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"All things change, but Gilbert Roland remains the same" (or not?). Recycling, adaptability, and endurance in age transition*

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Gilbert Roland's career spanned from the early 1920s to 1982, the year of his last appearance on-screen. In 1974, when he was 69, the *Los Angeles Times* commented upon his capacity to endure, defining his glamorous figure as living proof that time can add character to his handsome Latin features. Still, the sense of fulfillment derives less from invariability than from his ability to adapt to Hollywood's evolving trends and global expectations. This article contributes to the adaptability hypothesis for aging stars addressed by this special issue of *Mediascapes* by exploring Roland's critical moments. At the beginning of his career, the actor either capitalized on the Latin Lover trend or attempted to erase his origins to avoid excessive typecasting. However, as he aged, his career stalled in smaller movies, and finding roles became all the more challenging. The turning point took place after World War II, when the actor, now in his 50s, began portraying characters associated with his Mexican origin. He aimed to present a more confident and assertive image of Mexico in Hollywood through the characters he played on the screen. Two main strategies employed by Roland are emphasized in the article: firstly, he proposed a positive role model, established through a well-planned program combining awareness of aging and the objective of maintaining a consistent standard of professionalism. Secondly, he addressed his audiences across the US-Mexico border to secure a transnational and transgenerational understanding of his messages. This article provides a fresh perspective on Gilbert Roland's career by moving beyond the narrow portrayal of him as just a Latin Lover, which has been the focus of academic scholarship thus far. Instead, it highlights his modern approach, based on a full grasp of the factors that have driven popularity in the post-war phase of Hollywood studio production.

Keywords: Adaptability, Latin lover, Mexican actor, Star system, Post-war Hollywood

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An interesting article published in the *Herald Examiner* in 1969 defines Gilbert Roland as a "fully realized man", an appropriate definition for such an actor whose career spans from the 1920s, when he started as an extra at $3 a day with Clark Gable and Gary Cooper, to 1982, the year of his last appearance on the screen. At that time, this Mexican American actor, arrived in Hollywood at the age of fourteen, was a seventy-year-old man. The article describes Roland as a transnational star, widely recognized by an audience distributed along the US-Mexico border, where people admired him for fifty years. Roland's endurance was his best quality. The columnist delves into the actor's perseverance and ability to adapt as he navigated the shifting landscape of different practices and modes of production. Primarily, the editorial highlights how this ability played a pivotal role in shaping Roland's career, enabling him to thrive despite a series of ongoing challenges (AMPAS, "Scrapbook n. 5"). However, his skill in being responsive to change was mostly grounded on a strategy for communicating his ethnic identity in a way that reflected the social temper of the time. His approach impacted how Hispanics were perceived in American society after World War II. This essay intends to explore the relationship between maturity and ethnicity, arguing that a self-aware ethnic stance enabled Roland to succeed in old age and adjust to a growing sensibility focused on a different, renovated cause. The connection between ethnicity and maturity allowed him to establish effective foundations for the transnational and transgenerational success that characterized the latter phase of his career, after he turned fifty.

Roland's career can be divided into two phases, with World War II as a pivotal point between the first and the second. The initial phase lasted from 1925 to 1940, when the image of Roland as a Latin lover emerged according to the established formulas introduced by studio production. The second phase, from 1945 to 1982, marked a shift toward embracing the realities of old age. Simultaneously, the period represented a significant moment of self-awareness regarding ethnicity in Roland's life, a personal choice that reflected a broader shift in American society, culture, and cinema industry. The emergence of a new generation of actors who willingly engaged with the cause of the early civil rights movement also mirrored the advent of a post-1948 phase of studio production after the landmark antitrust case at the US Supreme Court leading to the Paramount Decrees. This phase is often remembered as an era in which Hollywood industry increasingly adopted flexible production and distribution practices, fostering independent enterprise and international creativity based on the contribution of new global talents (Mann, 2004). Roland's move toward a different communication strategy partially echoed this critical change, especially when the actor addressed audiences across the border, emphasizing his ethnic origin or clearly articulating his fight for a wider variety of roles for Mexican actors. By examining Roland's life and career, we can assess not only the evolving portrayal of Mexicans in Hollywood but also the actor's way to cope with aging issues.

Luis Antonio Dámaso de Alonso and the craze for all things Latin

Let us start with a few biographical data. Roland was born Luis Antonio Dámaso de Alonso in 1905, in Ciudad Juárez. His father was a Spanish bullfighter who settled in Mexico with his wife before the birth of Luis. The young Luis Antonio wished to emulate the father and dreamed of becoming a matador. However, in 1913, after the breaking out of the Mexican Revolution, the family moved across the border to El Paso. Started in 1910 and lasted 10 years, the Revolution intensified the movement of Hispanics northward. The Spanish-speaking population grew significantly between 1910 and 1930, as many families, attracted by job opportunities in American agribusiness, founded new communities in Texas, California, Arizona or settled in existing barrios in Los Angeles (Ruiz, 1993). The Alonsos were very poor at that moment and the father asked his children to help the family so Luis Antonio — who was eight years old when they crossed the border — had to sell newspapers in front of the hotel El Paso del Norte. He did not know English at that time but was greatly helped by his teacher Alma Bartlett at Franklin School. When he was fourteen years old, he caught a freight train and moved to Hollywood looking for a job as an extra.

Contrastive images of Mexicans characterized the first phase of Hollywood history when Roland arrived in Los Angeles in the early 1920s. Mexicans were often depicted as villains, primarily in westerns, where they appeared as nameless bandits or cantina girls. These characters had a fleeting presence on the screen, serving mainly as a plot device. The fiery Latina was usually confined within the limits of the protagonist's fling and usually marked by bad intentions or unrestrained sexual behavior. The main character could flirt with her, but the shallow relationship sooner or later had to give way to the respectful marriage with an Anglo-Saxon woman. The male counterpart of a cantina girl was usually a "greaser". The term originated from a purported habit of Mexican workers to use grease while loading heavy burdens in cargo wagons to protect the skin from scratches, which suggested scarce hygiene. In common usage during the years of the Mexican-American War (1846-1848), this term was still used at the beginning of the following century in dime novels and early silent films (Stanfield, 1987, pp. 97-112; Fojas, 2008, p. 6). Men or women, the Mexicans were generally associated with the full range of shades in the portrayal of evilness: irrational violence, dishonesty, dementia, brutality, moral degeneration, sexual urges, ugly physical aspects such as unclean hair or missing teeth (Berg, 2002). The situation began to change when pressures coming from foreign public opinion led to take direct action. In 1922, the Mexican government began to boycott Hollywood products, leading the foreign relations office of the MPPDA (Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America) to slightly change the status quo of using despicable stereotypes to systematically represent the population south of the border (Vasey, 1997, p. 19). Albeit many scholars argue that the change in contents and forms was extremely limited,[1] the need to tackle the boycott led to the emergence of different roles, with noble *caballeros* and Latin lovers as substitutes for greasers and harlots.

Roland started his career roughly after this event when, to a certain extent, it was a good time to be different in America. In her book on the story of Latinos in Hollywood, Clara Rodríguez points out that the decade was very likely the most generous of times for Latinos in film (2004, p. 2). The author might exaggerate a bit, however if a change happened somehow, it did happen also through the emergence of the Star System. The beguiling almond-shaped, black eyes of Rodolfo Valentino are certainly responsible for the affirmation of a different sensibility. Inaugurated by the Italian *divo*, a craze for all things Latin was registered in a tendency to foreground *Latinness* not only in Spanish or Latino actors but also in Anglo stars such as John Gilbert, Clark Gable, or Robert Taylor, whose pencil mustache and ebony shades were particularly seductive. The fabrication of a star aimed at emphasizing an exoticism that was, at times, completely made up. According to Rodríguez, this tendency aligned with a broader pattern in newspapers and in the trade press, where the origins of all stars were established and illustrated. As the author writes, "short biographies, in small print, often accompanied full-page photos of stars, giving other information such as birth date, height, weight, hair and eye color, name of spouse, and ancestral details" (p. 10). Even those who did not have Spanish surnames or who had previously changed them to English-sounding names in the effort to escape typecasting, have their Latin American origins accentuated to capitalize on a great demand.

Roland took advantage of this moment and participated in the same fabrication process. The first studio to hire him was Preferred Pictures, which was founded by B. P. Schulberg — father of Budd, who authored the novel *What Makes Sammy Run?* (1941) and wrote screenplays for Elia Kazan's films *On the Waterfront* (1954) and *A Face in the Crowd* (1957). The studio devised Roland's unexpressed quality and crafted the image of a Latin lover for his first significant role as Carl Peters in the 1925 film *The Plastic Age* (Wesley Ruggles). Schulberg produced the movie before later becoming a supervisor at Paramount, where he also brought along Clara Bow, the film's leading lady, and Roland (AMPAS, f. 61). Despite the Anglo-sounding name of the character, Carl Peters, the actor's look, with its dark skin and eyes, accentuated a daredevil personality. Shortly before *The Plastic Age*, the young Luis Antonio was asked to change his name to a "nice middle-class-sounding American name such as George Adam", but he could not look at himself in the mirror and look credible under that name. He thus chose to combine the names of his favorite male and female movie stars, John Gilbert and Ruth Roland (AMPAS, "Scrapbook n. 3"). He capitalized on olive complexion, black eyes, and thick, curly dark hair as unequivocal signs of ethnicity. Name and look encapsulated a precise identity and validated the important process of recognition in the audience, which happened according to a specific intention that mingled opposite characteristics. For instance, he mostly referenced all-American stars, as evidenced by his repeated emphasis on the healthy and active style of Douglas Fairbanks over the ambiguous detachment of Valentino. In the minds of the audience, Gilbert Roland evoked a mix of playful, amused vigor and a hint of sensuous impudence, revealing his desire to blend European poise with Latin characteristics. His romantic relationships with three beloved female actresses of Anglo origins — Clara Bow, Norma Talmadge, and

Constance Bennett — opened the golden doors to heavenly parties, rich villas, and country clubs allowing him to join the entourage of celebrities living in luxury ("Home Movie n. 3"). He simultaneously presented himself on the same level as his audience, not a big star but a great fan who, through his stage name, pinpointed a youth spent dreaming of becoming a Hollywood celebrity.[2] Roland thus resulted from a combination of the opposites: ordinary aspiration and extraordinary lifestyle, empathy and unattainability, the American character and the Latin look.

The period between 1925 and the early years of the following decade was the apex of his stardom, also aided by the relationship and following marriage to Bennett, which lasted from the late 1930s to 1946. Like Antonio Moreno and Ramon Novarro, Roland was an emblematic figure of his time, but it would be incorrect to assume that this was an ideal time to be a Latino star. This historical period was marked by significant confusion among audiences regarding who could truly be considered Latino. In the early twentieth century, the term "Latin" was indistinctly referred to Italians, Portuguese-speaking individuals, and Spaniards, while "Spanish" generally encompassed the Spanish-speaking populations of Latin America. The terms "Indian" and "Mexican" were also used interchangeably. Only later, were the terms "Latino" and "Hispanic" introduced to identify those with origins, respectively, in Latin America and Spain (Rodríguez, 2004, pp. 21-22). Additionally, studios tended to categorize the ethnic roles into different segments, often discriminating against darker-skinned or non-European buffoons and harlots in favor of main characters who were lighter-skinned, upper-class, and of European descent. However, Roland partially escaped this tendency, often playing a variety of different roles. In *After Tonight* (George Archainbaud, 1933), he plays Captain Rudolf Ritter, an Austrian high-rank soldier, as producers preferred to cast him as a generic 'foreigner' in films where he nonetheless played the leading man with dark hair and bedroom eyes, the erotic dream of the leading lady.[3] Conversely, in *Call Her Savage* (John Francis Dillon, 1932), Roland is Moonglow, a calm and collected Native with whom the rambunctious Nasa Springer, played by the It-girl Clara Bow, ultimately finds serenity. Nasa's reckless behavior is not a result of her ethnic background, but rather stems from a lack of fatherly love and acceptance, affection that only her intelligent and sympathetic soul mate Moonglow can guarantee. Despite a variety of different ethnic roles being offered to a celebrity essentially considered a romantic incarnation of a handsome and athletic Latino, ethnicity *per se* was seldom discussed. More often being a Mexican was a factor surfacing in the iconic list of "all things Latin" that encouraged the adoption of a certain look: "lace mantillas, Spanish combs, ruffled lace dresses, dark sultry looks, pulled-back hair with Spanish side curls, toreador themes and clothes, or flamenco poses" (Rodríguez, 2004, p. 26). This look surely shaped the popular spirit or mood of the time but struggled to affect the social perception on a deeper level.

The challenges of aging and a new motivation

The first phase ended with a personal and professional crisis: the marriage with Bennett ended in a bitter divorce in 1946, and parts in Hollywood were difficult to find. This phase was the lowest point in his career. He was forty-two years old. The second chance he thought he deserved was only granted by the low-budget film industry. After the war, Roland started from scratch again in B-moviedom, at Monogram Pictures, playing the starring role of Cisco in the cycle of six movies released between 1946 and 1947: *The Gay Cavalier* (William Nigh, 1946), *Beauty and the Bandit* (William Nigh, 1946), *South of Monterey* (William Nigh, 1946), *Riding the California Trail* (William Nigh, 1947), *Robin Hood of Monterey* (Christy Cabanne, 1947) and *King of the Bandits* (Christy Cabanne, 1947).

Cisco is one of the most beloved incarnations of a Mexican hero after Don Diego Vega/Zorro. The latter was initially disseminated by the 1919 novel *The Curse of Capistrano*. During nighttime the sophisticated aristocrat Don Diego becomes Zorro — Spanish for "fox" —, a crime fighter and avenger who combats corrupt governors and army captains in Spanish California using bullwhip, sword, and supersonic reflexes. His calling card is the letter Z carved on the foreheads of evildoers as punishment or reminder that he is always watching from the shadows, ready to stop rascals and hoodlums. According to Stephen Andes, Zorro, the hero that was first serialized by American writer Johnston McCulley in 1919, was the result of a concoction of multiple sources that elaborated upon the adventurous life of the Mexican bandit Joaquín Murrieta (Andes, 2020, pp. 10-59). Even if we see traces of this Mexican origin in Zorro, the inevitable association with Douglas Fairbanks, who made the character immensely famous in *The Mark of Zorro* (Fred Niblo, 1920), elaborated upon this origin, transforming it into a story about a white hero with whom the white, middle-class audience could mainly identify (pp. 110-133).[4] Cisco is a Zorro transplanted in a western setting who still maintains the primary purpose of defending the weak against the powerful. However, the clear ethnic codification of Cisco represents a novelty, pinpointing a return to and a confirmation of the Mexican origins represented by the folk hero Murrieta. Cisco is not a masked, white vigilante but a vaquero dressed in a traditional suit — like Murrieta — who steals from the rich and gives to the poor, always prepared to defend fellow friends usually located south of the border against evil characters of Anglo descent. Furthermore, while the adventures of Zorro were limited to the setting offered by late Nineteenth-century California, Cisco expands his adventures to the entire Mexican borderland.

Albeit extremely modest, these popular serial films strongly encouraged the creation of a new discourse of community that promoted a collapse of the old barriers based on the alleged cultural and social authority of a white Anglo-Saxon elite. In them, the viewer could witness the creation of a new world where older standpoints became untenable. One of these standpoints established, for instance, that a dramatic hero needed to be Anglo-Saxon while criminals were expected to display traits associated with a foreign country or a specific ethnicity (May, 2000). By contrast, the cycle often sympathized with poor but noble Mexicans

or with the most liberal and young Hispanic aristocracy against the evil plans of greedy characters that were always associated with the northern side of the border. Cisco was the best representative of a renovated Mexican American character: lighthearted, contemptuous of the law but not of a personal ethic, and a superb lover compared to lukewarm, tepid, too-polite Anglo cowboys (Loy, 2001). Notably, Roland was allowed to contribute to the dialogues, which testifies not only to the relative freedom permitted in B-moviedom but also to Roland's aspirations for a different star persona, less identified with previous stereotyped roles. This figure remained unchanged throughout his career, mainly when the actor acquired full maturity.

In contrast to the first phase, when Roland either capitalized on a Latin look or tried to erase his identity to avoid excessive typecasting, his homeland became extremely important in this second phase. Notable filmmakers began to take notice of his acting skills, mostly Vincente Minnelli, who chose him for the role of Gaucho, the suave actor who keeps the screenwriter's wife, the southern belle Rosemary (Gloria Grahame), occupied in *The Bad and the Beautiful* (1952). Here, the actor shows a bright caricature of a Latin lover, which attests to his capacity for a self-ironic approach in examining his past. He also worked with Anthony Mann in *The Furies* (1950), where Roland is Juan Herrera, a Mexican version of a traditional cowboy, proud and ready to fight against the tyrannical power of T.C. Jeffords (Walter Huston), evident illustration of the Anglo-Saxon idea of the frontier as a theatre for the self-assertion of a free man in a territory that was purportedly considered fully available. Mann's film was adapted from Niven Busch's novel of the same title, *The Furies*, published in 1948, the centennial of the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo (1848), which ended the Mexican-American War and roughly established the border we know today at the Rio Grande. Juan and the Herrera family's struggle in the film symbolizes a yearning for recognition of Mexicans' right to live on the land that once belonged to them, a land that was previously Mexico. The actor later appeared in numerous runaway productions of westerns south of the border, where he usually played a proud and uncompromising idealist fighting for the cause of the Revolution. The last phase of his career, from the late 1960s to 1982, was mainly occupied by a series of productions of Spaghetti westerns that exported a similar trope, plot, and characters — albeit steeped in a large dose of cynicism and irony — to a different country. The final role was that of Don Braulio Zavala, the antagonist of the titular gringo outlaw in Fred Schepisi's *Barbarosa* (1982).

Old age led Roland to develop a strong desire to advocate for the cause associated with this newly adopted ideological mindset. During this second phase, his ethnicity emerges not merely as a social type, as it did at the beginning, but more deeply as a personal choice that enables the actor to comment upon the contradictions of the society in which he lives. Firstly, his discourse on Mexico acquired a nostalgic overtone. For instance, in an interview with the *Los Angeles Times* in 1971, the actor, in his late sixties, recalled his childhood in Ciudad Juárez, describing the country as a land of contrasts, made of poverty and genuine sentiments. Mexico is associated with a geography of the soul that mingles a real place with a heart full of memories. However, his homeland was not just a place to be seen with eternal

homesickness. Roland often highlighted his fondness for Mexican cinema, mainly expressed toward the film director of the golden age Emilio Fernández, as well as his admiration for actors extremely popular in the US, such as Pedro Armandáriz, Miguel Inclán, Pedro Infante, Mario Moreno (Cantinflas), Dolores del Río, and Maria Felix. Equally stressed in numerous Spanish-speaking journals and magazines was the admiration for cherished historical figures representing national identity, above all, Pancho Villa.[5] Furthermore, Mexico often became a source of inspiration for all his most personal TV or film projects, and a means to draw attention to and promote the characters he played. Apart from *Blood on the Horns*, a script co-written with Niven Busch, inspired by his father's life, Roland penned many original stories. One of them, *La Dulcera*, recounted in first person the story of a *soldadera* of Pancho Villa who follows the leader through all his battles and prepares *bisnaga*, the cactus candy the leader of the Revolution adored. She is also the mother of Tiburcio, who later betrays Villa. The story was later sold to NBC and provided the foundation for the episode number 24 of the first season of *Wagon Train* (NBC, 1957-62; ABC 1962-65), titled *The Bernal Sierra Story*. To fit the show's format, the story was set in the days of Benito Juárez rather than those of Villa, and the focus of the treachery shifted from the traitor to the victim. Roland starred in the episode playing Bernal Sierra, a man who escapes from a sentence to death for armed resistance against the troops of Maximilian I and joins the wagon train in Texas to take revenge against a fellow combatant killed by a gringo who hides among the pioneers (AMPAS, f. 164, 165). In the promotion of all these films and TV series, rather than downplaying his *Mexicanidad* as a blemish to be erased in assimilatory practices, Roland literally used it as a signature, a source of pride and empowerment. This tendency also surfaces at the level of the performance.

In the post-war years, Roland's acting style was still rooted in a pragmatic, pre-Method approach, which adopted the technique of inventing characters on the basis of a natural and instinctive ability rather than using the complex procedures established by the Actors Studio. He was more at ease with cool wit or ironic suavity than with dramatic bursts of anger or despair that were typical of the post-war phase of acting. The vitality of his roles is particularly evident in his portrayal of Escobar in *Bandido!* (Richard Fleischer, 1956). Here, instinctive reactions and colorful, almost improvised gestures — such as the quick sign of the cross — are designed to evoke a sympathetic response in the Spanish-speaking segment of the mainstream audience. Ethnicity is often the object of a self-ironic approach that uses a playful detachment in addressing such representations. Nonetheless, this sort of aloofness does not contradict a fight for better roles and rather reveals the importance of wearing an ironic outfit. Roland often recalled that his desire to change the Cisco Kid's scripts back in 1946-47 was intended to highlight that the protagonist was a well-read man who quoted Shakespeare or Mexican poets. In an article published in *The New York Times* in 1969, he complained about the stereotypical image of Mexicans wearing sombreros, going barefoot, and playing the guitar (AMPAS, "Scrapbook n. 9"). The Mexicans he wished to portray were men of honor, courage, and idealism but also extremely intelligent, full of confidence, and self-ironic.

A narcissistic approach and a transgenerational formula

The relationship between old age and ethnic self-awareness can thus be seen at three levels: personal, ideological, and semiotic or performative. This framework only partially reflected the marketing strategy of studio production. The trade press surely promoted Roland as a transnational actor both before and after World War II. This is exemplified by *Cine-Mundial*, the Spanish-language version of *Moving Picture World*, a magazine documenting Hollywood's expanding influence in Latin American markets and the emergence of Mexico's national cinema (Serna, 2014). In a 1941 issue of *Cine-Mundial*, Roland's marriage to Bennett served as an excellent opportunity to illustrate that Luis Alonso — the newspaper used his real name — was the perfect teacher for his wife when Bennett needed to learn the Spanish language for a film production she was preparing for Warner Bros. ("Hollywood. En las verdes colinas del poblado de Calabasas," 1941, p. 465). During the post-war era, the bilingualism mentioned by *Cine-Mundial* remained a crucial aspect, as it showcased his ability to work in both industries, including Hollywood runaway productions in Mexico, where the knowledge of the local language was highly valued. However, this is just one facet of a larger narrative that characterized the more personal strategy of the actor, a strategy that was later confirmed by his performances on-screen and discourses — in Spanish or English — off-screen. It was in this last phase that he aimed to build up and stabilize the different image developed during the two years of Cisco.

In the last years of his life and career, the actor applied a conservatory and narcissistic approach to aging issues. Supported by usual claims over his healthy habits, dietary restrictions (apart from red wine), and active life daily spent on the tennis courts of the Beverly Hills Tennis Club, the conservatory approach represents a strong connection to the energetic and positive attitude that characterized his maturity. He always bragged about having maintained the same waist size since his twenties. Furthermore, with maturity also came a sense of complete detachment toward all the things that had caused suffering in his past, when, back in his twenties, he struggled to be recognized as a skilled actor. A transgenerational formula also played a pivotal role in this final phase, mainly applied to a particular attitude toward success or lack of it. One of the most repeated advices from Roland to younger actors was to avoid worrying. During an interview he states: "I do not eat myself up inside by fretting about things. That's what makes people old" (AMPAS, "Scrapbook n. 9").

This transgenerational formula, seeking a possible dialogue with a younger generation, is also present in his final role, that of Don Braulio in Schepisi's revisionist western *Barbarosa.* Visibly old and tired, Roland plays a one-legged patron of a big hacienda who harbors a deep hatred for the outlaw gringo named Barbarosa, performed by the legendary country singer Willie Nelson. In the film, Roland shows a worn-out version of the narcissistic image that he has kept alive for years. The first time the viewer sees him, Don Braulio bemoans the loss of many Mexicans killed by the gringo. He despises Barbarosa, blaming him for the gunshot wound that led to the amputation of his leg. Out of anger, the old man

encourages the youth around him by recounting stories meant to ignite their courage and fuel their desire for revenge against their Anglo enemy. All he wants is a retaliation against the outlaw. However, as the film progresses, it becomes clear that the two men cannot live apart, not only because of their kinship — Barbarosa has a child with Don Braulio's daughter — but also because they share the same imaginary border landscape. One cannot exist without the other. The director gives Roland only three scenes, but they are incredibly powerful. In these moments, the actor concludes his career by portraying on the screen the complex love-hate relationship that, on the one hand, unites the two ethnic groups and, on the other, reflects Roland's life as an in-between man, a *fronterizo*. Simultaneously, he shows to younger generations that hatred toward others can be a harbinger of self-destruction.

Roland's last years occupied a limited niche in which ethnicity, albeit deeply expressed and articulated, still appeared uncrossable and distant. To a certain extent, the risk of remaining within the limits that characterized the first years was still high. Nonetheless, his most personal films, interviews, and deliberate choices in private life reflected a clear intention to articulate an ideological perspective grounded on a specifically Mexican experience that also had a universal overtone. This perspective called for a reassessment and a deconstruction of the mainstream audiences' preconceived notions and categories, expanding their perception of Mexico and its population. In this light, Roland exemplifies a positive outlook on aging, especially when compared to Ramon Novarro, for whom aging was never easy (Rodríguez, 2004). The ability to address younger generations by proposing old age as a synonym for trustworthiness identifies an entirely different historical moment from the one obsessed with youth and rejuvenating approaches. Compared to the construction of girlhood as a route to stardom for many white women in the classical era of Hollywood,[6] the old age of Gilbert Roland certainly took advantage of a different gender but also turned on its head a preconception about getting old, suggesting that aging could become a means to express reliability and a desire for authenticity (Bolton & Lobalzo Wright, 2016). Thus, old age turns into an opportunity to express a specific stance on ethnic identity, one that simultaneously suggests that aging can be a synonym for credit rather than supremacy and wisdom rather than conventional values. In this way, Roland could deconstruct the initial stereotype and shape a new horizon of meanings related to what it meant to be a Latino in the US.

In the final analysis, old age gives Roland the strength to endure through an association not with a national stereotype of Latin masculinity but with a form of ethnic identity that is not afraid of expressing a deep-seated skepticism regarding the capacity of American society to fully accept and validate an ethnic group that was for so long forgotten, avoided, ignored, or misrepresented in a merely exotic image. With his mature presence and established position as a fulfilled actor, he could also align with a cultural context marked by a revival of the importance of ethnic pride in American society, a moment in which ethnicity was no longer connoted as a simple Latin look, but as a sign of authenticity and sincerity. By examining his career, we can assess the different stages of the process that continue to

advance the interests of ethnic groups in American society. We also discover compelling evidence that it is indeed possible to embrace the journey of aging with wisdom and grace.

Biographical Note

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Notes

[1] According to Laura Isabel Serna, for instance, the American audience, primary source of revenue, had very few objections to stereotypical representations. Hence, the studio executives preferred to maintain the same codes, simply being evasive about the location. In this way, a direct connection between a place and a population was less clear (Serna, 2014).

[2] Many modern sources remember that he was one of the biggest movie fan in the world. In all his interviews Roland recalled that he "played hooky from school to watch serials at a local movie house" in El Paso. The city of El Paso is never forgotten in his memoirs and interviews (Rodríguez, 2004, p. 90; AMPAS, "Scrapbook n. 3").

[3] Similarly, Dolores Del Río and Ramon Novarro were cast as generic 'foreigners'. Del Río is a Native raised by a Mexican family in *Ramona* (Edwin Carewe, 1928), a Polynesian in *Bird of Paradise* (King Vidor, 1932),

the titular French woman in *Madame DuBarry* (William Dieterle, 1934). Navarro is a Russian lieutenant in *Mata Hari* (George Fitzmaurice, 1931) and the titular Jewish man in *Ben-Hur* (Fred Niblo, 1925).

[4] Fairbanks nonetheless remains one of the most evident activators of social and cultural changes that also hailed the lower classes' taste and their idea of fun (May 1980, pp. 96-146).

[5] "As a small boy", the actor writes in a tribute, "I remember him on the steps of the *Aduana* (Spanish for customs) after he captures the town from the *federales*. I looked at him in silent admiration. He was the *gran guerrillero*. The fearless liberator. Pancho Villa was the savior of Mexico" (AMPAS, f. 204).

[6] Gaylyn Studlar's excellent volume *Precocious Charms* (2013) largely explains this connection between female stardom and the construction of girlhood.