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Race and Popular Culture

November 28th, 2020

The Caucacity of Stereotypes in Films

Growing up Mexican American in the United States was not always an easy thing. I remember the first time I ever felt represented on TV I was around 5 years old watching Sofia Vergara on the American comedy *Chasing Papi.* I remember thinking that she was who I wanted to be, not realizing it was a stereotyped, oversexualized version of what someone thought my race represented. Sadly, I think this is the case for many Mexican American people in the United States. In this essay, I argue that Mexican people and Mexican American people are often portrayed in stereotypical ways that depict them as lower-class people who often have big loud families and that the stereotyping of Mexican people can have negative effects on the members of that group. I also argue that Mexican women are often seen as housekeepers who end up serving others. I will be using scenes from movies such as *Jack and Jill, Spanglish, Fools Rush In,* and *Beverly Hills Chihuahua* to prove my argument. I am interested in this topic because as a Mexican American woman living in the United States, it is rare to feel represented in the media, and when representation is present it is often negative. It is very hurtful for people of Mexican descent to see these negative representations of us on TV because there is so much more we have to offer than just characters for comedic effect.

*Spanglish* is a 2004 American romantic comedy that portrays Mexican women in very stereotypical ways. In *Spanglish,* Flor Moreno, a Mexican woman, is a single mother who is undocumented. She has two jobs that she can not keep up with so she has to get a nannying and housekeeping job with a white family. (Spanglish 2004) Although Flor is the main character of the movie, she is still portrayed in a very stereotypical and negative way. A hurtful stereotype that is shown is that Mexican women often work as housekeepers. There are many shows and movies that depict Mexican women as housekeepers or nannies because it has become such a wide known stereotype. This feeds into the machismo culture that heavily enforces gender roles, and expects women to be servers, especially to men. It also gives the idea that Mexican women have no other skill or talent so the only thing they must know how to do is clean a house. Usually, Mexican women are seen working for white families which also enforces the idea that Mexican people have to be saved by white people in order to make it in America. This is shown when in the film, the white family makes a comment that Flor does not speak Spanish, this creates a language barrier between them and creates the main conflict of the movie. Eventually, Flor decides to start learning English so she can better communicate with this family. Flor had been living in the United States for a while, but it wasn’t until she met this white family that she decided to start learning English. The film doesn’t portray her learning a new language as her bettering herself, instead, they make it seem like she is only doing that to make the white family more comfortable with her presence since they gave her a job and changed her life. This is hurtful to Mexican American people because it is a widely held belief that we either speak English poorly or not at all. I often find myself apologizing because English is my second language and I am afraid of making mistakes. Sadly, stereotypes are very commonly found in films, especially romantic comedies that focus on interracial couples.

The 1997 American romantic comedy *Fools Rush In,* is a film about a white man who falls in love with and marries a Mexican American woman. The film focuses on the cultural clashes that both characters go through while spending time with each other and their families. In *Fools Rush In,* Isabel, one of the main characters, is a photographer*.* However, when her husband’s parents meet her for the first time, they assume that she is the maid. The father also makes a hurtful comment and says that there is much better help to be found considering how close they are to the border. This comment makes it clear that the white family believes that Mexican women only work as maids or housekeepers. They also see them as easily replaceable. When Isabel gets upset at this, the father suggests he fires her. Something that makes this situation worse is that Alex, the husband, is ashamed to tell his parents they are married due to her racial background. (Fools Rush In 1997) This falls into the previously discussed stereotype that Mexican women are seen as houseworkers. However, this is not the only stereotype seen in the movie. In the scene where Alex is going to meet Isabel’s parents, they arrive at a loud house filled with people. Alex questions the number of people present and Isabel tells him that some of the family couldn’t make it. (Fools Rush In 1997) Alex is surprised by the size and loudness of her family and seems uncomfortable. Throughout the movie, there are many subtle examples of stereotypes and they are all used for comedic effect. The movie ends with Alex and Isabel working on their marriage so Isabel does not end up being a single mother in Mexico. Stereotypes should not be used for comedy, especially when they are negative. This is hurtful to Mexican American people in the United States because it creates an image that is often hard to escape.

*Jack and Jill* is another movie that tries using stereotypes about Mexican people for comedic effect but fails at actually being funny. The 2011 film *Jack and Jill* tells the story of two twins. In one scene one of the twins, Jill, meets Felipe, a Mexican gardener. It is after this interaction that the film begins to stereotype Mexican people. First, Felipe is a gardener to a rich white man. He ends up being attracted to Jill, a white woman. When Felipe invites Jill to his family’s picnic, he claims that they will eat, have fun, play soccer, and steal white people’s wallets. This single sentence feeds into the stereotype that all Mexican people are criminals and that they victimize white people. Once Felipe and Jill go to this picnic, Felipe introduces his very large Mexican family and explains that they’re all named Juan, Juana, Jose, or Josefina which are all very stereotypical Mexican names. When Jill asks Felipe about his wife, he says she passed away and must be sneaking into heaven. This creates the idea that even in the afterlife, Mexicans are sneaking into places as it is a widely held belief that Mexicans are the only people who immigrate or illegally cross the border. The picnic is also a big party with lots of people wearing soccer jerseys and cowboy hats playing loud Spanish music in a park, playing into the stereotype that Mexicans have big, loud families. In *Jack and Jill* Felipe’s character was created to be funny, however, Felipe is only an overly stereotypical version of a Mexican man who ends up with a white woman who is wealthier than he is. Sadly, this is common in many movies, even in children’s movies.

*Beverly Hills Chihuahua* is a 2008 American family movie. The film tells the story of Chloe, the dog of a rich businesswoman who ends up lost in Mexico after being dognapped by a gang of Mexican dogfighters. This event leads to Chloe’s babysitter seeking help from their Mexican gardener and his Mexican dog, Papi. Papi ends up finding Chloe and they try to return to the United States by illegally crossing the border on a train. Although the film is about dogs, they still manage to incorporate very stereotypical Mexican aspects. Papi is a Mexican dog so he is portrayed as very street-smart, and he is a light brown chihuahua dog. While Chloe, on the other hand, is pampered and very naive and she is also a white chihuahua dog. (Beverly Hills Chihuahua 2008) The film portrays Mexico as a very poor and dangerous country, and it portrays Mexicans as dangerous and corrupt. The only person who does not seem to fit this stereotype is Papi’s owner who also happens to live in the United States. *Beverly Hills Chihuahua* was a film made by Disney for kids, however, they reinforce hurtful stereotypes about Mexico and Mexican people. There is also one scene where the dogs are lost in Chihuahua state in the northern part of Mexico and they stumble upon an Aztec temple which is geographically incorrect but Aztecs are usually correlated with Mexicans. At the end of the film, Papi is adopted into the rich family for saving Chloe and he no longer has to be a gardener. I was eight years old when the movie was released and I remember Chloe being my favorite character. This experience also made me very afraid of Mexico even though my whole family is from there. This film is very hurtful because it portrays Mexicans in a negative light and creates a bad image of them.

Oftentimes, Mexican, and Mexican American people are portrayed in negative, stereotypical ways. This choice is often made for comedic effect, but many people don’t realize how much this impacts the people who are actually part of this group. Personally, growing up in the United States as a Mexican American person was very hard. I often saw stereotype versions of my people on TV, and it was so common it was easy to miss. In this essay, I analyzed scenes from movies such as *Spanglish, Fools Rush In, Jack and Jill,* and *Beverly Hills Chihuahua.* Scenes in these movies stereotype Mexican people living in the United States and their families. They also enforce various stereotypes such as Mexican women working as housekeepers, Mexican families being big and loud, and they also manage to subtly criminalize Mexican people. In all of these films, there is also always a white person who manages to save the Mexican person in some sort of way, which is also a negative way to portray Mexican people because they do not need saving. Mexican people are usually stereotyped in these negative ways, and this can have lasting effects on the people who identify as such. In 2020 we are aiming closer to more inclusivity but we are still not there, and we can do better.

Works Cited

Beverly Hills Chihuahua. Directed by Raja Gosnell. Walt Disney Pictures, 2008.

Fools Rush In. Directed by Andy Tennant. Columbia Pictures, 1997.

Jack and Jill. Directed by Dennis Dugan. Sony Pictures, 2011.

Spanglish. Directed by James L. Brooks. Columbia Pictures, 2004.