Latino Youth in Film: *McFarland, USA* and *Spare Parts*

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Abstract:

The representation of youth in American cinema has undergone many changes in the last decade. The "teen film" identified by Timothy Shary, emerged in the 1950s and fully developed in the 1980s with varieties ranging from horror and rock to beach teen. Until the first decade of this century, all these forms of the American teen film represented mainly one social class and ethnicity. In the introduction to *Youth Culture in Global Cinema* (2007), Shary and Alexandra Seibel explain, "When Hollywood has focused on characters between childhood and adulthood, the films tend to follow the dreams of success and popularity that many young people share, and youth culture is portrayed as primarily white, middle class, non-religious, and fun" (2007, 1). In 2015, *McFarland, USA* (Niki Caro) and *Spare Parts* (Sean McNamara) were released. Produced by two major studios—Walt Disney and Pantelion respectively—, these films focus on Latino youth, both immigrants and first-generation Americans. Interestingly, these films bring to the fore a demographic that has been characterized by Victor Sáenz and Luis Ponjuan as "vanishing from the American education pipeline" (2009, 54). Based on real-life stories, *McFarland, USA* and *Spare Parts* show low-income and undocumented Latino students dealing with high school life. Ronald Chennault notes two patterns: "all the films share the centrality of a white educator who is depicted as the savior of the students in the film" (2006, 152) and "a reliance on disparaging stereotypes of racial minorities to propel their narratives" (2006, 153). In this essay, I examine the challenges that Latino teens face in their high school education and analyze their representation in *McFarland, USA* and *Spare Parts*, arguing that these films, released at the end of the second Obama administration, present Latino teens as having the talents and qualities needed to achieve their potential and become good American citizens. I begin by contextualizing common features of Latinos' education.

Keywords: McFarland, USA, Spare Parts, Latino youth, Latino cinema, American high school films, undocumented migrants

Latino Teens and Education

In the last several decades, there has been increased scholarly and cinematic attention to the obstacles faced by young Latinos. Their rise to prominence coincides with the worldwide phenomenon of globalization, which has particularly impacted young people. Addressing its effects on youth, Néstor García Canclini notes

> the great number of young people who contribute the greatest percentages to unemployment and informal employment statistics and, in many countries, also contribute to the convoys of migrants, to the statistics of violent deaths like those of soldiers, hitmen or victims of urban violence or narco-terrorism. (2013, 342)

In Latin America, young people encounter higher levels of unemployment which often propels them to migrate in search of better opportunities, while Latino youth are many times, exposed to urban violence. Latinos' turning to gangs has been briefly shown in films such as *Stand and Deliver* (Robert Menéndez 1988) and *A Better Life* (Chris Weiss 2011), reinforcing the common stereotype of young Latinos as criminals. Although Latinxs are the largest minority, they continue to be underrepresented in television and film.[1] When they are represented, they are portrayed "in stories related to crime and participate in a disproportionate amount of conversations about crime and violence on primetime programming" (Rivadaneyra et al. 2007, 263). In addition to their negative representation, Latinxs also experience the pressure to assimilate to the dominant White culture. Wayne Cornelius explains that "many Anglos view [them] as a 'problem minority' because they do not appear to assimilate fast enough into the dominant culture" (2002, 178). Thus, on one hand, visual depictions either omit or distort Latinex, while on the other, the values of the dominant culture are presented as better. If, as Andrea Sharkey and Rob Shields perceptively argue, "while youth experience second-class citizenship as they are relegated to the status of 'citizens in becoming', most go on to attain the rights of a 'full citizen' with time" (2008, 240), many Latino high school students are subjected to second-class citizenship beyond their adolescent years and never reach the status of full citizen, due to either their ethnicity or their immigration status.

This "second-class citizenship" begins at schools, where Latinos constitute a demographic group that lags behind others in achievement. In the early 2000s, Richard Valencia stated that "wherever Chicano communities exist, school failure appears to be widespread among Chicano student enrollment" (2002, 4). Among the many reasons for Latinx school failure, Valencia notes school segregation, teacher discrimination, and curriculum stratification (2002, 23-30). Moreover, Valencia and Mary Black have judiciously noted the existence of a myth that Mexican Americans do not appreciate an education. They explain:

> Given that Mexican Americans (allegedly) do not hold education high in their value hierarchy, this leads to inadequate family socialization for academic competence, which in turn contributes to the school failure of Mexican American children and youth. (2002, 83)

Although this myth has been debunked, it still permeates the views of many educators in the United States. There is another reason that Latinx lag behind other groups in academic achievement. As Sáenz and Ponjuan argue, Black and Latino males often "reject academic excellence because they perceive it as 'acting White'" (2009, 60). That is to say, young men of

color who pursue academic success are believed to identify with the values of the dominant American culture.

Latino adolescents face other hurdles in their access to postsecondary education. Watson Swail, Alberto Cabrera, and Chul Lee list the following: poor academic preparation, parents without a high school diploma, and low family income (2004, 4). The problems are considerable if we take into account the increasing number of Latino students: by 2008 they accounted for 21% of the students in public elementary schools, and in 2010, Latino children became the majority population in California (García Bedolla 2014, 135). Another crucial issue is the legal status of young Latinx. In 2001, the Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (Dream) Act was introduced to legalize the status of almost 800,000 youth who had entered the United States illegally and had since resided in the U.S. As the Dream Act was not approved in Congress, in 2012, the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) was passed to grant temporary permission for those young residents, mostly but not exclusively, Latinx, to study, get a driver's license, and work if they had no criminal records.

In the twenty-first century, the effective integration of Latino teens depends on their access to higher education. As they become an increasingly significant portion of the American population (comprising 11.3 million children and adolescents today), their college education— or lack thereof— has noticeable implications for the American economy (Nancy Gonzáles et al. 2012, 259). Although Latinx constitute the largest minority and the fastest-growing segment of the American population (Gándara and Contreras 2009, 5), a 2004 report from the Pew Hispanic Center mentions that "73% of Latinos aspired to postsecondary education but only 55% aspired to a B.A." (2004, 4). In 2009, Patricia Gándara and Frances Contreras called attention to the fact that "only one in ten Latinos has a college degree, compared to more than one in four white Americans" (2009, 5). These scholars successfully made the case for the correlation between Latinx achievement and its impact on the American economy. Due to their low education, they argued, Latinos will be limited to low-skilled and poorly-paying jobs. Their low socio-economic status, in turn, will affect the American economy in future decades as young people will enter the workforce and replace retiring baby boomers. If the earnings of Latinxs are modest, so will be their social security contributions. The educational attainment of young Latinx thus has broad societal consequences for the United States. During the Obama administrations (2008-2016), the period in which *McFarland, USA* and *Spare Parts* were made and released, there were hopes for new educational policies that would benefit minorities.[2] However, Lisa García Bedolla, who has studied documents of the Obama administration concerning Latinos, concludes that "Latino influence remains largely symbolic" (2014, 141) because structural inequalities are still pervasive in the American education system

In the last decade, young Latinos started reaching important educational milestones, a trend that is represented in *McFarland, USA* and *Spare Parts.*[3] In these films, however, Latino families are shown as indifferent to or discouraging of Latino teens' access to higher education.

Consequently, it befalls to external White mentors to encourage these Latino high school students. Despite this similarity, *Spare Parts* gives voice to two Latino students, thus representing them as less stereotypical, while at the same time, educating the audience about their plight.

McFarland, USA

McFarland, USA (2015) was directed by New Zealander director Niki Caro.[4] Produced by Mayhem—which specializes in feel-good sports films (Graser 2011, n.p.) and Walt Disney Pictures, the film is loosely based on a real story involving a Caucasian coach—Jim White (Kevin Costner)—who led a team of Latino high schoolers to several cross-country state championships. Caro's film, which grossed $44.5 million, was described by A. O. Scott as "very much a heroic-teacher melodrama about a white coach leading a team of poor, nonwhite strivers toward glory" (2015, n.p.). Indeed, *McFarland, USA* deals with the issue of lack of aspiration among young Latinos, but displaces them from the title, emphasizing instead the town where they live. Located in the San Joaquin Valley in California, McFarland is surrounded by orchards and fields in which all members of Latino families—regardless of their age—work.[5] In a recent review of the literature around the topic of child work, Harry Shier identifies four different stances surrounding this issue. The first deals with the child as a victim of abuse and exploitation, the second sees child labor as an activity that has to be eliminated, the third places child work in a wider spectrum created by labor demands, and the fourth views child work as part of social movements to liberate young people (2017, 37-38). *McFarland, USA* adeptly avoids taking any of these positions: rather, it portrays young Latinos working as a normal facet of their community. The film also depicts other Latino teens as lost, either practicing the wrong sport or engaging in unproductive activities that may lead them to petty crime. The film's narrative begins with White's relocation to McFarland—a working-class municipality, predominantly inhabited by Latinos—after being fired from more mainstream school districts.

In *McFarland, USA*, Coach White brings an outsider perspective that disrupts the status quo of the residents in general and a small group of Latino boys in particular. When he and his family take a first look at the town, they see a lower-middle-class community in which gangs of Latinos appear to dominate the local scene, making the newly-arrived family fearful for their well-being. In McFarland, the high school and penitentiary are near one another, as if reflecting the only two options available for young people: education or criminality.[6] At the high school, White sees his senior coach colleague act indifferently towards Johnny Sameniego (Héctor Duran), who gets injured during a football game, and steps in to protect him. Seeking to leave his mark on the school and his students, White discovers that some of them are good runners, a fact that gives him the idea of coaching a cross-country team. Though he has neither competed nor been trained in cross-country, he sees untapped potential in his young Latino students and quickly recruits Johnny as the first member of the team. However, White faces negative institutional culture of the high school. One colleague tells him "Nobody wins around here."

Moreover, not all Latino teens are enthusiastic about his idea of putting together a cross-country team.

The student who most exemplifies both the promise of being an excellent runner and the reluctance to join Coach White is Thomas Valles (Carlos Pratt). Thomas is an aloof, resilient Latino teenager who has become invisible to others but White notices that he effortlessly traverses fields with long, graceful strides. At first White's attention makes the young Latino uncomfortable. His decision to not join the cross-country team is rooted in his determination to follow the path available to him so far: study, work, and live in the margins of a consumer society. His stoic but rather limited autonomy is the product of both his individual circumstances and the plight of Latino youth in general. His father, a migrant worker, spends long periods separated from his family, leaving the adolescent without a strong role model. In addition, Thomas has accepted society's unspoken rule of not asking for help. This leaves him literally without a way out of a life of solitude. As a Latino, he is simultaneously called to be a leader, that is, to protect his mother and sister, but without standing out. When he is involved in a fistfight at school, White, who is running out of options for his initiative, pleads Thomas' case and gets him out of detention—with the condition that he join the cross-country team.

McFarland, USA displays a sharp contrast between what takes place during and after school. The young Latinos who make up the cross-country team are never seen in class, only in the social spaces—the cafeteria, the football field, etc.—, thus suggesting that academics are not a priority. When the school does appear, it is shown painted in dull gray and beige tones, denoting a lack of enthusiasm. Though the school system does little to engage and inspire the young Latinos, as the drab setting reflects, there is one character who is concerned about these students. Twice, María (Vanessa Martínez), another teacher at the high school, speaks on their behalf. First, she encourages White to invest in them, saying that they are "invisible." Later, she reads the essay of one of the Latino students on the cross-country team who expresses the liberating and rewarding experience of running. Competing has empowered him, divesting him of his "poor Latino" identity. María serves to link the extra-curricular Latino activities with the school's academic mission, but those brief instances of attention illustrate the pervasive indifference of the rest of the school staff in improving the lives of the Latino students.

McFarland, *USA* shows the ways in which the coach and the members of the cross-country team benefit each other. The Caucasian coach rescues a group of underprivileged Latinos, and, is, in turn, enriched by them. At first, White appears as the consummate outsider when he asks whether "Díaz is a common name where you come from" only to learn that he is dealing with numerous members of the same family. His initial inadequacy to guide the team is shown again when he trains with the boys, only to realize that his endurance does not match theirs. When he loses the Díaz brothers because training for cross-country reduces their time working in the fields, White volunteers to help them. He soon discovers that picking produce is an extremely demanding job and that his young mentees have more stamina than he, a finding that further convinces him of their ability to run cross-country. Despite his shortcomings, White

is portrayed as a willing learner: he does not hesitate to pitch in to work the fields if he can help his mentees have time for cross-country training. His attitude gradually earns him acceptance into the Latino community, a shift that it is marked by his being called "Blanco" (a translation of his last name). As White learns of the impact of his concern for the welfare of the team members, he invests time and energy in familiarizing himself with cross-country. When he finds that he has prepared the team to run only on flat terrain, and not climbing and descending slopes, he acknowledges his responsibility in the team's defeat and quickly changes their training routine. White also notices the profound ties of affection between Latino adolescents and their parents.

White's initial failure with the Latino teenagers entails a cultural clash that he overcomes by getting more involved in the lives of the team members, but to the detriment of his own family life. Thomas, the fastest athlete, challenges his authority, insisting: "We are not runners, we are pickers. We are always gonna be pickers.... It is never gonna change." These words display a resigned outlook about the opportunities available to him and the other team members in McFarland: their physical efforts result in few occasions for advancement and recognition. Despite the teens' stance, White spends more time with them, even forgetting his own daughters' birthday celebration. In one scene, he drives around town and finds Thomas sitting on an overpass. Despite the early tension between them, White takes the opportunity to ask the young Latino about himself and his familial circumstances. Although the coach notices the profound ties of affection between Latin adolescents and their parents, Thomas reveals— in spite of his bravado—that he still needs the guidance and supervision of a caring adult. Acting as a concerned mentor, White saves him from personal injury or even death with a candid talk in which he opens up about his own shortcomings and convinces Thomas that belonging to a team means being part of a new "family."

McFarland, USA does not hide the problems of a town populated mainly by Latinos. Just as evident as the residents' hospitability and generosity are youth who threaten and disrupt the town's hard-working environment are also evident. While the film does not give them screen time, one night their presence is felt sowing chaos and violence, perhaps explaining the prominent place that the local penitentiary occupies so close to the school. Gangs jeopardize the wellbeing of all members of the local community and are a constant reminder that they co-opt young, disaffected Latinos whose lives take place at the margins of society due to their social class and intense manual labor. Another issue among Latino fathers is their prioritization of work over leaning and extracurricular activities. Mr. Díaz, for example, sees his sons' participation in the cross-country team as a luxury, while Mr. Valles tells Thomas, "Saca la cara de esos libros, van a arruinar tus ojos. Nadie necesita libros en el campo" [Take your face out of the books. They will ruin your eyes. Nobody needs books in the countryside]. Both fathers appreciate work in the fields as a form of survival, without considering the benefits of an education.

Within this context, the McFarland cross-country team defies the stasis and conformism of the local Latino community. Whereas the team members always end in the same place,

returning to their town after each competition, participating in races across the state takes them outside of their habitual milieu and opens their eyes to new opportunities and dreams. After the McFarland team qualifies for the state championship, White takes them to see the Pacific Ocean, a first-time experience that conveys both a recognition for their efforts and a widening of the Latino teens' mental horizons. For these youth, competing is also a means of showing their talents and earning respect outside their tightly-knit community. Conscious of the steep challenges that the Latino teens face, White gives them a pep talk, encouraging them to "Believe in yourself and in your team mates." The objective assessment used in the cross-country races highlights their undisputable achievements for both themselves and larger audiences. Crossing the finish line at the competitions is an apt metaphor for the encouragement needed for the Latino athletes to move beyond their individual and local circumstances, thus projecting themselves as citizens of a larger community. *McFarland, USA* reflects what Martin Japtok has noticed in relation to some ethnic bildungsromane: "encounters with the mainstream and a maturation process, however, cause the main characters to reconsider their relationship both to the ethnic group in general and to the dominant parent figure in particular" (2005, 21). For the Latinos of the McFarland cross-country team, competing and winning far from their community reveals that they are ready to tackle new journeys, particularly those leading to postsecondary education, a path that White encourages them to consider. The final credits show that all seven runners of the original team that won the state championship in 1987 attended college and returned to McFarland as counselors, teachers, and other civil service professionals. Therefore, their way out of working as pickers for life did not necessarily imply moving out of their community; rather, they returned and enriched it in other ways.

Spare Parts

Directed by Sean McNamara, *Spare Parts* is based on Joshua Davis' 2004 article that later became a New York Times bestseller, *Spare Parts: Four Undocumented Teenagers, One Ugly Robot, and the Battle for the American Dream*. With a script by Elissa Matsueda, *Spare Parts* was produced by Pantelion-Televisa, a company which, according to Henry Puente, saw in 2013 the unforeseen success of its film *Instructions Not Included* (Eugenio Derbez), and thus, decided to invest heavily in films for the Latinx audience (2019, 46). With a box-office gross of $3,6 million, *Spare Parts* narrates the real-life story of a group of Latino high schoolers from a public school in Arizona who took part in a robotics competition against teams from Duke, Stanford, and MIT, among others. Despite their humble means and low budget, the team of Latino students won first place in this prestigious competition. *Spare Parts* went into production in October 2013, a year after the passing of DACA and was completed in April 2014. The film received mixed reviews. Sheri Linden, the reviewer for *Hollywood Reporter*, wrote that "Matsueda's screenplay is alert to details that ground the film in the day-to-day lives of young people who are American in every way but technically" (2015, n.p.). For her part, Susan Wloszczyna of the

Roger Ebert blog found the film "more exhausting than it is inspiring. No A for effort here, just a passing grade for at least attempting to shine a light on a continuing problem that plagues the immigrant community" (2015, n.p.). In her review, Wloszczyna mentions *To Sir, with Love* (James Clavell 1967), but does not make parallels with more recent Latino youth films.

Spare Parts situates the action in an Arizona high school. The initial takes show a montage of several ethnic places in Phoenix with street murals and locally-owned businesses and different students as a new school day begins. As the camera shifts to Carl Hayden Community High School, there is a brief shot of a fence surrounding the school, which implies that it is more than a place of learning; it is also a place of containment. When Mrs. Lowry (Jamie Lee Curtis), the school principal is introduced, she indicates that she was just dealing with a fire marshal, possibly because of a prank, suggesting an environment that at times is unsafe. As she interviews Mr. Cameron (George López), a well-credentialed-engineer-turned-high school substitute teacher, she also mentions the school's high turnover of educators, a fact that conveys their dissatisfaction with the profession, the school, or both. In addition, as she and Cameron tour the school, the halls appear dark with almost no lighting, underscoring the grim statistics that Lowry shares: "It is impossible to estimate how many students will go to college. Possibly a third claim to go, but then they drop out after a semester or two. It is not easy. Half of them, are undocumented and then every once in a while, one of their classmates disappears and is deported to Mexico the next day." The following scene further shows a lack of resources: there are three working computers for 2,000 students, and Mrs. Kolinsky (Marisa Tomei) tries to stop a scuffle between female students saying that the school nurse is not available, revealing staffing deficits. For Cameron, the school is presented as a place of petty crime. First, student Lorenzo Santillán (José Julián) alters the sensors of the substitute's car. Second, Cameron inquires why students do not open their books, he is shown the cabinet where they are stored, only to discover that it is locked to prevent theft.

In a departure from other school films, *Spare Parts* tackles head-on the vulnerable status of four undocumented Latino students. This segment of the Latinx population has suffered both low high school graduation rates and low access to postsecondary education (Gándara and Contreras 2009, 27). The lack of avenues for undocumented Latino students is presented from the film's initial takes. Driven Oscar (Carlos Pena), who states, "I have places to go," hopes to join the Army, but given that he cannot claim American citizenship, his dreams to serve become unattainable. His plight is also a common one for undocumented youth who cannot apply for financial aid. Walter Nichols, who has studied the plight of DREAMers, explains that "as children moved into adulthood, the constraints of their 'illegality' become more apparent and burdensome" (2013, 8). In *Spare Parts*, Mexican-born Oscar suffers the consequence of his illegal status. Without the possibility of a career in the military, he quickly searches for another venue that could lead to opportunities after his high school graduation. For him, the robotics competition is a way to both redirect his energies and show his leadership abilities. Oscar displays

a determination that has rarely been seen in cinematic representations of Latino youth when he uses one of the three in-high-demand school computers to print the flyer for the robotic competition. Despite his limited possibilities, he is highly motivated, a quick learner, and extremely articulate. His initiative makes him approach Cameron, who challenges him to gather a small group for the robotics club. Oscar first recruits Cristian (David del Río), a computer nerd who is being bullied. Lorenzo joins the robotics team after Mr. Cameron catches him breaking into Ms. Lowry's car and Luis Aranda (Oscar Gutiérrez) is also invited to the team. Jeannette Catsoulis argues that "each of the young men, students at Carl Hayden Community High School in Phoenix, is permitted a single, identifying trait" (2015, n.p.). All four students, however, share their undocumented status.

Even though the Latino members of the robotics team are all undocumented, Oscar and Lorenzo are given special status as they both tell their stories. One evening, Oscar tells his girlfriend Karla (Alexa Pena Vega) his journey of immigration: as an eight-year-old, he was hidden in a van for hours and promised a Happy Meal, but the emotions of the day overwhelmed him and he fell asleep, missing his opportunity to have the coveted burger. For his part, Lorenzo speaks about his mother's deportation and the fact that he has not seen her in six years. Oscar's and Lorenzo's confessions are significant. Sarah Wright and Tom Whitaker, who have studied the use of voice in film, note that "the act of speaking is thus intimately bound with broader questions of political agency, alerting us to the way in which identity—and, in particular national and social identity—can be constructed and contested" (2017, 91). Lorenzo's words reveal the problematic effects caused by the deportation of a family member. By using his voice, Oscar not only recounts his migration to the United States, but also and more importantly, expresses his lack of political agency as a young undocumented immigrant with few available opportunities due to the lack of documents. Oscar's story foregrounds his destiny as an undocumented Latino teen: his dreams are deferred and the promise of achieving recognition due to merit seems to fail to materialize. Moreover, he has to make multiple sacrifices just to evade deportation. When he is warned about an impending arrest, he decides to break up with Karla to liberate her from the fate of being with him, constantly subjected to insecurity and the threat of upheaval. His words seem to be premonitory, as moments later, he is approached by a man who might be an ICE official and has to run to save himself, probably from being arrested. Viewers see him sleeping on the bathroom floor of his high school, an action that suggests that he lacks safety at home, but feels secure at his school, in part, thanks in part to the robotics team.

The group solidifies around Mr. Cameron, the club's advisor who initially appears as a reluctant mentor given that his position is temporary. Furthermore, his recent arrival at the high school does not make him an involved member of the school community. Here it is important to mention that López incarnates two real-life White high school teachers: Fredi Lajvardi and Allan Cameron. In the film, Cameron's character slowly warms up to the possibility of helping the students enter the robotics competition. His main strength is the ease with which he relates

to them, as they all use street smarts to overcome obstacles and find creative solutions. *Spare Parts* shows that their ingenuity comes from their experience in finding solutions to the many constraints and hardships of being undocumented. Oscar is constantly vigilant about the presence of immigration authorities who can deport him. Cristian sleeps in an unheated trailer and suffers the absence of his father who is a migrant worker. Lorenzo has seen his mother being deported and has to cover for his brother's pranks to maintain his clean record. And Luis faces the stigma of being considered unintelligent due to his big size and his tendency to use few words. Despite their backgrounds, Cameron challenges the team members in many ways. First, he asks them "to put themselves out there," that is to say, to raise money for the materials needed to build the robot. Oscar quickly sets out to solicit donations, and when he realizes the respect given to the Army uniform, he wears it and secures donations from local businesses. Second, when the team has to build a model for their prototype, Cameron encourages the members to work collaboratively.

As in *McFarland, USA*, in *Spare Parts*, the fact that the main activity is an extracurricular has both positive and negative implications for the representation of Latino and their interest in attending college. On the positive side, the film portrays Latino students' engagement in an activity that goes beyond the usual class schedule, showing their high motivation in this competition. On the negative side, their tight-knit community separates them from the main, more diverse student body of their high school, stressing academic segregation. Nonetheless, the group's composition seems to be based on the different talents and abilities of their members who happen to be mostly undocumented Latino students. In this regard, involved teacher Ms. Kolinsky alerts Cameron (and viewers) early on that she is watching what is going on in the robotics club. Her attentiveness to the students' needs and activities portrays her as a godmother figure for them. While Wloszczyna has read this character as Cameron's love interest, Ms. Kolinsky is the crucial link between the extracurricular organization and the high school and lends validity to the student club. In one opportunity, when she finds out that Mr. Cameron may leave the school, she tells him, "Every day they (the students) are told in a hundred ways that they are worthless, that they are beyond hope. They are kids. They need protection." Like Cameron, Kolinsky is another member of the dominant culture, who oversees the Latino teens.

One particular event that exposes the status difference between Cameron and the Latino students is their trip to California to attend the robotics competition. First, Lowry reminds Cameron that he will be crossing state lines with four undocumented students, and thus, he needs to avoid speeding and being stopped by the police. Once in California, Cameron shows his mentees the Pacific Ocean as he drives them to the competition site. This scene is symbolic as the Latino students are reaching the geographic border of the United States as they arrive at their destination, in a journey similar to the one so many Americans took to the West. Later, Cameron takes them to see the ocean and the beach—places of leisure and socialization. The timing for this excursion is crucial as it takes place in the middle of the competition. Thanks to

the teacher's initiative, the Latino students feel temporarily liberated, momentarily leaving behind the pressures of the contest. This pause by the sea serves the purpose of highlighting the teacher's expansion of the young Latinos' minds: he has taken them to the continental confines of the American territory. Just like the robotics competition, the touristic enjoyment of the ocean introduces the Latino students to a new experience—playing with the waves—and a new landscape, made possible by the White educator. But despite his efforts to free the students from their burdens, Oscar tells Cameron that ICE has been looking for him, a stark reminder of the young Latino's undocumented status.

Nonetheless, participation in the robotics club provides the four Latino students with an unusual sense of belonging. *Spare Parts* chronicles the process through which these youth use their energies and problem-solving skills to tackle laws of physics and electrical circuits. As the members of the robotics team bond, they discover that they experience similar challenges and a shared cultural background. The night before the competition, Oscar and Lorenzo re-wire their prototype's circuit. Their closeness reveals that both have gained a new respect for each other: while Lorenzo still does not understand Oscar's desire to join the Army— "They want us out"—, his question to his teammate about his interest in serving reveals his openness to listening to him. For his part, Oscar apologizes for calling Lorenzo names, a fact that suggests a new appreciation for him. Their newfound trust and care for each other is one of the most valuable lessons of their preparation for the competition. The film's ending presents them excelling as a unified team in a prestigious STEM contest. The young Latinos of *Spare Parts* can successfully perform on an uneven playfield in which creativity has to offset a lack of resources. The constraints that they face in their daily lives have fully prepared them to innovate with scant means and a consistent level of dedication.

The victory of the Latino youth at the demanding contest acts as a catalyst for their path to postsecondary education. The rolling credits update viewers on the four students on whose lives the film was based, including some of the difficult choices they later made. Given that their undocumented status did not make them eligible for financial aid or scholarships, a special fund was set up for them. Oscar's story is emphasized by footage of Senator Dick Durbin petitioning for his case in Congress: the young Latino graduated with a degree in Engineering Mechanics from Arizona State University. He turned himself in and was deported but later joined the Army and became an American citizen. The other three attended a community college: Lorenzo became a chef and opened a catering business with Luis and Cristian. The positive experience of the robotics club paved the way for these Latinos' high school graduations, postsecondary education, and successful careers.

Concluding Remarks

In the time of the "vanishing Latino males in higher education," *McFarland, USA* and *Spare Parts* make Latino youth their focal point, showing the different challenging aspects of their lives:

low income, parental indifference or opposition to higher education, and undocumented status. In successfully overcoming these obstacles, Latino youth are shown as winners, in both athletic and robotics competitions, a needed step to build their self-confidence and showcase their talents before entering colleges across America. This more conspicuous representation of Latino youth has played a significant role in diversifying the types of adolescence found in films from the United States. They represent the new talent needed for the continuity and revival of meaningful forms of citizenship in the United States.

Although in *McFarland, USA* and *Spare Parts* and similar to other American films about minorities in high schools—White male mentors, who do not belong to the Latino community, guide Latinos out of their comfort zone, the coach and advisor in these two films are presented as less than ideal: in *McFarland, USA*, Jim White has been repeatedly demoted and in *Spare Parts*, Fred Cameron at first appears reluctant to become involved in the lives of his Latino students. But precisely because the mentors are learning alongside the Latino youth, their stamina, determination, and problem-solving also influence them. These adults, in turn, invest in their mentees' and expand their horizons: in both films, we find an excursion to the Ocean as a much-needed pause between the taxing demands of the competitions. These trips are also opportunities for leisure and bonding surrounded by natural beauty.

While *McFarland, USA* enjoyed considerable box-office success, *Spare Parts* allows two Latinos to tell their stories as undocumented teenagers. In doing so, the film shows the toll that the lack of legal status has on some Latino youth. Shot two years after the passing of DACA, *Spare Parts* makes a powerful statement about the plight of Latino high school students before the law that was approved during the second Obama administration. If adolescence has been considered as a period of second-class citizenship, for the Latino adolescents, their citizenship is even more devoid of rights as they face numerous challenges in their access to quality education and attention from qualified adults. Problems such as lack of family engagement (particularly for some members of the first generation), undocumented status, and low income (or the intersectionality of being a student and worker), emphasize their restricted citizenship, and hence, their lack of options for viable paths towards postsecondary education and upward mobility. Considered together *McFarland, USA* and *Spare Parts* are predicated on the values and potential of young Latino protagonists who are becoming an important segment of the American population.

Endnotes:

1. Rocío Rivadaneyra et al. cite a study of 50 popular films in 1996 in which Latinos were only 2 of the 147 lead characters (2007, 263).
2. Prudence Carter wrote:

   I delight in the possibility of the social and psychological benefits that President Obama's representation of excellence and leadership might have on Black and brown schoolchildren, as well

as their nonblack and nonbrown peers, as they become immersed in daily media images and messages about President Obama and his work. (2009, 287)

3. Steve Murdock, former U.S. Census Director during the Bush administration, pointed out that "clearly there is a college-going culture among the Hispanic population" (in Marcus 2016), a statement supported by recent data from the National Center for Education Statistics: "the percentage of Hispanic 18- to 24-year-olds enrolled in colleges and universities increased from 21.7 percent in 2000 to 39.2 percent in 2016" (2016, n.p.).
4. Caro directed the highly acclaimed film *Whale Rider* (2002), about a Maori girl who is dismissed because of her gender.
5. *McFarland, USA* was shot in Albuquerque, New Mexico.
6. One of the films differences from real life is that Coach Jim White worked in a middle school (not high school) whose building was close to the local correctional facility and penitentiary.

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