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What happens when a tough, independent, dark-featured Mexican woman admonishes and advises a proper, principled-but-naive white woman in a fictional southwestern frontier town?

Anthony Macías

“To be a Mexican woman in a town like this”

Guadalajara-born actress Katy Jurado had already been working in Mexican cinema for eight years when she lit up the silver screen with her unforgettable performance in the 1952 U.S. feature film *High Noon*. During one of her powerful scenes with then-newcomer Grace Kelly, Jurado’s character, Helen Ramirez, tells Kelly’s character, Amy, “I *hate* this town. I always hated it. To be a Mexican *woman* in a town like this.” In this scene, Katy Jurado more than

merely reads her lines to Grace Kelly: she seems to be speaking for every *Mexicana* in male mogul, studio-dominated Hollywood. This scene, this historical flashpoint, represents an entry moment that illuminates social orders, racial stereotypes, and gender norms, rippling the pond of American culture, reverberating within film history, and echoing through the decades to the present. Gary Cooper won a 1953 Best Actor Academy Award for *High Noon*, in which his character, Marshall Will Kane, shares one scene with Helen Ramirez, his ex-lover. Towards the end of their exchange, she briefly switches from English to Spanish, saying, “Un año sin verte.” He replies, rather wistfully, “Si, lo se.” Their mutual respect, unspoken understanding, and deep feelings are evident in Coop’s slightly awkward body language and bittersweet glances, in Katy’s wringing hands and piercing, shimmering eyes. Her face glows, glamorously, gloriously lit from directly above in the classic Hollywood studio movie-star style. Katy Jurado won a 1953 Best Supporting Actress Golden Globe for *High Noon*, her second American film.

Historian Carlos Cortés convincingly argues that the culture industries operate “a parallel educational system, the ‘societal curriculum,’” providing “information about race, ethnicity, culture, and foreignness;” that the “entertainment media” “help shape expectations,” “influence audience’s values and attitudes,” and “condition” viewers. Ethnic stereotypes in the mainstream mass media dehistoricize and dehumanize specific ethnic groups, which ultimately maintains and strengthens a white supremacist socio-economic

structure. Yet just as negative stereotypes do ideological work for hegemony by reiterating and legitimizing hierarchies of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and class, I argue that positive types can begin to deprogram passive consumers with subtle, counter-hegemonic representations. Moreover, beyond discussions of trait identification and good versus bad images, actors can, through their craft, disrupt, and thereby challenge the dominant ideological narrative in popular cultural productions.

High Noon provides a compelling example due to the filmmakers' liberal ideological project, and to the Mexicana character's righteous moral compass, which centers and grounds the story. Paradoxically, Katy Jurado's portrayal of Helen Ramirez is considered both one of the best Latina representations, and another in a long line of Mexican harlots. The "harlot" stereotype is usually the hot-tempered mistress of the Anglo hero. Unlike her cinematic stereotypical opposite, the aristocratic, virginal "dark lady," the harlot is defined by her raw sexuality and loose morality, and is often a prostitute. Duplicating many features of the traditional Latina mistress, Helen Ramirez is sensual, emotional, and sexually active, having slept with the villain, the hero, and the hero's young deputy, but she is neither prostitute nor madam. Rather, Ramirez is a savvy businesswoman, yet also an unmarried outlier who lives in the town's fancy hotel, socially isolated from the film's judgmental Anglo townspeople.

Thus, Helen Ramirez is much more complex than traditional Latina harlots, and there is something different in the way that Jurado, who was born

into a wealthy family, holds her head and carries herself. Unlike both previous and later characterizations of Mexicanas in Westerns, Ramirez displays ethnic pride and financial independence. An older white man works for, and takes orders from Helen, and she summons a local Anglo businessman, who arrives, hat in hand, with whom she negotiates to buy a stake in her store and become her “silent partner.” In a rare movie moment, he gratefully thanks Ramirez for the business opportunity, and for always being “decent” to him, then sincerely bids her good luck as she settles her affairs and prepares to leave town. She also deals with her current Anglo lover, Marshall Kane’s deputy, Harvey, whom she had earlier told to “grow up,” from an undeniable position of strength. Indeed, in one of Jurado’s emotionally electric scenes, she slaps Harvey, played by Lloyd Bridges, when he puts his hands on her against her will. This open-hand smack in the face is arguably a second flashpoint from the same film, and it is undeniably an unprecedented act of defiant dignity by a woman of color in American cinema.

Tellingly, Helen Ramirez is the only other character in the film willing, like the hero, to uphold and protect their ethical convictions. In the “to be a Mexican woman” scene, immediately after Ramirez tells Amy how she hates living there, Amy replies, “I understand,” to which Helen retorts, “You do? That’s good—I don’t understand you. No matter what you say, if Kane was my man, I’d never leave him like this. I’d get a gun; I’d fight.” This turning point marks the beginning of Amy’s character arc, with Helen as the catalyst,

culminating in the film's showdown climax, when the Quaker pacifist Amy shoots one of the bad guys in the back. In my opinion, the Helen Ramirez subplot is the film's most intriguing precisely because of her multifaceted position as a heterosexual woman, bilingual brown *mestiza*, and successful entrepreneur within the film's fictional setting, Hadleyville. Katy Jurado's nuanced, three-dimensional, proud portrayal of Helen Ramirez brings a seemingly stock character to life, exposing the "ambiguities and contradictions" within what George Lipsitz calls "the univocal narrative of American culture."

In light of the postwar ideology of domesticity, and the concurrent backlash against female freedom and mobility, Ramirez is a convenient foil for Grace Kelly's chaste bride character. Indeed, Jurado's dark features and accented English contrast starkly with Kelly's blonde delicacy and finishing school enunciation. Film scholar Richard Dyer suggests that 1950s "pin-up" stars like Marilyn Monroe were paragons of white female desirability. Similarly, actresses such as Grace Kelly and Elizabeth Taylor epitomized the more respectable, upper-class racialized, gendered yardstick against which actresses such as Katy Jurado were measured. For me, Jurado's presence, repartee, sure-handed strength, and blunt honesty recall the *femme fatales* of forties *film noir* more than the sexpot and debutante Anglo actresses of the fifties. As Dyer argues, most female film roles during the fifties portrayed idealized, physically unthreatening women who were merely "vehicles for male sexuality." Ironically, while cinematic white women were being screen-written back to their supposedly

proper social place, Helen Ramirez's marginality allowed her to transcend previous Latina representations.

Nevertheless, like many motion picture Latinas, the Ramirez character's visibility, strength, and interracial liaisons are made more acceptable to white filmgoers by her sexual immorality and inevitable abandonment. Like many women in Westerns, Helen Ramirez exhibits agency only because she is outside the patriarchal gender roles of wife and mother, but unlike white prostitutes in films such as *Stagecoach* (1939) and *Red River* (1948), Ramirez can never be redeemed by marrying the Anglo hero, nor can she ever rival the white woman as moral authority or civilizer. In short, if the woman equals the nation, as is the case in both Hollywood Westerns and postwar America's discourse of national identity, then Helen Ramirez illustrates how the dominant culture's morality does not apply to women of color.

As Charles Ramírez Berg contends, when lone Anglo heroes like Gary Cooper's Will Kane turn their back on a contemptible social system, they have the *luxury* of accepting or rejecting that system; of being iconoclastic rugged individuals or valuable community members. Helen's choices, as written, and as filmed, are considerably more limited. Although Kane is a moral outsider, he is still part of the larger Anglo common culture. Therefore, after he and Amy ride into the sunset they will live happily ever after, but when Helen Ramirez relocates, what will become of her? Clearly, she is a survivor—as she reminded Harvey, “I can take of myself”—but she will always remain an *other* in the eyes

of Anglos. She will likely move to another frontier town in the same southwestern territory, but the filmmakers never felt it necessary to explain where Helen is from, or where she is going.

In the end, no matter how much agency and resistance we might ascribe to Katy Jurado, *High Noon* is not Helen Ramirez's film. Nevertheless, to many Chicano and Chicana viewers, Jurado fiercely steals her scenes, and so it depends on your point of view, your identifying subjectivity, and your situated knowledge. If you can shift your paradigm and refocus your lens from the white male and female leads of U.S. History to the bicultural, bilingual, borderlands mestiza, *High Noon* is all about Helen Ramirez. According to Carmen Huaco-Nuzum, mestiza spectators can directly identify with Jurado's unique, stereotype-subverting, "culturally empowered characterization." For instance, as Dionne Espinoza notes, Beverly Sanchez-Padilla created a tribute performance monologue, "La Katy," inspired by Katy Jurado's challenge to Lloyd Bridges in *High Noon*. In such ways, Jurado's iconic performance, particularly when she tells Grace Kelley how she feels as a Mexican woman in a white town, lingers in people's historical memories, looming larger in the Chicano cultural imaginary than in the mainstream mind's eye. Why do so many Chicanos and Chicanas admire Jurado's performance in this film? As Helen Ramirez told Amy, "If you don't know, I can't explain it to you."

With *High Noon* ranked number 27 on the American Film Institute's list of 100 Greatest American Films, future generations of movie lovers and casual, as

well as critical viewers will continue to engage in myriad ways with this significant scene, and with Katy Jurado's moving performance, which shines brightly not only in contemporary Hollywood, where Salma Hayak is one of the biggest (and highest paid) stars, despite the fact that choice roles for Mexicanas or Chicanas, especially as they age, are still rare, but also back into the past, prompting us to ponder Mexican womens' role in the mythical American Old West, and their glaring absence in textbook and documentary narratives of U.S. History.

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