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## The Shadowed Self Archetype of Mexican Gender and Technology in Michael Peña Films

By Melissa Villa-Nicholas

In a 2023 interview with the SAG-AFTRA Foundation Conversation, Michael Peña reflected on his 30-year career and how far he had come from being typecast in roles as an extra to playing the central hero of the biopic *A Million Miles Away*, about Mexican American migrant farm worker turned astronaut José Hernández:

You know, 30 years ago when I was starting out I was like I you know I'm the kid that went to prep school, I was auditioning for gangbanger number three, gang banger number two, and I was like, I'm going to get gangbanger number one, I swear to God. And that was my dream and, you know, dreams can evolve, let's just say that (SAG-AFTRA Foundation).

The “gangbanger” role was one that Peña would repeatedly reference in interviews about the development of his career; it serves as an indication point in interviews about the evolutionary trajectory of Peña's acting opportunities. Significantly, as Peña reflected on his leading role in *A Million Miles Away*, he paints a spectrum of Mexican male archetypes that illustrates the paradox at hand: perceptions of Mexican masculinity are organized by archetypes in which only *some* Latinx masculine identifiers are legible in association with advanced information technologies. However, by way of this spectrum in Michael Peña films, we might note that his shadow of the familiar “gangbanger,” even in

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*A Million Miles Away*, a movie where Mexican men in the U.S. have reached peak STEM achievement, is always present and co-constructing the *next, next* frontier, artificial intelligence (AI).

This article explores these archetypes and analyzes how Mexican men are portrayed with information technologies by way of Michael Peña films. Michael Peña's films reveal a social order of Mexican masculinity<sup>1</sup> as organized around information technologies, from the technological criminal to the superhuman AI, Mexican men are discursively perplexed. Through a discourse and textual analysis of films, scripts, popular media, and film reviews, I argue that Michael Peña's acting portfolio demonstrates the U.S. archetypes around Latinx men's masculinities is a binary with benign, heroic roles aligned with advanced technologies, and typecast criminality associated with low proximity to information technologies. Peña's films over time can serve as a case study to make sense of the puzzle of Mexican masculinities in 'futurity,' in that they find a place for a racialized and gendered group that has been traditionally classified as manual and non-techno futuristic.

Mexican cyborg masculinities found in Peña's acting career are organized in a binary that allows for "gangbangers" on the non-technical side and astronauts on the

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<sup>1</sup> In this article, 'masculinity' references the socially performative gender roles that are not essential or biological, but rather "The socially constructed generated consensus of what it means to be a man, to be 'manly' or to display such behavior at any on time" (2009, pg. 86) as defined by Deborah Kerfoot & David Knights. Masculinity in this circumstance is that which is inscribed, allowed for, and performative among Mexican men in the U.S. racial context.

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other. The Atlas of AI (Crawford) describes how users conceive of AI as a laborer without sentience but also as an immigrant threat, a shadowed counterpart of Mexican immigrant men's longstanding presence in the United States. This analysis centers on Michael Peña's film portrayals of Mexican men negotiating technologies in U.S. contexts and builds on theories of Latinx studies, Chicanx studies, race studies, and Science and Technology Studies (STS); it relies on close readings of interviews about Peña himself, audiovisual texts, social media posts, and publications about and by Peña. I am not only concerned with the content from Peña's movies, but also with his acting career and how Peña, as a case study, is arranged in relation to information technologies in an echo of social anxieties surrounding Mexican gender and masculinity in U.S. contexts. When his film portfolio is considered as a whole, Peña's roles demonstrate a more extensive social order of *how* Latinx gender is conceived in the U.S. alongside anxieties surrounding the shift in information technologies. Where will Mexican men in the U.S. go in these imagined communities if social formations shift with technological change? What purpose will Mexican men serve in the midst of accelerating shifts in technologies? How does Peña's dossier of films reflect sense-making around gender, race, and cyborg formations involving technology in the U.S.? How is Mexican gender organized in the space colonies of tech moguls' dreams? For if the nation is an imagined community, then Peña's films may be seen as an ongoing conversation of what will become of Mexican men, those who have for decades been rendered as alien citizens by way of manual labor, immigration policy, discriminatory employment practices, and educational

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segregation and separation (Ngai). Where will Mexican men be in the always-approaching futurity of rapidly changing information technologies? My analysis builds upon previous scholarly work on Mexican masculinities as portrayed in film, with a focus on the representation of information technologies and racial constructs. Previous research has overlooked bringing together these two elements that orbit each other—Mexican gender and information technologies as represented in pop culture—under the scope of analysis. Michael Peña's career trajectory over time serves as an ideal case study to illuminate our understanding of underpinning racial and gendered social ordering in this emerging age of AI.

Peña's career trajectory reflects how archetypes of Mexican gender and masculinity, as associated with information technologies, mirror social orders of normativity. Archetypes help us think about how race, gender, nationality, and information technologies intersect through roles in Peña's acting career. The term "archetype" originates from ancient Greek, meaning an original pattern. Carl Jung, the Swiss psychiatrist and psychoanalyst, incorporated archetypes into his theory of the human psyche. Jung believed that archetypes are universal, mythic characters that reside in the collective unconscious and reflect basic human motivations (Stevens). While Jung identified 12 archetypes, further scholarship advocates that archetypes can be built out of social tropes; archetypes "provide us with ways of theorizing about specific elements of the stereotype" and are deeply embedded into assumptions that

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form patterns of behavior (Schlesselman-Tarango 670). Archetypes, as they are framed by stardom and film, echo societal habits; Mary Beltrán says that stardom representations "'teach' notions of identity and leadership to citizens from all walks of life, including lessons regarding the meaning of gender, class, race, and ethnicity in a particular time and place" (5). The Mexican gang banger/faithful binary is a shadowed self archetype that follows Michael Peña through his career.

This article's concern is the social models and ideologies that negotiate, situate, and attempt to make sense of masculine Mexican gender roles in the U.S., as represented by information technologies. First, I review Mexican men's place in popular culture and the historical foundations of this representation in the United States, often included in the nation at arm's length through the hard labor of state formations. Then I look at the 'technological' criminal, Luis, in *Ant-Man*, as a necessary sidekick for hero Paul Rudd. Next, I look at the role of la familia in Peña's role as an astronaut in *The Martian* and *A Million Miles Away*. Finally, I explore the potential of Mexican immigrant men's labor as an AI interface design in Netflix's *Extinction*. The more significant concern for those archetypes is to locate embedded assumptions that impact the everyday lives of Latinxs as they are associated with information technologies, and the potential in the cyber-Latinxs.

**Literature Review**

Popular cultural representations of Mexican men in film have been discussed in Latinx and film studies, with the tropes and divergences in U.S. cinema as the primary mode of analysis. This article serves two functions in contributing to Latinx studies, film studies, and STS: it extends previous literature about Mexican men in American cinema as it examines masculine gender roles; it paves new ground in analyzing the implications of these gendered and racial archetypes around recent technological obsessions: space and AI. Among Latinx film studies, Peña himself has been a case study for an actor who *made it*, so to speak; from one-line roles as “gang banger 1,” to the show-stealing Luis in *Ant-Man*, to the central character of *Extinction* and *A Million Miles Away*, Peña is now a response to the long-criticized dearth of Latinx actors in Hollywood. Frederick Luis Aldama and Carlos Gabriel Kelly argue that Peña exercises agency by inserting himself into the stereotypical through *palomazo*, roles that interrupt “established structures and orders” (201). However, as seen in his films, notably *Ant-Man*, Peña will reinscribe himself into stereotypical formations. Typical in cinematic roles around Latinx masculinity are binaries of hypersexuality of the ‘Latin lover’ or the re-conscripting of Mexican men as the ‘family man,’ often praised for their potential to reground American values into ‘normative kinship networks’ of *la familia* (Rodríguez). Representations in film attempt to stake out a place for Latinos but also reshape gender roles into a palatable product that uses kinship discourse to assign public identity: Hollywood’s desire for ‘Latin’ bodies

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coincides with their "dismissal of those bodies in their complex, flesh, and blood manifestations" (Rodríguez 71). This renders Latino gender roles illegible and reinscribes Latino men back into the kinship binaries.

In the United States, Mexican men have been assigned tenuous 'roles' since early colonization; their belonging and racialized citizenship are historically precarious in state formation. Since the foundations of state-making in the U.S., Mexican men have been associated with labor and crime. With Westward expansion after the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, citizenship and racial belonging for Mexicans were tenuous—Mexicans already established in what would become the United States were given land and property based on being racially categorized as 'White,' though Mexicans were never fully included in the racial privileges of whiteness. For example, they were subject to school and neighborhood segregation that interpellated Mexicans as racial 'other.' Mae Ngai names this "racialized fracture," with full citizenship for Mexicans in the U.S. as 'alien citizens' because even those Mexican Americans who are born in the U.S. remain 'alien' by national standards (8).

Throughout U.S. history, Mexican men have been aligned with hard labor, even as they were resented for or were violently excluded from those jobs. In the 1920s, Mexicans were restricted from moving into the U.S. through border control and visa restrictions, making them the largest undocumented group at that time, "The actual and imagined association of Mexicans with illegal immigration was part of an emergent

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Mexican 'race problem,' which also witnessed the application of Jim Crow segregation laws to Mexicans in the Southwest, especially in Texas, and, at the federal level, the creation of 'Mexican' as a separate racial category in the census" (Ngai 7). Latinxs were often subject to hostility when they received membership, separated into lower pay rates and seniority lines. Mexican men throughout U.S. history have been deemed necessary for labor in agriculture and construction, but always kept from full citizenship inclusion. While U.S. state formations may value whiteness in citizenship inclusion, Natalia Molina says:

Despite the deep tradition of racial hierarchy and racial exclusion built into the American system, the dynamics of capitalist expansion always worked at cross-purposes to the goal of racial and cultural homogeneity. In other words, as the United States expanded both territorially and economically, the demand for labor almost always trumped the social desire to maintain racial purity (22).

Mexican men have often found themselves at this crossroads of inclusion and distance in citizenship and state formations. Traditional gender roles of masculinity played a significant role in the early development of Information Communication Technology (ICT) infrastructure in the United States. The Mexican labor force also played a crucial role in building the railroad infrastructure during the 19th and early 20th centuries. Mexican and Mexican American railroad track workers, known as *traqueros*, were recruited after the exclusion of Chinese, Black, and Native American workers (Marcos

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Garcílazo). The media, railroad companies, and labor subcontractors portrayed *traqueros* as possessing superhuman abilities, justifying their value and necessity in building the railroad. This historical influence extended to laying the fiber-optic network, with Mexican masculinities considered biologically suited for labor-intensive manufacturing (Villa-Nicholas). Michael Peña's film dossier reflects the interconnected relationship between Mexican men, information technologies, and U.S. citizenship.

***Ant-Man: Luis, The Lovable Criminal***

*Ant-Man* responds to mainstream media's anxieties around Latinx men in information and technology futures with a character that is positioned as necessarily criminalized, endlessly faithful to the white lead, and as an entrée into the Latinx community that might otherwise be closed off to whiteness. While Luis is not the hero, he is intentionally constructed as a comedic threshold that the hero must overcome to enter their hero's journey, utilizing advanced science and information technologies.

In *Ant-Man* (2015), Peña plays Luis, a member of Paul Rudd's heist group of friends. We begin with Luis because, for Mexican STEM roles in film, this role was lauded for evading the stereotypical Mexican masculine archetype of a criminal, thug, thief, or gangbanger, only to have been followed by that archetype as an undetected shadow. The role of Luis was a breakthrough for Peña, considered a show-stealer alongside Rudd's Scott Lang and a nuanced character that finally allowed Latinxs in the Marvel-verse. However, considering Luis's character in relation to technology and in the context of

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Peña's interviews, we find that Luis is a shadow self that often follows Mexican men who portray innovators, engineers, technologists, or scientists in film. In *Ant-Man*, Luis is a 'criminal' character who serves as a sidekick to help the main character appear more capable of wielding the technology and science required of a white hero and their call to adventure. Unwavering loyalty to a white counterpart and, by extension, to the cause of technological progress will be featured in multiple Peña films, including *A Million Miles Away*, *The Martian*, and *Extinction*. While Peña's character is reviewed as 'show-stealing,' the character of Luis was a carefully constructed Latinx part that supports Rudd's ascension into *Ant-Man*.

*Ant-Man* was hailed as a unique film due to its particular focus on quantum physics and quantum realms. Quantum physics is the foundation that allows the audience to suspend their disbelief: the main characters, using advanced technologies, can manipulate the laws of physics. The main character in *Ant-Man*, Paul Rudd's Scott Lang, is a petty thief who is given superhero powers through quantum physics. The film was portrayed as a breakthrough in introducing audiences to quantum mechanics through sci-fi storytelling (Chow). In the movie, Scott Lang is released from prison and goes to live with his friends and former cellmates, Luis Carrenza, Kurt, and Dave. Lang agrees to a large heist that lands him in the debt of Hope van Dyne and Hank Pym, and so he must learn how to use quantum mechanics to wield superhero abilities and wear the 'suit' of *Ant-Man*. However, Lang needs a sidekick to enter the high-tech world of

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donning the Ant-Man suit, and Marvel requires a credible, authoritative presence in the realm of crime, such as Luis.

Luis is considered one of Peña's most famous roles by reviewers and audiences alike. Media outlets praised Peña for a comedic, complex character. Luis was a surprise to audience members because of his character's seemingly contradictory characteristics: a Northern California Chicano criminal with detailed storytelling abilities and highbrow taste. On *The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon*, Fallon noted how Peña was the movie's highlight (The Tonight Shows). Film reviewer Liam Gaughan went so far as to say that Peña's character brought nuance to the otherwise politically neutral Marvel universe:

*Ant-Man's* Luis represents a different side of heroism in the MCU; he may have a checkered past, but he's also a victim of unfair economic and social circumstances within the MCU. The Avengers may have saved the world from extraterrestrial threats and multiverse dilemmas, but they haven't made it much easier for working-class people like Luis, who are just trying to make ends meet. Luis doesn't have an easy life, but his perpetual sense of optimism is entirely endearing. He shows how even those without superpowers can have an impact as he helps his best friend, Scott, accept his destiny of becoming a hero and father. It's not only one of Peña's best performances, but the most entertaining part of the *Ant-Man* franchise that shows how unique it is (Gaughan).

However, a sole reviewer saw through these praises. Umberto Gonzalez noted that in the

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end, Peña's role propagates the historic casting of Peña as the gangbanger, the historical trope of the Latino criminal that checkers the history of U.S.-based film:

Luis, a cholo gangbanger ex-con, feels to me like a throwback to the cinema of the 1950s when Mexicans were stereotyped as criminals and Bandidos. Every time Luis opens his mouth to talk in the movie, rapid-fire jibberish emerges. He didn't speak coherently even once. Even in the beginning when Luis uttered that his father got deported, I asked myself, 'Immigration issues in a Marvel movie?! Really?! Was that necessary?!'

While Umberto Gonzalez's analysis is critical, it is only one in a long list of positive reviews of Luis that firmly believe Luis to be an 'authentic' Latinx character in the Marvel Universe.

Luis, while lauded by audiences, film critics, and media for his nuance, is indeed an intentional fabrication by Peña, Rudd, and the producers. In discussing the film's decision-making around the character of Luis, Peña and the film producers chose a version of the character that made Paul Rudd's character likable. Peña discusses the choices of how Luis came to be written:

I remember initially I thought I'd do [Luis] a certain way, and there were two characters that I thought of. But me and Paul did a test with other actors to see

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who would fill out the gang and it just wasn't working. I had to go back to the drawing board, and I came up with this guy, the way he talks... (Brown).

Peña's portrayal drew on a friend of his, who Peña says presented a casual and happy reflection of his life in and out of incarceration. He describes this friend in a clip from *The Tonight Show* on YouTube aptly titled "Michael Peña Mimics His Criminal Friend Pablo for Ant-Man":

Yeah, I grew up with this guy that is slightly a little bit of a criminal...but a loveable criminal. And I'll be like, 'what did you do this weekend?' 'I went to jail dog.' I go to Disneyland and this guy is like 'I went to jail.' ...he has that perpetual stoned look, like a glazed over look...I based this character on him (The Tonight Show).

Peña appropriates Pablo's cadences for the part of Luis. While mimicking his friend Pablo, Peña takes on articulating words with a slight California Chicano accent and uses language like "dog" and mispronounces words like "Re-al-ity show". Peña discussed the careful and intentional construction of Luis as a lovable and legible 'criminal.' In an interview in *Now Toronto*, Peña shows the interviewer how his friend Pablo talks by playing a Facebook video of him: "Penas (sic) character had an accent and upbeat attitude that gave all his lines a gut-busting spin" (Sumi). This suggests that for the main white character to adapt to the advanced science and technology of quantum

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mechanics, there must be an outlandishly comedic, formerly-incarcerated Latino as a reinforcement of the superhero.

Luis/Pablo serves as a support to Scott Lang, a criminal and a 'dummy' (a label often given to Lang among the Avengers heroes). Luis's character represents a slightly edgier side of 'criminality' than Lang's and offers the audience a glimpse into the private lives of Hollywood's constructed Latinx California family, such as when Luis mentions that his father was deported. Luis's criminality and California Chicano culture, represented as off-limits to outsiders, *allow* for Scott Lang to enter the technology of Ant-Man. The permanence of Luis's criminalization, whether through an assumed undocumented status or as the initiator of the heist that leads Rudd to become Ant-Man, is a necessary trope for Ant-Man to be able to ascend. It is also a trope that is disguised as show-stealing and nuanced. Critical Latinx Studies theorist Lisa Cacho notes the permanency of criminalization for actual people like Luis's family:

To say that some groups form the foundation for law is to say that law is dependent upon the *permanence* of certain groups' criminalization. These permanently criminalized people are the groups to whom I refer as *ineligible for personhood*— as populations subjected to laws but refused the legal means to contest those laws as well as denied both the political legitimacy and moral credibility necessary to question them (6).

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It is Luis's entrance into authentic criminalization that allows Scott Lang/Ant-Man to slide easily along the spectrum from criminality to hero, and it is Peña's proximity to real-life Pablo that allows Peña to break into Hollywood via Latinx 'authenticity.'

The fidelity of Latinx men to their loved ones in a highly technological scenario is crucial to the plot's function and the main character's success: Luis will stand by Scott Lang's side in heists. Audiences are 'surprised' to find Luis's criminality juxtaposed with his taste in high art: "You know me, I'm more of a neo-Cubist kind of guy, but there was this one Rothko that was sublime" (*Ant-Man*). Luis's purpose is to surprise audiences because of the juxtaposition of his intelligence with his 'criminality.' In one of the most cited scenes of *Ant-Man*, Luis recalls a story that cuts to multiple scenes of different characters talking, with Luis's voice ventriloquizing over those characters' voices. Luis's story visually moves from wine tasting to a family outdoor BBQ to a baseball game. The story demonstrates the necessity of Luis, a character who can allow the white viewer and Scott Lang temporary passage into the intimate lives of Latinxs. During the story, Lang asks multiple times if the heist tip is airtight. Luis's character is constructed for his fidelity to Lang and the entrée he provides (to Lang and the audience) into Latinx conversations and spaces where they would otherwise be an outsider. The audience is led to assume that, as an insider to Latinx spaces, Luis's 'tip' is more authoritative than as an outsider.

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Anxiety around Latinx men as criminals is quelled by Luis's preference for highbrow culture, his allowance of a white man into Latinx private spaces, and comedy. Fear around a Latino threat (Chavez), the narrative of the invasion of Latinx criminality that has been depicted since the 1970s, is neutralized for a larger purpose that serves science and technological advancement. We now turn to the function of la familia, as seen through the lens of Peña playing the role of astronaut.

***Astronauts: Fidelity and La Familia in *The Martian* and *A Million Miles Away****

Chicanx Studies have elucidated how la familia/the family functions as a theme in Latinx cultural production in the U.S. *La Familia* was an organizing theme for Latinxs in the Chicano movements of the 1960s and 1970s, and can have gender and sexuality implications that animate social inequities among Latinxs by instituting and circulating normative kinship networks (Rodríguez) that Latinxs challenge and resist. Among mainstream cultural productions, the Latinx atomic family has been overtly criticized. For example, in the 1990s and early aughts, anti-immigrant rights movements focused on Latina fertility and Latina reproductive deviance for having more than the socially acceptable 2.5 children, fueling social anxieties around a Latinx population explosion (Parrado and Flippen). La Familia has also justified Latinx immigrant population growth as a positive addition to the United States, with immigrant rights advocates arguing that Latinxs are more socially conservative and value the family structure, values eroded through cultural revolutions in the U.S. La Familia/the family, then, is a culturally

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constructed concept tied to Latinx identities in the U.S. that cannot be perceived as neutral in film. We turn to Michael Peña's astronaut-based films, *The Martian* and *A Million Miles Away*, to distinguish the function of la familia as an entrance for Latinx men into what is, in Western contexts, socially praised as the apex of science and technology achievement and new colonialism.

In *The Martian*, Peña's character, Rick Martinez, is a supporting role to the main character, Mark Watney, played by Matt Damon. The film's premise is that Watney is stranded on a mission to Mars, and many characters must work together to save him. Martinez's character is endlessly loyal, a family man, and religious when the time calls for it. Rick Martinez, as a Latinx man and trope, is a necessary anchor to normative kinship and old-world religious beliefs that his fellow white astronauts had long left behind in their pursuit of space. *A Million Miles Away* was made as an ideal representation of Latinxs in the U.S. overcoming discrimination and achieving the pinnacle of STEM achievement via the true story of José Morena Hernández, a former Mexican migrant farmworker who trained as an engineer and inventor and eventually worked as an astronaut for NASA. Hernández spent most of his career at the Lawrence Livermore Lab, and his most notable achievement was not becoming an astronaut but co-inventing the first full-field digital mammography system, which significantly improved breast cancer detection in terms of both accuracy and speed (Tyrrell). *A Million Miles Away* was directed by Alejandra Márquez Abella, who negotiated to film the movie

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in Mexico City, and most of the cast are Mexican American actors. Márquez Abella insisted on the Mexico City film location because she wanted to ground the story in the authenticity of Mexican actors and heritage (Jacobs). *A Million Miles Away* tells the story of Hernández's tireless training and efforts to become an astronaut for NASA. Hernández especially wanted Michael Peña as the lead actor because of his work on *The Martian*, and Hernández and Márquez Abella have said that Peña was always the first choice for the lead role. *A Million Miles Away* is also significant because it is one of the handful of roles where Peña has been cast as the lead.

In interviews about *The Martian*, Peña praises his character, Rick Martinez, as a crossover role. Playing an astronaut is described as the apex of Latinx ascendancy in achievement:

'I am not afraid to play Latin roles - that was a big part of my life,' says the Mexican-American actor who was born and raised in Chicago. Yet Peña says it has been great to be able to transcend more 'stereotypical' roles; he plays astronaut Rick Martinez in the new blockbuster movie 'The Martian,' with actor Matt Damon and directed by Ridley Scott (NBC News).

Space, for Peña, is a contrast to the world of gangsters and stereotyped roles of criminality. Peña relates becoming an astronaut to moving away from criminalization:

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'I've been an actor for 20 years, and I think the first 14 years it was all struggling...at first it was all gangsters,' he said, laughing, of the roles offered him for many years. 'The reality that everyone is stereotyped; everyone gets typecast so you have to work to get out of that,' he said (NBC News).

Rick Martinez serves two functions in *The Martian*: as the supporting role and as a plot device, emphasizing endless fidelity to the lead and conservative family values. In *The Martian*, a major storm on Mars forces the crew of The Hermes to abort their mission and head back to Earth. During the onset of the storm, Mark Watney is punctured by a communications satellite, and the captain of the crew must decide to leave him, presumed dead, on Mars. Still, Martinez is verbally resistant to believing Watney has died. When the crew must choose to stay in space for an additional 500+ days to save Watney, Martinez is the first to volunteer and casually dismisses the possibility of being court-martialed as a military officer when he returns home—his priority is faithfulness to his friend. Martinez must face his disapproving Latina wife and small child on a video monitor for volunteering to continue his mission for over a year to save Mark Watney. His function as a character is that the audience does not doubt his fidelity to 'the mission.' For Martinez (and Peña), this spectrum of criminalization/gangbanger on one end and technological skill-sets on the other is functional—he can *work* his way toward further nuance and out of rightlessness through his faithfulness to Mark Watney and the larger U.S. mission. Fidelity, in *The Martian*, serves as Martinez's conduit to citizenship and a

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means of escaping rightlessness. His proximity to space, the final frontier, and the highly sought-after 21st-century colonialism serves to demonstrate that he will die for Mark Watney and the larger U.S. project. Through their unwavering loyalty as compatriots, Latinx men reveal that they can gain access to advanced information technology systems.

Second to fidelity, Rick Martinez's role is an anchor to ensure conservative family values in colonization. Stranded on Mars, Mark Watney must find a way to grow his food to survive until the next mission landing. This dilemma leads Watney to build a greenhouse inside the Mars hub; however, materials are scarce, and he lacks flammable objects. The script displays the necessity for a Catholic Latinx in the colonization of Mars among a group of White astronauts that might have already abandoned such religious beliefs. Watney says:

MARK (CONT'D)

Believe it or not, the challenge has been

finding something that will hold a flame.

NASA hates fire. Because of the whole

"fire makes everyone die in space" thing.

So everything we brought with us is flame

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retardant. With the notable exception

of... Martinez' personal items.

He holds up Martinez' pack. Removes a small wooden cross.

MARK (CONT'D)

Sorry, Martinez. If you didn't want me

to go through your stuff, you shouldn't

have left me for dead on a desolate

planet.

He starts shaving the cross down with a knife.

MARK (CONT'D)

I figure God won't mind, considering the

Situation (Goddard)

Religious beliefs are not discussed in *The Martian*, which is heavily based on scientific principles and deduction. However, the film needs a rogue character willing to break NASA rules for their belief system. In this film, Martinez's character is willing to break the rules for his friend and his religious values. As a colonizing project, Martinez is cast as an ideological *Hail Mary* in that his belief systems can assist Americans with

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conservative values they might have already lost back on Earth. Indeed, when the Latino immigration threat flares, immigration advocates make the case that Latinxs will bring more conservative family values, religiosity, and benevolence that may otherwise have been lost to Americans. For Latinx men to be part of the film's neo-colonial project, their *function* mirrors that of Latinx immigration into the United States, proving that they will be model citizens in these new colonial projects.

The story of *A Million Miles Away* illustrates the intersection of Latinx identity with various STEM fields in the U.S. The film illustrates how Hernández encountered obstacles in achieving his goals in engineering and as an astronaut, including being mistaken for the custodian in his workplace. As a metaphor for the Latinidad movement in primarily white spaces, the film shows Hernández listening loudly to his music in Spanish on the way to his first engineering job and turning his radio down when he approaches the building. In one scene, as he tries to assimilate, Hernández listens to 1980s pop music by Rick Astley in English. When Hernández has a scientific breakthrough and starts to receive more respect and a leadership role, he switches back to listening to his Spanish music loudly in the parking lot. This small metaphor represents countless cultural negotiations that Latinxs navigate in non-Latinx STEM spaces, code-switching to achieve their goal in innovations. This echoes Carlos Gabriel Kelley's assertion of the strategic *palomazo* Peña adopts—for Latinxs in STEM, a

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code-switching *palomazo* is often necessary to move into these long-discriminating fields.

*A Million Miles Away* is strategically placed as a film about Latinxs in STEM and the genre of technologically innovative stories alongside films such as *The Imitation Game*, the story of mathematician Alan Turing, a gay man who built code-breaking during World War II while struggling with the external homophobia of the mid-twentieth century, and *Hidden Figures*, about the Black NASA mathematician Creola Katherine Johnson, who worked on orbital mechanics for the first NASA launches that sent men to space. The American public has come to crave these films, which portray historically marginalized people achieving STEM breakthroughs despite the oppressive circumstances in the U.S. Such films serve as apologetics in that they overturn stereotypes that underrepresented people do not have histories in STEM and demonstrate that it was *possible* to beat the policy-driven discrimination odds to fulfill American values of innovation and technological advancement. However, one character haunts Hernández in *A Million Miles Away*, reminding him of his shadow self: his cousin, Beto.

The director Márquez Abella based the character of Beto on friends from José Hernández's neighborhood, one of whom died of a drug overdose, and another who committed suicide. In the film, Beto is a cousin of José Hernández who continues to work in the fields after Hernández leaves for college and becomes an engineer. Beto and

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José had grown up in the same circumstances. However, Beto was killed as a young man in a shooting. Beto (whose nickname is Pepito) acts as Hernández's shadow self when Hernández finds himself at a discursive crossroads, or a seemingly impossible challenge, he touches base with Beto, who reminds José how critical his success is to the community, reminding him to stay anchored in his culture. When José buys a newer car and sells his Impala, Beto jokingly calls it a betrayal. While José struggles with the challenges of becoming an astronaut, Beto encourages him: "Who better than a migrant [to go into space]? Somebody that knows what it is like to dive into the unknown? Who better than that?" (*A Million Miles Away*). However, for the storyline, Beto's character serves a greater purpose than a soundboard for José: the shadow self that must die and haunt José, reminding him of how he *could have ended up*, the rightless implicated gangbanger specter that follows Mexican men in technological spaces. In an interview, Hernández reflected on the creation of the character Beto and recalled the importance of personal merit to evade that shadow self:

The reality of life is that you have to work harder to get the same recognition (as others). That's reality. You can choose to deal with it in two ways. You can have a chip on your shoulder, and you could be combative, argumentative, and complain and you'll be viewed as a controversial person. Or you could do what I did.

Understand the rules and realize that perhaps I have to work 1.4 times as hard to

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get the same recognition. I'm not afraid of hard work so I said, I'm just going to work hard (Castro, 2023).

The implication here is clear: personal merit, not structural change, is the avenue to evade the rightless shadow self, for Mexican men to enter highly technological work, achieve the height of scientific achievement, and be included in colonial projects. However, that rightless 'criminal,' his binary self, will always be a shadow for Mexican men in U.S. STEM spaces, no matter their social status.

Each film is distinguished from the other by the nuance of Peña's characters. *The Martian* relies on tropes of Mexican men as faithful; faithful to the colonial project; faithful to religious belief when all other scientists have left faith behind; faithful to the family, even when his duty to them is secondary. Martinez is rewarded as the only astronaut to return to space when the story's conflict is resolved, whereas his counterparts appear to be home with their own families. At the end of *The Martian*, Martinez launches into space with Chinese and American astronauts to demonstrate the collaboration of two major empires in the Martian colonial project, foreshadowing perhaps that Mexican men have futures as Martian colonizers when they fill particularly acceptable citizen roles.

According to Cacho, the Latinx 'gang banger' and Latinx undocumented people are inherently criminalized as rightless. They suffer a *social death* in that the foundation for law depends on their criminalization, which makes them ineligible for personhood:

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These populations are excluded from ostensibly democratic processes that legitimate U.S. law, yet they are expected to unambiguously accept and unequivocally uphold a legal and political system that depends on the unquestioned permanency of their rightlessness (Cacho 6).

Following Peña's logic on the success of his career, the rightless, stereotyped roles of the gangbanger sit on a spectrum opposite to that of the astronaut. In recent years, voyages to space and the colonization of Mars have represented the pinnacle of Silicon Valley success, with the likes of Elon Musk and Jeff Bezos among the tech billionaires heavily focusing on space colonization in the 2020s. *The Martian's* release in 2015 reflected a flurry of focus on space by tech moguls. For Peña, having Latinx representation on the orbiting vessel that eventually rescues Mark Watney is a move away from the social death of the gang banger typecast and toward the fuller citizenship and personhood of the astronaut, polemically discussed as the social peak in technological development.

The ending of *A Million Miles Away* is a surprise: Hernández turns to a political career, and he and his father choose to start a winery in California. The haunting of Beto is completed by the film's end after Hernández has fulfilled his mission and is no longer pursuing STEM achievements. Both astronauts are anchored in the concept of la familia as the bridge to their success. Both astronauts are portrayed as playing an essential part in future colonial projects of space exploration if they walk their lines of la familia,

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loyalty, and merit, demonstrating that they will not succumb to that shadow self, Peña's specter, who is always present.

We turn now to Peña's final technologically distinguished film as lead— and perhaps one of his most understated in terms of its portrayal of Mexican men's relationship to technology —as a cyborg in Netflix's *Extinction*.

***Extinction* and AI as a Latinx Immigrant**

At a glance, *Extinction* (2018) replicates the above models of la familia and fidelity as an established way for Mexican men to access advanced information technologies. However, what *Extinction* does differently is pose open possibilities for Latinx men and Latinx masculinities in cyborg futures. Peña plays Peter, husband, father, and factory custodian, who has nightmares about what appears to be a predicted alien invasion. Peter's anxieties disrupt his family life with his wife, Alice, and their two daughters. When the alien invasion comes to fruition, the story reveals that Peter's nightmares were memories from a previous AI-human war that rendered humans as aliens to Earth. Alice, Lucy, and Hanna are AI from a long-ago war that left humans exiled to space and AI as settlers on Earth, their home planet. Peter and his family's identity as AI is a surprise reveal to the audience. The story reveals that after humans mistreated AI for decades, AI humanoids revolted and expelled surviving humans from the planet. After that world war, most AI humanoids chose to wipe their memory and live as humans. For all intents and purposes, it is important to establish that *Extinction* is

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'post-racial' in that race and intersectionality are not positioned as mainstream subjectivities or identities; Peter does not overtly identify as culturally Mexican, and there are no indicators of nation-state identity beyond Western and English-speaking. Instead, the story heavily alludes to themes of immigration and citizenship via AI.

Reviews for *Extinction* were distinctly mixed, with *GQ* proclaiming "A Netflix Sci-Fi Movie that... Doesn't Suck?", and *RogerEbert.com* giving the film a 1.5-star review. *Extinction* was described as not particularly memorable in terms of plot and script. However, what sets *Extinction* apart from Peña's previous tech-based films is its examination of the correlation between Mexican men's immigrant experiences in the U.S., the metaphor of outer space 'alien' as a stand-in for immigrants in the U.S., and the reception and anxieties surrounding AI interface design as a technological palimpsest for immigrant labor. Luis Aldama and Gabriel Kelly argue that this film is allegorical:

Peña is the higher-order thinking and feeling brown subject who stands against the invading human forces. He subverts cinematic expectation between good (Anglo human) and bad (brown/other alien invader), clearing the way for a new cognitive schema where audiences will introspect about how whiteness has traditionally destroyed, deported, and/or subjugated Latinx peoples (208)

Latinxs' relationships to AI are rooted in a contextual premise that Latinxs in the U.S. have a history of involvement in information labor, both visible and invisible, often structurally positioned in manual labor roles, such as call centers and

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telecommunications (Villa-Nicholas). Latinxs in the U.S. have also been anthropomorphized through raced and gendered Latina AI chatbots, designed through the lens of 'acceptable' models of citizenship where they are fluent in English first, then Spanish, and designed with the traditionally marketed 'Latino look' with straight hair and light skin.

From government-designed USCIS's 'Emma' to Silicon Valley companies' chatbots, there is a precedent of Latinxs designed as AI that engenders and implicates social stratifications. In U.S. imaginaries, Latinxs can become an ideal model citizen when designed by AI as an information worker that evades the 'Latino threat.' This context is important to *Extinction's* understanding of Latinx AI. Those AI designs also promise a resistant information worker who may have problems passing such anti-immigrant technology screenings as E-Verify or required background checks (Sweeney and Villa-Nicholas). Therefore, in the U.S. imaginary, Latinx AI can be designed and imagined as an ideal Latina citizen. However, Latinx men have been portrayed in film in proximity to AI for decades, such as Edward James Olmos's roles in the police and military in *Blade Runner* and *Battlestar Galactica*, and Oscar Isaac's portrayal as an AI designer and exploiter in *Ex Machina*.

Peter acts as a double entendre for Latino masculinity, eroding his assigned role as an 'illegal' anthropomorphized agent. Like his real-life contemporary chatbot counterpart, he is a custodian and an AI laborer for humans, working rudimentary jobs

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and attending to building maintenance. After the AI revolution and the expulsion of humans, Peter is an engineer who repairs large-scale cables and is no longer the target of his peers' ire. As an analogy for the AI interface as immigrant labor, Peter has more rights and autonomy after the overthrow of the Earth's citizens. However, in the post-revolutionary period, once AI humanoids achieve liberation and appear to be moving toward sentience, Peter and Lucy form a nuclear family, adopting AI children. Peter's role as protector of his family erodes when he recalls the trauma of the enslavement of AI and the AI revolution; however, by the end of the film, Peter remembers his past as a second-class-citizen AI and agrees to protect his autonomy and liberation by remilitarizing AI to take back the Earth from the 'alien' humans. At the end of *Extinction*, Peter looks at his AI-chosen family and agrees to realign with militarization against humans, thereby reinstating his masculine role as the family protector. *Extinction* is a self-aware project that acknowledges Latinx information labor, which is similar to Latinx immigrant labor in the U.S. The 'Latino threat' narrative is invoked as the user generates social anxieties surrounding their interaction with AI.

*Extinction* can also be viewed as a contemporary demonstration of U.S. anxieties around public access and the use of AI in that it delineates user-designed AI with Mexican men and the Latino threat (Chavez). The film pulls back the curtain of these social anxieties about AI to reveal that they are the same anxieties around immigrant labor and Mexican masculinity. Contemporary AI interfaces and the user experience with

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the AI interface invoke immigrant labor in the U.S., and the "Latino threat" manifests in contemporary user anxieties around AI modes of labor.

There is an echo of social reflection on the dichotomy of the 'alien' and the 'citizen,' in which *Extinction* questions a post-revolutionary moment in which the formerly suppressed immigrant (AI) has unseated the hostile citizen (humans). In *Extinction*, we enter a post-revolutionary moment where the alien/immigrant/AI has already overthrown the previous state formation and built a new state. Rather than aligning the audience with humanity's need to take back their 'home,' at the end, the film questions if Peter, now conscious of his former status as an alien, will take up arms to protect his role as a non-normative father, family protector, and defender of AI statehood. *Extinction* reveals the potential of the state failure for Latinx masculinity-as-cyborg in a post-alien state where gendered roles and citizenship are not deterministic.

As we move further into the era of AI, we can identify in pop cultural representations subtle U.S. anxieties around how Latinx men and Latinx masculine archetypes are discursively situated with information technologies. As a case study, Michael Peña's career exemplifies a dichotomy between the non-technological criminal /typecast gangbanger and the high-achieving astronaut who assists in space colonization. Peña's role in *Extinction* highlights that anxieties surrounding the public's interface with AI are often analogous to anxieties surrounding immigrants in the U.S. *Extinction* poses an open question about Mexican men as cyborgs and their gendered

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archetypes. Still, Latinx men have a shadowed self, the typecasted criminal/gangbanger and his faithful counterpart, who travels with them, and reinscribes gender into the age of AI.

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