

## INTRODUCTION

### Latina and Latino Stars in U.S. Eyes

This is a book about Latina and Latino stardom, but even more it is about the U.S. entertainment media's imagining of Latina/os.<sup>1</sup> In the case studies that follow, I interrogate the dynamics of star production and promotion for a handful of film and entertainment television stars since the silent film era and what we can learn from them about the evolution of Latina/o and national identities in the American imagination (or "U.S. eyes"), as filtered through Hollywood film and star promotion. More specifically, I ask, how have Latina/o opportunities and star images reflected or challenged the shifting status of Latina/os in relation to racial, class, and gendered notions, and notions of citizenship and national identity? And given that sociohistorical and film and television industry contexts have established radically different openings and opportunities for Latina/o actors at distinct junctures, what can Latina/o stardom teach us about these periods in Hollywood and in U.S. social life?

When I began this project in 1998, it seemed, on the surface at least, that Latina/os had reached a level of visibility, popularity, and status in English-language film, television, and popular culture that was unprecedented. Ricky Martin was shaking his bon-bon for television audiences, and "J.Lo," then known only as Jennifer Lopez, was drawing the spotlight with her acting achievements and celebrated body. While few Latina/os could be found on network television at the time, Hollywood films included a growing roster of well-known Latina/o and Latin American stars, including Lopez, Salma Hayek, Benicio del Toro, and Jimmy Smits. Indeed, along with the fact that Latina/os were soon to surpass African Americans as the largest nonwhite

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group in the United States, mainstream news sources were also trumpeting the news that Latina/os were becoming increasingly visible and influential in popular culture. In a “Latin USA” cover issue, *Newsweek* announced the rise of “Generation Ñ,” while *New York* magazine, renamed *Nueva York* for its own special issue, heralded the recent “Latino explosion” in cultural life, sports, and politics.<sup>2</sup> Yet the success and grand-scale promotion of such performers as Lopez and Martin was not the complete picture; the actual behind-the-scenes scenarios and star promotion texts often did not match the optimism or the hype regarding a late-1990s “Latin Wave.” As I discuss in more detail in chapter 6, hints of contradiction and marginalization could easily be discerned, whether in promotional texts that emphasized the curvaceous bodies and supposed innate sensual earthiness of these performers or in discussion of U.S.-born Latina/os as “crossover” stars.

I offer this quick glimpse of a recent moment in Latina/o media representation as a way to demonstrate both the complexity of this research topic and the importance of pursuing it through in-depth, historically contextualized study. Latina/o images in the U.S. entertainment media have been nothing if not ambivalent, reflecting the shifting and equally ambivalent racial and social status of Mexican Americans and other Latina/os in this country in the last century. For example, in more recent years it has become more likely that we may witness Latina/o actors portraying richly textured characters, such as that of college-bound teen Ana Garcia, played by America Ferrera (now of *Ugly Betty* fame) in *Real Women Have Curves* (2002). But my students still tell me, overwhelmingly, that they feel that negative and stereotypical images continue to be more the norm than the exception. And they know all too well the age-old stereotypes, given useful labels by Charles Ramírez Berg and others: the Latin lover, the bandido/cholo, the harlot or spitfire, and so on.<sup>3</sup> These sorts of one-dimensional images continue to be seen and to carry weight today, even as some Latina/o actors and media professionals are experiencing greater opportunity.

The exploration of Latina/o opportunity and stardom promises to be informative far beyond the study of media representation, moreover. This is because such images have power. As Richard Dyer most famously has argued and other scholars have since documented, media representation and stardom in particular provides important and telling clues regarding the sociopolitical status of a people within a society, as well as playing a role in relations between various groups.<sup>4</sup> Not only have they provided images to non-Latinos of who and what Latina/os might be, but over the decades they have provided images to people of Latin descent that can affect how we see ourselves and what we can make of our lives.

*Sell myself  
x Berenice*

To provide parameters and focus to my research on this complex topic, I structure my study several ways. First, I look at questions regarding the evolving racial status of Latina/os through the lens of film and television stardom, with the understanding that it is a forum through which ethnic notions and racial borders are reinforced, challenged, and otherwise made meaningful.<sup>5</sup> Given this understanding, a great deal can be learned regarding the media construction of Latinidad (what I term “Hollywood Latinidad” to describe the industries’ construction of a collective, imagined “Latin-ness” through media products and star publicity) from exploring the careers and media texts produced in relation to popular Latino and Latina stars in previous eras and today. It also can teach us a great deal about Latinidad as defined by Frances Aparicio and Susan Chávez Silverman, referring to Latina/o identity formation through lived experience by Latina/os themselves. They refine the term as “Latinidades” to refer to this dynamic in relation to the diverse communities and identities that comprise Latina/o identities in the United States and transnationally.<sup>6</sup> Thus, both Hollywood Latinidad and its potential influence on Latinidades are the focus of this book.

My study is not encyclopedic, however. It does not aim to address the experiences of all Latina/o stars or to document the entire careers of the stars that serve as case studies. Rather, I further structured this book by situating my case studies within transitional moments in media and U.S. social history and what can be gleaned from them with respect to Latina/o representation and stardom. In this evolution there have been important junctures in media history with respect to Latina/o opportunity and representation; for instance, they include the transition from silent to sound film in the late 1920s, the 1970s era of “socially relevant” television, and the period when the first Latino-directed feature films reached national audiences in the 1980s. In addition, sociopolitical developments that had an equally influential impact and which I address in the chapters that follow include the Great Depression, World War II, and the rise of Chicano and Puerto Rican media activism targeting U.S. television networks and film studios. These periods and events offered new, although not necessarily better, opportunities to Latina/o performers, times and spaces in which popular notions of Latinidad and how Latina/os should be represented in the entertainment media were brought to attention or called into question.

Structuring the chapters in this way provides an abbreviated overview of the historical evolution of Latina/o representation and stardom in Hollywood film and U.S. entertainment television, major components of what I term Hollywood Latinidad. I build here on the work of Ana M. López, who aptly described Hollywood as a cultural ethnographer, figuratively creating

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stars

race and ethnicity through its cinematic representations of various groups.<sup>7</sup> As López illustrates in her work on Latina stars of the “Good Neighbor” era, such images are embedded within and reflect the ideology and material realities of their social and historical moment.

To this end, *Latina/o Stars in U.S. Eyes: The Making and Meanings of Film and TV Stardom* explores the evolution of Latina/o and American identities as evidenced in transitional moments in U.S. media history and Latina/os who became stars in these moments. Chapter 1 is centered on Mexican actress Dolores Del Rio, whose Hollywood film career from 1925 through the early 1940s spanned the transition from silent to sound film. Chapter 2 then examines the career of Cuban musician, actor, and television executive Desi Arnaz, who, after appearing in “Good Neighbor” films in the 1940s, became an extremely popular television actor in and executive producer of the 1950s hit series *I Love Lucy*. Chapter 3 surveys the early decades (1950s and 1960s) of the film career of Puerto Rican performer Rita Moreno, who witnessed the breakdown of the studio system and the rise of independent film companies. The attention in chapter 4 turns to Puerto Rican and German Hungarian actor Freddie Prinze, who quickly rose to stardom in the title role of NBC’s *Chico and the Man* (1974–78), but not without intense controversy and complaints from Chicano media activists and other viewers. Chapter 5 then shifts the focus to Mexican American actor Edward James Olmos, who became a symbol of Latino filmmaking in the 1980s. In chapter 6, the focus is Nuyorican actress, singer, and franchise head Jennifer Lopez, who rose to mainstream stardom amidst the growth of Latina/o media production and the news media’s discursive construction of “crossover” stardom in the late 1990s. Finally, in chapter 7, I investigate the impact of millennial trends that have emphasized mixed-race heritage and ethnically ambiguous characters on Latina/o opportunity and stardom through an exploration of the career of actress Jessica Alba and comparison to her contemporary, Rosario Dawson.

Readers may wonder at some of these choices. While some of these actors may never have reached major star status, each exemplified success for a performer of Latina/o heritage in his or her respective historical juncture and media era. Their diversity with respect to gender, nationality, training, class background, appearance, and career entrée also allows for exploration of questions regarding the conflation and at times privileging of particular Latina/o groups in Latina/o representation and star promotion, the diversity and disparity of opportunities experienced by Latina/o actors over the decades, and the impact of increasingly pan-Latino identities today. The inclusion of both film and television stars also allows for comparative analysis

of the opportunities and limitations afforded by each media industry at different historical junctures, shedding greater light on the complex evolution of Latina/o stardom and of the Hollywood media industry’s more general imagining of Latinidad.

## Stardom and the American Imaginary

The stakes here are about more than entertainment. They’re about who we allow to dance inside our imaginations and why.

—Kristal Brent Zook, *Color by Fox: The Fox Network and the Revolution in Black Television* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 64

As scholars such as Richard Dyer, George Lipsitz, and Ella Shohat and Robert Stam have well documented, media representations play a powerful role in American and global social relations.<sup>8</sup> We can look to the entertainment media as one of the most important places where “ideas, myths, fictions, ideologies, and social models are produced, displayed, negotiated, and contested,” as Alberto Sandoval-Sánchez has argued,<sup>9</sup> and stars are the heroes and heroines that populate and invigorate this landscape. In this regard, stardom operates on a national and increasingly global scale as a powerful social force. Stars—or the lack of stars from particular groups in a society—“teach” notions of identity and leadership to citizens from all walks of life, including lessons regarding the meaning of gender, class, race, and ethnicity in a particular time and place. For example, stars’ public images have long assisted in the reification and reinforcement of U.S. racial categories and particularly in the construction and celebration of whiteness. In this regard, whiteness traditionally has been likened to such qualities as purity, beauty, and integrity—and perhaps more important, to the various privileges and rights inherent to American citizenship and identity.<sup>10</sup> Scholars have documented the reinforcement of such notions of whiteness, to list just a few examples, in relation to stardom associated with vaudeville theater performances and early Hollywood film.<sup>11</sup>

I should note here that I use terms such as “whiteness” and the more general “race” with the understanding that racial categories are not biological constructs, but rather categories that have been constructed socially, as described by Michael Omi and Howard Winant and others.<sup>12</sup> More specifically, race historically has been constructed in relation to a black-white binary in the United States. As Neil Foley points out, such a binary was made possible only because “the United States . . . repudiated the idea of racial hybridity

Stars +  
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for most of its history"; as a result, the United States has had "no cultural or legal context for understanding the racial place of mestizo peoples" such as Latina/os.<sup>13</sup> Unsurprisingly, there is continuing confusion regarding the status of Mexican Americans and other Latina/os as racialized citizens, and whether we should be considered a separate race or an ethnic group even today.<sup>14</sup>

Moreover, studies have documented the importance of film and media stars as role models and as influential in the establishment of self-image and social attitudes toward other groups.<sup>15</sup> We learn from such role models what sort of a life we can hope for, literally what to aspire to, as well as what to think of others and to expect others will think of us. Will others think we're smart, capable, trustworthy, and attractive, or unintelligent, untrustworthy, and/or unattractive? These are powerful messages that can play determining roles in the futures of all young people and in social relations between ethnic groups. A greater understanding of the construction and marketing of stars from nondominant ethnic and racial groups, such as Latina/os within the context of the United States, therefore can reveal a great deal about the prevailing racial attitudes and social relations of a time and place.

And what is stardom? Scholars such as Christine Gledhill define film and television stars as actors who become the object of public fascination to the extent that their lives off-screen are as interesting to fans as their performances.<sup>16</sup> I would add that the opportunity for an actor to attain star status generally comes with being cast in psychologically compelling lead roles, as well as through being given "star treatment" publicity in the entertainment media. When we consider stardom from this perspective, the odds appear stacked against Latina/os in many respects. Although the number of Latina/o television and film roles has increased in the last decade, there are still few Hispanic characters that are well-developed protagonists around which stories revolve. In the realm of television representation, studies have documented that Latina/o characters have only recently increased from 2 to 6 percent of all prime-time roles,<sup>17</sup> even while the Latina/o population has grown to 15 percent of the U.S. population. Those characters that do appear typically are in minor rather than starring roles.

This lack of visibility and substance in film and TV story worlds dovetails with the relative dearth of Latino and Latina stars, when you consider that opportunity to attain star status typically emerges from being cast in well-developed lead roles. While studios, networks, production companies, and related industries spend millions each year to create and promote stars that will appeal to the widest possible audience, Latina/os still are seldom the object of such promotion. Given how few Latina/o images are circulating in

*Burden of representation*

the popular imagination, these images, of both performers and characters, arguably hold more importance and are more heavily judged, given that they carry what James Baldwin, Kobena Mercer, and others have termed a "burden of representation."<sup>18</sup>

It is an especially useful time to explore the meaning and significance of these dynamics in popular culture. The burden of representation experienced by Latino and Latina stars can be seen as growing heavier as they represent an increasing population. In this respect, the proportion of Latina/os in the United States has more than tripled, from 4.5 percent of the population in the 1960s to an estimated 15 percent in 2008, while Latina/os comprise one in five U.S. youth today.<sup>19</sup> Scholars are just beginning to critically examine the impact of this population shift on the media landscape and on U.S. social life and identity.

Perhaps as an early reflection of these shifts, the rising status of a handful of Latinos and Latinas in U.S. film and television also makes the topic of Latina/o stardom particularly timely. Actors such as Jennifer Lopez, Benicio del Toro, America Ferrera, and George Lopez have gained critical recognition and status in the last decade, while Latina/o filmmakers and producers are successfully launching films and television series, signs of an increasingly visible and powerful "Latinowood"<sup>20</sup> within the historically white media production and star system. Should the success of these individuals be taken as a sign of improvements for Latina/os in Hollywood with respect to opportunity, creative agency, or star promotion? While this has yet to be determined, Latino and Latina stars likely will have increasing visibility and impact.

### The Racial Riddle and Other Twists of Latina/o Stardom

The first wave of scholars to study Latina/o stardom have laid an important foundation on which I build here; they include but are not limited to Charles Ramírez Berg, Ana M. López, Chon Noriega, Clara E. Rodríguez, Angharad Valdivia, and Gary Keller.<sup>21</sup> For one, Latina/o film and television representation rests heavily on notions of appearance and race that have dictated a bifurcation of opportunity for Latina/o actors: those who might be potential stars, and those who will only be cast in minor and character roles, regardless of talent. In fact, over the last century most Latina/o stars have had fair skin and European phenotypic features (body type, facial features, hair type, etc.). Antonio Ríos-Bustamente and Clara E. Rodríguez, for example, have documented how casting opportunities in the first decades of U.S. film were dependent on how closely Latina/o performers embodied such "white"

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beauty and body ideals.<sup>22</sup> Interviews that I conducted with Latina/o actors and media professionals as part of my research confirmed that this sort of typing has diminished only slightly. The unwritten rules of Hollywood casting generally include the necessity for Latina/o star hopefuls to have light tan skin and European rather than indigenous features, the ability to speak English well and without an “undesirable” accent, and that they be of medium to tall height, with a slim build.

In addition, Rodriguez points out that fair-skinned, blonde, and blue-eyed Latino actors and actresses, like those of darker coloring, typically are not considered for Latina/o roles; by Hollywood standards they do not have what she terms the preferred “Latin look.”<sup>23</sup> These norms have broadened slightly in recent years, however, as a handful of Latina/o actors of darker skin tones and more indigenous phenotypic features are finding acting opportunities. Actress Rosario Dawson, who is of Puerto Rican, Afro-Cuban, Irish, and Native American descent, and comedian and actor George Lopez, who is Mexican American, are two illustrations of this trend.

Complicating the process of racialization that Latina/o actors experience is the phenomenon of cultural racialization. As scholars such as Rosaura Sanchez explain, cultural racialization describes the dynamics by which Mexican Americans in the United States have been categorized as nonwhite based on such factors as language, accent, cultural practices, and class differences, rather than appearance.<sup>24</sup> Similarly, Latina/o actors have been categorized (as, for example, “Latin,” “Hispanic,” or “ethnic”) based on class-related associations related to such factors as family background, accent, comportment, and body language, as much as appearance. For example, as Alicia Rodríguez-Estrada documents, Mexican-born, fair-skinned actress Lupe Vélez experienced more intense racialization in Hollywood in the late 1920s than fellow Mexican Dolores Del Rio, at least in part because of her perceived working-class background.<sup>25</sup> These dynamics are of no minor importance; given the equation of whiteness with citizenship and all of its attendant rights in the United States, whether Latina and Latino stars have been constructed as white, nonwhite, or indeterminate, citizens or foreigners at various junctures arguably has had a profound impact not only on film, television, and star images but also on public attitudes, and thus on social institutions and legislation that made a difference in the lives of U.S. Latina/os.

In addition, it has been argued that when it comes to Latina/o actors, some are perceived to be more appealing by film and television casting agents and producers than others, with nationality and other elements of ancestry factoring in to these dynamics. As I note in chapter 1, for example, Dolores Del

Del Rio

Rio’s promotion in the late 1920s showcased her Spanish ancestry and to an extent downplayed her Mexican nationality. More recently, Spanish actors Antonio Banderas and Penelope Cruz have been among the most heavily hyped Latina/o stars, despite the fact that many U.S. Latinos do not include Spaniards in their definition of Latina/o identity because of their European status. Angharad Valdivia has aptly documented this privileging of Spanish nationality in Hollywood’s version of Latinidad.<sup>26</sup> Actors who have already become stars in Latin American countries also have often been privileged over “home-grown” Latina/os by casting directors, as my interviews in the industry bore out. Mexican Americans in particular have been underrepresented among Latina/o stars, despite the fact that they are the largest Latina/o group in the United States, comprising 58.5 percent of the Latina/o population in recent years.

The climate of a particular social era also necessarily has an influence. The status of Latina/os in the racial hierarchy of the United States—and thus within the realm of popular entertainment—has evolved in relation to historical and social developments. As scholars of Latina/o history have documented, Latina/os have been considered “maybe, sometimes white” based on what is most politically useful to those in power at particular junctures.<sup>27</sup> In turn, Latina/o actors have faced greater or lesser opportunity in Hollywood during various periods. Eras in which Latin cultures are the object of interest among mainstream Americans and in which a “Latin look” has been considered particularly beautiful have brought about peaks in opportunity. A case in point is the substantially more welcoming and open star system that some Latina/os encountered in the last years of silent cinema in the mid- to late 1920s. In this period, a rage for the foreign and cosmopolitan, including the popularity of Spanish fantasy heritage mythology, contributed to audience interest in stars considered Latin lovers, as I address in chapter 1. Similarly, President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s Good Neighbor policy of the late 1940s prompted increased interest in Latino and Latina performers with musical abilities. Desi Arnaz, the subject of chapter 2, found openings in Hollywood film and U.S. television because of this trend. Even such “Latin explosions” have often typically involved ambivalent media representation and star promotion, however.

Finding opportunities to be cast in roles is only one element of Latina/o representation and stardom, moreover. “Hollywood often . . . capitalize[s] on the economic possibilities of difference,” as Joanne Hershfield argues,<sup>28</sup> and the star images constructed for nonwhite stars historically have capitalized to some extent on the employment of stereotypical associations—both those considered “positive” and “negative”—held by whites of nonwhites and white

SHIFTING  
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Welcome  
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ethnic groups.<sup>29</sup> Such has often been the case in the marketing of Latina/o stars. These promotional tendencies have included ambivalent and contradictory discourses regarding race, ethnicity, and difference as considered relevant for promoting Latina and Latino star hopefuls; typically through deliberate measures by media producers, publicists, management personnel, and actors themselves in hopes of adding to the potential star's unique appeal.

*calm* For example, in time periods when Latina/os have been promoted as stars, the utilization of “tropicalist” tropes, neocolonialist associations with Latin America as always involving “heat, violence, passion, and spice,”<sup>30</sup> has often flavored their promotion to U.S. audiences. It has been argued by Frances Aparicio and Susana Chávez-Silverman that such associations always imply Euro-American superiority, even while purportedly celebrating Latin America.<sup>31</sup> With respect to Latina/o stars, a tropicalist slant on their promotion has often resulted in stars being referred to as “fiery” and “hot” and given such labels as “spitfires” and “peppermints.” While these tendencies are perhaps most associated with Carmen Miranda and Latin musicals of the Good Neighbor film cycle, they have long been intrinsic to Hollywood Latinidad, to the extent that they are seldom noticed or questioned. For example, Rita Moreno was photographed inside a life-size firecracker in 1954 without comment, while almost fifty years later, Ricky Martin was showcased on the cover of *Entertainment Weekly* under the headline “Caliente!”<sup>32</sup>

Such associations have often been extended to the Latino and particularly the Latina star body. The image of the curvaceous, hypersexualized Latina star is an entrenched trope of Latina cinematic representation. Although for actors of all ethnic backgrounds, “sex sells,”<sup>33</sup> Latina/o actors appear to have the most difficulty escaping publicity that labels them as exceptionally and innately sexy, or as having excessively sexy and/or voluptuous bodies. The media obsession with Jennifer Lopez’s rear end in the late 1990s, a topic of chapter 6, serves as a vivid case in point; retrospective exploration of her predecessors’ careers demonstrates that this is not a new phenomenon. Related notions of personality and social status also have been reinforced through such tropicalist discourses; Latina/o performers in this manner have been promoted to the non-Latino public primarily as passionate, inviting bodies with little intellectual or moral substance.

### Latina/o Star Hopefuls: Behind the Scenes

Also important to consider are the corporate structures and climate behind the scenes in the film, television, and talent management industries that have

- Corporate  
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an impact on actors being provided (or not being provided) opportunities to demonstrate whether they possess the intangible qualities that might support stardom. These include the challenges that actors face when they vie to secure agents and other management personnel, be cast in roles, and be promoted as stars. While a handful of Latina/o actors have achieved success, it is still extremely difficult for most to break into the industry or find substantial employment, as has been documented most recently in a 1999 Tomás Rivera Policy Institute (TRPI) study commissioned by the Screen Actors Guild.<sup>34</sup>

In this respect, stardom is a phenomenon that cannot be separated from its production, and in particular from the decisions on the part of executives to promote a would-be star. Scholars such as Gill Branston, Reba L. Chaisson, and Barry King attest to the “self-fulfilling prophecy” in Branston’s words, inherent in the promotion of stars and hit films.<sup>35</sup> With respect to these dynamics, the long-term invisibility of Latina/os in the film, television, and promotion industries, particularly in executive circles, combined with a severe under-representation of Latina/os in writer and other creative positions, arguably plays into a Hollywood mind-set that seldom considers Latina/os worth the financial investment of star promotion.

In coming to a more nuanced understanding of the situation that Latina/o actors face, however, it is important to make a distinction between these actors and the Latina/o characters that populate film and television story worlds. Actors, of course, are limited only by Hollywood’s and society’s norms with respect to cross-cultural portrayal, while Latina/o characters can be and have been portrayed by actors of any racial or ethnic designation. As Sarah Berry points out, drawing on Shohat and Stam, a “racialized politics of casting” exists,<sup>36</sup> which has historically limited the acting opportunities for Latina/os and other actors deemed nonwhite. Charles Ramírez Berg describes this dynamic with respect to Hollywood narrative tradition: Hero and heroine roles have historically been the exclusive domain of the white actors and actresses, while Latina/os and other actors deemed nonwhite have typically been cast as villains, sidekicks, and temporary love interests.<sup>37</sup> While this paradigm is occasionally sidestepped today, there were very few exceptions in Hollywood’s classical era and thus few opportunities for Latina/o actors to prove whether they might have star appeal. Conversely, cross-cultural portrayals by white actors in Latina/o roles have until recently been acceptable. More substantial, “star-making” Latina/o roles in fact were often played by Anglo actors during the classical Hollywood era. The role of Puerto Rican immigrant Maria in *West Side Story* (1961), played by Natalie Wood, and of Mexican revolutionary leader Emiliano Zapata, played by Marlon Brando in

*Viva Zapata!* (1952), are just two cases in point. Other Anglo actors who have played Latina/os in brownface over the decades include Charlton Heston, Bette Davis, Madonna, Paul Muni, and Marisa Tomei.

When Latina/o actors have portrayed Latina/o characters, their roles and star promotion have been influenced by age-old patterns in Latina/o representation. As I explain throughout the first chapters of this book, this has included such tendencies as the inaccurate conflation of disparate Latina/o cultures and the stereotypical representation of Latina/os as highly sexual, comic, subservient, and/or criminal. Ramírez Berg's description of Latina and Latino film roles as Latin lovers, bandidos, harlots, and clowns aptly describes the majority of such roles.<sup>38</sup> Valdivia, borrowing a term from Gayle Tuchman, describes such stereotypes and obstructions to being cast as active protagonists as an example of the "symbolic annihilation" that Latina/os have historically experienced in the mainstream media.<sup>39</sup> While some of these patterns are shifting, traces still remain in contemporary representations and star promotion.

This is not to say that Latina/os have been passive victims throughout the decades with respect to media representation and participation in the Hollywood industries, however. Mexican Americans and other Latina/os have protested denigrating news coverage and media representation in the United States since at least the early twentieth century, as José E. Limón has noted, with Latina/o media advocacy focused on the film studios and networks reaching a peak in the late 1960s and early 1970s.<sup>40</sup> They have also worked to become filmmakers, television producers, and other media professionals on both independent and mainstream projects and as such to gain creative agency over such representations. The dedication and hard work of Latina/o media activists and filmmakers, as I discuss in more detail in chapters 4 and 5, has profoundly influenced how Latina/os have come to be represented and possibilities that Latina/o actors now face in the mainstream media environment.

## Organization of This Book

As noted earlier, this study analyzes the evolution of Latina/o film and television representation and its reflection of the broader social status of Latina/os, through the lens of mediated stardom. To do so, I draw on Ella Shohat's conception of "ethnicities-in-relation" in studying Latina/o stardom in relation to evolving notions of whiteness and national identity and to the social and industrial history and climate in which these dynamics of star production, promotion, and reception have been embedded.<sup>41</sup> In particular, I examine

the individual and industrial choices and structures that have influenced opportunities for and orchestrated the career trajectories of individual Latina/o stars in U.S. media and social history.

This topic, however, introduced a number of research challenges. Stardom, as a multifaceted phenomenon that includes the production of media texts and star publicity texts, the performance of the public image by the celebrity, and critical and audience response, can be difficult to reconstruct and study. As Joshua Gamson notes, this is a subject that bridges the realms of both institutional and interpretive analysis, making it difficult to research adequately through a single research method.<sup>42</sup>

For this reason, I combined a number of methodological approaches in my research. These approaches included archival research at a number of locations around the country. These sites included the Margaret Herrick Library of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, the Paley Center for Media (formerly the Museum of Television and Radio in Los Angeles), the Harry Ransom Center for the Humanities at the University of Texas at Austin, the Cinema-Television Library at the University of Southern California, the UCLA Film and Television Archive, and the Center for Film and Television Research at the University of Wisconsin. At these archives I studied film, television, and star promotional materials, focusing in particular on promotional posters, publicity stills, film exhibitors' press books, studio-produced biographies, and magazine and newspaper articles about the stars in question and their peers. The Margaret Herrick Library at the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, with its meticulous archive of star and film-related materials, proved to be a particular treasure trove in this regard.

My work also included study of critical and popular reception, such as evidenced in film and television reviews, box office figures, television ratings, and so on. In addition, I engaged in critical analysis of the stars' films and/or television episodes when available, viewing some at libraries and archives when they were not commercially available. Some of Del Rio's silent films, Moreno's B-films of the 1950s, and episodes of *Chico and the Man*, for example, were viewed at the Film and Television Archive of UCLA and the Museum of Television and Radio.

I also conducted interviews with Latina/o professionals working in the film and talent management industries (including producers, actors, writers, casting directors, and an agent) and engaged in participant observation work related to Latina/o star promotion activities in Los Angeles. Much of this work was made possible through an internship at the trade journal *Latin Heat* and by participating in events sponsored by Nosotros, a Latina/o actors'

Archives

advocacy group in Los Angeles, in the summer of 2000. This fieldwork and the formal interviews and informal conversations that ensued provided a useful context for understanding the social climate in which Latina and Latino actors have worked in the last several decades and currently work within the film and other entertainment industries.

In chapter 1, “Latin Lovers and American Accents: Dolores Del Rio and Hollywood’s Transition to Sound,” I explore the opportunity experienced by a handful of Latino and Latina actors in the 1920s vogue for “Latin lovers” and the subsequent, dramatic changes in Hollywood’s imagining of Latinidad after the transition to sound film and the economic downturn of the 1930s. In illustration, I survey the career and evolving star image of Mexican actress Dolores Del Rio (1905–83), whose U.S. film career roughly spanned the years 1925 to 1943. After her first hit film in 1926, at the peak of the late silent film era, Del Rio became a leading Hollywood star. She found her opportunities shifting by the early 1930s in relation to film industry notions of the American accent and the solidification of norms of American whiteness that marginalized Latina/os, however. Her post-sound publicity and film roles illustrate the de-evolution of Latina opportunity and the racialization of even light-skinned Latina/o actors in this period.

In chapter 2, “The Good Neighbor on Prime Time: Desi Arnaz and *I Love Lucy*,” I survey Latina/o representation and racialization in the 1940s and 1950s as inflected in the career and star image of Cuban-born musician, actor, and later television producer Desi Arnaz (1917–86). Arnaz began as a singer and leader of Cuban bands in the United States and later embarked on a Hollywood career when he was enlisted as a performer in several Good Neighbor-flavored films in the 1940s. He is best known, however, as the first Latino television star, from his performance as Ricky Ricardo on the extremely popular television series *I Love Lucy* (1950–57), opposite his real-life wife, Lucille Ball. Arnaz also was the first Latino television executive, serving as the show’s executive producer and president of Desilu Productions. Exploration of Arnaz’s career and star promotion thus brings up a number of questions regarding Latino and Cuban identities and U.S. racial borders as expressed in the mediums of film and television in these decades.

This is followed by chapter 3, “A Fight for ‘Dignity and Integrity’: Rita Moreno in Hollywood’s Postwar Era.” I return to focus on the film industry, exploring Latina opportunity and star promotion during the 1950s and 1960s. With respect to industrial shifts, this was a period that included the breakdown of the studio system and the growth of independent film production. Despite a growing awareness of racism in the United States, the film industry

remained staunchly “all-American.” The impact of these trends is examined in this study of Puerto Rican performer Rita Moreno’s early film career. The actress experienced many obstacles during this period, in particular casting norms that dictated that Latinas be cast only in secondary, nonwhite roles—whether Latina, Asian, American Indian, or other ethnic variety—even after her talent was officially recognized with an Oscar win in 1962 for *West Side Story*. I conclude with consideration of a theater and film role that Moreno portrayed in the 1970s, that of Googie Gomez in *The Ritz*, and the question that it raises regarding the importance of Latina and Latino authorship in the construction of both Latina/o cinematic characters and star images.

In chapter 4, “The Burden of Playing Chico: Freddie Prinze and Latino Stardom in Television’s Era of ‘Relevance,’” I examine shifts in Latina/o representation and stardom in the 1970s, described by scholars as network television’s era of “social relevance,” as the presence of Chicano and Puerto Rican media activists began to be felt. *Chico and the Man*, which aired on NBC from 1974 to 1978, offered the first Latino lead role since *I Love Lucy*, as well as being the only “socially relevant” series with a Latino in a starring role. Starring Puerto Rican and German Hungarian actor Freddie Prinze as Francisco “Chico” Rodriguez, *Chico and the Man* focused on the *Odd Couple* pairing of an older white garage owner and Chico, the young Mexican American man who worked and lived with him. Prinze’s character, notably, was the subject of ongoing debate and negotiation among the producers, the network, and Chicana/o and other viewers; such dynamics are revealing regarding network and national notions of Mexican American, Latino, and American ethnic identities in the 1970s. In this chapter I analyze Freddie Prinze’s promotion as a star before his suicide in 1977 in light of the negotiations that took place on the series.

In chapter 5, “The Face of the ‘Decade’: Edward James Olmos and Latino Films of the 1980s,” I focus on shifts in Hollywood’s construction of Latinidad as Latina/o filmmakers began to have an impact on a national level. While not the full-blown “Decade of the Hispanic” trumpeted by the mainstream news media, it was a period in which the first Chicano and Latino-helmed feature films reached national audiences, often to critical and popular acclaim; these films included *El Norte* (1983), *Zoot Suit* (1981), *The Ballad of Gregorio Cortez* (1982), and *Stand and Deliver* (1988). Interestingly, in the press coverage that ensued about the new Latina/o filmmakers and films, Mexican American actor Edward James Olmos was promoted as the primary star and as a symbol of Latina/o visibility in U.S. popular culture. I study Olmos’s 1980s career and star promotion in relation to the rise of Latina/o feature filmmaking and the

shifting status and voice of Chicana/os and other Latina/os in other respects in U.S. culture.

In chapter 6, “Crossing Over the Latina Body: Jennifer Lopez and the 1990s ‘Latin Wave,’” I document 1990s shifts in Latina/o opportunity, media representation, and star promotion in relation to the career and star image of Nuyorican actress, singer, and media mogul Jennifer Lopez during her rise to mainstream stardom. A number of social and industrial developments provided openings that were instrumental to Lopez’s success, including the growth and a rising awareness of the Latina/o audience and increased Latina/o and African American media production. An illustration of these developments but also of the continued strength of traditional tropes that have long colored Latina/o star promotion, Lopez was introduced to U.S. and global audiences in highly body-focused promotional texts, a phenomenon that I explore. I conclude by reflecting briefly on Lopez’s subsequent status in Hollywood and the upper-class associations and ethnic flexibility that later came to dominate her image, as well as on her re-emphasis on Latina/o-focused projects in more recent years.

Finally, in chapter 7, “Ethnic Ambiguity in the Era of *Dark Angels*: Jessica Alba and Mixed Latina/o Trends,” I address the question of Latino and Latina stars of mixed ethnicity. Although in the past mixed-race stars of partial Hispanic descent typically shrouded some aspect of their mixed heritage (Anthony Quinn and Raquel Welch are two well-known examples of stars who were “closeted” in this way), currently such actors are more often “out” about their mixed ancestry. In the post-millennial era, they also happen to be among the most successful Latina/o stars. What are the implications with respect to historical and contemporary notions of Latinidad in Hollywood and the United States, when many of today’s Latino and Latina stars, such as Freddie Prinze Jr., Salma Hayek, and Benjamin Bratt, are of partial Hispanic descent? Through exploration of the careers of mixed Latina actors Jessica Alba and Rosario Dawson, I speculate on the significance of the contemporary broadening of notions of Latina/o identity as constructed by the Hollywood media industries, by Latina/o and other media professionals, and by audiences themselves.

# 1

## Latin Lovers and American Accents

*Dolores Del Rio and Hollywood's Transition to Sound*

Going to the local cineplex or turning on the television with the hope of finding Latina and Latino actors featured in starring roles can be a more heartening experience these days than it was just a few decades ago. Today we might happen upon a variety of actors of Latina/o and Latin American descent, among them America Ferrera, Benicio del Toro, Rosario Dawson, Michelle Rodriguez, or Diego Luna, to name a few, playing film and television characters that are richly textured and not predicated on the old standby stereotypes. Celebrity publicity venues such as entertainment news shows and supermarket tabloids also heavily feature Latina/o icons: Jennifer Lopez, Wilmer Valderrama, and Eva Longoria Parker, among others, have made regular appearances in recent years. It’s a shift from what was the norm even two decades ago, when Latina/o actors more typically struggled with extremely limited roles and casting opportunities.

Taking this historical survey of Latina/o participation in Hollywood film back even further reveals that the 1990s’ “Latin Explosion” was only the most recent wave of Latina/o global stardom, however. There was another era, now often forgotten, in which Latino and Latina actors were hired for their perceived box office potential, viewed as especially attractive and trendy, and promoted as international stars. In the mid- to late 1920s, known as the Golden Age of U.S. silent film, a number of actors of Latina/o descent were among the top stars at their respective studios and in the film industry more generally. This first “Latin invasion,” as the film fan magazine *Photoplay* described the influx of Hispanic actors in 1927, provided opportunities for a handful of actors that has only recently been matched.<sup>1</sup> Actors from Mexico

Latin invasion  
of 1920s.

1920s  
Latina/o  
popularity  
in silent  
era