-
The romantic dynamics in Six Days, Seven Nights illustrate well the narrative uses of stereotyping. Stranded on a desert island, the Anglo leads, Robin (Anne Heche) and Quinn (Harrison Ford), gradually fall in love, though they each have a romantic partner back at the resort. They can do so without tarnishing their morality for two reasons. First, because they never consummate their relationship . . .

dorse a subtle kind of racial purity, saying, in effect, that Anglos should mate only with their own kind. The film’s narrative does this by demonstrating to the audience that Angelica, Quinn’s Latin bombshell of a girlfriend, is promiscuous. Making things even worse is the fact that the man she seduces, on her first night without Quinn, is Robin’s fiancé, Frank (David Schwimmer). Quinn, however, is unaware of this, since he and Robin are stranded on a deserted island and their radio is broken. But because he has been betrayed, viewers are able to perceive him a free romantic agent. He may not know what Angelica has done, but the movie goes to pains to make sure the audience knows. This allows Quinn to pursue Robin and still adhere to the moral norms required of Hollywood’s protagonists. According to the logic of Hollywood, then, he is not really unfaithful since Angelica was unfaithful first.

In contrast, Angelica’s sleeping with Frank, the secondary Anglo male character, is framed as casual sex and paints her as sexually frivolous. Furthermore, Frank’s infidelity with a Latina provides the reason why he is no longer worthy of Robin. Quinn’s falling for the WASP woman, Robin, however, is “more serious,” developing into “the real thing,” that is, “true love”—as opposed to the fling he was obviously having with Angelica. It’s one more illustration of Latino stereotypes being used to demonstrate the moral rectitude of Hollywood’s WASP film heroes. Though Anglo heroes are tempted by and may have sexual di-

versions with Latinas, they can still “redeem” themselves from this moral and racial transgression if in the end they (1) reject the Latina and (2) are faithful in their “important,” i.e., Anglo, relationship.1

The antecedents of Angelica’s female buffoon stretch back to the golden age of the studio system. One might say that the striking Mexican actress Lupe Vélez, a comic star working in Hollywood from the late 1920s to the early 1940s, is a classic female clown. Vélez is best known for her role as the ditzy “Mexican Spitfire” in a series of eight films, though she also starred in a number of other comedies and melodramas. While she is seemingly caught in the stereotype, especially in the “Mexican Spitfire” films, I will later show that Vélez found ways to subvert it.

A better example is another well-known female clown, Carmen Miranda, who provided colorful portrayals of Latin American women in numerous films in the 1940s. What is operative in Miranda’s case is exaggeration to the point of caricature, another way to elicit derisive laughter and belittle the Latina Other. Miranda’s multicolored costumes and fruit-covered hats donned to perform splashy “Latin” musical numbers (most notoriously “The Lady in the Tuttì-Frutti Hat” number from Busby Berkeley’s The Gang’s All Here [1943]) instantly mocked the folkloric costumes—and customs—of Brazil and Latin America in general. This tradition of the exotic, comical, and oversexed Latina showbiz performer lives on with Angelica in Six Days, Seven Nights, a dancer whose Latin exoticism and eroticism are once again played for laughs.
The origin of this male stereotype can be traced to one star: Rudolph Valentino. An Italian immigrant, by 1921 he had worked his way up from minor movie parts to a starring role as the protagonist in *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*, a story of the effect of World War I on young Argentinean men. In a famous scene, Valentino dances seductively with a cantina woman (again, the barroom harlot) and finishes by almost kissing her but suddenly flinging her to the ground instead. With this and other of his film roles as the dashing and magnetic male Other (in *The Sheik* [1921], *Son of the Sheik* [1926], and as the rising bullfighter in *Blood and Sand* [1922]), he defined a new kind of screen lover. Valentino’s smoldering presence in these films created the basis for the Latin lover as the possessor of a primal sexuality that made him capable of making a sensuous but dangerous—and clearly non-WASP—brand of love.

Since then, the Latin lover has been a continual screen character, played by a number of Latin actors, for example, Ricardo Montalbán (most notoriously in a film called *Latin Lovers* [1953]) and occasionally Gilbert Roland (as an Italian Latin Lover in *The Racers* [1955]) to Antonio Banderas in films like *Never Talk to Strangers* (1995). In these roles, the actors haplessly reiterate the erotic combination of characteristics instituted by Valentino: eroticism, exoticism, tenderness tinged with violence and danger, all adding up to the romantic promise that, sexually, things could very well get out of control.

The Dark Lady

The female Latin lover is virginal, inscrutable, aristocratic—and erotically appealing precisely because of these characteristics. Her cool distance is what makes her fascinating to Anglo males. In comparison with the Anglo woman, she is circumspect and aloof where her Anglo sister is direct and forthright, reserved where the Anglo female is boisterous, opaque where the Anglo woman is transparent. The characters Mexican actress Dolores Del Rio played in a number of Hollywood films in the 1930s and early 1940s exemplified this stereotype well. In both *Flying Down to Rio* (1933) and *In Caliente* (1935), for example, she played fascinating Latin women who aroused the American leading men’s amorous appetites the way no Anglo woman could.

A contemporary incarnation of the dark lady is María Conchita Alonso’s character in *Colors* (1988), another stereotype blend. She is the dark lady for the first half of the film (where she is the love interest for Sean Penn’s Anglo cop), then suddenly reverts to the harlot (when she becomes the mistress of one of the gang leaders to spite the cop and to demonstrate how little he understands the realities of the barrio). According to Hollywood, then, beneath every Latino is a savage, a Latin lover, or both, and at heart every Latina is a Jezebel.
Although the vast majority of Hollywood films have utilized these stereotypes when Latinos were portrayed, Hollywood cinema is not as simple, static, or ideologically one-sided as that. To begin with, as I mentioned in Chapter 1, many films were ideologically conflicted when it came to their Latino images, vacillating between negative portrayals and stereotypical idealization. And some films did at times arrive at more enlightened imagery. Then there were filmmakers who contested the simplifications of Hollywood's filmmaking conventions, for either aesthetic or ideological reasons. And there were also Latino actors who subverted or resisted stereotyping in their performances. It is important to acknowledge the progressive imagery of the conflicted films, as it is to remember the contestational films. First, out of historical fairness and critical evenhandedness, and second, to counter the claim that it is impossible for Hollywood filmmaking to break with stereotypes or avoid them altogether.

This more comprehensive view of Hollywood cinema history reveals that, besides the familiar Latino stereotypes, there are five categories of films that feature Latino counter-stereotypes:

1. those that were conflicted, partly stereotypical and partly progressive;

2. those that departed from the dominant filmmaking paradigm, sometimes simply by casting Latino actors to play Latinos;

3. those that were ideologically oppositional;

4. those in which Latino actors subverted the stereotypes; and, finally and most recently,

5. those made by Latino filmmakers whose project was overtly, or, in the case of filmmakers like Cheech Marin and Robert Rodríguez in El Mariachi, covertly, to counter Hollywood pattern of Latino imagery.

I will discuss the first three in the remainder of this chapter, and the fourth, acting subversions, in Chapter 4. The final category, those films made by Latinos, I introduce and discuss in Part 3.
A CRASH COURSE ON HOLLYWOOD’S LATINO IMAGERY

Progressive Images from Conflicted Ideology

Much film criticism of the last two decades has been based on the notion of the incoherent text, positing the contradictory nature of dominant cinema that resulted in many Hollywood films’ running the ideological gamut from conservative to progressive. Consequently, it should not be surprising that this conflicted pattern holds true when it comes to stereotyping. A good example is a film like Flying Down to Rio, which, although producing the prototypical dark lady stereotype and stereotyping Latinos (and people of color) in other ways, still exhibits a number of impressively progressive elements.

Among the more obvious stereotypical images is the already mentioned dark lady, Belinha de Rezende (Dolores Del Río) who is fetishized as a highly charged, sexually mysterious feminine ideal—and thereby marked as Other. An American blonde sitting at Belinha’s nightclub table in an early scene in the film utters a double entendre that expresses the stereotypical thinking about the dark lady (and the Latin lover, for that matter) perfectly. When the rich, handsome, and available band leader, Roger Bond (Gene Raymond), only has eyes for Belinha and eventually temporarily abandons the conducting of his orchestra so that he can dance with her, the blonde wonders aloud: “What have these South Americans got below the equator that we ain’t got?” Furthermore, in later scenes Belinha reveals a sexual passion smoldering beneath her surface reserve, Hollywood again resorting to the stereotypical pattern that every Latina is at heart a vixen. When she’s stranded on a deserted beach with Roger, the film displays her two sides, the restrained woman and the libertine, arguing about her true desires. “After all,” her good side says, “I must keep my reserve.” To which her “dark” side replies, “You and your reserve. If people knew you as I do, they would be shocked.”

In order for the dark lady to be a suitable object of Roger’s desire, she is propped up while the other major female character, Honey Hale (Ginger Rogers), is put down, stereotyped as the easy blonde. Honey is the sassy singer for Roger’s band, the Yankee Clippers, and is the North American female contrast to Belinha’s Latin American dark lady. Honey is casual and uninhibited, and Belinha is formal and restrained. One indicator of Honey’s character is her costume. The dress she wears when she sings her solo musical number, “Music Makes Me,” early in the film, is dark and sheer, revealing her arms and legs. It contrasts with Belinha’s white dress in the same scene, which is white and buttoned up at the neck, where it too is diaphanous and reveals her shoulders.
Further evidence of Honey's promiscuity can be found in the lyrics of the song she sings, which proclaim her cheery nymphomania, specifically that she is unable to control herself sexually at the sound of music:

I like music old and new
But music makes me do
The things I never should do.
I like music sweet and blue,
But music makes me do
The things I never should do.

My self-control was something to brag about,
Now it's a gag about town.
The things I do are never forgiven,
And just when I'm livin' 'em down,
I hear music, then I'm through,
'Cause music makes me do
The things I never should do.

Clearly a sexual free spirit, and therefore morally unsuitable for Roger, the WASP lady-killer of a leading man, Honey is thus relegated to the narrative's second-string romance, with Roger's assistant, Fred (Fred Astaire). This is formalized in the narrative when they team up for the next dance number, "The Carioca" (the musical number that marked the beginning of the legendary Astaire-Rogers partnership).

Another Latino stereotype in the film is the male buffoon, in the person of the Brazilian nightclub manager who mispronounces "Schenectady" and "Syracuse," and calls Roger's band "the Yankee Clippers." But beyond the presentation of standard Latino stereotypes, the film exhibits another kind of stereotyping by illustrating a sort of cultural sexuality gradient in the ten-minute-long "Carioca" production number. As the number develops, a series of groups perform the mildly suggestive dance, in which partners dance provocatively while touching foreheads. The dancing becomes more sensuous and erotic as the performers' skin color darkens. The first wave of well-heeled, fair-skinned patrons gives way to Brazilian dancers in their folk costumes, and then, finally, to black dancers, who are the most overtly sexual of all, thrusting their pelvises to the music's rhythms. Interspersed are a couple of sophisticated Astaire-Rogers renditions, executed with the grace and fluidity that came to characterize the duo's routines.

In sum, the "Carioca" provides a graphic, skin-color-coded demon-stration of the allowable standards and practices of sexual expression in pre-Code Hollywood cinema. The Astaire-Rogers WASP version is the most inhibited and reserved, sexually abstract in its smooth elegance. The Brazilian elites are more sensual, the folk dancers more primitive, and the blacks the most erotically explicit. This American-white-to-Third-World-black sexual spectrum stereotypically marks people of color as different in sexual norms. And, because Hollywood films generally equate variances from American sexual mores as signs of moral turpitude, the dance number also comments negatively on the Latin Americans' moral values.

On the progressive side of the ledger, however, there are a number of noteworthy elements in Flying Down to Rio. The first is the use of an effective anti-stereotyping technique I call "stereotypical reversal," invalidating a known stereotype in an interesting and unexpected way. For example, when Roger and Belinha are stranded on the island, they are confronted by a bare-chested black man. Roger and Belinha (and we viewers too) read this movie situation as Hollywood has prepared us to, that is, stereotypically. As I said in Chapter 2, away from the Western metropolis, the male of color represents danger. So, given the conventions of American filmmaking, in this particular case it is not unlikely that the Black man might well belong to a tribe of African savages, head-hunters, or cannibals. A moment later, however, when the man actually steps away from the bush, he's wearing slacks and golf shoes, is carrying a golf bag, and speaks with a British accent. It turns out that Roger and Belinha have landed in Haiti, right next to a country club. The Black man is playing a round of golf and is looking for his lost ball.

Another example of stereotypical reversal occurs at the beginning of the Carioca. The native Brazilian band at first consists of a handful of sleeping musicians—the stereotypical lazy Latinos. Sizing up their musical competition, Roger's Yankee Clippers figure they'll be a cinch to succeed in Rio de Janeiro. When the Brazilians are asked to play, though, they suddenly come to life, are joined by a number of other musicians, and in the blink of an eye a full orchestra is playing and the joint is jumpin'. In this and in the previous example, we can see that stereotypical reversal works so well because it is based on the shared knowledge of the stereotype (by the filmmakers, the characters in the film, and the film viewers). Once the reversal occurs, characters (and, more important, viewers) are brought up short, and the stereotype is effectively deconstructed. It is a powerful counter-stereotyping technique because it teaches characters and viewers that easy, stereotypical assessments are
unreliable. That lesson may be something that viewers take with them when they leave the theater.

The eventual outcome of the narrative is another interesting progressive component. As I have discussed, the romantic subplot in most Hollywood movies concludes with the WASP hero and the virtuous Anglo woman united in love. So just the fact that *Flying Down to Rio* ends with a bicultural romance (Roger and Belinha about to be married) is notable in itself. But how the narrative arrives at that point is even more fascinating and counter-hegemonic.

As we saw in the case of *Six Days, Seven Nights*, the compulsory pairing of Hollywood’s “ultimate couple” requires the elimination of other suitors. In *Flying Down to Rio*, we have seen how Honey was devalued and shunted off to Fred, a supporting male character. Belinha’s romantic choices thus boiled down to Roger, the wealthy Anglo bandleader, and a Latino male, her Brazilian fiancé, Julio Ribeiro (Raul Roulien). Typically, Hollywood films either stereotype such a character, in the process making it clear that he and the leading lady are somehow incompatible, or give him a personality flaw (selfishness, for example), a physical impairment (a limp, say), or both. Interestingly, though, Julio is not a Latin lover stereotype, is not portrayed as a bad match, and displays neither psychological nor physical defects. Rather, he is a noble gentleman. He gallantly steps aside and allows Roger to marry Belinha. With the marriage ceremony about to occur onboard an airborne plane, he makes his exit by suddenly parachuting out of the cabin, the action that ends the film.

What’s so remarkable about Julio’s actions is that in the classical Hollywood cinema, nobility and sacrifice are almost exclusively the WASP hero’s attributes. Take the ending of *Casablanca* as an example. Though the conclusion of the film was said to be in doubt throughout the filming, with several endings proposed and considered, in fact the film’s now-familiar ending was inevitable given the dynamics of Hollywood’s narrative paradigm. Why? Because only the ending that we know, Rick (Humphrey Bogart) sending Ilse (Ingrid Bergman) and her resistance-leader husband (Paul Henreid) off to defeat the Nazis, allowed Rick to be the most complete hero. By striking a blow against the Nazis and sacrificing his love for Ilse in favor of the greater good, Rick becomes Our Hero: more courageous, altruistic and noble than anyone else in the film.

Similarly, in *Flying Down to Rio*’s final scene, Julio is shown to be more noble (and more decisive) than Roger. So rather than presenting a convincing case, as most films do, of how perfectly suited the male and female main characters are for one another, *Flying Down to Rio* instead raises an intriguing question at the end: Did Belinha wind up with the right man?

Another more recent case of an ideologically conflicted film that makes a progressive statement in its casting is *Anaconda* (1997). The film relies on a familiar movie trope dating back at least to the silent adventure film *The Lost World* (1925), which presents Latin America as a treacherous wilderness filled with unimaginable danger. In *The Lost World* it is prehistoric dinosaurs, in *Anaconda*, a giant snake. But Jennifer Lopez’s casting in the role of documentary filmmaker Terri Flores does for Latinas in action adventure films what Sigourney Weaver’s Ripley did for women in science fiction in *Alien* (1980). Just as Weaver took command of a male genre and thereby forced viewers to reconceptualize it, so too Lopez is a modern-day Latina adventure heroine (following in the footsteps of Lupe Vélez’s fearless mountain woman in *The Gaucho* [1927]). With grit and perseverance Terri ultimately triumphs over the gigantic snake, while the handsome, virile Anglo lead, Dr. Steven Cale (Eric Stoltz), who would normally be the take-charge hero of such a film, lies unconscious for half the film. Her heroics, therefore, seriously undermine the entire genre’s raison d’être: the ritual commemoration of WASP male heroism in hostile territory (and, ideologically and symbolically, of U.S. imperialism in the Third World).

**Latinos Playing Latinos**

The second counter-stereotyping instance involves films that deviated from the Hollywood filmmaking paradigm outlined in the previous chapter. The simplest and most progressive move was an obvious one, yet not a standard practice of classical Hollywood-era moviemaking: the casting of Latinos to play Latinos. I do not want to adopt the essentialist position that holds that only members of a group can play that group. Still, it is generally true that over a century of filmmaking, standard Hollywood casting norms most often called for Anglo actors to play Latinos, usually in brown face and, with the coming of sound, speaking English with a thick Spanish accent (from the silent era’s “greaser” bandits to Eli Wallach’s *bandido* in *The Magnificent Seven* [1960]). And, I would argue, the representation of Latinos suffered as a consequence. On the other hand, striving for ethnic authenticity in casting makes sense in terms of verisimilitude, and it often has a beneficial side effect on characterization too, allowing for cultural shadings that might not have occurred otherwise.
As I will discuss in Chapter 5, in John Ford’s *Fort Apache* (1948) the
respected Mexican character actor Miguel Inclán was cast as Cochise,
and he speaks Spanish and his *indio* dialect, bringing to his depiction a
cultural resonance and authenticity that an Anglo actor would have
been hard-pressed to provide. The film also stars Pedro Armendáriz as
Sergeant Beaufort, a Mexican American with a heterogeneous ethnic
background. Once an officer in the Confederate army, he then acquits
himself admirably as a capable frontier soldier, and, because he is Mex-
ican American and speaks Spanish, he is chosen to interpret between
the army officer and Cochise. It amounts to probably the most interest-
ing, complex, and fully realized portrayal of a Mexican American in any
studio-era film.

Other memorable portrayals due directly to casting decisions include
Katy Jurado’s Helen Ramírez in *High Noon* (1952) and Anthony
Quinn’s “Mex” in *The Ox-Bow Incident* (1943), two performances so
rich in cultural texture that it’s difficult to imagine any Anglo actors
playing those roles. A lesser-known but still impressive example is *Cri-
isis* (1950), the story of a couple, Dr. and Mrs. Ferguson (Cary Grant and
Paula Raymond), who find themselves caught up in a South American
civil war. Director Richard Brooks made what could have been a card-
board view of Latin America three-dimensional by his inspired casting
of Latinos in key roles: Puerto Rican–born José Ferrer as the megalom-
aniacal dictator, Ramón Novarro as his chief military henchman, An-
tonio Moreno as the dictator’s private physician, and Gilbert Roland as
a rebel leader.

Its fidelity to casting Latinos as Latinos, in both speaking and bit
parts, makes *Crisis* one of the most evenhanded treatments of Latin
America in all of studio-era Hollywood cinema. Brooks created a more
naturalistic Latin American world than is typically seen in Hollywood
cinema by making a simple, commonsensical, but all-too-rare creative
decision: to populate his fictional Latin American country with Latinos,
rather than Anglo extras in garish costumes and brown face. (For con-
trast, compare *Crisis* with *Juarez* [1939], in which the title role was
played by Paul Muni, Porfirio Díaz by John Garfield, and Anglo char-
acter actors played the majority of the other Mexican characters. An
even more telling comparison can be made with a film made around the
same time as *Crisis*, *Sombrero*, a 1953 MGM musical melodrama set in
Mexico. It surrounded Ricardo Montalbán, who was Mexican, with a
cast of players such as Cyd Charisse, Pier Angeli, Vittorio Gassman, and
Yvonne De Carlo, non-Hispanics all, playing Mexicans.) The cast of
*Crisis* is so overwhelmingly Latino that the film might give the impres-
sion of being shot on location; in fact, it was shot on the MGM studio back lot.

One reason that the setting in *Crisis* seems more like a foreign country, and less like Hollywood’s stereotypical view of Latin America, stems from a fundamental decision that Brooks made when he was writing the script. Brooks’s Latin America is one in which the natives speak Spanish fluently as their first language. Rather than appear ignorant or slow-witted because they speak broken English with a thick Spanish accent, these characters speak fluent Spanish to one another, and if their English is poor, they acknowledge that to Dr. Ferguson, just as he readily acknowledges that his Spanish is rudimentary at best. (Indeed, in an interesting linguistic reversal for a Hollywood film, we see—and hear—Dr. Ferguson butchering Spanish.) All of this is a result of casting actors who can speak Spanish fluently, namely Latinos.

One propitious side effect of this enlightened approach to filmmaking is its presentation of a wide range of character types. Typically, the evil Latino antagonist (in this case, Farrago, José Ferrer’s nefarious dictator) is a bandido variant who is contrasted with the upright Anglo protagonist. Here, Farrago’s villainy is offset by Dr. Ferguson (Cary Grant), but his potentially stereotypical traits are diluted by the presence of so many other Latino characters: a revolutionary leader (Gilbert Roland) and his brave band of rebels, a competent physician (Antonio Moreno), a pious priest (Pedro de Cordoba), and a professional musician (Vicente Gómez).

**Ideological Opposition**

Films in the third, ideologically oppositional, category need not necessarily be radical in content or form; it is enough that they question the status quo, rather than blindly accepting it as the best of all possible worlds. A case in point is John Huston’s *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* (1948), which at first glance may seem to be another Hollywood foray into stereotypical Mexico. After all, its lead bandit character, Gold Hat (Alfonso Bedoya), is the quintessential bandido, and he does deliver that classic bandido line “Badges, we don’t need no stinkin’ badges.” But Huston’s Mexico is more than simply a haven for bandits, and he depicts a fairly broad sampling of Mexican society, from village administrators to Mexican indios, most of them played by Mexicans who speak Spanish to one another (Robert Blake’s shoeshine boy being the notable exception).

Yet the film’s most convincing counter-stereotyping aspect by far is its
critique of U.S. imperialism in Mexico, beginning with the American oil company’s exploitation of its workers. In this light, the quest of the three prospectors for gold becomes a cautionary tale condemning North American greed for Mexico’s natural resources. And in the character of Fred C. Dobbs (Humphrey Bogart), it posits madness as the end point of that greed. In more recent cinema, there are other exposés of U.S. covert Latin American operations in Oliver Stone’s Salvador (1986) and Roger Spottiswoode’s Under Fire (1983). Although these films do follow the “WASP adventurer in the Third World” formula, they nevertheless make some pointed critiques of U.S. interference in the internal affairs of Latin American nations.

There have been other forms of resistance to the dominant stereotypical imagery of Latinos. Some Latino actors, even those who worked in the classical studio era, found ways to subvert the system. These forms of subversion and reaction I turn to in Chapter 4. And later Chicano and Latino filmmakers used their anger at Hollywood’s Latino stereotypes as the basis for their oppositional aesthetic. This cinematic response I discuss in Part 3.
I maintain that there have been Latino actors whose performances have managed to resist stereotyping—resisted, that is, as much as they could while being caught in the grip of Hollywood’s stereotypical filmmaking conventions. It’s a claim that several critics of women actors and performers of color have made over the years. But proving that actors have subverted stereotypes has always been difficult. To begin with, the actor tends to possess the least amount of authorship of any of the key creative artists on a film set. Actors have always been hired hands. In the Hollywood studio era, actors were contracted to studios and assigned to play whatever roles studio executives deemed appropriate. They were even loaned out to other studios like so much chattel. Even today, except for superstars who are able to initiate their own film projects, most actors are still hired by powerful producers, agents, or directors.

For performers of color this lack of power is exacerbated because Hollywood filmmaking has predominantly been a white enterprise. As Angharad Valdivia points out, “individual actors may be of a particular ethnic or racial background,” but “they may not necessarily be powerful enough to demand a sensitive portrayal, whatever it may be.” Beyond that, there is the crucial issue of casting practices, in which some actors of color may be regarded as not black or Latino enough “according to stereotypes that have become paradigmatic in producers’ minds.” Finally, “not all actors of a particular ethnic or racial background will necessarily want to deviate from stereotypes or to acknowledge that there are stereotypes!”

Then there is the fact that, as Peter Krämer and Alan Lovell point out, “acting is an elusive art.” An actor’s performance, they say, consists of: