Connecticut College American Studies Senior Seminar
“The Globalization of American Culture” Book Review

Author: Rita Moreno
Title: “Rita Moreno: A Memoir”
Publisher: Penguin Group, 2013
Reviewed by: Carter Goffigon

Rita Moreno’s memoir reads like the classic tale of “The American Dream.” Born Rosita Dolores Alverio, Moreno’s young mother whisked her away when she was then 5 years old to begin a new life in a harsh and cold barrio in the Bronx in 1936. Moreno’s memoir candidly and poignantly tells the story of leaving behind her family in Puerto Rico, watching her mother struggle to make a life for them in America, and discovering singing, dancing and acting as a means of escaping pain and proving herself. Though immensely talented and captivating as a performer, Moreno met constant racism and sexism as she climbed the ranks in Hollywood and tried to make a name for herself. She reflects on the expectations of female actresses, her long time love affair with Marlon Brando, and the difficulty of being typecast as the “fiery Latina” even after winning an Oscar, two Emmys, a Tony and a Grammy. Her story is one of struggle, determination, heartbreak, love and ultimately, success. Rita Moreno’s memoir gives nuance, emotion and grit to a narrative with which every American understands and can identify.

Though her book was not published as part of the academic American Studies field, Rita Moreno’s memoir captures the experience of many immigrants seeking better lives and opportunities in America. Furthermore, Moreno’s confrontations with racial prejudice and sexism are vital parts of American culture and the undeniable role of race, class and gender in the creation of the American identity. While articulate and profound, her conversational tone and descriptive language is accessible and makes it easy to
connect with Moreno through all of her memories. Moreno is a beautiful storyteller; her relaxed and often, colloquial phrasing embraces and transports the reader to the colorful, “ice cream houses” of Juncos, Puerto Rico, the somber brick apartment buildings in New York City in the dead of winter and the lavish and celebrity-filled parties in South Beach, Florida and Hollywood (10). Her name and celebrity status gives Moreno the power and opportunity to draw in readers and attention, while her experience gives her the insight to provide a poignant social critique worth studying.

Hollywood becomes a character unto itself in the book. It is clear how deeply intertwined the entertainment industry and the notion of celebrity was, and still is, in every element of American culture. Hollywood defined beauty, especially for women. Moreno recalls tedious, painful and expensive transformations to achieve an acceptable level of whiteness and make herself look like Betty Grable or Elizabeth Taylor before meeting with studio executives and directors. Despite all of her efforts, she was, more often than not, categorized as the “all purpose ethnic” and cast in roles as diverse as “Indian princess” or “Siamese maiden” in films like, *The King and I*, released in 1956. Hollywood not only dictated a woman’s appearance but also her behavior. Moreno recounts being expected to date publicly and exploit her sexuality to get hired. She writes, “Hollywood relied on its young actresses to be eye candy, to decorate its opening events and parties like so many bright, sweetly scented flowers” (117). Moreno’s life and memoir is a fascinating view into the development of the entertainment industry. Hollywood had become a corporation and young actresses were its hottest commodities.

Following her remarkable and Oscar-winning performance in West Side Story, as the “fiery Latina,” Anita, Rita Moreno threw herself into the growing Civil Rights
Movement in the 1960s. Her involvement in politics was not uncommon among those in the entertainment industry and serves as yet another example of Hollywood’s relationship with and influence on American history and ideology. As Moreno describes, many actors and actresses sought to leverage their visibility and social power to raise awareness and spark change. After decades of trying to appear American and white, Rita Moreno dedicated herself to a cause that celebrated diversity and human justice.

Now into her eighties, Rita Moreno writes about her life honestly and shamelessly. She spares few details and makes no apologies for the life she has led and decisions she has made. Moreno spent a great deal of her life feeling and being made to feel inferior and inadequate. Rather than collapse under that pressure, Rita Moreno found strength and persevered. As her memoir makes abundantly clear, this was not easy or without serious roadblocks, but Moreno makes a point to appreciate the value of her struggles. In the final pages of the book, she sincerely and quite frankly writes, “Yes, there are loose ends, but here I am, healthy, happy beyond what one reasonably expects, fully able to remember and reflect, and equipped to dream” (286). It is this honesty and perspective that has kept her going and made the “American Dream” a reality for Rosita Dolores Alverio.