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Fast and Bilingual: *Fast & Furious* and the Latinization of Racelessness

by Mary Beltrán

Abstract: This article interrogates the immense popularity of *Fast & Furious* (Justin Lin, 2009), the fourth film in the *Fast* franchise, with US Latino viewers when it was released, exploring both the film industry's targeting of Latinos in recent years and the potential of and limitations inherent to foregrounding a "bilingual aesthetic" in a franchise known for an ethos of racelessness. Comparisons to the short film *Los Bandoleros* (Vin Diesel, 2009), included with *Fast & Furious* on the commercial DVD, highlight borders that still exist when major US studios construct a seemingly multicultural narrative for global audiences.

"Cómo se dice *socko*?" *Variety* asked.[1] The bilingual headline was posed in response to a film's success that appeared to catch the industry off guard. In early April 2009, *Fast & Furious* (Justin Lin, 2009), the fourth installment of *The Fast and the Furious* film franchise, topped the domestic box office on its opening weekend, grossing more than $71 million. (The next installment, *Fast Five* [Justin Lin, 2011], would later eclipse that figure at $86 million).[2] The franchise, centered on spectacular car stunts and multicultural ensemble casts, had garnered a dwindling audience for the 2006 installment *Fast and Furious: Tokyo Drift* (Justin Lin), but the producers and Universal had high hopes that Vin Diesel and the other original stars' return would revitalize the franchise. Making the film's success even more notable, *Fast & Furious*'s opening-weekend

1 This translates as "How do you say socko?" Pamela McClintock, "Hollywood Studies Latin 101," *Variety*, April 13–19, 2009, 6 (reprint of "Movie Marketing Targets Latina/os," *Variety*, April 10, 2009).

2 Pamela McClintock, "'Fast Five' Scores Record Setting $83.6 Million at Weekend Box Office," *Hollywood Reporter*, May 1, 2011, http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/fast-five-scores-record-setting-183949; the May 4, 2011, update notes "*Fast Five* opened to $86.2 million at the domestic box office—$3 million more than the studio's Sunday estimate of $83.6 million."

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audiences included a surprise 46 percent Latino viewers.[3] Industry trade journals and the *Los Angeles Times* made note of the news, underscoring the growing importance of the US Latina and Latino audience to Hollywood.[4] The film, like *Fast Five*, also went on to perform extremely well internationally, holding the number one slot for several weeks and sometimes months in Latin American countries, in Asia and Europe, and in other countries worldwide.

Fast & Furious reunites Paul Walker and Vin Diesel in the roles of Brian O'Conner and Dominic Toretto, vastly different protagonists (Brian is the "fast" to Dom's "furious") and former friends; Brian as an undercover cop almost had Dom, an infamous street racer who has used his skills to criminal ends, arrested years prior. In this meeting, they must work together and, more important, utilize their formidable racing skills to bring down a common foe, a Mexican heroin smuggler responsible for the death of Dom's girlfriend. As this brief description likely makes evident, *Fast* is an action-oriented genre film that aims to maximize the excitement of its car stunts more than crafting nuanced character portrayals. Just as important as the car-fueled spectacle, however, is the underlying ethos of the *Fast* franchise, that of an urban, multicultural, and presumably postracial world in which the story's heroes perform cultural border crossing with ease.[5] I note in analysis of this aesthetic of "racelessness" established in the 2001 *The Fast and the Furious*, however, that it does not extend on close examination beyond such aesthetic elements. From the original film, *Fast & Furious* inherited a diverse cast of light-tan hue, including Diesel (of Italian and purported African American or Afro-Dominican heritage), Jordana Brewster (of Brazilian and European American heritage), and Michelle Rodriguez (who is Dominican and Puerto Rican). Walker was the lone returning star of European American heritage. In line with conventions of the franchise, the story world is also populated with diverse, nonwhite extras; the resulting palette of light-tan and brown skin tones in the background is a defining visual element of what I have previously called the "multiculti action film."[6]

3 The opening-weekend audience also was 28 percent Caucasian, 16 percent African American, 8 percent Asian, and 2 percent "other," according to CinemaScore. Pamela McClintock and Dave McNary, "Fuel-Injected Sequel," *Daily Variety*, April 6, 2009, news 1.

4 More recently, the large Latino audiences that came out to see the LAPD cop drama *End of Watch* (David Ayer, 2012) and 3-D children's film *Hotel Transylvania* (Genndy Tartakovsky, 2012) inspired similar discussion. See McClintock, "Hollywood Studies Latin 101"; McClintock and McNary, "Fuel-Injected Sequel"; Benjamin Svetkey, "'Fast and Furious': Inside a Surprise Smash," *Entertainment Weekly*, April 9, 2009, 1043; Reed Johnson, "'Fast and Furious' Taps into Latina/o Market," *Los Angeles Times*, April 7, 2009, http://articles.latimes.com/apr/07/entertainment/et-carLatina/o7; Pamela McClintock, "The Secret to a Smash Movie: Lure Latinos," *Hollywood Reporter*, October 3, 2012, http://hollywoodreporter.com/news/latino-movies-end-of-watch-hotel-transylvania-375971.

5 Mary Beltrán, "The New Hollywood Racelessness: When Only the Fast, Furious (and Multiracial) Will Survive," *Cinema Journal* 44, no. 2 (Winter 2005): 50–67.

6 Borrowing from popular parlance, I first applied "multiculti" in film studies in 2005 to refer to the cinematic construction of idealized multicultural communities in film and television narratives through the casting of actors of a variety of skin tones and the incorporation of nonwhite cultural referents in art design and mise-en-scène, to the neglect of incorporating multiple, culturally diverse voices and characters within these filmed narratives. Multiculti films and television aim to look multicultural but are more ambiguous and typically white centrist on deeper examination. See Beltrán, "The New Hollywood Racelessness."

Gregory T. Carter also has aptly described this contemporary aesthetic, often facilitated through casting mixed-race, ethnically ambiguous actors, as "mixploitation."[7]

This installment of the franchise, notably, is the first that makes Latinos, and Latino culture, central defining elements to the raceless aesthetic. The short film *Los Bandoleros* (Vin Diesel, 2009), a prequel to *Fast & Furious* and part of the DVD set that was written and directed by, and starred, Vin Diesel, and features Michelle Rodriguez and reggaetón artists Don Omar and Tego Calderón, only reinforces this emphasis. Scholars such as Mike Davis and Augustín Lao-Montés have documented the Latinization, or increasing Latino influence and related cultural hybridity, experienced in the past decades in American cities and regions; we are witnessing parallel trends in US media culture as Latinos constitute a larger portion of the audience, and as Latina and Latino actors, characters, and themes are at times occupying the center stage of films and television series.[8] As a case study of the Latinization of a mainstream film, *Fast & Furious* provides an instructive example of a successful effort to target Latino and Latin American audiences in addition to other audiences, as well as of the challenges and tensions inherent in such production and marketing dynamics.

As I explore in this study of the film and through interviews with its director, Justin Lin, casting, narrative, aesthetic, and marketing choices that can be described as contributing to what I call a "bilingual aesthetic" were particularly important in this regard. I attempt to illuminate in the process the construction of such an aesthetic by the film's creative producers and promoters—not a simple prospect given its slippery nature, as it involves an embracing of cultural hybridity and mainstream US culture, even while Latino cultures are invoked and at times given visibility and voice. This is particularly the case for *Fast & Furious* and other films of the *Fast* franchise, given how they combine appeals to Latino viewers with production and marketing choices interpellating a broadly multicultural and global audience and, like other films in the franchise, how they embrace an ethos of postracial multiculturalism.

Ultimately, *Fast & Furious* mobilizes notions of race in contradictory ways. It reinforces Hollywood traditions of white centrism, reinforcing notions of white male mastery while also dramatizing the figurative borders crossed daily by culturally competent global youth—both Latino and non-Latino—who fuel race-car and other commercial youth cultures. It is not surprising that a film franchise that has built one of its greatest appeals on its embodiment of cultural mingling and border crossing has expanded that vision to embrace the Latino diaspora within and outside the United States. However, despite this progressive visibility, there are tensions and limitations inherent to foregrounding *latinidad* alongside an ethos of racelessness. This study aims to illuminate the multiple overlapping and often contradictory discourses given voice in the film. The contrasts between *Fast & Furious* and *Los Bandoleros*, as I note here, underscore where the ideological borders lie with regard to the still-ambivalent status

7 Gregory T. Carter, "From Blaxploitation to Mixploitation: Mixed-Race, Male Leads and Changing Black Identities," in *Mixed Race Hollywood*, ed. Mary Beltrán and Camilla Fojas (New York: New York University Press, 2008), 203–220.

8 Mike Davis, *Magical Urbanism: Latinos Reinvent the US City* (New York: Verso, 2001); Augustín Lao-Montés, "Mambo Montage: The Latinization of New York City," in *Mambo Montage: The Latinization of New York*, ed. Augustin Lao-Montés and Arlene Dávila (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 1–53.

of Latina and Latino protagonists, particularly those of a darker hue, and of Latino audiences in relation to *Fast & Furious* and similar big-budget, studio-backed films.

In this study, I explore these tensions through critical and textual analysis of the film and its extratextual and promotional materials. I also carry out an analysis of the film's critical reception with attention to how the industry responded to the knowledge that Latinos composed a large portion of the opening-weekend audience. To do so, I survey film reviews in the popular press, including both mainstream and English-language Latino-oriented news outlets, using the Lexis/Nexis database, as well as postrelease discussion of the film in industry trade journals such as *Variety*, *Hollywood Reporter*, and *Broadcasting and Cable*. Finally, I buttress this research with interviews in March 2010 and March 2012 with *Fast & Furious* director Justin Lin regarding the film and its production, its popular and industry reception, and his thoughts on the ongoing development of the *Fast* franchise.

I begin with a summary of the still-scant research and discussion in the trade press regarding US film and media producers' outreach to Latino audiences in the past few decades. Given that *Fast & Furious* mobilizes and embodies on several fronts the geographic and figurative borders that American and particularly acculturated Latino and Latina youth negotiate in their daily lives, my analysis also builds on relevant scholarship and theory regarding thematic border crossing in American media and contemporary notions of multiculturalism and US race relations. Given the growth of Latinos to 17 percent of the US audience and the projection of their continued growth in the US population, *Fast & Furious* is an important test case of the Latinization of contemporary US media. It also provides a rich site to study "postracial" trends in millennial-era film and US society, as I reflect upon in my conclusions.

Cinematic Borderlands: Hollywood and the US Latino Audience. The Latino audience in the United States is growing in size and, arguably, influence, given their numbers (they account for 17 percent of Americans, 20 percent of American youth, and 25 percent of children aged five and younger) and documented avid moviegoing habits.[9] US Latinos are also younger on average than white Americans, which makes them both more likely to be moviegoers and presumably desirable to advertisers.[10] However, it was not until the 1980s when a handful of feature films directed by Latino directors found national distribution and a measure of success (such as *La Bamba* [Luis Valdez, 1987] and *Stand and Deliver* [Ramón Menéndez, 1988]) that the film industry began to take the Latino audience seriously, as noted by scholars focused on US Latino film such as Charles Ramírez Berg and Henry Puente.[11] Other moments in which the

9 Latinos have been found to comprise 28 percent of heavy moviegoers and are more likely than other Americans to attend a film within its first weeks. See Karen Humes, Nicholas A. Jones, and Roberto R. Ramirez, "Overview of Race and Hispanic Origin: 2010," US Census Bureau (Washington, DC), 2011, http://www.census.gov/prod/cen2010/briefs/c2010br-02.pdf.

10 The average age of Latino Americans in 2008 was 27.7, compared to 36.8 years old for white Americans. See "Census Bureau Estimates Nearly Half of Children under 5 Are Minorities," May 14, 2009, US Census Bureau (Washington, DC), 2009, https://www.census.gov/newsroom/releases/archives/population/cb09-75.html.

11 Charles Ramírez Berg, *Latina/o Images in Film: Stereotype, Subversion, and Resistance* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002); Henry Puente, *The Promotion and Distribution of US Latina/o Films* (New York: Peter Lang, 2011).

US media industries appeared to take notice of the profits to be made from Latino audiences include 1995, when beloved Mexican American singer Selena was killed and sales of her music skyrocketed, and when Latino and Latina stars such as Jennifer Lopez and Benicio del Toro headlined financially successful films in recent years. In another influential development, Latinos also surpassed African Americans as the largest nonwhite group in the United States in 2000. Latinos have grown in numbers and influence and arguably are beginning to play a decisive role as citizens, consumers, and audiences.

Response on the part of film and television producers to this growth appears to have been mixed and often lukewarm, however. Studies of Latina and Latino representation on prime-time television (equivalent longitudinal studies of films have not yet been attempted) have found in recent years that Latinos accounted for no more than 4–6 percent of all recurring prime-time TV series characters, with the most recent statistics from 2004.[12] More recently, a Screen Actors Guild study found that Latina and Latino actors performed in 6.4 percent of all film and television roles in 2008.[13] Confusion regarding whether US Latinos watch English-language media often plays a role in their continued underrepresentation in English-language film and television. In just one example of attitudes within the industry to this underrepresentation, *Broadcasting and Cable* notes that there was little attention paid at the Hispanic Television Summit in 2008 to why English-language networks "aren't more aggressive" about reaching out to Latino viewers.[14] Nevertheless, a small evolution can be discerned with respect to some producers attempting to target Latino viewers within their broader potential audience through casting and other production strategies. While not the most empirical of studies, a survey of articles on English-language television in *Hispanic* magazine in the past decade reveals shifts in Latino news-media opinion regarding representation in television programming, from the disappointed and critical in September 2003 to more cautiously optimistic by 2006 and 2008.[15] Likely related to this shift in response to Latino representation in English-language television, a small number of Latina and Latino characters joined some children's and prime-time series casts (even while one of the few series with a Latino lead, *The George Lopez Show* [ABC, 2006–2007], was canceled). Occasional moments of subtitled Spanish or of the inclusion of a Latino point of view also at times can be found in both children's and prime-time television in recent years.

In this manner, a Latinization of US media thus is becoming evident, in some instances, in film and television. Latinization is defined for the purposes of this study

12 Allison R. Hoffman and Chon A. Noriega, "Looking for Latina/o Regulars on Prime Time Television," Research Report No. 4, UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center, Los Angeles, 2004.

13 *2007 and 2008 Casting Data Reports* (Los Angeles: Screen Actors Guild, 2009), http://www.sag.org/content/studies-and-reports.

14 "Latin Lessons," *Broadcasting and Cable*, October 26, 2008, http://www.broadcastingcable.com/article/116031-Latin_Lessons.php.

15 Eric Deggans, "Where Are the Latina/os? TV Network Executives Turn a Blind Eye to Increasing Hispanic Demographics," *Hispanic* 16, no. 9 (2003): 3839; Richard D. Hoffman, "The Next Generation of Hispanic Television is in English," *Hispanic* 18, no. 12 (2005), reprinted at http://news.newamericamedia.org/news/view_article.html?article_id=c80921424ff5e204fd30e81993ee22a4; Romina Ruiz-Goreira, "Welcome to Prime Time," *Hispanic* 21, no. 9 (2008): 42–44.

as an overt courting of Latino viewers and an increased visibility of Latina and Latino characters and culture through a variety of strategies. Examples can be seen in children's television series built around Latina protagonists, such as *Dora the Explorer* (Nickelodeon, 2000–) and *The Wizards of Waverly Place* (Disney Channel, 2007–2012), in the inclusion of Latina and Latino characters among the ensemble casts of some films and television series (to the benefit of such actors as Sofía Vergara, Adam Rodríguez, Eva Mendes, Mark Consuelos, and Sara Ramirez), and in the establishment of bilingual networks, such as SiTV (now nuvoTV) and Mun2, which aim to appeal to acculturated Latinas and Latinos.

Media producers, studios, and networks have, however, frequently appeared unsure about how to appeal to Latino viewers and in which language. Puente has documented ways in which studios more often than not miscalculated the targeting of the Latino audience while marketing US Latino films such as *La Bamba* (1987) and *My Family* (*Mi familia*; Gregory Nava, 1995) in the 1980s and 1990s.[16] In recent years, Adam Fogelson, chair of Universal Pictures, who was head of marketing for the studio during *Fast & Furious*'s release, has noted: "[Latinos] are a great and reliable moviegoing audience, and they have a lot of power that needs to be taken seriously. Yet I think the industry is still struggling in how to reach them. But there's no reason to be struggling."[17] Producer Elizabeth Avellan, who produced the *Spy Kids* franchise (Robert Rodríguez, 2001–2011) and other Robert Rodríguez films, has stated also that film studios often still don't know how to "crack the code" of appealing to Latina and Latino viewers. Having a Latino director and executive producer can make a major difference in naturally imbuing a film with a Latino sensibility, she added. "It's just that they're not going around going, 'We're making Latino films'; they're saying, 'We're making awesome films that include our point of view and our flavor and our rhythms and things like that.'"[18]

As noted by Luis Torres-Bohl, president of Catalia Communications, which co-owns the Mexico-based Mexicanal Network, and other experts on marketing to the Latino audience, US producers often mistakenly assume that all Latinos can be reached through one advertising message or simply through Spanish-language media and marketing.[19] While there is a dearth of scholarship on the media habits and interests of US Latinos and Latinas, with most of this research published just in the past decade, advertising firms in recent years are discovering in their own research that Latina and Latino youth in particular are often acculturated to the US mainstream, quick adopters of new media technology, and engaged in English-language popular culture in addition to Spanish-language media.[20] They are, however, arguably only beginning to be targeted by English-language media producers. Perhaps this is because such facts

16 Puente, *Promotion and Distribution.*

17 McClintock, "Hollywood Studies Latin 101."

18 Cited in Breeanna Hare, "Studios Try to 'Crack the Code' on Hispanic Moviegoers," CNN, July 13, 2011, http://www.cnn.com/2011/SHOWBIZ/Movies/07/13/latino.movie.audience/index.html?iref=allsearch.

19 Luis Torres-Bohl, "Advertisers Continue to Overlook Hispanic Demos," *Television Week* 27, no. 27 (2008), http://www.tvweek.com/news/2008/10/guest_commentary_advertisers_c_1.php.

20 See, for instance, *Brown Is the New Green: George Lopez and the American Dream*, directed by Phillip Rodriguez (Carrolton, TX: Public Broadcasting Service, 2007), DVD.

contradict false assumptions about US Latino viewers that have persisted over the decades: that they consume only Spanish-language media (which Spanish-language networks presumably are loath to correct) and participate solely in a Latino-specific popular culture. In fact, it appears that the primary unifying trait of young Latino media consumers is a hybridity of interests, language, and cultural preferences in their media habits.[21]

The US film and television industries are slowly responding. Since the 1990s, some of the film studios have begun to act on documented knowledge that many Latinos are not as interested in Spanish-language films as in mainstream, English-language films marketed specifically to them, with both languages employed to reach Latinos of varying media consumption habits. Films that have performed well with a US Latino audience after studios' marketing teams employed these insights, as opposed to simply a Spanish-language campaign, include Universal's *The Mummy* (Stephen Sommers, 1999), Twentieth Century Fox's *Alvin and the Chipmunks* (Tim Hill, 2007), and Paramount's *Transformers* (Michael Bay, 2007). Universal in fact began such efforts in earnest a decade ago, after noting the large Latino audience garnered by films such as *The Mummy*. For instance, it successfully targeted Latina and Latino viewers with the earlier *Fast and the Furious* films, with Latinos composing 24 percent and 38 percent of the audience, respectively, thus successfully building an audience with each successive film of the franchise.[22]

The marketing for *Fast & Furious*, capitalizing on this knowledge and success, included a Spanish- and English-language promotional campaign to target Latino potential viewers inside and outside the United States. Among other elements of the bilingual campaign, Universal ran Spanish-language ads on Telemundo and Univisión during the World Cup and other key moments, placed previews on websites that target Latinos, and ran outdoor advertising in both Spanish and English in US neighborhoods with large Latino populations. In addition, Michelle Rodriguez and Vin Diesel took part in Spanish-language press junkets in Mexico and Miami.[23] Research reported by Ruth Behr and Reny Diaz after the film's release underscored that relying just on Spanish-language advertising would not have been sufficient: only 11.6 percent of moviegoers on opening weekend said that they had watched a Spanish-language trailer beforehand.[24]

Given the research and care that went into the marketing of the film to Latinos, it was surprising to discover upon analyzing the film's coverage in the trade press that

21 For example, in a 2007 study, only 7 percent of a sample of 766 Latina and Latino respondents between the ages of fourteen and thirty-four responded that Spanish was the language they spoke the most. See New Generation Latina/o Consortium, "New Generation Latina/o Media Habits, Internal Report," 2007, http://nglc.biz/. Studies by Vicki Mayer and Viviana Rojas, respectively, on the media habits of Latina and Latino youth in San Antonio and Austin had similar findings. See Vicki Mayer, *Producing Dreams, Consuming Youth: Mexican Americans and the Mass Media* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2003); Viviana Rojas, "The Gender of Latinidad: Latinas Speak about Hispanic Television," *Communication Review* 7, no. 2 (2004): 125–153.

22 McClintock, "Hollywood Studies Latin 101."

23 Ibid.

24 Ruth Behr and Reny Diaz, "From Hayworth to Cansino: Turning the Tides in Latino Movie-Going Sensibilities," *Nielsen Consumer Insight*, July 2009, http://en-us.nielsen.com/main/insights/consumer_insight/July_2009/from_hayworth_to_cansino.

the buzz over the *Fast & Furious*'s opening-weekend Latino audience did not last long. As noted earlier, there was some initial, substantial acknowledgment in such trade journals as *Variety* and *Hollywood Reporter*. A few film executives, most from Universal, took the occasion to trumpet how well the studio had anticipated and catered to the interests of the Latino audience. Peter Adee, former head of marketing for Universal, now in charge of marketing for Overture Films, said that the studio "found a way to tap into this community authentically."[25] Rob Moore, cochair of Paramount at the time, commented that this entailed a culturally hybrid perspective, or what I call a "bilingual aesthetic," such that Latino audiences felt that they were included without its seeming forced.[26] In such marketing, I would argue, media programming and promotional messages highlight both the cultural hybridity and the cultural specificity of US Latinos.

In the English-language and bilingual Latino-oriented press, I found reviews and interviews regarding the film's success, typically with an emphasis on the film's stars. None of this coverage attempted to critique the film; all appeared to simply embrace it with respect to its targeting of Latino viewers. *Latin Heat*, a Latino-focused online industry trade journal, covered the premiere of the film and *Los Bandoleros* with video coverage that emphasized how the film foregrounded Latino cultures in various ways.[27] It also featured interviews with actors Vin Diesel, Don Omar, and Tego Calderón. *Latina*, a magazine focused on youth-oriented fashion and culture, marked the films' release with an interview, and cover and inside photos of Michelle Rodriguez.[28] Newspapers in cities with large Latino populations, such as the *Los Angeles Times*, also focused their coverage of the film's release on how it had targeted the Latino audience and had achieved its success in large part because of that audience.[29]

As mentioned in these Latino-centric discussions of the film, its appeal and that of the franchise to Latinos is linked in part to narrative and aesthetic elements. The narrative of the original *The Fast and the Furious* (Rob Cohen, 2001) is based in East Los Angeles and centered on a car-racing culture that is Asian American and Latino dominated in real life and a close relative to lowrider culture, pioneered by Mexican American pachucos in the 1950s. The film also featured a Latino-centric car club, although it serves primarily as background color to Brian O'Conner's and Dominic Toretto's story lines. *2 Fast 2 Furious* (John Singleton, 2003) subsequently paired Paul Walker with African American actor Tyrese Gibson but included Latinas and Latinos in the diegesis; it did so through its inclusion of Miami and California settings and characters such as undercover customs agent Monica Fuentes, played by Eva Mendes. While the Justin Lin–helmed *Fast and Furious: Tokyo Drift* shifted the focus to expatriate white, African American, Asian American, and Japanese characters in Tokyo, reggaetón music

25 McClintock, "Hollywood Studies Latin 101."

26 Ibid.

27 "Latin Heat Presents Red Carpet: Featuring Vin Diesel," *Latin Heat*, July 18, 2009, http://blip.tv/latin-heat-presents/red-carpet-featuring-vin-diesel-2394104.

28 Angie Romero, "Bad Girl Done Good," *Latina* 13, no. 7 (2009): 98–100.

29 Reed Johnson, "'Fast and Furious' Taps into Latina/o Market," *Los Angeles Times*, April 7, 2009, http://articles.latimes.com/2009/apr/07/entertainment/et-carLatina/o7.

for the first time contributes an energetic vibe, informed by Latin youth culture, to the repeated story line of a young (white American) man learning to command respect within a culturally diverse subculture. Lin's *Fast & Furious* builds on this appeal and more directly interpellates Latino and Latin American audience members through a number of cinematic and narrative choices.

These stylistic and narrative choices offer a clear payoff with contemporary American and global audiences, as can be viewed in the box-office earnings of *Fast & Furious*; it was Universal's biggest moneymaker of 2009. Adam Fogelson, head of marketing during the release of the film, was in fact not long after promoted to the position of chair of the studio. Regardless, the survey of trade journal and mainstream popular press response in the weeks following the film's release turned up a relatively small number of articles with a focus on the film's appeal to Latino viewers. Reviews, for the most part, merely focus on the film's story line, with reviewers equally divided in their assessment of its appeal, apparently on the basis of whether or not they enjoy action-driven car-racing films. Most news outlets, meanwhile, all but ignored the Latino opening-weekend audience, focusing instead on Vin Diesel as a star or on other elements of the film's success. Benjamin Svetkey noted in *Entertainment Weekly* that perhaps the film's success was due to Diesel's "one-race" appeal now having full effect in the post-Obama era, citing the fact that 39 percent of the opening-weekend audience told CinemaScore that they came to see the "actor in the lead role" and statistics demonstrating that African Americans, white Americans, and other non-Latinos came out in large numbers to see the film.[30] Other journalists, such as Claude Brodesser-Akner for *Advertising Age*, noted only the smart spring release of this "summer" movie on a weekend with little competition.[31]

The lack of notice does not negate the importance of the film in relation to the US Latino audience, however. Having explored the popular and industry trade reviews and reactions to the film, I turn now to the film itself and its interpellation, both deliberate and coincidental, of Latino viewers.

Fast and Latino: *Latinidad* and Ambiguous Whiteness in *Fast & Furious*. *Fast & Furious* in many ways follows the story formula established in *The Fast and the Furious* and the following two installments in the franchise. *Fast & Furious* is the first true sequel, however, reuniting protagonists Dominic Toretto and Brian O'Conner, as well as other ensemble cast members from the original film. Aside from returning to the original film's loose ends, particularly Brian's broken friendship with Dom and his ruptured romance with Dom's sister, Mia, franchise expectations demand two things: that the narrative revisit the diverse—that is, the tan, beige, brown, and white—street-racing world of *The Fast and the Furious*, and that Brian and Dom must race again. As noted earlier, this time they do so to bring down a Mexican drug kingpin. While the FBI, for which Brian now works, wants to put drug smuggler Arturo Braga (John Ortiz) behind bars, Dom and Brian also aim to find him to avenge the death of Dom's girlfriend,

30 Svetkey, "'Fast and Furious,'" sec. 12.

31 Claude Brodesser-Akner, "Entertainment A-List No. 1: Universal Pictures," *Advertising Age*, May 18, 2009, http://adage.com/entertainment-alist09/article?article_id=136592.

Letty. Daring feats of racing one-upmanship and other tests of masculine mettle propel the narrative, and the multicultural street-racing subculture is once again showcased as Dom's (and to a lesser extent, Brian's) natural habitat.

The narrative opens with Dom and Letty, who have been on the lam in South America, carrying out a heist in the Dominican Republic that depends, as always, on Dom's driving skills and unflappable nerves. Their partners in the complicated theft of gas tankers from a moving truck are Han Seoul-Oh (Sung Kang), the cool and tough Korean American character previously featured in *Tokyo Drift* (and Lin's 2002 film *Better Luck Tomorrow*), with a pretty Dominican woman by his side, and new team members Rico Santos (Don Omar) and Tego Leo (Tego Calderón). Omar and Calderón, notably in relation to appeal to Latino and Latin American viewers, are popular reggaetón artists, appearing here in showy roles as joking con artists and, like the rest of the group, deft drivers. With respect to their relationship to the multiculti aesthetic of the franchise, they are notably darker-skinned Latinos (particularly Calderón, who also sports an unruly short Afro in the film and dreadlocks in *Los Bandoleros*) and speak Spanish, traits that have not been included among Dom's posse until this installment. The team touches base via mobile phones, and Santos and Leo briefly joke with the rest, in Spanish, about why their heist couldn't involve simply robbing a bank. In these exchanges, Dom, somewhat surprisingly, now speaks perfect Spanish himself, which comes in handy when the caper goes awry and he has to quickly communicate with the others to save Letty from a fiery death.[32] Through Spanish fluency, Dom's already-ambiguous ethnic status arguably is presented as even more hybrid, metaphorically if not actually Latino, and thus even more capable of meeting contemporary challenges in this increasingly multicultural—and now multinational—new world. In a complex and miraculous display of driving skills and courage, Dom saves Letty and the group is able to pull off the heist.

After this stunning feat, all in the first minutes, the film's title is revealed, accompanied by energetic reggaetón music and thus more spoken Spanish. The next scene opens in Panama City, Panama; Dom, Letty, and the team celebrate at a beachside club with a crowd now standard for the *Fast* franchise: beautiful women and a few men, all of light-brown skin tones (and as previously established in *The Fast and the Furious*, one tall and thin body type), dancing to reggaetón. The scene underscores how the off-white brand established previously in the franchise is replicated with little effort in a Latin American setting and, through dance music, with a driving beat that just happens to be *en español*.

The slippage between multiculti American and Latin American is pronounced in this moment. It's no coincidence that the historical *mestizaje* (racial mixture) of Latinos results in their complicated positioning in relation to the Hollywood vogue for ethnic ambiguity in recent years, as I have written elsewhere.[33] As Angharad Valdivia has also cogently noted, "Latinos provide a third space, albeit still a space of difference. . . .

32 Dom's ability to speak fluent Spanish is established in *Los Bandoleros*, when Letty teases him for being able to "speak Dominican" after living in South America for a lengthy period. Diesel also spoke (somewhat-broken) Spanish at press junkets for *Fast & Furious* and *Los Bandoleros* in Mexico and the Dominican Republic.

33 Mary Beltrán, "Mixed Race in Latinowood: Latina/o Stardom and Ethnic Ambiguity in the Era of *Dark Angels*," in *Mixed Race Hollywood*, ed. Mary Beltrán and Camilla Fojas (New York: New York University Press, 2008), 248–268.

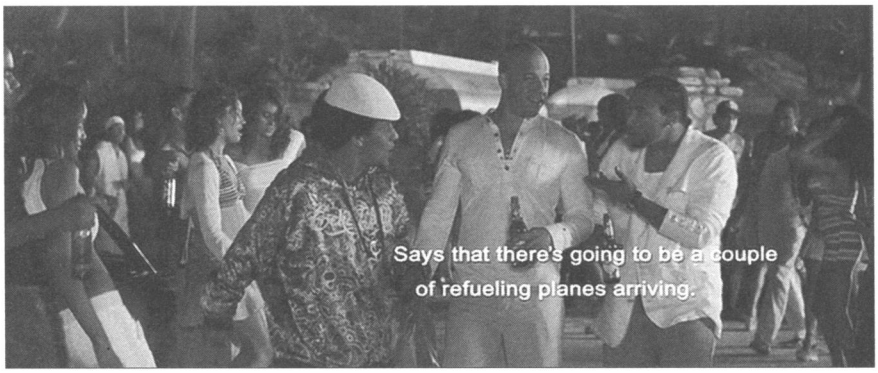

Figure 1. The *Fast* franchise's "raceless" aesthetic takes on a distinctly Latino articulation in *Fast & Furious* (Universal, 2009) when Dominic Toretto, Tego Leo, and Rico Santos, speaking Spanish, celebrate a victory at a Panama City nightclub. Subtitles are included for English-speaking audiences.

Certainly this becomes a new shorthand for a media industry that relies on shortcuts to represent mediated images."[34] Latin Americans and Latinos, at least as embodied by models with café-au-lait skin tones and reggaetón stars of any skin tone, are easily positioned as natural participants in *Fast*'s hybrid and global youth scene. Because of the traditions of the Hollywood star system, however, even in this diegesis of liminal possibility, Latina and Latino stars serve primarily as spectacles adding to the multicultural aesthetic and are circumscribed to roles supporting the more traditional American heroes.

In the *Fast and Furious* narrative, Dom later slips away from Letty in the middle of the night; he has become a wanted man on an international scale and he fears for her safety. Ultimately, however, he cannot protect her; he later returns to Los Angeles because Letty has been murdered. Brian O'Conner also is back in the city and now an agent for the FBI. The story returns full circle to the original film's conclusion at this point, as broken relationships come to a head and the dual protagonists face new challenges to their integrity and racing skills as they attempt to infiltrate Braga's gang.

One of the questions raised by the film and the other films in the franchise regards the place and status of whiteness in an increasingly multicultural US and global culture. In *Fast & Furious* and all five *Fast* films, heroic whiteness is salvaged in contrast to a traditional, xenophobic whiteness. This is accomplished through developing the dual protagonists as open to cultural learning and flexibility, in addition to possessing traits inherent to the traditional Western and racing-car film hero, such as bravery and integrity—and a confident lead foot. Meanwhile, various white adversaries within each *Fast* film are exposed as narrow-minded, power-hungry, and/or racist. Parallels can be found in Neal King's explication of the cop action films of the 1980s and 1990s, in which white cop protagonists often "join with the victims of white male leadership, those abused by white men in groups lawful and criminal, and so build a better, somewhat less dirty hero."[35] In this regard, Brian and especially Dom, as ambiguously

34 Angharad N. Valdivia, *Latina/os and the Media* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2010), 189.

35 Neal King, *Heroes in Hard Times: Cop Action Movies in the US* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999), 102.

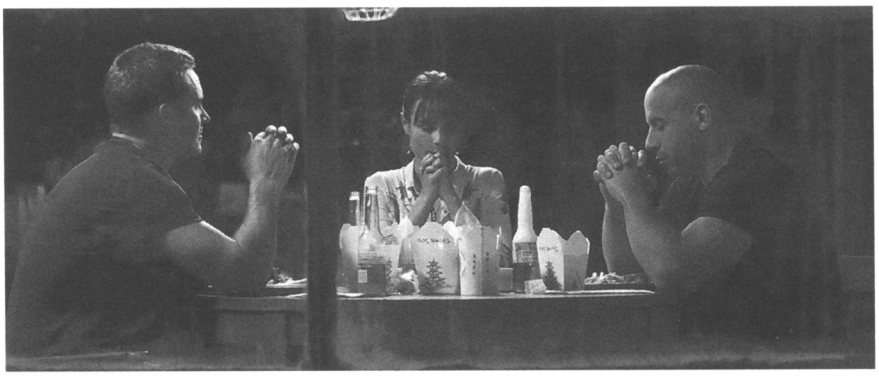

Figure 2. Dominic and Mia Toretto's family- and faith-oriented sensibility, demonstrated here in their insistence on saying grace before shared meals, can be likened to associations often made with Latino families in the United States (*Fast & Furious* [Universal, 2009]).

white heroes, are at times positioned in contrast to villainous white characters, which in this case include the man fronting for Braga (Robert Miano), whose fair skin and obvious wealth mark him as a racially and economically privileged "white" Mexican. An emphasis on cultural flexibility is further underscored in *Fast & Furious* through the incorporation of cultural elements that have been particularly associated with Latino cultures (and more generally with working-class American families of all backgrounds, including Italian Americans and Irish Americans—perhaps providing a clue to the protagonists' ultimately flexible racial identities). Dom and Mia, who are presumably Italian American, given their surname, but who grew up in Latino-oriented Los Angeles, are now shown to possess many of the traits typically ascribed to Latinos in the United States. They benefit from the emotional grounding of embracing religion and loyalty to family above all else, a moral code that Brian admits he envies. They are presumably Catholic, demonstrated in Dom and Mia's saying of grace before they and their friends share meals. Family and religion clearly motivate the Torettos' actions, with criminal acts undertaken only to preserve their family and freedom. Dom, additionally, was in a long-term relationship with Letty, now speaks fluent Spanish, and lived comfortably in Latin America for several years. Brian, the seemingly "whiter," more inflexible protagonist, will by contrast be able to meet the challenges ahead only when he embraces a more flexible and spiritual identity that includes these cultural values and elements.

Dom and Brian, to different degrees, thus can be viewed as liminal figures in relation to traditional notions of American identity and whiteness, with the previously established fluidity of Dom's racial identity underscored through the further Latinization of his character. As expected, the two secure positions as drivers smuggling drugs for Braga, after a tense, hard-won race. They and their fellow drivers are subsequently required to bring drugs in their cars over the border from Mexico through a complicated network of underground tunnels, getting through the blind spots and avoiding deadly crashes only with help from Braga's assistant, via satellite. The use of similar tunnels for illegal drug trade has, notably, been mentioned in the US news since 2006 in relation to fear-inducing accounts of the dangers of immigration; the US-Mexico

border therefore comes to be viewed only as a region rife with danger and criminal activity wrought by Mexican thugs. Racial flexibility becomes a prominent theme in a different way at this juncture of the film, as Dom's and Brian's identities as white Americans are reinforced in their opposition to Braga and his employees.

Brian's and Dom's dangerous work infiltrating Braga's operation eventually comes to nothing, however, as the FBI accidentally arrest Braga's employee posing as the drug lord rather than Braga himself. When Dom decides to travel into Mexico to pursue Braga on his own, Brian insists on accompanying him, a gesture that demonstrates his ultimate choice of loyalty to the Toretto family over his safety and social standing. Mexico in this case is positioned as lawless, a place where powerful criminals are able to escape punishment, as established in earlier border Westerns.[36] Despite this, Dom and Brian ultimately seize Braga after a scuffle and attempt to bring him back to the United States. Fenix (Laz Alonso), Braga's notably dark-skinned second-in-command (who, viewers learn, was responsible for Letty's death and is patently unremorseful), is soon after them with a posse of men in fast cars. In their final challenge, Brian and Dom must drive the gauntlet of underground tunnels to survive and bring Braga to justice—a feat almost impossible without the technological assistance they had been given earlier. The geographic border thus becomes even more rife with uncertainty, a dividing line that demarcates danger and chaos from what is just, civilized, American, and white. Through demonstrations of bravery, determination, and driving skill (in addition to the skill of countless stunt drivers), Brian and Dom make their way through. Brian's car bursts through the mountainside on the US side first, but he has been hit by Fenix's car and severely injured. Fenix is about to shoot Brian when Dom's car bursts out, killing Fenix, and justice is done.

While in all of the *Fast* films most of the protagonists' battles are waged and won through car races and stunts such as this concluding event, conflicts also often take the form of cultural inflexibility and ethnocentrism, made evident in underlying themes of cultural competence and of underdogs fighting for justice and respect. In this regard, some of the villains in *Fast* are actually minor characters positioned initially as allies. One is Brian's coworker, Agent Stasiak (Shea Whigham), who demonstrates unabashed racial ignorance and insensitivity, for example, when he snarkily conflates Chinese Americans with Korean Americans in an early scene. He receives his comeuppance soon afterward, when Brian is justified in beating him up, a scene that again parallels King's conclusions regarding earlier cop films that pitted vaguely white cop heroes with integrity against xenophobic and corrupt white cops and criminals, and salvaged white heroism in the process.[37] Later, significantly, it is Stasiak who acts impulsively and ruins the FBI's opportunity to arrest Braga. Conflict also is provided by a rigidly inflexible law enforcement system, in opposition to the flexibility and integrity of the protagonists' sense of justice. In the coda of *Fast & Furious*, Dom is sentenced to twenty-five years in prison for his earlier crimes, despite Brian's appeal to the court for

36 Charles Ramírez Berg and Camilla Fojas document these patterns in the tradition of the border Western genre and ethnic/racial representation. See Berg's *Latina/o Images in Film* and Fojas's *Border Bandits: Hollywood on the Southern Frontier* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010).

37 King, *Heroes in Hard Times*.

Figure 3. Agent Stasiak, on the right, is one of several xenophobic, corrupt white figures against which the more ambiguously white protagonists face off in the *Fast* franchise (*Fast & Furious* [Universal, 2009]).

clemency. He later is shown among other prisoners on a bus to Lompoc prison. This is not the end, however. In the concluding scene, Brian, Mia, and Santos and Leo, in three fast cars, close in on the bus. A cross dangling from Brian's rearview mirror is a telling symbol of his new cultural flexibility and moral code. Dom hears them and, almost imperceptibly, smiles. The cars rev past and the closing credits begin, paired with images of shiny car parts and yet more hip-hop and reggaetón music. The sound of Spanish rapped decisively by Pitbull and Tego Calderón sets the final tone. The verve of Latin-influenced and future-leaning global youth as embodied in car-racing culture and reggaetón cannot be confined, we can surmise from these final moments of the film.

Latinos and the Mixed Vogue: Selling Young, Urban *Latinidad* in the *Fast* Franchise. As underscored in this summary, there are multiple ways in which appeal to Latina and Latino viewers has been established in the *Fast* franchise, and particularly in this installment, through Lin's and the producers' production and narrative choices. Most important, the inclusion of several characters, including Letty, Santos, and Leo, and their portrayal by performers of Latino descent, serves as a reminder that Latinas and Latinos are integral to this hip and culturally diverse youth culture, even while the Mexican characters Braga and Fenix, also representatives of *latinidad*, are portrayed mainly as one-note villains destined to live life on the margins of society. Don Omar and Tego Calderón's previously established status as reggaetón stars of global recognition and popularity inevitably adds to their impact in this regard. The Latino and Spanish-speaking characters in the narrative, aside from the variances of character development of heroes and villains, moreover, are represented with familiarity and respect. For example, Santos and Leo are portrayed as comic but cool; while they banter, there are no cues for laughter, and they have positions of respect within Dom's team, a narrative development that is surprisingly rare in US films built around large ensemble casts. Similarly, although the truck driver who is robbed in the opening scene in the Dominican Republic is played for comic effect, using what sounds suspiciously like Mexican slang in his oath "Hijo de tu madre!" (son of your mother) as

he bails out of the crashing truck with his huge pet iguana, the representation comes across as affectionate rather than denigrating. Settings in the Dominican Republic, Panama, East Los Angeles, and Mexico also importantly broaden the culturally diverse world of *Fast & Furious* to include Latin America.

Also related to the film's emphasis on Latinized protagonists is having Dominic Toretto now able to speak fluent Spanish, in addition to including a fair amount of Spanish in the dialogue, supported by remarkably quick and fluid yet unobtrusive subtitles, particularly in the opening scene. This is reinforced in Vin Diesel's prequel, *Los Bandoleros*, about Dom's life on the lam in the Dominican Republic before the *Fast & Furious* narrative, in which Dom and Letty's dialogue is entirely in Spanish. In privileging lead characters' abilities to speak Spanish, Lin arguably contributes to the film's overall bilingual aesthetic and effectively promotes an understanding that English- and Spanish-speaking characters are on equal footing. In addition, reggaetón in the background in many scenes makes spoken Spanish part of the diegetic point of view in a more subtle but still influential manner.

In addition, the white (and in the case of Dom, off-white) heroes are shown in *Fast & Furious* to benefit from a cultural flexibility that entails embracing traits often associated with Latinos, including Spanish fluency, placing family loyalty above all else, and enacting a personal spirituality in relation to a belief in a higher power. Through these narrative developments, Latina and Latino culture and characters are becoming more integral to the racelessness, or utopian multiculturalism that has characterized the *Fast* franchise. A Latino subjectivity is not allowed to flourish, however, and whiteness still is privileged in a manner that undercuts the revolutionary possibilities of making Latinos central figures in this future-leaning world, as I describe in more detail here.

Problematically, moreover, in conjunction with these discourses, an emphasis on crime associated with the US-Mexico border, and particularly on drug smuggling from Mexico to the United States, simultaneously hearkens back to the legacy of the border Western and to more contemporary anti-immigration stances that stigmatize people of Latino descent as potential criminals. Svetkey joked in *Entertainment Weekly*, "Welcome to Lou Dobbs' worst nightmare," referring to the conservative pundit's vision of Mexican criminals bringing drugs into the United States with impunity.[38] In this regard, it isn't the first time that the "raceless" world of the *Fast* franchise has in fact been highly racialized through an emphasis in the narrative on racialized criminality. In this regard, a critique could also be posed regarding representing global *latinidad* primarily through reggaetón, given that the genre, like gangsta-inflected hip-hop culture, has a tendency to emphasize hypermasculinity and criminality, not to mention sexism, in its lyrics and imagery.[39]

Such notions of borders dovetail with conventions paradigmatic of mainstream Hollywood films that continue to centralize and reinforce the superiority of whiteness

38 Svetkey, "'Fast and Furious," sec. 5.

39 Similarly, from a broader gender perspective, the *Fast* franchise could be criticized for its über-masculinity, considering that male street racers stand in for youth culture as a whole and women's natural place is often shown to be the sidelines, on the dance floor, or in the home.

over *latinidad* or racelessness; such moments bring Dom's and Brian's identities as white into stark relief. For instance, Dom and Brian are more masterful and cool under pressure than their darker-skinned (and xenophobic or criminal white) adversaries, and they demonstrate preternatural knowledge and skills related to car racing. In this regard they are in keeping with traditions of white male mastery and achievement established in films of the classical era, such as Richard Dyer describes in *White*.[40] Such is the case when they are shown smartly tricking up their cars with useful (and expensive but somehow attainable) modifications, and when Brian is the one racer who smartly thinks to use GPS technology—available to all—to find a shortcut in a close race. Traditions of Hollywood genres also reinforce these dynamics. As Paul Newland's study of what he calls the car-crash genre underscores, cinematic narratives of fixing up and crashing cars are distinctly American (and I would add, white American); films in the *Fast and the Furious* franchise clearly build on this tradition.[41] The legacies of the car-race film, the cop action film, and the Western, which have historically underscored the prowess of white American heroes, are also powerfully influential at times with respect to the character construction, editing, and soundtrack of *Fast & Furious*. For instance, while hip-hop and reggaetón are utilized heavily in the soundtrack, the car-race sequences are often set to more traditional instrumental background music, in this case mastered by film composer Brian Tyler, which all but trumpets Brian's and Dom's prowess while undercutting that of their more ethnic competitors. Finally, the legacy of the border Western can be seen in the protagonists' ease in crossing the US-Mexico border and success in the showdown with the Mexican criminal and his team on their own turf, and in the reinforcement of traditional geographic and ideological borders in the process. For longtime Hollywood film viewers, these narrative developments are likely a given that they would not think to question.

The multiple and contradictory discourses of the film and its promotion salvage *Fast & Furious*'s potential appeal to Latino viewers and viewers in Latin America, however. The packaging of the film for commercial sale, for instance—such as the two-disc special edition DVD set—adds extratextual media products meant to appeal to this specific market. The trailers featured include a variety of Latino and urban-oriented young adult films, such as *Bring It On: Fight to the Finish* (Billie Woodruff, 2009), starring Cristina Milian, and *Fighting* (Dito Montiel, 2009), a boxing film starring Channing Tatum (notably for this audience, the star of the original *Step Up* [Anne Fletcher, 2006]), Terrance Howard, and Luis Guzmán. It also rewards race-car fans and those interested in Latino elements of the film with commentary available in Spanish and featurettes with titles like "Under the Hood: Muscle Cars," "Virtual Car Garage," and "South of the Border: Filming in Mexico." Also featured on the DVD set is Diesel's *Los Bandoleros*. In the film, a prequel to *Fast & Furious*, Dom lives in a Dominican beachside village with friends Santos (Don Omar) and Leo (Tego Calderón) and Santos's extended family; the children refer to him as *padrino* (godfather). His comfort in this setting notably underscores

40 Richard Dyer, *White: Essays on Race and Culture* (London: Routledge, 1997).

41 The *Fast & Furious* two-disc special edition DVD featurettes "Races and Chases" and "Shooting the Big Rig Heist" about the complex work behind the car-stunt scenes underscore this reality behind the scenes as well: all but one of the countless individuals shown working on these scenes is male and white. Paul Newland, "Look Past the Violence: Automotive Destruction in American Movies," *European Journal of American Culture* 28, no. 1 (2009): 5–20.

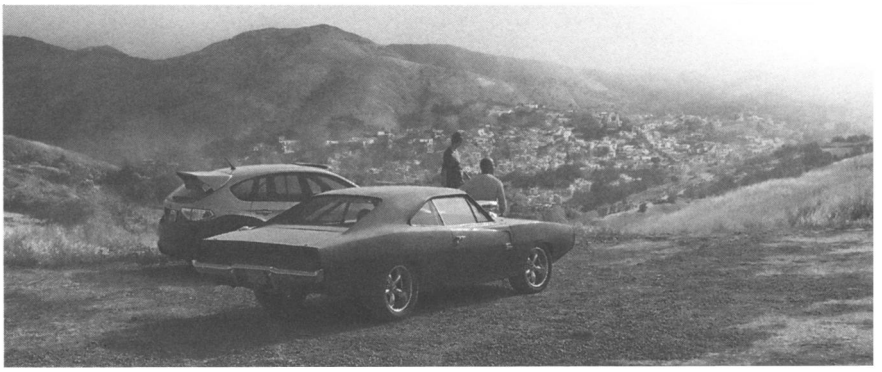

Figure 4. Dom and Brian overlook the US-Mexico border that they will soon cross in *Fast & Furious* (Universal, 2009).

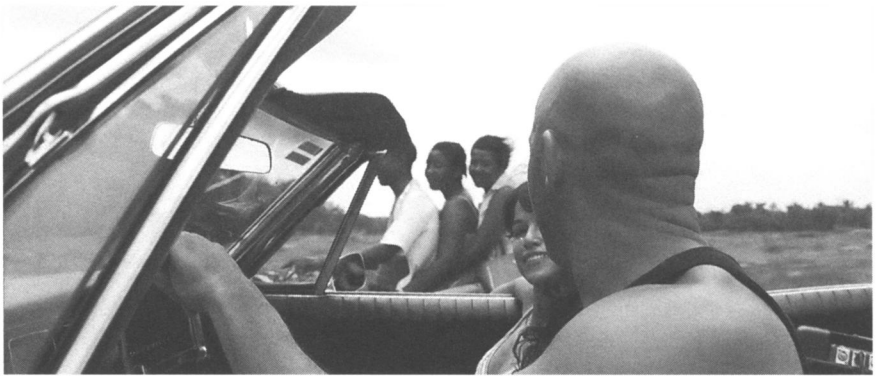

Figure 5. Dom and Letty drive alongside local Dominicans as they head to the beach in Vin Diesel's short film *Los Bandoleros* (One Tribe Films and Universal, 2009).

that his life in exile in the Dominican Republic is not qualitatively inferior to his life in the United States, aside from the loss of connections to his family and loved ones. As is realistic but still rare in a Hollywood film, the dialogue in the short film is almost entirely in Spanish, with English-language subtitles. During the course of the twenty-minute narrative, Han (Sun Kang) arrives to help Dom break Leo out of jail. Letty (Michelle Rodriguez) also arrives, having tracked Dom from Mexico, where they had been living until Dom felt that their criminal life was getting too dangerous for Letty. They reunite, and the narrative ends with Dom and Letty in a romantic interlude.

Two notable distinctions can be made in comparing *Los Bandoleros* to *Fast & Furious* and the other *Fast* films. One is that *latinidad* is represented with more diverse, and often darker, bodies than in the *Fast* feature films. This is particularly evident in the opening scene, in which dark-skinned Dominicans are shown alongside Leo in the local jail, in a subsequent scene at a beachside nightclub, and when Dom and Letty drive to the beach and speak to Dominicans walking and riding alongside the road. In these instances, the spectrum of skin colors is broadened to include and embrace individuals of dark-brown skin tone, a rarity in a film distributed by a major Hollywood studio. Another is its integration of *reggaetonero* Tego Calderón's politically incisive critique of

Figure 6. As Tego Leo, reggaetón artist Tego Calderón sings from a local jail about the exploitation of Dominicans in *Los Bandoleros* (One Tribe Films and Universal, 2009).

capitalism as related to poverty and incarceration, particularly of dark-skinned Dominicans, in a song during the jail scene. These distinctions make it more evident that the purported racelessness of the feature films in the franchise is located within a highly stylized and politically tame diegesis, intended to be palatable to white and middle-class viewers while also appealing to working-class youth and to youth of color nationally and globally. It makes one wonder whether authentic, working-class Latina and Latino and Latin American representation will always only flirt with political subversion within a big-budget Hollywood film production.

Hollywood Border Crossings: Bringing Diversity "into the Room" of a Film Franchise. I was fortunate during this research to have the opportunity to interview director Justin Lin in March 2010 and again in March 2012. These interviews provided important insights into the making of the film, the evolution of the franchise, and particularly how film studios are taking Latino and other nonwhite viewers and directors into account. In the interviews, Lin confirmed that Universal and other studios have an awareness of and interest in reaching Latino viewers, or rather, Latinos within and in addition to the broad spectrum of the American audience in the case of youth-oriented franchises such as *Fast*. The white, male, similarly educated ranks of Hollywood studio and marketing executives have changed little, however, such that a nonwhite or working-class point of view still is rarely "in the room," as Lin put it, in meetings to plan the development of big-budget franchises. As such, he takes pride in having reached a stage in his career in which he now finds himself in those rooms and able to help steer a film franchise that holds importance around the world for young people of various ethnic backgrounds and often working-class status. A Taiwanese American who grew up in Orange County, California, earlier in his career Lin was best known for independent feature films that focused on contemporary Asian Americans, including the critically lauded *Better Luck Tomorrow* (Justin Lin, 2002) and the films *Shopping for Fangs* (Justin Lin and Quentin Lee, 2001) and *Finishing the Game* (Justin Lin, 2007). The choice to direct two studio-helmed films in 2006, *Annapolis* and *Fast and Furious: Tokyo Drift*, led to Lin's now-instrumental role with the *Fast* franchise, as director not just of *Fast & Furious* and *Fast Five* but also of *Fast & Furious 6*, released in late May

2013. He noted in the interviews that he was initially motivated to play a role in the franchise because, in fact, he disliked the ways in which Asian Americans and other nonwhite characters were portrayed in the original film; he felt challenged to bring a less white-centric and more multidimensional sensibility to *Fast and Furious: Tokyo Drift* when he was given the opportunity. Lin's creative authorship has since had substantial influence on the franchise's evolution (he is one of a few individuals with a role authoring the franchise's narratives, although he does not take writing credit for this work), and he has served as the director of all the most recent installments.

In the interviews, Lin spoke of his satisfaction and solid working relationships with executives at Universal, even while he has often had to negotiate with them to have the films reflect his vision and perspective, which is distinct from that typically found in blockbuster, action-oriented films. These have included fighting for changes in the *Tokyo Drift* script, which originally was rife with stereotypical elements such as Buddha statues and women in kimonos, for the casting of unproven actors who didn't fit typical Hollywood aesthetic ideals, and for the inclusion of subtitled dialogue in Spanish in *Fast & Furious* and in Portuguese in the case of *Fast Five*. For instance, he chose to cast nonactors Don Omar and Tego Calderón in both recent films after one of Don Omar's songs had been used on the soundtrack of *Tokyo Drift* and he had a chance to meet the two performers. He later fought to let them speak in the film as they normally would, in Spanish: "That's been a challenge. . . . They don't like subtitles and stuff. And it's a fight. . . . My whole argument coming into this franchise was to say hey, look, you know, I get it. I get that you want to have chases; you want to have races; you want to have fun. But there are a lot of layers we can add in there."[42]

Some of our discussion centered on Universal's potential awareness of Latino and other nonwhite viewers in the production and marketing stages of *Fast & Furious*. Lin confirmed that in the case of massive-budget tentpole films, the realities of the money on the line prompt studios to attempt to control the outcomes as much as possible, with proven stars and formulas. Producers' choices at all stages of the making of a film thus are questioned and, whenever possible, tested through various measures of audience response, including the utilization of focus groups (with participants chosen to replicate the age range and demographic mix of the expected audience) to ascertain audiences' favorite characters and test screenings in both large and small cities in the United States. Projections of the ethnic demographics of the potential audience also are routinely calculated on the basis of the box-office figures of similar films or previous films in a franchise. Studios and their marketing teams make a science, albeit an in-house science, of such breakdowns, as this research typically is strictly confidential and closely guarded. In this regard, US Latino audiences are now considered large enough to factor into domestic marketing plans and thus recognized as a group worth targeting, at least with a franchise—like the *Fast* series—with proven appeal to this market (Asian Americans, by contrast, are not). Lin pointed out that perceived international appeal also factors in, as the global selling power of Latino, African American, and Asian American stars may be viewed as hurting the possibilities of international distribution for big-budget films, even though action and car-stunt films are considered

42 Justin Lin, personal interview, Austin, Texas, March 6, 2012.

safe bets for export. In contrast, the casting of global stars such as Omar and Calderón can increase appeal inside and outside the United States. Tensions in the motivations driving studios to Latinize their films are made evident here, as the pull of the growing Latino and Latin American audience begins to drive production and promotion more than the push of Latino media advocates and viewers asking for greater visibility in prior decades.

The diverse and heavily Latino domestic audience for *Fast & Furious* was therefore projected by Universal on the basis of the demographics of the audiences for the previous films, test screenings, focus-group findings, and other research. Even so, Lin stated that he sees working-class identity, rather than a multicultural, Latino, or other raced identity, as key to the appeal and global success of the film. His assertion brings into question the ways in which signifiers of race and ethnicity on the one hand and of working-class status on the other hand are often conflated in both scholarly and popular readings of contemporary films. As such, the bilingual aesthetic of the film must be understood as a working-class bilingual aesthetic. As he noted:

> To me, there is a connection with the community, with Latinos. But I actually see it more about class than race. I think the fascination is with cars, whether it's Asian, Latinos. And a lot of Latinos are working class. If you look at the numbers, $200 million was outside the US. When we went on the press tour, around the world, we went to the working-class towns of Germany. We went to Lille instead of Paris; we went to where the fans were. And so it was more about class to me. It just so happens that a lot of Latinos are working class.[43]

As noted previously, Lin did push to include Don Omar and Tego Calderón, popular celebrities particularly with US Latino and Latin American youth, among the ensemble cast of *Fast & Furious*. Most of the young Latino and African American actors and performers working in Los Angeles in fact were vying for roles in the film through their agents. Lin was adamant that casting the right actors rather than aiming to cast a particular mix of actors of various ethnic backgrounds was most important to the film's integrity. He also negotiated to include subtitled Spanish dialogue and a number of Latin American settings as the backdrop. Of such elements, he noted:

> That was part of the effort to start pushing the boundaries. I think when you do get the sense that [the franchise is] going to other countries, otherwise we're just Americans and we think everybody should speak our language. . . . These characters, when they can understand Spanish and stuff; I think it's interesting. It's totally consistent in this world. Yeah, it took a little [convincing of studio executives]. Nothing's ever easy. But I like going in there and really fighting the fight. And again, I think it benefits the film. It benefits the sensibility of the film.[44]

In the process of fighting for what he felt was a more interesting, believable story of American characters entering a global milieu, he also arguably constructed a bilingual

43 Justin Lin, personal interview, Studio City, California, March 19, 2010.

44 Ibid.

world and mind-set that might offer greater appeal to Latino and other viewers living in a similarly bilingual manner.

Conclusions: Embracing Borders Will Make You Faster (and White Americans without Borders Are Fastest of All). *Fast & Furious*'s promotional tag line "New model. Original parts" aptly hints at its repetition of many of the aesthetic and narrative elements for which the franchise has become known. As I noted in 2008, the original, similarly titled *The Fast and the Furious* was one of a handful of films of the late 1990s and early 2000s that presented American youth as embodying and embracing racial diversity, that cast mixed-race actors as protagonists, and that featured cultural competence, or the ability to engage successfully with others of different backgrounds, as a prerequisite for leadership in the action milieu.[45] These cinematic conventions clearly are in tune with contemporary sensibilities, as they characterize the now highly lucrative *Fast* franchise and a wide swath of films and television series in the past decade that have attempted to imitate its success. This cycle, whether described as multiculti, mixploitation, or another term, is more socially relevant than ever. In the past decade we have become an increasingly racially diverse—and not coincidentally in relation to *Fast & Furious*, increasingly Latino—society.[46] In tandem with ongoing demographic shifts, many Americans believe that we have moved beyond problems of racial inequalities to become a postracial nation, to use a contested term that entered popular parlance with the election of a black and mixed-race US president, Barack Obama, in 2008.[47] Unsurprisingly, multiculti films and television of this same period include story lines that focus on communities notable both for their diversity and for their lack of attention to racial specificity (aside from whiteness) or racial inequities. Such narratives are arguably engaging for American audiences because they play with contemporary tensions over multiculturalism while also seemingly resolving such tensions.

The emphasis on cultural and geographical borders in *Fast & Furious* ultimately fuels multiple and often contradictory ideological thrusts regarding Latinos and *latinidad*. As I found in my research, when *Fast & Furious* makes Latinos and Latin Americans central to this now-familiar, raceless milieu, it results in both progressive visibility and clear limitations regarding Latino representation. Latino and Latin American culture, and especially its associated cultural hybridity, are valorized in the film. The Dominican Republic, Panama, and East Los Angeles in the United States are presented as dynamic and youthful, and the realities of Latino and working-class struggles are also given voice in both *Fast & Furious* and *Los Bandoleros*. Notably, Latino-influenced *mestizaje*, rather than a more generic hybridity, is also demonstrated as gaining cultural capital within the film's story world. However, old paradigms die hard, as it is only when such *mestizaje* is deployed by its white heroes that it enables the literal and

45 Beltrán, "The New Hollywood Racelessness."

46 According to census projections, Latinas and Latinos are expected to become one-third of the US population by 2050. See Jeffrey Passel and D'Vera Cohn, "U.S. Population Projections: 2005–2050, Pew Hispanic Research Center," February 11, 2008, http://www.pewhispanic.org/2008/02/11/us-population-projections-2005-2050/.

47 See, for example, Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *Racism without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009).

figurative border crossing held up as necessary for contemporary mastery of the increasingly multicultural and global environment. In this regard, *Fast & Furious* and other films of the multiculti wave need to be viewed critically, regarding how diverse and dimensional Latino characters and cultures are both given voice and muffled in service of utopic multicultural aesthetics and narratives. *

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