

a.k.a. Pablo:
Mexican American Images for Television
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The study of "minority group images in mass media" has been of considerable interest both to humanities and social science writers in the ethnic and media fields. Most investigations have focused upon the descriptive content of the minority portrayals, though a few have also dealt with related aspects of minority group reactions to images. Among the large volume of varied writings have been those which have considered minority group images in films,¹ images of Asian Americans in print and electronic media,² dissections of single television shows about minorities,³ and responses of minority audiences and media critics to television portrayals of their group.⁴ In general, studies have tended to find minority media images inaccurate, inadequate, and too infrequent. Explanations for these tendencies have usually emphasized how mass media reflect prejudices existing in the culture of the larger society, the faulty perceptions or decisions of the image-makers (writers, producers, directors, executive programmers), and the underrepresentation of minority persons in important and powerful image-shaping mass media positions.

Media images of minorities have often reflected the changing societal status of a given group. Such was the case in the spring of 1984 when an important media event came and went. A new Norman Lear television situation comedy about Mexican Americans—*a.k.a. Pablo*—aired six episodes from March 6 through April 10, but subsequently was not renewed by the American Broadcasting Company (ABC) network for the following season. Nonetheless, *a.k.a. Pablo* was the first major prime-time show since *Chico and the Man* in 1974 to convey images of Mexican Americans to television's prime-time millions, and at a time when growth and influence of Hispanics in the United States were being increasingly noted and publicized.

This essay presents an overview of the *a.k.a. Pablo* series' content and

discusses its significance. Information was obtained through the author's systematic viewing and content analysis of the six episodes. In addition, some of the at-the-time press reactions, as well as two published interviews with the show's star, comedian Paul Rodriguez, are used in this analysis.

The Road to *a.k.a. Pablo*

More general overviews of television entertainment portrayals of Hispanics and Mexican Americans, from the 1950s to 1984, have revealed, first, an absence of images, an invisibility; too few Hispanics have been shown. When shown, they have been greatly underrepresented. Also, they have been portrayed in mostly stereotyped ways when shown: as comic buffoons, macho peacocks, the downtrodden, the delinquent and criminal, and as police.⁵

For television prime-time situation comedy, the major recent pre-*a.k.a. Pablo* Hispanic show was the James Komack Company's *Chico and the Man*, which was introduced by the National Broadcasting Company (NBC), in 1974 and ran until 1978. It was the story of the ongoing relationship between a young, ambitious East Los Angeles Chicano, Chico Rodriguez, and his elderly, cranky Anglo employer, Ed Brown.

Although the show initially met with negative reactions from organized Latino groups, this problem was gradually overcome. Indeed, *Chico and the Man* was the third highest Nielsen-rated prime-time show of the 1974-1975 television season.⁶

Strictly speaking, between *Chico and the Man* in 1974 and *a.k.a. Pablo* in 1984, there were two other brief Hispanic-related situation comedy series, though both were less visible and received far less fanfare and audience response than either *Chico* or *Pablo*. *Viva Valdez* appeared May-September 1976 on the ABC network. It was about a close-knit East Los Angeles Mexican American family. Luis and Sophia Valdez owned a plumbing business, and had four children and a cousin from Mexico living in their home. *Condo* appeared on ABC for several episodes in the spring of 1983. It dealt with two related-by-marriage families who moved into a condominium. One was a downwardly mobile upper-middle-class WASP family, and the other was an upwardly mobile Hispanic family that was becoming middle class. Both *Viva Valdez* and *Condo* quietly ended after their brief airings in their respective seasons and years.

The Episodes of *a.k.a. Pablo*

a.k.a. Pablo in spring 1984 was the story of Chicano stand-up comedian Paul (Pablo) Rivera (played by Chicano stand-up comedian Paul Rodriguez) and his family—father, mother, sisters, brothers-in-law, nieces and nephew. The following is a brief summary of each episode:

Episode Number One. Paul made his big bow as a stand-up comedian at the Comedy Store in Hollywood. He returned to his family's home afterwards in East Los Angeles where he lives, and slept in. His family and agent were shown and introduced. His father objected to what he felt were ethnic slurs in Paul's jokes.

Episode Number Two. Paul, growing in popularity, appeared on the Merv Griffith Show, both stand-up and chatting with Merv. He jokingly described to Merv the characteristics of each of his family members. They in turn resented this negative intrusion into their privacy. The show ended with family tension about whether or not Pablo should use them for his humor

Episode Number Three. Paul found out that he might star in a new television series. He reluctantly met with an image consultant, who wanted to change his image for television (clothing, name, and so forth). She visited his home where his young nephew asserted he did not want to be a (disadvantaged) Mexican, but a non-Mexican, "like Uncle Pablo." Paul ended up stressing to his nephew how proud he was of his Mexican identity and heritage.

Episode Number Four. Paul was selected to entertain at a fancy dinner across town for President Reagan. His traditional and conservative father wanted him to wear a tuxedo; his liberal unmarried sister urged "street clothes." Dressed in street clothes and carrying a prop knife, he and his agent were arrested en route for speeding and jailed. Against father's wishes, several family members obtained his release and Paul expressed his love for them and for his father, who eventually (though reluctantly) showed up at jail too in the end.

Episode Number Five. While Paul anxiously awaited news about his possible television series, the whole family concentrated on preparations for his niece's *quincenera*, a church ceremonial celebration for a young girl who turns fifteen years of age. The entire family dressed up for it and was excited and proud. Meanwhile, two Mexican American activists visited Paul, having heard that his possible series might be offensive in concept to Hispanics. Paul was torn between his new-found media celebrity status and ethnic visibility to the public on the one hand, and the more immediate private joys of the traditional family celebration on the other.

Episode Number Six. The family was at home, the men of the family absorbed in television spectator sports. Paul “sweet talked” a female guest of his unmarried sister; the guest was economically successful and owned franchises. The men felt the guest was leading their women astray from such ideas as “the man is the boss.” The men and the women argued and then stopped talking to each other. The guest finally left, deliberately kissing Paul to make him look good (manly, seductive) in the eyes of the other men. The men, and then the women of the family too, subsequently returned to being in a pleasant mood.

Themes and Lessons

At least five themes are discernible from the episodes: One was Paul's attempt to get ahead and succeed in the largely non-Hispanic world of big-time show business. Another was the ongoing generation and attitudinal conflict between son and father, the father doubting the worth and dignity of the son's occupation and efforts. Another was the liberal activist daughter confronting the traditional and conservative father. A fourth was the warmth and unity of the large Rivera family, which was capable of smoothing over internal disputes and being a source of loyalty and joy: the family's love conquers all. Finally, the importance of and pride in being Chicano and Hispanic was a strong and recurrent theme.

The themes were played out in relation to Rodriguez's comedy skills and the special personality characteristics of each family member: serious and conservative blue collar papa, warm and loving mama, liberal activist unmarried sister, romantic married sister number one and her somewhat intellectual husband, and hard-working married sister number two (a domestic in Beverly Hills), her macho big belly husband, and their children. The idea seemed to be that had the show continued, audiences would both follow Paul's career in the outside world, as well as share the internal life of his large and warm family, getting to know and like each unique member.

As television situation comedy goes, *a.k.a. Pablo* was a generally quite “instructive” show about Mexican Americans for the prime-time millions. Its episodic content contained several important messages or “lessons” for television audiences, such as: (1) Perhaps ethnic groups reach a point where they are secure enough to poke fun at themselves (through jokes), though some members still see such humor as “offensive.” (Interestingly, the show seemed to want to “have it both ways”: First, get the laughs out of a joke, but then also dissect what is objectionable about it to some!). (2)

Even though you try to get ahead in the mainstream, you should still remember your ethnic roots and family. (3) Chicanos have a very strong family-orientation.⁷ (4) Even so, there are often differences between individual Chicanos within families, concerning politics, lifestyles, and goals. (5) Chicano families are also influenced by such external societal developments as sports mania and changing sex roles. (As to the latter, for instance, mama taught her daughters that “the man commands but the woman decides.”)

Rodriguez Was Rivera/Rivera Was Rodriguez

a.k.a. Pablo was, of course, like many other television situation comedies, especially designed to fit the talents of a rising young stand-up comedian, Paul Rodriguez in this case. Both as to much of its content, and as evidenced in personal interviews with him, apparently much about Rodriguez was Rivera and Rivera was Rodriguez, perhaps more so than with most other shows and their stars. Like Rodriguez, Rivera was also a barrio boy who has become a successful stand-up comedian, who also went on talk shows, and also was considered for a series. Rodriguez on *a.k.a. Pablo* told some of his own nightclub jokes, such as (roughly told here) suggesting that a Mexcian with a knife in his mouth is flashing his “Mexican Express Card,” or, you can always tell a Mexican on the freeway: twenty or more people packed into an old car going twenty-five miles an hour in the inside lane.

Like *a.k.a. Pablo* Rivera’s father, Rodriguez’s father also was not happy with or impressed by his son’s choice of comedian as an occupation, or with his son’s “success”:

...he wasn’t supportive. He believes that this is a part-time job that I’ll return to college and be a lawyer and bail him out of jail. He feels that this is a phase I’m going through...He frankly doesn’t think that show business is an honorable profession...He sees it as a problem, a problem with me.⁸

Like *a.k.a. Pablo* Rivera, Rodriguez was pulled over and questioned by police (in his new Porsche),⁹ and has had a new wardrobe selected for him for his new image.¹⁰ Like *a.k.a. Pablo*, Rodriguez has grappled with both the rewards and pressures of new celebrity status: He has wondered if young women were attracted to him for his personal qualities, or for his fame,¹¹ and has experienced contradictory expectations from other Chicanos:

Tremendous pressure on me...imagine this. To mess up. Whether it is in my personal life or my public or artistic life; to make bad movidas. I’m their example right now. I know that some Latinos will look at me as the white man’s ideal Mexican. From both sides I get it. Some Hispanics say that I don’t go far enough. The *gavachos* say that I go too far. The liberals say that I don’t go as far as I should. So I walk an invisible tightrope.¹²

Critical Reaction

Critical reaction to *a.k.a. Pablo* in the Hispanic media, on the whole, was favorable. It was generally seen as a positive image show and a step forward in television portrayals of Hispanics (as well as in increased employment for Hispanic actors). Most saw the most controversial aspect of the show—the jokes Paul tells about Mexican Americans in his act—as either poking fun, or as so exaggerated as to be unbelievable, or as humor used to show stereotypes in order to break them.¹³

One major exception was Antonio Mejias-Rentas, the entertainment critic for *Hispanic Link*, a news service reaching more than 200 Latin-oriented newspapers and magazines in the United States, in English and Spanish. He saw the first episode (which revolved around the joke of the knife as Mexican Express Card) as a big and offensive ethnic slur, and added:

I have a notion that Hispanics should be portrayed on television as they are in real life. If this is the first opportunity to be on prime-time national television, I think they did it wrong. If there were 20 other shows about Latinos on television and this was just one, it would still not make the stereotype acceptable.¹⁴

And William Zamora, the president of *Nosotros*, an alliance of entertainment professionals dedicated to opening up opportunities for Hispanics, by the summer of 1984 complained that despite the opportunities the show had provided for Hispanic actors, it was not continued because:

...people didn't identify with it. There was too much yelling and screaming, too many characters running around. It was the Anglo writers' idea of Mexican-American family life, not what it's really like.¹⁵

The reactions were unusual though since most responses were favorable, particularly in comparison with the initial responses to the James Komack Company's *Chico and the Man* show a decade earlier.

As the current writer observed a few years ago:

When *Chico and the Man* began in the Fall of 1974, the only series featuring a Chicano lead character, it set off a storm of protest by Chicano media commentators, especially in its first few weeks. Chicano commentators associated with such groups as Tenaz, *Nosotros*, *Justicia Para Chicanos in the Media*, Hispanic Urban Center, Brown Berets and East Los Angeles Health Task Force were alarmed by such things as offensive dialogue (The Man to Chico: "take your flies and go"), the subservient position of Chico, the casting of a Puerto Rican to play a Chicano, and the lack of the Chicano writers...Both *Chico and the Man* and *Bridget Loves Bernie* in part experienced such comparatively high levels of vocal and visible protest because they had to shoulder the burdens of being "the one and only" shows about their groups on television in an ethnically aware and sensitive era.¹⁶

Eventually, in response to critics, *Chico* was made more acceptable with less offensive dialogue and a close father/son-like relationship between Chico and his employer, Ed "The Man" Brown. But it appears that by

1984, a decade later, at least with *a.k.a. Pablo*, the Norman Lear company *was* ethnically aware and sensitive enough, and experienced enough with such types of shows, to be able initially to avoid the more offensive elements of content (and without being overly bland or non-ethnic either).

Conclusion

The record of *a.k.a. Pablo* in audience measurement ratings and popular demand was not sufficiently strong for the ABC network to renew the show for the 1984-1985 season. It was, after all, in competition in its time slot on Tuesday nights with NBC's *The A-Team*, a show usually in the top ten in Nielsen audience rankings. Lear has observed:

...ABC was looking for a miracle. Long-term reality means hanging in with a show like *a.k.a. Pablo*, developing an audience. I feel six shows are too little, especially when you're seeing the first Mexican American family on TV. That's an acquired taste.¹⁷

But ABC apparently did not wish to "hang in"; ratings and reactions overall fell below its anticipations and expectations. After the show was officially cancelled, Lear sent Rodriguez a note that read, "Dearest Darling Paul, America was not ready for us, but I wouldn't have traded this for anything."¹⁸

Was "America was not ready for us" the truth? The assertion was probably *not* correct. The mid-1980s is a time of heightened Hispanic growth, visibility, and dynamism, the right time for *a.k.a. Pablo* or a show like it. Hispanics by now number approximately twenty million and will probably surpass blacks as the largest American minority group by the year 2000. In spite of the show's particular experiences, the prime-time millions *were* probably ready for such a show, and the Hispanic audience was definitely ready and eager and overdue for it. While network decision-makers claim their cancellation decisions are mainly based on objective audience numbers, because theirs is a business whose primary goal is to attract advertisers with those numbers, final decisions are sometimes delayed because of "hunches" or other subjective considerations.¹⁹ So if there was any group "not ready" for *a.k.a. Pablo*, it was the network decision-makers themselves. In their haste to cancel the show without further exploration of alternate night and time slots, it was *they* who were "*behind the times.*" America no doubt was not ready for the Valdez family of *Viva Valdez* in 1976, a show truly ahead of its time, but by 1984 the Rivera family should have been able to become a television fixture.

In any event, *a.k.a. Pablo* has now become a part of television and

ethnic history. Perhaps it will eventually be followed by more new shows about Chicanos and other Hispanics (as well as other groups), that will even more effectively and successfully convey their ethnic images to television's prime-time millions, though this was not the case during the year immediately following the show's appearance and demise.²⁰ But this is not enough.

Hispanics and others will need to be prepared and united to take a stand and work for the non-cancellation and continuation of the next show they deem worthy enough. Such an effort will need to be a grass-roots, mass audience-type campaign (that suggests "numbers"), not just an endeavor of the more organized Hispanic interest groups. Fortunately, a precedent for such a successful campaign exists in the case of the Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS) show about two policewomen, *Cagney and Lacey*.

Cagney and Lacey was cancelled in the spring of 1983. In a previously unheard of action, CBS executives changed their minds and decided to bring the show back to life in the spring of 1984. This was partly because of a deluge of grass-roots protest mail from rank-and-file viewers (not just feminist interest groups), urging that the show be reinstated. Regardless of whether or not *a.k.a. Pablo* deserved a similar effort, Hispanics and others might well study the *Cagney and Lacey* precedent in preparation for the future.²¹

Notes

¹Randall M. Miller, ed. *The Kaleidoscopic Lens: How Hollywood Views Ethnic Groups*. (Englewood: Ozer, 1980).

²Particia Iiyama and Harry H. L. Kitano. "Asian Americans and the Media." *Television and the Socialization of the Minority Child*. G. Berry and C. Mitchell-Kerman, eds. (New York: Academic Press, 1982) 151-186.

³Jack Slater. "The Amos 'N Andy Show." *Emmy*. Vol. 6 (November/December, 1984) 46-49.

⁴Norman L. Friedman. "Responses of Blacks and Other Minorities to Television Shows of the 1970s About Their Groups." *Journal of Popular Film and Television*. Vol. 7 (1978) 85-102.

⁵See B.S. Greenberg, M. Burgeon, J. K. Burgeon, and F. Korzenny. *Mexican Americans and the Mass Media*. (Norwood: Ablex, 1983) 30-31; and Lewis Beale. "Que Pasa? Not Much, At Least for the Hispanic Image." *Emmy*. Vol. 6 (September/October, 1984) 36-39.

⁶Tim Brooks and Earle Marsh. *The Complete Directory to Prime Time Network T.V. Shows: 1946-Present*. (New York: Ballantine, 1979) 809.

⁷Research shows Chicanos, on the whole, *are* quite family-oriented. For a good discussion of the particularities and complexities of measuring Chicano "familism," see Maxine Baca Zinn. "Familism among Chicanos: A Theoretical Review." *Humboldt Journal of Social Relations*. Vol. 10 (Fall/Winter, 1982/1983) 224-238.

⁸Jorge Luis Rodriguez. "An Interview with Paul Rodriguez." *Avance: The Latin Entertainment Magazine*. Vol. 2 (April/May, 1984) 50.

⁹Penthouse Interview. "Paul Rodriguez." *Penthouse*. Vol. 15 (July, 1984) 151.

¹⁰Rodriguez, 19.

¹¹Penthouse Interview, 100, 148.

¹²Rodriguez, 50. Paul Rodriguez has frequently commented that he was uncomfortable being asked "political" questions about Latinos, as if he were a Latino "spokesman." He was asked such questions, though, because in March and April of 1984, through his television prime-time visibility, he suddenly became one of the most known and recognized Latinos in the United States.

¹³Rick Sherwood. "Pablo: An Acquired Taste for Viewers?" *Daily News*. (Los Angeles Life section, March 27, 1984) 20.

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Bruce Cook. "Latino Actors Want Piece of Movie Pie." *Daily News*. (Los Angeles Life section, July 20, 1984) 4.

¹⁶Friedman, 99.

¹⁷Beale, 38.

¹⁸Bruce Cook. "For Rodriguez, 'Pablo' was a.k.a. Opportunity." *Daily News*. (Los Angeles Life section, July 20, 1984) 5.

¹⁹Todd Gitlin. *Inside Prime Time*. (New York: Pantheon, 1983) 19-63.

²⁰In this regard, the 1984-1985 season was not promising. Only one new series could have been called an ethnic one—"The Cosby Show"—and

though it was highly popular with viewers, it was about an already more-televised group (blacks) and featured a veteran star with already established popularity (Bill Cosby). The degree of popularity of "The Cosby Show" though, especially for a new show—third in the Nielsen ratings for the entire 1984-1985 season—seems to have facilitated the future prime-time selection and scheduling of some additional new ethnic shows about blacks, as reflected in preliminary network announcements about the 1985-1986 season: NBC has the comedy "227," about Chicago black neighbors, ABC has "He's the Mayor," a comedy about a black mayor, and CBS has "Charlie and Company," a comedy about a black middle-class family in Chicago. No ethnic shows about groups other than blacks are on the preliminary 1985-1986 network schedules.

²¹Joyce Sunila. "Cagney and Lacey." *Emmy*. Vol. 7 (March/April, 1985) 23.

Critique

There is no question that the television show *a.k.a. Pablo* was an important media event for the Mexican American community. All such prime time shows which deal with ethnic groups highlight minority problems and give visibility to peoples otherwise not dealt with in the mass media. Whether or not such shows create as many stereotypes as they dispel is another matter altogether.

Even not very good shows such as *The Jeffersons*, *Sanford and Son*, and *Good Times* provided air time for black actors and made more positive portrayals possible in such shows as *Benson*, *Webster*, or even *The Cosby Show*, the highest rated show of the current season. One can argue whether or not the integration of the latter examples signals progress or retrogression. The point is that with sufficient media exposure, blacks are now staple figures on prime time television shows whether those shows are black-oriented or not.

As Friedman points out, such opportunities have been lacking for Chicanos and even those shows which have appeared have been short-lived with the exception of the ill-fated *Chico and the Man*. *a.k.a. Pablo* followed in its predecessor's wake. There is little to quarrel with in