The American Dream

The American dream can be defined in many ways. For example, the online Oxford dictionary defines “the American Dream” as “The ideal by which equality of opportunity is available to any American, allowing the highest aspirations and goals to be achieved” (www.lexico.com/en/definition/american). Implicit in this formal definition is that “the American Dream” can be, and perhaps has always been, pursued by people of all races, creeds, and backgrounds. James Truslow Adams (1933), a popular historian writing during the Great Depression in the US, suggests this inclusive view. In describing the American dream, he writes that it is

that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement . . . It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position.

He also stresses that the American dream is not just about (certain) individuals “making it” economically, but rather, “If we are to make the dream come true we must all work together, no longer to build bigger, but to build better” (1933, 326). Hochschild (1996) also highlights that part of the American dream is achieving upward economic mobility across generations.

But, for some groups, for example Native Americans, African Americans, Asian Americans, and Latinx Americans, the American dream has fallen short of reality because of exclusion and discrimination (Jillson, 2004). In short, the American dream has not always been achieved, and it has been achieved differently by many. For Americans of Latin American and Puerto Rican heritage, a core animating value has been a desire for equality in what they have long perceived as the land of opportunity. Thus, Latinx Americans (like other Americans) want equal opportunity—to work, to raise families, to own homes, to build communities, to serve the country, to live and be prosperous, and to share in the bounty and dignity that many have defined as the essence of the United States. In essence, to contribute, as all other groups have, to the engines that have made America great. This is what has made credible a claim for American exceptionalism, for American success. In addition, the
Latinx community (like all others) wants to be acknowledged for their contributions, for good or ill. Yet, is this how “the media” tends to treat Latinx Americans?

**Mass Media’s Role**

Latinx Americans, like other groups, have often faced barriers to full acceptance and inclusion in American life and have faced discrimination in employment, housing, and treatment. While Latinx communities in the US have made progress in each of these arenas, there are still barriers that influence their full inclusion in, and their pursuit of, the American dream. One of these barriers has to do with perceptions.

The mass media has played, and continues to play, an important role in how Latinx individuals are perceived by others (Martins, Weaver, and Lynch, 2018). This was brought home to me when a newly hired Latinx assistant professor shared with me that when she went to her university’s childcare center to enroll her child, someone assumed that she was one of the childcare workers.

Examining how Latinxs have been and continue to be portrayed in US mass media, we see either a lack of representation or a persistent display of narrow conceptions and stereotypes of Latinx Americans in both entertainment and news outlets. This is problematic because, as Merskin (2007) notes, the longer and more regularly the same information is presented, in the same way, to the same audience, the more the stereotypes become normalized in the American popular imagination. Studies of mass media have shown and continue to indicate that there are persistent portrayals of Latinxs as second-class citizens whose aspirations and concerns are often viewed, like those of Black Americans, as less validly “American” than White Americans. Perhaps just as pernicious is how seldom Latinx Americans actually appear in mass media programming. This is especially striking in shows or films that are set in cities that have large proportions of Latinx Americans living and working there.

But then, if truth be told, historically, the American dream has generally been depicted in the media, and to a large degree in literature, as something pursued mainly by Whites. The 1966 film *An American Dream*, which was based on Norman Mailer’s book of the same name, vividly illustrates this view. A more recent TV show called *American Dreams*, which aired from 2002 to 2005, also featured a predominantly non-Hispanic White cast. An exception to this general pattern on TV was Edward James Olmos’s *American Family*, which aired on PBS (i.e., the Public Broadcasting Service) during a similar time period (2002–2004) and featured a Mexican American family of multiple generations pursuing its American dream in California.

**The Data Picture in the 21st Century**

In order to better understand the dynamic relationships between the Latinx community, the American dream, and the US mass media in the twenty-first century, it is important to first understand the demographic context of the American dream and the Latinx community’s position within the United States. For example, it is not generally acknowledged, and seldom mentioned in US English-language mainstream media, that according to the US Census the “Hispanic or Latino” population has been for the last two decades—or since the beginning of the twenty-first century—the largest racial-ethnic group in the US. Population figures for the 2020 decennial census figures are not yet available (US Census Bureau, 2020), but recent figures estimate the “Hispanic or Latino” population to be 18.7 percent of the US population in 2020; this percentage is projected to grow to 19.9 percent by 2025 (US Census Bureau, Population Division, 2018b). In approximate terms, Latinx Americans will then constitute about one-fifth of the US population. In whole numbers, this equals 62,313 million people in 2020 and 68,484 million by 2025 (US Census Bureau, Population Division, 2018a). These figures continue to surpass the populations of Spain and of each of the Spanish-speaking countries in Latin America, except for Mexico.
Thus, with the exception of Mexico, there are more Latinxs in the US than in any other Spanish-speaking country in the world.

Moreover, this is the case even though the population of Puerto Rico is not included in these figures, despite the fact that Puerto Ricans have been citizens of the US for over one hundred years, serve in its armed forces, and have migrated in large numbers to the US mainland. Puerto Ricans in the states also constitute the second largest Latinx group in the US, after Mexicans (Ennis and Ríos-Vargas, 2011). Indeed, West Side Story, now considered a classic “American” drama, one that has been performed in high schools all across the country for decades, was based on the notable migration of Puerto Ricans to the US. The play continues to have new cinematic and theatrical versions currently in production. Migration from Puerto Rico to the mainland is not merely a historical trend; it has recently intensified as one consequence of the impact of Hurricane Maria and subsequent earthquakes. 3

Within this larger demographic picture, we see that the non-Hispanic “Black or African American” population was also estimated to be 13.6 percent of the total US population in 2020 and that it was expected to rise to 13.9 percent in 2025 (US Census Bureau, 2018b; Vespa, Medina, and Armstrong, 2020, 7). The Asian population has also increased, estimated to be 5.8 percent of the total US population in 2020 and expected to rise to 6.3 percent by 2025 (US Census Bureau, 2018b). In contrast, the share of the NHW (“Non-Hispanic White”) or “Not-Hispanic or Non-Latino” group of Whites has been declining and is projected to continue to decline because of the aging of the NHW population and its lower fertility rate. In 2020, the census estimated this group to be 59.7 percent of the total; it is expected to decline to 57.7 percent in 2025 and to less than 50 percent in subsequent years (US Census Bureau, 2018b). More importantly, in terms of future scenarios, the census announced, “By 2020, fewer than one half of children in the United States are projected to be non-Hispanic White” (Vespa, Medina, and Armstrong, 2020, 4). Although these trends may reverse, depending on future fertility, mortality, and international migration, this is the current picture: non-Hispanic Whites composing barely 60 percent of the total and declining, and the minorities’ share increasing.

Along with this growth in the Hispanic/Latinx population, there has been a growth in purchasing power and strong consumption of media by the Latinx population (Morse, 2019). As a Price Waterhouse Coopers study concluded, US-based Hispanic consumers dominate mobile, entertainment, and much of popular media viewing and they “represent a growing market of media hungry, social influencers with spending power that continues to multiply” (PricewaterhouseCoopers (2016, 2). In essence, Latinxs are “super fans,” and this Consumer Intelligence Series report recommends that they be treated as such.

Given these demographic shifts, which highlight the growth of the Latinx population, one would expect more Latinxs to appear in the popular media programming. But do they? If so, how have they been included, that is, in what kinds of roles? How are Latinxs’ place within society portrayed in US media, especially in TV, film, and news reporting? How well are the issues that many Latinxs confront when pursuing the American dream portrayed? How often do we find the perspectives or stories of Latinxs in our normal, daily viewing of US news, scripted programming, or films? In essence, is the current demographic reality reflected in our media and, if yes, how is it portrayed? This chapter addresses these questions by reviewing the relevant literature and then focusing on the recent media coverage of “Puerto Rico and Puerto Ricans” in US English language mass media.

Latinx Diversity: A Mexican Is Not a Puerto Rican Is Not a Cuban Is Not a Salvadoran Is Not a Honduran, and So Forth

In examining the treatment of ethnic communities, it is important to bear in mind that just as Asian Americans and other racialized groups in the US are not monolithic, so too the Latinx community
is hugely diverse. Latinxs herald from over twenty Spanish-speaking countries. They are further
crosscut by race, class, gender, geographic concentration, and history in the US. In fact, some Latinx
subgroups predate the formation of the US. In addition, the histories of their respective countries
of origin with regard to the US also distinguish some groups (Gonzalez, 2011). Latinx scholars have
long been aware of these interethnic differences. For example, Pedraza-Bailey (1985) early on focused
on the refugee status of post-Castro Cubans versus the labor migrant status of Mexicans. Also, there
is—as one Latinx comedian recently put it—the “no papers needed” status of Puerto Ricans.

In the past, little attention was paid to the number of people who crossed the southern border
to visit family or to pursue a new life in the US. It is only fairly recently that these border crossings
became an issue. Indeed, the well-known Academy Award–winning actor of fifties and sixties fame,
Anthony Quinn, got into the acting business because his father crossed the border and found work
behind the cameras in early Hollywood. Quinn was born Manuel Antonio Rodolfo Quinn Oaxaca
and his father was undocumented. It was only during the Obama administration that deportations
increased and that the term “Dreamers” was applied to the “children of immigrants” who came to
the US without papers. This is when the DACA legislation (the Deferred Action for Childhood
Arrivals) was passed in 2012 as a first step toward adopting broader immigration reform. The Trump
administration attempted to “wind down” the DACA program, but in 2018 the US 9th Circuit
Court of Appeals ruled against the Trump administration. In June 2020, the Supreme Court ruled
that DACA could not immediately be shut down, as the justification the government gave was insuf-
cient or, in legal terms, “arbitrary and capricious.” However, Chief Justice Roberts said that the
administration might try again to provide adequate reasons (see Savage, 2020 and Liptak and Shear,
2020). Since those crossing the southern US border come from many Central American and South
American nations, diversity within the Latinx American community has grown.

Intermarriage rates also contribute to this diversity. Within both the Asian American and the
Latinx communities, intermarriage rates with other groups are high. According to Livingston and
Brown (2017), since the 1967 Loving decision, when intermarriage restrictions were declared uncon-
stitutional, the rates of intermarriage have increased for all groups, but the rate is particularly high for
Latinxs, who make up a substantial share of intermarried couples in the US.

As one consequence of these trends, Latinxs are hugely diverse. But, there are strong cultural, lin-
guistic, and intermarriage ties, as well as other intersectionalities of class, gender, and race that exist
within the US Latinx community. Moreover, there is the tendency of others (non-Latinx and Latinx)
to lump all persons identified or profiled as Hispanic or Latinx into the same generic category and to
treat them accordingly. This is illustrated in the story I cited earlier of the young, newly hired Latina
assistant professor who was assumed to be a childcare worker, and not a faculty member, when she
went to register her child at the university’s childcare center. It should be added that her university
was and is still generally considered to be a well-regarded, progressive institution. I wonder now how
this experience influenced her views of the American dream and how often countless stories like
hers—all too common for Latinxs—make it into our mass media? How does the inclusion or exclu-
sion of such stories influence how we, as Americans, think about the American dream?

Early Studies of Race/Ethnicity and the Mass Media

Studies have shown that many American dreams are formed by the illusions that TV manufactures.
Do US media images and narratives support, or distort, Latinxs’ pursuit of the American dream?
How do these mass media portrayals influence young Latinxs, given that the US’s future will be
greatly influenced by the makeup of its youngest cohort? In this regard, the National Center for
Educational Statistics recently indicated that between fall 2000 and fall 2017, the percentage of pub-
lic school students who were Hispanic increased from 16 to 27 percent. Meanwhile, the percentage
of public school students who were White decreased from 61 to 48 percent and the percentage of
students who were Black decreased from 17 to 15 percent (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2020). Given these demographic changes, how do media images of Latinxs influence not just Latinx children, but all children, the majority of whom attend public school?

There has been a growing awareness of how all children’s views or desires are influenced by mass media, whether through commercial advertising or by programming with strong themes of violence. Research has shown that children’s views on race and ethnicity are also influenced by the media images that they see on TV. Children Now’s (1998) early study of 1,200 children ages 10–17 clearly showed that positive characteristics were often associated with White characters and negative characteristics were associated with minority characters. To be more specific, White characters were identified as having lots of money, being well educated, being a teacher, doing well in school, and being intelligent. Minority characters, to the contrary, were depicted breaking the law, having a hard time financially, being lazy, and acting poorly. As the study notes, “Children think that the roles of boss, secretary, police officer and doctor in television programs are usually played by White people while the roles of criminal and maid/janitor on television are usually played by African-Americans.” This was true across each of the groups of 300 children, whether African Americans, Asian Americans, Latinx Americans, and White Americans, who were questioned via focus groups and surveys. In short, race and social class were tightly connected in children’s minds, as a result of viewing TV, which is still for many the most economical and available media source.

Moreover, all the groups in the Children Now (1998) study agreed that the news media tended to portray African American and Latinx people—especially young people—more negatively. Yet, in this study conducted over twenty years ago, all of the groups agreed that it was important for children to see people of their own race on TV, and over 80 percent believed that the media could teach children that people of their race were important. Their responses suggested that children wanted to see more people of all races interacting, and they wanted TV programming to reflect the reality of their lives. A more recent study by (PricewaterhouseCoopers (2016, 21) that focused on Hispanics of all ages from different generations also found clear majorities of each generation saying, “I like seeing people like me on TV, on YouTube” and on all media.

Mass Media and the Latinx Community Today

We live in an era where media has hugely expanded, in part because of technology and greater access to that technology by more people and, in part, due to corporate expansion. As The Economist (2019) recently noted, although there have been changes in how viewers receive and access their media, the media giants continue to expand and to vie for viewers’ eyeballs. Media has become enormously important. This has especially been the case during the recent COVID-19 pandemic, when electronic media became the main means of communication for social, familial, and business purposes as well as for entertainment. The election of a media-shrewd president has also contributed to its significance vis-à-vis political events. A number of articles have focused on this. For example, Keefe (2019) details (via interviews with those responsible for producing the show) how Trump’s time on The Apprentice contributed to his media orientation, especially with regard to network television, which still reaches millions of viewers on a daily basis.

As Hauhart (2018, p. 51) has noted,

The expansion of media’s reach and influence over the twentieth century has only been exponentially increased in the twenty-first century by the proliferation of cable channels on television, the explosion of alternative talk radio, and the apparently limitless tendency of the internet to generate new venues for distributing personal expression, political opinion, information and disinformation. In essence, mass media (also known as “popular media” for a reason) is defined by its wide reach—nearly everyone in US society can access it.
The American Dream, Latinx, and Mass Media

Indeed the impact of US media on what constitutes the American dream is so extensive that it extends beyond United States borders to other countries. Interestingly, it is only when those from other countries come to the United States that they realize how much the reality of life here differs from what is projected by the mass media. In particular, visitors and immigrants discover how much of the everyday reality of diversity in the United States is absent from media coverage. When I asked my fairly recently arrived, foreign-born sample of seventy-one young, avid US TV watchers from thirty-seven different countries whether US TV provided them an accurate reflection of race-ethnic relations before coming to the United States, over 74 percent responded unequivocally “No” (Rodríguez, 2018). I quote some of their responses next. (Because the interview respondents I quote came from different countries and were not native English speakers, I have placed words or phrases in brackets after awkward phrases for the reader’s benefit. I do not use my respondents’ real names.)

Alicia, an undergrad from Brazil, said that on TV, “Everybody is white except for one; or everybody is black.” Speaking to the issue of “tokenism,” she added that she hadn’t “found a show that reflects what she now sees—a variety of colors.” Yang, a grad student from China, said, “The main characters are always white and in the US there are a lot more people here—not just white.” Indira, a graduate student from India, said, “I just saw white people. . . . Another surprise when I came were [was] seeing many Asians here. I saw America as just white people [on TV].” Nanette, from the Yukon in Canada, said, “They don’t really show all of the dynamics of society, all the different races and ethnic backgrounds.”

Only a minority of my respondents (13%) felt that race/ethnic relations were worse than had been shown on US TV. Interestingly, others felt that the actual “positive sides of diversity” that they observed in the US were not shown, for example learning about neighbors’ food and cultural customs. Moreover, they noted that other types of diversity, which they also observed now that they were in the US, were not shown, for example religious or intraethnic diversity. Nevertheless, a majority (54%) acknowledged that watching US TV had influenced their views of race, and a near majority (45%) admitted that their views on culture and ethnicity were also influenced (Rodríguez, 2018, 120 and Chapter 7). In addition, they acknowledged that watching US TV in their home countries influenced their lifestyles, views, and consumption patterns (Rodríguez, 2018, Chapter 4 and Chapter 8), a measure of just how influential mass media can be.

Latinx Americans are avid users of all mass media: they are not only TV owners and watchers but also radio listeners, moviegoers, social media participants, periodical readers, and paperback book buyers. As such, they are exposed to the culture content as well as the advertising content accompanying commercial mass media. Both ads and content sell a particular version of the American dream, which influences the way in which viewers see themselves. Those who immigrate to the United States want to be fully included in American life. They wish to receive equal opportunity not only to consume culture but also to define themselves and define American life as one that respects their Latinx heritage. Latinx Americans want to see and hear what they bring to the equation, for example their culture, the Spanish language, and their past and present contributions to the United States. To a substantial degree, mass media is behind schedule on acknowledging some of these contributions. To cite a pedestrian, perhaps amusing example, we knew by 2013, although the mass media did not widely announce it, that salsa had surpassed ketchup as America’s preferred condiment (Associated Press, 2013).

Research Studies Focusing on Diversity in the Media

Numerous studies have detailed the historical and continuing lack of diversity in US media, in particular the relative absence and misrepresentation of Latinxs. Negrón-Muntaner et al. (2014) analyzed the top ten movies, as measured by domestic gross revenue, as well as the top ten highest rated, scripted TV shows on network, PBS, and select YouTube sites through March 31, 2014. They also
conducted twenty-seven interviews between 2009 and 2014 with media advocates, executives, and innovators. They found that while the Latinx population had increased, and the number of Latinx supporting actors had increased, the number of Latinx leads had actually decreased.

In addition, the proportion of Latinx directors was a paltry 2.3 percent. Similarly, Latinx producers constituted only 2.8 percent and Latinx writers 6 percent of those employed on these projects. They also noted that the majority of the Latinxs in these positions were from Latin America and not from the United States. Mochkofsky (2019) similarly found that most Latinx news journalists were Latin American immigrants as opposed to US-born Latinxs who came from the communities the Latin American journalists were hired to cover. Negrón-Muntaner et al. (2014) concluded that the rate of change was slow and that the range of characters was narrow. Furthermore, they found that news coverage was worse than the fictional world they analyzed, for they found that only 1.8 percent of TV news producers were Latinx, and that the proportion of Latinx guests on news/talk shows accounted for only 2.7 percent of all guests. Not surprisingly, the proportion of Emmys awarded to Latinxs from 2002 to 2013 was only 1.9 percent.

Smith, Choueiti, and Pieper (2013, 2016) have conducted similar, but broader, analyses and arrived at similar conclusions. In 2013, they reviewed the top one hundred grossing films from 2007 to 2012 and found that only 10 percent of the characters in these most popular films were Black, 4.2 percent Hispanic, 5 percent Asian, and 3.6 other or mixed. Seventy-five percent of the speaking characters were White, and females were underrepresented in every group, with Hispanic females “more likely to be depicted in sexy attire and partially naked than Black or White females,” while Asian females were less likely to be sexualized. Over the five-year period they studied, they found little deviation from these patterns. They expanded their analysis in 2016 and included ten major media companies, prime time first-run scripted series, and digital offerings that had aired between September 2014 and August 2015. They found that Hollywood continued to have “a diversity problem.” It was soon after this study that the powerful hashtag #HollywoodSoWhite made its appearance.

The diversity problem is not limited to Latinxs. Hunt and Ramón (2020) examined the top 200 theatrical film releases in 2018 and 2019 to determine the extent to which people of color and women were present in front of and behind the camera. They found that in 2019, despite gains made, people of color remained underrepresented among film leads, film directors, film writers, total actors, and studio heads. Women, likewise, made progress in these areas, but also remained underrepresented on every front—“though they approached proportionate representation among acting roles” (3). And yet, when Hunt and Ramón (2020) surveyed which films were the most successful at the global box office, they found that those films with the most diverse casts enjoyed the highest median global box office receipts, and those with the least diverse casts were the poorest performers. People of color also accounted for the majority of domestic ticket sales for eight of the top ten films in 2019. Despite these findings, the award structure did not change very much. At the 2018 Oscars, nineteen of the twenty acting nominees were White, and not a single film directed by a woman was nominated in the best director category. In 2019, actors of color fared better: three of the four winners in the major acting categories were nonwhite actors. However, in 2020, the nominations and awards were less diverse overall.

The studies on Latinxs are not particularly surprising to those who follow the scholarly literature. They do raise doubts about whether the media has sufficiently incorporated this large and fast-growing group into its view of “what” or “who” America is today. While some quality programs have featured Latinx Americans prominently, they have tended to be short-lived. One of the better-known examples is Ugly Betty, a comedy-drama on ABC (American Broadcasting Corporation) that aired from 2006 to 2010. Jane, the Virgin fared a bit better, running from 2014 to 2019. The show also won the first Golden Globe award for the CW network and was very popular within the Latinx and other communities. More recently, a revived One Day at a Time (2017–?), which was premised on the earlier (1975–1984) non-Hispanic comedy series by Norman Lear, has had a fitful on-and-off
experience with various carriers. It is unclear, as of this writing, when and what its future will be. *The Baker and the Beauty*, hugely successful in Israel and adapted to the American screen with a Latinx family, debuted in 2020 but was cancelled after only 2-1/2 months. Low viewership was cited for the cancellation, but questions remain about whether the show was treated in the same way as other shows with similar numbers of viewers. Was the show cut off sooner than other shows with predominantly White casts and story lines? Did they receive similar and effective advertising? Only *Dora, the Explorer*, a cartoon on Nickelodeon Jr. with a lead Latina character, had what is considered a long run, that is, 2000–2019.

In addition, many of the Latinx characters that appeared in some series disappeared or were killed off early in some series. For example, in the long-running *Lost* series (9/2004–5/2010)—still viewable via Netflix—a number of Latinx characters were written out of the series early on; or, in other series, the Latinx ethnicity of the character was not transparent. Moreover, the Latinx characters were often marginal, and many fit the stereotypes of vixens, victims, or victimizers (Rodríguez, 1997). The Latinx community is hardly unaware of this continuing lack of representation and misrepresentation. Segura and Pedraza (2018) polled a sample of 423 Latinx adults in the US in 2018 and found that despite being enthusiastic consumers of various media (e.g., TV, cable, streaming, downloads, DVDs, and films), significant majorities thought there were not enough Latina/o actors, directors, or story lines in the media they consumed. Moreover, the majority saw stereotypical portrayals of Latinxs in film as harmful, and they wanted to see more films with “relevant stories and co-ethnic talent” (3). Young moviegoers (18–20) were even more likely than were older patrons to want to see Latinx-themed films or Latinx talent.

There is a long history here. As Félix Gutiérrez (2016), Professor Emeritus of Journalism and Communication in the Annenberg School at the University of Southern California and a veteran chronicler of Latinx images, notes,

Greasy bandidos, fat mamacitas, romantic Latin lovers, lazy peons sleeping under sombreros, short-tempered Mexican spitfires, violent revolutionaries, faithful servants, gang members, and sexy señoritas with low-cut blouses and loose morals have long been staples of Latin images in fiction, films, and television.

With regard to the news media, he also observes, “When Latinos were covered in Anglo news media during much of the 20th century, the editors, news directors, and reporters often used shorthand word symbols to trigger stereotypes of Latinxs as posing a threat, i.e., “Zoot Suiters” in the 1940s, “Wetbacks” in the 1950s, “Chicano Militants” in the 1960s, and “Illegal Aliens” in the 1970s and 1980s.”

*Early Films*

However, an even longer historical view shows that it was not always exactly this way, as early on in film history there were periods when “Latin” often included those who spoke a language derived from Latin, for example Italians and the French, it did not exclude Latinxs from “south of the border.” Indeed, there were major male and female Mexican movie stars acting in and headlining early Hollywood films, as well as playing non-Latinx roles and Latina/o characters in all class positions. Some names that will be familiar to history film buffs include Myrtle Gonzalez, who was born in Los Angeles, a native Mexican Californian who had her first starring role in 1912. She was one of Universal’s best-known leading ladies at the time. According to popular fan magazines of the time, there were also other prominent and celebrated Latinx actors, for example Dolores Del Rio, Lupe Velez, and Ramon Novarro from Mexico; Antonio Moreno from Spain, and Maria Montez from the Dominican Republic. Even non-Latinxs took on Latinx names due to their popularity. For example, Jacob Krantz, a Hungarian immigrant, took
on the name Ricardo Cortez; Krantz achieved major marquis status and starred in over ninety movies with that name (Rodriguez, 2008)

The inclusion of Latina/o actors in early films was facilitated by a number of factors. For example, as a new industry that had evolved from the penny arcades and the burlesque halls, acting in films was not yet accepted as a fully respectable profession. The films were also Black-and-White, blurring shades of skin color, and white makeup was used extensively to accentuate features. The films were also silent, thus obliterating accent differences. Finally, many of the studio heads and directors were immigrants themselves who had not yet fully incorporated American subtleties of discrimination and exclusion. For some, a dark-haired Mexican beauty was reminiscent of the Eastern and Southern European beauties they had grown up with and admired. For many of the same reasons, the hugely popular silent screen actor, Rudolf Valentino (from Italy), was cast as and personified the original Latin Lover. The early movie-going public also likely included many of the immigrants and children of immigrants who had come to the US in the late nineteenth century from Southern and Eastern Europe.

The Questions Today

This quick overview of the history of media and film treatment of Latinxs raises important questions. How successfully can Latinxs and others pursue the “American Dream” if US diversity and Latinxs’ own positive and historical contributions to this diversity are not conveyed within the entertainment media? Equally to the point, how fruitfully can Latinxs pursue the American dream if the news media and even the academics producing the research literature and training the future journalists are not covering Latinx culture? As Graciela Mochkofsky, Tow Professor and Director of the Spanish-language Journalism Program at the Craig Newmark Graduate School of Journalism at the City University of New York, noted, “most mainstream media studies and criticism regularly ignore Latino journalism—as well as pretty much all media serving US communities of color” (Mochkofsky, 2019). What are Latinxs to do? How do they pursue the American dream, despite their absence from these media narratives? One approach is reflected in the following: Maria Teresa Kumar is an activist, television co-host, and founder and CEO of Voto Latino, “a grassroots political organization focused on educating and empowering a new generation of Latinx voters, as well as creating a more robust and inclusive democracy” (www.votolatino.org). When asked, “What’s your favorite object in your office?” she responded,

A statue of Cesar Chavez next to the American flag. It speaks to why I do what I do. I deeply believe in America and her possibility, and it’s a constant reminder that her possibility can’t be realized until we provide real equity and opportunity for the most marginalized among us.

(Fast Company, 2020, 38)

This approach speaks strongly to how important it is for Latinxs to become familiar with their own histories of struggles and successes and see them portrayed.

Media Coverage in Puerto Rico

Why the focus here on media coverage on Puerto Rico and Puerto Ricans? Given the historical significance of Puerto Rico vis-à-vis the US, and especially given what has occurred in Puerto Rico in the last three years, it is significant how little media coverage has been given to the extraordinary events that have occurred there. To note just a few:

- In September 2017, Hurricane Maria struck. Maria was a deadly Category 5 hurricane that left over 4,000 people dead (Hernandez and McGinley, 2018) and left the island without power for
months. According to the National Hurricane Center, it was the tenth–most intense Atlantic hurricane on record and the most intense tropical cyclone worldwide that year. It also devastated Dominica and St Croix.

- There was also the citizen-led, peaceful, forced resignation of the elected governor, Ricardo Rosello, in which thousands of Puerto Ricans participated. Although a precedent-setting political event, media coverage was limited. Where else has that happened within the US or its territories? Indeed, how often had this occurred anywhere in the world in recent times?
- As of this writing, Puerto Rico has suffered continuing earthquakes and mudslides.
- Lastly, while all Americans have been affected by COVID-19, the situation in Puerto Rico has garnered little attention. To quote Miguel A. Soto-Class, president and founder of the Center for a New Economy in Puerto Rico, “What is a gut-punch to New York or California is a knock-out blow for us” (Soto-Class, 2020).

“This Ain’t No American Dream We’re Livin’ In”

In essence, the previous listing of events conveys the sentiment that is echoed in the phrase, “this ain’t no American dream we’re livin’ in.” This idea may be found in many songs and literary sources, but my source here is the film *Pow Wow Highway* (1989). It is spoken by Buddy Red Bow (played by A. Martinez), a character who is a member of the Cheyenne nation and a former Viet Nam vet. Buddy describes his reservation in this way to a corporate entity that is interested in continuing its profitable strip-mining operations on the reservation. The quote is relevant to the media coverage on Puerto Rico because areas such as Native American Indian reservations or unincorporated territories are often viewed only from the perspective of how they can be used to increase corporate profit. Marginalized Americans, whether on Native American reservations or island territories, are less often taken into account when the question is one that concerns their welfare, health, safety, and betterment.

**The Coverage**

It is true that some mainstream journalists, like David Begnaud from CBS News, have consistently followed events in Puerto Rico after Maria and have attempted to portray both the views from within as well as the views from without. Occasional articles, such as one by Rosa and Robles (2020), have also highlighted the impact of the pandemic in Puerto Rico. Still, it does not overstate the matter to say mass media coverage in English was—and has been since these events—occasional, minimal, and often superficial. A striking example is the initial announcement of only sixty or so deaths occasioned by Hurricane Maria. This low number continued to persist despite the fact that research studies, such as that at Harvard noted earlier, calculated the number of deaths after Hurricane Maria to be over 4,000. The Spanish-language media in the US had more coverage, but a 2017 study of Hispanic language preferences by media type for Latinxs ages 18 and up found that substantial proportions preferred English-language content (Dunkin, 2019). This is not an insignificant matter.

To some degree, it was the impact of the hurricane on the communications system in Puerto Rico that also contributed to the lack of coverage. As Modestti González (2018) notes, the day after the hurricane, 95.2 percent of the cell towers in Puerto Rico were out of service. And analyses by the Federal Communications Commission continued to show major outages months after the hurricane. But even this fact received little media attention. Except infrequently, it was as though Puerto Rico fell off the map.

Indeed, when Hurricane Maria took place I decided to join Facebook for the first time. That was practically the only place, I learned, to get any information on what had happened and how people and my extended family were doing. Hundreds, perhaps thousands, of families did not know
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whether their relatives were dead, ill, sheltered, hungry, or lost. The situation persisted for months. In essence, Facebook was where people went to find out who was alive, who was not, who was in need, where people were now living or had gone, and what human and property losses they had incurred. It was the people, using Facebook, who found the other people—not the media and not the government in Puerto Rico or in the US. Stories of how people in general were recovering from the hurricane were hard to locate since coverage was largely absent from my English-language mass media.

Strengths and Resilience Generally Missed

As noted earlier, part of this lack of coverage after Maria is explained by the major power and communications outages in Puerto Rico at the time. Another part of it is explained by the fact that Puerto Rico (like Hawaii) is an island far from the continental US. However, when camera crews or government relief organizations complained that they could not “get there” or could not deliver aid and supplies to Puerto Rico, many Puerto Ricans in the states (including myself) raised questions such as Where are the helicopters? They still exist, don’t they? When food, water, or supplies did arrive, they were often not distributed. Trucks or cars could not travel on roads severely damaged by the hurricane. I thought then, “are there no jeeps or tractors that could help?” Then I saw at least one photo (perhaps on Facebook) of a line of ordinary Puerto Rican residents who, standing next to one another, had figured out that they could pass from hand to hand the supplies, so that they could be brought up the mountain road that the convoys, cars, or trucks could not navigate. This was a story of impressive resourcefulness and ingenuity but one that was widely underreported. There were and have continued to be many, many such efforts to address the effects of the hurricane as well as the subsequent earthquakes. Yet these stories of resiliency, strength, and successes have received little US media attention—although they have much to teach others facing similar situations—and much to teach about Puerto Ricans.

There have been exceptions to this pattern of omission. Chef José Andrés, displaying a similar “can do” attitude (but receiving more media attention, which was quite merited), was covered in news stories cooking and distributing food to all who were hungry. He did very well what other organizations charged with distributing food could not do. Additionally, a recent opinion piece by Nicholas Kristof (2020) does speak more generally to the resiliency that Hispanics in the US have demonstrated when faced with difficult situations. Kristof also suggests that Hispanics might offer a model for civil society during the current pandemic.

Additionally, some academics have begun to study and describe these experiences (see, for example, the edited volume by Bonilla and LeBrón (2019). And, others have begun visually documenting some of these efforts—what has succeeded under these conditions, and what, therefore, might be applicable to other areas in the US or around the world. See, for example, Collins’s (2020) social documentary covering the history and environmental impact of the hurricane and earthquakes in Puerto Rico and Fritz’s (2019) documentary that reveals the strength and sustainability of the people of Puerto Rico and their sense of community. See also websites for the Center for Puerto Rican Studies at Hunter College (www.centropr.hunter.cuny.edu) and Casa Pueblo (www.casapueblo.org). Both have provided, and continue to provide, invaluable information on the efforts at recovery, as well as opportunities for vital exchange between those involved in the recovery efforts.

However, little attention from the popular media has been given to these ongoing recovery efforts. For example, many efforts are now at work to utilize solar energy, community-driven alternative and affordable energy approaches, environmentally sustainable systems, hybrid approaches, and water collecting systems. Efforts have also continued to educate others to be more conscious of how to protect themselves and the environment so as to be prepared for future emergencies. Moreover, some groups have also begun to encourage greater use of indigenous materials and locally sourced and produced...
products and foods, so as to shift from an import-dependent economy to one that makes more and better use of Puerto Rico's own natural resources.

Sadly, however, the most prominent and memorable mass media coverage of the hurricane was the film footage of President Trump throwing paper towels into the crowd of onlookers in Puerto Rico, who had just experienced the worst hurricane to hit the island in over eighty years. In some ways, Professor Cecilio Ortiz's statement, “Hurricane Maria and Puerto Rico foreshadowed how the U.S. would deal with the COVID-19 pandemic,” is both prescient and relevant (Collins, 2020).

Black Lives Matter and COVID-19

As I began to write this chapter, I was happy to see that the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement had, to a large degree, influenced a reconceptualization of the US as a country where Black—and I would add—Brown and other nonwhite lives should matter as much as White lives. As our constitution requires, all people should be treated equally, especially within the criminal justice system. Still, white/not-white differential treatment tends to permeate many institutions and dimensions of life in the US. The pictures of recent citizen–police encounters have played an important role in illustrating the differential treatment that those who are “not white” often receive, especially within the criminal justice system. Those images have led many people of all races and ages in the US to reconsider whether all are treated equally and if all lives really do matter. Furthermore, as in the past, the call has been heard internationally (Blain, 2020). The impact of BLM has also been felt in other countries as well. As The Economist (2020) states,

America is both a country and an idea. When the two do not match, non-Americans notice more than when an injustice is perpetrated in say, Mexico or Russia. And wrapped up in that idea of America is a conviction that progress is possible.

The “idea” referenced here is the American dream, and also implicit is the idea that progress is associated with its successful achievement. African Americans/Blacks and their allies have opened, or reopened, the conversation about the roads we all walk in life. And, I am grateful to the historical and current roles that they have played in reminding us all that everyone should be allowed to walk on the same roads.

The recent protests inspired by this summer’s events and the BLM movement have occurred within the devastating and historically unique COVID-19 health crisis. Here again I observed minimal media attention given to the impact on the Latinx community. It was no surprise to me, and it is now no secret, that COVID-19 impacted communities of color in the United States disproportionately. As the epidemic continues, numbers will continue to change, but initial reports that included counts of Latinxs in New York City, the early epicenter, showed that in the city’s most infected zip code, 37 percent of the residents were Latinx; in the second-most infected zip code, 64 percent of the residents were Latinx (Despres, 2020; US Bureau of The Census, 2019). In the city as a whole, the age-adjusted death rate for COVID-19 was 22.8 (per 100,000) for Latinxs, 19.8 for African Americans, 10.2 for Whites, and 8.4 for Asian Americans (Mays and Newman, 2020).

As Mays and Newman (2020) note, “Latinos represent 34 percent of the people who have died of the coronavirus but make up 29 percent of the city’s population, according to preliminary data from the city’s Health Department.” Further, these authors call attention to the fact that these figures do not include the “100 to 200 people per day” who die at home and are presumed to be virus victims but were not tested. Of course, Latinxs are not the only group overrepresented in death rates from COVID-19. As Mays and Newman (2020) also note, Black people represent 28 percent of deaths but make up 22 percent of the area population. However, Latinxs are, at the point of this writing, still the most affected in New York City. On the national level, “the fullest look yet at the racial inequity of
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coronavirus found the number of corona virus cases per 10,000 people” to be 23 for Whites, 62 for Blacks, and 73 for Latinxs (Oppel et al., 2020). This is particularly troubling. For as Kristof (2020, 9) notes, “despite poverty and discrimination, Hispanic Americans live significantly longer than white or black Americans” and they have enjoyed a longer life expectancy—81.8 years for Latinxs compared with 78.5 years for Whites and 74.9 years for Blacks (Kristof, 2020, 9).

According to Sáenz (2020), Latinxs are also overrepresented among people infected with the COVID-19 virus relative to their share of the population in those states beyond New York’s borders that separately report Latinx cases. This is particularly concerning because Latinxs are relatively younger than other groups in those same states—and younger people have tended to have lower death rates overall. The higher incidences are due, in part, to the jobs that Latinxs tend to have, which are often in the “essential workers” category—jobs such as delivering food, operating public transit, and working in health care. As a recent study by the Pew Research Center found, Americans generally agree that immigrants—whether undocumented or living legally in the country—mostly do not work in jobs that US citizens want (see Krogstad, Lopez, and Passel, 2020). These are the workers who cannot telecommute; they fill jobs that often bring them into closer contact with others (often ill individuals).

In part, the Latinx infection rate is also due to fewer healthcare options, lower incomes, living in high-density housing, and sometimes living in multigenerational households. Disparities in health care and underlying health conditions, such as higher incidences of heart disease, diabetes, asthma, and hypertension, may also make Latinx and other groups more susceptible. In addition, some Latinxs may be discouraged from seeking medical care because of the lack of information in Spanish or for fear of being deported. These inequities have received some modest attention in the media, but all of these factors, plus disparities in health care, may make some regrettably believe that these differentials account for a more “acceptable” level of death. Or, as some may put it, it stands to reason that given these conditions, death and contagion rates are higher. And, the upshot of this thinking can result in less serious media attention being paid to what undergirds or contributes to these conditions for both Black and Brown Americans.

Conclusion

Research has shown that media images and coverage tend not to be as inclusive or representative of Latinxs as their influence and proportion of the US population should reflect. Mass media coverage of Black Americans reflects a similar degree of neglect, and the BLM movement reminds us that the American dream is only a national dream if it is shared by all Americans. And so, I am buoyed by the success of the BLM movement—facilitated in part by social media and greater mass media attention—in raising greater consciousness about these issues and by the involvement of people of all races, ages, and classes in this movement. BLM affirms the intent of the American dream, as defined at the start of this chapter—that it should be open to all who wish to pursue it. Also, as stated at the start of this chapter and as the BLM movement continues to remind us, the American dream is a dream of a social order in which each person “shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position” (Adams, 1931).

Notes

1. The US Census Bureau uses the terms, “Latino” or “Hispanic” to gather its counts, and I use the terms employed by the sources that I quote. But in writing this chapter, I have chosen to also use the term Latinx, as it is a fairly recently introduced generic term that seeks to be as inclusive as possible. For those interested in the debates surrounding the best term to use, see the following: Gimenez (1989), Hayes Bautista and Chapa (1987), Oboler (1995), Steinmetz (2018), and Treviño (1987).
2. An accurate 2020 decennial census count may be marred by the presence of the pandemic, which has made door-to-door surveying difficult, and by fears on the part of some Latinx/Hispanics of being counted because they are noncitizens or undocumented. Or, they may be reluctant to be counted because they are residing with and/or related to others who are in these categories. Also, they may fear that, within the current anti-immigrant political context, this might endanger these relatives, who could be grandmothers, cousins, or parents.

3. Since this chapter will focus on Puerto Rico, I add the Puerto Rico population figures, making for a total of more than 65,117 million Latinx in the US in 2020. The population figure for Puerto Rico is based on the Worldometer elaboration of the latest United Nations data. According to this, the population of Puerto Rico was 2,864,170 as of Tuesday, June 9, 2020. www.worldometers.info/world-population/puerto-rico, accessed, 6/11/20.

4. This figure comes from a Harvard study that was published in the New England Journal of Medicine that put the deaths figure at an average of 4,645 dead, but the study also indicated that deaths might have surpassed 8,000, as many died subsequent to the hurricane.

References
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