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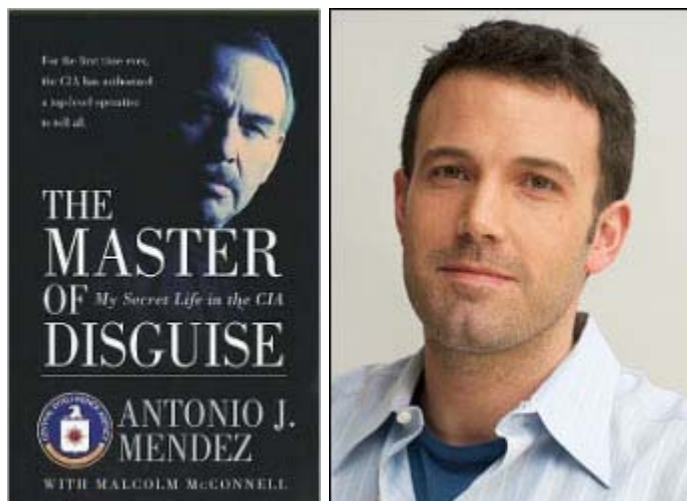
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## [Ben Affleck casts himself as Tony Mendez in “Argo”](#)

*July 5, 2011*

On June 27th, [Variety](#) reported that Ben Affleck will be directing a movie starring Ben Affleck. The film is *Argo*, a screenplay based on a 2007 article from *Wired Magazine*: [“How the CIA Used a Fake Sci-Fi Flick to Rescue Americans From Tehran.”](#)



When this casting was announced, Hollywood dailies poked a bit of fun at Affleck for casting himself as the star of his own film. They also noted that [Bryan Cranston and John Goodman](#) will be co-starring. What the trades didn't mention was that the lead character of *Argo*, [real-life American CIA agent Tony Mendez](#), is Latino. Affleck is not.



Tony Mendez in Laos in 1968. [source: The Master of Disguise](#)

In 1979, CIA agent Tony Mendez cooked up an ingenious plan to rescue six American embassy workers from Iran. He would take on the fake identity of Kevin Costa Harkins, a film producer from Ireland location scouting for a movie to be filmed in Iran, *Argo*. To build his cover, Mendez brought in Hollywood talent including Academy Award winning make up artist John Chambers (to be played by John Goodman in the film) to create a fake Hollywood production company and fake Canadian identities for the stranded Americans.

The stakes were high: failure would drag Canada into the international conflict between the United States and Iran, and Mendez and the diplomats would undoubtedly be tortured and executed. This is the story about how Hollywood film-making literally saved lives. But it's also the story of how Mendez, a young man with a [multiethnic background](#) from small-town Nevada, whose creative CIA leadership facilitated one of the most daring “exfiltration” rescues in known history.

A 2006 UCLA study from the Chicano Studies Research Center found that [only 1.2% of lead roles go to Latino actors](#) (contrasted against 82% of lead roles going to white actors.) Under the guidance of director Ben Affleck, the role of Tony Mendez would have been a great opportunity for a Latino actor to star in a stereotype-defying, heroic lead role.

## The Missing Man in “Howl” and other stories

Sadly, this isn't the first time Hollywood has cast a white actor to tell history made by a minority in real life.

*Howl* (2010) told the story of San Francisco's Six Gallery and the 1957 obscenity trial against Allen Ginsberg's poem *Howl*. In 1957, [Shigeyoshi Murao](#), the Japanese American manager of the City Lights Bookstore, was dragged off to jail for selling Allen Ginsberg's [Howl and Other Poems](#).

“Imagine being arrested for selling poetry!” Murao, a lifelong friend of Ginsberg, would later reflect. Murao

was bailed out by the ACLU and removed as a defendant in the obscenity trial after the prosecution could not prove he knew what was in the book he was selling.

According to the [San Francisco Museum and Historical Society](#), although much of the publicity surrounding the Howl trial was focused on storeowner Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Murao committed the actual controversial act of selling the so-called “obscene book”. As a result, Murao, whose family had been interned during World War II, was the one who served the jail time. “To me, he was the real hero of this tale of sound and fury, signifying everything,” Ferlinghetti wrote in later years.



Murao at the *Howl* trial, seated behind the defendant’s table in a black suit, with his hand over his mouth.

Given Murao’s important role in the history and story of *Howl*, he is conspicuously absent in the 2010 film. [Patricia Wakida](#) of the Japanese American National Museum unsuccessfully tried to contact the producers to ensure Shig Murao would be included in the film. As depicted on its official website, *Howl* (2010) had an [all-white lead cast](#) and the only defendant depicted in the film is Ferlinghetti.



We also previously blogged about the 2010 film [Extraordinary Measures](#) where executive producer Harrison Ford cast himself as “Dr. Robert Stonehill,” developer of the cure to Pompe disease. In real life, the Pompe cure was developed by Taiwanese doctor Dr. Yuan-Tsong Chen. The 2008 film *21*, inspired by the real-life Asian American [MIT Blackjack Team](#), also took artistic license with history, portraying the majority of the team, including the film’s main characters, with white actors.

People of color made history in the CIA, participated in the Beat Generation, cured deadly diseases and played Vegas, but the average person familiar with these stories wouldn’t know it from watching the movies. The cumulative impact of this kind of casting: In Hollywood, white actors depict minorities credited with reaching monumental, historic achievements. Actors of color cannot even expect to be cast in roles inspired by people from their own communities, and minorities remain invisible in their own stories.

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Discussion

Community

"

**Tsugaru Samurai** • a year ago

I wonder who type of excuses all the racists and racial apologists who defended the casting of Last Airbender are going to use this time. This is more "Whites actors are universal and can play anyone, of any race or ethnicity" nonsense. Maybe they'll say Ben Affleck looks more like Tony Mendez that Tony Mendez does.

15 | • Reply • Share ›

**Zotalot** • a year ago

The best thing to do when most people think you're a terrible actor is to racebend because it's not like that will make people dislike your more or anything, Affleck. /sarcasm

8 | • Reply • Share ›

**LailaKhan** • a year ago

OMG, this just adds to the number of roles that other ethnicities could have done, like 21, eth. Also, the new 21 Jump Street does not feature any roles akin to those of Dustin Nguyen and Holli Robinson Peete

7 | • Reply • Share ›

**red\_zone** • a year ago

I heard about this and was like, 'Good GRIEF, Hollywood! GET A CLUE!'

3 | • Reply • Share ›

**Blau Garrido** • a year ago

Santiago Cabrera (from Heroes and Merlin (BBC) could perfectly play Tony Mendez!!!

5 | 1 | • Reply • Share ›

**Marissa Lee Mod** • a year ago • parent

I think Esai Morales would be perfect.

5 | • Reply • Share ›

**Jay Chan** • 10 months ago • parent

Some of his pictures are a very good resemblance. Hollywood will, as usual, feel differently.

2 | • Reply • Share ›

**minnielarure@gmail.com** • 14 days ago

They fail to mention that the reason that Tony Mendez in the real life situation succeeded where other agents didn't is due to the fact that he was "brown" like most Iranians and that's why he could blend.