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ENTERTAINMENT & ARTS

Hollywood's treatment of Latinos is an open wound. Healing it requires a reckoning



(Illustration by Evan Solano / For The Times; photos: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studios Inc., Universal Pictures/Warner Bros., Columbia Pictures/Universal Pictures)

Hollywood's history with Latino representation is a muddy mess. Why even Washington politicians are taking action.

By [DANIEL HERNANDEZ](#) | STAFF WRITER
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Veteran actor Edward James Olmos didn't hold back when he submitted testimony to the U.S. House Judiciary Committee [hearing on diversity](#) in American media last September.

"White Hollywood does not want to tell the real stories of Latinos," he said in his written remarks. Latinos, he lamented, "are in a worse place now" than in 1964 when he started in the business and made his mark with "Blade Runner" (1982) and "Stand and Deliver" (1988). "Just because there are several successful Latino actors does not mean that Latinos are making it in Hollywood."

It's one of Hollywood's biggest open wounds.

<https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/story/2021-06-13/latino-gap-hollywood-movies-tv-representation>

Even as the big-budget film adaptation of the Lin-Manuel Miranda musical “In the Heights” hit theaters and HBO Max on Friday to rave reviews, Latinos in Hollywood say they face outsize obstacles in getting stories that reflect their experiences to the screen.

U.S. Latinos in 2025 are expected to reach 20% of the population, according to [census projections](#), meaning 1 in 5 Americans will identify as Latino in a handful of years. By 2045, a quarter of Americans are expected to be Latino. Yet study after study shows a vast gap between the number of Latinos represented in English-language Hollywood productions and their share of the population at large. USC’s 2020 inclusion study of [1,300 popular films](#) found that 4.9% of speaking roles in 2019 movies went to Hispanic or Latino actors. And UCLA’s 2020 “Hollywood Diversity Report” found an underrepresentative [5% of the roles](#) in scripted broadcast TV shows went to Latino actors in the 2018-19 season.

“I don’t need another statistic, I get it,” Eva Longoria, the actor and political advocate, said in a Zoom interview as she prepared to begin filming her directorial debut, “Flamin’ Hot.”

Closing the gap of Latino representation “is not only morally correct, but this is economically sound to do,” Longoria said. “They make one Latino show and go, ‘Well, we tried.’ Quantity is important.”

Over the last few years, as diversity and inclusion became more urgent industry concerns — and relative representation has improved slightly for Black and Asian Americans in Hollywood — many Latinos, from top-floor executives to actors just starting out, have taken action to close the gap that persists between the nation’s largest minority group and their presence in this country’s entertainment culture.

In October, 270 Latino creators, led in part by “Vida” showrunner Tanya Saracho, [released an open letter](#) to Hollywood with a five-point call for change, chief among them: “No stories about us without us.”

“By refusing to tell our stories and by refusing to put us in charge of telling them,” the letter stated, “Hollywood power brokers are complicit in our exclusion.”



SPECIAL REPORT

Hollywood's Latino Culture Gap

Times journalists examine the complicated history of Latinos in Hollywood and the actions being taken to increase their representation, which remains stubbornly low. [FULL COVERAGE](#)



"Vida" creator showrunner Tanya Saracho founded Untitled Latinx Project, which released an open letter to Hollywood advocating for more Latino representation. (Myung J. Chun / Los Angeles Times)

Washington has gotten involved too. After the House Judiciary Committee hearing on diversity in the media in September, the nonpartisan Government Accountability Office agreed in October [to initiate a report](#) on Latino [representation](#) in film, television and publishing [at the request](#) of Rep. Joaquin Castro (D-Texas), then-chair of the Congressional Hispanic Caucus, and Rep. Carolyn B. Maloney (D-N.Y.), chair of the House Committee on Oversight and Reform.

Behind the scenes, Congressional Hispanic Caucus [members sought face-to-face meetings with](#) executives in Hollywood, publishing and the news media about hiring and negative portrayals of Latinos.

A team of Times journalists examined the state of affairs for Latinos in the industry, finding dismal figures and a slow pace of change. Reporters also tackled murky questions about what kind of representation Latinos lack or seek, and how some of their personal ventures in the industry soured their view of it.

"We're talking about the single most important art form that humans have ever created,"

Olmos said in his live testimony via video during the Judiciary Committee hearing. "Nothing attacks the subconscious mind more. You sit down before a theater screen, a dark room, with no peripheral vision. Everything goes into the subconscious, and it stays there."

El Paso turning point

On Aug. 3, 2019, a 21-year-old believer in the white supremacist conspiracy theory the "Great Replacement" walked into a Walmart in the Texas border city of El Paso with an assault-style rifle and began shooting, intending to target Latino, specifically Mexican, people, according to a federal affidavit. Twenty-three people died, most of them Latino.

It was the largest anti-Latino racial massacre in recent history. Some blamed former President Trump's demonizing language about immigrants. Others cited the cultural vacuum that allows negative ideas about Latino people to take root when stereotypes dominate. Although the anti-Mexican element to the attack was skipped over in much of the mainstream news coverage, El Paso became [a turning point](#) for many.

"That's when I dug in and decided that we were going to go all out, and we were going to make this a top priority," Rep. Castro said in an interview.

To mark the one-year anniversary of the attack, Castro penned a furious essay in Variety.

"There is a dangerous nexus," he wrote, "between the racist political rhetoric and the negative images of Latinos as criminals and invaders that Americans see on their screens."



Rep. Joaquin Castro (D-TX) in the Rayburn House Office Building on May 13, 2021. (Kent Nishimura / Los Angeles Times)

He and other lawmakers said they are prepared to use regulatory and political pressure to break Hollywood’s complacency on Latino representation.

“I don’t think any industry is off-limits” to government intervention, Castro told The Times.(See the full interview [here](#).)

“We know what happens in D.C. affects entertainment, and how we’re portrayed in entertainment is how we are treated in real life,” said Brenda Castillo, head of the National Hispanic Media Coalition. “If we’re not seen, then we don’t exist, and then we’re treated poorly. We’re treated as noncitizens, as criminals and rapists, and that’s why our children are in cages.”

The 2% factor

“Forget whether Hollywood is Black enough,” actor Chris Rock wrote in an often-cited [essay](#) for the Hollywood Reporter in 2014. “A better question is: Is Hollywood Mexican enough? You’re in L.A, you’ve got to *try* not to hire Mexicans.”

Since Hollywood’s earliest days, white Americans needed to see nonwhites as different, not similar, said Chon Noriega, a veteran UCLA film historian and [the departing director](#) of the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center.

Mexicans became useful villains, historians say: swarthy, dangerous antagonists to fairer heroines or heroes, through a range of negative stereotyping. The insistence of the earliest American filmmakers to cast any nonwhites as criminals or buffoons extended to North American Indigenous people, Black Americans and Asian Americans.

Over time, critics argued, the stereotypes of yesteryear have been supplanted by more contemporary models: the farmworker, helpless immigrant or refugee, the narco or cartel hitman, or, enduringly, the domestic worker, perhaps never played so frequently and with as much aplomb as by Lupe Ontiveros, who died in 2012.

“Forty years ago, [filmmaker] Jesús Treviño named it the 2% factor,” Noriega said. “We’re staying at the same fairly constant rate of inclusion, but the population keeps growing, so you’re actually being fooled into thinking things are the same.”

Despite liberal Hollywood’s best intentions, every other decade becomes the emerging “Decade of the Hispanic,” as if the group exists in a perpetual state of arrival. The idea is “similar to the sleeping giant,” Noriega said, “trying to describe a situation of very limited change and have some element of hope to it.”

In November, a study by [Morning Consult](#) found that nearly half of Latino media consumers polled expressed being “tired” of seeing the familiar portrayals of Latino people as criminals or as “lazy.” And 25% of the respondents said the biggest stereotype about their race or ethnicity was related to their career or finances.

One person polled, when asked to describe the most common Latino stereotype, offered: “Poor single mother working two jobs with three kids in a gang or trying to get an education.”

“All we are is the help,” another respondent said.

Not neutral

Melinna Bobadilla identifies as a “working actor” who has had a reasonably successful early career. In 2017, she landed the part of Bertha in the Luis Valdez revival of “Zoot Suit” at the Mark Taper Forum. Then she got a recurring role in the final season of “Orange Is the New Black” (playing an Indigenous migrant stuck in detention at an Immigration and Customs Enforcement facility) and appeared in a key episode of the Apple+ immigrant anthology series “Little America.” She also has a part in the upcoming second season of the Netflix darling “Gentefied.” And she starred in the short “For Rosa,” portraying one of [the real-life women](#) sterilized without full consent at Los Angeles County General Hospital in the 1970s. It’s now streaming on HBO Max.

But there are certain roles the L.A. native with degrees from UC Berkeley and New York University has trouble landing. They are the neutral roles with no race or ethnicity identified.

“When I have auditioned for those roles, I end up watching the show or the film, and it’s defaulted to white,” Bobadilla says. “So it makes me wonder if there is just lip service being paid to equity and diversity in casting. It’s really easy to hide behind ‘Well, it’s just the best person for the job.’”



Melinna Bobadilla at her home in Los Angeles: “I’m not a fan of saying, ‘Where’s our equivalent of this Black show? Or this Asian show?’ There’s not enough representation when it comes to Black actors and Black executives. ... Are we just conforming to bilingual whiteness?” (Genaro Molina / Los Angeles Times)

It’s fallen to creators of color to make room for actors like Bobadilla.

Kumail Nanjiani, co-creator of “Little America,” set out to tell original stories of immigrants by hiring writers, directors and actors of color. Bobadilla’s episode, directed by Aurora Guerrero, is about a high schooler whose immigration status affects her college prospects. The Boyle Heights drama “Gentefied,” headed by co-creators Marvin Lemus and Linda Yvette Chávez, has been praised for showcasing a rainbow of up-and-coming Chicano, Central American and California-rooted artists who are part of a generation pushing for richer representation at studios and media companies.

Increasingly — and also posing new challenges — actors and audiences in Bobadilla’s generation tend to want their entertainment to reflect or match their values. Bobadilla, who described herself as Chicana, says she chooses roles with awareness of her “positionality.” She said she struggled with deciding to play the “Orange Is the New Black” character identified as Maya K’iche’, because she is not a member of that specific Indigenous group.

“I’m not a fan of saying, ‘What about us? Where’s our equivalent of this Black show? Or this Asian show?’ I would still say there’s not enough representation when it comes to Black actors and Black executives,” Bobadilla said. “Are we just conforming to bilingual whiteness? Again, that’s erasure. I’m interested in disenfranchising white supremacy in all its facets.” For that, she finds inspiration in two trailblazing models: Viola Davis and Sandra Oh.

“I look to them and I feel a connection, and I feel empowered in a way that I do not feel when I see a white Latin American person simply because they have a Spanish surname,” Bobadilla said. “That’s not sufficient for me.”

Longoria stressed that even with the diversity of races and backgrounds that count as Latino, unity is needed.

“Do we have collective power if we ourselves are segregating? ‘I’m not Cuban; I don’t want to watch that show. I’m not Mexican; I don’t want to watch that show,’” Longoria said, echoing some reactions to shows among viewers. “Our community has a responsibility to show up, as well. We need everybody to keep their foot on the gas.”

She’d like to see more recruitment of Latino executives, agents, producers, casting directors, technicians of every sort: “You want someone in the DNA of those companies, and in those rooms, that understands the community.”



Eva Longoria: “I don’t need another statistic. I get it.” (Christina House / Los Angeles Times)

“We all want diversity; the industry wants it too, but they’re also spending a lot of money, so they want the product to generate revenue,” said director and writer Michael D. Olmos, a son of Edward James Olmos. “It’s all those things. It’s a horse-or-buggy thing.”

Co-director of the 2012 breakout hit “Filly Brown” with Gina Rodriguez and the late Jenni Rivera, the younger Olmos said the industry he has pursued can often be a “meritocracy,” but it is also a “referral industry,” in which connections matter most of all. And making those connections can be tough.

This is partly why the elder Olmos founded the [Youth Cinema Project](#), which teaches fourth-graders how to make their own movies. He wants to address the so-called “pipeline” issue at the earliest stage.

Flavio Morales, an executive vice president at the distribution and production company Endemol Shine Latino, argues that a flood of low-budget Latino content is one answer to the idea that if more people of color work as grips, costume designers, camera operators, editors or production assistants, the pool of future directors and film pioneers naturally grows.

“Look at the Blaxploitation movement,” he said of the often-dismissed films. “We got line producers, writers, directors. We need our Blaxploitation movement, and we need our Roger Corman. How are we going to get better if we don’t practice? We just need more things on the screen. More, more, more.”

Others express admiration for the way Black creatives such as “Girls Trip” producer Will Packer have leveraged decades of collective organizing and pressure to break old molds in the industry.

“We have to start projecting that light,” said producer George Salinas, a native of South Los Angeles. “There was a certain stereotype for African Americans before Tyler Perry, before the Will Packers out there, and all these guys who just elevated the storytelling for African Americans. Now you see them portrayed as doctors and important lawyers, and that’s fantastic. And that’s what we’re trying and going for.”

“It is up to us to tell our own stories,” Olmos said in his congressional testimony. “And we will.”

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