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Hollywood's Latino Oblivion



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The hub of movie making needs to include more Latinosa, both in front of the camera and in decision-making roles

When Lupe Ontiveros was ignored during this year's Oscar tribute honoring those who passed away, it highlighted the invisibility and lack of awareness of Latinos in Hollywood. The excuse was there wasn't enough time to fit everyone in, so the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences added a photo gallery on its website. It didn't include Ontiveros either.

The insensitive omission sparked controversy in the Latino community. The social media sphere was abuzz, unleashing a barrage of comments, criticism on Facebook, Twitter and online stories about the Oscars. The pressure was such that almost two days later, Ontiveros made it into the online photo gallery.

"It was an inexcusable oversight," says Chon Noriega, author, researcher and professor in the Cinema and Media Studies program at UCLA. "It's a very specific incident, but it's so indicative of the Hollywood mentality. Latinos just aren't recognized, as they should be."

Despite a continuously growing and economically powerful Latino population, Latino actors still aren't getting lead film or television roles. Actor Esai Morales has complained about this for years. "Why are we almost always the zero and never the hero?" questioning why even plum roles about Hispanics don't go to Latinos. "Even the great villains, like Tony Montana [from Scarface] cannot be played by our own.... When are we going to get our history told, because it's stolen from us?"

Most recently, Ben Affleck played the role of CIA agent Tony Mendez in this year's Oscar-winning *Argo*. "This falls in the same category as playing black face. That's totally unacceptable," exclaims producer/filmmaker Moctesuma Esparza.

"Affleck had the power to cast a Latino in the role, but chose to cast himself in a way that the audience had no idea the main character was Latino. He denied the American audience to see a Latino hero. That's something that harms our community."

With fewer and less important roles, Latinos aren't getting nominated for Oscar awards and many are denied entry to the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, whose members nominate and vote for the winners. Currently, Latinos make up less than 2 percent of its members, while 94 percent are non-Hispanic whites.

Ontiveros tried to become an Academy member but was rejected. So was Esparza. "I qualified, applied and didn't get in. I didn't bother to reapply," he recalls. "In general, the Academy is reflecting the general lack of awareness of the industry in reference to Latinos. They don't understand or appreciate the Latino community and its talent."

The same goes for Hollywood executives, who pigeonhole Latinos into stereotypical roles of maids, gardeners and drug traffickers, when those categories don't define the essence of the hugely diverse Hispanic population in the United States. Esparza blames the lack of opportunities and unnecessary ethnic stereotypes on a simple fact. "There is not one Latino senior executive in film in any of the studios who can greenlight pictures more reflective of us and our reality."

Esparza counts himself lucky. "I've had a wonderful career. I've made movies that I wanted to make, many others that I wanted to make that I didn't get to make. I'm the exception, as is Robert Rodriguez."

Less than 0.1 percent of Latino television and film executives have greenlight authority, according to the study "Inclusion, exclusion and impact of Latinos in media," co-authored by Esparza and Frances Negrón-Muntaner, director of the Center for the Study of Ethnicity and Race at Columbia University. That study shows that less than half of one percent of producers and directors and less than five percent of actors of network television pilots are Latino.

If Hollywood executives don't understand Latino culture, they should understand numbers. Latinos constitute 25 percent of U.S. moviegoers. Their purchasing power is expected to reach \$1.5 trillion by 2015. And in California, home to Hollywood, the Latino population will dominate by early 2014—more of a reason why Hollywood power brokers should be taking notice. Some seem to be paying attention, setting aside, for example, marketing budgets targeting Latino audiences.

"I think the demographic force, progress in politics and hopefully the end of the undocumented immigration problem in the United States will set the stage for change," says Esparza, who adds that the Latino community must hold the industry accountable for its decisions. "Hollywood will have to catch up with the rest of society."