

**Statement for the House Judiciary Committee Hearing
Hearing on Diversity in America:
The Representation of People of Color in the Media
September 24, 2020
EDWARD JAMES OLMOS**

Good afternoon. My name is Edward James Olmos; I am an American film, television, and theatrical actor of Mexican descent. I am a producer, screenwriter, and director of film and television. *Blade Runner*, *Selena*, *Battlestar Galactica*, and *Miami Vice* are just a few examples of my work in film and television productions. Still, my overall body of work consists of over one hundred and twenty-one films, over three hundred television shows, and the iconic role of El Pachuco in the theatrical and film production of *Zoot Suit* – for which I received a Tony Award nomination. I have an estimated 29 awards as an actor and some 27 nominations.

With that said, I want to tell you that I am also a storyteller – a truth-teller. Here is my truth:

In 1981, I produced and starred in a film entitled *The Ballad of Gregorio Cortez*, lauded as a landmark of Chicano cinema. This film depicts a Mexican American farm worker who speaks no English and is falsely accused of stealing a Texas Ranger's horse. A heated misunderstanding leads to the death of a lawman. Cortez is forced to run from the Texas Rangers. This film peels away layers of prejudice and myth surrounding Cortez, uncovering an ordinary hard-working man persecuted by the law and put on trial for murder. I drove from city-to-city in my beat-up car, promoting and screening this film free of charge to anyone who would have it (and me). I made this film because I wanted to make sure that the truth was told.

In 1979, I starred in *Zoot Suit*, a play written by Luis Valdez. *Zoot Suit* is based on the Sleepy Lagoon murder trial and the Zoot Suit Riots in Los Angeles during World War II. After a run-in with a neighboring gang, a fight ensues at a party, where a young man is murdered. Discriminated against for their zoot suit-wearing Chicano identity, twenty-two members of the 38th Street Gang, twenty-one of which were underage, are placed on trial for the murder, found guilty, and sentenced to life in San Quentin prison. Meanwhile, in Los Angeles, through the efforts of persistent lawyers and an activist-reporter, the boys win their court appeal and are set free two years after being incarcerated.

I starred in this powerful play because I felt it was a role that I could not pass up. This story needed to be told, and I thought I could add texture to the overall plot, and I wanted to make sure that the truth was told.

I am the first Mexican American to ever receive an Academy Award nomination for Best Actor for my portrayal of Jaime Escalante in Stand and Deliver. Escalante was a Bolivian American educator known for teaching Chicano students calculus from 1974 – 1991 at Garfield High School in East Los Angeles, California. Stand and Deliver, depicts how Chicano students overcame immense obstacles to pass AP Calculus tests during their senior year. The film received several Independent Spirit Awards, including for Best Male Lead, which I won., No one wanted to give us a penny to tell the story of a Bolivian man helping Chicano kids take a math test. After watching my performance, I realized what Escalante gave us, it was like catching lightning in a bottle, and we did it. We made a film about a Chicano here. Si Se Puede! Si Se Pudo! Yes, We Can! I helped make this film because I wanted to make sure that the truth was told.

In 1964, while in college, I took my first acting class. The discipline I learned playing baseball, and my passion for singing naturally led me to consider acting. As a young actor, I was always auditioning, but I was always rejected. So, I kept at it and studied acting under the greats.

I speak to students throughout the country to help promote the notion of taking responsibility for one's actions and one's happiness in life. I use my own "disadvantaged background" as an example of the childhood I had growing up in East Los Angeles, infamous for its gang problems. I tell the kids, "If I can do it, so can you". And I try to point them in a positive direction.

I state to you here, The Congress of the United States of America, that the entertainment industry, also known as Hollywood, does not understand diversity. I am an outspoken person. Just because there are several successful Latino actors does not mean that Latinos are making it in Hollywood. I can tell you for a fact that those same actors are not testifying before you today because they are afraid. They are afraid of being blacklisted and punished for speaking truth to power. I am not afraid. I have the truth on my side. La pura verdad. The word. The Constitution of the United States guarantees freedom of speech - freedom of expression, but for Latinos and other people of color in the entertainment industry, the likelihood of being retaliated against or blacklisted is a reality.

I was an outspoken person when I was a poor actor trying to find work in Hollywood, and I am still outspoken as a successful actor today. I will always be outspoken.

The bottom line is that Hollywood does not want to give us any real opportunities. They throw us a bone here and maybe one over there, but there is no real concerted effort to do anything because they do not have to, and that is also the truth.

In 1964, when I started out in the entertainment business, Latinos were less than 2 percent of all the content in television and film. Today, with 22 percent of the population, we are still less than 4 percent of all content created. We are in a worse place now.

The entertainment industry feels that if they hire one Black actor, one Latino, and one Asian American actor as extras that they have done their job. With that, they feel that they have met their diversity quotas. I say, "Shame on you. Shame on you for being lazy." The industry will argue that they are doing a better job with the overall diversity numbers, but the real facts and the statistics prove otherwise. The truth is that the lack of Latinos in Hollywood is worse than it has ever been. The actual numbers are deplorable. Look them up, and you will see for yourself.

My colleagues, Alma Martinez, and Pepe Serna are veteran actors like myself whose body of work has garnered them entry into the Academy of Motion Pictures of Arts and Sciences (AMPAS). They are voting members. They will be submitting written statements, and it is my hope that you will read their powerful words that share their personal experiences as dig deeper. We are all directed by a true storyteller, Luis Valdez, who created a troupe of actors known as El Teatro Campesino / The Theater of the Farmworker, who followed the migrant workers and Cesar Chavez. El Teatro Campesino's origins began with performances on flatbed trucks to educate farm workers on the dangers related to agricultural fieldwork.

The truth is that Latinos are not given the opportunity to tell their own stories. We recently saw the mega-success of the film "Black Panther." Where is the superhero who represents the Latino community? Where is our superhero? I tell you where our superhero is. They are working in the agricultural fields of America, making sure that America has plenty of inexpensive food to eat. That is where they are!

The film and television studios do not want to give us the opportunity to create a superhero because they are content with their belief that Latinos must be feared and kept in their place. So, they continue writing us into the stereotypical roles of pimps, prostitutes, drug addicts, drug dealers, gang bangers, bank robbers, and serial killers.

I am here to tell you that they are lazy writers, producers, and directors. They are not writing from a place of truth. They would rather write from what they know and not what they discover. They know that writing us into these stereotypical roles is a formula for success that makes money for the studios. That is what they know.

Throughout my years in the entertainment industry, I have been trying to make a movie about the life of a Mexican American real-life superhero, Roy P. Benavidez, Recipient of the Medal of Honor. In 1968, Mr. Benavidez, a staff sergeant with the Army's Special Forces, the Green Berets, heard someone yell "get us out of here" over his unit's radio while at his base in Loc Ninh, South Vietnam.

Sergeant Benavidez jumped aboard an evacuation helicopter carrying only a knife, and flew to the scene. After jumping off the helicopter, Sergeant Benavidez was hit by shrapnel from two hand-grenades and shot in the right leg, but he continued towards his fellow troops finding four dead and the others wounded.

He pulled survivors onto the helicopter, but its pilot was killed by enemy fire taking off, and the helicopter crashed and burned. Sergeant Benavidez got the troops off the burning helicopter, and over the next six hours, he organized return fire, called in airstrikes, administered morphine, and recovered classified documents. In the process, he was shot seven times, among those in the stomach and thighs, and hit by more grenade fragments. He was also bayoneted by a North Vietnamese soldier, whom he killed with his knife. At the end of the ordeal, he shot two enemy soldiers as he dragged the survivors aboard another evacuation helicopter.

Can you believe that Roy P. Benavidez, a former Green Beret sergeant who received the Medal of Honor from President Ronald Reagan for heroism while wounded in the Vietnam War, had to also fight to keep the Government from cutting off his disability benefits?

You see, Hollywood does not want to make a movie about the life of a real-life superhero who happens to be Mexican American. They want to make movies like Wonder Woman, Batman, and Avengers. These blockbuster films never include a Latino.

I'm very grateful that I've been able to do the movies I've been able to do in my lifetime, but I will say it's been a really difficult time to understand or accept why more Latino-led stories have not been produced.

Still, I say to all my brothers and sisters in Hollywood to never give up pursuing your dream of making it in Hollywood. Tell your stories and have the courage to use your voice.

White Hollywood does not want to tell the real stories of Latinos. Our stories of success do not stand up to the reality of the myth and the preconceived notions that they have of us. So, it is up to us to tell our own stories. And we will.

I am here to stress the importance of quality education and arts in education. I encourage you all to champion funding that helps students become our future storytellers.

I have served as an ambassador for UNICEF, and I have received numerous citations for my work as an activist. Yes, I am an actor, but I would rather be known as an activist, and here is why: The children are our future.

I devote much of my time to causes, particularly those focusing on the needs and rights of children. I make, on average, some 150 personal appearances each year to places where I can reach kids at risk: juvenile halls, detention centers, boys/girls clubs, schools. Anywhere I can get across my message that "we all have a choice" about where life takes us.

I am particularly proud of my work in The Youth Cinema Project (YCP), which helps to teach young students resilience and to become real-world problem-solvers. YCP bridges the achievement and opportunity gaps by creating lifelong learners and the entertainment industry's multicultural future.

Our curriculum is aligned with English and VAPA Standard to help close the Achievement Gap. Every student, no matter his or her academic background, writes from experience, learns the value of their voice, and promotes their ideas, verbally and in writing. Our young filmmakers learn graduate-level concepts and

decide how to apply them to their films while collaborating and problem-solving with their peers. YCP is not a classroom exercise in which students pretend to be filmmakers. Every Youth Cinema Project student is a filmmaker. Banking on students is one of the solutions.

I still find it incredible that we still use the word race as a cultural determinant, out of our need to differentiate one another. It is also incredible that film and television studios and theatrical companies strongly resist telling the story of the American Latino.

In the sci-fi television program, *Battlestar Galactica*, I played the role of Admiral William Adama. The Admiral was known for proclaiming, "So say we all!! I ask you, "Whatever happened to the human race? Are we not all part of the human race?" So say we all - We are all part of the human race. So say we all.