

SCREENING *MESTIZAJE*: MULTICULTURAL  
AESTHETICS IN CHICANO FILM,  
1950-2000

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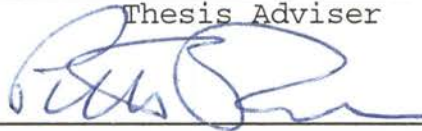
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At long last, I dedicate this dissertation to my parents, my brothers and sisters, and Jill.

## FOREWORD

In the middle-class, suburban neighborhood where I grew up, located just a few miles from where "America's Team" (the Dallas Cowboys) played their home football games, there was a small, mom-and-pop grocery store. "Buddy's," a Winn-Dixie affiliate, served for years as a neighborhood center. But aspects of the store that made it successful in the 1960s and 1970s made it appear old-fashioned by the early 1980s, and soon it failed. The doors were locked, the lights were dimmed, and the faded red sign out front was pulled down.

Over the next few weeks, however, the old store was transformed into a bright yellow market. The store's new sign had brilliant colors that danced as they lit up and shimmered, spelling "Carnival"; a bunch of multi-colored balloons, the company's logo, filled the bottom corner of the sign and dashed a rainbow glow across the parking lot. Outside, on the normally neatly swept but lonely sidewalk that ran along the front of the store, were tables full of merchandise, like the open-air *tianguis* (markets) scattered throughout border towns to the south. Inside, where there had been a small hardware section, now stood a *tortilleria* with clouds of flour and oven heat. The background instrumental Muzak was occasionally complemented by a

mariachi tune. A few piñatas dangled from the ceiling. The items that were "typical" for a grocery store, like white bread and apples, were mixed in with dried pepper *rístras*, *queso blanco*, hand-made tamales, and *pan de huevo*. There was a busy-ness to the store and its surroundings that had been missing for years. Inside and out, the store's diverse mix of cultural influences and commercial approaches resulted in a renewed viability in the neighborhood.

One man, a bum, stood out among the store's patrons. Nicknamed "Borracho" because he was frequently inebriated, the man nevertheless appeared different from other indigents. Borracho wore a ragged, too-small tuxedo jacket and shirt with close-to-matching black pants, which had been mended with conspicuous patches of red and green fabric. Though his suit and black shoes showed obvious signs of distress, Borracho was resourceful in his attempts to maintain a respectable appearance. And rather than beg for handouts, Borracho would tell jokes, recite poems, and sing songs for shoppers in the parking lot. Like the *pelado*, an underdog character type found in Chicano literature, Borracho's "stylized" performance and appearance suggested a certain dignity and resiliency, as if he hoped to overcome his poverty and misfortune and regain a productive position in the community, and his resourcefulness helped to reconfigure his identification within the neighborhood.

My first visit to the new store and experience with Borracho piqued my interests in America's difficult and

contested notions of culture, ethnicity, and race. Were the changes to the store simply a marketing response to an economic situation or did they mirror and promote a social impulse toward integration and multicultural appreciation in American society? How had minority cultures such as Chicano culture both adhered to and resisted a dominant tradition that historically favored Euro-American values over those of minorities? More importantly, how had Chicano cultural influences on mainstream markets reflected a shift toward tolerance for--even adoption of--minority ethnicities throughout the broader American culture? The questions about grocery stores and their customers focus upon an important truism: American culture is dynamic and diverse. Although appearing dominated and over-determined by complementary ideologies in any given era, American culture engages in a constant exchange of different values, beliefs, and perspectives. Where a single grocery store in my neighborhood demonstrated the point locally, feature films do so on a national and even international scale. By starting with "markets" and the cultural dialogue that seems to help shape them, I hope to call attention to some of the issues that ground this study of U.S. narrative film's social function in American culture.<sup>1</sup>

END NOTE, FOREWORD

1 The appendix at the end of this study surveys the dynamics of Chicano culture as articulated in U.S. social histories.

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INTRODUCTION  
BACKLOTS AND BORDERLANDS: FORMULATING  
MAINSTREAM CHICANO FILM

"The time has come to redefine all things American," Luis Valdez proclaimed in 1972 ("Introduction" xxxi). Empowered by the Chicano civil rights movement, this statement implied a radical, perhaps even militant-nationalist, insurrection against "all things American," but by the 1980s Valdez and other cultural workers had effected and promoted a larger pattern of change in American society toward multi-ethnic and multicultural integration. Chicano feature films increasingly serve this social function through innovative hybridized aesthetics that effectively unite cultural themes and forms from divergent American sources. Like children of mixed heritage, these *mestizo* films at once cross traditional boundaries that divide the continent and American culture and, in crossing, the films breathe new life into the essential qualities of America--equality, liberal democracy, natural rights--to re-define "America." *Mestizo* is American.<sup>1</sup>

Although the Chicano Power movements starting in the late 1960s stimulated a growth in Chicano cultural-specific media, these expressions most often embodied the exclusionary politics of nationalism and, thus, rarely gained access to mass audiences. By the middle of the 1980s, however, Chicano cultural expressions begin to reach mainstream audiences

through the mechanisms of the film industry and as a result are more effective for social change. Studios profit from films that address a growing Latino market; Chicano cultural expressions benefit from the increased exposure; and artists and cultural viewpoints traditionally excluded are allowed expression. Like the Carnival grocery stores opening since the 1980s in neighborhoods across the United States, Chicano films explore new cultural terrain by framing capitalism around multiculturalism. Most importantly, though, these films resourcefully employ particular multicultural aesthetics that not only provide specifically-Chicano cultural expressions--in arts, music, literature as well as film--but also highlight historical patterns of power relations among Chicano identification models and various forces within mainstream American society. Like Borracho's resilient "style," hybridized aesthetics in Chicano films enact strategies as they fuse available resources into a mode of recovering or uncovering cultural identification. In the act of unifying these divergent American cultural ideas and forms, Chicano film's multicultural aesthetics reinstate equality and human rights in territorialized segments of American culture, where they have been denied on the basis of race, ethnicity, and gender. Ideologically, these aesthetics invert traditional power relationships, sometimes with subversion and other times with subtle humor, in the formulation of democratic social politics. How do marginalized elements, those often considered a threat to the

core of culture, in fact revitalize essential qualities of that culture? It is upon the social and ideological purpose of these Chicano film aesthetics that this study focuses.

Chicano film culture might be analyzed according to three phases of emergence and development. Initially, critical studies led by Allen Woll and Arthur Pettit found that films made in the United States misrepresented Latino and Latina characters and themes. Looking back on this earliest phase, Chicano film scholars emphasized the issues of representation and, eventually, exploitation. That is, because depictions were created by filmmakers unaware of Latino and Latina "consciousness," then the films were not authentically *about* Latino and Latina culture and experiences. Rarely did these studies consider the relationships that the film images shared with the dominant currents of ideology in the U.S. mainstream; instead, they categorically labeled the films stereotypical and biased.<sup>2</sup> These studies, which fed off the civil rights and Chicano power movements beginning in the early 1960s, created a rationale for self-representation in film that would mark the second phase of Chicano film.

Two anthologies, *Chicano Cinema* edited by Gary D. Keller and *Chicanos and Film: Essays on Chicano Representation and Resistance* edited by Chon A. Noriega, compile critical discourse on Chicano films, themes, characters, actors, and filmmakers, emphasizing the effect of the civil rights movement on Chicano film culture. As Noriega's title and

Keller's introduction indicate, Chicano filmmaking, following the social turbulence and revolutionary changes of the 1960s, adopted expressions of Chicano nationalism and separatist "resistance" in order to "combat the falsity" of the Hispanic images created by the U.S. film industry (13). Because Hollywood cinema historically has corresponded to policies "imperialistic and racist in nature" and Chicano cinema both suffered from and retaliated against the resulting oppression, Chicano filmmakers "by necessity" used cinema as a "political weapon" (Camplis 317-18; Noriega, "Between" 167). Militancy and separatism, then, in Chicano film acted as a self-defense mechanism and even a counter attack against discrimination and aided in the creation of an independent Chicano representation. Significantly, although some politically conscious artists gained limited access to mass media, the borders that withheld Chicano cultural expression from the mainstream remained intact.

Since the civil rights struggle, definitions of Chicano film most often rely on militancy and separatist nationalism of the Chicano power movement (and Latin American renegade politics). More specifically, the criteria for Chicano film has become the triplex: *by*, *for*, and *about* Chicanos and Chicanas.<sup>3</sup> Such an essentialist conceptualization can relate "racial 'authenticity'" or "biology to cultural identity as one of fixed determinism," as Rosa Linda Fregosa acknowledges, while ignoring, or at least deemphasizing, the significance of ideological functions of film (xviii). This

type of categorization is not only disintegrative, but proves paradoxically dangerous to a culture already "impure" by purist's standards. Though such a conceptualization might have served its historical context following World War II and through the civil rights movement, if nothing more than to raise awareness of racism and ethnocentrism in the film industry, Chicano cinema seems to have outgrown this discursive condition.

Starting slowly in the 1980s with films like *Zoot Suit*, *The Ballad of Gregorio Cortez*, *La Bamba*, *Born in East L.A.*, *The Milagro Beanfield War*, and *Stand and Deliver* and becoming more fully developed ever since, Chicano film culture has entered a third on-going phase marked by "direct negotiation with Hollywood" and the so-called American mainstream (Noriega, "Introduction" xi). On the one hand, the "wave" of Hollywood interest in Chicano culture has been documented as a primarily business-related response to a growing Hispanic market (Keller, *Hispanics* 163).<sup>4</sup> But the "negotiation" at the center of the "Hispanic Hollywood" phenomenon transcends simple business dealings and necessitates a bridge by which a "crossing-over" could occur. And perhaps Chicanismo, the very essence of Chicano culture's struggles between dominant traditions and ideologies, provides a key marker of paradigmatic shifts in American culture, especially as they are depicted on film.

That Chicanos share with other indigenous peoples a legacy of oppression from European and Euro-American conquest

is paramount to understanding the cultural force of *mestizaje*. Though it can denote a racial mixture, *mestizaje*, like Chicanismo, articulates the cultural and socio-political syncretism that has been integral to civilizations in the Americas, starting before the Spanish conquest in the 16th century and continuing into the 21st century.<sup>5</sup> As Arnoldo Carlos Vento explains, the social force of *mestizaje* is a "process" by which a hybrid culture is an "inconclusive product in the making" (93). By definition, this sort of cultural hybridization continually evolves, corresponding with multiple perspectives and values and favoring a collective human consciousness in its cultural identification.

Chicanismo, as a social and cultural term, embodies the social force of *mestizaje* as it survives among the dominant traditions of the United States and Mexico. Symbolized by a three-headed creation in the nationalist murals and graphic arts of *el movimiento* (Chicano rights movement), Chicano culture selects and amalgamates various cultural elements from past indigenous societies, from Spanish-colonized Mexico, and from the United States.<sup>6</sup> Significantly, the strength and resistant power associated with a hybridized "American" culture was viewed during the turbulent civil rights era as a "weapon" against powers of oppression, especially institutions within the United States. However, as pro-U.S. nationalistic agendas within the dominant culture periodically waned, the resistant ethnic movements--e.g.,

Black Panthers, Brown Berets--lost momentum. *Mestizo* cultural politics gain durability as they engender humanistic exchange of knowledge, myths, and values. A number of post-nationalist Chicano cultural leaders including Luis Valdez and Jose Burciaga point to the fact that Chicanismo has the advantage of maintaining the best values of representative "American" cultures through its definitive syncretism.

Unlike traditional melting pot ideology, which stresses a universal, monolithic structure of American culture, or its extreme opposite, a separatist position which favors distinct pluralism, *mestizo* cultural identification considers disparate segments both individually and as integral parts of a "multiversity" complex. Like contemporary social construction theory, *mestizaje* appreciates the values associated with its constituent segments and blends those of different cultural backgrounds and time periods; however, it avoids the nihilistic pitfalls of postmodern fragmentation. Robert Stam, applying Bahktinian dialogism to a comparative analysis of ethnic representation in film, aligns material dialectism with "polyphony." That is, considering the ways "genres, languages, and cultures" reveal a "multi-vocality" in ethnic film representations abolishes inequalities and heightens cultural tolerance (Stam 263). American *mestizaje* is, as Luis Valdez indicates, "a true melting pot" whose aim is to merge the ancient with the new "to create new forms" and an American identification "born of the racial and cultural blendings of centuries" on this continent



("Introduction" xv, xxxiv). Significantly, mainstream Chicano films employ specific aesthetics in their expression of American *mestizaje*. Moreover, Chicano film, historically acting as an alternative to dominant traditions, continues to grow, diversify, and provide interesting pieces to the American mosaic. The time has come for film studies to closely examine the complex relationship that exists among Chicano film culture and the elements of the so-called dominant U.S.-American mainstream culture.<sup>7</sup>

While the labels "Hispanic Hollywood phenomenon" and "Chicano film renaissance" of the 1980s indicate the certain move Chicano film made toward the mainstream, such a shift did not occur immediately or distinctly. Rather, the cinematic aesthetics through which Chicano cultural expressions relate to their varied and complex audiences perform progressive social functions. More than simply giving ethnic expression from or for a racially defined population, Chicano film aesthetics reflect and perhaps help develop the multifaceted and complex constructions of cultural identity--Chicano, Latino, U.S. citizen, American--in light of such problematic issues as social and economic class, individual rights, institutional and state authority, and gender in accordance with specific historical contexts. Thus, textual and intertextual processes by which cultural elements selected from dominant traditions form a hybrid or *mestizo* film aesthetics respond to particular social contexts.

Parallel to this primary social function of its aesthetics, Chicano film culture gives a microcosmic view of larger social patterns of compromise and change, historically important to the formulation of democratic societies. Chicano aesthetics in mainstream U.S. film reveal themselves somewhere between a "weapon" and a "formula," according to Chon A. Noriega, somewhere between Latin American militancy and Hollywood conventionality. As multicultural tools, they negotiate often treacherous ideological terrain. Chicano film culture, then, gives a view of the paradigmatic shifts that have occurred both in Hollywood and in the larger American culture to which mainstream films speak. On one level, the rise of Chicano film culture acts as a model for the rise of independent film production. And, to a limited extent, those business practices specifically associated with the U.S. film industry's corporate power (from studios to talent agencies) depict and influence the historical and ideological contexts in which Chicano film aesthetics operate. And perhaps more generally, these aesthetics promote American ideals of democratic liberty and equality, resourcefulness and resilience, and capitalism; they cultivate in their diverse audiences cultural awareness and tolerance for difference, which is paramount to dispelling inequality and hate that have proven so destructive to late-20th-century society. As a result, the aesthetics which constitute mainstream Chicano film culture invigorate rather than jeopardize the American spirit.

Chicano feature-film culture, born from multiculturalism, is still relatively young. With the exception of only a handful of filmmakers working in the early silent era before the studio system's vertically-integrated operations took root, Chicano media artists made an initial impact on American film in the 1960s.<sup>8</sup> Jesús Salvador Treviño, Harry Gamboa, Jr., Ernie Palomino, Eduardo Moreno, Sylvia Morales, and José Luis Ruiz sought as an outlet of cultural expression local television program production, independent documentary, and short-format filmmaking.<sup>9</sup> The grassroots politics of the Chicano power movements were indelibly drawn into these early efforts at Chicano cultural expression. However, after the 1980s, when Chicano film culture began feeding into the mainstream, film studies continued to uphold the "resistance and affirmation" ideological function of Chicano films. Throughout the 1990s and into the 21st century, scholars rely on the "by, for, and about" criteria to define Chicano film, even though, as Noriega acknowledges, "there are more histories to be told, histories that account for other texts and practices" (Noriega, *Shot* 195).

Some media artists, such as Luis Valdez (who directed *Zoot Suit* and *La Bamba*), Moctesuma Esparza (who produced *Only Once in a Lifetime*, *The Milagro Beanfield War*, *Selena*, and *Price of Glory*), and Jesús Salvador Treviño (who, after the nationalistic *Yo Soy Chicano*, directed popular television shows including *NYPD Blue*, *Nash Bridges*, *The Pretender*, *The*

*Practice*, and most recently *Resurrection Blvd.*) used the early period as a sort of training ground and then followed the political shift, if only gradually and guardedly, toward the mainstream in their narrative film work. Many films since 1980 have accessed a mainstream audience through studio production budgets and/or theatrical distribution mechanisms: *Zoot Suit*, *La Bamba*, *Born in East L.A.*, *The Milagro Beanfield War*, *Stand and Deliver*, *El Mariachi*, *Desperado*, *A Million to Juan*, *American Me*, *Mi Vida Loca*, *My Family*, *Selena*, *Star Maps*, and *Price of Glory*. A fair number have received funding from the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) and/or Corporation for Public Broadcasting, especially through the prolific American Playhouse series: *Ballad of Gregorio Cortez*, *El Norte*, *...and the Earth Did Not Swallow Him*, and *Break of Dawn*. By "crossing over" markets, venues, and production modes, these Chicano films are able to negotiate issues of ethnicity within the larger spectrum of mass culture. Perhaps even more telling are the number of non-"Chicano" filmmakers making films relevant to Chicano studies as well as Latino directors able to make popular films not restricted to ethnic-specific content. A list of the most provocative films made by non-Latinos over the last half century would include *Salt of the Earth*, *Alambrista!*, *Follow Me Home*, *Men with Guns*, and *Fools Rush In*. And, by the end of the century, Latinos were able to work in Hollywood unfettered by their ethnicity: films include Marcus de Leon's *Big Squeeze* and *Kiss me a Killer*; Ramon Menendez's

*Money for Nothing*; Alfonso Arau's *A Walk in the Clouds*; Luis Llosa's *Anaconda* and *The Specialist*; Rodrigo Garcia's *Things You Can Tell Just By Looking at Her*; and Robert Rodriguez's *Four Rooms*, *From Dusk Till Dawn*, and *The Faculty*.

Clearly, the nationalist criteria for Chicano film culture ignore the diversity of films and practices relevant to Chicano studies and film studies. "Crossing over" markets and traditions, Chicano films cannot be adequately defined by the triplex "by, for, and about" Chicanos. Because almost all Chicano feature films since the 1980s follow mainstream production and distribution modes, Chicano film studies must adapt. Among the many advantages in making Chicano films through Hollywood for mainstream audiences, the most important is probably not a bigger budget and the security it affords but broader and more ethnically diverse audiences. Scholars need to consider how multicultural aesthetics in American films give expression to Chicano identification alongside notions of American cultural citizenship and, as a result, how they revitalize essential American characteristics.

Chicano media artists recognized that traditions tainted by racial discrimination against Latino culture were not erased easily or completely with the new-found liberalism following the civil rights struggle or with the subsequent arrival of the few minority artists who gained entry. As tradition and economics dictated, the U.S. film industry through conservative leadership both reflected and

promulgated racial and ethnic intolerance ingrained in key aspects of dominant U.S.-American culture. Moreover, filmmakers attempting to participate in Chicano cultural formulation discovered that Chicano mainstream films still needed to pass, as did all mainstream films, age-old Hollywood marketability tests--meeting audience expectations and succeeding at the box-office. In terms of reception, Chicano films were subject to a double bind: being ethnically distinct and "authentic" for Chicano cultural nationalists; and following the conventions and formulas of the established film industry closely enough to sell tickets and make a profit with mainstream audiences. Ironically, it is this specific racial and, more importantly, cultural double bind that both forced and allowed filmmakers to construct the aesthetics that ground Chicano film culture.

This dissertation analyzes selected American films that reveal the origin and function of multicultural aesthetics in Chicano feature films. These selected films, although not necessarily meeting the "by, for, and about Chicanos" criterion, are relevant to Chicano studies and film studies because together they reveal the evolution of Chicano cultural identification in U.S. film. Even more importantly, precisely because several of these films do not conform to the "by, for, about" criteria, these films show how the multicultural aesthetics at work in U.S. film redress questions about citizenship in American culture. Rather than remaining limited by exclusionary politics, these films

resituate Chicano film culture as they address mainstream markets and involve diverse viewpoints. The analyses are interdisciplinary in their attempt to examine the ways films--as forms of entertainment, business, art, and social activism--negotiate complex structures of culture and ethnicity. The title "Screening *Mestizaje*" suggests the ways that Hollywood has both traditionally hidden and more recently expressed the mix of cultures that constitutes the ever-changing nature of American culture. Aesthetics in Chicano film, rather than tending toward abstraction as in traditional philosophical studies, respond to the vital multiculturalism of Chicanismo that dismantles U.S.-American/Mexican duality, often combining artistic, economic, and social functions in their *movidas* or practical strategies.

The overall organization of the dissertation follows a relatively simple timeline covering the last half of the 20th century with the first part starting after World War II and leading up to the "cross over" phenomenon of the 1980s; the second part showing its effects to the turn of the century. Moreover, significant connections among American histories and film production techniques highlight problematic issues within specific historical contexts.

Chapters, then, showcase the various interaction among representative films, emulating the dialogue between extreme ideological views within given periods and social contexts in American culture. In chapter one, *Viva Zapata!* and *Salt of*

*the Earth* reveal the hegemony of dominant Eurocentric culture during the Cold War as ethnicity in film is controlled by state and corporate authorities. The treatment of revolutionary themes in *Zapata!* and *Salt* reveals the ideological contest in U.S. society over American values. Banned throughout North America, *Salt* and its *huelgista* aesthetic lose out to dominant ideologies, but the union solidarity among the working class reflected in *Salt* initiates the collective protest that grew into Chicano nationalism. Chapter two addresses the power and fear associated with Chicano nationalism. By the time Chicano cultural workers gained access to electronic media forms during and after the civil rights movements, their body of work represented the "resistance" and exclusionary politics oppositional to the traditional U.S. nationalism represented by Wayne's independently-produced *The Alamo*. Perhaps more directly than any other film of its time, *The Alamo* attempts to bolster support for conservative American values at a time when those values were very much in jeopardy. Some twenty years later, *Zoot Suit* might be interpreted as the Chicano nationalistic counterargument in response to the conservative and exclusionary politics of Wayne's America. However, *Zoot Suit*'s emphasis on the pachuco's transgressions, or *pachuquismo*, expresses Chicano nationalism, even as it initiates a move to the mainstream that will help Chicano film grow throughout the century.



Chapters three and four explore Chicano media artists' move toward the mainstream, merging Mexican, indigenous, and Latin American with U.S cultural forms, ideologies, and business practices. Even though the "Hispanic Hollywood" phenomenon allows a "crossing" of markets and traditions and, thus, erodes many barriers traditionally territorializing American society, the films continue to reflect the cultural conversation among competing ideologies. Centered on problematic issues such as the family, gender construction, and Chicana feminism, *American Me*, *My Family*, and *Mi Vida Loca* reveal the extent to which multiculturalism gives expression to cultural identities battling traditional representations through *rasquachismo* and reconstructions of gender and identity. Finally, in chapter five, *Desperado*, and *Fools Rush In* deconstruct the notion of "selling-out" by "crossing over," as Chicano aesthetics begin to fully emerge in mainstream Hollywood productions. An extension of his low-budget hit, *El Mariachi*, the studio-produced *Desperado* reveals Robert Rodriguez's adaptation of resourceful filmmaking methods and represents better than any other film the changes in production methods that Chicano films have made since the 1980s. *Fools Rush In* reveals that just as Latino filmmakers have moved toward the mainstream, studio-produced films in the mainstream have moved toward a respectful appreciation for and commercial treatment of multiculturalism, further reinforcing the social integrative function of multicultural aesthetics in Chicano film.

Although the conversations change with different contexts and problematics, all of these films reveal that multicultural aesthetics can perform a social function in mainstream films. The range of issues and conversations gives some idea of the diversity of the field of Chicano film. Just as Chicano film culture is *mestizo*, hybridized, and diverse, so too, to a certain extent, must be a cultural studies approach to them. Moreover, how the "cross-over" films formally and thematically construct Chicanismo within particular contexts reveals a significant trend in U.S. mainstream film and culture toward a merging, a hybridization, a *mestizaje* of traditionally distinct cultures. Thus, in their act of crossing over marketing and ideological borders, they disrupt the territories traditionally dividing American culture and revive the essential American characteristics of equality, freedom, and natural rights. A study of mainstream Chicano film aesthetics gives a view of the assemblage of pieces into the American mosaic at the dawn of the 21st century.

## END NOTES, INTRODUCTION

<sup>1</sup> *Mestizaje* is a Spanish noun, denoting a mongrel or mixed breed offspring. From this literal meaning, the term comes to mean cultural or, more generally, figurative hybridization. Moreover, within the Chicano cultural politics, where identity derives from awareness of being between dominant U.S. and Mexican traditions without one to call one's own, *mestizaje* can refer to the strategy of combining available cultural and traditional resources into a mode of survival. The adjective form is *mestizo* or *mestiza*.

<sup>2</sup> Though referring more directly to the image of Native Americans in U.S. film, *Hollywood's Indian*, edited by Peter C. Rollins and John E. O'Connor, collects essays which reveal, as the book's introduction states, the complicated "notion of how Hollywood and the larger media culture use, refine, rewrite the Native American story and image for mass consumption" (5).

<sup>3</sup> In 1975, Francisco X. Camplis called for a film culture "by and for us," implying the use of "subversion" as a sole means of expression (322).

<sup>4</sup> Keller's discussion of "The 'Hispanic Hollywood' Phenomenon" shows that general interest, business, and industry periodicals (*Time*, *Newsweek*, *Advertising Age*, *Variety*, etc.) focused on the advantages of marketing mainstream films to a Hispanic population (*Hispanic* 163).

*Newsweek*, for example, in a review of *La Bamba* claimed that the "sound of money" drove its Latin beat (Foote 66).

5 "Chicanismo" is a noun denoting the ideology and spirit of Chicano cultural identification. During the civil rights movements, the term held connotations of independence, autonomy, and racial or ethnic pride. "Chicanismo" has lost some of the radical political connotation, as have the terms "Chicano" and "Chicana," and refers more neutrally to the idea of living in between dominant cultures and traditions.

6 Emanuel Martinez's *Mestizo Banner* and Amado M Pena's *Mestizo* depict a three-faced, head that represents the culmination of cultures in Chicano cultural identification; see illustrations #5 and #9 in the CARA (Chicano Arts: Resistance and Affirmation) exhibition catalog (Griswold del Castillo, *Chicano* 239, 241). In her discussion of the exhibition, Alicia Gaspar de Alba explains that the tripartite head symbolized "the racial and cultural consciousness of Chicanos/as" (50).

7 Christine List's *Chicano Images: Refiguring Ethnicity Mainstream Film* advances Chicano film studies in this direction.

8 Antonio Rios-Bustamante's research uncovers the fact that the work of only one independent director, Eustacio Montoya, and a small number of assistant directors, cinematographers, and various technicians survived since the silent era.

<sup>9</sup> A number of sources provide information on these early Chicano media artists and their work, including Christine List's *Chicano Images*, Rosa Linda Fregosa's *The Bronze Screen*, and Gary D. Keller's introduction to *Chicano Cinema*.

## CHAPTER ONE

### UNITED WE STAND: AMERICA'S COLD WAR AND CHICANO FILM

#### ***The Beloved Rogue: Zapata Goes Hollywood***

Hollywood legend tells how, when asked about social politics in his films, studio mogul Samuel Goldwyn replied: "If you want to send a message, use Western Union" (Cripps 2). A certain pragmatism rings true in Goldwyn's off-hand quip. Production managers in the studio system prioritized box-office receipts over any individual film's message. Producers generally managed time, expenditure, and talent solely for the studio's economic benefit. However, Darryl F. Zanuck, writer-turned-production executive at Warner Bros. in the 1920s, founder of 20th Century in 1933, and eventually head of production at 20th Century-Fox into the 1950s, slightly modified this characterization of the producer-mogul.

While he certainly upheld the responsibilities all studio executives had of making movies that would make profits, Zanuck often favored "exposé" stories that met marketable standards.<sup>1</sup> Productions throughout Zanuck's career reveal this trend: *Five Star Final*, *Two Seconds*, *The Match King*, and *I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang* at Warner's; *The Bowery*, *The Grapes of Wrath*, *Wilson*, *Boomerang*, *Gentleman's Agreement*, *Pinky*, *Che!*, and other socially and politically expressive films during his tenure with Fox and 20th-Century Fox. Gussow claims that Zanuck's artistic

maturity led him away from reliance on formulas, but more likely Zanuck saw a commercial advantage in treating controversial topics (141).<sup>2</sup> Perhaps this aspect of Zanuck's temperament significantly contributed to the "house style" of 20th Century-Fox, which maintained a margin of profit through "program" productions with a "conservative aesthetic" and, occasionally, consciously broke convention with a "defiant social critique" (Mordden 263).

Decisions to produce politically and socially conscious films were not motivated by mere message-making in the 1950s, though. Competition existed between the studios within Hollywood on commercial as well as artistic levels throughout the system era. And, nearing the end of the era in the 1950s, studios faced new challenges in the form of television which drew audiences away from the theaters and anchored them in their living rooms. Money once practically guaranteed to a studio through its ownership of theater chains and the "sure-seaters" became revenue lost to other modes of entertainment and to theater owners as a result of the "consent decrees" which broke up the oligopoly the studios enjoyed. Along with these factors, studios felt pressure from the changing political climate, a certain move toward conservatism following the Second World War, not only in the United States but throughout their global market. So, 20th Century-Fox, as well as other studios, needed to produce films which not only would distinguish themselves from the other studios' offerings and the television-entertainment

available in movie-goers' living rooms, but also would balance carefully the political and social climate of their constantly oscillating American and global markets.

During World War II when the United States faced labor shortages in urban factories as well as rural farms, the Braceros Program allowed an unprecedented number of Mexican immigrants and Latinos of various ethnicities to contribute to America's home-front war efforts. Such domestic acts of patriotism mirrored international efforts to unify allies against the threat of the fascist axis powers. However, following the war, as patriotic unity shifted to a more domestic and less international perspective, the improvements made in race relations evaporated. Hollywood film studios recognized the contradiction: while mainstream American culture grew more conservative, an alternative population and viable market emerged. Studios in the 1950s continued with great caution to treat Hispanic-related subjects, as they did earlier when "talkies" transformed industry operations in Latin American markets.

In most instances, American films in the 1930s with Spanish subtitles were ineffective because of the high rate of illiteracy; added to that, nationalists warned Latin Americans against the "pervasive penetration" by films with English language and American ideology (Keller, *Hispanics* 115, 120). Between 1930 and 1938 the Hollywood giants made over 100 Spanish-versions of American films--often with relatively very low budgets, no stars, and weak production



values--to little commercial success. Recognizing the inadequacy of converting American films to Spanish, studios began casting Latino and Latina actors (as well as Italians and even dark-skinned Anglos) for stories that would address the Hispanic population, roughly a fifth of the total market for Hollywood films by 1950. Throughout the 1930s and 1940s and into the 1950s, the number of social dramas and otherwise politically-aware films in American cinema which featured either Hispanic-related themes or Hispanic characters increased gradually, as cultural and ethnic pluralism challenged the trend toward mainstream homogeneity (Cripps 56-57). Most of those, though, as products of the studio "businesses" had to answer to conservative establishments within America's film industry, unlike the independently produced *Salt of the Earth*, which uses union-based production methods different from Hollywood's *modus operandi*.

The "Cisco Kid" series at 20th Century-Fox, *Viva Villa!*, *Bordertown*, *The Ox-Bow Incident*, *A Medal for Benny*, *The Ring*, and *Viva Zapata!* reveal Hollywood's attempts to tap into the Hispanic market in America and abroad, while significantly giving expression to the voice of the Mexican and Latin American population. Paradoxically, the films such as *Zapata*, which focus on the Mexican Revolution, simultaneously valorize rebellion as an expression of democracy, while remaining cautious not to offend the conservative "establishment"--financial backers, government, and moviegoers--within their contemporary American market. Pettit

notes that this tension ultimately disables the Hispanic images and representations and, thus, reflects Eurocentric expectations (219). In the end, it seems, making a socially conscious film within the Hollywood studio system worked as long as it passed the marketability test and offered the "right odds" on turning a profit in the theater (Behlmer 178). But even more importantly, studio productions in the 1950s, even those considered "provocative," avoided ideological values incompatible with mainstream views.

As one of the last films Zanuck produced for 20th Century-Fox before he ventured into Europe and back to Hollywood a decade later in the independent production wave, *Viva Zapata!* (1952) reflects several significant issues influencing the Hollywood studio system in the 1950s. Ironically, the very conditions which benefit the production of a "historical" treatment of Emiliano Zapata and his leadership in the Mexican Revolution prevent it from achieving commercial or critical success as a social statement, especially in its ambiguous treatment of Chicano social politics. Reviews in mainstream circulation during the film's theatrical run point to its confused agenda. *Time* echoes *Life* and *Newsweek* when it describes the Zapata character's "middle-of-the-road" politics as an odd blending of Steinbeck's liberal platitudes and "flabby moralizing" with Kazan's pragmatic direction (92). In the clearest analysis of the ideological values of *Zapata!*, Paul Vanderwood demonstrates how the film speaks more clearly to

America's post-World War II struggle against Stalinism than Zapata's fight for land reform. However, Vanderwood draws Zanuck, Kazan, and Steinbeck into a much closer political circle than the filmmakers' work and personal politics warrant.

Political representations of revolutionary themes as well as characters in *Viva Zapata!* reveal a conflation of the ideologies in the film and the 1950s American society it reflects, as opposed to *Salt of the Earth*. Multiculturalism as it appears in *Zapata* deals ambiguously with ethnicity and the Chicano politics the Mexican populist leader intimates. Ironically, *Viva Zapata's* treatment of revolutionary principles and characters reinforces the traditional boundaries in American culture that *Salt of the Earth* violates. *Zapata* ultimately maintains the status quo through Zanuck's executive control in an attempt to make a "provocative" subject palatable to its 1950s mainstream and global market, while *Salt* transgresses dominant ideology (and eventually the law) to express its multicultural message.

### **A Tiger Tamed in *Viva Zapata!***

According to Vanderwood, plans for a movie on Zapata originated with a faithful Zapatista named Gildardo Magaña who documented the Mexican agrarian movement in his biographical study on Zapata.<sup>3</sup> A liberal scholar of the Mexican Revolution, Edgcomb Pinchon, found in Magaña's work the historical information which helped him complete his

chronicle of Mexico's struggle for a democratic government, which inspired both *Viva Villa!* in 1933 and Steinbeck's story ideas. M-G-M was the first studio to act, purchasing the property rights in 1939.<sup>4</sup> But, by the late 1940s when the slated director for the Zapata film, Lester Cole, attracted attention from the Congressional House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC), M-G-M gave up on the idea for fear of offending audiences and backers. With Zanuck at the helm, 20th Century-Fox, which already had plans for a Zapata feature tentatively entitled *The Beloved Rogue*, bought out M-G-M and lined up Steinbeck for the script and Kazan for direction. Most likely Zanuck saw a greater commercial advantage than political risk in treating Zapata and the Mexican Revolution.

Although the Zapata story embodies, discursively speaking, a site of contested ideologies and the filmmakers involved in the project recognized this from the start, Zanuck, Kazan, and Steinbeck each envisioned a particular political slant for the film.<sup>5</sup> Many critical studies of the film overlook the ideological confusion and instead cite historically inaccurate content as the downfall of this story.<sup>6</sup> But, as a film about the Mexican Revolution, *Viva Zapata!* reveals more about the Cold War milieu in which the film was produced and shown. Less than the film's ability to depict the history of the Mexican Revolution and Zapata's role as a leader, perhaps the film suffers from the competing ideologies in the story and in the production. In writing

the script for the film, Steinbeck's own liberalism favored Zapata's populist reformism. While most screenwriters in the studio system followed the orders of the producers, directors, and sometimes even stars, Steinbeck with his literary reputation wielded some authority and control in the production of *Zapata!*

Steinbeck's "intense personal identification" with Mexican culture and history in his writing along with his respect for Zapata's leadership and courage indicated his commitment to the film (Benson 280; Millichap 122). For the basis of the characterization of Emiliano Zapata, Steinbeck relied on Edgcomb Pinchon's translation of Gildardo Magaña's historical sketch. In Pinchon the author found details that reflected a liberal democratic bent in the Mexican hero's political accomplishments, especially concerning land reform. Pinchon describes Zapata as a defender and spokesman for his village's farmers and ranchers, one who rallies his people to fight the tyranny of Mexican rule (19). Steinbeck hoped to show the Mexican hero's liberal democratic spirit and draw a rich portrait of Mexican culture. For example, one of the author's ideas initiated a multicultural aesthetic incorporating *corridos* throughout the film to narrate the story (Behlmer 171-73).<sup>7</sup>

Through the agency of a script doctor, Jules Buck, Zanuck urged Steinbeck to revise his several-hundred-page long catalog, filled with Mexican history and Zapata's biography, into a script the studio could produce. Zanuck

and Kazan influenced Steinbeck's revisions during conferences before productions began. By the summer of 1951, a shooting script was completed, most likely finalized by the producer himself, with a few pages branded "Revised--'Viva Zapata!'"--6/2/51" and "Zanuck" parenthetically appended to the upper left-hand corner.<sup>8</sup> Right up to the start of production, Kazan and Steinbeck debated over "last minute" revisions (Kiernan 293-95). Once shooting started, Zanuck advised Kazan on points of critical interest in the film (Morsberger "Note" xxxvii).

Most films produced in Hollywood during the studio era incorporated a managerial-based process. A studio product of the 1950s rarely reflected the single, unified vision of an artist, but rather it took shape as members of a collaborative team of diversely specialized filmmaking professionals made their particular contribution to the project under guidance of the producer. However, controversy added to the complexity of *Zapata's* production. Because *Viva Zapata!* embodies such explicitly political and contested ideas, given the contemporary American Cold War culture as well as tense race relations, Kazan's direction and Zanuck's managerial control reflect individual ideological stances sometimes at odds with Steinbeck's original depiction of the Mexican revolutionary hero. A prime example of Steinbeck's philosophy in his characterization of Emiliano Zapata and his movement remains in the manner in which Zapata takes charge in the film's opening. Steinbeck clearly drew this portrait

of Zapata as an agrarian reformer from Pinchon's historical description of a similar meeting over the villagers' entitlement to a lot of land (Pinchon 25-35).

Marlon Brando's Zapata with his brother Anthony Quinn's Eufemio and a collection of villagers respectfully seek the advice of their Presidente, Fay Roope's Díaz, regarding the loss of their land to sugar plantation owners. Outside/in editing, a conventional pattern from an establishing shot to more detailed shots, reveals the lowly peasants entering the stately capitol where their Presidente resides. A high angle depicts the peasant congress diminutively, reinforcing their tyrant ruler's condescending treatment toward them. However, the portrayal as treated in the shooting script emphasizes the collectivity of the peasants. Shot/countershot shows the conversation between the villagers as a collective and the country's dictator in a one-shot. Only after Díaz refuses help to the soft-spoken crowd, Zapata's voice emerges from the masses, with a suggestion of rebellion. Steinbeck's script, as well as much of the film, makes clear that Zapata leads not in order to seek an executive title, but rather out of a deep-seated need to help his community and family survive. Zapata's actions reflect those of a democratic pursuit of freedom over a tyrannical force, typical of Steinbeck's literary style, with an emphasis on an ideological strain of non-teleology.<sup>9</sup> That is, through Zapata's leadership the revolution does not represent another attempt to usurp the dictator-presidente, but instead

embodies the goal of surviving for survival's sake. Zapata serves and leads his fellow villagers to reclaim their land and revive their community with attention only to recovering their inalienable rights.

However, in cinematically treating Zapata's rebelliousness, Kazan overturned the collectivity of the peasants in favor of highlighting the individual action of Zapata. When the presidente asks the lone rebel peasant to identify himself, a one-shot holds on Brando's Zapata and then on his name written and circled on a scroll. The shot/countershot convention stresses not the union of the peasants but rather a *tete-a-tete*, Zapata against Díaz. The following scene equally highlights Zapata's leadership, as he steers his horse through enemy soldiers (and peasant neighbors), lassoes and drags a machine gun away from them, and defends the unarmed peasants. For Zanuck, the revisions make the film all the better, as Brando's Hollywood hero meets audience expectations, but for Kazan the story embodies explicitly anti-communist themes. That Zapata's heroic action reclaims the peasants' rightful land and their livelihood not only gives their rebellion the suggestion of democratic enterprise but reveals the corruption and tyranny of the *empresarios* who have abused their power and wealth. In Kazan's treatment, Zapata warns American audiences against the threat of communism to American capitalism.

Morsberger argues that the "finished film was very much Steinbeck's statement." However, in these and other scenes



throughout the film, Steinbeck's liberal democratic message seems undercut by Kazan's revision and direction ("Steinbeck's Zapata" xii). More specifically, the political pressures and expectations of each filmmaker working on *Zapata!* amounted to a contest of ideologies as embittered as those reported in HUAC hearings and throughout 1950s America. The conflation of ideologies, apparent in the differences among script drafts and the film's final form, impairs the multicultural message that the Zapata story potentially offered.

Other aspects of the film reveal the filmmakers' ideological contest. Steinbeck's non-teleological notions of revolution appearing in the script seem inconsistent at times with Kazan's anti-communistic message. Once Villa and Zapata meet to discuss the future of Mexico's government, Zapata refuses to be presidente but moves into the capitol to exercise leadership. When a secretary addresses him as presidente, Zapata corrects him, announcing that he is a "general." When Zapata recognizes that his leadership in the capitol amounts to executive command, he returns to Morales, his home, stating that "there are some things I forgot," and that he must leave "in the name of all [he] fought for." Upon returning, Zapata stands among other villagers, reinforcing the democratic ideals of their revolutionary cause, one especially highlighted by the corrupt turn his brother Eufemio chooses and for which he is assassinated. Earlier Zapata explains to his wife, Jean Peters' Josefa,

that the people have "themselves" to depend on: "They've changed. That is how things change--slowly--through people. They don't need me any more . . . strong people don't need a strong man." Dramatizing Zapata's point, the penultimate scene reveals several Zapatista followers, including Bernie Gozier's Charro, explaining that if something should happen to Zapata, the people will "get along": "we're still here . . . we know how to survive." The collective efforts of the group to rally behind and support Zapata reveal Steinbeck's decentralized democratic principle at work.

However, in the film's conclusion, Kazan's direction places emphasis on revealing the corruption of Joseph Wiseman's Fernando, a Stalinesque bureaucrat. Fernando sees revolution as a means of exercising power to gain a dictatorship over the masses. When Zapata and his forces defeat Díaz, Fernando warns Zapata to take control and claim his right to dictatorial power or else another leader will. A low angle one-shot reveals the severity of Fernando's threat, and lighting and make-up detract from his appearance as a symbol of his corrupt politics. Fernando stands in direct opposition to the ideology proffered by Lou Gilbert's Pablo, who risks and loses his life in defense of the weak-willed but well-intended actions of Harold Gordon's Madero, the man who made Zapata's revolution possible. Pablo proclaims:

Our cause was land--not a thought, but corn-planted earth to feed the families. And liberty--not a

word, but a man sitting safely in the evening. And Peace, not a dream--but a time of rest and kindness. The question beats in my head, Emiliano. Can a good thing come from a bad act? Can peace come from so much killing? Can kindness finally come from so much violence?

Pablo's liberal ideals awaken Zapata, and reveal Fernando for the fascist he has become throughout the story.

Kazan, in fact, deemphasized the liberal democratic strain in the film, offering a quite different, explicitly anti-communist interpretation of the story. Roger Tailleur distinguishes Kazan as one of the most well-known and successful Hollywood directors to actively participate in the "red-bait" purge of Hollywood communism (44). Confessing to earlier political "transgressions" into socialism, Kazan found himself needing to defend his film's political, social, and artistic messages as well as his position as director in the studio system.<sup>10</sup> In addition to his numerous public denunciations of communism, Kazan testified in a HUAC hearing, providing information about Hollywood friends and associates with communist political beliefs. As part of his defense, Kazan also provided HUAC and the conservatives in American culture an explanation for the message of the then-recently completed *Viva Zapata*.

In a letter printed in the *Saturday Review*, Kazan underscored the significance of what he called the "one nakedly dramatic act": "in the moment of victory, [Zapata]

turned his back on power" (22).<sup>11</sup> As Pauly acknowledges, both Kazan and Steinbeck earned reputations for artistic treatments of social reform issues; however, Kazan's emphasis on Zapata's renunciation of power refutes the ideology proffered by Joseph Wiseman's Fernando to the exclusion of all other ideas generated in Steinbeck's script (146). Biskind notes the fact that Fernando's premonition proves true, though the film admittedly uses Fernando's conservative stance to highlight Zapata's leadership and individualism (12).

While Steinbeck's script favors the juxtaposition of these two extremes in an attempt to highlight the democratic ideals Zapata himself expresses, Kazan's direction instead places emphasis on refuting Fernando's socialist statement. Kazan's perspective on the story, perhaps, reflects his paranoia over the conservative movements in American culture. Recognizing Kazan's as well as the studio's need to defend itself with its decision to treat such controversial themes, Zanuck supported Kazan's revisions of the story in the film's production. Steinbeck's script reveals a liberal democratic spirit in the Zapata-led revolution, emphasizing the importance of community and agrarian economics; however, Kazan and, to a slightly lesser extent perhaps, Zanuck appreciated the political charge of the characters and themes, determining at all costs to present an anti-communistic film, fraying, at times, the liberal democratic statement Steinbeck creates. That is, in the competition

between Steinbeck's story, Kazan's direction, and Zanuck's executive leadership, there is a conflation of liberal democratic, anti-communist, and conservative democratic values.

Integral to the manner in which themes and characters come alive on the screen, casting decisions also reflected the competing ideologies in *Viva Zapata!* As Morsberger notes, some Chicano, Mexican, and other critics argue that the lead role, at least, should be played by an Hispanic actor ("Steinbeck's *Viva*" 207). Given the criticism surrounding some of Steinbeck's literary representations of Hispanics and their adapted big-screen images, 20th Century-Fox and all involved in *Zapata* surely recognized the importance of casting.<sup>12</sup>

The decision to cast Anthony Quinn--himself part Mexican, part Irish, and a Mexican American immigrant--as Eufemio, the leader's brother and a supporting role for which Quinn won an Academy Award, advanced the representation of Hispanics in this film. Though Quinn disclaimed any Mexican political self-consciousness, his family's involvement in the Revolution as well as his own in Chicano movements threatened his position in the studio system (231, 10, 83).<sup>13</sup> First with Paramount studios, Quinn served as a romantic icon, in some ways a "Latin lover," imbued with the "continental" flare of exoticism; it is this "type" which allowed Quinn to take on other non-stereotypical roles, such as Eufemio (Quinn 11; Millichap 129). Quinn and Brando provide a nice pairing

for this film, yet the differences in accent, language, and other cultural contexts provided by these two and other less important actors hurt the continuity of the film. With Hispanic actors such as Armendariz, the then-retired Mexican expatriate Arturo De Cordova, the rising star Ricardo Montalban, or even Anthony Quinn available, the decision to cast Marlon Brando in the lead as Emiliano Zapata deserves consideration.

Asserting that the practice of "browning up" white actors for Hispanic roles led to hypocrisy and "false" images in film, Woll notes that Brando's selection for *Zapata* as well as Charlton Heston's for *Touch of Evil* works against a growing trend in 1950s American cinema of ethnic-appropriate casting (48-49). Certainly both Heston and Brando had box-office appeal, a quality studios banked on; however, the decision to cast Brando as Zapata represents a vicious cycle in Hollywood commerce which historically has excluded Latinos. While Pauly claims that Brando's representation as the Mexican revolutionary reflects the film's historical inaccuracy and, thus, all that is wrong with *Viva Zapata!*, Millichap and most other critics overlook the ethnic-politics of casting Brando as Zapata (155). Acknowledging problems with the various accents and dialects present throughout the film, Millichap argues the debatable point that an "excellent makeup job" and restraint over his "typical mannerisms" and patented mumble-speech make Brando "the perfect choice" for the lead role (128-29). Having set the stage for the young

star with *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Kazan persuaded Zanuck to cast Brando as Zapata, though the producer recognized the significance of such a decision (Millichap 128; Behlmer 207).

In memorandums to Kazan and Steinbeck during screenplay revisions, Zanuck explained his consternation over the questions not only of casting the lead but about the entire film's language. In December 1950 on the heels of a revised screenplay, Zanuck reminded the writer and director of the importance of selecting an actor for the principal role; the producer claimed that casting Brando in the role would mean eliminating "any thought of accent, or even the flavor of accent" (Behlmer 176). With a conventional narrative mode in mind, Hollywood classicism tinged with the social problem genre's realism, Zanuck expressed concern over a historical and biographical film of "a grizzled old Mexican warrior" who speaks "clear-cut English" and the further dilemmas of the language and accents of the supporting and subordinate roles (Behlmer 176-77).<sup>14</sup> One of the producer's suggestions, "the simplest solution," was to find an ethnic-appropriate actor "talented enough to play Zapata" (Behlmer 177). Though Zanuck recognized the problem of making an American film spoken in English about a Mexican character who spoke Spanish, perhaps the issue of casting roots more deeply in the ideology of the film. That is, the decisions involved in casting reveal the competing ideologies of the men making those decisions.

For Zanuck, making *Viva Zapata!* merely involved meeting a marketing demand for "socially provocative" subjects. Before filming began, Zanuck explained to Steinbeck and Kazan that the film should avoid "preachments," that the agenda of "the picture itself, as a whole, should be the message" (175). In the process of revising the script, Zanuck expressed frustration over the marketability of the story's message. Fearing that the message might suggest revolt as the answer to social problems and, even further, that Zapata's idea of revolt might be construed by the American public as communism, Zanuck requested that Steinbeck and Kazan "clear up" the message and give an "upbeat" ending to the story; here, the producer invoked the lines Ma Joad delivers at the end of *The Grapes of Wrath* as a responsible treatment of political issues (Behlmer 175). Zanuck explained his confidence in *Viva Zapata!*: "[I]t is a great story, regardless of background and nationality. It has guts and drive" (Behlmer 171). Furthermore, Zanuck claimed that the story had no direct application to the contemporary world situation, neither Cold War politics nor volatile race relations. For Zanuck, the risk and benefit of this film rested on one factor: commercial success. In the mid-1940s, while working on *Wilson*, Zanuck explained the difference between the success of *The Grapes of Wrath* and the relative failure of *The Ox-Bow Incident*; aside from either film's "significance" or "dramatic value," profit and popularity were key:



To be truly successful, to make its point, a picture must be a financial success at the box office. It must be seen by the maximum number of people. If it fails at the box office it merely means, particularly in a serious film, that the point has failed to get across.

(Behlmer 75-76)

To this end, a successful message in Zanuck's opinion, making "interesting entertainment," which audiences "wish to see . . . and do," stood in contrast to the explicitly anti-communistic statement Kazan claimed he tried to create with *Viva Zapata!*, not to mention the different yet "historical" treatment Steinbeck applied in the script, showing Zapata as the Mexican hero approaching legendary status as a liberal democratic leader of the people (Behlmer 174, 76).

The revision of the film's title from *The Tiger* to *Viva Zapata!*, demanded by Mexico's censorship office, symbolizes the death of the film image of Zapata, as his political significance wavers with the film's inconsistencies. Reflecting back on *Viva Zapata!*, Zanuck found the film artistically excellent and described Kazan and Steinbeck's work positively, yet the film failed commercially--and, therefore, failed--because its subject matter was "unsatisfactory" or "unpopular" (Behlmer 215, 238). Just a few months after *Viva Zapata!* left the theaters, Zanuck cautioned Kazan, working on another socially-conscious, anti-communist film, *Man on a Tightrope*, against attempting to

make another "violently" anti-communistic film at a time when audiences craved escapist entertainment (Behlmer 215). While much of the film's commercial failure reflected Zanuck's diagnosis, that a film fails when only the "intelligentsia" pays to see it, *Viva Zapata!* suffered as a social statement and as an artistic film as well because it embodies a conflation of competing ideologies (Behlmer 224).

Perhaps as much as any other production, this film reveals the "red-tape" conflicts present in the Hollywood studio system in the 1950s, exposing the managerial hierarchy from which the studios in the 1930s and 1940s had benefited. *Viva Zapata!* represents specifically the end of Zanuck's reign at 20th Century-Fox and also the beginning of the end of the powerful mogul and his studio system in Hollywood. The film, more importantly, points to a marketing principle filmmakers in Hollywood would follow for the next three decades; especially when treating subjects related to minority cultures or other provocative issues, mainstream films profit from appealing to dominant ideologies in American society. Even though the conflation of political perspectives in the making of *Zapata!* emulates the cultural dialogue that is inherent in America's democratic spirit, the dominant-against-alternative paradigm witnessed in *Zapata's* production reflects a mode of operations in Hollywood after the middle of the century. Chicano film culture, locked out of the "dominant" mode of Hollywood and American culture, would seek empowerment through alternative modes; this

precedent is set in *Salt of the Earth*, a film that was not only made very differently from *Zapata!*, but also presents a portrait of multicultural America missing in studio films.

Ultimately, the potentially powerful story of Emiliano Zapata and the Mexican Revolution falters, as thematic and formal representations reveal the competing ideologies of Steinbeck, Kazan, and Zanuck both in the production as well as in the film itself. As a representative Hispanic-related film of the Hollywood studio system in the 1950s, *Viva Zapata!* stands in a countercurrent to the independently produced *Salt of the Earth*. Although Hollywood studios recognized a growing interest after W.W.II in race and ethnicity, perhaps the combination of political pressure from the dominant right alongside a fickle market watching television and craving escapist entertainment dissuaded the film businesses from expressing multicultural and multi-ethnic representations. For a film to have done so in the 1950s, as *Salt of the Earth* did, it had to operate outside of the territories of Hollywood and dominant American culture.

***Vaya con Dios: Disenfranchised from Hollywood, U.S.A.***

When asked by a reporter if *Salt of the Earth* (1954) was in 3-D, Paul Jarrico, the film's producer, wryly answered it is in 4-D. Confused, the reporter asked "what the hell does it have?" Jarrico replied "content." *Salt* director, Herbert Biberman listed among the producer's attributes a good sense of humor, which probably benefited their independent film

company as a survival strategy when it attempted to oppose Hollywood's ruling order. But an even more important truth remains in the line.

*Salt of the Earth* contains socially and politically conscious messages like few other American films ever, and like no other film produced in America's Cold War era. Although 1950s mainstream American media stirred controversy around the film's production--*Newsweek* called the production company "reds in the desert" (27)--a strong contingency of viewers recognized that the opposition to the film was ungrounded since it is only a strong "pro-labor" film that calls for equal rights for women and racial minorities (Murray 314; Crowther). And a 1953 special issue of *Frontier* magazine chronicled the conspiratorial efforts of state officials and studio executives in preventing the completion of the film (Kerby). Still, an industry-wide boycott disallowed the film wide-scale distribution, and the film showed for only eight weeks in two New York City privately-owned theaters and ten other theaters in New Mexico, California, and Colorado until it was revived in circuit screenings almost a decade later. Unfortunately, *Salt's* distribution suffered from its "banned" label.

Ironically though, in the almost half century since its completion, such a label has become a marketing advantage. One retrospective study of the film cites that the AFL-CIO, which initially refused to help the union production company and even tried to sabotage the film project, some three

decades later sponsored its cable-television broadcast (Miller 31). And the film's growth in popularity at university and festival screenings since the 1970s reflects its enduring message of equality (Hitchens 79). The cover label of the only currently available VHS format (by MPI Home Video) urges that the film "must be seen" because initially it was boycotted and its messages were suppressed. And, several studies of the film, despite the fact that it has never been fully released and has suffered from its limited exposure, describe it as a "classic." If historical accounts of the film production are accurate, then *Salt* represents an aberration in the political climate of "Cold War" America. In the early 1950s, conservative elements in American culture forced the production underground, but in its very act of resistance against and subversion of the dominant culture, the film, which at times was spirited through Hollywood post-production facilities under the pseudonym *Vaya con Dios*, creates an American liberal democratic message. That these messages offered by *Salt* have met renewed interests hints at the film's powerful expressions of shifts in American culture. The film's messages and the process by which they were suppressed warrant close examination, though, because they offer a comparison to typical 1950s Hollywood-studio fare, a view of the Cold War political climate, and a particular function of multiculturalism in American film.

Through its Chicano brand of cultural hybridity, *Salt of the Earth* presents an essential expression of American

democracy. Unlike *Viva Zapata!* and other Hispanic-oriented Hollywood films, *Salt of the Earth* resists conservative political and social pressures and offers its limited audiences an independent statement of America's liberal democratic spirit. At the heart of the film, decisions about characterization, form, and thematic content both reflected and actualized the liberties and rights of Americans.

Almost a decade before plans for *Salt* began, during and after World War II, a number of training films, shorts, documentaries, and features produced by the U.S. government and Hollywood studios engaged a similar purpose: to give voice to American democracy. By 1940 and 1941, the war raging in Europe created crises of conscience on a number of domestic fronts for American society, which in the 1930s gained security in its isolationism and the "second" New Deal social reform. While crucial issues surrounding racial and gender equality arose, other political and ideological issues of the period also influenced the workings of the film industry in the U.S. The ties that bind Washington, D.C., Wall Street, and Hollywood have always been a significant part of studio operations, but in the early war years, those ties became especially taut. Washington bureaucrats foresaw Hollywood as a marketing apparatus for the nation, and New York financiers recognized that films matching public sentiment would protect investments. As American politics shifted from a position of isolation to one favoring involvement in the war, so did studio films--witnessed

especially in the social problem genre with its realism and critical edge. Many of the biggest names in the business (including Zanuck, who chaired the Research Council, responsible for coordinating allocations for government film projects) made personal sacrifices to engage in the war effort and promote American patriotism.

Periodically, the Army Pictorial Division of the U.S. Signal Corps reported to Congress that Hollywood's film producers and their employees genuinely supported and aided the government in its war efforts; that the majors were galvanized by their support conveniently reinforced their power within the vertically structured film industry. Perhaps rooting the studios' patriotic endeavors was business-minded self-interest. As a result, Washington distrusted Hollywood and feared the monopolistic control studios exerted. The 1948 "consent decree" was just one method the Government maneuvered to gain leverage on the studios. Important political figures criticized Hollywood for making films without a strong enough democratic message, most likely as a way to hurt the studio giants' credibility with the American public and to chip away at their power.<sup>15</sup> Robert Sklar and other film historians characterize the relationship between the U.S. government and the U.S. film industry as antagonistic rather than cooperative, as "Hollywood served as a convenient and vulnerable villain" (249).

Perhaps nothing demonstrates the strain between Hollywood and the U.S. government better than the HUAC hearings. Though Congressman Martin Dies initiated the investigations in the late 1930s to create a sense of national unity ostensibly as a defensive measure against threats to U.S. national interests, Senator Joseph McCarthy later orchestrated the Committee on Un-American Activities with a series of unconstitutional inquisitions. Late-20th-century historians recognize in hindsight how right-wing radicalism jeopardized the civil liberties of all Americans during the McCarthy era through book-burnings and "purges" in the Popular Front, in institutions of higher learning, in various industries, and in the arts. America suffered from a sense of political schizophrenia, as liberal reformism of the Roosevelt era was replaced by a heightened conservatism of the Truman-McCarthy era. Ironically, Hollywood films such as *The North Star*, *Days of Glory*, *Mission to Moscow*, and *Song of Russia* (its story conceived by Jarrico) promoted America's alliance with the Soviet Union during the war effort and proved just a few years later at best embarrassing and at worst "politically subversive" for their makers. The Truman Doctrine of 1947 upheld the issue of containment, a major move into Cold War policy and toward general distrust of communist forces. In the same year, the Taft-Hartley Act weakened the position of the labor unions in America's political sphere.



Most in Hollywood heeded the warning; "friendly" witnesses (including Kazan, in 1952) testified in the HUAC hearings, naming other filmmakers who had questionable or dangerous political beliefs. The high-profile status of some of America's most successful filmmakers made them targets of un-American investigations. Of the infamous "Nineteen" subpoenaed, "the Hollywood Ten" became even more infamous for refusing to testify on the grounds that the hearings denied them their constitutional rights. Those ten filmmakers, who served jail time concurrent with the outbreak of war in Korea and the arrest of the Rosenbergs, became symbolic of a great movement in the film industry and throughout American culture. The Hollywood "blacklist" enabled politicians and right-minded industrialists to protect conservative interests by systematically challenging liberalism in American society. In such a political climate, notions in line with the Popular Front, the labor movement, and minority equality were often espoused as "Red" and, therefore, a threat to U.S. interests. The liberal democratic spirit which professes gender, economic, and racial equality thus became an "alternative" and outlawed vision of America.

Hollywood studios had a great deal at stake in this ideological war. To avoid government censorship and to satisfy public expectations meant walking a fine line; *Viva Zapata!* reflects the sort of conflation of ideas that results from at once presenting a socially provocative message while appealing to mainstream tastes. Pressure to maintain such a

balance not only came directly from Washington and New York but trickled down into the film industry from the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA), the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees and Moving Picture Machine Operators (IATSE) and other film-related unions, and conservative leaders in the field such as Howard Hughes. To be labeled "unfriendly" meant practical exclusion from the film industry, as the intimidating power of the politicians and studio chiefs rippled throughout the vertically integrated industry. For Biberman and the other filmmakers of the *Salt* company, opposing the blacklist and the hegemony behind it was tantamount to asserting their American rights.

After serving six months in jail for contempt charges, Herbert Biberman returned to the West coast with hopes of making a film. Having worked on Broadway, written and directed a number of studio films<sup>16</sup>, and voiced his radical-left politics as a member of the Hollywood Communist Party and as a co-founder of the Hollywood Anti-Nazi League, Biberman had considered making an independent film earlier in his career and had even been offered funds for such an undertaking. By 1951, forming an independent company would be his only means of making a film, especially one expressing the liberal messages he wished to dramatize. Biberman approached several other blacklisted artists, recognizing the wealth of talent and experience either being undersold on the black market or wasting away without film work. Paul Jarrico, who had twelve screenwriting credits before his

expulsion, agreed to join Biberman in forming a company devoted to making "films with content" ("Paul" 280).<sup>17</sup> Jarrico convinced his brother-in-law and fellow radical, Michael Wilson, who had earned an Academy Award and substantial success as a screenwriter until he was labeled "unfriendly," that the company would provide an opportunity to treat socially relevant issues. Although the production strategies of *Salt* mirror many of those associated with Soviet agit-prop, Biberman and the other filmmakers claimed true devotion to expressing the democratic spirit of the people involved in the production and the story. Revisionist historians such as Lorence recognize that the blacklist was not the single most important tie among these artists; all were genuinely devoted to liberal and egalitarian social ideals and wished to express them in film, even at great personal risk.

Initially, the company searched for stories and, with some disappointment, developed scripts for production.<sup>18</sup> Having battled against the discrimination of the purge themselves, the members of the company wished the film to embody a "counterattack" and a sense of "resistance" against the dominant right (Jarrico, "Paul" 280; Biberman 27). Whatever story they filmed would have to capture their progressive vision of equality in a liberal democratic context. Biberman credited Jarrico for recognizing the potential of a story about miners in Silver City, New Mexico on strike (37). During a vacation trip, Jarrico met Clinton

Jencks, a Local 890 representative for the International Mine, Mill, and Smelter Workers Union, who defined the organization's politics as "rank-and-file democracy" (Jencks 380). Along with Jencks the members of the company appreciated the potential of the story, hoping to "blend" the "social authenticity" through "realistic form and content" with the "personal authenticity of the dramatic form" (Jarrico, "Breaking" 170).<sup>19</sup> Biberman praised Wilson for thematically weaving into the "love story" between a striking miner and his wife the unification of a people struggling for freedom: "the indivisibility of equality" serves as the theme (39). Though the sense of unity and equality appears in the film as symbolic ideas, it is equally enacted in the workings of the film company.

In an unprecedented move, the filmmakers released all authority to the democratic body of the union; no decision was made about the film without it passing a majority approval. As Jencks described it, the film project, like the mine workers union, demanded collectivism because "survival depended on it" (381). Biberman recalled that throughout the collaboration, while there were no battles for personal advantage on the part of the union workers or the filmmakers, a great many debates over "points at issue" were resolved in a democratic fashion:

. . . one thing we never argued about--what we were undertaking. It was one thing and we were one in seeking it. But as to a quality in the script, the

achievement or failure of mood or point in the direction of a scene, the battles were long, fierce, and always resolved. Not on the ground that one or the other was the supreme authority, even in his particular field. But, if discussion did not bring agreement, then on the basis of a majority vote . . . we came to rely on it, increasingly, as security for the end object, against our own individual weaknesses, even in the areas of our greatest individual strength . . .

[we] worked toward that of the majority. (54)

Decisions about the script, casting, finances, and other elements of the production were clearly governed by the democratic rule.

Each draft of Wilson's script entered a procedure of critique and revision according to the comments not only of filmmakers but also of the miners and their wives.<sup>20</sup> Collaboration brought to life the democratic spirit of equality in the script. Likewise, real miners and their families played almost all of the parts in an effort to provide a true-to-life picture of the struggle of the union and the working-class community. The lead male, Ramon Quintero, was played by real-life miner and union leader Juan Chacon, who had no acting experience but brought to the character authenticity from his own personal experiences. And perhaps even more importantly--and contradictory to studio practice--the leads were played by ethnically-

appropriate actors. The female lead, Esperanza Quintero, was played by the popular Mexican actress, Rosaura Revueeltas, who effectively dramatized the sensibility and gravity of the life of a miner's wife. Both leading actors as well as most of the supporting actors could draw from their own experiences to help shape the multicultural American identification drawn by the film. Unlike studios relying on stars to carry a film, these casting decisions as well as other elements of the production separated the company from the "Hollywood tradition" (Biberman 44).

And as the production veered from the tradition of Hollywood, so did its economic structure. Initially, Biberman suspected that any production he and other blacklisted filmmakers attempted would be withheld from typical investment routes. That is, in the vertically integrated film industry, to be blacklisted from the studios effectively meant being blacklisted from any business with whom the studios dealt. A few months into the production, such threats became immediately tangible for the entire company. Spurred by a few inflammatory news pieces suggesting that the company was involved in spying on the U.S. government, Congressman Donald Jackson officially declared the company an affiliate of communist forces intent on undermining national interests.<sup>21</sup> Largely resulting from government interference, the company had to work underground, as the opposition they faced ultimately amounted to a conspiracy. And so, those working on *Salt* quickly realized

that they had to find alternative resources for all aspects of their filmmaking, which included finding independent investors, especially those not fearful of political intimidation, for the film's \$52,000 budget. Ironically, when Biberman found supporters he also sometimes rediscovered the very same determined ideals motivating the film itself.<sup>22</sup>

In one meeting with a head-strong, conservative capitalist, after the director warned that supporting the production might be construed in the conservative climate as political subversiveness--or even an "un-American activity"--the businessman promised an investment for the sheer principle of exercising his right as a U.S. citizen to use his money as he saw fit. Another investor, identified as a "black Republican," admitted shame for the paranoia and fear ruling American society. After realizing that the cast and crew might be thrown off "public" sets, Biberman approached one of the few ranch owners in the area to ask for use of his land. Biberman found what he would later describe as a "militant, arrogant, unregenerated Jeffersonian" motivated to act against the radical-right by "anger and shame" (51). Biberman completed the contract with one-thousand acres of ranch land for one dollar and a promise from the rancher to watch over the filming, gun-in-hand and prepared to protect the cast and crew from "reactionary un-American[s]" opposing their right to film (51-2). In his search for support, Biberman found Americans with "outraged national pride" ready to fight to regain their birthright liberty (52).

The filmmakers discovered a similar attitude among the union workers. Collaboration came in the form of extras standing-in at a moment's notice and baby-sitting for others acting in scenes. When, as the end of filming neared, right-wing radicals attempted to assault cast and crew and to damage equipment, members of the company (including the director and others involved in the planning of the film) took turns standing on twenty-four-hour armed guard to protect the project and its participants. Although the film work often required the cover of night or undercover secrecy and sometimes even the appearance of war, those involved in the film reclaim their democratic pride. Biberman drew a telling comparison of the company to the soldiers who fought in the American Revolution, both armies fighting overwhelming odds to create a democratic union.

Although the production process and the social liberalism of the filmmakers might be construed, especially in the "Cold War" climate of the 1950s, as working against American democracy, the spirit of the *Salt* is actually in line with founding principles of the United States: equal opportunities, individual freedom, and social responsibility. The investment process, in fact, embodied capitalistic ideals, and the will of the people in its effect overturned the verdict of HUAC. Ironically, the production succeeded on the very basis upon which its conservative opponents denounced it. The disenfranchised filmmakers carved a space for the company's liberal democratic vision of America



through the workings of the film production. However, the blacklist and its political fallout formed only a single aspect of the exclusionary status of the company and its members. That the New Mexico workers and their families were predominantly U.S. citizens of Mexican ancestry serves as a key to the film's message.

### ***Los de Abajo* (The Underclass) in *Salt of the Earth***

In the relatively few critical studies of the film--given its significance to such broad-ranging issues as liberal politics, the labor movement, cinema history, gender construction, and race--specifically Chicano elements are either ignored completely or displaced by attention to Marxism and feminism.<sup>23</sup> Most recent scholarly attention has focused on recovering the production history and the political pressure the film battled.<sup>24</sup> In her examination of filmed Chicano stereotypes, Linda Williams offers the clearest explanation for the effectiveness of *Salt of the Earth*. Pointing to the casting decisions and to the on-location shooting, Williams notes that the film's sense of realism comes from an "authenticity of social context" as opposed to a reliance on Hollywood conventions (62). Recalling Italian neo-realism, this reading of *Salt* reveals an "integration of character and history" that gains credibility through its "more careful documentation of class and culture" (Williams 62). The aesthetics of *Salt*, however, owe less to the documentary-realist tradition, as Williams

argues, than they do to the authentic experience of being excluded from and living in between dominant traditions. That is, the social politics of *Salt* hinge on its treatment of Chicanismo.

Williams, nonetheless, plants an important landmark in the field of Chicano film studies when she claims that "there is a powerful need for some kind of authentic . . . culturally differentiated form that can speak to and for Chicanos" (61). *Salt of the Earth* discovers and explores a Chicano-specific form; however, it only borrows from the documentary tradition, in a way similar to other U.S. films in the social problem genre. In fact, the company sought to blend social circumstance into a "dramatic form" to reveal the "greater struggle" of the Chicanos in the remote, southwestern mining town. (Jarrico, "Breaking" 169-70). At once, the company avoided melodramatics and stereotypes by viewing the Chicano families as "ordinary people" (Jencks 385). At the same time, the filmmakers recognized that racial discrimination forced the Chicanos into unity, and so racial inequality operates as the primary subject for the story. These Americans, struggling between dominant traditions yet belonging solely to none, were both "typical and exceptional" (Jarrico, "Breaking" 170). In effect, then, the feminist issues and even the collective bargaining issues derive from the cultural blending that is inherently part of the film's treatment of Chicanismo. That the Chicanos--and more broadly, those of mixed Native and European

backgrounds--have been disenfranchised from mainstream American society on the basis of race and ethnicity for centuries makes their struggle an especially appropriate symbol for the struggle of others denied, for various reasons, access to elite and mainstream cultures and for the development of a multiculturally progressive society.

The diversity of the company reflected this "greater struggle" and the democratic principle of the production. Not only were Chicano cultural workers and politically blacklisted filmmakers working on the film, but among the crew there were African American and women artists previously excluded from studio projects on the basis of racial and gender prejudice. While most of the members of the company were disenfranchised from the Hollywood order, the Mexican immigrant and Chicano members of the community lived within a tradition of subjugation by the dominant structures within American society. Silver City and its surroundings thus serve a single, telling historical example.

The land in Grant County, New Mexico, served historically as a native "homeland" for indigenous societies, until it was taken or bought by imperialists--Spanish in the 16th century and U.S. Euro-Americans in the 19th. Early in *Salt of the Earth*, Revueltas' Esperanza explains that Europeans and Euro-Americans possessed the village by re-naming it "Zinc Town, New Mexico, U.S.A." And, although her husband's grandfather owned this land and the family's "roots go deep in this place," it is appropriated by the mining

company. Historically, European colonists exploited not only the land but, more shameful, the people. The division of labor, wealth, and power traditionally had been racially and ethnically defined; Natives in great numbers took the role of the *peons* (laborers) who gained very little for doing very difficult and dangerous mining work with little to no opportunity for promotion, while the European incomer took the role of *patron* (owner) who reaped the benefits of the mining operations. While some dual-labor theorists, such as Mario Berrera, borrow from Chicano nationalist politics and tend toward radical, Marxist economic agendas, the labor dispute in *Salt* centers much more firmly on the broken promise of the free market where equal opportunities are denied on the basis of race and ethnicity. The division of labor roles parallels a two-class economic structure, starkly divided between *pobre* (poor) and *rico* (rich), and these racially- and ethnically-motivated divisions deny Mexican immigrants and Chicanos equality. Such is the basis of conflict in the film; Ramon and his family derive little benefit and have practically no opportunity for upward mobility regardless of their efforts.

*Salt* further reflects this historical situation by showing the abuse of predominantly Hispanic workers by an absentee-owner. Wilson, in forming the treatment of the story, hoped to capture the complexity of the struggle for equality, which for the Chicano community existed "on so many levels," and envisioned unity within disparate segments of

American society as the goal (qtd. in Biberman 39). Collective bargaining operates for the miners union as a tool to gain expression and, thus, defeat discrimination. However, the film is not simply about the union struggle or even labor equality. In this film as well as in the Chicano working class communities it emulates, the act and idea of striking contained a resource of power and expression previously withheld from *la plebe* (working class Chicano peoples). *Huelga*, a term denoting the actual strike as well as suggesting the spirit of a political rally for entitlement, underlies the liberal messages of the film. Blending various indigenous, Mexican, and United States cultural influences, *Salt* creates an aesthetic of social activism represented by the New Mexico miners strike.

### ***Huelgista Aesthetic in Salt of the Earth***

Throughout the production, the company considered carefully how the theme, the "indivisibility of equality," might play to the film's diverse and, possibly, hostile audiences. Significantly, the company expected to access a mainstream audience and proceeded accordingly, but the film's ban prevented any wide-spread distribution. During production, though, the filmmakers recognized the importance of making the story discernible and relevant to an "average English-speaking audience," while envisioning the grander purpose behind the film of acting as a "cultural stimulus" for minority groups throughout the Americas (Jarrico,

"Breaking" 170). The filmmakers hoped to balance the provocative politics of the film with conventional storytelling to appeal to a diverse audience. *Salt* and its union-based independent production company opposed the conservative monolith of 1950s Washington as well as transformed the dominant conventions of the studio system in an attempt to make a pro-labor and multicultural statement palatable to a mainstream audience. In view of labor activism, *Salt* actualizes the union in its production and, thus, is itself an embodiment of socially conscious unionism, while, additionally, it professes a pro-union statement thematically.

Esperanza's voice-over introduces her husband Ramon as he works alone lighting a fuse in a mine shaft, "living half his life with dynamite and darkness." For eighteen years Ramon has worked without gaining benefits given to Anglo miners. After a near-fatal accident in the mine, caused by unfair and dangerous working conditions, Ramon recognizes that the Mexican immigrant and Chicano workers must get "equality on the job." And the union serves the predominantly Chicano miners as their sole tool for expression and negotiation. For the Hispanic miners, equality translates into a safety code and equal pay and benefits, comparable to their Euro-American counterparts; for their wives and families, it means having healthy living conditions, such as hot running water for proper sanitation like white households in the town have. Initially, conflict

arises from the disagreement between these two views, as Ramon argues that the community should "leave it to the men" to first gain employment rights which might then allow domestic improvements. A second accident, also caused by dangerous and unfair working conditions which injure one worker, prompts the miners to strike. In a union meeting that same evening, a vote makes the walk-out official, and impassioned speeches proclaim equality "as the one issue in this strike" and solidarity as the "one answer." Ironically, when wives of the miners propose establishing a ladies auxiliary that supports the union and provides an outlet for their viewpoints, the men refuse.

That the male miners abuse their new-found power by ignoring the needs of their wives and families and by denying them representation replicates the oppressive power structure against which the men are fighting. At the insistence of the women, the men reverse this decision, and the ladies auxiliary is allowed to support the men on the line by providing hot coffee and meals. *Salt's* narrative inclusion of female perspectives alongside their male counterparts represents a significant departure from status quo social politics, and it further reinforces the democratic liberalism at the heart of the story. When a court injunction disallows the miners from picketing, the only strategy that will save the union places the ladies of the auxiliary in the picket line for the men. Although Ramon at first prohibits Esperanza from participating alongside the other miner wives,

she eventually becomes one of the strongest and most vocal activists. In this turn, Ramon and the other men must then fulfill domestic responsibilities, and in so doing they learn a hard lesson and gain a better understanding of their wives and their community. Ramon best exemplifies this as he toils, putting wash on the line and admitting that "hot running water . . . should have been a union demand from the beginning." The liberal democratic spirit of the film derives from the inclusivity of the miners' community and from their equal interchange of knowledge and values. Such a humanist exchange helps the film serve as a model for America's democratic culture.

Most importantly, the philosophy of unity transcends labor negotiations and touches all aspects of the community. Esperanza explains that through her participation in the union, she wishes "to rise, and push everything up." In the climax of the film, when the mining business fails in its attempt to evict the Quintero family, Ramon and Esperanza for the first time are in agreement about how unity and equality can give their family and their community "dignity" if they "all fight together--all of us." More is at stake in this dispute than employment rights or fair housing; Esperanza argues that the "indivisibility of equality" extends beyond labor negotiations and provides a hopeful future for her community. In the film's final scene, Esperanza is shown in close-up, her chiseled face reinvigorated with hope, and her voice-over explains: "we had won something they could never



take away . . . [and] our children . . . would inherit it." This one-shot, in adapting the Hollywood convention, stresses not the glamour of a star-heroine, but a hopeful message of liberal democracy and equality.

The strike operates as a trope, showing the strength of unity and equality. Although born out of desperation, the act of striking enacts the will of a disenfranchised group to resist oppressive treatment at the hands of some dominant group. In *Salt of the Earth*, this works on many levels. Symbolically, the production represents for the filmmakers retaliation against the blacklist and political conspiracy denying them the right to express their views. For the miners, the strike inverts the economic leverage big business exerts over the working class by threatening profits. And, for the miner wives, it represents a pivotal turn in their gender-marked roles in the community. And, perhaps most significantly, because the miners and the working class community predominantly is of Mexican ancestry, the reversal of power overturns racial discrimination against Mexican immigrants and Chicanos. It is through the political spirit of the strike, one of a specifically Chicano brand, that feminist issues, collective bargaining issues, and political blacklisting form meaning. *Huelga*, then, as a political spirit of unity within the Chicano working class, draws strength from the cultural struggle Chicanos in the 1940s and 1950s faced, living in between traditions without a distinct

tradition of their own. The aesthetics of *Salt* reflect this cultural struggle.

The legacy of discrimination and the daily hardships Chacon's Ramon and the other Chicano miners face surpass those of the Anglo miners. While Chicano miners must work alone to "speed up" production, Anglo miners work in pairs according to a safety code. Ramon earns less pay for more dangerous work than his Anglo counterparts. When Ramon questions this discrimination, the foreman threatens to replace him with "an American." No longer purely Mexican and not accepted as American, Ramon and his family must implement *movidas* or strategies to survive, using whatever means they can access. While "solidarity of working class men" initiates the walk-out, the strike gains strength by fusing different cultural influences into a survival strategy. And even when the strike is threatened by a court injunction, the resourcefulness of the Chicana women preserves the community's democratic goal of equality. A blending of labor issues and Chicano unity allows victory in the strike and, more importantly, the possibility of a hopeful future for *la raza*.

The visual style further reflects multicultural survival strategies. Because Biberman and the other filmmakers wished the film to possess the mainstream appeal of a studio product, some Hollywood conventions remain. More often in *Salt* than in typical studio films, conversations are revealed in two-shots with imaginative blocking, where one person

looks over another's shoulder, resulting from the lack of technical resources. But, several key sequences of the film follow the classical paradigm, where invisible editing creates a highly mimetic representation of reality. So, a conversation features a two-shot which establishes the context and then continues with shot-countershot segments which guide viewer's attention during the discussion. For instance, near the film's climax, Esperanza and Ramon debate the changes in their home and their community, especially the way in which the Chicana women have taken charge of the strike. Ramon explains that he cannot live with her acting this "new way," and Esperanza agrees, adding that they can't go back to the "old way." With the strike as well as the future of her family and community in mind, Esperanza concentrates on "winning" through unity and equality. The form of the sequence uses shot-and-countershot to emphasize the volley of points; however, unlike most studio films, the one-shots mark significant points about the democratic changes in the community rather than highlighting a star's dialogue or reaction. *Salt* transforms the shot-countershot convention to emphasize the liberal democratic messages in the film.

Similarly, the use of the standard love story places the film within the Hollywood tradition, but in *Salt* the personal story of the Quinteros mirrors their social circumstance. Again, the film is interested less in focusing on any star personality or the depth of any central character than on the

liberal democratic content of the film. Parallel editing heightens the symbolic effect of Esperanza's giving birth to Juanito, which correlates with the abusive treatment by police against Ramon. The symbolism is clear here: that Chicano culture is figuratively born out of the racial and ethnic discrimination resulting from living between dominant traditions; this convention, initiated here, proves invaluable to later Chicano films. Rapid cuts help to focus attention and build drama as the birth approaches and the physical abuse grows more brutal. A final close-up of Esperanza, gasping in labor-pains, shows her crying out to Ramon, while a final close-up of Ramon, bleeding from the mouth, shows him crying out to Esperanza; the two images merge into a double exposure, then blur, as the characters are lost from the film reality. Borrowed from narrative film tradition, the parallel cutting technique clarifies for viewers the discrimination and creates a space in which Chicano culture can be defined out of a fusion of cultural influences and a resistance to oppression. Like the code-switching between English and Spanish in the dialogue, the juxtaposition of conventional and unconventional film forms blends different cultural influences and allows an expression of Chicano culture.

Music in the film, under the direction of Sol Kaplan, another successful artist who found himself blacklisted in Hollywood, also provides a juxtaposition between cultures. An orchestral arrangement with a decidedly military flare

runs with the credits at the film's opening; at other points, American pop music plays from juke boxes in cantinas or the radio in the Quintero living room. When the radio is repossessed during a party, though, Ramon tosses a guitar to a friend and orders, "let's hear some real music for a change." Ramon and his community use their available resources, sometimes incorporating and transforming American cultural influences to meet their own purposes. At other times, there is a distinct reliance on Mexican and Native influences, as when "La Adelita" creates the musical context for Esperanza's Saint's Day celebration. *La Mañanita* celebration updates the sacred traditions with the social circumstance of the Chicanos in 1940s New Mexico.

Where Hollywood conventions were ineffective or were unavailable due to various limitations, the film company invented techniques. One of Biberman's influences was the art of Mexican and Chicano muralists including Diego Rivera, which revealed to Biberman some cultural influences outside of American elite and mainstream art (80). Biberman explained that rapid cuts from consistent angles and different distances could provide the film narrative with action and emphasis without destroying the "rhythms" of the Chicano social context or unnecessarily altering the viewpoint (80). Perhaps the single greatest achievement of the filming techniques used in *Salt* was the treatment of the social context, capturing the complexity of Chicano

lifestyles and emphasizing the importance of unity in their fight for equality and representation.

The company was also restricted by a stationary camera, because dolly or moving shots were logistically impossible. Out of this limitation, however, imaginative uses of panoramic shots helped convey the theme. The first day the women serve on the picket line, for example, the scene begins with a long pan that shows women hiking in to the mine gates from great distances and from all directions. As the camera travels along the horizon, the flow of *la plebe*, the working class people, reflects the film's sense of unity and liberal spirit of democracy. In another establishing shot on the women's second day picketing, swish pans show first the women on the line, then women working at the coffee shack, then Estellita playing with other young children, then Luis and other boys skipping school and watching from the bushes, and finally Ramon with other striking miners keeping watch over the women. After this series of pans, a full shot of the picket line shows miners' wives dancing and singing as they circle the front of the mine gates. From a technical aspect, the pans provide a great deal of information about the setting and the involvement of the whole community at the picket line, all through a stationary camera.

In the film's resolution, where a sheriff serves the order to evict the Quintero family, the officer's point of view is shown through an almost full-circle pan, showing miner families from the town and others who have traveled by

truckload and by foot to support the working class struggle. The vast numbers reinforce the strength associated with unity. Out of these pan shots, the film reveals the landscape and the people of the area in an expansive yet realistic manner. The Chicano workers and their families are shown not as wholly positive or negative and not as "types," but with a cultural richness owing to their social condition. The "indivisibility of equality" lives in the actions of the miners and their families, and through their act of striking they gain a power of expression and initiate independence. Like a folk art, the film blends different cultural influences out of available resources, fashioning a tool for use of the people. The aesthetics of *Salt of the Earth* at times adopt and transform studio conventions while at other times invent new techniques in an attempt to express multiculturalism for a mainstream appeal. The purpose and the basis of the film's social critique remains utilitarian, to show a mass audience Chicano identification as part of a multicultural American society.

The social politics of the mining community and other union-based organizations, reflected in *Salt's huelgista aesthetic*, originated the solidarity of the Chicano civil rights movements that would come to fruition only a few years later. However, the "indivisibility of equality" that the union film highlights grew into an exclusionary social politics in Chicano nationalism, meeting and matching an equally exclusionary social politics in conservative U.S.

society. By the late 1960s, Chicano film represented an alternative to dominant mainstream culture, described by its "resistance" to U.S. society and its "affirmation" of Chicano independence. Films reflecting the social context of the civil rights movement extended the dissidence of the Cold War in their treatment of ethnicity and reinforced in many ways the territorialization of American culture, exemplified by the dialogue between the pro-U.S. *The Alamo* and the Pro-Chicano *Zoot Suit*.



## END NOTES, CHAPTER ONE

<sup>1</sup> Zanuck professed himself "The Executive" completely in charge of all production matters at 20th Century-Fox from 1935 to 1956, describing the studio as his "One-Man Show" (Gussow 140). Gomery supports this assessment of Zanuck's role at the studio (76). Campbell claims that the scripting stage of many 20th Century-Fox productions most reflected Zanuck's political perspective, undoubtedly a result of his writing background (50).

<sup>2</sup> Mosely notes that *Viva Zapata!* was certainly not the only studio film that treated topics sensitive to their contemporary political climate; with such films, Zanuck gave voice to a political stance quite different from his own personal Republican and conservative views, most likely with the hope of finding a movie-going market and turning a profit (190, 241).

<sup>3</sup> Of the explanations of the origin of the film, Vanderwood's seems to provide the most convincing evidence and reconciles other rather unsupported histories (185-88). See also Biskind, Parini, Millichap, Ciment, and Kiernan.

<sup>4</sup> According to Pauly, by the late 1940s M-G-M's progress on the Zapata film included commitment to Cole for direction, an 80-page script, and Robert Taylor cast as the lead; when the "fallout" from HUAC's 1947 investigation

blacklisted Cole, a gray shadow fell across the entire project (145).

<sup>5</sup> There is some debate among film historians over which filmmaker was most responsible for the 20th Century-Fox Zapata film. See Pauly, Parini, E. Steinbeck.

<sup>6</sup> Millichap asserts that the mariachi music and other details used in the script gathered during research trips by Steinbeck and Kazan help to strengthen the story, while citing other parts weakened by historical inaccuracy (130). Morsberger and Parini reveal as evidence that "Steinbeck had done his homework with a vengeance" by applying historical details from Pinchon's history, *Zapata the Unconquerable* ("Steinbeck's Viva" 191-93; 329). Others who attack the film on the basis of historical inaccuracy include Biskind and Pauly. Pettit fairly criticizes the historical inaccuracy of a film that neglects to show the people actually involved in the Revolution, the quarter of the population that died for their liberty and land (230).

<sup>7</sup> Zanuck persuaded Steinbeck to remove *corridos* originally planned to add contextual richness and authentic Mexican flavor to the film (Behlmer 171, 173).

<sup>8</sup> Pages 45A, 46, and 48 of the "Script City" screenplay appear to have been revised by Zanuck; these pages correlate to 48-51 in Steinbeck's *Original Screenplay* edited by Morsberger.

9 Morsberger uses Camus' distinction between the rebel and the revolutionary to discuss Steinbeck's non-teleological notion of spontaneous leadership ("Rebel").

10 Pauly sympathetically shows Kazan's position during his report to HUAC (141-48).

11 Neither the politically-conservative history of the Mexican Revolution offered by Millon, nor the "definitive" version provided by Womack supports the accuracy of Zapata's refusal of power and leadership as Kazan depicts it.

12 Pettit along with other critics view the *paisanos* in *Tortilla Flat* as stereotypical "happy savages" disenchanting with and isolated from Anglo-European North American progressivism (191-93); the lead roles featured Spencer Tracy and John Garfield. Conversely, Pedro Armendariz's portrayal of Kino in *The Pearl* stands out as a non-stereotypical representation of a Mexican character.

13 In one part of his autobiography Quinn professes to having no overt ethnic or racial consciousness (231), but in another, he reveals the importance of his memories of his mother and father fighting with Pancho Villa in the Mexican Revolution (10). At the risk of hurting the publicity image 20th Century-Fox created for Quinn, he decided to hold a fund-raiser for the Chicano boys implicated in the "Sleepy Lagoon" Murder Case; Zanuck, in fact, warned him against the political act, not only with the threat of losing film work but more importantly that HUAC might find his actions "subversive" (Quinn 83).

14 Biskind echoes Pauly, and several reviews criticize the variety of accents in the film, "of Bronx, Jersey, and Brooklyn," as detrimental to the verisimilitude of the themes in the film (13).

15 Congressman Martin Dies and Senators Gerald P. Nye and Ralph O. Brewster lead the charge against the U.S. film industry for not promoting "American values" in line with the conservative dominant culture.

16 Two of Biberman's films were wartime pro-Ally films for Howard Hughes at RKO: *Action in Arabia* and *The Master Race*.

17 "Content" here emphasizes both a departure from escapist studio fare as well as "a counterattack against the blacklist" (Jarrico, "Paul" 280).

18 Among the stories that were never produced, Dalton Trumbo proposed dramatizing the biography of a woman who was separated from her husband and her children after being labeled a "red." Other story ideas also showed innocent victims of McCarthyism (Jarrico, "Paul" 280).

19 Lillian S. Robinson discusses the narrative strategy of dramatizing the public message of oppression within the private story of Esperanza and Ramon (172-73).

20 The filmmakers claim that no less than four-hundred individuals read drafts of the script by the end of production. Thus, the miner family members became the "censors" and "producers" by adding their "point of view" to

the film (Jarrico, "Breaking" 170; Wilson qtd. in Biberman 38).

21 When regional news organizations reported that the film company's activities took place near the nuclear testing grounds, paranoia led some in American society to believe that the filmmakers were undercover communist spies. The media's misrepresentation of the film production and its company appear responsible for much of the controversy surrounding the film (Biberman 86; Jarrico, "Paul" 281; Jencks 385; Lorence 82).

22 See Biberman for a full explanation of the company's financial sources (35-37, 51-52).

23 Deborah Rosenfelt indicates the importance of the film's "outspoken feminism" (94). Peter Morris points to the "struggle by women for equality" as the dramatic impulse of the film (490). Linda Dittmar singles out gender issues, interpreting Esperanza's political action as feminist self-assertion. Lillian Robinson reads the film through a Marxist-feminist frame, associating the underprivileged working class with women as the film seeks to alter the conditions of social power.

24 Besides Biberman's own memoir, the only book-length study of the film, *The Suppression of Salt of the Earth* by James Lorence, smartly chronicles the history of the production and its conspiratorial suppression. Like the retrospective article by Tom Miller, Lorence's study revisits

the making of the film, though within a broader context of film history and American studies.

## CHAPTER TWO

### BIRTH OF A NATION: NATIONALISM AND CHICANO FILM

#### **Multiculturalism and Hollywood's Independent Spirit**

In 1759, in his "Letters from an American Farmer," Crèvecoeur defined American cultural identification as a new breed formed from a "mixture of blood" and values shared by "European" immigrants (659-60). Late 20th-century historians recognize that Crèvecoeur's multicultural vision of America united the "great mass of arts, sciences, vigor, and industry" from across Europe bound by the Western tradition, while ignoring the vast civilizations that thrived on the continent before the European conquest began (Crèvecoeur 660). As Frederick Jackson Turner claimed, God-ordained westward expansion in the honored legacy of Manifest Destiny helped define the American character through the 19th century. At the closing of the American frontier, definitions of the American character began wavering, marked by cycles of acceptance and rejection of multiculturalism in American society. The issues surrounding racial equality in American society continued to surface throughout the 20th century.

The 1950s was a decade of "peace, progress, and prosperity" for mainstream U.S. society, as Dwight D. Eisenhower alleged, yet minority groups pointed to invisible barriers based on race and ethnicity that excluded them from American culture. By the late 1960s, organized social

activism that was most often pushed underground in the 1940s and 1950s surfaced in the form of mass demonstrations and, sometimes, radical militant action. The 1960s is most often remembered as a period of backlash by marginalized communities erupting in social turbulence and discord. Starting in the 1960s the rise of cultural relativism left many U.S. citizens asking the same question Crevecoeur had asked some two centuries earlier: what is an American?

According to cultural historians, the "crisis in ideological confidence" in the 1960s originated from the well-populated Boomer youth movement, which in increased numbers questioned the authority of state officials, corporate powers, and other dominant institutions in the U.S. (Wood 162-63). Among the results of the rise of reactionary politics ("part counter-point, part consequence," according to Robin Wood) was a highly visible counter-culture that was reflected in the revolutionary and "incoherent texts" of some of the period's independent films, not under the tight grip of studio management (Wood 49). Independent filmmaking then assumed a revolutionary connotation from the contemporary civil rights movements, especially in political expressions of cultural identification.

Since the days of D.W. Griffith's two-reelers, independent filmmaking helped establish Hollywood as the U.S. film capitol. By nature these films owed a great deal to their director-artist's "vision," more so than the later studio collaborative process would generally allow. The



vertically integrated studio system overshadowed independent filmmaking from the 1930s through the 1950s, but after the consent decree divested studios of their theater ownership and as the system declined, independent film production re-emerged with an increased appreciation for individuality and an allowance for the expression of potent socio-political messages (Sklar 305).<sup>1</sup> Along with the antitrust laws, the growing popularity of television pressured film studios to revise their business operations. By the 1960s, most studios followed Warner Bros. and Universal into the "television age," leaving exhibition to theater chains and implementing various independent production schemes to reinforce their primary business role as distributor. While fewer films were produced overall, this did not mean that studio films were any less lavish or suffered from smaller budgets than those during the system's height, and on the contrary some films, like *Cleopatra* released in 1963, suffered from excessiveness and a bloated budget.

John Wayne's independently-produced *The Alamo* met a similar fate. Lavish production values and then-advanced camera work added to the film's epic quality and power, though the budget--the largest to that date at around \$14 million--put Wayne personally and professionally in debt. First-run box office returns amounted to less than \$8 million, and it took several years before Wayne recuperated. With the rugged individualism of his star-personality, Wayne the filmmaker tried to revive the business practices of the

studio era. As late as 1960, Wayne would use his "independent" vision to revive conservative politics with old-fashioned business practices.

With the rise of independent films in the 1960s, an alternative cinema emerged within and alongside the American film tradition. Racial and ethnic issues appeared in independent films in ways that in studio films they could not; perhaps even more importantly, independent productions opened as a venue for the expression of liberal pluralist and multiethnic representations within American film alongside equally strident conservative statements. By the early 1980s, the social politics of the Chicano civil rights movement gained expression for a mainstream audience through the filmic representation in *Zoot Suit* of *pachuquismo*, a lifestyle characterized by a manipulation of various cultural influences and traditions into a subversive mode of survival. Multiculturalism, then, operated to reformulate a specifically-Chicano, independent identity. That *pachuquismo* favored criminality, reactionary rebelliousness, and separatist nationalism, making it a regressively static and ineffective cultural identity for Chicanos, was significant nonetheless, because it contested an equally exclusionary U.S. nationalism. That is, perhaps Chicano separatism ran as a counter current to an even more pervasive and authoritative separatism rooted in post-World War II U.S.-American mainstream culture. Where *Zoot Suit* represents nationalistic resistance to an equally exclusionary tradition, John Wayne's

independent films reveals a clear example of that tradition. Thus, an independent film like Wayne's 1960 *The Alamo* maintains a long-standing American tradition.

Echoing Crevecoeur and the perdurable Western tradition, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. and other cultural historians voice a conservative refutation of cultural pluralism, saying that it "rejects the unifying vision of individuals from all nations melted together into a new race" (16). For Schlesinger, the formation of United States culture in the 19th century depended on individuals fulfilling their civic obligations, and, therefore, without assimilation society falters. Americans not assimilating into the cast, "miserably treated as they were," according to Schlesinger, nevertheless "contributed to the formation of the national identity. They became members, if third-class members, of American society and helped give the common culture new form and flavor" (14). Numerous cultural historians, from extreme pluralists like Horace Kallen and Robert Blauner to more moderate integrationalists like John Higham, David Hollinger, Werner Sollors, and Ronald Takaki, criticize the melting pot theory, arguing that cultural identification cannot adequately be defined by universalist essentialism. And perhaps even more importantly, because it purports to serve as a "common" and unifying element within the United States, dominant culture undercuts many democratic ideals, as it exiles certain Americans and their cultural values to "third-class" status.

*The Alamo* exemplifies this sort of a nationalistic stance on conservative U.S.-American ideology, in its insistence on tradition and erasure of multiculturalism. Though some of this portrayal is inescapable, given the facts of the historical event, the manner in which Wayne's production uses the Alamo as a metaphor for 1960s American politics revives a nationalistic stance.<sup>2</sup> And that the film was independently produced by John Wayne reinforces this ideological point.

John Wayne was more than simply a Hollywood actor or even a star. As popular and prolific<sup>3</sup> as any actor in American film, Wayne as a performer and on-screen persona generally stood as a mainstream authority figure. Few American actors carried an ideological power in his acting style as did Wayne. Wayne exhibited unusual grace for his hulking size, which probably helped him carry heroic action parts. But is size, strength, and popularity enough to garner the sort of mythic power that had become part of the John Wayne mystique? Exempt from active duty during W.W.II, Wayne represented the U.S. military through his acting and his screen persona. Wayne received commendations such as the "Iron Mike" from the U.S. Marine Corps., an award from the Veterans of Foreign Wars, and high praise for his patriotism from General Douglas MacArthur.<sup>4</sup> In his war films, Wayne encapsulated the brave and patriotic U.S. soldier, and in many of his westerns, he embodied the freedom and rugged individualism of the American Adam; significantly, both

played into conservative American values. Approaching legendary status as an actor and on-screen personality, Wayne's off-screen personality added a crucial dimension to the myth.

Scholars, critics, and biographers battle over the relevancy of Wayne's off-screen actions to his screen roles.<sup>5</sup> But the "Duke" persona merged in significant ways with his adoption and expression of right-wing political views in 1948 (Riggin 15).<sup>6</sup> More than any other actor, John Wayne combined these different elements of the man and star to provide a myth for conservative American politics and a validation of its ideology.<sup>7</sup> From 1948 up through the mid-1970s, Wayne recognized that he could use his mythic power as an "ideological weapon"; nowhere is this more clearly represented than in the independent films that Wayne produced, where his "personal politics" appear on screen, like *The Alamo* (Levy 18; Davis 202; Riggin 9). Traditional American Eurocentrism shapes the treatment of the Alamo story, as conservative politics overshadow the Mexican-American issues surrounding the historical event.

For over fifteen years, as his political activism grew, Wayne remained interested in filming a story about the Alamo. That Wayne succumbed to what he called a "bad deal" with United Artists to get the film distributed reflected just how certain he was that the film would confirm a conservative ideology in American culture and be commercially successful (qtd. in Clark 19).<sup>8</sup> Where Ronald Davis claims that the film

reflected Wayne's "personal slant on politics more than any movie he ever made," Garry Wills translates that to say that Wayne had dreamed "*The Alamo* would be a knockout blow to communism" (Davis 220; Wills 200). Even the publicity for *The Alamo* stresses patriotism by telling U.S. viewers it is their duty, as Americans who "prize freedom above tyranny," to see the film (Andersen 47). Wayne made a distinctly U.S.-American statement in his independent film work such as *The Alamo*, reflecting a conservative democratic stance. Reviews of the film waver in their interpretations of Wayne's rugged individualism between what *Life* termed "sentimental eloquence" and what *Time* described as "teary sentiment that blears every other frame of the film," although the mainstream reception of the film overlooked the blatantly conservative ethnic-politics of the film (120; 76). The theme of sacrifice reinforces the conservative democratic principles at work in the film. More to the point, though, Wayne's treatment of Eurocentric U.S. imperialism over native cultures operates as a metaphor for the 1960s policies of intervention and containment that denounce cultural pluralism. Manifest Destiny, then, as it serves a historical point in the film, equates to an exclusionary nationalistic statement for U.S. mainstream culture.

### **Reclaiming America: Nationalism in *The Alamo***

Throughout *The Alamo*, the cultural influences that necessarily inform the historical event are overshadowed by

nationalistic ideology. Shortly after arriving at San Antonio de Bexar, Wayne's Davy Crockett and his band of freedom-fighting Tennessee volunteers start a party at the local cantina. Beekeeper (Chill Wills) grabs a guitar and tells the "Texicans" to "open up [their] ears and listen to a little pure Tennessee." The music and the dance, where Tennessee men lead native women in traditional, Tennessee folk moves, reflect the transmittal of Eurocentric "American" values. Finally, Beekeeper proclaims his satisfaction with this new land and his decision to "marry up with Conchita [the native woman he is currently serenading] and be the man of this house." This, one of the introductory scenes of the film, implies a sort of imperial conquest, one vaguely reminiscent of *la Chingada* myth where 16th-century conquerors take the land and the native women as their own, as well as U.S. settlers' 19th-century westward migration in the expression of Manifest Destiny. The film depicts "pure Tennessee" expanding westward and taking leadership over the natives and the Mexican province.

In one of the few critical studies of *The Alamo*, Rodney Farnsworth points to this scene as indicative of the political rhetoric of "social and ethnic diversity" operating in the film (27). Farnsworth argues that the film creates a "sense of community" that favors diversity in its range of human types--which he supports by describing the eccentric characteristics of U.S. volunteers who have traveled from back east--and leaves the "critique of Anglocentrism and

other contradictions in Wayne's presentation of the Mexicans" to future Chicano film studies (27-28). Such an interpretation only propounds the Eurocentrism that drives the democratic principles in the film. The historical use of the Alamo and its myth of sacrifice creates an oppositional rhetoric to American multiculturalism.

Though the fighters, both volunteers from U.S. states as well as soldiers of the U.S. militia, serve to protect the native inhabitants of this "contested" land from Mexican tyranny, their "taking command" not only reveals a sort of Eurocentric arrogance but forces the native population to accept their new social scheme. That is, native inhabitants become subordinate in a social hierarchy in which U.S. fighters defend and seize control of their native land and erase their history and culture. General Sam Houston (Richard Boone) first exemplifies this when he describes the men protecting the province of Texas: with a wave of his hand toward Juan Seguin (Joseph Calleia), the *alcalde* (mayor) of San Antonio de Bexar, and the handful of other *Tejanos* defending their lands, Houston condescendingly describes them as "a few good friends." Colonel William Travis' (Laurence Harvey) description of the *Tejanos* emphasizes their enduring "hardships" by the "tyrannical government of a military dictator," Santa Anna, and justifies the militia's intervention. And even Jim Bowie (Richard Widmark), who has assimilated into the Mexican aristocratic culture by



marriage, holds onto his Southern cavalier values by keeping a Black slave, Jethro (Jester Hairston).

Bowie reveals more of this political stance in a conversation with Crockett sitting in a San Antonio *mercado* (outdoor market). Using invisible cutting and an exceptionally "clean" Hollywood style, this scene reflects formally and contextually the transferal of Eurocentric culture to native tradition. A long two-shot establishes the scene in which Bowie and Crockett converse. As the conversation becomes more pointed, the shot tightens to a medium two-shot. Eventually, shot-countershot with cuts on action and reaction mimetically represents the conversation between the two men. And the conventional Hollywood style mirrors the thematic point of the scene. Bowie explains the need for the military intervention: to defend the "courage" of the Mexicans. Bowie's description, though, reflects imperialistic arrogance as the native characteristic "courage" refers to being "not afraid to live for today," what Anglo-America mistakes for "laziness." The film shows the freedom fighters transplanting their Eurocentric American cultural paradigm in this Mexican province and attempting to make it a separate republic.

Because succession of the Texas Republic not only marks independence from Mexico, but more importantly realigns the territory within antebellum political issues, the fight at the Alamo represents 19th-century U.S. expansion. A number of military rituals dramatize this point, such as Travis

ordering the "1824" Texas flag raised within the mission-fort walls, ignoring the fact that the Alamo was rightfully a part of the Mexican province. As the flag rises atop the Alamo, Travis explains that the fighters stand "ready to do their duty and cognizant of the will of God." In the tradition of Manifest Destiny, the fight for Texas Independence, then, adheres to a providential plan for the spread of U.S. governance throughout the Americas. Crockett, too, proves "republic" to be a multifaceted concept, when he guesses the plan Austin and Travis have proposed for Texas Independence. Crockett explains that it means being able to "live free and talk free," but more than that it strikes a particularly human note and makes a man "tight in the throat." More than any other character, Crockett demonstrates the spiritual element of U.S. colonialism that is inherent to Manifest Destiny, though this theme is problematized by his and his volunteers' sacrifice.

Ironically, the villain of this film and of the Alamo (according to the U.S. myth), Presidente Santa Anna, played by Ruben Padilla, receives little actual screen time but models the Mexican gentry. Instead, the evil of Santa Anna's dictatorship indirectly surfaces through a white merchant and *empresario* (liaison for U.S. settlers into Mexico), Wesley Lau's Emil Sande, whose villainy comes from his lack of principle and his self-serving opportunism. In one of the best scenes of the film--for it combines the conventions of Hollywood style and escapist entertainment with the pointed

message of the film--Crockett disarms Sande and prevents him from taking advantage of a poor *Tejano* boy and a *Tejana* widow. The formal rhythm of the sequence is punctuated by the closing and opening of the widow's front door and by the cuts on action. Sande uses political leverage, because he's "acceptable to the powers that be" with loyalty to none, to force the widow, Linda Cristal's Flaca, to marry him and provide him the dowry of her inheritance. It is ostensibly according to democratic principle less than self-service that Crockett persuades Sande to give a "gratuity [to] the boy" carrying his bags and protects Flaca where she cannot defend herself. The scene reveals that Wayne's Crockett serves as "Mr. Tall American," who the *Tejanos* "could turn to for help." Like Wayne's officer serving in *The Green Berets* who is fighting for the orphaned Vietnamese boy symbolizing a nation unable to defend itself, Crockett intervenes to protect the democratic principles of freedom and liberty.

Though altruism reinforces the democratic principle to which Crockett and the Alamo defenders adhere, the political reformation of Texas as an independent republic more in line with the U.S. than Mexico undercuts their sacrifice. Near the film's end, Houston receives a note detailing the situation at the Alamo, "as sad as death" according to Travis, where the U.S. military force must buy "precious time" with the sacrifice of their lives. Integral to the power of the U.S. myth of the Alamo, the fighters choose to stay in spite of facing certain death. In the film, the

first volunteers to decide to stay and rejoin Travis are Bowie and his slave, Jethro. Given his freedom as certain death draws near for his master, Jethro too exercises his right to choose, which he determines is "what [the] men are fighting for," and stays to fight. It is paradoxical that Jethro uses his freedom to preserve a social system that provides him no freedom. While the film hardly could change historical facts, the symbolism of Jethro further problematizes the way sacrifice reinforces the democratic principles, especially equality and freedom, at the center of the story. U.S. fighters gained from the Alamo a foothold in western expansion for European-American cultural values from their defense of the province and the U.S. interests in that land. Crockett's home-spun philosophy explains that a dictator must be stopped before "he whets his appetite." And for Crockett, facing the threat of death to stop Santa Anna's dictatorial tyranny provides him with a purpose, which he explains to Flaca in a powerfully expansive scene where they converse under a tree.<sup>9</sup>

Flaca and Crockett must make the sacrifice of denying their love of one another for the advancement of their cause. However, allusions to imperialism and Manifest Destiny undercut the democratic principles for which they make their sacrifices. Driving this point home is highly stylized cinematography that rivals the greatest of the studio system films. A languishing tilt shot climbs a massive tree growing along a green and rolling river bank, starting at its giant

rooted trunk and finally reaching its sun-kissed leaves at treetop. "Lord above, that's one beautiful tree," proclaims Crockett, equating the picturesque scene with a spiritual experience. An aerial shot looks down through the giant limbs of the tree onto Crockett and Flaca peering up into the tree in awe. Crockett posits that it is "the kind of tree Adam and Eve must have met under" and that Texas "is green and growing, like those green pastures they talk about." In form and dialogue, Texas has become the embodiment of the natural sublime, as the Hudson River valley did for Thomas Cole and other American romanticists. The painterly qualities of the shots seem to borrow from George Caleb Bingham, who resituated the romantic sublime of the Hudson River valley to the Missouri countryside. Trees, Crockett claims, in the past were places from where bears or Indians would spring upon him, but now the natural scene reminds him of the importance of "feeling useful."

Significantly, eastern values have moved west along with the volunteers and militia. The westward movement, ordained by God, fulfills the expansion efforts of the U.S. to settle the continent. But the Eurocentrism of Manifest Destiny doctrine contradicts the equality of the fighter's democratic purpose for which they make their sacrifice at the Alamo. The erasure of the native cultures and their history appears in Crockett's description of the tree: "this tree must have been growed before man put his first dirty footprints on this prairie." While this adds to the mythic or timeless stature

of the tree as an idealistic symbol, it ignores the native civilization and their cultures thriving on the continent before the European settlements began.

Where mainstream American sources view the Alamo as a symbol of United States culture starting with its claim to independence from Mexico early in the 19th Century, some Chicano perspectives attempt to revise the ignored or forgotten history behind the myth (Brear 112-31). Rodolfo Acuña, for example, argues that what has been territorialized as the U.S. Southwest is actually an "occupied" native homeland for Chicanos. As part of the 1960s counterculture revolution, Chicano ethnic pride campaigns have reassessed the U.S. myth of the Alamo and its denial of native culture and history. While the Chicano revisionist efforts might undertake separatism in their Chicano national statements, they resist the erasure by mainstream cultural forms. For Wayne, *The Alamo* spoke for the conservative politics of the 1960s through the historical sacrifice made by U.S. freedom fighters. As an independent producer who accessed the Hollywood system and its conventions, Wayne made the film a spectacle with a stridently conservative political point. His wife, Pilar, acknowledged that Wayne admitted to targeting "the flag-burners, the draft-dodgers, and the faint at heart who didn't believe in good old-fashioned American virtues" (qtd. in Davis 220). Like Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. and other universalists, *The Alamo* provides a sense of unified cultural expression for the United States. However,

in its representation of traditional values, *The Alamo* put into film the predominant ideology of conservative America, one that favors Eurocentrism and ignores racial and ethnic minorities. As such, *The Alamo* stands as a separatist national statement for conservative U.S.-American culture.

### **The Duke and the Pachuco**

Where "The Duke" gives expression to conservative America through even its most turbulent times, Luis Valdez offers a future for *la plebe* (working class Chicanos) in desperation. And, in significant ways, Luis Valdez from the mid-1950s on into the 1980s typifies a "John Wayne" for Chicano America. Like Wayne's cultural work, Valdez's plays and films proffer a singular vision of America. The antithesis, perhaps, of Wayne's conservative patriotism appears in Valdez's Chicano separatism, and each results in a brand of nationalism shaping United States-American culture. While Wayne's national vision evinces Schlesinger's *pot-eu-feur* theory, Valdez's nationalism opposes a unified view of Euro-American culture and provides an alternative yet similarly exclusionary expression for Chicanos in the United States. Through a particular blending of historical perspectives, Valdez incorporates *mestizaje* (hybridization) as a cultural tool to resist and subvert the hegemony of white "American" culture and to liberate the Chicano nation through independence.

According to cultural philosopher Edward Said, resistance marks the antagonistic relationship that is inherent to the politics of imperialism; thus, a polarization occurs between the colonialists and the colonized. According to those advantaged by imperialist politics in the United States, this polarization translates into "American" against "un-American" ideals. Any activity that threatens or even examines the forces of (status quo) unity in the United States is condemned as "un-American." For Chicanos, disadvantaged by imperialist politics, abiding by the Eurocentric customs results in oppression, subordination, and discrimination--and over centuries has resulted in such a legacy. However, for Chicanos, subverting the dominant power structure allows for qualified liberation and a relatively more fulfilling cultural identity. That *Viva Zapata!* and *Salt of the Earth* reflect two oppositional sides of this domestic cold war in McCarthy-era America parallels the dialogue between *The Alamo* and *Zoot Suit* during the socially turbulent civil rights movements. *Zoot Suit* reveals a profound historical connection between America's 1940s and 1980s cultural politics by examining racial and ethnic discrimination of Chicanos. Although it makes some efforts at transcending separatism by crossing markets with some mainstream appeal and limited studio backing, ultimately the cultural politics of *Zoot Suit* defend Chicano nationalism's self-protective posture.



Said, in direct refutation of Schlesinger, theorizes that American culture and the cultural identities it produces are "too varied to be a unitary and homogenous thing" (xxv). "Cultures are involved in one another," according to Said: "None is single and pure, all are hybrid, heterogeneous, extraordinarily differentiated, and unmonolithic" (xxv). Thus, the oppositionality harbored by nationalistic cultures against one another that initially might serve as a source of resistant power and independent autonomy later must be resolved so cultural identities grow and progress. And yet, how does antagonism and polarity often resulting from the politics of imperialism and liberation result in the replacement of one exclusionary power with a newer one? From this new authority comes cultural representations equally static and regressive as those of the older authority.

This is the case in *Zoot Suit*. Without qualification, Chicano scholars praise Luis Valdez for carving out a cultural space for the Chicano nation within the larger context of American culture. Significantly, Valdez draws on the struggle of the Chicano, living in between traditions, as the very resource of power for liberation. By fusing diverse cultural and historical influences, Valdez exalts Chicano cultural independence. Thus, multiculturalism evolves as a form of cultural identification in American drama and film through Valdez's work. And yet, at the root of Valdez's plays and films up to the mid 1980s is a philosophy of separatism, Chicano nationalism, which further cripples the

cultural exchange among different members of the United States.

Valdez, from a young age, possessed an interest in theater. After some success writing plays during his college days at San Jose State, Valdez joined the United Farm Workers (UFW) movement and in 1965 founded what would become the internationally acclaimed theatrical troupe, El Teatro Campesino, as a union organizational tool.<sup>10</sup> Witnessed in the film and production of *Salt of the Earth*, a vital affinity exists between the early union efforts by Mexican immigrant and Chicano farm laborers and the initiation of civil rights activities. *La huelga* as a practical labor negotiation tactic serves as well as a philosophy of resistance through solidarity. El Teatro Campesino started as laborers met during breaks and performed mostly improvised *actos* (skits), which boldly satirized the unfair and hazardous working conditions. After a short time, the troupe began touring college campuses and cities in the U.S. and Europe to disseminate their message of labor abuse at the hands of large agribusinesses in the southwest and the need for unionization for workers, most of whom were of Mexican descent.

Although the happy marriage of El Teatro Campesino and the UFW union was short-lived, ending official ties in 1967, the company's *actos* (skits) continued to stress many of the issues relevant to farm laborers and Chicano independence. Because of the UFW's single-minded resolve to gain equality

in farm labor, the theatrical company often suffered as performers were lost to picket lines or field work. Valdez foresaw a grander purpose for theater in the movement. Primarily following the direction of Valdez, the Campesino company became more directly interested in dramatizing the issues of all Chicanos and only occasionally returned when the UFW movement enlisted its cooperation. However, two interrelated ideas survived and emboldened El Teatro Campesino after it moved away from the farm labor movement: collectivism and *la carpa* aesthetic.

At the root of the power of any union is solidarity. For the Mexican immigrant and Chicano workers, *la huelga* transcends labor negotiations and fosters a sense of cultural independence. That is, through the collective strength of the group, Chicanos might use resistance against dominant cultural forces as a means of gaining expression and autonomy. According to Valdez, the Campesino productions, especially the mostly improvised *actos*, gain expression through collectivism that is denied through simple assimilation and acculturation ("Conversation" 131). However, when the source of identification requires exclusivity, such a strategy reinforces division from the dominant groups rather than integration along with them. Equally important, this source of cultural power utilizes subversion and deconstruction of dominant culture, as those ideas which are relegated "third-class status" become the very basis of a new identity. Nowhere is this better

exemplified than in the Chicano aesthetics of *la carpa*, a theater of carnival style.

*La carpa*, as a genre and performance style akin to what Bakhtin refers to as *carnavalesque*, melds the informality and even vulgarity of low art, often improvisational humor, and the inclusion of typically discarded viewpoints into a social and political satire. A key aspect of *la carpa* is the aesthetic of *rasquachismo*, which favors the underdog who survives and recognizes dignity in his survival despite his subordinate status. In *la carpa* theater, *rasquachi* dramaturgy appears formally in the process of recycling and reusing those resources others overlook as worthless; moreover, a certain bravado and stylistic flare accompanies the process of reinvesting value in worthless items. Although this aesthetic serves in an undeniable way American film late in the 20th century (once directors like Gregory Nava, Cheech Marin, and Robert Rodriguez gained artistic license to incorporate it in Hollywood-funded projects), it has its roots in the Campesino. Because El Teatro Campesino often had little to no budget, costumes, or props, the *mise-en-scene* and production by necessity incorporated whatever resources were available. Used burlap sacks were split and stitched together for a backdrop; a flatbed truck served as a mobile stage; actors, generally those who volunteered and were chosen more for being articulate than for dramatic "talent," improvised actions and lines with only a rough sketch of a story in mind. But, in its rough-and-tumble

fashion, the Campesino always exhibited dignity and even a confident flare. So, Valdez used *la carpa* as well as the significance of solidarity as he ushered the Campesino beyond the union struggle.

In his "Notes on the Chicano Theater," Valdez advanced the notion that Chicano dramatic arts should incite cultural awareness: "The nature of Chicanismo calls for a revolutionary turn in the arts as well as in society. Chicano theater must be revolutionary in technique as well as content. It must . . . educate the pueblo toward an appreciation of *social change*, on and off the stage" (356). For Valdez, social change extended beyond working-class relations and met other minority movements of the 1960s in the larger arena of civil rights. In the first national Chicano youth conference, the Denver Youth Conference of 1969, Valdez and other cultural workers initiated a counterdiscursive reconfiguration of Chicano identity. Along with other authors of the *Plan Espiritual de Aztlán*, Valdez reclaimed precisely those "types" devalorized by mainstream U.S. culture and reappropriated them as subjects of a new Chicano identity: the pachuco (urban youth); the bloodthirsty Aztec (indigenous warrior); and, the convict (pinto), all three of which appear in *Zoot Suit*.<sup>11</sup> By the mid-1970s, Valdez stood as a statesman of Chicanismo and as a founding father of the nationalist ideology working toward the liberation of the Chicano nation.

As a leader of *la movimientto* (Chicano civil rights movement), Valdez uses his film *Zoot Suit* to create a cultural space in which Chicano identities might be reconfigured. Both Christine List and Rosa Linda Fregosa in their critical studies of the film give persuasive interpretations for its formulation of Chicano identity. Fregosa, however, dismisses the solidarity of the Chicano nation and focuses instead on the male chauvinism in the conception of El Pachuco. And List places the politics of the film closely in line with *La Bamba's* commercialism, arguing that El Pachuco's "transformative identity" breaks from the "nationalistic myth structure," ignoring rebellion and separatism at the root of Valdez's message (78). In the process of inverting and reconfiguring dominant ideas, Valdez demonstrates the necessity of eradicating Western influences and formulating a unified, specifically-Chicano sense of existence: "society has tried to impose its reality on us . . . we were and still are recreating our own reality" ("Interview" 75). Thus, by subverting the dominant culture and its conception of reality and creating a specifically-Chicano reality, the pachuco becomes an exclusionary cultural identity for the Chicano nation through its particular use of cultural fusion.

### ***Pachuquismo in Zoot Suit***

In the mid-1970s, the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles commissioned Luis Valdez to write a play about some

aspect of California's history. Valdez labored with the historical facts behind the Sleepy Lagoon case and the zoot suit riots, two actual events marking a formative period in the history of Chicanos in the United States. In the 1942 Sleepy Lagoon case, the courts as well as the media indicted and convicted a whole Los Angeles gang, seventeen young men in total, for the murder of and conspiracy to murder one other young Chicano, which was later repealed due to lack of evidence.<sup>12</sup> The zoot suit riots broke out that same year, first in Los Angeles and later in other cities across the U.S., where military servicemen *en masse* physically attacked "zoot suiters," young men and women dressed in a pachuco style.

For the pachucos and pachucas, wearing "drape shapes" and gesturing the confident "homeboy" stance was partially a celebration of independence and of youthful defiance and partially an exercise in assimilation through exaggerated American consumption.<sup>13</sup> That is, the very notion of pachuquismo assumes creating a mode of survival out of the very nature of living under the pressure of dominant traditions. In the film, the traditional Mexican parents call the zoot suit a sign of "trash," while the police, media, and other institutions of mainstream society associate it with criminality. In both cases, established traditions view the zoot suit as symbolic of a cultural consciousness generated by transgression; it is precisely this transgressive power, though, that provides the pachucos and

the cultural identification they represent with a means of autonomy. The zoot suit and pachuco lifestyle, then, significantly mark a mode of survival, incorporating and blending ideas from a variety of American sources. Both interpretations, however, reflect the racial and ethnic discrimination against Mexican immigrants and Chicanos by the dominant cultures, as the zoot suit they wore becomes a symbolic threat to "American" values. Significantly, these "American" values underline the legacy of discrimination and oppression sanctioned against the Chicanos. The lesson learned by the Chicanos might be that if the rules are unfair, disobey the rules, a philosophy similar in nature to others in the American tradition espoused by Thoreau as well as Lincoln and other U.S. statesmen.

Valdez remained unsure of the entire project until he envisioned the mythic character of El Pachuco. After the production enjoyed some measurable success on the West coast, Valdez grew interested in adapting the story to film for a wider release, hoping the film could reach "out to audiences beyond the barrio" and serve as a "rallying point for the growing political awareness of people about Chicanos" (qtd. in Cizmar 64). Among the studio offers, Paramount promised \$8 million for rights to the story but refused to let Valdez direct. When the play failed to carry the same critical weight on Broadway as it did in California, studios winced. After the Paramount offer had expired, Universal story editor John Humphreys under the direction of studio president Ned



Tanens proposed a two-week, \$2.5 million shoot that would cut production corners, give Valdez a chance to direct, and still provide a mainstream release for the film. Valdez chose to sacrifice time and budget for the filming in order to retain artistic control, while working with one of the largest Hollywood businesses, Universal Studios (Valdez, "Pachuco" 96-97; Barrios 162). In 1981, *Zoot Suit* became the first feature film directed by a Chicano. A huge factor in the success of the film results from maintaining the "mythic" quality of El Pachuco, portrayed by Edward James Olmos in the film. El Pachuco represents for Valdez a "power that is raw, terrible, and disgusting to some, and glorious to others" ("Pachuco" 99). In forming the play around this character, a "mythic" pachuco, Valdez begins reconfiguring what is often considered a negative type, even to some outside of conservative America.

In his landmark discussion of the Mexican character, Octavio Paz describes the pachuco as a "sheer negative impulse, a tangle of contradictions," and instinctively rebellious (13-14). Paz continues: "the pachuco does not want to become a Mexican again; at the same time he does not want to blend into the life of North America . . . [the pachuco] attitude reveals an obstinate, almost fanatical will-to-be" but a will that affirms nothing positive (14). That El Pachuco does not affirm anything considered positive in U.S. culture proves to be the "central political problem" for some critics of the film (R. G. Davis 126). However,

that El Pachuco is not wholly positive or negative, that he is the "law of contradiction" proves Valdez's purpose in creating the character, one who is a "bad guy," does not fit into mainstream culture, and expressively criticizes the "unjust, obviously racist" 1940s American society ("Pachuco" 108, 101). By extension, transgression as it relates to *pachuquismo* reflects the civil rights *movimiento* in direct response to U.S. nationalism.

El Pachuco acts as a rebel against mainstream society, and significantly his rebellion operates on a number of levels, "ideological, cultural, even mythical" (Valdez, "Pachuco" 98). Through his rebellion, El Pachuco serves as what Valdez labels an "internal authority" for Henry (Daniel Valdez) and other Chicanos and Chicanas struggling to find a cultural space and an independent identity (Valdez, "Pachuco" 98).<sup>14</sup> This struggle inherently involves acknowledging and manipulating various cultural influences into a hybridized form. In his discussion of the "Dialogic Imagination" in the novel, Bakhtin explains that artistic hybridization allows different voices to recognize one another through a dialogue, and that inherently part of each distinct voice is a distinct consciousness (327-29). As in Robert Young's 1982 *The Ballad of Gregorio Cortez* released just a year later than *Zoot Suit*, the incorporation of differentiated perspectives allows the inclusion of traditionally silenced voices and a move toward democratic equality; significantly, though, the perspectives themselves favor exclusionary politics in a counter-attack

against dominant traditions. The multicultural aspects of *Gregorio Cortez's* narrative actually counterpose two distinct stories: a conventional western from the viewpoint of a posse of Texas Rangers, and a *corrido* from the viewpoint of the "outlaw" *Tejano* the Rangers are hunting. While the western depicts Olmos' Cortez as a ruthless killer, responsible for the death of a lawman, the Spanish-language ballad or *corrido* tells of his innocence. The confusion between the lawman and Cortez over linguistic and cultural differences is reflected and reinforced in the film's dual narrative. Like *Gregorio Cortez*, *Zoot Suit* favors Chicano nationalist consciousness in its multi-voiced narrative. The distinct consciousnesses, though widely separated by history and ideology, form a coherency in the film text. El Pachuco and the *pachuquismo* he embodies allows a phenomenological argument in which pachuco reality not only blends but manipulates disparate historical and ideological ideas, some from 1940s U.S. elite and popular cultures, some from traditional Mexican culture, and some from suppressed native indigenous cultures. Through its brand of multiculturalism, then, the film reconfigures the pachuco as a formulation of a distinctly independent Chicano identity.

In *Zoot Suit*, Valdez incorporates and quotes press coverage and actual courtroom transcripts of the case and riots. In addition to attention to established historical documents, Valdez uses styles of dress and music of 1940s America, borrowing from both mainstream pop and marginalized

cultures. For example, Valdez creates mood and setting by including big-band music with swing-dance routines alongside traditional Spanish and Mexican music such as mambo songs and dance routines. Perhaps the best example of the musical fusion in the film is Lalo Guerrero's pop hits with their melding of Mexican and swing influences, three of which are included in the film.<sup>15</sup>

But more than simply gluing different cultural influences to one another, the film blends aspects of diverse cultures to reconstitute a reality that allows an examination of traditional ideas. Throughout *Zoot Suit*, newspaper bundles are used as chairs and the judge's bench, in the resourceful manner of *rasquachismo*. Moreover, front pages are used as backdrops and curtains to show thematically how the dominant culture's sense of truth surrounds the characters. In the introduction of El Pachuco, he slashes with his switchblade through the giant front page functioning as a curtain, and in so doing, slashes through the newspaper's version of reality. El Pachuco's opening speech explains that the "*mono*" (movie) will present a "construct" of reality. El Pachuco, thus, legitimizes his own and his culture's perspective of reality, one that is influenced but not dominated by tradition.

Significantly, the dialogue of the film is bilingual, but this too helps constitute a pachuco sense of reality. Valdez warned critics of the work against mistaking the bilingualism of the characters as a temporary "bicultural

confusion"; moreover, the new, street-corner language of *Calo* combines Spanish, English, and much slang into a new linguistic system that helps recreate a specifically-Chicano consciousness ("Introduction" xxxi). So when a reporter calls out a dateline for his press release ("City of the Angels, August 2nd, 1942"), El Pachuco corrects him by alluding to the Spanish name for the city: "*Nuestra Senora de Los Angeles de la Porciuncula, pendejo.*" More than inducing Spanish into the Anglocentric reports, the language of the film, such as the multiple references to the "zoot suit," "drape shapes," and "*tacuche*" itself, uses English and Spanish slang in a truly revolutionary way. El Pachuco uses language to rebel against the mainstream traditions and to suggest a historical and ideological paradigm that contests conservative American biases.

The opening sequence transports viewers back to the 1940s, which as a result links the circumstances of pachucos in the 1940s with Chicanos in the 1980s. One of the results of the production's relatively low budget is that theatrical vestiges survive in the film; that is, much of the film is recorded as a play, though employing cinematic strategies of camera movement, editing, and effects. As a result, the audience of the play performs as an actor in the film, providing at times reactions and aligning the viewer of the film with the action on the stage in a concrete way. As the film opens, a black-and-white still reveals the Carroll Theater in the 1940s. The still gradually dissolves into a

live, full-color shot of the Aquarius Theater in 1980s, the Hollywood site of the actual filming. A vintage and highly stylized 1938 Chevrolet rolls up to the valet, ostensibly driven by someone coming to see the show. As the car comes to a stop, a close-up of the vanity plate reads: "Zooter." The interplay of different times creates for the film a framework, one that is completed in the final shot, which reveals El Pachuco dancing. In theatrical form, El Pachuco freezes at the end of the routine, and the shot becomes a still and dissolves into a black-and-white image of El Pachuco as he might have looked in a 1940s photograph. Through this framework, borrowing from outside/in editing convention, the representation of the pachucos in the 1940s intricately involves the social circumstances of Chicanos in the 1980s, as each tries to gain an independent means of cultural representation.

The theme of Chicano independence gains strength through the Chicano and Chicana characters who act as historical agents. Throughout much of the film, Henry performs according to El Pachuco's direction, and his actions fulfill a need to reclaim a sense of reality that does not discriminate against the Chicano nation. Henry, El Pachuco, and other characters express views which often contest "official" perspectives of reality. Although her reading of the film provides a key to the means by which Chicano identity is formed, Fregosa argues that pachucos and pachucas depicted in the film inhabit a "brotherhood of Chicanismo"

that privileges masculine attributes, and so female characters and the Chicanas they represented are subsumed by a "universal Chicano male cultural identity" (36-38). But such an interpretation discounts the significance of courtroom testimony given by Rose Portillo's Della during the Sleepy Lagoon trial. *Zoot Suit's* incorporation of male and female viewpoints serves as a preview, though not fully developed, of the Chicana feminist multicultural aesthetic in later films like *Mi Vida Loca* and *Selena*. Chicana and Chicano characters, female and male united, subvert "official" versions of history by creating an oppositional social reality, one that allows their expressions.

Reinforcing these thematic instances of Chicano independence, Valdez further reconfigures *pachuquismo* as a source of subversive power by transforming dominant cinematic conventions throughout the film. Gang members are introduced one-by-one during their booking at the police station. Chicanos are shown in medium one-shots, emulating mug shots. Simultaneously, a reporter announces that the police have a "showup" and any "victims" of crimes should come for the "identification of suspects." The implication is that the pachucos and pachucas shown are the suspects, but editing inverts this idea and reveals them as victims. As one pachuco is shown, the reporter calls out, "victims of assault"; subsequent images of pachucos and pachucas follow the reporter's description: "victims of . . . similar crimes." Thus, conventional cutting on action in this

sequence subverts the logic of realist narrative and reverses the notion of victimization. Similar to *Gregorio Cortez*, this produces an oppositional perspective of the situation and reconfigures the gang members as victims rather than criminals.

According to Valdez, the essence of the pachuco, struggling to formulate a cultural identity out of whatever resources were available and beneficial to that identity, initiated an independent and liberated Chicano sensibility:

To me *pachuquismo* was the direct antecedent of what has come to be termed "Chicano consciousness." In the 1940s pachucos were caught between two cultures, viewed with suspicion by both conservative Mexican-Americans and Anglos. The pachucos were the first to acknowledge their bicultural background and to create a subculture based on this circumstance. The pachuco emerged as a cult figure for he was the first to take pride in the complexity of his origins, and to resist conformity. ("Interview" 75)

El Pachuco as "mythic" character embodies this "cult figure," and his cinematic representation mirrors his resistance of dominant traditions. More to the point, El Pachuco serves to narrate the film in a surreal or magically real manner, whereby he directs the action and cinematically constructs the social reality of the story. For example, El Pachuco creates a jump cut from a conversation with Henry in jail to



a courtroom scene by throwing his switchblade literally across the stage from one setting into the next. The use of El Pachuco's narration, like other elements of the film, does not conform strictly to Hollywood conventions. Lighting in the film, like much of the *mise-en-scene* and musical arrangement, has more of a theatrical than a cinematic quality. Part of this might result from *la carpa* aesthetics, making the most of a modest film budget and a minimalist set. But more directly, the lighting functions in the film to show the surreal aspects of El Pachuco. Along with jump cuts, the lighting disrupts the logical conventions of the narrative and suggests a nonlinear and nonfoundational logic behind El Pachuco's "direction" and narration of the story line.

Through form, characterization, and theme, the film reveals a particular blending of cultural influences. Thus, the multiculturalism of *Zoot Suit* not only provides a key to understanding the social circumstance of the pachucos and their need for rebellion, but also marks a significant moment in American film by the creation of an independent Chicano cultural identity. That the film travels widely across disparate segments of American history and culture, even crossing *fronteras* (borders) into terrain categorically ignored in American culture studies reflects the complexity of rebellion in the Chicano national identity. Using "mythic" elements in El Pachuco's construction of social reality, the film imposes a separatist vision of Chicano culture.

## **Reclaiming Aztlán: Nationalism in Zoot Suit**

A number of theories were proposed for the play's generally negative reception when it was produced on Broadway in 1979 as the first by a Chicano director. Perhaps audiences expected more of *la carpa* and *rasquachi* aesthetics with which Valdez had gained fame in El Teatro Campesino, rather than a relatively "slick, professional" look (Huerta 69). Perhaps the multicultural "eclectic style" was simply "too much" for the New York audiences (Huerta 75). Valdez suggests that the play suffered from a "continental" bias, one that followed the story during film adaptation negotiations and reappeared in East-coast film reviews (Valdez, "Conversation" 135; Canby). At the core of this bias is what Valdez calls "white man's arrogance" that ignores pre-Columbian tradition and favors truth as it "resides in Western European culture" ("Pachuco" 99; "Interview" 75). "Transplanted European culture," according to Valdez, masquerades as American culture, and *indigena* (nativism) is "distorted, stolen, ignored, or forgotten" ("Pachuco" 99). And when "all the truth, power, and goodness in life resides in assimilation" into Eurocentric American culture, an "ancient pride" in the Chicanos, who have become foreigners in their native continent, makes them rebel (Valdez, "Pachuco" 99; "Introduction" xxiii).

El Pachuco's rebellion invigorates this "ancient pride." Shielded by "*la tinta negra y roja*," his black and red zoot suit, El Pachuco in part reincarnates the superhuman Aztec,

Tezcatlipoca (Valdez, "Pachuco" 100).<sup>16</sup> The film, then, aligns the social circumstance of Chicanos in the 1980s with that of the pachucos in the 1940s and with Natives throughout the legacy of oppression starting with the 1521 Spanish Conquest. When U.S. military servicemen attack El Pachuco, his struggle involves the legacy of colonial oppression started in the 16th century. As a lesson to Henry, El Pachuco surrenders to the servicemen, who strip the suit from his body. A series of similar images implies travel across time: first the victim is a weeping *Indio* in a loin cloth; then he is Henry's brother weeping and stripped naked as he was during the 1942 riots; and finally he is again an *Indio* but this time with a renewed strength and pride. The Spanish Conquest, Valdez notes, forced the Natives to accept a European-based worldview and subordinated them to their conquerors. It is this legacy of oppression continued by Eurocentric U.S. society against which Chicanos must rebel by drawing on the strength of their forgotten past.

Mythically, though with at least some historical veracity, the Conquest acted as a rape--a spiritual violation of the native culture; a figurative violation of the native populations; and a physical rape, as Spanish men impregnated *Indios*, resulting in mixed races, literally *Mestizaje*. The *Mestizo* and *Mestiza*, rejected as a bastard by a Spanish father, was born into colonization and shared an Indian mother's misery: such is the basis of *La Chingada* myth. Wayne's *The Alamo* treats this colonization as heroic, but

Valdez's *Zoot Suit* urges a revision of its history. Valdez points out that the *Mestizo/a* accepted tyranny and oppression as his or her lot in life ("Introduction" xxi). But *Indios* and *Mestizos* do not merely disappear into ancient history; rather, they survive in the barrios of 20th century United States cities as *La Raza* (Valdez "Introduction" xv).

*Mestizaje* is the "true melting pot," and Chicanos must reject efforts to make their population "disappear into the white melting pot," Valdez commands ("Introduction" xiv-xv). As a spokesperson of *la movimientto* and a Chicano artist, Valdez urged *La Raza* to replace the Eurocentric worldview with a renewed appreciation for Native traditions. In order for *Aztlán*, the "mythic" homeland of the *Indigena* North of Mexico within the U.S. borders, to be reclaimed, Valdez admonishes, Chicanos must "think in national terms, politically, economically, and spiritually" ("Notes" 358).

Arguing for the rejection of Western-biased worldviews, Valdez proclaimed *mitos* (myths) as the basis of constructing social reality. Myths, for Valdez, refer to "the underlying structure of a truth that is just below the surface of reality" ("Pachuco" 98). And for Chicanos, the ancient mysticism of Native cultures necessarily blends with their practical social situation. Chicano consciousness--rebellious against discriminatory American cultural politics by necessity--derives from Native mysticism "merging with modern technology" to form a new identity and a "new reality, rooted in the origins of civilization in this half of the

world" ("Introduction" xxx). Such a rejection of Western bias accompanies for Valdez a separatist philosophy that favors an autonomous Chicano nation as part of "*La Raza C6smica*, the true American people" ("Introduction" xxxiv). El Pachuco's "self-determined" and rebellious will exemplifies this sense of pluralistic independence and autonomy. Valdez argues that *pachuquismo* gains its strength by rejecting the dominant culture and forming "its own base" ("Pachuco" 98). Chicano nationalism, according to Valdez, rejects the hegemony of Western culture by reconfiguring the Native traditions as "the foundation of civilization" ("Pachuco" 98). At the heart of this ideology is El Pachuco's advice to Henry: "don't hate *La Raza* more than you love the *gringo*," warning the entire Chicano nation against assimilation and acculturation into institutions of oppression.

Recreating a pachuco reality goes hand-in-hand with reconfiguring the pachuco identity within American culture. In the end of the film, multiple endings provided by different characters speaking from different perspectives not only show the potential of constructing reality, but also reveal the opportunities independent and autonomous members of the Chicano nation may have of determining their own future. After the appeal and his release from prison along with his friends, Henry appears to be reunited with his family and barrio community. The implication that life will be good for Henry, his family, and his community is

overturned by the reporter's testimony: "Henry Reyna went back to prison . . . killed another inmate . . . got into hard drugs. He died of the trauma of his life." El Pachuco quickly reverses this choice of endings by orchestrating a barrage of "other ways to end this story." Perhaps Henry fought and died in the Korean War; perhaps Henry married Della and fathered children who would continue the Chicano struggle for independence; perhaps Henry was a "born leader" or a "social victim." The final line indicates that Henry, like his "mythic" counterpart El Pachuco, was a "myth" that helps to reconstruct reality whereby *pachuquismo* and the pachuco rebellion fosters an independent cultural identity to serve the Chicano nation.

El Pachuco as narrator in *Zoot Suit* constructs a pachuco reality that not only allows for an appropriate blending of United States, colonial Mexican, and indigenous Native American cultural influences, but more importantly serves the nationalistic Chicano cultural identity. This Chicano identity forms from subverting and rejecting dominant forces in American culture and reviving forgotten or ignored cultural influences from Native traditions. But in the process of reconfiguring subversive and even transgressive acts, which might provide a means of independence and autonomy for members of the Chicano community, *Zoot Suit* impairs the cultural dialogue within the differentiated and complex society of the United States. Like some characters in later Chicano gangxploitation films, El Pachuco, Henry,

and the pachuco type they encapsulate suffer as they represent a static and regressive cultural identification. In the end, like John Wayne's separatist philosophy, Valdez's vision of the Chicano nation burns rather than builds bridges between separated segments in American culture.

*Zoot Suit* did not meet box-office expectations or create a "rallying point for the growing political awareness of people about Chicanos." Valdez and critics point to Universal's lack of commitment when it came time to promote and distribute the film, accounting for some of the low attendance figures, but perhaps a greater problem with the film was its separatist politics. While the multicultural aesthetic at work in the film exhibited Valdez's hope for mainstream appeal and worked to cross marketing lines, the explicit message of the film more clearly expressed the sentiments of Chicano nationalism. Probably, as Valdez recognized, separatism not only disables the mainstream appeal but also incites a regressive cultural identity. Perhaps more clearly than any other Chicano film artist, Luis Valdez represents the paradigmatic shift that occurred between his 1981 *Zoot Suit* and his 1987 box office hit *La Bamba*. This shift enables multicultural politics of Chicano film to address mainstream American audiences and promote liberal democratic equality. Chicano films, initiated though not fully developed by *Zoot Suit*, are able to reinvigorate cultural identification of the American character. This is a

significant trend in Chicano film from the middle of the 1980s through to the end of the century.



## END NOTES, CHAPTER TWO

<sup>1</sup> Melvin Van Peebles explores the issues of ethnicity and race in his treatment of 1970s Black militant politics in *Sweet Sweetback's Baadass Song*. However, in *Sweetback*, Gordon Parks' *Shaft*, Jonathan Kaplan's *The Slams*, and others, one of the few specifically-African American film aesthetics appear. Blaxploitation, as it has been labeled, at once criticizes the "establishment" and gives expression to an underrepresented voice in American film, while glorifying violence and criminality as part of the Black "ghetto" lifestyle. Most 1970s blaxploitation films, though, were produced and distributed by Hollywood businesses making profit from the prime market interest in the violent and sensationalist subject matter, without giving any benefit or improvement to the African American community. Like later Chicano gangxploitation, these films did not provide positive, generative images for minority groups and, thus, were racially prejudicial in their one-sided stereotypes and thought corrosive in the American communities to which they spoke. But as independent films, many gave work to filmmakers previously discriminated against and, perhaps more importantly, represented a segment of American society excluded from the mainstream.

<sup>2</sup> Though historical veracity is not a goal in John Wayne's treatment of the Alamo, as Frank Thompson and a number of critics point out, Wayne did familiarize himself

with the historical details of the siege, having discussions with and reading the books by Lon Tinkle and J. Frank Dobie. Wayne was extremely familiar with a number of historical sources on the Alamo, including Tinkle's *Thirteen Days to Glory* and Dobie's *In the Shadow of History*. A work which examines these and the so-called "Texas creation myth" is Holly Brear's *Inheriting the Alamo*.

<sup>3</sup> Biographers and critics alike point to Wayne's longevity and popularity. See Wills (11-14), Levy (17), and Riggin (11).

<sup>4</sup> Biographers agree that these awards help reflect Wayne's importance as a military icon. See Levy (xv), Riggin (40), and Wills (12-13).

<sup>5</sup> The different conceptions of "John Wayne" are discussed by Levy (xv), Riggin (1-3), Olsen (336), and Ronald Davis (9).

<sup>6</sup> Before 1948, Wayne revealed little interest in politics; however, four years after the Motion Picture Alliance for the Preservation of American Ideals was established by the rightists Sam Wood and Walt Disney in 1944, Wayne succeeded his compatriot Ward Bond as its president and cooperated with efforts by HUAC. Wayne further expressed right-wing politics through his support of conservative Republican politicians during their campaigns, his active membership in the John Birch Society, and his film collaboration with Hollywood red-baiter Howard Hughes.

7 Victor Navasky's chronicle of the HUAC hearings indicates Wayne's contribution as president of the Motion Picture Alliance for the Preservation of American Ideals (89).

8 Andersen and Clark explain that in 1952, Wayne agreed to distribute Wayne-Fellows and Batjac films through Warner Bros. and to star in a number of Warner Bros. pictures in exchange for backing on the Alamo project; the studio never complied (15). Frustrated, Wayne searched for a distributor that would help Batjac finance the film. For \$2.5 million and distribution of the Alamo film, United Artists contracted Wayne for distribution rights to several later productions, a concession on *Alamo's* profits, and a promise to star in the Alamo epic (Clark 19; Davis 233).

9 A number of critics point to this particular scene as an example of the extraordinary camera work of the film. Frank Thompson praises William Clothier's cinematography as the film's "single greatest asset" (74).

10 Yolanda Broyles-Gonzalez explores the aesthetics and gives a history of El Teatro Campesino, emphasizing its ensemble of actors and collective work.

11 Fregosa speaks of this "inversion/reversal" in order to argue that El Pachuco embodies the "origins" and "desires" of pachuco consciousness (30-32).

12 The slanted media reports in *Time* and various newspapers at the time were opposed by a more liberal report

in "The Sleepy Lagoon Case," a special pamphlet prepared by a citizens advocate group in 1942, similar to the newsletter prepared by Alice in *Zoot Suit*.

13 One theory explains what the style of the zoot suit owed to Rhett Butler's costume in *Gone with the Wind*. Whatever its derivation, the zoot suit, like the 1930s gangster's bold pin-stripe suit and wide-brim hat, revealed excessive assimilation of U.S. popular culture. In its exaggerated form, the zoot suit borrowed legitimacy from the clothing worn in corporate-capitalist America. Valdez argues this last point, that the pachucos were "just trying to be American" ("Pachuco" 104).

14 Ironically, the very best studies of this film, by Christine List and Rosa Linda Fregosa, continue to use Western ideas such as Freudian and other psychological theories to discuss the role of El Pachuco (List 35; Fregosa 30-8). A critical analysis based on Valdez's own description of the multicultural character would avoid the dominance of Western institutional thought.

15 One of Lalo Guerrero's songs, "El Pachuco," glamorized the zoot suiter type, and when this song landed on pop record charts, Guerrero was contracted to produce more "pachuco songs" including "La Pachuquilla," selling more than sixty thousand copies in its first few months of release (Barker 24).

16 Valdez proposes in his "Notes on Chicano Theater" that Chicano drama should reflect its Mayan and Aztec origins

as a way to reject the materialistic and traditionally "realistic" mainstream U.S. drama. Thus, embodying ancient nativism into his characters facilitates reconfiguring social reality. Genaro Padilla claims that Valdez's work eventually became "esoteric" to the point of being lost on audiences not literate in pre-Columbian mythology (121).

CHAPTER THREE  
ALL IN THE FAMILY: GENDER CONSTRUCTION  
AND FAMILY IN CHICANO FILM

**"A Place Called Hope"**

Almost two complete terms after his first presidential election campaign, running with the inclusive slogan above, Bill Clinton described America's multicultural society with the same hope he had almost a decade earlier, explaining that in this new era minority cultures can mix into "American culture . . . and this can be America's greatest strength." The best image for this hopeful vision of American culture is a mosaic, filled with diverse, individual pieces that integrate into a complex and unified whole. Admittedly, the mundane reality of American culture appears less hopeful, although much evidence points toward actualization of democratic equality. For example, multicultural aesthetics in many recent Chicano feature films highlight the cultural hybridization or *mestizaje* that allows the construction of cultural identification in the politically contested spaces of U.S. society. However, it is only relatively recently that Chicanos and Chicanas re-crossed borders of divisions (racial, ethnic, sexist, economic) that formed with the 1848 Hidalgo Guadalupe territorial treaty. According to David Gutiérrez, W.W.II marked a historical point where the "gap" was narrowing, and after the civil rights movements social advances were much more tangible (312, 18). The trend toward

a multicultural America has continued to grow since the 1980s.

U.S. immigration and upward social mobility within the country have increased the representation of Latinos in U.S. politics, business, and other fields, as the ethnic Mexican population in the U.S. grew from five million in 1970, to almost nine million in 1980, and again to fourteen million in 1990 (Gutiérrez 312-13). The estimated total Latino population in the U.S. at the end of the 1980s exceeds twenty-five million (Walley 41). Although much of this vast population concentrates in the U.S. southwest--California, Texas, Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado--cosmopolitan areas throughout the country have witnessed similar demographic shifts on a smaller scale (Gutiérrez 312-13). Though criticized for upsetting the domestic economy, liberalization of trade across the continent through the 1986 General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs (GATT) and even more so through the 1994 North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) helped lower economic barriers along the national borders; profits from U.S.-based transnational businesses as well as population increases and quality-of-life improvements in Mexican border towns attest to the economic "cross over" phenomenon (Gutiérrez 314). These continuing demographic and economic patterns mirror significant socio-cultural transformations for Chicanos, which incited Raul Yzaguirre of the National Council of La Raza and others to declare the 1980s "the decade of the Hispanic." However, where the civil

rights *movimiento* called for unity of Chicanos and replaced natural rights with exclusive group rights, Chicano identification emphasizes cross-cultural strategies and inclusivity (Hollinger 63-66).

In education, despite ethnic program cut backs during the Reagan-Bush years, advances during the civil rights movement continued through organizations like the National Association of Chicana and Chicano Studies (NACCS), *Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlan* (MEChA), Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), and others. Literacy and socialization, educational attainment, and professionalism have improved for Latinos in the U.S. over the last two decades (Trueba 251; Myers 183). In 1990, at the third in a series of conferences dedicated to Chicana writers and filmmakers called "Chicana (W)rites," renegade filmmaker Lourdes Portillo celebrated the meeting because it showed that "the border is not a wall" and that interchange can render the border "invisible" (279).

Not unexpectedly, Chicano cinema since the middle of the 1980s provides a strong example of the ways that negotiations of ethnicity have not only become an integral part of our American culture but moreover reinforce its strongest attributes. As with Chicano films after W.W.II up to the 1980s, a dialogue mirrors larger cultural exchanges and debates in American society. Hollywood studios often misappropriated Latino stereotypes for their own ideological agendas right up through the civil rights movements, and



Chicano national filmmakers responded (part counter-attack, part consequence) with exclusionary treatments of their own. But by the mid 1980s, the barriers marking territorialization of American culture and its refracted image in mainstream films proved more penetrable than ever before. Is this a superficial response to the currents of "political correctness" sweeping the U.S. throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s, or is there something more substantive in this phenomenon?

Traditionalists attack late-20th century neo-liberalism in the name of "political correctness," as a "dictatorship of the proletariat" sweeping academia (Adler 54). Allan Bloom and Roger Kimball among others led the charge against what has been mislabeled everything from a liberal fascism or a new McCarthyism to a communist conspiracy, directed at fragmenting the universal knowledge base of the Western tradition by the order of cultural (and value) relativism. Jeffrey Williams replies to these charges, though, indicating that "political correctness" "oversimplifies a broad spectrum of liberal-left positions" that are in conversation with conservative-right positions on the opposite extreme of such issues as multiculturalism and human rights, not to mention hate crimes, immigration, education, the family, gender constructions, and others (2-3). Shallow "PC," rooted in appearances and euphemisms, has in fact detracted from the ideological debate that has proven crucial to the dynamics of American culture and cultural identification. But perhaps

the importance of theory and academic studies of American culture and film, sometimes stamped with the "PC" label, is that they have created post-colonial perspectives through which to consider conceptions of ethnicity and American cultural citizenship. In other words, they have added new voices and dimensions to the democratic spirit of American culture. Stanley Fish, Bruce Robbins, and others argue that ideological analyses in interdisciplinary modes of cultural studies collapse cultural divisions and hierarchies and democratize the subject matter (Robbins 97).

Whether serving for entertainment, art, or propaganda, the aesthetics of feature films carry an ideological weight. Film images and sounds incite emotional investments and psychological affects in viewers, perpetuating certain sets of values, while denouncing others even if only implicitly (Nichols 1-3). Yet, as Robert Stam and Louise Spence note, differences are "transformed into 'other'-ness and exploited or penalized by and for power" (3). That is, "ethnicity" is viewed as something "other" than whichever ethnicity is dominant, assuming the dominant type as "universal" or central and ignoring the fact that ethnicity is ubiquitous. In U.S. films, this most often means that the classification "ethnic films" refers to those which negotiate issues relevant to only non-Eurocentric viewers and created by only non-Eurocentric filmmakers.<sup>1</sup>

Many scholars in Chicano film studies, including Chon A. Noriega and Rosa Linda Fregosa, define Chicano film in

similarly exclusionary terms--"by, for, and about Chicanos"--focusing on its "resistance" to television, mainstream media, state regulation, and patriarchal tradition and its "affirmation" of an independent Chicano nation (Noriega, *Shot* 195; Fregosa, *Bronze xv-xix*).<sup>2</sup> Even when Chicano film scholarship involves mainstream feature films, such as studies by Gary D. Keller and Christine List, the body of film emphasizes essentialist definitions according to "Hispanic participation" and maintains its "affirmation and resistance" social function (Keller, *Hispanics* 1-2; List 13). Ilene Goldman, in her analysis of the 1987 cross-over hit *Stand and Deliver*, discusses the "tension" in Chicano film between "maintaining an identity distinct from dominant culture" and assimilating, a discursive condition described by Noriega as "between a weapon and a formula" ("Between" 181). Conceiving Chicano film in terms of its oppositionality to mainstream film reinforces the marginalization and separatism originated in the dominant-against-"other" relationship; thus, alternative cinema too often means subaltern cinema, severely limiting the worth of Chicano feature films to their mainstream American audiences.

After the initial attempts with *Zoot Suit*, *Ballad of Gregorio Cortez*, and *El Norte*, several Hollywood studios made concerted efforts to maximize the commercial and multicultural appeal of Chicano films. Many reports dismissed the so-called "Hispanic Hollywood Phenomenon" as merely a marketing ploy by studios to draw on a growing

Latino population in the U.S., likened to the exploitation films that play off of sensational qualities of provocative issues to make money for the studio corporations. However, the wide appeal, commercial success, and social function of Chicano films in the mid 1980s reveals, perhaps, a larger paradigmatic shift in America toward multiculturalism. Even more so than *Zoot Suit* and *Ballad of Gregorio Cortez*, multicultural aesthetics in *Stand and Deliver*, *La Bamba*, *Born in East L.A.*, *The Milagro Beanfield War*--all released between the summer of 1987 and the spring of 1988--fuse thematic issues and formal conventions from a variety of traditions as they "crossed over" the line traditionally dividing (and defining) "mainstream" and "ethnic" films. By "crossing over," these films and later Chicano features redefine Chicano cultural identification as a *mestizaje* or hybridization of constituent cultures and traditions, no longer relying on "resistant" or sub-alternative relationships to dominant forms. And most significantly, the *mestizo* themes and forms reinforce liberal democratic principles in American society.

In Ramon Menendez's *Stand and Deliver*, Academy Award-nominee Edward James Olmos portrays Jaime Escalante, who quits his lucrative job in computers and every morning leaves his middle-class neighborhood in Los Angeles to serve as a math teacher in a barrio high school in East L.A. A montage deliberately shows the bridge dividing Los Angeles from East L.A. that Escalante crosses during his daily commute;

crossing this invisible border parallels the "movement" mainstream viewers make as they travel vicariously into the barrio classroom with Escalante. *Stand and Deliver* borrows from "teacher film" conventions where the charismatic and accomplished teacher inspires his or her students to appreciate and develop skills that will enable their success in mainstream American culture, but Escalante's students must first overcome discrimination that comes with their "name" and "complexion." Movement across borders, thus, acts as a symbiotic relationship in the creation of Chicano cultural identities that are very different from the negative studio stereotypes traditionally shown in feature films or the assimilationist types that show movement one way, toward dominant culture and in rejection of nativity. Escalante reveals math, and even more shocking calculus, as "the great equalizer" in a world ready to discriminate against his predominantly Chicano students. Ironically, a history lesson in the math classroom informs the students that Mayas, their "ancestors," first contemplated the concept of zero value, so the Chicano students "have math in [their] blood." Proficiency in math provides the Chicano students access to institutions of higher learning and professional careers outside the barrio through assimilation, but even more significantly, it recovers a lost sense of history and culture.

Thus, *Stand and Deliver* combines established generic conventions and politics with native and Chicano perspectives

into a film with mainstream appeal. And it reached its diverse audiences using Warner Bros. and Corporation for Public Broadcasting's American Playhouse distribution mechanisms, grossing almost \$14 million domestically. Most importantly, though, the film's multicultural aesthetics move beyond the nationalist politics of resistance and affirmation, and blend cultural influences into a new mode of survival and desire ("*ganas*"), like Chicanismo, out of the very struggle of living in between dominant traditions. In the process, the film resituates Chicano culture without relying on oppositionality to a centralized "norm," and it reinforces American characteristics of resourcefulness, ambition, and democratic equality.

Like *Stand and Deliver*, Luis Valdez's *La Bamba* draws on a number of traditions and cultural influences to create a multicultural aesthetic. Given the separatist social politics of Valdez's union-based *actos* and even his play *Zoot Suit*, it might prove surprising that Valdez hoped to eventually reach beyond a Chicano national audience with his work. Valdez explains that with the success of *Zoot Suit* on stage, he hoped the adaptation could "bridge the gap to a place where all races can meet" (qtd. in Cizmar 46). When the film failed to meet commercial or critical expectations, Valdez contemplated that because so much of the story dealt with the "alienation" the pachucos and pachucas endured, "the film unfortunately reflected some of that alienation" (Linfield 15). Universal's weak promotion and distribution

of the film did not help. Determined to make the Ritchie Valens bio-pic no "less political than *Zoot Suit*," but with an impassioned story and form to which audiences would be drawn, Valdez teamed with producers Daniel Valdez (his brother and Henry from *Zoot Suit*) and Taylor Hackford (producer of *Bound By Honor*) in the Columbia production (Linfield 15). In interviews about *La Bamba*, Valdez emphasized that he was aiming to make "an American film," suggested by the film's promotional tagline: "Born to Poverty. Destined for Stardom. He Lived the American Dream" (Lubenow 79). Valdez addresses a mainstream audience, and the box office returns of over \$60 million prove his success. But, in adapting the Hollywood musical bio-pic to the life story of Chicano singer Ritchie Valens, Valdez employs multicultural aesthetics that self-reflexively critique territorialization in American society through the notion of "crossing over."

*Variety* and other mainstream reviews pointed to Ritchie's (played by Lou Diamond Phillips) "total buy-in to the American Dream" and his appearance as the "Latino boy next door" as cliched (Corliss 62; Kael 71-72; Hinson B7). But, especially in comparison to his macho pachuco half-brother, Esai Morales' Bob, Ritchie's characterization highlights the very notion of stereotyping Chicano identities through his adoption of Eurocentric middle-class values. Moreover, Ritchie's premonitions of the airplane wreck that would take his life are treated with a Latin American magical

realism, and his prayers and belief in a necklace idol, given to him by a *curandero* (healer), suggest an investment of native spirituality. The clearest example of multiculturalism's social function is in the film's music. For mainstream appeal, 1950s rock-n-roll provides popular, familiar songs, while Carlos Santana and Los Lobos add an ethnic flavor to the film's soundtrack. And the title song, with which Ritchie Valens made unprecedented success on the U.S. pop charts, adapts to pop rock the traditional Mexican wedding lyrics, to be sung by a groom to his bride as a promise of his strength and stamina:

Para bailar la bamba,  
Se necesita una poca de gracia,  
Para mi y ti,  
Y arriba y arriba,  
¡Por ti sere!  
(To dance the bamba,  
A little grace is needed,  
For you and me,  
And up, and up  
For you, I'll be!)

By transfiguring the Mexican ritual song to a rock-n-roll hit, Ritchie Valens and Valdez's *La Bamba* redraw the boundaries between traditions and create a new American cultural identification.

*La Bamba*, *Stand and Deliver*, and other Chicano feature films of the mid 1980s reflect a shift in American culture



toward integration. That these films enjoyed such commercial success and were accepted into studio operations after years of rejection suggest that more than merely meeting a market demand they performed a significant social function in uniting various cultures and traditions into multicultural American modes of survival. The nature of Chicanismo, struggling among dominant traditions without one's own, makes negotiations of ethnicity in Chicano film particularly symbolic for America's dynamic culture. In 1987, Santiago Pozo, then special-markets manager at Universal, predicted that *La Bamba's* success "will help us all," referring not only to the marketers and filmmakers wishing to share their Chicano films with mainstream audiences, but also to the films' value to its audiences (Walley 41). By 1995, a *Boxoffice* report revealed that Pozo guessed correctly: "Latinos have left behind marginalization for mainstream cachet in Hollywood . . . Hispanic-themed films have won financial confidence in the executive suites of major studios and independents" (Major 6). In that same report, Bruce Corwin, president of Los Angeles-based Metropolitan Theatres, foresaw that "there will be more cross-over pictures like *My Family*, which is doing very well in both mainstream and American subtitled, Spanish markets" (Major 6). *My Family*, especially as it compares with *American Me*, extends the business and cultural practices of the "cross-over" mid-1980s Chicano films. In their multicultural aesthetics, *American*

*Me and My Family* address mainstream audiences in their negotiation of gender construction and the America family.

### **Social Science "Myth" in *American Me***

As the credits roll at the conclusion of Edward James Olmos' *American Me* (1992), a depressingly heavy rhythm mix accompanies the following rap lyrics:

I know about being macho,  
Calling the shots, the big-time head honcho . . .  
While you sit in your cell writing a letter,  
Saying when you get out, things'll be better . . .  
But now, ain't no sunshine.<sup>3</sup>

For Olmos' character, Santana, and the other Chicanos "doing time" in a California prison, utter despair pervades their lives. The film provides some historically and sociologically accurate details of the plight of incarcerated Mexican Americans, as suggested by the rap lyrics, invoking traditional notions of *machismo* and the strength of familial bonds. Olmos explains that *American Me* shows "a cancer in this subculture of gangs," anticipating criticism from the Mexican American community for the depiction of Chicano "manhood" (qtd. in Fregoso 123). However in its portrayal of the gangs, both in and out of prison, *American Me* equates the "cancer" of the barrios with the dysfunction of the Chicano family, and in so doing, offers some negative and traditionally-stereotypical Chicano representations. As many reviewers note, characterization of Santana and his *clica*,

his familial-like gang, mirrors similar contemporary offerings within the gangxploitation genre, including *Blood in, Blood out: Bound By Honor* and the quasi-feminized *Mi Vida Loca/My Crazy Life* (Huaco-Nuzum 92-94). While *American Me* intends not to stand as definitive scholarship on Chicano gangs in the barrios or in prison, the film manipulates the Chicano experience and vitiates the traditional strength of the Mexican-American family.

Unlike *American Me*, Gregory Nava's *Mi Familia/My Family* reveals the challenges inherent in belonging to the constantly evolving Chicano family. Nava explains his intentions: to try to present "images up on the screen that are . . . not stereotypical but that are positive, that place us in the society with our communities, put family in the center of our culture . . . to retain our culture" (qtd. in West 27). Fusing "old world" traditions and spirituality with modern pragmatism, Jimmy Smits' Jimmy and the rest of his family create successful yet realistic modes of survival. Forefronting the potential of the Chicano family, *My Family* proffers a hopeful, reaffirming vision of the future for *La Raza*.

Though a simple comparison proves these two films to be oppositional in their treatment of Mexican-U.S. cultural influences, a number of significant narrative and ideological threads bind them. Both *American Me* and *My Family* symbolize the struggles not only between individuals and their dominant cultures but also within characters' internal confusion and

uncertainty through the literal and figurative act of imprisonment. Both films also interrogate notions of Chicano masculinity and Chicana femininity--*machismo* and *hembrismo* specifically--and types of "family." Loosely reflecting a historical survey of theoretical and sociological conceptions of the Chicano family and its relationship to gangs and imprisonment within the Chicano community, *American Me* and *My Family* undermine and critique the very process of stereotyping. Thus, these two films reveal how filmic representations derive from various constitutive cultural and traditional paradigms. *American Me* and *My Family* then reflect the diversity of the Chicano community and the manner in which contemporary Chicano films balance the demands of Hollywood styles with some specifically Chicano aesthetics. Although more explicitly articulated in *My Family* than *American Me*, both films employ multicultural aesthetics in addressing mainstream audiences. Where *My Family* reflects integrational social politics in American culture, *American Me* recalls the separatism of Chicano nationalism.

In the early 1970s, Floyd Mutrux began writing a script based on the biography of a real-life gang leader and prisoner who inspired Santana's character in *American Me* as well as Montana's character in Taylor Hackford's 1993 *Bound By Honor*. In the early 1980s, Edward James Olmos and producer Robert Young (known for his direction of *Alambrista!* and *The Ballad of Gregorio Cortez*) secured the rights to Mutrux's script. With screenwriter Desmond Nakano, Olmos

revised Mutrux's conception of Santana from a "Zapata-like romantic hero" to the hardened prison lord that ultimately appears in the film (Christon 4). The character of Santana embodies the "subculture in which loyalty, friendship, and family become part of a twisted and deadly code of ethics" passed "from father to son," according to Olmos (Lee 26). Olmos hoped *American Me* would serve as a warning against the violent gang lifestyle and show uninformed audiences the extent of the damage (Pristin F1). With a production budget of \$20 million--then, the largest for a Chicano film--and access to Universal's distribution mechanism, Olmos could address his warning to a mainstream audience for maximum effectiveness.

However, the nationalist politics and grim realism of the film ultimately resulted in mixed reviews and a financial loss to Universal, as the film "remained in the red" at \$13 million. Faced with this criticism and financial failure, Olmos claimed that he "could care less" about mainstream reception, but instead celebrated that the "film is being seen by the people who are going to use it the most," implying that Chicanos in the barrios need the message more than the rest of the country and will follow its advice (Garcia 41). Perhaps even more surprising is that when Olmos requested approval from the National Hispanic Media Association for the film, they expressed "regret for the making of the film" (Garcia 41). *Machismo*-based violence in *American Me* recalls the exclusionary politics of the Chicano

power movements that proved ineffective in the 1970s and reinforces the barriers that traditionally divide America's territorialized culture. And, perhaps even worse, male-patterned violence becomes the basis of the Chicano family and identity. The film's realistic style and basis in real-life characters and incidents lends credence to the exclusionary politics.

In its treatment of Santana, the 18 year-old father of "La eMe," the "Mexican Mafia" in Folsom and Chino state prisons in the mid-1960s and 1970s, *American Me* depicts in brutally realistic fashion the complexity of the power structures involved in the composition of the prison "Family." Location shooting at Folsom for two weeks, another week at Chino, and on the streets of East L.A. in actual gang territory added to the realism of the film. Prisoners and gang members mixed in with actors in some scenes, and Olmos sought permission from gang members to film in the barrios (Lee 28). Cinematography under the direction of Reynaldo Villalobos (part of the 1982 collaboration with Olmos and Young in *The Ballad of Gregorio Cortez*) and production design by Joe Aubel provide a gritty naturalism that suggests the gang story is not only true but represents Chicano culture. Testament to the film's complexity and realism, the film garners praises for its anti-gang and anti-drug themes, while receiving negative criticism for its excessive violence and pernicious depiction of Chicano culture. As Kathleen Newman claims, though melodramatic in its portrayal, the film

creates a didactic conclusion that the violent lifestyle of Santana and his gang "serve neither the individual nor the community" (98).<sup>4</sup> Olmos and his crew filmed with the hope that showing violence would help eradicate it in the barrios (Lee 32). Indeed, *American Me* reveals historically how the gang members' attempts to acquire power ultimately prove counterproductive and result in Evelina Fernandez's Julie proclaiming at the film's end: "there's no fucking hope for our kids, for our barrio." But, the film's reliance on *machismo* in identification of Chicano culture and the family might reinforce more than denounce the role of violence. Significantly, Santana's fictional biography, which serves as the basis of the film's plot, mirrors the social science "myth" of the Chicano family.

Prior to the emergence of revisionist theories beginning in the 1970s, Chicano studies reveal a great deal through empirically-founded generalizations about the importance of the institution of the Mexican American family to individual Mexican immigrants adapting to life in the United States.<sup>5</sup> At the base of the Chicano family structure according to a host of social science theorists,<sup>6</sup> a predetermined patriarchal hierarchy modeled after the authoritarian Mexican culture places the father as leader of the family, thus subordinating sons, and even further, wife and daughters as subject to the man's rule. Mothers, wives, and daughters traditionally respond to their subordination fatalistically and accept their roles as caregivers, while sons generally

retain such views in their advancement to adulthood (Carrillo-Beron 6). Paradoxically, the supportive and nurturing function of the family may incite the "*machismo* syndrome" in which a man, rather than accepting his role as paternalistic head of the family, must further verify his virility in the face of deep-seated maternal and spousal dependence (Johnson 14). Through his overt demonstration of power, the macho male proves his superiority and independence, while remaining intimately oriented toward and appreciative of the system which allows him such control within the family.

Because Mexican Americans often experience dissociation from predominantly Anglocentric U.S. culture, generally leading to feelings of inferiority, the power a macho male possesses within the family structure represents his primary outlet of masculine self-expression. Other aspects of Chicano culture subsume familial principles when permissible, so that the collectivistic and reliant spirit of the Mexican American family often infuses communal relationships; thus, as Joan Moore demonstrates, a group of Chicanos might form a *barrio clica*, composed of brothers, cousins, and neighbors, which creates a "brotherhood" and assumes family-like traits (99). Patriarchal power relations survive, in which the elder men decide on actions taken by the group, and, consequently, loyalty and gratitude to the elders align younger men more firmly in the fraternal system. Often bound by unlawful behavior and physical shows of strength,



alliances between gang brothers, *carnals* or *hermanos*, start with grade-school conflicts, become more cohesive during young adulthood through experiences in juvenile hall and other institutions outside the barrio, and remain "salient" and endure throughout most members' lifetimes (Moore 35). As a result of fighting and violence, rampant drug use and exchange, and poor education--all part of *la vida loca*--"prison is an omnipresent reality in barrio life" for Chicano gang members (Moore 98). Unfortunately, this serves as a conventional aspect of Chicano character types in many U.S. films, including *American Me*.

Imprisonment of Santana and his *carnals* operates in *American Me* not only as a trope, symbolic of the exploitation Chicanos face in a predominantly white-American society, but also as a logical or expected development in the film's depiction of the social science "myth." From his adoptive father Santana learns *machismo*. As head of the family, Santana's father demonstrates his control in ways he cannot outside the home; clearly, his abusiveness, in addition to declaring his authority over his family, results from and stands as a figurative revolt against the hegemonic, Anglo-dominant American culture. Explicitly revealed through a flashback to the 1943 riots between U.S. servicemen and zoot-suiters, Santana's father recognizes the oppression society wields through his own beating as well as his wife's rape, a sexual violation by U.S. sailors during which Santana is conceived. As an illegitimate, mixed-blood son, Santana

symbolizes and serves as a constant reminder to his father of his degradation by U.S.-American society. Not until his mother's death are Santana and his father able to negotiate a healthy relationship, though earlier the elder passes on, perhaps implicitly, a significant lesson to his son: Chicanos must express strength and "take control" when the opportunity arises.

Such an opportunity arrives when Santana and his two "crime partners," JD (a white "*hermano*") and Mundo, march through a rival gang's territory and pronounce "*La Primera*" as better than the "Hazard." Though a chase by the opposing gang results in the young trio breaking into a restaurant, JD getting shot, and all three landing in juvenile hall, a unity draws the Chicano teens together, initiating the familial bonds which will guide them throughout their lives. At the root of this loyalty "*por vida*" among Santana, JD, and Mundo remains an ostensible display of macho strength, to the detriment of any true emotional bonds. Santana discovers a means of displaying strength through rejecting and subverting authority which provides a new-found sense of empowerment and liberation, though such strategies ultimately prove self-defeating. In juvenile hall Santana seeks revenge against his rapist by fatally knifing the attacker, an aggressive and politically conscious act, which at once proves his macho strength and, thus, shows his resistance against an oppressive force, but also earns him an extended sentence and an automatic trip to prison upon his 18th birthday. In

hindsight, Santana admits that because he relied on macho strategies, "the shit got even deeper." *Machismo* wins Santana the respect of the other delinquents and places him as leader of the gang, a position of influence and responsibility later in prison as "La eMe" gains control of various illegal activities both in prison and in the barrio. Santana's actions reinforce the barriers in a territorialized American culture.

The characterization of Santana, his family, and his *carnals* shares remarkable similarities with the social science "myth," precisely because as characters they highlight the negative aspects of *machismo* as the definitive principle of the Mexican-American family. Praising the realism of *American Me* for reflecting a shift in the "cultural politics" of Chicano filmmaking, Rosa Linda Fregoso draws a significant parallel between the film's "savage vision of Chicano gang life" and its portrayal of "the depraved and ruined Chicano *familia*" (123-27).<sup>7</sup> A teen-age JD agrees with Santana's rationalization that they must keep a "strong *clica*" (or gang) to keep "getting respect": "Our *clica*, our barrio, our family, it's all we got. When we were kids, belonging felt good, but having respect feels even better." From the barrio, into juvenile hall, and onto prison, the *clica* and the fearful respect it incites replaces the family and its nurturing quality, and *machismo* remains the foundational principle. Prison internment for Chicanos as depicted both in *American Me* and in the social science

"myth" focuses on the macho strength of the *pinto*, the prisoner.

Though attempting to redress many of the erroneous character traits associated with young Chicanos, R. Theodore Davidson's analysis of the behavioral manifestations of Chicano prisoners in fact relies on a "single dominant trait": *machismo* (65). Using the California penal system, San Quentin in particular, as his example, Davidson provides one of the earliest historical and sociological explanations of the prison "Family."<sup>8</sup> Because many incarcerated Chicanos have previous ties through gang participation, the "familial" alliances not only shape their prison lifestyle, but replace the support system no longer accessible from the barrio or home. Beginning in the mid 1960s, convicts exploited and mentally and physically abused by administration and staff members, who are exempt from the official system's punishment, determined to act out. In response to the hypocrisy of such abuses, Chicano convicts formed a mafia-like counter force, ultimately named the "Baby Mafia" or "Family" (Davidson 80). Relatively unknown, even to most living and working within the prison culture according to Davidson, the subversion by the "Family" steals control from the state regulated system, undermines the official power of the prison, and gives expression to the Chicanos' deep-rooted reliance on a paternal support group, one in which, significantly, *machismo* benefits the in-group (81-82). Davidson, in fact, claims that the "Family" "perfect[s] the

natural sense of unity among Chicanos to an extreme degree-- and to their immense advantage" (83). Within the California prison system in the 1970s and 1980s, factions broke away from the "Family," forming competitive groups which most often adopted the negative familial values: "*La Nuestra Familia*" or "Our Family," consisting primarily of rural Chicanos; "Mexican Mafia," mostly of East Los Angeles Chicanos; and non-Chicano groups (Williams 132; Davidson 80-100, 150-51). The substructure of these groups remains similar, and in accordance with the social science "myth," Chicano prisoners rely on the nurturing influence, the approval, and the cooperative protection associated with *machismo* in the modal Mexican American family.

*American Me* reveals the transition from juvenile hall to prison as a logical development in the historical and sociological explanation of the "myth." An image of boys playing handball in the juvenile hall yard visually dissolves into an image of men playing handball in a prison yard, indicated "Folsom State Prison" with a documentary-style title. A "shotgun" crack of the ball bouncing against the ever-present walls emphasizes the fact that as Santana, JD, and Mundo have aged, the intensity of their situation has heightened. As father of the Chicano prisoners' "Family," Santana orchestrates drug trafficking, extortion, gambling, prostitution, and other pieces of the power "game" they subversively created. Santana explains that the gang "didn't really have a choice" because "before there was nothing," no

way that Chicano prisoners could make an effective expression of their desire for control. A significant aspect of the "Mexican Mafia's" pride relates to *machismo* and their ability to not let "feelings get in the way" of their "taking care of business," which eventually translates to killing other Chicanos in rival gangs, such as the leader of "*La Nuestra Familia*," as well as *hermanos* within the "Family" for "showing weakness." However, until facing his own execution, Santana defends the "Mexican Mafia's" macho actions as their sole means of self-empowerment: "we made it better for our people in the joint," ignoring not only the human loss, but more specifically the self-destruction of *La Raza*.

#### ***Hembrismo (Femaleness) in American Me***

Chicano studies begin in the 1970s the difficult but necessary task of re-examining the claims of the social science "myth," attempting to advance a better and more sympathetic understanding of the Mexican American family and its relationship to individual Chicanos and Chicanas. One of the earliest critics, Miguel Montiel scrutinizes the generalizations and "uncritical use of concepts like *machismo*" grounding the "myth" (40).<sup>9</sup> Moreover, Montiel recognizes that using the inferiority complex of the macho male as the root of not only the Chicano family structure proper but also its communal and institutional offshoots disables the "myth" from "defining normal behavior and thus automatically labels all Mexican and Mexican American people

as sick--only in degree of sickness do they vary" (46). Thus, the "myth" defines the Chicano family as a "tangle of pathology," stripped of its positive and generative power as center of the Mexican American community (Mirandé, "Chicano" 748-51). Nathan Murillo and others redefine the Chicano family as an institution providing stability, warmth, and protection (101-103). Though Chicanas may not possess the "prestige or status of the man," they exert some influence within the domestic sphere over the nurturing and affectionate quality of the family (Mirandé, *Chicana* 113). Perhaps the most radical critic, Maxine Baca Zinn claims that beneath the surface of the patriarch's rule actually exists an egalitarian relationship between the mother and father of the modal Mexican American family (26).

With the benefit of historical distance, more recent family studies recognize a binarism between the biased "myth" and the comparably stereotypical, reactionist "sympathetic" portrait of the Mexican American family. Alfredo Mirandé explains: "Although these two views would appear at first glance to be polar and irreconcilable . . . they are in agreement over a number of characteristics of the Chicano family" (*Chicano* 152). Though the interpretation and assessment of the characteristics differ, emphases on familialism, male dominance, and the importance of *machismo* belong to both views. Most significantly, Murillo replaces the negative aspects of *machismo* which render it a pathological tool with a positive energy which enables the

macho male to use "his authority within the family in a just and fair manner" (103). So a dichotomy exists in the social science literature between "good" and "bad" uses of the masculine power associated with and defined by *machismo*. *American Me* extends such a dualistic notion of *machismo* through the development Santana undergoes as a result of his interaction with two female characters, not only ironic but also especially problematic given that so much of the narrative depends on a homosocial gangster context.

Rosa Linda Fregoso, Carl Gutiérrez-Jones, and other film scholars draw attention to the representation of Chicanas through the characterization of Julie (Evelina Fernandez) and Esperanza (Vira Montes), Santana's girlfriend and mother respectively. Santana's mother shares significant parallels with the mythical Mesoamerican mother who suffered the "spiritual rape" of conquest, associated with a number of metanarratives including *La Llorona*, *La Malinche*, and *La Chingada*. However, relatively little of the film's naturalistic story operates on a mythic level. Unlike Steinbeck and Kazan's mythologized revolutionary warrior Emiliano Zapata and Valdez's romanticized wartime outlaw El Pachuco, Santana's political consciousness is treated realistically, perhaps even drawing on the tradition of documentary-realist narrative. But the symbolic and mythological significance of Esperanza reinforces the equation between Santana's family and the social science "myth."



According to Octavio Paz, the simplistic--and thus faulted--explanation of Mexicanism derives from a version of the nation's history as victim of conquest, colonization, and exploitation (71). *La Chingada*, then, acts as the mythic mother who has been impregnated through rape, and her bastard children, "*los hijos de chingada*," are products of violation and deceit (Paz 75-88).<sup>10</sup> Stoic resignation and submission to the overwhelming power of *El Chingon* represent the honorable course of action for the rape victims, mother and child. An inherited sense of inferiority haunts the Mexican character, which drives the macho male to confirm his strength and virility through *machismo*. Social science studies absorbed key elements from this Mexican tradition in their description of the Chicano family, especially visible in the centrality of the negative aspects of *machismo*. And in *American Me*, the sailors' rape of Esperanza mirrors *El Chingon's* rape-conquest of the mythic mother, *La Chingada*. In accordance with both Mexican tradition and the sociological "myth," Santana's mother submits to his father, who in turn displaces his "revenge" for the violators--literally U.S. sailors and mythically Spaniards and United States conquering colonialists--to his wife and children. The relationship between his mother and father, in which his father dominates through macho strength, serves as a cue for Santana to become a modernized *El Chingon*, to violently take control and confirm his strength.

Opposite Santana's mother, who espouses a philosophy of *aguantate* (to grin and bear it), Julie stands as the only true survivor of barrio life and, in Olmos' own words, the "only hero of the film" (qtd. in Lovell 14). Chicana liberal feminists including Ana Castillo and Elizabeth Martínez describe in their writings the hope for a "collective vision toward [the] development of an alternative social system" in which equality reigns (Castillo 220). Such "a place called hope" fades too quickly in this gang film. Although once a gang member herself, Julie rejects the gang life poisoning her community and attempts to provide a different kind of life for her son. Julie's determination to "take care of business"--to provide for her family and community--stands in direct opposition to the macho strategies of the gangs. Julie's *hembrismo* sustains a strength of character and an adherence to principles, which offer Santana an alternative reality very different from the one he learned in his family, in the gang, and in prison.

Santana remains a divided character at the film's conclusion. Julie explains that Santana is like two people:

One is like a kid who doesn't know how to dance,  
how to make love, that's the one I cared about  
. . . But the other one I hate . . . the one who  
has his rap down, who knows how to run drugs, who  
kills people.

Thus, Santana embodies a competition of histories and philosophies; the *machismo*-driven prison lord who suffers

from an inferiority complex and lashes back violently was born when sailors violated his mother, but another Santana was born "when [he] met Julie." Through quite mundane actions, such as learning to drive or to dance, going shoe shopping or for a walk along the beach, Santana discovers experiences missing from his prison life and learns from Julie a means of surviving independently from macho strategies. When a salesman does not look him in the eyes, Santana takes it as a personal affront and a sign of disrespect against him. Julie, in her pragmatic and independent manner, explains that the salesman was just "doing his *pinche* job," disclosing Santana's false pride and the emphasis he places on outward, physical displays of strength and respect. Julie allows Santana the opportunity to "think with his heart" and to show strength of character rather than virility, emotional development he has never before considered. The two Santanas prove irreconcilable, however, and the "glimmer of hope" that Olmos invests in Julie only highlights the self-destructiveness of Santana and his "myth"-based prison family in the film's resolution (Lovell 14).

Parallel editing and structure cinematically reveal the logical conclusion to *American Me*, the story of Santana's life and family and its reflection of the social science "myth." Though sharing significant similarities in their exposition of religious and cultural influences on ethnic families in American film culture, *American Me* and *The*

*Godfather* differ in the ideals each "father" upholds in his "family." In *The Godfather* trilogy, an interplay of time references creates a contrapuntal structure providing an epic quality to the Corleone family story. Though on a much smaller scale, the framing device in *American Me*, Santana's remembering his life while in his cell awaiting execution, recalls Catholic convention so that the narrative elevates to a confession of his guilt, and historical coverage by the film encompasses more than simply the life of Santana, one Chicano, but rather suggests historicity of the Chicano experience. Parallel editing in *The Godfather* integrates storylines in the United States and Italy and helps establish the cause-and-effect explanation at the film's end. As Michael stands as "godfather" at his nephew's baptism, images of mafia gunmen preparing for "hits" on various family rivals in New York City and Las Vegas accompany the ironic voice-over of the priest asking the second-generation "Don Corleone" if he "renounce[s] Satan and all his works," wishing him to "go in peace" with the Lord. The intercuts of the baptism with mafia actions organically fuses the mafia's business with the family, both of which Michael ultimately rules as "Godfather." The social and economic power the Corleone family, an Italian American family, possesses differs greatly from that of Santana and his Chicano family and gang, outsiders of the dominant culture. With "all the judges and politicians in his pocket," Vito Corleone uses economic power and bribery to gain political favors and

social clout. Though Tom and others join in the family's business, wealth and its power generally remain with the Corleone family name and bloodlines. Within the Chicano family, as exemplified by *American Me's* gang and prison "Family," non-consanguine relations may develop as strong or even stronger than those within the family proper. The cooperative spirit adopted by the prison "Family" leads Santana to believe that his macho-based strategies of "taking care of business" benefit his community until he encounters Julie's *hembrismo*-based actions and recognizes that his view of life is "distorted."

In *American Me*, cross-cutting interposes Santana's heterosexual initiation against the rape-murder of an Italian American drug-lord's son by the "Mexican Mafia" in prison. By Santana's order, the gang "Family" must defend its economic rights (to sell drugs in the East Los Angeles barrios) by brutally beating, sodomizing, then anally knifing the Italian American prisoner. Parallel montage correlates this gruesome execution with the lovemaking encounter between Santana and Julie, which turns violent as Santana is unable to climax.<sup>11</sup> Though Santana initially tries to sodomize Julie, she refuses and fights out of Santana's grip.<sup>12</sup> On a mythic level, the prison rape dramatizes the dominance of *El Chingon* over *La Chingada*, reflecting the lesson Santana learned from his mother and father in accommodation of the social science "myth." Though "Family's" violent "message" is effective, retaliation by the Italian American mafia boss

sets off a series of gang killings, where many Chicanos and others are left dead. Similarly, Santana's attempt to sodomize Julie reflects his inability to change and the depth of his *machismo* as defined by the "myth." But her refusal to accept the role of *La Chingada*, first by resisting Santana's violent sexual advance and later by refusing his Saint Dismas medal and the gang legacy it symbolizes, represents her strength and independence, illuminated by comparison to the gruesome death of the Italian American drug lord's son.

Inspired by Julie's strength of character, Santana begins questioning his macho actions and those of the prison "Family." Julie shows Santana that the business of the "Family" "kills kids," and he laments that the gang spends time fighting other Chicano and non-Chicano gangs "instead of getting our people out and keeping them out." While Santana attempts to raise the "Family's" actions up for scrutiny, he never fully sheds the macho values. When he searches for his younger brother's drug stash, the confrontation between Santana and his father revives the macho ethic through a struggle of strong men, rather than engaging emotional ties the men share. Santana never diminishes the importance of leadership, and of particular importance, paternalistic "fatherhood" of the "Family." Facing an emotional crossroads, Santana, back in prison for holding another gang member's drugs by accident, recognizes that the gang's activities take a heavy toll: "none of us knew the price." Before his experiences with Julie, Santana thought it a sign

of "weakness to listen to a woman," but Julie's strength of character, her *hembrismo*, endorses a hopeful, positive future for *La Raza* not dominated by the negative aspects of *machismo*. However, the solution Julie represents falls short of explaining, as Gutiérrez-Jones acknowledges, how she would "manipulate her historical situation," and more specifically, how she would overcome the male-dominated hegemony of physical abuse reigning the Chicano family and community (152). Comparable to the binarism underlying the "myth" and the reactionary views of the Chicano family, Julie only *begins* to create an alternative social system to the one figuratively imprisoning Santana's mother. Fregoso explains that Santana's "story ends before hers can begin" (133).

Drawing suspicion from JD and his other *carnals* for criticizing the prison-gang lifestyle he founded, Santana recognizes the self-destructiveness of the "Family":

"whatever we had, we gave it away." JD confronts Santana, warning him that he and others see that he is "starting to show weakness." Eventually the "Family" for its own protection against any display of weakness kills Santana. The gruesome mass-stabbing culminates with Santana's bloody corpse, angled up from ground level, falling in slow motion several floors; Santana's floating body suggests the isolation and helplessness related to his death. Ultimately, the *machismo*-based actions associated with the social science "myth" negate any emotional bonds which Santana shared with his prison "Family," and "business" continues as usual. In a

last parallel montage, Santana's execution complements Puppet strangling Little Puppet, Julie going to school and refusing to allow her son to "go with the guys," and Santana's younger brother Paulito leading the next generation of *vatos* on a drive-by shooting. The cross-cutting among these scenes juxtaposes the personal story of Santana's demise with the public story of the barrio, thus reorienting the Chicano community. Significantly, Julie and the *hembrismo* she embodies provides the only sign of optimism for the future of *La Raza*, a future seemingly overwhelmed by the predominance of a destructive *machismo* in the Chicano family, indicated by the camera's point-of-view in the final scene. The camera enacts the gun in the young *vato's* hand, randomly aiming, pointing out innocent victims, and then blasting directly into the audience. Because that audience is diverse and mainstream, the indictment is clear: the killings in U.S. barrios, while certainly hurting the communities directly involved, hurt all of American culture. This final gunshot points out the faulty logic of separatism for any segment of American society. While the shadow of doom cast over American culture is exactly what denounces Santana's reliance on macho power, the "glimmer of hope" in *American Me* loses out in the theater's darkness.

### ***Familia Reaffirmed in My Family***

Unlike *American Me*, which accommodates the social science "myth" and centralizes negative aspects of *machismo*



in its depiction of Mexican American families, *My Family* (1995) offers a multi-dimensional portrait of the Chicano family, one which rejects conventional *machismo* and facilitates a hopeful future for both Latin audiences and, more significantly, American culture. In writing the script for *My Family*, as they did with *El Norte* in 1983, Gregory Nava and Anna Thomas borrow from Latin American literary tradition; specifically, the Sánchez family owes to Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* the idea of several generations of one family that serves as protagonist (West 26). Cinematographer Edward Lachman and designer Barry Robison help Nava create a colorful, magical realist depiction of the family that at once gives expression to Latin American and indigenous spirituality, while contextualizing the family's story in California history. Nava explains that in creating this story, he tries to blend influences from Mexican *telenovela* alongside Hollywood melodrama, silent film convention alongside the memories and photographs from his *Californio* grandfather, and pre-Columbian mythology alongside Catholic religion ("One" 43; West 27). And with the guidance and backing of executive producer Francis Ford Coppola, it is not surprising that the film effectively addresses diverse audiences in its complex treatment of ethnicity and the family in American culture.

*My Family* employs multicultural aesthetics to give expression to the inter-cultural struggle of the Chicano family. And rather than emphasizing the separatism of

Chicano nationalism or simple assimilation into U.S. society, the film reveals the "universal human experience" of recovering from the past effective modes of survival for the future (Nava qtd. in West 26). The goal of the film, according to its director, is to use the entertainment value of the film story to "enlighten" and inspire mainstream audiences about the human condition (West 26-7). Nava and Thomas independently produced *My Family* with financial support from private sources including the American Playhouse and Coppola's studio, American Zoetrope. Although garnering Independent Spirit honors, the film actually benefited commercially from Coppola's and Nava's name recognition, as well as Edward James Olmos and rising stars Esai Morales (*La Bamba*), Jimmy Smits (fresh off television hits *NYPD Blue* and *LA Law*), and Jennifer Lopez in the cast. Wide distribution by New Line Cinema in the U.S. provided the film access to a mainstream audience, and it grossed over \$11 million (McCarthy 74). *My Family* expresses Chicano ethnicity, but it does so with an integrational philosophy to show, as Nava explains, that Chicanismo is "beautiful" and has a great deal to "contribute" to American culture. In its business and marketing strategies as well its forms and themes, the film bridges the gaps between the national tradition of Chicano film (and its remnant conventions in Hollywood films) and mainstream Hollywood film. Multicultural aesthetics in *My Family*, then, reflect diverse yet unified social politics in

American culture and erode the barriers of a territorialized culture in the very act of crossing them.

Opening her discussion on "healing" American society's wounds of discriminatory violence, Chicana cultural theorist Irene Blea describes a "bridge" across which Americans may travel in order to begin understanding differences at the root of social conflict and discrimination (141). The bridge can certainly act as a powerful symbol for the passage Americans face, toward a direction in search of new knowledge or back to tradition. Gregory Nava echoes Blea's and other contemporary sociologists' appraisals of the situation facing the Mexican American family, at once breathing new life into the institution, while negating the plethora of negative stereotypical representations offered in American films. Several cultural and film historians note the prevalence of Latinos systematically depicted in American film culture as *narcotraficantes* or drug pushers, gang members, criminals, and *pintos*.<sup>13</sup> Significantly, *machismo* serves as a convention in many film depictions of Chicano culture. Directors such as Nava and Olmos often face the difficulty of either maintaining the cultural and ethnic integrity of their films' messages or utilizing the conventions of mainstream film production and distribution. In either case, stereotypical images of Chicanos reach a mass audience much more frequently than do non-stereotypical images, though these odds have started shifting since the mid 1980s (List 20). Through its depiction of the Sánchez family, *My Family* both thematically

and formally balances the demands of mainstream American film against the opportunity to express a Chicano social and political expression of survival, highlighted by the images of bridges that connect East and West Los Angeles.<sup>14</sup>

*My Family* opens with a shot of the river that divides predominantly Mexican and Chicano East L.A. from the predominantly white West L.A., and then pans up to the bridge across which workers from the barrios travel west. Paco, portrayed by Edward James Olmos, relates this image through a voice-over narration with a sense of kinship and community: "Whenever I see the bridges that connect East Los Angeles and Los Angeles, I think of my family." Paco's father, José (Eduardo Lopez Rojas), joins his people on that bridge on their way to work, although "no one crosses from the west to go into the barrio." The shots of the bridges work on several levels, establishing the importance of movement and, more specifically, migration. Crossing "*las fronteras*," figurative and literal borders, in order to settle the family and community shows at once the intractable barriers that territorialize American culture, while at the same time drawing mainstream viewers across the border vicariously with José. Blending historical and cultural impressions, *My Family* creates a filmic family photo-album through the acts of storytelling and montages. To tell about his family, Paco must start in a small village in Mexico and tell how his father decided to leave in search of America, "*un otro*

*pais*"--subtitled "another country"--"on the other side of the world." Gathered from the tall tales his father relates of his journey and from other family stories passed down from the quasi-mythic El Californio, who adopts José as a "grandson" only minutes after they meet, the history of the Sánchez family reveals a regenerative cycle with epic qualities for the Chicano family and community, fusing traditional Mexican and U.S., Chicano, and popular cultures.

Through a careful and, at times, beautifully rendered balance of cultural influences, *My Family* historicizes the mass deportations of the 1930s, the emergence of the *pachuco* identity of the 1950s, the political and social activism by Chicanos of the 1970s and 1980s, and the future of *La Raza* through the characterization of the Sánchez family members, notably complex and multifaceted representations of Chicanos. Each family member faces certain challenges and reaps certain benefits through membership in the Chicano family. When José and Maria (Jennifer Lopez) fall in love, quite literally at first sight, an iris frame freezes the delicate beauty of Maria from José's enchanted point-of-view. Pitted against such a compassionate introduction, however, Maria's deportation along with thousands of other Mexican Americans exemplifies the inhumane and unjust treatment she and her family survives. The iris shot, like an album portrait, predicts the line of photographs along the mantel, a constant reminder of the importance of the family's long and enduring history. Implicitly part of a family's history is the act of

survival and adaptability to meet the changes that come with the passage of time. Recounted in José's "working man's" poetry in his speech at the older daughter's wedding, the resilience and strength of the Sánchez family story becomes clear: "the greatest riches" one can have in life "is *familia*." The nurturing and supportive environment of the Sánchez family differs wholly and essentially from the unhealthy situation explained by the social science "myth"; similarly, *My Family* transcends the simplicity offered by the "sympathetic" reactionary views. Significantly, José's love for Maria and their children and his responsibility to his family espouse a form of *machismo* very different from that associated with authoritarianism. *My Family*, then, reflects a paradigmatic shift toward multiculturalism and integration in American society, witnessed in the revisions and diversification of Chicano cultural identification.

On a number of fronts, including Chicano cultural studies, social science, and family studies, the Chicano family continues receiving attention. Mirroring the cultural shift away from ethnic nationalism in the late-1970s and 1980s, examinations of the Chicano family favor pluralism and relativistic appraisals of societal norms and values.<sup>15</sup> As Christine List notes, Chicanismo becomes "increasingly defined by its diversity," thus negating the dominant cultural influence of *machismo* (8). George Sánchez argues that the assimilation and acculturation processes of Chicanos and Chicanas result more often in conflict and consensus

through a dynamic interaction than in a static caricature (131). Thus, like the bridges joining East and West L.A., the Chicano family melds various cultural influences into a mode of survival, appropriately adaptive given the diverse range of situations and influences. *Machismo*, too, breaks out of the "caricature mold" to reveal masculine power founded on strength of character. As Rudolfo Anaya explains, "being manly (*hombrote*) mean[s] having a sense of honor . . . for himself and for his family" (66-67). Marked by "a code of ethics that stresses humility, honor, respect of oneself and others, and courage," *machismo* "is not manifested by such outward qualities as physical strength and virility but by such inner qualities" as loyalty, integrity, and strength of character (Mirandé, *Hombres* 67). The definitive principle of *machismo* remains "providing for the family" in its myriad needs (Anaya, "I'm" 67).

Like Julie's *hembrismo*-based actions in *American Me*, José and Maria in *My Family* "take care of business" in their family by implementing strategies very different from those reflected in Santana's family or the prison "Family." Little gender-defined demarcation in familial power structures exists between the Sánchez parents, so the film's portrayal of the Chicano family offers a fresh injection of democratic equality. José and Maria, cooperatively working for the family's benefit, negotiate tradition, primarily Mexican tradition. Though *El Californio* presents an extremist position of isolationism and nationalism, with his grave

marker reclaiming Mexican territory around his body in the family's cornfield, the Sánchez parents adhere to principles they brought with them from their homeland. José travels the bridge to work in the "white" world of Los Angeles as a gardener to support his family, and then travels back again to plant his *milpa*, the corn and bean crops in the gardens around their home. For José, there is "dignity in his work," dramatized by sweat pouring down his face and blood seeping from his blistered hands as he pulls weeds in the courtyard of a posh West L.A. home. Unlike the stereotypical expectations of the traditional Mexican father, José shows tender affection for his wife as well as his children; kisses on the cheek and hugs enact his opinion that there is "no greater blessing in all the world than children," and "a good wife is the best thing that can happen to a man." Maria, like her husband, shows appreciation to her family through traditional notions of respect and loyalty. Keeping her promise that nothing would prevent her from rejoining her family in California when she is deported, Maria exhibits great determination and fortitude. Maria adds a Mexican spirituality to the film, as she explains the family's successes and struggles through mythic and magical terms paradoxically buttressed by a staunch belief in Catholicism.

From their parents, the children learn familial values, though as first generation Mexican Americans, they face the difficulty of living in between cultures. Both daughters adopt their parents' conservative views of religion, the



older by marrying in a traditional Catholic ceremony (which was planned so that "no one could miss it"), and the younger, Antonia, by becoming a nun. The oldest son, Paco, transforms his parents' sense of traditionalism into a form of assimilation, professed by his military service in the U.S. Navy. And moreover, Memo, later "William" the attorney, joins mainstream culture through education and hopes of a prestigious career. Although mainstream reviews split between calling this film, as the *Film Journal* did, an "insult" to Latinos because the characters are "without exception, complete clichés" and others like *Sight and Sound* praising the characterization of the Chicano family for "slipping beyond stereotype," few reviews recognize the complexity of the characterization (Noh 54; O'Brien 54). Varied and representative of different types, the Sánchez family has one key characteristic--diversity--which helps construct what Nava calls a "mythic structure" in the film (West 27). Chucho's (Esai Morales) gang activities, involving both violence and drug trafficking, are revealed as the most detrimental to the family structure, perhaps best exemplified by their lasting influence on Jimmy, the youngest and most impressionable.

José exclaims that Chucho is going to be a "special boy," witnessing a sign in the clouds, an angel, after his conception. That Maria is carrying Chucho when she is deported, "the day everything changed," suggests a tangential relationship with the "*La Chingada*" narrative, her abduction

serving as a form of violation against the family and Chucho's misplaced birth resulting from *El Chingon's* abuse of power. But unlike *American Me's* Esperanza, Maria resists her oppressive treatment, and returns to her family in California; moreover, the entire episode incurs mythical value in Maria's interpretation. Though she proves strength of character in her volition, during her journey the evil river spirit, embodied through strategic shots of the owl--*buho*, a death servant that ushers souls through the afterlife in native mythology--enchants the boy. Living stranded between two dominant cultures imposes a disadvantage on Chucho; he and his parents are "from two different worlds," while he remains unable to fully assimilate into mainstream American culture. José and Maria wish Chucho had adopted the values of respect and pride his older siblings acquired. Not fully recognizing his family's sacrifice in crossing the bridges--his brothers figuratively and his father literally--Chucho believes it a mistake to work so hard to earn so little, screaming to his father: "Fuck *la dignidad*. Fuck your struggle. I don't want to be Mexican . . . and most of all, I don't want to be like you." Impressed with the idea that it "doesn't matter how you get [money], as long as you get it," Chucho joins a gang "selling *mota* [pot]." In his rebellious act, an independent and politically conscious identity takes form: the pachuco. In its depiction of Chucho as a pachuco and of Jimmy as first a *pinto* and ultimately a

father, *My Family* blends aesthetic and cultural codes of Mexican, Chicano, and U.S. cultures.

### ***Rasquachismo in My Family***

Standing on the edge of the *milpa*, swinging a garden hose around his head, and flinging his arms in gesture of a great battle, José performs for his son a story about how he fought a giant snake when he was a "*chavalito*," a young boy. On a significant level, this scene reinforces the humility and meekness of José as a father, refuting the authoritarian Chicano father; however, more exists in this scene and throughout the film through inclusion of multicultural aesthetics. *Rasquachismo*, a "sensibility" or an "attitude" that derives from a "comprehensive worldview" of the "outsider" or the "have-not" in Mexican and indigenous American cultures, professes a philosophy of "*fregoda pero no jodido*," "down, but not out" (Ybarra-Frausto, "Rasquachismo" 155-56). Though often associated with Chicano visual arts with bawdy or displeasing pastiche, the value of *rasquachismo* lies in its use of parody and irony to break loose of tradition (Ybarra-Frausto, "Interview" 214-15). As an aesthetic sensibility of the "poor" and "underprivileged," it is "rooted in resourcefulness and adaptability" as it seeks to subvert existing paradigms and redraw boundaries (Polkinhorn 53; Ybarra-Frausto, "Rasquachismo" 156). The ironic humor of José wrapped with a garden hose-snake further qualifies the Mexican and American notions of heroism and

masculinity. And that his *milpa* serves as the background for his act draws in traditional Mexican and mainstream American references to the characterization of José, an *hombrote* father at odds with the stereotypical Mexican male.

Perhaps the epitome of *rasquachismo* in terms of film production strategies, Robert Rodriguez's *El Mariachi* balances the demands of "Hollywood" and mainstream American audiences against creating a film with an "ethnic ingenuity," as Charles Ramirez Berg describes it. *El Mariachi* affords its ethnic flavor, greatly reminiscent, at times, of *rasquachi* visual arts, as a result of its low budget and resourceful production techniques.<sup>16</sup> Though *My Family* comes closer to a typical American feature film in terms of its production and distribution, specific elements of the film owe to a *rasquache* aesthetic and allow a confluence of traditions and cultures in forming a mode of survival for the Chicano family. Nava explains that the *milpa* as well as the ever-expanding house symbolize the resilience and adaptability of the American character with the ancient American concept of *Olin* from an Aztec philosophy of cyclical movement and regeneration ("One" 44). The blending of histories and cultures in these two symbols reveals the significance of *rasquachismo* aesthetics in the film's conception of the "family".

The Sánchez house "grew with the family," and "rooms weren't planned much more than the kids." With its imbalanced structure, mismatched painting and furniture, and

overgrown gardens in front and back, the "home" stands as testament to the family's resourcefulness and adaptability, especially as it appropriates U.S. and Mexican designs. During a visit by the assimilated Memo and his prospective in-laws, an upper-class white couple who live in West Los Angeles but never before visited East L.A., the house clearly falls short of their expectations. But, the mix of cultural codes, what Martín-Barbero describes as an impure "intermingling" of ethnicity, race, class, and conceptions of power, domination, and complicity,<sup>17</sup> which the home embodies, extends to the family in its formulation of survival *movidás*, coping strategies, especially for Chucho and Jimmy. And so the mode of survival which the Sánchez family adopts represents a hybridization, or *mestizaje*, of historical and cultural codes.

Chucho, more than any other character, opposes both United States and Mexican tradition and, like El Californio, puts no faith in the "*pinche* church" and the "*pinche* government." Chucho, blood-brother of sorts with Henry Reyna in Valdez's *Zoot Suit* and Santana in *American Me*, believes that he might carve a political space in American culture through his brand of Chicano nationalism. Significantly, ostensible displays of strength and macho power found the pachuco stance, recalling the social science "myth" and the gang-family which uses fear to gain respect. However, *My Family* subordinates a visual representation of the pachuco gang leaders to Paco's voice-over explanation, which

undercuts the pachuco type. Chucho faces off with his rival, Butch, outside his sister's wedding: a close two-shot reveals the two virile, young men eyeing each other unflinchingly, and Paco's voice-over erases the "power" of the pachuco stance: "they were both so full of macho bullshit, it was incredible." Paco overrides the macho strength within the visual image by explaining that "of course he and my brother had never really done anything to each other." Similarly, when Chucho plays with the younger Chicanos in the barrio and teaches them to dance the mambo, his defiance of tradition assumes more compassion and emotion than typically allowed the hardened, "macho" pachuco. Moreover, when a mother snatches up her child and "saves" the boy from "playing with pachucos," the boundaries between the rebellious pachuco culture and Mexican American culture fades. Through the irony of comparing the traditional reaction to gangs, specifically Chucho's pachuco character, to Chucho's actual actions, *My Family* not only reveals Chucho as a compassionate member of the Chicano family and community, but also reconfigures the pachuco stereotype.

Chucho does invite trouble through his defiant, "muy macho" image. A police reprimand against Chucho for selling marijuana to make money in the economically destitute barrio awakens in his father a sense of indignation. José knows "it was right" to kick Chucho out of the house, though "deep down in his heart, he didn't feel so right." The interaction between Chucho and his father, again, proves José's

attentiveness to his family, but also offers another dimension to Chucho's pachuco identity. Regretting the broken bond between himself and Chucho, José wishes he "could hold him again," like he did when Chucho was a little boy, and "forgive him." Pushed to the edge, Chucho accidentally switch-blade knifes a rival pachuco during a scuffle at a dance. Similar to several scenes in Valdez's *La Bamba*, music and dance exemplify an interrelationship between American and Mexican traditions. A mural of Mexican folk dancers on the wall of the dance hall juxtaposes the 1950s pop rock music, further isolating the pachuco gang members dependent upon one another for support. At the extreme of U.S. militancy against the pachuco gang, policemen searching for Chucho once he goes into hiding refer to him as a "known pachuco gang leader" who "has killed and will kill again." Through parallel editing, the police search for Chucho interrupts the innocent play of Jimmy and his friends and the familial interaction of Sánchez family members watching "I Love Lucy" on television. An equation between Chucho fleeing the police chase and Jimmy fetching a ball undermines the stereotype of the hardened criminal, the pachuco gang leader, and killer. Through a conflation of perspectives Chucho embodies a multifaceted character, as the pastiche of types--vicious killer, macho pachuco, loving son and brother--actually subverts *machismo* conventions and the resultant stereotypes of the Chicano cultural identity and family.

According to a pragmatic explanation, a policeman kills Chucho in a kangaroo court execution. However, as in *El Norte*, Nava takes advantage of non-realistic and "magical realistic" interpretations of events. According to Maria, the spirit of the river finally recaptures her son. A blue-tint shadows the scene as Jimmy watches Chucho fall, and the white owl, the evil river spirit, lurks in the framing of the bridge overhead. Though witnessing the execution-killing of his older brother would leave a horrible impression on the young Jimmy, his mother's mythic explanation alternately shows that the river spirit influenced Jimmy. In the *pinta* "20 years later," Jimmy appears isolated, first walking down a line of cells and then appearing behind bars. The blue-tint of the scene recalls the mythic element of Chucho's murder, now correlated with Jimmy's imprisonment and the emotional burden of hate and rage resulting from his isolation. Paco acknowledges that others in the family have shame for Jimmy's incarceration, though he recognizes that Jimmy "carries a lot of shit for the rest of us." Released from the institutional prison, Jimmy appears behind a set of bars on his bedroom window, blowing cigarette smoke into the breeze outside, unable to abandon his feelings of hopelessness and restraint. Jimmy's character initially appears easily defined by the single agent of "anger that was always there," like he's fire on the inside and stone on the outside. Jimmy's anger creates an isolation which rules his life until his "bossy" sister Antonia enlists Jimmy in her



"political bullshit" to save the life of a Central American political prisoner, Isabella (Elpida Carrillo). Isabella's political exile recalls Maria's deportation. Imprisonment, thus, operates on a number of literal and figurative levels in *My Family*.

Through his interaction with strong female characters, Jimmy in *My Family* transcends the *vato loco* or *pinto* stereotype. *My Family's* incorporation of relatively well-developed female characters whose actions lead to a feminist expression of social politics initiates an important shift that will be more fully realized in Chicana characters in *Mi Vida Loca* and *Selena*. Influenced by the Chicana point of view, Jimmy exhibits sympathetic, multi-faceted, and, at times, humorous characteristics in his struggle to fit into American society. Jimmy's sister, Antonia, remains committed to social and political activism after leaving the order to marry a priest she meets while helping political prisoners in Central America. Antonia cajoles Jimmy into marrying Isabella, not only to save her from deportation and certain execution in San Salvador, but also to make a political statement. *Rasquachismo* flavors Jimmy's transformation from a "loner" *vato loco* to a self-proclaimed "goddamn revolutionary," smacking of ironic wit. Traces of slapstick, Jimmy's nervous miscues with the pen as he signs the marriage license and his difficulty with a sticking door as his family questions him about his recent marriage, add to the playfulness of Jimmy's expression of character. Antonia

persuades Jimmy he can "use the system to fuck up the system," a politicized subversive tactic quite different from the macho-based actions defined by the "myth" and shown in the prison "Family" in *American Me*.

Antonia persuades Jimmy to use his rights as a U.S. citizen to "get back at . . . the whole establishment." She and Jimmy, who jokes about meeting back in divorce court, do not consider or understand Isabella's views of the situation, however, until their mother provides a traditional explanation. Knowing the determination it took returning to her family in California after being deported, Maria provides a perspective similar to Isabella's. According to Maria, without certain sacred things like marriage and family, "it doesn't matter whether we live or die." And Memo adds the voice of U.S. law, extolling the legal authority of the marital contract. Constructed from the various diverse perspectives of the family members, the marriage becomes both pragmatically and ideally an act of survival for Isabella, and she wedges herself into Jimmy's life by returning to his apartment "no matter what Jimmy said."

The notions of marriage and, eventually, family undergo examination and reconfiguration through the divergent perspectives, supporting the redefinition of Jimmy's *machismo*. Underscoring Antonia's manipulation of Jimmy, Isabella forces Jimmy to do "what no self-respecting *vato loco*" would do. Comically depicted, Jimmy in "colors" and "shades" shakes his head in confusion at his newlywed wife's

Julio Iglesias poster hanging in his apartment. Like Julie to Santana, though, Isabella affects Jimmy as their marriage of necessity allows alternative survival strategies. Jimmy, while detailing his car, dressed in vato gear and listening to "oldies," learns to shed the oppressive weight of his past. Isabella changes the music to an upbeat salsa tune and instructs Jimmy that "it's time to get new." Reluctantly, Jimmy reveals his psychological wounds to Isabel, who empathizes. The romance of the sweetly sexy dance scene leads to a consummation where Jimmy and Isabella root their love in their mutual pain, anger, and memory of loss. Jimmy releases his pain: "Fucking anger . . . fills me up . . . I don't give a shit about nothing, like I'm still in prison." Isabella reciprocates by explaining that she knows his feelings: "I feel them too. I'm alone." Empathy bonds Isabella and Jimmy as each discovers the other's loss and isolation. Prisoners, both literally and figuratively, of political oppression, Jimmy and Isabella form a family. Though Jimmy and Isabella's family enacts modes of survival as does Santana's "Family," *My Family* shows family as a cure for loss while *American Me* proffers a "Family" which kills for power.

Out of the love that Isabella and Jimmy share and the family they start, a brand of José's pragmatic "take care of business"-attitude arises in Jimmy. "Something about being a father" and providing for a family awakens in Jimmy a sense that the future matters, and he joins the "parade of workers

crossing the bridges." However, *My Family* does not portray Jimmy's cultural transformation as a simple matter of assimilation in the manner of Memo/William. Isabella's death in labor temporarily reverses Jimmy's transformation, dramatized by an image of his fist crashing through a pawn shop display case, which physically recalls his emotional pain and solitude. Esperanza proffers a mythic explanation that Isabella's soul joins other women who died giving birth who help the sun to set. Jimmy, himself, explains to Paco that the family, including his son, should "think of [him as] dead." The resurgence of isolation and pain in Jimmy's life leads directly to his return to the *pinta*, though more importantly it targets Jimmy's character as a discursive site for competing conceptions of family and fatherhood. That Jimmy refuses to acknowledge or to show responsibility to his son, Carlito, provides one explanation for the boy's delinquency. Like his father, Carlito "gets into a lot of trouble, pero he's got a lot of spirit." José's earthy explanation, "when the corn is strong, so are the weeds," provides an alternative reading and reinforces Paco's holistic view that Jimmy carries burdens for others.

"Something powerful," though, happens when Jimmy sees his son after his release from prison. That Carlito rejects Jimmy's attempts to show fatherly affection reminds Jimmy that "sometimes you don't get things back," and he reviews the loss of Chucho. Jimmy negotiates his role as father, realizing an important lesson: "I never thought about what

[Carlito] needed. I have never been there for him." Ultimately Jimmy asks Carlito to help him look for his father: "maybe you could help me find your father, get to know him better." At once, their reunion refutes traditional and sociological descriptions of family and macho behavior, but more significantly Jimmy promises to shed the isolation built into his sense of imprisonment. Both Isabella and Carlito induce Jimmy's transformation and adoption of "new" strategies to overcome the burdens of his past. Through a contest of identities--*pinto*, *vato*, son, husband, and father--divergent philosophies and cultures give shape to a reconfiguration and reaffirmation of the Chicano family. Like the *rasquache* decor of the Sánchez home, Maria and José believe that a piece of each family member's spirit remains in the home. Mirrored by the mismatched dining set, each family member imparts a different facet to the ever-changing and enduring Chicano family. With faith in their survival *moviditas*, coping strategies, Jimmy and his family move beyond typical boundaries and reaffirm the *familia*, revealed in *My Family* through pluralistic integration and a diversity of cultures and traditions. Suggested by the closing scene, in which a subtly softened image of José and Maria, sitting in their dining room chatting over a cup of coffee, dissolves to a long shot of the bridges across which people travel, Jimmy and his family favor unity to redraw the portrait of the Chicano family by remembering "mi familia."

The dialogue between *American Me* and *My Family* retraces the historical development of Mexican American representations, mirroring various theoretical and cultural treatments. *My Family* and, to a lesser extent, *American Me* reveal the confluence of historical and traditional conceptions of the Chicanos, Chicanas, and the "families" to which they belong in their formulations of screen types. As such, both films reflect pluralistic and negotiative methods of characterization. Incorporating divergent cultural codes--including race, ethnicity, gender, and power structures--in order to portray the diversity of the Chicano community, *American Me* and *My Family* provide a relevant context in which to consider how *Mi Vida Loca* and other films incorporating a feminist voice tackle these complex issues.

## END NOTES, CHAPTER THREE

<sup>1</sup> Ella Shohat points to this poststructuralist definition of ethnic as "other" in relation to the dominant (215-16), and Jude Davies and Carol R. Smith reverse this practice by centralizing a "feminist" viewpoint and, thereby, deconstructing the dominant masculine viewpoint (51-52).

<sup>2</sup> The "by, for, and about" criteria for Chicano film was created by Chicano filmmakers themselves. See "Towards the Development of a Raza Cinema" by Francisco X. Camplis and "Notes on Chicano Cinema" by Jason C. Johansen.

<sup>3</sup> "No Sunshine," performed by MC Kid Frost and written by Arturo Molino, Jr. and Bill Withers, appears on the *American Me* soundtrack.

<sup>4</sup> Newman uses aspects of state theory to argue that *American Me* "reterritorializes" cultural space through issues of violence and gender.

<sup>5</sup> Often cited for associating the Chicano family with adaptability, Mario T. García argues that the constancy provided by the family as an institution is the single most important influence on the Mexican American immigrant's transition into American society (Barrera, *Work* 118-39). Johnson states that the centrality of the family "permeates virtually every scholarly work" on Latin cultural experience (14). Carrillo-Beron notes the need for more comparative

studies, scientifically based as opposed to theoretical, on the Mexican American family structure (1-2).

6 Norman Humphrey and Robert Jones present sociological theories in the 1940s which found the social science "myth."

7 Fregoso, focusing on issues of spectatorship, argues that *American Me's* realism effectively speaks to its specifically-Chicano audience.

8 Williams acknowledges that the events which transpired in the California prison system during the summer and fall of 1973 made "lockdowns" routine in threatening situations. Those events included over 500 stabbings, of which Williams notes that California officials attributed up to 75% to warring Chicano factions, namely "The Family" and "*Nuestra Familia*" (131-33).

9 Octavio Romano-V points to Anglocentric social sciences as the source of the "distorted" view of Chicano history ("*Anthropology*" 43).

10 Paz elucidates the uses of the word, "*chingar*." Though in some uses the verb evokes an aggressive-sexual connotation, Paz settles on the more general definition: to do a "violent act" to another, wounding or harming (73-82).

11 Newman aligns Julie with "rape victims" in *American Me* (99). Fregoso mistakenly describes this crucial scene, stating that Santana "attempting to sodomize Julie . . . reaches orgasm" exactly as the prison rape-murder takes place (132-33).



12 In Lovell, Olmos explains that Universal studios demanded that Santana's sodomy of Julie be removed from the film (14). The collaborative result reveals Julie's struggle, thus suggesting her resistance to Santana's macho power.

13 Since Keller's and Noriega's landmark studies on Chicano cinema, numerous other book-length works have examined the issue of Mexican-American representation. Victor Fuentes, who claims that outdated images of Chicanos still prevail in American cinema (233), stands among the many contemporary scholars analyzing the representation of Mexican Americans in film.

14 Nava explains the symbolic and multicultural importance of bridges to the film's "mythic structure" in an interview with Dennis West (28).

15 As early as the 1970s, sociologists such as Kuper recognized the complexity involved in explaining Mexican immigrant and Mexican American character types. Kammeyer, theorizing urban movement as a dominant cause, notes the diversity of cultural influences on the Chicano character (164, 299). In a more overt move to displace *machismo* as a cultural influence, Keefe and Padillo show how the family essentially comprises the Chicano world view, making "life meaningful" (10, 142-44).

16 Reviews such as Richard Corliss' notes that *El Mariachi* made a "big bang" while spending "few bucks."

Reports claim that Rodriguez's budget for shooting the independent feature, his first, was around \$7,000.00. See chapter five.

17 Jesús Martín-Barbero distinguishes between the various levels of "politics" influencing the formulation of society (459).

## CHAPTER FOUR

### FEMMES FATALES: CHICANA FEMINISM IN FILM

#### **"The Many-Headed Demon of Oppression"**

In their collection of "writings by radical women of color," *This Bridge Called My Back*, Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa describe the unique social position of non-white women in the United States. Though *This Bridge* creates a hopeful vision of absolute equality, enabled through a "unified movement" among women of color, it tells of the "many-headed demon of oppression" Chicanas must slay in order to gain their freedom (195). On the basis of race and ethnicity, Chicanas historically have faced a legacy of oppression as members of a Chicano community; however, unlike their male counterparts, Chicanas have met a second form of discrimination on the basis of gender, both within as well as outside their own communities. Chicanas, therefore, have been doubly removed from the (Eurocentric, patriarchal) dominant U.S. tradition. During the civil rights movements starting in the late 1960s, Chicanas often were deprived of the gains made by women in the feminist movement as well as those made by Chicanos in the *movimiento*. Paradoxically, those social movements designed to instill equality and recover an American liberal democratic ideal in fact reinforced the unfair social policies they ostensibly fought against. So, in the last three decades of the 20th century, as some racist and sexist barriers fell, Chicanas often found

themselves less advantaged than other marginalized communities by social changes, leaving their cultural identification, perhaps, more "territorialized" than others. A history of Chicana cultural identification reveals their social position at a nexus of racial, ethnic, and gender discrimination.

Consistent with and inherently tied to the social science "myth" of the Chicano family, La Chicana represents, according to sociological, mythical, and historical explanations, the obverse of the macho Chicano male. Most importantly, Chicanas remain passive and subordinate to their male counterparts, even accepting abuse and losing their independence for the good of their families and macho men (Hayden 20; Madsen 22; Mirandé, *Chicano* 147-49). Myths such as *La Chingada* reinforce these sociological views, though, as Ana Castillo argues, the history of "male supremacist practices of the Mexicas (Aztecs)," which subjugate women, goes back even further than Spanish-Mexican colonialism (14-15).

Though starting in the 1970s Chicano studies reassessed the social function of the Chicano family and the Chicano husband and father in it, thus redefining the significance of *machismo*, cultural critics agree that Chicana social roles remain much more persistent (Mirandé, *Chicana* 5). The slow change for Chicana culture most likely results from its doubly-marginalized status, even within marginalized male-dominated Chicano or Eurocentric, middle-class feminist

communities, suffering from multiple forms of discrimination. Across a political spectrum, from radical to liberal, feminist Chicanas, *feministas*, agree that Chicana cultural identification must move out from behind the shadows of *machismo*, yet the strategies and ideologies of the camps greatly differ.

Like some other Third World feminist groups, Chicana radical *feministas* adopt nationalist agendas from the *movimiento*, sometimes manifested in the *palomilla*, *clica*, or homosocial gang (Mirandé, *Chicano* 158; Tong 237). Like the gangs of their male counterparts, the racially-exclusive Chicana social groups form familial bonds of unity "por vida" ("for life") as statements of Chicanisma separatism, which offer solidarity and cultural expression at the price of a regressive and divisive identity. Moreover, as Chicana gangs incorporate militant agendas in a trans-gender adaptation of *machismo*, violence and division obscure the realities of differences in race, ethnicity, gender and destroy the hope for unity inherent in America's democratic society.

Liberal feminist Chicanas, on the other hand, warn against the dangers of conflicts that feed on nationalist agendas (Martínez 239). Rather than taking up a gun of their own in a counter-attack, liberal *feministas* claim that Chicanas use their "*mestiza conscientizacion*"--a unique consciousness derived from bringing to life the mix of races, histories, and cultures of the Americas--to gain identity and strength from the "internal solidarity of the family," social

unity, and the "connections of all things" in the universe (Baca Zinn 29; Castillo 220; Anzaldúa, *Borderlands* 377-78).<sup>1</sup> "Xicanisma," as Ana Castillo urges, cannot be a mirror of patriarchal elitism, but rather should build and mend alliances throughout American culture (216). Though dissimilar in their methods and degrees of success, *feministas* work to overcome the legacy of *machismo* and its various affiliations with Chicano families and American culture.

It is no coincidence that *machismo* operates as a key convention in Chicano gangxploitation films, as exemplified by *American Me* as well as *Blood In, Blood Out: Bound By Honor, Walk Proud, Boulevard Nights*, and others. The lopsided battle between macho strength and a feminine "glimmer of hope" in *American Me* and other Chicano gangxploitation films reveals the extent to which *machismo* has become a convention in both Chicano and other mainstream Hollywood films. Feminine strength, if it appears at all, merely highlights the domination of masculine strength, as the ineffectiveness of Julie's *hembrismo* points to Santana's too-far-gone *machismo* in *American Me*. The social activist work of Chicana film culture, then, must determine how *machismo* as a cinematic convention influences positively or adversely cultural identification. Is *machismo*, especially as it is defined and appears in big-budget action sequences and with sensationalistic glamour on the big screen, one of the "many-headed demons" robbing Chicanas and their families of their

humanity and, thus, killing America's democratic spirit? How might female-voiced Chicano films recover a liberal democratic ideal in American film and culture?

### ***Feministas (Chicana Feminists) in Film***

Like a newborn child, Chicana film culture at the end of the 20th century is not yet fully developed, but promises (like film culture as a whole) growth as it matures. Like their male counterparts, though in even smaller numbers, Chicana media artists began during the Chicano power movements of the 1960s making short-format films, documentaries, and local television programs mostly through independent productions and often with unstable budgets and for localized audiences. As did other Chicano media artists, Chicanas suffused their film and television work with the nationalist politics of the Chicano power movements, which rarely allowed for female-centered expressions.

While several male Chicano filmmakers crossed over to mainstream markets starting in the 1980s, the few Latina filmmakers recognized in Chicano film studies (women like Sylvia Morales and Lourdes Portillo) maintained their low visibility by avoiding--or being denied access to--dominant film production avenues. There may be an ideological dimension to these female filmmakers refusing to make inroads to mainstream film, as Ramón Saldivar argues: in their fight with the "many-headed demon," Chicana filmmakers create "a critique of critiques of oppression" that are "counter-

hegemonic to the second-power," thus battling both racism and sexism (173). Rejecting the cultural hegemony associated with big-budget, mainstream productions amounts, as Fregosa argues, to resistance against an American patriarchal tradition ("Chicana" 190-91). And, creating a discursive space separate from traditional feminist scholarship allows for consideration of specifically ethnic and racial issues as they intersect with Chicana cultural identification.<sup>2</sup> Thus, productions "outside" the Eurocentric and male-dominated systems represent Chicanas making films on their "own terms" and not the dominant culture's; this is true, according to Fregosa, even within the traditionally marginalized, male-oriented "Chicano canon" ("Chicana"). But taking the traditional criteria of Chicano film--"by, for, about Chicanos"--to its logical progression for Chicana film culture--"by, for, and about Chicanas"--results in even stricter exclusivity and severely limits the possibilities of Chicana film culture from propagating socially active statements regarding ethnicity and gender.

American film and culture are hampered more than they are advanced by such exclusive definitions, determined racially, sexually, or both.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, as studio bosses like Darryl F. Zanuck maintained, no film is a success if no one sees it; this philosophy stands for commercial success as well as social activism, because even the most incisive film argument goes to waste if it has no audience to work upon. The greatest advantage of Chicano feature films, including



those that are female-centered, remains their ability to address their often socially provocative messages to diverse audiences. How might feature films temper the demands of Hollywood conventions with innovative aesthetics in order to both meet the expectations of a wide audience and provide a socially provocative message? Chicana feature film, accessible to mainstream audiences, could effectively redress the inequality and unfair social position women of color endure and, furthermore, make progress toward America's democratic ideal.

Rosa Linda Fregosa acknowledged in a 1992 article that in terms of mainstream feature films, "little evidence" suggested that Chicanas have escaped their "relative invisibility" ("Chicana" 189). And though in 1995 Fregosa praised *Mi Vida Loca/ My Crazy Life* for its "gender politics" and described it as the "best mainstream film on Chicano gangs," the "first commercial film about girl gangs" as well as "the first mainstream film about Chicanas," she also qualified it as a "white girl's story" because Allison Anders, its director-writer, is an American woman of European descent ("Hanging" 36). Since then, *Selena* has joined the short list of Chicana feature films and provides some "glimmer of hope" for the future of Chicana film. While the exclusion of Chicanos and Chicanas deserves critical attention as systemic bias and minority under-representation may be determined, Chicana film culture as well as America at large suffers from such defensive posturing. *Mi Vida Loca*

(1994) and other Chicana feature films move beyond essentialist--racist and sexist--definitions of Chicana film and speak to a mass audience. The marketing schemes-- including a "three-pronged" marketing campaign and "making of" featurettes on HBO and Cinemax--with which Sony Pictures Entertainment handled *Mi Vida Loca* hint at the film's cross-over potential, not only appealing to audiences of different backgrounds but redrawing boundaries among gender, race, ethnicity, and the family in American culture (Klady 15; Toumarkine 1). Multicultural aesthetics in these films present a social function that at once integrates diverse cultural expressions, like other Chicano feature films, while foregrounding issues revolving around sexism and gender construction. Chicana cultural identification inverts and reverses the ethnic struggle Chicanos face living between dominant traditions, while also addressing gender issues. In their *feminista* expressions, Chicana films reinforce American characteristics of equality and democratic liberty, although this proves especially problematic in the case of *Mi Vida Loca* since some of the feminist strength its characters gain comes from an adoption of destructive and regressive *machismo*.

Despite her commercial success, critical achievements, and acceptance into the industry, Allison Anders subtly suggests that her professional status remains "marginal" (Rich 15). The female director has built a reputation for herself in the "next wave" of filmmakers by scoring profits

with emotionally-charged "melodramas" on relatively small budgets (Anders, "Contemporary" 27; Levy 40).<sup>4</sup> Anders won recognition at the 1992 Sundance Film Festival as well as a New York Critics Circle Best New Director Award and a collection of Independent Spirit Awards for her first solo feature, *Gas Food Lodging*. A graduate from what she called the "Sundance class of 1992," Anders maintains negotiations with Columbia and a number of other Hollywood companies for future film projects as one of the most sought-after filmmakers of the 1990s (Biskind 76; Levy 25). And still, gender politics at the center of her films set Anders apart from most of her Hollywood contemporaries.

A self-professed "proud feminist," anchored in the "consciousness-raising" fight against "patriarchal values," Anders admits to feeling obligated to create diverse expressions of women, which rarely appear in mainstream film (Anders, "Contemporary" 26; Rich 15). Though focused, as viewers recognize, on dramatizing in all of her films the "struggles of women," who through a "bond with one another" find a balance between their "material poverty" and "emotional richness," in *Mi Vida Loca* Anders contextualizes her feminism in the social politics of an L.A. barrio (Rich 15). Anders' choice of context perplexed some viewers not prepared for her revolutionary turns, perhaps accounting for the film's only modest return at just under \$3.3 million during its domestic theatrical run.

Like Lourdes Portillo's *Despues del Terremoto/ After the Earthquake*, Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderland/ La Frontera*, and Sandra Cisneros' *La Casa en Mango Street/ The House on Mango Street*, Allison Anders' *Mi Vida Loca/My Crazy Life*--as all of these titles indicate--deals with the complex interstices of Latina culture in between dominant traditions, crossing and deconstructing the borders that traditionally have separated American culture. In fact, *Mi Vida Loca* shares a great deal with *House on Mango Street* in its non-traditional narrative strategies. Set in an inner-city barrio, *Mi Vida Loca* effectively captures a snapshot, sometimes ethnographically true, of the lives and lifestyle of Chicana and Chicano young adults, tempered by Anders' stylized melodramatics. Rather than prioritize one story in a linear progression, Anders chooses to include several interdependent stories told in three loosely organized chapters. These stories are told from a number of perspectives from male and female characters in English, Spanish, *Calo*, and other American slang. Incorporating different viewpoints in a team of voice-overs places the Mexican *testimonio* or testimonial narrative alongside the classic paradigm's reliance on mimetic conventions, giving a mainstream audience through a multicultural aesthetic "authentic" insight into the Chicana and Chicano characters and their "vida loca."

One story recounts the life-long friendship of two Chicanas, Angel Aviles' *Sad Girl* and Seidy Lopez's *Mousie*, which is strengthened by their being "jumped into" a local

gang, later jeopardized by their jealousy over a neighborhood vato, Jacob Vargas' Ernesto, then finally reunified after his death by their mutual need for support, which they find in the feminist bonds of their *clica* (gang). A second story tells of the epistolary romance between Sad Girl's sister, La Blue Eyes (Magali Alvarado), and a vato from a rival barrio, El Duran (Jesse Borrego). El Duran, like Olmos' Santana, embodies a dual vision of the Chicano whose negative macho characteristics allow his self-defense but destroy his hopefulness and humanity. In prison El Duran shows his sensitivity and human compassion through writing poetry and letters, but when he returns to the battlefield of the barrio, his pride and gangster *machismo* insure his survival. A third story focuses on the release from prison of Giggles (Marlo Marron), an older homegirl, who served time for a crime committed by her boyfriend. Hopeful when she first returns to the barrio that she can make a legitimate lifestyle for herself by getting a job in the computer field, Giggles quickly realizes that *la vida loca*, characterized by homosocial gang solidarity and outlaw activities, remains her only access to autonomy. A wrap-around story follows Ernesto's devotion to a souped-up truck, branded "*suavecito*," and what happens to it after his murder. Punning with his name, the film reveals Ernesto's misdirected dedication to a show truck at the expense of his children and their mothers, Sad Girl and Mousie, as well as his own well-being. His truck and his lucrative drug-dealing business serve as the

symbols of macho power that his homeboys, El Duran's rival Chicano gang, and the homegirls all vie for after his death.

The initial reception of *Mi Vida Loca* did not match Anders' previous success. A number of mainstream reviewers rejected the ideology offered in the film, automatically seeing gangs as negatively stereotypical.<sup>5</sup> These reviews ignore the political possibilities of Chicana gang depiction, and they suggest a stronger objection to the film's lack of "authenticity." In spite of the film's "daring and gritty realism," its "faithful rendition of the style, stance, posture, gesture, mannerism, and speech of so many *Pachucas-Cholas-Homegirls*" living in the Los Angeles Echo Park barrio, where the film is set, Fregosa criticizes Anders for the "substance" of the "life and culture of Chicanas" in the film, lacking their "own point of view" ("Hanging" 36-37). Bad press after the film's opening at the Cannes Film Festival surprised fans of Anders' work and somewhat hurt the film's reputation, but a number of these critics overlook the complex relationships among the stories, citing dramatic or narrative problems with the film's "flawed storytelling" (Willis 12; Levy 382). And yet, several of these same reviewers appreciate how *Mi Vida Loca* veers from the gangxploitation genre and inverts the Hollywood conventions of glorifying and glamorizing "male-themed" violence, without fully recognizing the film's narrative strategies (Levy 381; Fregosa, "Hanging" 36; Gleiberman 33). Anders theorizes that *Mi Vida Loca* might have suffered from viewers expecting to

see more sensationalistic gang violence, like a "Girlz-n-the-Hood," and from their disappointment when the violence fails to materialize on the screen (Rich 15). But the narrative strategies and themes Anders chooses for *Mi Vida Loca* subvert rather than reinforce the *machismo* essential to Hollywood's gang films. *Mi Vida Loca* self-reflexively critiques the gang genre. Anders explicitly denounces Hollywood's use of convention as a misogynistic brokerage of power, citing the three-act structure, linear goal-driven narrative, and typical pacing and editing as patriarchal, "masculine models" (qtd. in Dargis 60). But Anders presents more than a feminist revision of patriarchal power in *Mi Vida Loca*; her unconventional narrative strategies set a stage in which Chicana *feminista* is expressed. That Anders, a white woman, treated the theme of a Latina gang proved to be the reviewers' greatest objection to the film. In her portrayal of the Chicana gang, Anders combines her own personal authority with careful research and collaboration. The complex narrative scheme, assembling a number of voices and perspectives, proves to be the film's greatest strength.

Like the Chicanas' "la vida loca," Anders' own experiences have involved a cycle of neglectful and abusive men, poverty, and single motherhood.<sup>6</sup> Breaking this cycle of abuse and inventing a generative lifestyle from her disadvantage proved to be the key to success for Anders, as she tells of her way of "turning what was shameful into this kind of boastfulness" (Benenson 17). Indeed, in her feminist

subversion of *machismo*, Anders uses an "underdog sensibility" and resourceful strategies in line with *rasquachismo*. But to avoid the trappings of a white filmmaker colonizing the images of Chicanas, Anders followed the collectivist model used in *Salt of the Earth* almost a half century before. Much of the visuals of the film, including the use of low-angle closeups on characters, Anders credits to the film's cinematographer, Rodrigo Garcia. Like the filmmakers of *Salt*, Anders used interviews with Chicanas and a committee of readers from the barrio to critique and revise the script to insure valid expressions of Chicana and Chicano perspectives. To heighten the social authenticity, several real-life gangmembers play main characters, including Nelida Lopez as Whisper. Moreover, Anders based her script stories on actual events she witnessed or heard about during her ten-year residence in Echo Park.

By combining her own experiences of abuse with the historical condition of oppression for Chicanas, Anders blends cultural influences into an innovative argument against sexist and racist exclusion that is a part of America's history. Anders explained before a screening of her film that her "goal was to humanize people who don't get represented on the screen," referring to Chicanas and women in general (Fregosa, "Hanging" 37). By foregrounding gender issues alongside the ethnic struggle of Chicana cultural identification, *Mi Vida Loca* reveals through its multicultural aesthetics the destructiveness of inequality to



America's democratic society. In its tragic conclusion, *Mi Vida Loca* urges its mainstream audience to work for integration of America's diverse society.

### **Sins of the Father in *Mi Vida Loca***

At first glance, Chicanos and Chicanas in *Mi Vida Loca* resemble stereotypical Hollywood film characterizations. In fact, *machismo* serves as a hub for the characters and plot, as it does in other Chicano gangxploitation films. That Sad Girl, Mousie, Ernesto, and others in the barrio accept their misfortune fatalistically harkens back to Paz's explanation of an ethnic stigma and Mexican national inferiority complex and its tradition (30). The barrio, like a prison, immobilizes the young Chicanos as they decide there is "no reason to leave" the one place where they get "respect." Traditional territories in American culture are upheld here as they were in *Zoot Suit*, *Ballad of Gregorio Cortez*, *American Me*, and most gang pictures. But, as opposed to *pachuquismo* as a form of resistance that provided a self-defined cultural identity denied by the dominant ideologies of its historical context, the violent lifestyle of Chicano gangs as exemplified in *Mi Vida Loca* fosters hate and proves counter-productive. Like Santana's "Family," Ernesto and his homeboys get "respect" from the fear they incite in their enemies; however, *Mi Vida Loca* subtly yet decisively undercuts the power associated with *machismo*, significant because the film not only subverts the centerpiece of the

Chicano film stereotype, but also calls into question issues surrounding gender construction.

Even more than *My Family*, where Chucho and his rival spar with one another and exchange blood-thirsty expressions while Paco's comic description exposes their "macho bullshit," *Mi Vida Loca* mocks the macho pride and strength of Ernesto and other *cholos* in the Echo Park gang through the irony of their own actions. While feeding his son, Ernesto baby-talks to the infant that he can grow up to be "big and strong," like his dad, but this becomes a joke on Ernesto as the criteria for being "big and strong" become clear.

Ernesto deals drugs in the very same neighborhood in which he grew up, yet he never considers the harm his "business" does to his home or neighbors. After having a child out of wedlock with Mousie, Ernesto betrays her by having another child out of wedlock with her best friend, Sad Girl. Though this broken trust creates a conflict between the two young women, which must be settled by a "throw down," Ernesto continues his infidelity, lying to each woman and promising his love and protection. Ernesto's murder by a dissatisfied customer, a female junkie, at the moment he had promised protection and "mi corazon, por vida" (his love, for the rest of his life) to both Sad Girl and Mousie, reveals his inability to give his love and protection to the women in his "families." With the money from his drug sales, Ernesto helps Mousie and Sad Girl provide for his two children, though he uses much of his money to detail his mini truck,

"suavecito." The fact that he chooses to invest money into a pickup that he "loves as much as [his] kids" while his children live off of welfare reveals his ineffectiveness and irresponsibility as a provider. But that Ernesto keeps the truck a secret from the two mothers of his children because he fears their reaction proves his cowardice and inability to manage his familial obligations. Moreover, because he hides the truck, the two women, after they discover it, question his integrity and character as a father, provider, and man. As a drug dealer, Ernesto relishes and takes pride in the control he holds over junkies, explicitly aligning it with masculinity: "you've got to have the nuts for this kind of business . . . sometimes it gets me hard just to say '¡Al rato!' ('Wait!')." And to back up his position of power, Ernesto packs a gun "that doesn't work for shit" and will not even cock, although it looks good for the clients.

Ernesto's ineffective (or impotent) *machismo* sanctions the cycle of abuse that women in the barrio endure, where fathers of their children leave Chicanas to raise the children single-handedly or with little support. Giggles later explains this as her fate, Rachel appears a single mother, and certainly Sad Girl and Mousie are subject to the cycle. Even La Blue Eyes, who falls in love through only a man's writings from prison, is misled by the lies of El Duran, saying he will love her "*por vida*" ("for the rest of his life") but concealing his identity and refusing to even see her after his release from prison. The ineffectiveness

of Chicano *machismo* is clear, yet when struggling to find their own form of autonomy and expression of power, the young Chicanas choose to adapt their homeboys' violent and aggressive strategies for their own causes. Although this trans-gender adaptation of *machismo* at first appears to provide a radical *feminista* escape from subordination and a pathway to autonomy and cultural identity, it actually highlights the destructiveness of exclusionary politics for Chicanas, Chicanos, and American culture at large. As in other examples of the gangxploitation genre but now with a feminist slant, Chicanos and Chicanas reinforce the territorial walls dividing them from other Americans.

Through a voice-over testimonial, Sad Girl shares her thoughts on *la vida loca* in her Echo Park neighborhood: she must "take life as it comes, what comes around goes around." In her younger days, Sad Girl was "too happy" for the tag, but "this crazy life" has taken its toll on the young woman. As young girls, Sad Girl and Mousie formed a feminine bond of solidarity, typical of Anders' characters. The change over time in the way gang solidarity manifests itself suggests the importance of the gang's social context. The "años," older gang members who have survived, discuss the way "gangster life" can give members a false sense of security. Bertila Damas' Rachel, an older Chicana who provides stability and advice to the younger homegirls, complains that the new generation looks less "feminine" and too much "like boys." Recently after Giggles' release from prison Rachel warns her

that "things have changed" for the worse, because the homegirls party with rival hoods, show disrespect for their families and vatos, use guns, and sell drugs. By the time Sad Girl and Mousie join their barrio gang, they must be "jumped in" to "prove [they] were down," and their homegirl gang relies on aggression to settle conflicts just as the homeboys do.

So, when Sad Girl and Mousie decide to settle their conflict over Ernesto's betrayal, the situation requires that the two "life-long" friends must engage in a fight that will supposedly end in one of their deaths. This consequence of the feminist adoption of macho strategies is only narrowly averted as the women recognize their commitment to one another and their "serious past." Anders highlights this moment with an interesting modification of mainstream film conventions that point to the ethnic and racist issues at hand. A montage shows the two women preparing for the duel. Sad Girl embraces her father, who tells her she "deserves a good time." Intercutting aligns this scene with Mousie saying good-bye to her son and warning him against the gangster lifestyle: "If I ever hear about you gang-banging, I'm gonna haunt your little macho ass." The parallel editing highlights the female characters sharing emotional moments with their families, eroding the "familial bonds" corrupted by their gang. More to the point, as Mousie's warning to her son explicitly states, the emotional moments work against the violence of gang-banging.

Nevertheless, the two women walk through lonely streets to their destined meeting. As opposed to the often gritty realism in other scenes, this montage creates a romantic tone, perhaps borrowing from Latin American magical realism, as in Nava's *El Norte* and *My Family*. Low-angle medium shots balancing the night sky and surroundings with the characters and primitivist music all suggest the supernatural "magic" of the night. Finally, as the two women confront one another, parallel editing ties this moment with the possible shooting of El Duran, driving through his rival territory as a sign that he is willing to fight for the truck, and the actual shooting of Ernesto. However, rather than show the bloody violence of the shooting, a materialization of the sensationalistic violence of which so many gang films take advantage, the film allows the gun shot to "echo through the hills," while the only visual image is the night sky with a full moon, concluding the mystical tone of the montage and suggesting the *mestiza* consciousness the girls might share. Although the women are deeply touched by the violence and the gang has gained some independence by adopting macho values, the montage reveals the moral the women will need to learn: that relying on violence "to prove a point" is ultimately counterproductive.

This political shift in the girl gang might be best seen in a comparison of two meetings. Early in the film, Sad Girl and the homegirls throw Mousie a baby shower; the interaction among the girls is casual and celebratory. Near the end of

the film, with the organizational help of Giggles, out of prison and cognizant of the fact that she cannot escape "*la vida loca*" by applying for a job in the computer field, the homegirls meet again. This second meeting reveals that the gang stands in defiance of the homeboys, who have met and decided, without Sad Girl's or Mousie's approval, to enter "*suavecito*" into a car show competition. The girls meet to decide by majority vote to approach the homeboys and propose they sell the truck to help provide for Ernesto's children. Although this change provides the homegirls autonomy, democratic franchise, and some expression, because other gang activities involve the violent strategies of the gangs, the political shift leads to the tragic conclusion of the film.

El Duran, the leader of the rival River Side gang, joins the Echo Park homeboys and the homegirls in claiming a right to Ernesto's truck. Not that he likes it--in fact, he despises it--but because it is a "matter of honor," El Duran demands that the truck be given to him. And because he is driving through the barrio both when Ernesto gets shot and the truck disappears, taken by a barrio boy for a joy ride, Ernesto's brother, Art Esquer's Shadow, and his gang believe that El Duran is guilty of both killing Ernesto and stealing his truck. For these unfounded suspicions, the Echo Park homeboys plan El Duran's murder. Less severely, a plan by the homegirls to reveal the truth of El Duran's identity to La Blue Eyes will coincide with his death, suggesting a second cause, his mistreatment of La Blue Eyes, for his

capital punishment. Once the execution takes place, off-screen with understated visual treatment, the workings of the barrio seem to fall back in order: the homeboys possess the truck and the homegirls through Whisper and Giggles have started their "own operation," taking on the late Ernesto's drug business. Sad Girl's voice-over gives a summary of the lessons the Chicanas have learned:

By the time our boys are twenty-one, most of them will be disabled, in prison, or dead. We [Chicanas] need to learn new skills for the future, because we can't count on the boys to take care of us and our kids. We have our own meetings now . . . and we defend our own neighborhood. By the time my daughter grows up, Echo Park will belong to her, and she can be whatever she wants to be. The homegirls have learned to pack weapons, because our operations have become more complicated . . . we are safe and practical. Women don't use weapons to prove a point. Women use weapons for love.

The homegirls believe that they have effectively modified the exclusionary politics and violently aggressive strategies of the macho gang for their own purposes. However, as in ancient tragedies which rely on vengeful justice, the social order does not last long. The penultimate scene shows the ineffectiveness of the girl gang's actions and the horror of their future under such macho principles.



Shadow, the gunman for El Duran's allegedly retributive killing, stands outside a barrio store next to the young daughter of Julian Reyes' Big Sleepy. As Big Sleepy finishes his shopping errand inside the store, a car full of Chicanas from River Side drives up to the sidewalk and attempts a drive-by execution of Shadow to avenge El Duran's death. This alone proves the ineffectiveness and destructiveness of the new mode of expression the Chicanas have adopted, in fact, using guns to prove a point as the macho Chicanos had before. Where Julie in *American Me* represents the "glimmer of hope" because she denounces Santana and all his macho ways, this reveals the tragic conclusion where the girls actually adopt the macho-violent homeboy strategy. The adoption of *machismo* by the girl gang carries with it the heavy burden of patriarchy's inequality and of brutish inhumanity. But the tragedy of this story is heightened because the shooter misses Shadow and kills the young, innocent Chicana by accident. Again, the violence takes place off-screen, but in slow motion the up-turned tricycle wheels reveal the tragic human cost of the new *feminista* strategies. Not only does this scene reveal the self-destructiveness of violence and macho strength, but gender issues highlight the counterproductivity of *machismo* whether in the hands of Chicanos or Chicana *feministas*. The final scene reveals the newly formed Chicano family, walking arm-in-arm away from the burial plot of the young Chicana. Rather than celebrating a union of love, this family becomes

a reminder of the human loss and a warning against the exclusionary politics of *machismo*.

**Viva la Mujer: A "Glimmer of Hope" in American Film**

Despite its depressing tone and tragic conclusion, *Mi Vida Loca* does imply the potential for a hopeful future for Chicanas and American culture at large. When describing Julie's *hembrismo*, her strength of character and survival strategies, Edward James Olmos referred to her as the "glimmer of hope" as it appears in *American Me* (Lovell 14; Fregosa, *Bronze* 133). Like *Mi Vida Loca* and *American Me*, Chicano gangxploitation films and many American feature films with Hispanic themes highlight the negative traits of the macho Chicano as a cultural marker; however, where exploitive films use these characteristics as an easily applied convention, some Chicano feature films create arguments for change and imply a promise for equality in the future. *Mi Vida Loca*'s self-reflexive criticism of the gangxploitation convention of *machismo* provides cautionary weight against exclusionary politics in American culture. When feminist-grounded issues attempt to disrupt this pattern in American film, though, most often they appear as merely a "glimmer of hope" and little else.

*Mi Vida Loca* negotiates issues of ethnicity and gender construction in many of its formal transformations of classic film conventions. Perhaps most significantly, *Mi Vida Loca* follows the best examples in Chicano feature films, where

male domination is broken by strong female characters who act as agents of change in the film's message. Ironically, given the conservatism of the period, one of the first films that featured a feminist Chicana character was the transparently anti-McCarthy 1952 western, *High Noon*. The Mexican star turned Hollywood exotic mistress, Katy Jurado portrays Helen Ramirez, a woman on the fringe of Hadleyville's social structure because she is a "Mexican" and an unmarried woman. Yet, Helen expresses her intelligence and defiant independence with bravado rather than shame. Helen's position, "all alone in the world" consistent with the isolation and multiple forms of discrimination Chicanas face, allows her compassion and the unique perspective to understand the social pressure Gary Cooper's Will Kane endures. But Jurado's Helen does more than simply reaffirm Kane's sense of isolation and abandonment, she defines the moral point of the story and empowers Kane's bride, Grace Kelly's Amy, to act on her love for her newlywed husband in defense of his principles. In a discreet meeting with Amy, Helen urges her to set aside her pacifism, to stand by her husband and "fight" for justice.

The same year that *High Noon* showed in theaters, preparations had begun for *Salt of the Earth*, where Rosaura Revueitas' Esperanza expresses through her specifically female Chicana voice the miner families' fight for equality and human rights. And only a few years later in 1956, again, in a Hollywood western, *Giant*, Elsa Cardenas' Juana quietly

embodies the *Tejanas'* legacy of discrimination, even though she has married into the wealth and power of the Benedict family. Although less actively, Juana, like *High Noon's* Helen and *Salt's* Esperanza, symbolizes the inequality and racism leveled against Chicanos in U.S. society; moreover, Juana's relationship with three generations of Benedict men, father-in-law, husband, and son, reveals the growing trend in American culture toward integration. The lineage of "Jordans" ending with a Chicano boy, whom his grandfather, played by Rock Hudson, grows to love by shedding racial biases, symbolizes the "birth of Chicano culture" as a *mestizaje* of dominant traditions, which serves as an important convention in Chicano feature films. And Juana's entrance into this family, ironically one that has ascended to power through imperialistic conquest of the *Tejano* territory, highlights this shift toward integration through her female agency.

These examples are the exception, though, not the rule that Hollywood has followed over the last half of the 20th century. The multiple female characters expressing diverse perspectives in *Mi Vida Loca*, perhaps, mark a profound shift in the politics of Chicano film culture where Chicanas serve as active agents of social change. However, where *Mi Vida Loca* creates a warning against radical *feminista* adoption of destructive *machismo*, *Selena* highlights a liberal *feminista* cultural syncretism. Like the breakthrough *La Bamba*, which depicted a male musician "crossing over" to mainstream

market, a decade later *Selena* uses the musical bio-pic genre to do the same for a Chicana artist. Unlike traditional depictions of Chicanos and Chicanas in U.S. feature films, *Selena* departs from the violence and aggression in stereotypical portrayals, and as in *Mi Vida Loca* even the horror of her murder occurs off-screen, heightening the tragedy of her death. Mainstream viewers recognized and appreciated the respite from violence in this "fairy tale" story that stresses the "inspirational aspects of the singer's" life and offers a positive Chicana cultural identification (McCarthy, "*Selena*" 33).

In *Selena* (1997), Edward James Olmos' Abraham guides his young daughter's career toward the mainstream, because as a young musician himself, he was rejected by both Mexican and U.S. traditionalists for not fitting their respective image of an artist. Abraham warns Selena, portrayed by Jennifer Lopez, that "being Mexican-American is tough":

We've got to be twice as perfect as anybody else  
. . . our family has been here for centuries, and  
yet they treat us as if we've just swam across the  
Rio Grande . . . We've got to be more Mexican than  
the Mexicans, and more American than the Americans,  
both at the same time.

Abraham describes, in a corny speech that only a father could give his daughter, the legacy of oppression that Chicanos have faced in America and especially in the institutions of the United States. Selena, though, through the "magic" of

her music and talent "went right through . . . all those barriers" as if "they don't exist for" her. Significantly, Selena's rise comes as she performs with her family, helping to redefine the Chicano and American film family. After great success with her *Tejano* music in the U.S. and Mexico, Selena and her family know "she's ready" for the "cross-over." The thematic emphasis on crossing over, literally from *Tejano* to mainstream music markets, dramatizes the film's negotiation with ethnicity and gender constructions in its own attempt to appeal to a diverse, American mainstream, as reviewers acknowledged (Oppenheimer 62).

Thus, Selena's cross-over represents a greater social change in America, as suggested by her boyfriend's praise, "everybody's hopes and dreams are centered on you." And just as Selena proves she can make the cross-over to the mainstream, her family agrees, implying that her acceptance signifies a greater cultural compromise: "we've been ready for a long time." The integrational politics of Selena's cross-over success blend various cultural and historical influences. Concert footage, restaging Selena's last great performance in a sold-out Astrodome in Houston, Texas, opens and closes the film story, partially disrupting the historical truth of Selena's premature death. The concert program combines the doo-wop 1950s rock-n-roll that Abraham was never able to perform, disco and pop rock in English, and ballads in Spanish, a mix of genres and cultural forms. Like Ritchie Valens, Selena Quintanilla knew little Spanish and

was initially hesitant to sing in Spanish, but each artist making a conscious choice not only to sing in Spanish but to reposition traditional Mexican lyrics and genres into popular forms symbolizes pluralistic integration in America's late-20th century culture.

If Selena's real-life crossing over to mainstream music did in fact reflect a social shift toward integration and multiculturalism in American society, then the film effectively conveys how the power of art (music and film) expresses social attitude and identity. As a Chicana film, *Selena* prioritizes the voice of both a female and an ethnic minority who has endured the "many-headed demon." In addition, other multicultural aesthetics reinforce the *mestiza* consciousness that guides the film's symbolic crossing over. As Gregory Nava, director-writer, and Moctecuma Esparza, producer, have proven in their other films since the late-1980s, depicting Chicano identification necessitates a compromise among diverse cultural cues relevant to a mass audience. In fact, *Selena* grossed almost \$35.5 million in its fifteen-week U.S. theatrical run, profiting over its \$20 million budget--without counting international box-office returns or soundtrack sales. Much of the mainstream appeal of this film came from its stars: Jennifer Lopez, who set a record for highest paid Latina actor at \$1 million for her role; and, Edward James Olmos, who since his debut as an alcoholic immigrant coming to the U.S. "to make some money" in *Alambrista!* has garnered acclaim

and mass popularity for his acting and leadership in film culture. But more than star power makes this film a mainstream success. As *Variety's* headline suggested, the film's "cross-border appeal" carries a humanist "dream" (Sandler).

When EMI-Latin Chairman Jose Behar signed Selena Quintanilla in 1989 to a recording contract, he recognized her potential for mainstream success. Almost a decade later, Behar explained that the soundtrack to the film would prove to "Anglo and Hispanic audiences" Selena's talent. With promotional tie-ins to major international corporations like Coca-Cola, Anheiser-Busch, and Bank One, EMI-Latin promoted the film soundtrack with an "aggressive and comprehensive marketing campaign" in both English and Spanish to a mass audience. These business strategies behind the soundtrack mirrored the business strategies of the film. Warner Bros. executives believed that *Selena* had "universal appeal" and established promotions and distribution as such (Sandler 72). Likewise, the film's producers and director appreciated the complex issues surrounding the young Chicana's culture and thought that the beauty of her story would be "of interest to everybody" (Nava qtd. in Sandler 73). Nava and his crew treated Selena's story as "all-American, just as she was an all-American girl . . . an integral part of the fabric of American life" (Williams 52). Multicultural aesthetics in the film negotiate the complexity of showing Selena's ethnicity, gender, and cultural background as she struggles



to cross traditional barriers, while emphasizing that her story helps weave the fabric of America's diverse society.

Nava and his crew took advantage of their big budget and their access to Warner's high-tech production facilities. Nava and cinematographer, Edward Lachman, who worked on *The Day You Loved Me* and under Nava on *My Family*, made use of a number of formats and film stocks, and with editors they were able to tie these together in wide-screen (2.35:1) Super 35 technology.<sup>7</sup> These high-dollar techniques allowed the filmmakers horizontal compositions to show the liberation and free expression of the characters. More specifically, the filmmakers included "references from within Latino culture . . . to avoid clichés" through the guidance of *Tejana* artist Carmen Lomen Garza and Barbara Martinez Jitner, whose previous film experience included music videos for Los Lobos and documentaries for social organizations like the United Farm Workers (UFW). The Chicano painterly effects, the brilliant colors, and aleatory techniques drive a *rasquachismo* sensibility.

Nava and his crew followed the "school of 'working with what's there'" in terms of their resourceful filmmaking (Williams 59). Ironically, though, the film often employs sophisticated techniques to try to capture the sense of Chicano culture, one that traditionally relies on available resources. In shooting the concert scenes, for example, Nava relied on filming unrehearsed action with several cameras in the hopes of capturing a spontaneous energy in the actors.

Although this created additional expense, it revealed a more penetrating portrait of the film's characters. In addition, Nava explained that the film used pastel colors that are evocative of Chicano cultural influences "to weave the emotions of the story" and visually dramatize "the reality of what exists" for the young Chicana singer and her culture (Williams 55, 59). Lachman concurred that "blending three, four, or five colors that fight with each other or complement each other" serves as a "dynamic technique" to show "spontaneity" and resourcefulness that is central to her Chicanismo (Williams 53, 60). Color choices draw on the tradition of *rasquachismo* where members of an underclass may celebrate their innovativeness in making an advantage out of disadvantages, turning available resources, creativity, and talent into tools for success and expressions of cultural identity.

Perhaps the best example of the filmmakers' philosophy in treating Selena's story is revealed in the muralistic montage. Like a conventional montage, several images appear so that a cumulative symbolic relationship exists; however, rather than show images one after another and create coherency with parallel editing, the film's screen splits into triptych panels, reminiscent of the 1970s rock concert movies. *Selena* transcends the rock video conventions, though, by creating a muralistic, interdependent discursive space, where several "viewpoints" and symbolic associations related to Selena's story appear simultaneously. Geometric

matting in the Super 35 technology allows images shot in different formats and stocks to appear distinct yet unified. So, "real-life" home movies provided from executive producer and Selena's father shot on 16mm, "mock" home movies ostensibly shot in 8mm by Selena's film-sister during various tours, concert footage in 35mm, and images in other formats present a sort of mural of images on Selena's life (Williams 56). While these narrative devices required intensive and complex digital post-production techniques, they formed an innovative multicultural aesthetic that made use of big-budget Hollywood resources alongside the precious home movies of Selena's girlhood. Most importantly, though, the multicultural techniques in *Selena* empower Chicanas, including Selena as well as her "videographer" sister, through the voiced agency of narrative expression. In the multiple viewpoints that help give shape to the film biography of Selena is a tacit acknowledgment of equality across traditional racist and sexist lines.

Sadly, the artist who inspired such a film statement of democratic hope died young. While the real-life Selena Quintanilla Perez represents a "glimmer of hope" for an American ideal of democratic equality, a light that burned out before shining its brightest, the film image of Lopez's Selena testifies not only to the "magic" of her musical talent and energy but also to the shift in American social politics toward the cultural integration and *mestizaje* that her life represented. The film's thematic and formal

multicultural aesthetics poignantly reflect this symbolism. *Selena's* producer, Robert Katz, describes the story in Horatio Algerian terms as "a classic American dream that anybody under any circumstance can make it if they just persevere" (Sandler 73). The historical reality of Selena's life, though, leads American audiences to wonder if this American dream has yet been reached by a Chicana or Chicano. Perhaps, even more so than Selena, Robert Rodriguez has brought this dream to fruition in his filmmaking. Recalling the tagline for *La Bamba*, "Born to Poverty. Destined for stardom. He lived the American Dream," perhaps in Rodriguez's claim to fame the "cross-over" phenomenon reaches a new height.

## END NOTES, CHAPTER FOUR

1 Ana Castillo and other Chicana feminist theorists adopt the notion of political consciousness that Paulo Freire advances in his provocative sociological study of Latin American education and the working class, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Freire argues for a "mutual process" of social change in which classes interchange values and construct a "cultural synthesis" that allows a mode of "confronting" power relations and resolving contradictions between classes "to the enrichment of both" (28, 182-3). Hence, social change does not deny diversity but actually engenders it.

2 Feminist film scholarship, according to Jane Gaines, largely relies on psychoanalytic concepts of "sexual difference" where classic cinema favors the masculine voice and locates "the feminine, the opposite term, in the repressed or excluded" (198). One consequence of this methodology is that "class and racial differences have remained outside its problematic," reflecting a white, middle-class bias (Gaines 198).

3 From the Border Arts Workshop/*Taller de Arte Fronterizo*, "transcreative" theories replace the mythic homeland of *Aztlán* with the "cross-cultural" conception of "borderlands" where traditional hierarchies are dismantled and mestizo identities may form (Noriega, *Shot* 12-13). Christine List, representing a profound move in Chicano film studies toward "the mainstream," explores "trans-creative

strategies" in Chicano films that negate "older conceptions of ethnic cinemas" defined by their "difference" from "dominant culture" (148).

<sup>4</sup> Allison Anders defines her film work as "melodramas." She says that her films tell a story "from the inside out," charting "the interior journey of a character" and their actions, which happen as a result of their emotions ("Contemporary" 26; Rich 15).

<sup>5</sup> Rose Arrieta, explicitly from a Latina perspective, as well as Kevin Thomas agree with other reviewers who group Anders' portrayal of Chicana gangmembers with the gangxploitation genre (Arrieta 11; Thomas F4).

<sup>6</sup> Perhaps because *Gas Food Lodging* dealt explicitly with a single mother escaping a cycle of abuse by men in her life, this aspect of Anders' biography has become part of her celebrity, unfortunately, as Ruby Rich suggests, to the detriment of other aspects of her filmmaking (Levy 379; Rich 15).

<sup>7</sup> Debra Kaufman chronicles the "unique challenges" that post-production work on *Selena* presented. Warner Digital, CFI in Hollywood, and 525 Post Production contributed to the big-budget visual effects of the film, making its multicultural aesthetics more appealing to a popular audience.

CHAPTER FIVE  
THE AMERICAN DREAM: CROSS-OVERS  
INTO THE 21ST CENTURY

**A Pistolero in Hollywood**

When, in 1991, Robert Rodriguez journeyed from Austin, Texas, to Los Angeles with his recently completed first feature, *El Mariachi*, in hand, he dreamed of selling it to the straight-to-video Spanish-language market to earn just enough money to fund a second feature, but the video initially met rejection because it did not conform to market expectations. The film, which Rodriguez created without a crew and independently produced with his partner-actor Carlos Gallardo on an extraordinarily small budget (around \$7,000 before 35mm formatting and without licensing and publicity), ironically appealed to the Hollywood set precisely because its unconventional aesthetics did not conform to market expectations. With the guidance of Robert Newman and other representatives from one of the most prestigious talent agencies, International Creative Management (ICM), Rodriguez entered into what he later referred to as "the chase" by the biggest studios--Columbia, TriStar, Paramount, and Disney. Almost overnight, the filmmaker had gone from not having money for groceries to receiving multi-picture and hundred-thousand-dollar offers from several film giants.

Getting his first lessons in the "Hollywood biz," the young filmmaker acknowledged that the instincts and survival

strategies he learned to rely on in his filmmaking were ineffective in studio-business negotiations (Rodriguez, *Rebel* 98, 110). For example, Disney executives proposed a big-budget remake of the mariachi movie. However, the executives began revising the story: Anglo protagonist, not Latino; set in Texas, not Mexico; in English, not Spanish; an electric guitarist, not a mariachi. By the end of the session, the executives had restructured the narrative according to the Hollywood "Hero Paradigm" and placed the white musician-warrior on a Native American Reservation to be "healed" and to learn hand-to-hand karate-type fighting.<sup>1</sup> Finding the original "too ethnic," the executive revisions amounted to a simple updating of biases that have disarmed Hispanic-related themes and characters in U.S. films since before the middle of the century.

While a burgeoning field of Chicano films in the U.S. since the 1980s reflect and promote an integrational shift in American culture, stereotypes and discrimination still haunt Hollywood. James Monaco, among other film scholars, point to the 1980s when "easing" of racial binds meant a recovery of equal opportunity and representation in American film (81). Still, misdirected and superficial multiculturalism might give a shade of "political correctness" to a particular film, and only rarely do studio films screen genuine treatments of minority cultures. Most crucially for the Hollywood studio businesses, the story should be familiar enough to a mainstream audience and match their values so it succeeds at



the box office, and marginalized ideas may be included only to the extent that they help achieve this goal. Having arrived in Hollywood "ready to work, desperate for work," Rodriguez quickly realized "it was not going to be as easy to sell out as [he] thought" (*Rebel* 106).

But must a Chicano filmmaker "sell out" in order to work in Hollywood? Can complex and balanced treatments of minority characters and themes coexist with the Hollywood ruling order's business practices and conventions, or must that dominant order appropriate and manipulate those treatments for its own purposes? If the use of minority themes and characters, such as those from a Chicano sensibility, merely meets marketable standards for a profit and is oversimplified, then dominant culture as a monolithic force and its cinema co-opt those ideas, continuing a long-standing tradition of ethnic exploitation. If, however, the cross-over phenomenon, especially as it continues to evolve over time, reflects a greater acceptance of cultural pluralism and heterogeneity in American society, then perhaps Chicano themes and characters will help form an interculturally diverse mosaic that is 21st-century American film. Whereas before the 1980s separatism and transgression, as witnessed in *Salt of the Earth* and *Zoot Suit*, responded to the enmity against minorities by mainstream U.S.-American culture, after the 1980s subversiveness might help to analyze, deconstruct, and replace stereotypes and cultural identities, as in *My Family* and *Born in East L.A.* Cheech

Marin explains how a filmmaker might disguise ethnocentric politics within recognizable paradigms so mainstream audiences "don't taste it, but they get the effect" (qtd. in Noriega, "Cafe" 17).

In his *Born in East L.A.*, Marin engages the serious issue of unfair deportation practices by U.S. border patrol and, perhaps, even uses this as a metaphor for other racial and ethnic discrimination by state apparatuses against Latinos in the United States, but he masks these critical points in humor. Rudy, Marin's protagonist, faces deportation to Mexico based on his skin color and accent, even though he was, as Bruce Springsteen crooned, "born in the U.S.A."; parody helps generate the implicit criticism. And throughout his ordeal, Rudy searches after a beautiful Euro-American woman traveling the streets, symbolic of the United States as a "land of opportunity."<sup>3</sup> The red-headed white woman dressed in a seductive green dress embodies the red-white-green Mexican flag and, as she literally stops traffic during a Cinco de Mayo parade or struts in front of a mural featuring the U.S. and Mexican national flags, she creates an international and a bicultural fusion (and confusion) that subtly critiques the divisiveness of our society and draws attention to the broken promise of liberty and freedom for all. Significantly, American filmmakers most effectively promote ethnically-charged content when they compromise and qualify their individual style with Hollywood mainstream conventions.

Robert Rodriguez realized early in his professional career that the only way for him, a Chicano with no experience or connections, to break into the U.S. film industry was to actually make his "own movie" (*Rebel* 75). Rodriguez figured that, since films are "creative endeavors" and not necessarily "business enterprises," independent filmmakers should concentrate their creative energy and construct discursive spaces themselves through innovative aesthetics rather than imitations of the studio big-budget productions (*Rebel* 198, 200, 203). Tightly woven and fast-paced narratives, fluid and compelling camera movements, and efficient editing that keeps the story and characters interesting: these techniques became the base in the mariachi films whereby Rodriguez followed his own advice in making advantages out of his disadvantages as he blended diverse conventions and cultural influences in his experimental and oppositional "mariachi style" (*Rebel* 204). However, to reach a mass audience and most effectively promote his films, Rodriguez would need to work from within Hollywood, applying mainstream conventions to his already hybridized "mariachi style."

*El Mariachi*, after considerable critical praise at the Toronto, Telluride, and Sundance film festivals, grossed over \$2 million domestically when it was re-formatted and released with English subtitles; obviously, there was mainstream audience interest in Rodriguez's film style. Columbia offered Rodriguez the opportunity to make his sequel. The

continued story that Rodriguez originally envisioned around the mythic El Mariachi "gunman", *Pistolero*, eventually grew into the \$7 million Columbia-produced *Desperado*. His mariachi sequel succeeded commercially, making almost \$26 million in its U.S. theatrical run, even as it fulfilled Rodriguez's hope of presenting Hispanic-oriented stories that are "universal enough for other audiences" (qtd. in Haile 8; McCarthy 53). Rodriguez recognized, though, that in his rush to make a big-budget deal and gain access to more expensive cameras, crew, and cast, he had placed himself in a position where he lost the self-reliance and spontaneous energy that drove his earlier filmmaking; he relied on studio procedures rather than his own instincts (*Rebel* 169-70, 204, 160). Perhaps, though, the very blending of ethnocentric and multicultural themes and forms with mainstream conventions reflects the wave of cultural integration in American society and allows such film messages to be shared with mass audiences. Both *Desperado* and *Fools Rush In* show how multicultural aesthetics can take advantage of Hollywood genres, conventions, and industrial procedures, while maintaining a balance with Chicano-specific themes and forms. Significantly, both films resituate multicultural identification for mainstream American audiences as they consolidate much of the progress Chicano films have made since the 1980s.

Like Marin in *Born in East L.A.* and Nava in *My Family* and *Selena*, Robert Rodriguez blends cultural and cinematic

cues, creating *mestizo* (hybrid) aesthetics aimed at a mass audience in the mariachi franchise.<sup>3</sup> After the surprise success of *El Mariachi*, Columbia gained some confidence in Rodriguez.<sup>4</sup> Working within the studio's business parameters, Rodriguez effectively fuses his own innovative and efficient filmmaking style with some Hollywood conventions to create in *Desperado* multicultural aesthetics that express an ethnically rich message, while appeasing mainstream tastes. *Desperado*, thus, like *Fools Rush In*, creates a bridge across which themes and forms traditionally aimed at minority audiences "cross over" to mainstream interests.

#### ***Cruzando (Crossing Over): Hollywood Style in Desperado***

Unlike the vast majority of U.S. studio films released since the late 1980s, *Desperado* belongs to a small but growing corps of films that give expression to Chicano themes and characters as part of a formulation of a multi-ethnic American culture. Perhaps even more so than its prequel, *Desperado* interweaves traditional Mexican ballads and festival songs alongside the more popular sounds of the successful band Los Lobos and a conventional soundtrack, directed by Tito Larriva. The art direction, production design, costumes, and makeup (provided by other crew specialists courtesy of Columbia's big budget), while giving a Chicano flavor, similarly add conventional "production value" and, as a result, mainstream legitimacy to the appearance of the film. These production values, all

directly tied to the economic stability of a studio-granted budget, provide a mainstream appeal and, thus, make the multicultural statements in the film more accessible to a wider, more diverse audience.

The reception of this film reflects its merging of markets and audiences. While some Latino-oriented reviews point to the mainstream appeal, mainstream reviews in *Boxoffice*, *Time*, and *Rolling Stone* point to the diverse influences on the mariachi franchise: Sergio Leone's Spaghetti Westerns, John Woo's Hong Kong action pictures, Hollywood and Mexican action-adventure movies and, Rodriguez jokingly admits, a parodic "rehash of every other movie I had ever seen" (qtd. in Haile 6). While Rodriguez's filmmaking style emulates in significant ways the *cine fronterizo* (border film) and more specifically the *narcotraficante* (drug trafficking) genre, which are mainstays of the Mexican market, *El Mariachi* transplants these generic roots in a "transnational" model, as Charles Ramírez Berg argues in the best critical study of the film (111-12). Significantly, Berg points to the "ethnic ingenuity" which drives the film's aesthetics (125). Rather than simply depicting a warrior-adventure story that follows other big budget action pictures, the mariachi films subtly reconfigure mainstream genres and conventions within a *rasquache* aesthetic. *Desperado's* studio-based production methods and budget place the film's *rasquachismo* firmly in a commercial context.

As suggested by characters and themes in a number of American films including *My Family*, *rasquachismo* is a specific form of multiculturalism or *mestizaje* that allows a Latino underclass to take advantage of disadvantages and, in the process, overcome oppressive conditions by turning "ruling paradigms upside down" (Ybarra-Frausto, "Rasquachismo" 155). While the *pelados*, or farmworker clowns of the *carpa* tradition, too, live in poverty and are underdogs, rarely are these characters fully able to reverse their poverty and disenfranchisement; in the strongest of the *pelado* characters, the possibility of subversion is merely hinted (Broyles-Gonzalez 39). As Luis Valdez reveals, the politically conscious Chicano is the descendant of the Mexican *pelado*, separated by several generations of subversion and resistance against colonization through a merging of past traditions including *indio* mysticism with modern Mexican and U.S.-American developments ("Introduction" xxx). Through its historical and cultural blending, *rasquachismo* allows the creation of specifically-Chicano survival strategies or *moviditas* that build off of one of the essential characteristics of the "American character," resourcefulness.

Rodriguez's resourcefulness and adaptability, though, more than create an action-based inventive film style; specifically, they meld cultural codes--U.S.-American, traditional Mexican, and post-colonial native--into a *rasquache* aesthetic that informs not only the look of

*Desperado* but also its thematic message for mass appeal. *Desperado's* *rasquache* aesthetic operates as a *movida* through which character and theme subtly transfigure mainstream aesthetics and redraw Chicano cultural identification for a multicultural America.

The basis of the story in the mariachi franchise is mistaken identity, suggestive of the "mistaken" identification Chicanos have historically faced through systematic discrimination in America. Our hero, El Mariachi, while searching for work as a musician faces the onslaught of a vicious drug dealing gang, who falsely believes that he is a rival. *Desperado* continues from the prequel El Mariachi's search for vengeance over the oppressive drug cartel. Although played by star-actor Antonio Banderas, El Mariachi represents a Chicano "everyman," placing this character in line with *Zoot Suit's* mythic El Pachuco, larger than a single character and an embodiment of the notion of struggling between dominant traditions with none to call his own. His adversary, Joaquim de Almeida's Bucho, represents the corruption that may come from dominant power--in this case, control over drug traffic in the town. The story's conclusion reveals that Bucho and El Mariachi are long-separated brothers, who, when given similar opportunities and resources, have chosen different *movidas* or survival strategies: most importantly, Bucho's villainy derives from his reliance on greed and murder. El Mariachi, on the other hand, represents the "underdog" fighting for individual



rights and equality. And although Banderas's El Mariachi conveniently adopts macho fighting techniques alongside his pacific spiritualism, he remains aware of his actions and uses violence only in cases where there is no peaceful alternative. As a result, the usually stereotypical macho Chicano character acquires depth through sensitivity and justification for his actions.

Early in the film, a wide establishing shot of a busy street in Santa Cecilia reveals that our hero, El Mariachi, played by Antonio Banderas, has arrived to seek revenge for the death of his lover and the mutilation of his guitar-fingering hand by the villain. With an almost maniacal drive for vengeance and disregard for his surroundings, El Mariachi crosses the busy street in search of the drug lord and his gang. His clothes, a black and white mariachi suit, and his acoustic guitar case swinging at his side suggest the man's traditionalism, which is further reinforced as he walks in front of an old-world horse-drawn cab. But, just as that motorless cab seems overwhelmed by a hulking eighteen-wheeler truck and obsolete on a city block crowded with power lines, street lights, and modern shop windows, a mariachi musician is equally out of place. As explained later in the film, "there is not much work for a mariachi these days," and El Mariachi has fully adopted strategies, violent and regressive as they are, that will help him defeat his enemies. Thus, the case holds an arsenal of automatic weapons and explosives. In this introductory shot, the blending of

cultural and historical influences suggests a situational justification for El Mariachi and his violent acts to follow.

El Mariachi explains that he wasn't always violent, but found after his hand had been shot by a drug dealer that it was "easier to pull the trigger than to play the guitar . . . easier to destroy than to create." El Mariachi upholds mythic qualities and a strong sense of spirituality.<sup>5</sup> During montages formally linked by dissolves--one while El Mariachi bathes and prepares to do battle and another when he makes love to Salma Hayek's Carolina, for example--close-up inserts of a candle flame give an abstract quality to his actions. El Mariachi is shown praying for forgiveness, proclaiming he must "confess [his] sins," for he is "a sinner." In his prayer, he asks for "strength to be what [he] was," and pardon for what he is.

Like Carlos Gallardo's amateur portrayal in the earlier film, Banderas' El Mariachi in *Desperado* must accept violent behavior as part of his lifestyle and attach it to his traditionalism and spirituality to protect and defend his community from harmful forces, represented as drug dealers. However, El Mariachi as played by star-actor Banderas in *Desperado* differs in his commercial appeal, highlighted by conventional "glamour" lighting, frequent close shots, and even the pacing of the narrative. *Desperado*'s close shots of Banderas as El Mariachi, Hayek as Carolina, and de Almeida as Bucho allow acting to carry much of its dramatic point. The sequel's use of conventional shot-countershot for

storytelling sequences relies less on the strength of the story and more on the star appeal of the tellers--Cheech Marin as a bartender; Steve Buscemi as El Mariachi's ally; even Quentin Tarantino in a cameo as a joke-telling pick-up dealer. Significantly, such a formal emphasis on character (and star actor) over action also reinforces the thematic idea of El Mariachi's macho strength.

Initially, El Mariachi relies more on innocent luck and cunning than upon macho displays of power. For example, there are situations whereby El Mariachi moves out of the crossfire between two of Bucho's men, leaving them to shoot each other. In *Desperado*, El Mariachi maintains a stern "masculine" exterior, even as he expresses contrition for his "sins" and faith in tradition; the hero warrior combines his respect for the past with an acceptance of the future into his survival strategies. Banderas's El Mariachi, thus, reconfigures the macho Latin lover and warrior stereotype, showing enough of that caricature for commercial interest, yet subverting it with a deeper consciousness. Perhaps most clearly the newly-revised machismo appears through the love relationship Banderas' El Mariachi shares with his co-star Salma Hayek's Carolina.

Though not as explicitly strong a female character as Esperanza in *Salt of the Earth* or Julie in *American Me*, Hayek's Carolina does inject a positive element to the mostly violent and destructive survival strategies El Mariachi has adopted. Carolina, through the gifts of an acoustic guitar

and her love, offers to help "clear out the guns" and replace them with a "new lifestyle," which she and El Mariachi can "improvise" together. After they consummate their love, Carolina serenades El Mariachi in Spanish, singing about her love and existence only for him, and it initially appears that her peaceful lifestyle eclipses his violence. Once they are attacked by Bucho's men, though, El Mariachi must return to the shoot-or-be-shot strategy, and now he tows Carolina along with him. Significantly, both approach this violent lifestyle blending modern strategies with an appreciation for their native cultural tradition, perhaps symbolized in their red and black clothing--Carolina's conspicuous mismatched highheels and El Mariachi's black leather jacket with a rust colored scorpion patch on the back.<sup>6</sup> This scenario replays when, at the film's conclusion, Carolina driving the main henchman's jeep picks up the hitchhiking El Mariachi and suggests he finally quit the avenger lifestyle. El Mariachi initially tosses the gun-filled guitar case to the side of the road and leaves with his new lover, but the jeep reverses and they pick up the case because "it's a long ride to the next town." The thematic treatment of machismo incorporates El Mariachi's conscience and spiritualism, which redraws the action-adventure hero. El Mariachi's compromise between macho strength and sensitivity becomes more deeply imbedded through revisions to the cinematic formula of the Hollywood adventure film.

The conventional slow-motion climax of *Desperado* helps to build suspense and develop the multicultural theme but places emphasis on the star-actors over story. Perhaps, though, some conventional treatment of Chicano themes and forms makes them more accessible to a mass audience and reflects a cultural compromise in American society. Similarly, *El Mariachi*, by choosing to shoot the villain and save Carolina, fulfills the audience expectations of the strong-man adventure hero; in spite of his violent and regressive strategies, however, *El Mariachi* is justified by defending himself and innocent victims from the wrath of the drug lord. Moreover, that *El Mariachi* recognizes the horrible consequences of the violence self-reflexively critiques the warrior-hero's machismo. When he laments, to the injured little mariachi boy in the hospital, that everyone he has killed has been "someone's father, someone's son, someone's brother," his reliance on machismo makes way for a sense of regret, and he vows to use violence only when it is necessary to defend equality and individual rights. *Desperado*, then, redefines and recontextualizes machismo and Chicano cultural citizenship in mainstream American film.

In *Desperado*, Rodriguez combines some traditional studio film conventions with his own innovative "mariachi style." By blending historical and cultural influences into survival strategies, *El Mariachi* redraws stereotypical views of Chicano cultural identification and machismo for mainstream American film. *Desperado* levels a subtle criticism against

traditional discrimination, thus razing the walls that territorialize American culture and recovering democratic equality and individual freedom. Like *Desperado*, *Fools Rush In* uses its commercial appeal to subtly interrogate Chicano themes and forms and recontextualize multicultural identification in American film. Where the making of *Desperado* entails a Chicano entering Hollywood, however, *Fools Rush In* more effectively shows how Hollywood's approach to Chicano issues has grown more integrational than before the 1980s. Perhaps, in these two films, the bridges that unite traditionally divided communities in American culture are enacted in their multicultural aesthetics.

#### **Cultural Compromise in *Fools Rush In***

In some ways, *Fools Rush In* is a relatively conventional Hollywood love story: boy meets girl; boy loses girl; boy wins girl back, and they live happily ever after. This might be expected, given the professional background of the filmmakers involved on this project striving to make it a commercial success. Reviewers noted, in its attempt to appeal to the widest possible audience, across ethnic, gender, and, to a certain extent, age demographics, the film's story oversimplifies complex "cross-cultural" themes and forms (McCarthy 69; Glines 200). Aspects of *Fools Rush In* suffer in its commercial approach to politically-charged themes. Most clearly, melodramatic moments appear overburdened where the light comedy can no longer carry the

film's weight. Yet, perhaps its "sit-com" style actually works as an advantage, making its multicultural themes and forms accessible for a mass audience. Through the film's multicultural aesthetics appears a conception of ethnicity transcending simple political correctness that not only sets this film apart from traditional Hollywood romantic comedies, but debatably marks a profound change in the social politics in American film and the mainstream culture it reflects. Like the screwball comedies of the depression-torn 1930s with their subtle yet provocative arguments on economic class struggle and equality<sup>4</sup>, *Fools Rush In* points to the ethnic and cultural challenges facing the United States liberal democratic society at the end of the 20th century and, ultimately, reveals the advantages of compromise, integration, and mutual appreciation for multicultural American identification.

The story might appear contrived, perhaps improbable, in showing a marriage that operates in reverse out of the "love at first sight" myth, but producers Doug Draizin and Anna Maria Davis formed the film's plot from their own marriage. Draizin, experienced in producing popular comedies in mainstream film and television, along with wife Davis assigned the script to Katherine Reback, who shaped it into a cross-cultural, reversed romantic comedy. With the Columbia creative team's backing, Draizin and Davis shopped for a director who could manage the cross-cultural elements in the story with a light enough touch so as to not overburden the

comedy and escapist romance of the story. With the commercial success and experience of directing popular film and television, including some *Wonder Years* episodes and the family drama *It Takes Two*, Andy Tennant was the producers' favorite choice. Although Tennant and the others involved in the project sought a mainstream appeal in the film, they also recognized the importance of its cultural message, even as a Hollywood romantic comedy.

Although a number of reviewers condemned the characters in this film as "needless stereotypes," characterization in the film draws into scrutiny the issue of stereotyping. That is, stereotypes exist in certain characters so as to dramatize traditional cultural conflicts, while the main characters reveal through their differences from them the importance of cultural compromise. So, Tennant intentionally avoided "classic clichéd Mexican" and "WASP" family types by adding "nuance" to the main characters while dramatizing the "striking difference in cultures" integral to the film's message (Glines 200; "Behind"). Perhaps also, while the stereotypical caricatures subliminally appeal to mainstream tastes, the more developed main characters subvert the stereotypes and reconfigure multicultural American identification. Even three years before producers Draizin and Davis, had closed the deal with Columbia's creative team, they had approached Salma Hayek with the part of a Chicana artist, Isabel Fuentes, knowing the Mexican-born Hollywood film sensation and popular sex symbol would effectively bring



"integrity to the portrayal of her culture" ("Behind"). Alongside Hayek, her screen partner Matthew Perry, a television comic icon in his own right, plays a white businessman, Alex Whitman, and the film follows Hollywood convention by appealing to a mainstream audience through attractive star-actors and a relatively predictable storyline. But the stereotypes and generalizations, especially in the portrayal of the newlyweds' very different families, allow a critical message against stereotyping and provide the dramatization of the social problem that is ultimately resolved by the lovers' union.

Alex's father and mother, played by John Bennett Perry (his real-life father) and Jill Clayburgh, show the extremes of Eurocentrism as it has existed generally in the daily lives of white Americans, while Isabel's father represents opposing extremes of traditional Mexican (and Chicano nationalist) separatism. That these three characters are stereotypes in fact draws into question the act of stereotyping, a self-reflexive critique that draws attention to Alex and Isabel recognizing their own shortcomings. Alex's father first sees Isabel and announces: "that is what I call a housekeeper." His mother adds that it must be easy to hire "good help" being "so close to Mexico." These racist opinions establish the suspense that turns to ironic humor when Alex officially introduces Isabel to his parents as their new daughter-in-law. Opposite the Whitman's position of racial and ethnic discrimination is an equally

discriminatory resistant position embodied in Isabel's father, played by Tomas Milian. Isabel's father sees the Whitmans as "white strangers" and assumes that his daughter's marriage to Alex will suffer from irreconcilable differences because they are from "different cultures, different worlds."

Most film reviewers and audiences appreciated the light comedy and romance of this film, which scored close to \$30 million in its 20-week run in the U.S. and almost half that in Latino and other non-U.S. markets, but the profitability of this romantic comedy has resulted from its relevance to the contemporary social condition it depicts. Underlying the debate between the two families remain significant ideological value differences that work on mainstream viewers. Sandra Guidardo reported in her *Hispanic* review that as a "mainstream romantic comedy" *Fools Rush In* uses the power of love and humor to expose "misconceptions" about different cultures in America in an equal interchange of knowledge across Latino and European-American traditions (114). Alex's father voices a form of the universal melting pot theory when he explains that "this country was founded" by Europeans seeking freedom, and among them was his family. Isabel's father retaliates with a Chicano nationalist revision of Eurocentric history: "when the West was stolen from Mexico, the Fuentes family made a vow that even though they took our land, they never take our culture." The polarity between the Whitman and Fuentes families mirrors the tradition of oppositionality in American culture, as seen in

*Viva Zapata!* and *The Alamo* against *Salt of the Earth* and *Zoot Suit*. The regressiveness of these two exclusionary traditions, secured by both familial and cultural models, is made clear as the debate devolves into a screaming match of racial slurs, punctuated by Mr. Whitman deriding Mexican culture as "guacamole and ghetto-blasters" and Mr. Fuentes claiming that whites are ignorant of Native American influences.

The separatist philosophies of the Whitman and Fuentes elders surfaces in Alex's and Isabel's characters; however, where their parents remain stubbornly divided, Isabel and Alex learn to appreciate the values of each other's culture and through compromise form a union that redefines the American family and, by extension, American culture. The young couple must learn to overcome the traditional burdens of racial and ethnic biases and form a compromise of cultural values in their family. *Fools Rush In* reveals cultural compromise--central to American multicultural identification--through the symbolic birth of their daughter, a literal and figurative *mestiza*.

The introduction of Alex's character reveals his connection to New York City, historically an economic and cultural center for the United States. A long tilt descending from the Rockefeller Towers to the plaza and the busy Manhattan streets below at once gives a panoramic view of the city's architectural complexity and beauty, while suggesting a hierarchical power structure and adherence to

corporate managerialism. Alex initially embodies these American values. Early in the film, Alex's career takes top priority over everything else in his life, and he equates spending time with his family or dating as mere "distractions." Described as being "three places at once," Alex shows little concern for his family, his friends, his spirituality, or any aspect of his personal life, but strives to complete his work projects "on time and under budget." Ironically, the pragmatic, business-minded attitude that helps Alex succeed as an executive manager for an architecture company that builds dance clubs leaves him feeling incomplete and out of place once the strobe lights and music surge to life. Alex's single-minded drive for professional success represents a corruption of the American values of capitalism and self-reliance in the form of an unhealthy independence and isolation. Significantly, Alex's attitude parallels the exclusionary politics of United States imperialism, as a business colleague describes his business transactions: "you guys are taking over the world." The American southwest is his next conquest.

In an antithetical turn, Isabel's introduction reveals her connection to her family and its traditional Mexican culture and religion. A pan traces Mexico's mountainous horizon and natural landscape and focuses on Isabel floating on a stream near her great-grandmother's four century-old hacienda. As opposed to the "vertically integrated" tilt shot of the Manhattan skyline, perhaps the horizontal vista

of Central Mexico's wilderness suggests the continuity of land and family and the unity among family members. This contrast is effectively dramatized through Hollywood film conventions adjusted for these specific multicultural issues: outside/in editing and panoramic shots that emphasize the importance of "home" to these characters and their values. From the matriarchal line extending from her great-grandmother and mother, Isabel adopts an earthy spiritualism that combines traditional Spanish-Mexican Catholicism with a Native American reliance on "destiny" foretold through "signs," providing an "explanation beyond all logic and all reason." But also from this *feminista* line Isabel inherits a "wild spirit" that grows in this youngest generation into a resistant independence. Isabel expresses her independence when she refuses help and tells Alex "I make my own decisions" and "can take care of myself." Like Alex, Isabel embodies deformed American values of self-reliance and non-conformity that lead to isolation and anguish. Isabel's independence, similar to her father's traditionalism, represents the separatist social politics of the Chicano nationalist movement.

Initially Isabel's and Alex's independence represents two extremes of U.S. society, neither conciliatory with the other. Through a parable, passed down in her family, Isabel describes their situation. Atop a ledge overlooking the sublime Grand Canyon, introduced with a long, wide-angled shot that reveals the vast scale of the landscape, Isabel

recalls a legend of a family of squirrels who was separated one day when their plateau home divided and the canyon formed. Over time, these two families "became different, adjusting to their environments" by adopting "different traits," yet they remained the "exact same." Considering the legend, Alex asks, will the families ever "cross" the "canyon between them?" That Isabel and Alex must compromise and learn to appreciate their differences as well as their similarities provides a reflection of how mainstream audiences are reconfiguring American culture in the 21st century. Through traditional notions of assimilation, "crossing over" has assumed a minority culture adjusting to the dominant, but as American culture and its film representations have grown deterritorialized since the late-1980s, integration as a liberal humanist project involves cultural compromise with equal respect for all segments of America's democratic society. The multicultural aesthetic of "crossing over" appears in the adjustments of Hollywood formal and generic conventions as well as thematic issues throughout the film.

### **Rushing In and Crossing Over: A Fool's Paradise?**

Between the extremes of New York and Central Mexico, the cultural-geographic compromise of Las Vegas contextualizes the cultural compromise and synthesis of values at the center of the love story in *Fools Rush In*. Like the "green world" of other romantic comedies, Las Vegas and its surroundings

become a setting for extraordinary events not possible in the social spaces of established politics and history (Frye 163).<sup>5</sup> The meeting in Las Vegas presents Isabel and Alex with a temporary reprieve from the repressive social rules they must ordinarily follow. But because the American southwest represents a historically contested space--a plot of land in the westward movement toward 19th century U.S. Manifest Destiny and the mythic "homeland" of *Aztlán* for Chicano nationalist--the compromise between Isabel and Alex accrues significant cultural meaning not developed in most commercial romantic comedies. Through long, panoramic shots of Las Vegas, the city in the desert exemplifies the urban growth and materialism of U.S. corporate capitalism balanced against the sacred mysticism and sublime of the natural landscape that was once Native American homelands. Except for the broad vistas of Manhattan through which Woody Allen aligns his characters with their locale, rarely do commercial romantic comedies rely on long, panoramic shots as much as *Fools Rush In* does. In the images of the city and the desert as well as others throughout the film, Hollywood conventions are slightly adjusted for a multicultural emphasis.

When Alex tries to apologize for his reaction to Isabel's shocking news of their pregnancy, he follows her in a car chase, a staple for Hollywood products. However, unlike most film car chases, this chase emphasizes less action and speed, but more the instability of Isabel and Alex's relationship. Without quick cuts, shots of Alex show

his consternation and confusion over Isabel and their love affair. With the accompanying music, "Para Donde Vas" ("Where Are You Going?") performed by The Iguanas, the pace of the scene follows the Latin rhythm of the song more than the action genre chase convention.

Similarly, when Alex and Isabel initially try to live together, the changes in the decor of their home reflect their marriage. As a wedding present, Isabel's family redecorates the home Alex was provided by his firm. Partially because he was only staying temporarily but more likely because he saw decorating as another unimportant "distraction" from his work, the home took on what was described as an "institutional" appearance. After the Fuentes family redecorates, the home vibrates with life; it acquires a *rasquache* sensibility in which different bold, earth-tone colors cover each wall and brash fixtures, including a giant golden crucifix, shatter the monotony of the home's original appearance. Mismatched walls and family heirlooms not only add diversity, color, and style to the home, but reveal a spiritual strength of survival through family unity for Isabel. Although Alex is first shocked by the change, he exchanges with Isabel values that will "protect" their new American family.

Like the chase and the home decor, the treatment of Hoover Dam, where Isabel and Alex become engaged and later give birth to their daughter, draws together the symbolism of Alex's and Isabel's love and the social significance of



cultural syncretism, while showing significant adjustments to Hollywood convention. Cinematographer Robbie Greenberg, having photographed stories heavily situated in outdoor settings like *The Milagro Beanfield War* and the more action-oriented *Under Siege II*, understood the importance of the Hoover Dam scenes. In spite of the Hollywood budget, which allowed state-of-the-art equipment and even cooperation from authorities to help with traffic and permit crews access to the site, the filmmakers remained intent on developing strategies that maximized their resources. Greenberg recalled applying big-budget strategies such as using rain bars extended from a crane placed just out of frame and backlighting the rain with a bluish tint (Ferraro 18). Balanced against the limitations presented by the location and the importance of showing what Greenberg called the "cross-cultural" elements in the story, the collective efforts of the photography, art, and production teams modified Hollywood conventions for this film's multicultural message (qtd. in Ferraro 20).

Similar in function to the bridges that workers cross in *My Family*, the dam allows a flow of traffic across borders, literally between Arizona and Nevada but also figuratively, as Isabel travels this route from her great-grandmother's home in Mexico to her new home in Las Vegas. In fact, Isabel marks the center of the dam as a spiritual crossing point each time she makes a wish. Moreover, unlike a bridge, the dam, both functionally and symbolically, involves more

complexity. Hoover Dam was constructed just after the onset of the Great Depression in the 1930s, creating jobs for workers both within and south of the U.S. border. Isabel explains that part of her spiritual association with the dam derives from her great-grandfather having come North from Mexico to help build it. The Dam combines indigenous spiritual meaning, suggested by the bluish tint, with Western tradition's science as it preserves and redirects the natural resources of the southwest landscape. In its mixing of cultures, the dam reaffirms American qualities of ingenuity and resilience, symbolic of the *movidas* or modes of survival adopted by Isabel and Alex's new American family.

When Alex first meets Isabel's family, he recognizes the limitations of his own family's emotional and spiritual connections that have left him incomplete, joking that he "had no idea families actually talk at dinner." Isabel's family talks, sings, dances, and outwardly shows their affection for one another in a manner contrasting the impersonal and bourgeois values of the Whitmans. Before this moment, Alex could debate between a burger and a tuna melt for lunch and his "life made sense," but "somewhere between the tuna melt and [Isabel's] aunt's tamales," Alex became conscious of this part missing from his life, typical of the screwball genre, when he admits that Isabel is "everything he never knew he always wanted." But, in their union is a marriage of traditionally divergent American cultures. And by sharing with Alex her family's spirituality and

interdependence, Isabel reinforces her own reliance on family and faith. In their marriage and the love they consummate, Isabel and Alex reflect the cultural compromise and integration critical to the future of American citizenship.

Though historically viewed by the U.S. film industry and dominant American culture with disdain, the ethnic mix of a mixed-breed or *mestizo* child has long served as a convention in Chicano film.<sup>6</sup> In several films, Chicanismo is "born" out of the social condition faced by Chicanos and U.S citizens of Mexican descent, struggling between dominant cultures with none to fully embrace. As previously discussed, in *Salt of the Earth* the birth of Esperanza and Ramon's youngest child is intimately related to the racial discrimination and oppression of the miners and their families. And, in *Giant*, the "browning" of the Benedict clan represents a shift in their family values and in American culture. Even more directly, the character of Santana in *American Me* embodies the violent assault and rape of a Chicana by U.S. sailors, an updating of *La Chingada* myth. Though these hardly present pleasant images of "the birth of Chicanismo," they subvert and overturn the traditional dishonor and pejorative meaning that miscegenation carries. By the end of the century, *Fools Rush In* is able to use this image of a *mestiza* child in a mainstream comedy to highlight the strength and equality American culture actually gains from its mixed heritage.

A three-shot in the penultimate scene reveals the optimistic future of this new American family. A reformed

Alex and Isabel reject their independence and, instead, form a unified bond together with their child. Their daughter, like Chicanismo, is a product of an ethnic as well as cultural compromise, reinvigorating the values essential to a multicultural American spirit. The final scene, magnified in scope by an aerial view, shows the re-marriage of Alex and Isabel, this time with families and friends present. Adaptations of commercial film conventions, such as the big-budget aeriels and panoramic scenery shots, reinforce the cultural compromise at the center of the film's story. That the ceremony takes place on a plateau overlooking the grandeur of a southwest landscape implies a "happy ending" to the parable Isabel related earlier: that the separated family would be able to cross the canyon dividing them. In the crossing of traditional borders and boundaries that divide American society, this marriage restores the hope of liberal democratic equality to the American family and culture. Through a cultural blending in themes and formal conventions, *Fools Rush In* reveals the "birth" of a new American family and American culture out of *mestizaje*.

END NOTES, CHAPTER FIVE

<sup>1</sup> Rodriguez related this story to Charles Ramírez Berg in a personal interview (103) as well as to David Letterman in a *Late Night* interview.

<sup>2</sup> Fregosa argues that Rudy desires this woman as Chicanos desire social mobility in the U.S. (50-52). Noriega claims that the woman parodies the statue of liberty ("Cafe" 17-18).

<sup>3</sup> Fregosa points to the "*mestizaje* of cultural codes" at work in the cultural politics of *Born in East L.A.* (Bronze 62-64). List reveals how *rasquache* comedy in *Born in East L.A.* transforms multicultural identities crucial to the border film genre (112-16).

<sup>4</sup> With a choice of studios with which to work, Rodriguez decided Columbia with its youth-orientation and relatively liberal slant might present him with the best opportunity to complete projects free from interference (*Rebel* 111). In fact, Columbia sent their representative Stephanie Allain--who had recently worked with John Singleton on the politically-charged *Boyz-n-the Hood* after his smaller-budgeted filmmaking success--to Austin to woo Rodriguez, implying that Hollywood would come to him and allow him some creative expression through his filmmaking (95).

<sup>5</sup> Berg aligns the "spiritual" aspect of El Mariachi's character with the "Eastern mysticism" of a transnational

adventure formula, both borrowing from martial arts films; although this reading predates the sequel, not too surprisingly it predicts this generic conventionality (118-23).

<sup>6</sup> The colors red and black, as can be seen on the thunderbird flag of the United Farm Workers (UFW) flag and other Chicano emblems, sometimes refer to superhuman or supernatural powers in Mayan and Aztec mythology.

<sup>7</sup> Such theorists as Stanley Cavell (3), Elizabeth Kendall (44-47) see the romantic comedy genre of the 1930s as an escape fantasy from the depressed economy.

<sup>8</sup> Northrop Frye in *Anatomy of Criticism* argues that the basis of narrative lies in a birth-death-rebirth cycle, both for individual characters and a community to which they belong. The rebirth or renewal stage of romantic comedies requires a temporary relocation to a discursive space outside of ordinary rules--what Frye calls a green world, Mikhail Bakhtin the carnivalesque, and Victor Turner the liminal.

<sup>9</sup> According to Leonard Leff and Jerold Simmons, during the early days of the studio system Will Hays and the Production Code established a tradition in line with "middle-class morals," which forbade the filmic representation of "miscegenation" (6, 285).

CONCLUSION  
REFLECTIONS OF AN AMERICAN MOSAIC:  
FOREGROUNDING AMERICAN FILM

The 1999 Super Bowl half-time show reached an estimated 125 million people in the U.S. and throughout the world.<sup>1</sup> Although impressive, these figures are not so surprising, given the technological advancements of our "global village" age. What might be more surprising, the theme of this once "all-American" event was decidedly international and multicultural. The theme's multiculturalism, rather than simply addressing its world-wide audience, advocated appreciation in mainstream U.S.-American culture for values and ideas historically ignored or suppressed. In the half-time show, dancers and musicians wore costumes that combined futuristic space suits with pre-Columbian Indian head-dresses. The show brought together popular musical artists of various racial and ethnic backgrounds, including Enrique Iglesias, Christina Aguilera, and Phil Collins. Billed as the "Walt Disney World Walk of the Millennium," the event was hosted by Edward James Olmos, who stated its message: that different cultures throughout America and the world should come together as "one family."

In recent years, the sheer spectacle of the Super Bowl and its half-time show has become for some viewers more compelling than the game itself, and that translates to big profits for broadcast networks and advertisers. In fact,

thirty-second spots during the 1999 Super Bowl became the most expensive advertising venue in broadcasting at \$2 million.<sup>2</sup> These economic figures indicate the mass appeal generated by the event and its multicultural theme. The trend toward ethnic and cultural integration has grown stronger throughout popular U.S. culture at the dawn of the new age the millennium commemorates.

In the same year as the "Walk of the Millennium" show, the 42nd Annual Grammy Awards, through which the National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences pays tribute to outstanding musical artists, revealed a truly diverse mix of cultures and influences in the commercially successful music of the year. Latinos and Latinas made an especially strong showing, consistent with the impression other "minority" cultures have made in recent years, including styles of hip-hop and rap now pervasive in American culture. Pop musicians Ricky Martin, Marc Anthony, Christina Aguilera, Jennifer Lopez, and Gloria Estefan as well as a number of producers including Desmond Child and Emilio Estefan represented every pop music and general category. But perhaps the clearest example of the profound influence Latin rhythms recently have made on the mainstream U.S music scene was Carlos Santana's work, the sixth best-selling album of 1999 and winner of nine Grammy Awards.<sup>3</sup>

"Supernatural," as the album title indicates, extends the spiritual element prevalent in Santana's musical oeuvre, melding late-20th century technology, psychedelic moods of



the 1960s counterculture, and ancient indigenous culture. For example, the cover art of the compact disc is adapted from the *rasquache* painting "Mumbo Jumbo" by Michael Rios: a colorful mural contains hand-drawn ancient *indios* surrounding a guitar and drums, perhaps referring to Santana's vision of musicians as shamans, delivering listeners to an extraordinary world. And the cover merely hints at the cultural *mestizaje* of the album's music. Songs range in style from traditional Mexican and Latin American to pop rock and rap. And perhaps the strongest aspect of the album comes in the mix of musical styles and crossing of traditional disciplines and genres, as tracks blend Santana's stylistic guitar playing and singing with other popular musicians of different backgrounds including alternative and pop rockers Dave Matthews, Everlast, Rob Thomas, and Eric Clapton, rappers Lauryn Hill, Wyclef Jean, and others from both sides of the border and the rest of the world.

If there is a socio-political message in U.S. mainstream media's cultural syncretism, Carlos Santana expressed it in his acceptance speech for "Best Album" when he stressed the "one-ness" in family and community throughout the U.S. and the world; the album's producer, Clive Davis, concurred with Santana that the album is a "message to all" and inspirational as a "model for all." Few would argue that Santana "sold-out" in order to succeed in the mainstream, but rather his album's cultural *mestizaje*, similar to the multicultural aesthetics in mainstream Chicano film, reflects

the rising tide of what might prove to be a larger cultural wave toward acceptance and integration of multiculturalism in American culture at the opening of the new millennium.

With the television shows *Resurrection Blvd.* and *The Brothers Garcia*, the year 2000 witnessed two unprecedented nationally broadcast series that featured Latinos both on the small screen as well as behind the cameras in production. In the same year, the big screen combined the efforts of director Carlos Avila with several Latino actors including Jimmy Smits in *Price of Glory*. Although the media events show the extent to which Latinos have broken the barriers of mainstream media, ironically they revive some of the by-gone biases against Latinos, especially as *Price of Glory* and *Resurrection Blvd.* depict *machismo* through the subject of boxing to appease mainstream tastes for the sensationalistic. Chicano film studies cannot define its field of inquiry with the "by, for, about" triplex, even as Latinos gain entry into feature filmmaking, but rather critical analysis should consider the film aesthetics and their social function.

Over the course of the 20th century, American culture and its Hollywood filmed reflections have witnessed profound shifts in the conceptualization of the American character. By the end of the 19th century, as Frederick Jackson Turner proclaimed, the American frontier was closing and the United States, no longer overdetermined by Manifest Destiny, entered a cycle in which its national characteristics would be perpetually defined and redefined. Even a cursory view shows

the paradigmatic shifts--from New Deal liberalism to Truman-McCarthy policies; from the New Frontier and civil liberty movements to Reagan-Bush-Gingrich neoconservatism; and, finally, a "Bridge to the 21st Century," which enacts the very ideological tension among Clinton's progressivism, the right-wing conservatism of Newt Gingrich and Pat Buchanan, and others. Thus, American culture, rather than taking shape as a static and universal body of values, oscillates and shifts according to dominant and resistant ideologies in conversation at any given time, most often finding balance through compromise and hybridization rather than resting upon one or another extreme. Hollywood film images have both embraced and, at times, instigated that cultural dialogue, as exemplified by the previous chapters.

Historically, minorities have struggled on the outside of Hollywood's borders and, therefore, have remained silenced from the conversation. Between the 1950s and 1980s, only occasionally would ethnically-charged films reach mainstream audiences. Though conspiratorial theories of both the politically left and right extremes might argue otherwise, this is less a consequence of intentional racial bigotry and more a case of U.S. film operating as an industry and form of mass media, matching its audience's tastes and values. By the middle of the 1980s, an emerging Hispanic market lured the film industry and other segments of corporate America; the result was a deterritorialization of American society. Clearly the box office draw from films like *My Family*,

*Desperado*, *Selena*, *Fools Rush In*, and other mainstream Chicano films extended beyond a Latino audience. These numbers alone suggest a growing acceptance and integration of Chicano themes and characters into the American mainstream. The commercial success of these films justified their production, but that the films favored liberal democratic politics branded by multiculturalism deserves attention. Was "Hispanic Hollywood" only an economic response to a market demand, or did the multicultural crossover marketing schemes reflect a larger cultural pattern in the United States? Can American culture, or even Hollywood, exist "without borders?"

This study has attempted to explore the impact of the shift that occurred in the mid-1980s in U.S. film where multicultural aesthetics began reflecting the integration of previously distinct cultures and traditions. The "happy endings" of *My Family*, *Fools Rush In*, and a handful of other commercial films reveal an optimism and hopefulness for peaceful progress toward social integration and human compassion in America's democratic society. A number of post-nationalist Chicano culture theorists embrace this hopeful future that transforms the separatism and territorialization of traditional dominant and Chicano cultures into a reinvigorated American democracy. Luis Valdez's 1985 forecast expresses the hope that Americans in the next two decades would strive toward interdependence: "our future is totally interdependent. Depending on how we all learn to work with each other is how far we all go . . .

we need to not only build bridges . . . we need to view ourselves humanly" ("Conversation" 127). Elizabeth Martínez, some twenty years later in her call for "unity-in-diversity," shows that Valdez's hope for interdependence in a diverse society and culture that combines "ancient" and "new" has been realized at least partially, even though the social, political, and cultural transformation has been only gradual. From "repression and resistance" marking Chicano politics up through the *movimiento* to the "promise of transformation" at the *fin de millennium*, Martínez envisions the United States as "a community of communities that recognizes interdependence and relates on the basis of mutual respect" (xvii). But, thinking *sin fronteras*--without borders--proves difficult in a nation so grounded in traditions of bias.

Film studies in the late-20th century, as Dudley Andrew acknowledges, have become in-tune with the larger movement in cultural studies to "support 'identity politics' and, indeed, to take on the problem of the constitution of social identity itself (gender, nationality, ethnicity, sexuality)" (347). As globalized markets and the inauguration of digital technologies urge film scholars to look forward, Andrew admonishes, film studies must also consider how the past speaks to the present and future in the relationship film shares with its cultural environment (348). Though filmed representations of ethnic identities have made profound changes over the last half century, do multicultural aesthetics prevalent in U.S. film represent a change in

America's diversely manifest culture? Will Chicano-informed multicultural aesthetics in mainstream film continue to invest in America's hope for liberal democratic freedom and equality? And will films in the 21st century continue to add attractive and complex pieces to what has become a long American mosaic? To these questions, only the future holds the answer.

## END NOTES, CONCLUSION

<sup>1</sup> The *USA Today*, in its January 31, 2000 post-game reports, claimed that viewers throughout the world totaled 125 million.

<sup>2</sup> An article in *Advertising Age* confirmed facts surrounding the economic demands for 1999 Super Bowl advertising time; see Gilbert, et al.

<sup>3</sup> The official website for Carlos Santana ([Santana.com](http://Santana.com)) provides information concerning the commercial success of *Supernatural*.

SELECT FILMS LIST

- Alambrista!* Dir. Robert Young. First Run Features, 1977.
- The Alamo.* Dir. John Wayne. United Artists-Batjac, 1960.
- American Me.* Dir. Edward James Olmos. MCA-Universal, 1992.
- Anaconda.* Dir. Luis Llosa. Columbia-Sony Pictures  
Entertainment, 1997.
- . . . *and the Earth Did Not Swallow Him.* Dir. Severo Pérez.  
CPB, 1995.
- The Ballad of Gregorio Cortez.* Dir. Robert Young. Embassy-  
Kino, 1982.
- La Bamba.* Dir. Luis Valdez. Columbia-RCA, 1986.
- Blood in, Blood out: Bound by Honor.* Dir. Taylor Hackford.  
Buena Vista-Hollywood Pictures, 1993.
- The Big Squeeze.* Dir. Marcus de Leon. First Look-BMG, 1996.
- Born in East L.A.* Dir. Cheech Marin. Universal, 1987.
- Boulevard Nights.* Dir. Michael Pressman. Warner Bros.,  
1979.
- Boyz-n-the Hood.* Dir. John Singleton. Columbia, 1991.
- Desperado.* Dir. Robert Rodriguez. Columbia, 1995.
- Despues del Terremoto/ After the Earthquake.* Dir. Lourdes  
Portillo. Third World Newsreel, 1979.
- The Faculty.* Dir. Robert Rodriguez. Dimension-Miramax,  
1998.
- Fools Rush In.* Dir. Andy Tennant. Columbia-Sony Pictures  
Classics, 1997.
- Four Rooms.* Dir. Robert Rodriguez, et al. Miramax, 1995.



*From Dusk Till Dawn*. Dir. Robert Rodriguez. Miramax, 1995.

*Giant*. Dir. George Stevens. Warner Bros., 1956.

*The Godfather*. Dir. Francis Ford Coppola. Paramount, 1972.

*High Noon*. Dir. Fred Zinnemann. United Artists, 1952.

*Kiss Me a Killer*. Dir. Marcus de Leon. Columbia, 1991.

*El Mariachi*. Dir. Robert Rodriguez. Columbia, 1993.

*Men with Guns*. Dir. John Sayles. Sony Picture Classics, 1997.

*The Milagro Beanfield War*. Dir. Robert Redford. Universal, 1988.

*A Million to Juan*. Dir. Paul Rodriguez. Trimark, 1994.

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APPENDIX  
ON UNITED STATES SOCIAL HISTORIES  
AND CHICANO CULTURAL DYNAMICS

The issues surrounding Chicano studies at the close of the 20th century remain complicated and contested. In particular, social histories attempt in no small order to define the people and the cultures under study, but the various historiographic methodologies used in these studies often generate as many questions as answers. And because films and film scholarship share with social histories the function of reflecting and often propogating definitive cultural concepts--whether they are "multicultural," "minority," or "mainstream"--students of Chicano film should consider the questions and answers grounding Chicano historical studies.

Perhaps the central issue at stake in social histories that treat the people of Mexican descent living in the United States is acculturation. That is, to what extent must U.S. citizens of Mexican descent assimilate into American mainstream culture, and by what means can they maintain their heritage? These questions become especially problematic when the historical dimensions of the people and their culture--from Ancient indigenous roots to post-Columbian European-led colonialism to 20th century anti-colonial Chicano nationalism and multicultural syncretism--are put into place. Generally, apropos acculturation, social histories favor either

universalism, pluralism, or syncretism in their interpretation of the cultural makeup of the United States.

### **Universalist Models**

Numerous social histories of the United States maintain a universalistic conception of American culture, ignoring or minimizing the influences of minorities. Updating the ideology of consensus found in the writings of Hector St. John de Crevecoeur, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and others, many of these social histories rely upon dubious assumptions about American culture. Several of the most well-known studies conflate "United States" with "American," equivocating the political markers of the nation with the cultural geography of the continent. As a result of this national bias, the universalistic social histories misrepresent and dismiss indigenous cultures in their attempt to exalt unity, and they ground American culture on the values carried to the "New World" by the "old" immigrants from Western Europe.

In a 1940 essay explicitly devoted to redressing the imbalance of attention paid to nondominant cultural groups, Caroline Ware focuses on the "common rootlessness" shared by immigrants--"new" and "old"--arriving on the "American scene"; Ware argues that a process of "Americanization" "merge[s] them in the general American community," where Eurocentric values take precedent (62-64). Like Ware, John Higham in his 1955 landmark work, *Strangers in the Land*, examines how "new immigrant" groups--primarily "white

ethnics" from Italy and Eastern Europe--must adapt to "nativist" ideology established by the "old immigrants" upon the founding of the nation, all the while overlooking indigenous populations and their varied cultures. Even when some social historians acknowledge that not all racial and ethnic minorities in the U.S. are "aliens" as Robert Park, Milton Gordon, Louis Wirth, and Nathan Glazer do, their conclusions reiterate the universalists claim of a singular American cultural quality and demand minority accommodation and assimilation into the mainstream.

Perhaps the most influential U.S. social history, Oscar Handlin's *The Uprooted* (subtitled *The Epic Story of the Great Migrations That Made the American People*) advances the universalist view of American culture through the immigration theory, emphasizing in the introduction that "immigrants were American history" (3). Throughout his history, Handlin claims that the separation and feelings of alienation that immigrants naturally experience form the very essence of American culture. Like other universalistic claims, Handlin's immigration model attempts to bring a sense of order and cultural unity to what has been, more and less over eras, a diverse--and therefore a socially chaotic--nation. Although effective in demonstrating the significance of migrational movements in American society, Handlin overlooks citizens who are not immigrants, migrations that do not involve trans-Atlantic crossings, and cultural adaptations that are not European-based. In spite of these faults,



Handlin's study deserves recognition for drawing careful attention to issues of race and ethnicity within the formulation of American culture, and since its first publication in 1951 its influence appears in social histories that propound its thesis as well as in those that refute its generalizations.

A long line of social historians including David M. Potter, John Bodnar, Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., and others launch their own U.S. social histories from Handlin's immigration model, seeking a more complete definition of the essentialistic values that comprise the American ideal. A handful of studies specifically addressing the history of Mexican heritage in the United States adopt similar universalist strategies. One of the first comprehensive histories of U.S. citizens of Mexican descent, *The Mexican American People*, avoids issues surrounding the "displacement" of indigenous societies resulting from the U.S. acquiring land from Mexico in 1848; such a perspective implicitly favors the immigration model for the founding of the nation (35-36). Moreover, one of the central arguments of *The Mexican American People* is that, in spite of institutional discrimination, U.S. citizens of Mexican descent possess a striking potential for assimilation into and participation in mainstream society (9-11, 575). Although a number of Mexican-U.S. social histories borrow the universalist tradition, perhaps even more telling is the reaction against this view.

## Pluralist Models

In "Democracy Versus the Melting-Pot," Horace Kallen's attack on the universalist imagery in Israel Zangwill's famous play situates the debate over acculturation between assimilation and retention. Kallen and his contemporary, Randolph Bourne, argue that democratic principles allow ethnic and racial groups in American society to retain their autonomy and distinct heritage. Although Kallen's conception of pluralism is best visualized by the "orchestration" of society where groups, like different instrument sections, play their distinct parts within the larger piece, Robert Blauner and others adopt pluralism to help explain the separatism and militant division among minorities during and after the turbulent civil rights movements of the 1960s.

Borrowing from Robert Blauner's theory of internal colonialism, Rodolfo Acuña's *Occupied America* stands as a key historical work on Chicano culture. Significantly, subsequent editions of Acuña's work offer a more objective and less militant perspective on the history of Chicanos; however, the 1972 first edition emphasizes the nationalistic point of its subtitle, *The Chicano's Struggle Toward Liberation*. Echoing Armando Rendon's 1971 *Chicano Manifesto* and "El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán" authored by Corky Gonzales, Luis Valdez, and others at the first Chicano national conference in 1969, Acuña frames his history of Chicanos around the issue of restitution for a legacy of oppression by the United States. To counterbalance the

(neocolonial) prejudice and discrimination of dominant U.S. society and regain "self-determination," Acuña argues that Chicanos must reclaim the area of land lost after the U.S.-Mexican War (236). Considered by the dominant culture as the U.S. Southwest, Aztlán embodies the spiritual home of Mesoamerican people; thus, some Chicano nationalists rationalize their militant aggression and cultural separatism as self-defense against an equally aggressive and exclusionary Eurocentric dominant culture. Unfortunately, where pluralism protects marginalized cultures, it results in a divided and distrustful society.

Following Acuña's lead, a number of Chicano historians envisioned late-20th century social inequality through a historical lens, focusing especially on the legacy of conquest and imperialism, first by Spain in the 16th century and later by the United States in the 19th century. The emergence of Chicano social historians includes Albert Camarillo, Mario Barrera, Richard Griswold del Castillo, Mario T. García, Ricardo Romo, Rodolfo Álvarez, Mauricio Mazon, Arnoldo De León, and others. While the increased attention to issues surrounding race and ethnicity--and specifically Chicano culture--within American society and the number of traditionally-silenced voices given expression is advantageous for a democratic society, a critical analysis of many of these studies reveals methodological biases as countereffective as the ones against which they react. Ultimately, the nationalistic Chicano histories overemphasize

the victimized status of U.S. citizens of Mexican descent, and in a few cases they rationalize militance, aggression, and separatism as strategies for gaining social equality.

Defending the pluralist perspective, David J. Weber reveals how colonization in "their native land" has left Chicanos with a sense of intractable isolation (52-61). Stan Steiner's anecdotal history, *La Raza: The Mexican Americans*, and Arnoldo De León's *They Called Them Greasers* claim the nation's systemic discrimination against Chicanos renders them powerless. More specifically, Albert Camarillo, Christine Sierra, and Juan Gómez-Quiñones point to internal colonialism as the reason for Chicanos' relative political powerlessness in mainstream society, especially in terms of urban and labor relations. Other social historians, including Mario Berrera, Richard Griswold del Castillo, and Joan Moore, reveal the victimized status of Chicanos by collapsing race and class, borrowing at times from Marxism and the "underclass" theory proposed by William Julius Wilson in *The Declining Significance of Race*. Berrera, most notably in *Race and Class in the Southwest*, claims that the historical condition of internal colonialism displaced native modes of production in the Chicano homeland and, thereby, subordinated native populations on the basis of race and ethnicity.

Often implicitly, the internal colonialist model and its attendant labor-market theories foster a sense of powerlessness according to the underpinnings of

victimization. However, in other social histories, including Berrera's *Beyond Aztlán* and the collection *Aztlán* edited by Rudolfo Anaya and Francisco Lomeli, the internal colonialist model provides a rationale for resistance to dominant society's control. Resistance against traditional Eurocentric hegemony in some social histories, as in *The Chicanos* by Matt S. Meier and Feliciano Rivera and in John R. Chávez's *The Lost Land*, serves as a nationalistic protest for cultural distinction, which harkens back to the separatism of the civil rights movement. In other cases, however, resistance emphasizes a need for greater attention to the fundamental diversity of Chicano culture and multiple modes of identification for U.S. citizens of Mexican descent. While there is some truth to the historical materialism presented in the Chicano nationalist self-defense, ultimately the cultural pluralism advocated by the first edition of *Occupied America* and a host of social histories following in this tradition proves counter-productive as it leads to a regressive American identification, minimizes the diversity of Chicano culture, and fosters antagonism and hate within America's diverse culture.

### **Syncretist Models**

Chronic dissatisfaction with both universalist and pluralist traditional perspectives leaves social historians in need of alternative methods for considering how American society has survived as it has. Focusing on the mixing of

racas and the fusion of cultures, José Vasconcelos in his 1925 landmark essay, "La Raza C6smica" or "The Cosmic Race," provides a theoretical model of social formulation that avoids the oppositionality--a them-against-us attitude--that grounds pluralism and universalism. Vasconcelos proposes a vision of America that reflects back to its Ancient roots and, at the same time, looks toward the future; it opposes nationality and, instead, emphasizes universality and the common nature among races and nationalities. The key to the Cosmic Race, moreover, is an awareness among individuals that petty differences such as skin color and national affiliation not only are practically meaningless to fully conscious societies but actually become less tangible as races mix. Chicanismo, with its own racial, ethnic, and cultural fusion (or *mestizaje*) and survival strategies (or *moviditas*) that effectively engage different historical periods and cultural influences, serves as a prototype of the Cosmic Race. In the cultural syncretism of Chicano culture, America's multicultural society sees its future, as witnessed in the works by Vasconcelos and numerous other social historians.

While the theory of the Cosmic Race empowers individuals through beauty and creativity according to Vasconcelos, obvious objections appear in the mundane and practical demands of everyday life. And yet, social historians have made a profound if gradual shift away from the simple binary of universalist assimilation-pluralist separatism to methodologies that allow cultural syncretism and mutual

integration in American society. In *Send These to Me*, John Higham's "pluralistic integration" offers a method through which individuals within social groups mutually compromise and responsibly maintain their distinct heritage while cooperating with others in their society (242-43). Like Higham, Howard N. Rabinowitz and Ronald Takaki argue that the pluralist oppositionality reduces differences within groups and commonalities among groups; thus, new theoretical work must consider continuities rather than differences and recognize the arbitrariness of traditional boundaries-- racial, ethnic, cultural, national, all socially constructed (Rabinowitz 38-39; Takaki 298-99). David Hollinger, in his argument for integrational "cosmopolitanism" in a "postethnic America," and Werner Sollors both emulate in their social histories a shift to theoretical constructions of ethnicity. And most explicitly, Edward Said in *Culture and Imperialism* describes how old binary oppositions have made way for

new alignments made across borders, types, nations, and essences are rapidly coming into view, and it is those new alignments that now provoke and challenge the fundamentally static notion of *identity* that has been the core of cultural thought during the era of imperialism. (xxiv-xxv)

The shift to integrationalism and the theoretical approaches that allow reconfigurations of culture have long been part of social histories dealing specifically with U.S. citizens of Mexican descent. In his 1940 study of New

Mexicans, *Forgotten People*, George I. Sánchez claims that through the cultural character of hybridity and the strategy of integration, the previously "forgotten" New Mexicans represent the "birth of a new people" (3). Carey McWilliams, too, argues that in what is now borderlands between the United States and Mexico there is a marriage between respect for differences and desire for unity, as survival depends on living "one and together" (10-11, 289). Mario T. García, like McWilliams, points to the border between Mexico and the United States as a reminder of the complexity of the interchange among various cultural influences in Chicano culture ("*La Frontera*" 112-13). David Montejano in his study of Texas Mexicans explains that "the new order" is not complete in the 1980s; the title of the final chapter, "A Time of Inclusion," however, indicates that social relations have achieved "a measure of integration" (288).

Social historians including Octavio Ignacio Romano-V., Arnoldo Carlos Vento, and David Gutiérrez implement methodologies that allow for more complexity and alternatives, because *mestizaje* involves "multiple genetic and cultural origins exhibiting multiplicity rather than seeking purity" (Romano-V. "Historical" 168-73). For example, William V. Flores and others attempt to revise the construction of American identity through "cultural citizenship." Most clearly expressed in George J. Sánchez's *Becoming Mexican American*, social histories replace static assumptions such as universalist-pluralist oppositionality:



Across a variety of disciplines, the very language used to describe the particularistic experiences of individuals--culture, ethnicity, identity, gender, and race--has been challenged. In particular, any notion that individuals have occupied one undifferentiated cultural position--such as "Mexican," "American," or "Chicano,"--has been abandoned in favor of the possibility of multiple identities and contradictory positions. Moreover, the strictly nationalist position of early Chicano historians has been questioned, not only by cultural theorists exploring the complicated historical allegiances in the ethnic past but also by Chicana feminists who claim that a single standard of ethnicity largely left women out of historical constructions. (8)

Ana Castillo, Elizabeth Martínez, Gloria Anzaldúa, and a number of other Chicana feminists help validate the integrational approach to Chicano social history through their presence and engagement with the issues surrounding American culture and *mestizaje*. As Sarah Deutsch reveals, historians mark the complexity and diversity of Chicano and Chicana cultures through a theoretical shift away from victimization, separatism, and assimilation and toward cultural interaction (6). Theoretically, where the universalist-pluralist debate stresses polarity and dissention, syncretist approaches to social formation tends

toward mutual accommodation and cultural interchange; this cultural compromise, exemplifying *mestizaje*, reveals America on its way to an integrated "New World."

2

VITA

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