“‘And then… nothing’: Discovering Hollywood’s Hispanic Market from Zoot Suit (1981) to A Better Life (2011)”

Soon after Summit Entertainment released the film A BETTER LIFE in the summer of 2011, it was apparent to Hollywood studio executives that the film was not drawing a significant Latino box office. This dramatic film about an illegal Mexican immigrant and his son seemed particularly well-suited to engage with issues that are relevant to Latinos, including immigration, border-crossings, and cultural identity. Why Latinos did not form a substantial audience for this film perplexed many involved with the production and seemed to lend support to the industry’s understanding, as one director put it, that “Latinos do not go to see movies about themselves.”

A glance backward at earlier Latino-themed films will provide context for A BETTER LIFE’s distribution and reception. Starting with ZOOT SUIT (1981) and moving forward, this presentation will analyze the ways in which the Latino market has historically posed a “problem” for Hollywood and how that has affected the narratives and distribution strategies for mainstream Latino films.