

The academy's conundrum: Lupe Ontiveros



Chon A. Noriega is a professor in the Department of Film, Television and Digital Media at UCLA and the director of the Chicano Studies Research Center. This op-ed appeared March 1, 2013, in [the HuffPost](#).

It's a conundrum, to be sure. What do you do when your longtime maid dies? After all, she practically raised your children. She cooked your eggs just so, lightly sprinkling them with something red. You asked her what, but you could not make out her response. (Sounded like "tapas"...). So do you send flowers to her family?

Does she even have a family? Do you mention it in your year-end letter to friends and relatives? After all, she worked for you for almost 40 years. These are delicate matters. It is what makes life in Hollywood so very challenging.

In 1976 Lupe Ontiveros earned her first role in Hollywood. She played a maid on *Charlie's Angels*. Over the next 36 years she played, by her own account, more than 150 maids, holding her own against the likes of Jack Nicholson (twice). When she was not playing a maid, she played a prostitute or a madam. But she was also the patron saint of Chicano (and Latino) cinema, starring in now classic films: *Zoot Suit*, *El Norte*, *Born in East L.A.*, *My Family, ... and the Earth Did Not Swallow Him*, *Selena*, *Chuck & Buck*, *Luminarias*, and *Real Women Have Curves*. She had recurring roles in just about every Chicano-produced television series, and also *Desperate Housewives*. My personal favorite is her role as a drug lord in Taylor Hackford's 1993 film *Blood In, Blood Out*. Without a doubt, her final shootout scene is matched in American cinema only by Queen Latifah's in *Set It Off*. Lupe lived large on the silver screen.

Ontiveros passed away in July 2012 at age 69 — much too early, to be sure. Yet she had an astounding career, especially in light of the limited roles available for Latino actors. Why, she even did voice work in an episode of Seth MacFarlane's *Family Guy*. So imagine my surprise when the Oscars did not include her in the "In Memoriam" segment. The Oscars also snubbed Russell Means, Sherman Hemsley, and Phyllis Diller. These oversights took place during an Oscar ceremony that one writer [called](#) "a lengthy celebration of xenophobia and misogyny." Another writer [noted](#), "The more we pass off old stereotypes, rooted in hate, as normal -- as MacFarlane did again and again last night -- the longer those stereotypes, and their ability to harm people, will be in place." The Academy took the brunt of the blame, since its membership -- similar to the declining viewership for the Oscar broadcast itself -- is older (age 62 is the average), almost entirely white (94 percent), and mostly male (77 percent). The rationale for having MacFarlane as the host had to do with reaching out to a younger audience, which he did. The strategy relied heavily on what one writer [called](#) "the ironic hipster self-aware racism of 'being so cool that we know it's racist [and] that it's ok to participate in it. We're above it.'" Indeed, two Hollywood notables in the coveted 18 to 49 demographic received Oscars for creative work rooted in some form of racial masquerade: [Quentin Tarantino](#) and [Ben Affleck](#). Of course such an approach overlooks [the fact](#) that non-whites made up more than half of all births and accounted for over 92 percent of population growth between 2000 and 2010. These are delicate matters, indeed. Earlier this week, the Academy quietly added Lupe Ontiveros to its online "In Memoriam" page.