

Dr. Alma Martinez
Diversity in America: The Representation of People of Color in the Media

STATEMENT

I am Dr. Alma Martinez. I am an American film, television and stage actor and, as well, a university professor and published author. I hold a PhD in Drama from Stanford University, a MFA in Acting from the University of Southern California, and am a Dartmouth College Cesar Chavez Dissertation Fellow alum, a Fulbright Scholar, and a member of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Actors Branch (AMPAS).

My induction into AMPAS reflects my extensive body of work in the films *Zoot Suit*, *Under Fire*, *Barbarosa*, *Born in East LA*, *Cake*, *Transpecos*, *Crossing Over*, *Ms. Purple*, *Clemency* and in TV programs such as *Gentefied*, *Undone*, *Queen Sugar*, *The Bridge*, *American Crime Story: People vs OJ*, *Elena of Avalor*, *The Terror Infamy*, *Corridos Tales of Passion and Revolution* among others. I have acted on Broadway, Off-Broadway, in regional theatres across the country and on Mexican and European stages. These combined projects have garnered: Sundance Film Festival *Grand Jury Awards*, Oscar, Golden Globe and Emmy awards/nominations, Tony Award, and Los Angeles Drama Critics and New York Drama Desk awards.

In my decades of working in the entertainment industry, I have shared the screen and stage with distinguished acting colleagues Gene Hackman, Edward James Olmos, Alfre Woodard, Lupe Ontiveros, Ed Harris, Jean Louis Trintignant, George Takei, Liev Schreiber, Diane Weist, Danny Trejo, Nick Nolte, Jennifer Aniston, Cheech Marin, Frances Conroy and worked with directors like Zack Snyder, America Ferrera, Ryan Murphy, Ava DuVernay, Luis Valdez, Chinonye Chukwa, Roger Spottiswoode, Peter Medak, Jill Soloway, Fred Schepisi, and Daniel Barnez among others.

In my acting and professorial career I continually work to move our Latino community and our country, closer to becoming a true Democracy that affords the same opportunities to all. Prior to coming to Hollywood, I was a member of El Teatro Campesino, one of the most important political theatre companies of the 1960's and 70's. Founded by Luis Valdez as an organizing tool for the burgeoning Farmworkers Union led by Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta, the company went on to win an Obie and for Luis Valdez, countless awards. For four months we did a bus and truck tour across Europe playing in large Roman and small amphitheatres, in town squares, under tents and at international theatre festivals. In the U.S. our bus and truck tour crossed the Southwest for 6 months. We played at union meetings, church halls, schools, school cafeterias, outdoor squares, and occasionally, a real theatre. Our play, *La Gran Carpa de los Rasquachis* (*The Grand Tent of the Underdogs*) with its message, demanding human and labor rights for farm workers, rallied audiences and standing ovations in the U.S. and Europe. Up until that point, I had never experienced the power of theatre to change mind, hearts and lives. As a young actor in Hollywood, I joined NOSTROS the Latino Professional Actors organization founded by Ricardo Montalban to support and guide actors in Hollywood. As a member of SAG, I ran for office on a platform with other Latino actors, the first such effort in the union's history. I have given presentations on "The Evolution of Latino Images in Film" at over 100 universities, colleges, high schools, and conferences across the country. As a member of AMPAS I have reached out to other professionals of color to encourage and guide them through the nomination

process which, up until ten years ago, had been a process closely guarded by existing members, the majority of whom were white men. To date, I have helped 10 entertainment professionals of color become members.

As a director of theatre I select plays that I feel speak to our place in time. Over the past three years I've directed: *Facing Our Truth: Plays on Trayvon Race and Privilege* (multiple playwrights), Luis Valdez's *Los Vendidos*, *Vietnam Campesino*, *Los Militants* and I am currently directing Anna Deavere Smith's play *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992*.

I received my first union card (Actors Equity Association) in 1978 when I performed in the play *Zoot Suit* written and directed by Luis Valdez. The play was the first entirely Chicano/Mexican American production, including the playwright, cast, and director, ever produced at Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles. *Zoot Suit* broke all existing box office records and then moved to the Aquarius Theatre for an extended 10 month run. For the first time in the history of Los Angeles professional mainstream theatre, Chicano and Latino audiences flocked to the Music Center and filled the 750 seat Mark Taper Forum and 1,200 seat Aquarius Theatre to capacity. They sat enraptured by a play that depicted one of the darkest untold stories in Los Angeles history, the Zoot Suit Riots and the Sleepy Lagoon Murder Trial (circa 1945-47). What had for decades been a silenced and pained memory became a celebration and vindication in the hands of master playwright Luis Valdez. In Valdez's telling, Latinos, aka Zoot Suiters, were not the perpetrators of violence but rather victims of a judicial system that had historically failed to protect its most vulnerable citizens of color.

The story of Henry Reyna and the 38th Street gang was story telling in its highest form. Each night, Chicano-Latino audiences were enraptured by Mr. Valdez's mastery of the written word. The magnetic draw and almost breathless attention as audiences saw for the first time empowered, arrogant, defiant, sensual, and proud American of Mexican descent, the Pachuco, played by Mr. Olmos, completely control the stage and the theatre. For one magical night, audiences heard the little-known history of *El Pueblo La Reina de Los Angeles de Porciuncula*, the original name of the City of Los Angeles, told from a perspective that they were fully familiar with and was completely their own.

When the *Zoot Suit* run finally ended I was on cloud 9, hopeful and excited for what lay ahead for me. At 27, and after the unprecedented success of *Zoot Suit*, I believed with all my heart that Hollywood was finally ready to represent the real America, in all its diversity, and to accept Chicana actors like myself. Time Magazine even heralded this change of tides and dubbed the 1980's the "Decade of the Hispanic". Time covers made pronouncements of, "Yo Decido. Why Latinos Will Pick the Next President", "Magnifico! Hispanic Culture Breaks Out of the Barrio", "Immigrants. The Changing Face of America", "Hispanics Americans. Soon: The Biggest Minority" that heralded a new era in Hollywood's representations of Latinos.

Very soon after *Zoot Suit*, I booked my first feature film. A western. We shot in Brackettville Texas for 1 week and 2 weeks in Big Bend National Park also in Texas. The location was so remote, we flew in by private plane. The location was beautiful. High arid mountains that gleamed in the hot sun. Dry, arid, and cacti dotted landscapes. And constantly, the flowing waters of the Rio Grande River reminded me that I was only yards away from where I was born.

I thought to myself, "this film will be another great story about Latinos. Another Zoot Suit?" Once the film moved to the isolated location of Big Bend, everything came crashing down.

The producer and leading actor in the film started to make unwelcomed sexual advances toward me. I became anxious as these persisted. I deflected as much as possible but at one point, he used the guise of "rehearsing" to come to his cabin, 2 miles from basecamp. I asked that we rehearse during the day, but as the producer, he made me feel I had no choice. His driver picked me up at basecamp at about 8pm. I felt worried, not knowing what to expect. We arrived at his cabin and there were 3 crew members there playing music and drinking. I immediately felt a sense of relief, "I was safe." The producer then entered the room and said, "let's rehearse in here (the bedroom)." With that the crew members that I got to know well, stood and left without saying a word. My anxiety level rose even higher and I thought, "what did they think was going to happen?"

There were two beds in the room. He sat on one and I on the other and we faced each other. I immediately got my script and found the scene pages. He pulled out a guitar. He went on and on about how he had fallen in love with a Latina actress on location and how he loved Latinas. This went on and on as I kept trying to urge him to rehearse. Finally, I had reached my limit and told him angrily, "I don't know what you want, but I came here to rehearse." To which he responded just as angrily, "You Mexican women are all the same." With that he stood up from the bed and started to walk out to the living room. I had never in my life been pushed to do what I then did and today, knowing what I know, I would never again allow anyone to put me in that position. His remark, which I took as highly disparaging, since the producer was a white male and I personally grown up hearing remarks like that in films and television programs that portrayed Latinas stereotypically, as saints or prostitutes.

As he got up and walked to the door, I stood up grabbed him by the shoulder, turned him around and slammed his body against the wall. To add some levity to this dark story of sexual harassment, I have to add I am 5'2', the producer was 6' and double my weight at that time. I proceeded to throw every profanity I was raised to "never say" as I held him against the wall. Once I depleted my barrage, I stormed out of the cabin and started to hurriedly walk back to base camp. The driver that had brought me to the cabin, of course, was not to be seen. I walked, almost running, to get as far from there as I could but slowly, I began to realize that base camp was 2 miles away. There was no paved road, no streetlights, only the moon and large looming black silhouettes of the mountains that had days before had been gleaming like gold in the sunlight. I had a choice that night to return to the cabin or to walk to camp. After what I had gone through, I was not going back.

It took me ten years to tell my partner, then husband, what had happened. I kept it to myself for decades. Afraid, my husband would retaliate in some way or my agents would file a complaint and hinder my and his careers. When I finally did speak out, I made a joke of my experience. I was the first to laugh when I retold my response to situation, hurling this tall man against the wall. A very funny image. Very funny. And everyone laughed. Then the #MeToo movement happened and it all began to sink in. In 1980, this was my first film, I was 27, and I was sexually harassed. So why was I laughing? On reflection, this was the only way I knew to live with the trauma, the humiliation and the explosive response, my loss of control. Today, in this

Congressional Statement, I want to for the committee to realize that our young actors of color, who continue to face harassment and discrimination to this day and remain quiet, feel disempowered on the set because they feel disempowered in their lives.

I am a brown skinned woman born in Mexico. I identify as both a native of the Americas and a *mestiza* (Indian/European/African descent). Like our Black brothers and sisters, our history as an enslaved and colonized people set in motion U.S. laws that, to this day, continue to keep large factions of our community in poverty. As late as 1935, a state law prohibited a person of half Indian blood (a Mexican American) and half Spanish blood from becoming citizens or owning land. Legal precedents like this and others like the Dawes Act, the Indian Removal Act, and the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo have systemically deprived generations of Latinos from full economic, social, and judicial parity and from accruing legacy wealth. One has only to look at the Tulsa Massacre of 1921.

As a University Professor, I am in a position to attest to how Latino students, living as a people of color in our society are struggling to make it through college. Latinos enroll in high numbers, but the completion rate is proportionally dismal. Many hold 1, 2, even 3 jobs, live at home and oftentimes have to help financially support their families. Many are first generation college students and come from poor working class and/or blue-collar families. Our educational system has propagated the "myth" that a college education is the key to a solid financial future. The truth is that because of the burden of student loans, we are creating a new class hierarchy: the poor debt-burdened college graduate. Given the disproportionate lack of wealth legacy among Latinos, many will carry this debt burden for most of their adult lives. We must make a college education an attainable "American Dream". To do this we must eliminate student loan debt.

You cannot talk about inequities in higher education without discussing the disproportionately low rate of Latinos with PhD's and the even lower percentage of Latino Professors with PhD's that are denied tenure. The few Professors that make it to the highest levels of education are denied entry in numbers that warrant further examination.

My own education did not come easy. I was born in Mexico and immigrated with my family to the U.S. when I was only months old. My father was a mechanic and my mother eventually studied and became a beautician. I have 4 other siblings and I am the only one that went to college and completed a degree.

My father only completed 6th grade and my mother 8th grade. Coming from poor families they were expected to complete elementary school, learn a vocation and go to work so their expectation for my siblings and I was simply to finish high school without getting arrested - my brothers - and without getting pregnant - my sister and me. All of us finished high school to my parent's relief. I personally always liked school and learning. It was a refuge from a homelife that still embraced old world Mexican values and that I found was at odds to where my education was leading me. I was always at the top of my class, so I received scholarships throughout my years of study at Whittier College, USC and Stanford. But college life was not easy. I found it very hard to adapt academically and culturally. I received a full scholarship to USC after high school but dropped out my second semester. My tuition was paid for, but I was not told that I needed to pay for books. My family did not have the money, so I looked for classes that had the

least amount and cheapest books. When I was invited to go to a movie or dinner with classmates, I had to decline because I never had more than a few dollars in my purse. Neither my family or I knew that I would need more "pocket money". I was also used to being an A-B student so when my grades dropped to B-C, and I continued to find myself isolated because I had no money, I began to question if I belonged. In the middle of my second semester, my closet friend on campus overdosed on LSD. I called a doctor and left USC that same day. I lost my scholarship. In the ensuing 4 years, I made my way to the University of Guadalajara Theatre Dept. and then the National University in Mexico City Acting Conservatory. When I returned to the U.S. I reapplied and was awarded a full scholarship and I enrolled in Whittier College to where I completed my undergraduate degree. Stubborn by nature, I returned to USC and completed my MFA in Acting in 1995. To this date, all campuses, libraries and lecture halls I visit anywhere around the world always give me a sense of peace and possibility. A world of knowledge is literally waiting for me in the library "stacks". I relish learning and will always be a student.

It's been 40 years since Times Magazine proclaimed the "Decade of the Hispanic" when the impassioned hope of the Latino community and entertainment professionals was at its peak. We thought the class ceiling had cracked, the walls had been breached, and the gate was flung open. It was a new day. We waited and waited and to this day we continue to wait.

On September 23, 2020, the Norman Lear Center at USC Annenberg issued a report entitled "Change the Narrative, Change the World". The report analyzed depictions of 129 immigrant characters in 97 episodes of 59 scripted narrative shows that aired between August 2018 and July 2019. The study found that "half of the immigrant characters on television were judged to be Latinx" and "63% of characters with identifiable statuses overall being undocumented or asylum seekers." The report then stated that, "In reality, only 24% of the U.S. immigrant population is undocumented."

This report is just one example of how the media has inflated and influenced their audience's perceptions by creating shallow representation and perpetuating stereotypes that dehumanize Latinos and reduce empathy. This "overrepresentation in comparison to reality" has had dire and negative consequences for Latinos and the entire country.

Will the entertainment industry continue to be defined by the prejudices of their audiences or by their better selves? Most would say the latter but without the will, we are at a stalemate.

Therefore, we must look to our elected officials to hear the collective voices of our diverse citizenry that yearns and hungers to see themselves represented with dignity and humanity. The power of the media reaches every corner of the world and with that power it can be a medium for global healing and peace.