Playin' Native and Other Iterations of Sonic Brownface in Hollywood Representations of Dolores Del Río

santaperversa

Blog post published May 7, 2018 in *Sounding Out!*
https://doi.org/10.59350/sm7pv-pt680

Abstract

Mexican actress Dolores Del Río is admired for her ability to break ground; her dance skills allowed her to portray roles not offered to many women of color early in the 20th Century. One of her most popular roles was in the movie Ramona (1928), directed by Edwin Carewe.

Keywords

Music (Subfield), American Indian Studies, American Studies, Article, Chican@/Latin@ Studies, Cultural Studies



Recommended citation

santaperversa. (2018, May 7). Playin' Native and Other Iterations of Sonic Brownface in Hollywood Representations of Dolores Del Río. *Sounding Out!*. https://doi.org/10.59350/sm7pv-pt680

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Mexican actress Dolores Del Río is admired for her ability to break ground; her dance skills allowed her to portray roles not offered to many women of color early in the 20th Century. One of her most popular roles was in the movie *Ramona* (1928), directed by Edwin Carewe. Her presence in the movie made me think about sonic representations of mestizaje and indigeneity through the characters portrayed by Del Río. According to Priscilla Ovalle, in *Dance and the Hollywood Latina: Race, Sex and Stardom* (2010), Dolores del Río was representative of Mexican nationhood while she was a rising star in Hollywood. Did her portrayals reinforce ways of hearing and viewing mestizos and First Nation people in the American imaginary? Is it sacrilegious to examine the Mexican starlet through sonic brownface? I explore these questions through two films, *Ramona* and *Bird of Paradise* (1932, directed by King Vidor), where Dolores del Río plays a mestiza and a Polynesian princess, respectively, to understand the deeper impact she had in Hollywood through expressions of sonic brownface.

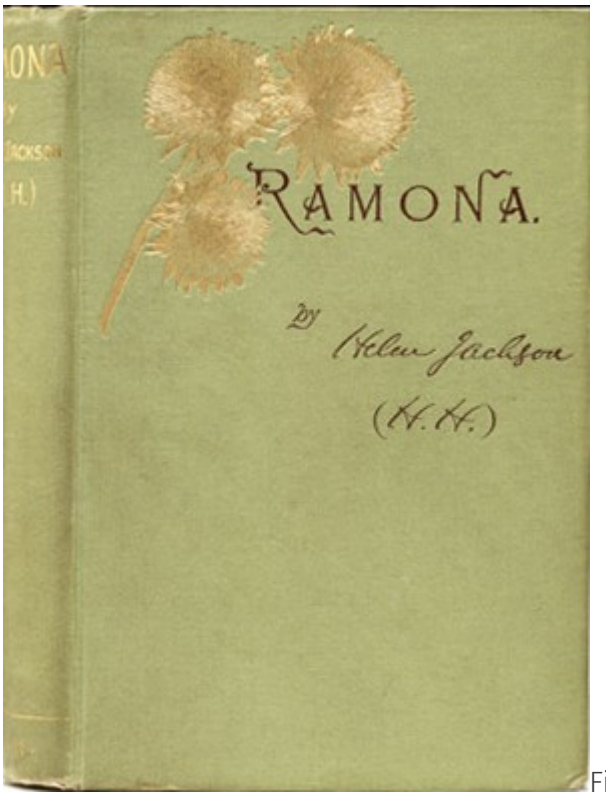
Before I delve into analysis of these films and the importance of *Ramona* the novel and film adaptions, I wish to revisit the concept of sonic brownface I introduced here in *SO!* in 2013. Back then, I argued that the movie *Nacho Libre* and Jack Black's characterization of "Nacho" is sonic brownface: an aural performativity of Mexicanness as imagined by non-Mexicans. Jennifer Stoever, in *The Sonic Color Line* (2017), postulates that how we listen to particular body(ies) are influenced by how we see them. The notion of sonic brownface facilitates a deeper examination of how ethnic and racialized bodies are not just seen but heard.



Picture of Del Rio as Luana in BIRDS OF PARADISE, available in the public domain.

Through my class lectures this past year, I realized there is more happening in the case of Dolores del Río, in that sonic brownface can also be heard in the impersonation of ethnic roles she portrayed. In the case of Dolores del Río, though Mexicana, her whiteness helps Hollywood directors to continue portraying mestizos and native people in ways that they already hear them while asserting that her portrayal helps lend authenticity due to her nationality. In the two films I discuss here, Dolores del Río helps facilitate these sonic imaginings by non-Mexicans, in this case the directors and agent who encouraged her to take on such roles. Although a case can be made that she had no choice, I imagine that she was quite astute and savvy to promote her Spanish

heritage, which she credits for her alabaster skin. This also opens up other discussions about colorism prevalent within Latin America.



First, let us focus on the appeal of Helen Hunt Jackson's *Ramona* (1884), as it is here that the cohabitation of Scots, Spanish, Mestizos, and Native people are first introduced to the American public in the late 19th century. According to Evelyn I. Banning, in 1973's *Helen Hunt Jackson,* the author wanted to write a novel that brought attention to the plight of Native Americans. The novel highlights the new frontier of California shortly after the Mexican American War. Though the novel was critically acclaimed, many folks were more intrigued with "... the charm of the southern California setting and the romance between a half-breed girl raised by an aristocratic Spanish family and an Indian forced off his tribal lands by white encroachers." A year after *Ramona* was published, Jackson died and a variety of *Ramona* inspired projects that further romanticized Southern California history and its "Spanish" past surged. For example, currently in Hemet, California there is the longest running outdoor "Ramona" play performed since 1923. Hollywood was not far behind as it produced two silent-era films, starring Mary Pickford and Dolores del Río.

The charm of the novel *Ramona* is that it reinforces a familiar narrative of conquest with the possibility of all people co-existing together. As Philip Deloria reminds us in *Playing Indian* (1999), "The nineteenth-century quest for a self-identifying national literature ... [spoke] the simultaneous languages of cultural fusion and violent appropriation" (5). The nation's westward expansion and Jackson's own life reflected the mobility and encounters settlers experienced in these territories. Though Helen Hunt Jackson had intended to bring more attention to the mistreatment of native people in the West, particularly the abuse of indigenous people by the California Missions, the fascination of the Spanish speaking people also predominated the American imaginary. To this day we still see in Southern California the preference of celebrating the regions Spanish past and subduing the native presence of the Chumash and Tongva. Underlying Jackson's novel and other

works like Maria Amparo Ruiz De Burton *The Squatter and the Don* (1885) is their critique of the U.S. and their involvement with the Mexican American War. An outcome of that war is that people of Mexican descent were classified as white due to the signing of Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo and were treated as a class apart. (See Michael Olivas' anthology, *Colored Men and Hombres Aqui* from 2006 and Ignacio M. García, *White but not Equal* from 2008). These novels and films reflect the larger dominant narrative of whiteness and its relationship to nation building. Through Pickford's and del Río's portrayals of Ramona they reinforce the whiteness of mestizaje.



Screenshot from RAMONA (1910). Here, Ramona (played by Mary Pickford) finds out that she has "Indian blood."

In 1910, Mary Pickford starred in D.W. Griffith's short film adaptation of *Ramona* as the titular orphan of Spanish heritage. Henry B. Walthall played Alessandro, the Native American, in brownface to mimic physical attributes of the native Chumash of Southern California. Griffith also wanted to add authenticity by filming in Camulas, Ventura County, the land of the Chumash and where Jackson based her novel. The short is a sixteen-minute film that takes viewers through the encounter between Alessandro and Ramona and their forbidden love, as she was to be wedded to Felipe, a Californio. There is a moment in the movie when Ramona is told she has "Indian blood". Exalted, Mary Pickford says "I'm so happy" (6:44-6:58). Their short union celebrates love of self and indigeneity that reiterates Jackson's compassionate plea of the plight of native people. In the end, Alessandro dies fighting for his homeland, and Ramona ends up with Felipe. Alessandro, Ramona, and Felipe represent the archetypes in the Westward expansion. None had truly the power but if mestizaje is to survive best it serve whiteness.



Poster of 1928's RAMONA, under fair use

Edwin Carewe's rendition of *Ramona* in 1928 was United Artists' first film release with synchronized sound and score. Similar to the *Jazz Singer* in 1927, are pivotal in our understanding of sonic brownface. Through the use of synchronized scored music, Hollywood's foray into sound allowed itself creative license to people of color and sonically match it to their imaginary of whiteness. As I mentioned in my 2013 post, the era of silent cinema allowed Mexicans in particular, to be "desirable and allowed audiences to fantasize about the man or woman on the screen because they could not hear them speak." *Ramona* was also the first feature film for a 23-year-old Dolores del Río, whose beauty captivated audiences. There was much as stake for her and Carewe. Curiously, both are mestizos, and yet the Press Releases do not make mention of this, inadvertently reinforcing the whiteness of mestizaje: Del Río was lauded for her Spanish heritage (not for being Mexican), and Carewe's Chickasaw ancestry was not highlighted. Nevertheless, the film was critically acclaimed with favorable reviews such as Mordaunt Hall's piece in the *New York Times* published May 15, 1928. He writes, "This current offering is an extraordinarily beautiful production, intelligently directed and, with the exception of a few instances, splendidly acted." The film had been lost and was found in Prague in 2005. The Library of Congress has restored it and is now celebrated as a historic film, which is celebrating its 90th anniversary on May 20th.

In *Ramona*, Dolores del Río shows her versatility as an actor, which garners her critical acclaim as the first Mexicana to play a starring role in Hollywood. Though *Ramona* is not considered a talkie, the synchronized sound comes through in the music. Carewe commissioned a song written by L. Wolfe Gillbert with music by Mabel Wayne, that was also produced as an album. The song itself was recorded as an instrumental ballad by two other musicians, topping the charts in 1928.



https://youtu.be/7WXASMlUvV8

In the movie, Ramona sings to Allessandro. As you will read in the lyrics, it is odd that it is not her co-star Warner Baxter who sings, as the song calls out to Ramona. Del Río sounds angelic as the music creates high falsettos. The lyrics emphasize English vernacular with the use of "o'er" and "yonder" in the opening verse. There are moments in the song where it is audible that Del Río is not yet fluent speaking, let alone singing in English. This is due to the high notes, particularly in the third verse, which is repeated again after the instrumental interlude.

> *I dread the dawn*
> *When I awake to find you gone*
> *Ramona, I need you, my own*

Each time she sings "**R**amona" and other areas of the song where there is an "r", she adds emphasis with a rolling "r," as would be the case when speaking Spanish. Through the song it reinforces aspects of sonic brownface with the inaudible English words, and emphasis on the rolling "rrrr." In some ways, the song attempts to highlight the mestiza aspects of the character. The new language of English spoken now in the region that was once a Spanish territory lends authenticity through Dolores del Río's portrayal. Though Ramona is to be Scottish and Native, she was raised by a Spanish family named Moreno, which translates to brown or darker skin. Yes, you see the irony too.



United Artists Studio Film Still, under Fair Use

Following Del Río's career, she plays characters from different parts of the world, usually native or Latin American. As Dolores del Río gained more popularity in Hollywood she co-starred in several movies such as *Bird of Paradise* (1932), directed by King Vidor, in which she plays a Polynesian Princess. *Bird of Paradise* focuses on the love affair between the sailor, played by Joel McCrea, and herself. The movie was controversial as it was the first time we see a kiss between a white male protagonist with a non-Anglo female, and some more skin, which caught the eye of The Motion Picture Code commission. Though I believe the writers attempted to write in Samoan, or some other language of the Polynesian islands, I find that her speech may be another articulation of sonic brownface. Beginning with the "talkies," Hollywood continued to reiterate stereotypical representations though inaccurate music or spoken languages.

In the first encounter between the protagonists, Johnny and Luana, she greets him as if inviting him to dance. He understands her. He is so taken by her beauty that he "rescues" her to live a life together on a remote island. Though they do not speak the same language at first it does not matter because their love is enough. This begins with the first kiss. When she points to her lips emphasizing kisses, which he gives her more of. The movie follows their journey to create a life together but cannot be fully realized as she knows the sacrifice she must pay to Pele.

https://youtu.be/lNZ9kGC4nBk

I do not negate the ground breaking work that Dolores del Río accomplished while in Hollywood. It led her to be an even greater star when she returned to Mexico. However, even her star role as Maria Candelaria bares some examination through sonic brownface. It is vital to examine how the media reinforces the imaginary of native people as not well spoken or inarticulate, and call out the whiteness of mestizaje as it inadvertently eliminates the presence of indigeneity and leaves us listening to sonic brownface.

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Featured image: Screenshot from "Ramona (1928) – Brunswick Hour Orchestra"

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