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Mexican in Four Images: Cinema, Self and Soccer in the Creation of Real and Imagined  
Mexicans.

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree Doctor of  
Philosophy in Culture & Performance

by

Leonard Melchor

2014

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## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Mexican in Four Images: Cinema, Self and Soccer in the Creation of Real and Imaginary Mexicans.

by

Leonard Melchor

Doctor of Philosophy in Culture & Performance

University of California, Los Angeles, 2014

Professor Peter Sellars, Chair

How does one come to understand the Mexican experience in the United States? How do we form these ideas from within the community and as an outsider looking in? From fabricated images in cinema to historical narratives in texts to real people-to-people encounters, we are constantly grappling to understand each other in an America that is hyper-mediated by images of others. This is due to expanding technologies such as digital social networking platforms, intense and pervasive media marketing, the symbolic cyber-world transferred over the internet and the very powerful American film industry. In this daily bombardment of media, how can we determine the accuracy of the images presented?

In my research an image is not simply a portrait or a digital picture in and of itself. The term image as I use it refers to the deeper social, economical, political and psychological meanings we assign to the images of others as well as the images that are created to represent us. These images function as precursors to social awareness and social interaction. This has deep



implications when considering how socially restrictive racial stereotypes can be. In this context, images of being Mexican are explored across several sites.

My research enters the dialogue first by historicizing Mexican images in American cinema. The Hollywood studio system has frequently portrayed the Mexican as lazy, immoral and lacking self-control. I continue with an analysis of the imagery produced by Chicano cinema, a genre of film produced by Americans of Mexican descent, whose aim is to rectify Hollywood stereotypes. Leaving the fictional celluloid world behind I then produce imagery of Mexicans based on real experiences. This is done by collecting oral testimonies of Mexicans that formed soccer clubs in West Los Angeles from 1959 to 1986. I interviewed key figures from the three clubs. They are all WWII-era immigrants that came from Juchitlan, which is a small town in the state of Jalisco. The research finds that these Mexicans formed a dynamic, imaginative and mutually caring community, contrary to the stereotypes in film. The social dynamics of soccer maintained group identity abroad and kept homeland culture alive while creating a thriving community in West Los Angeles.

I conclude the research by offering an image of myself in order to clarify my connections to my research subject. With this I undermine the “invisible hand” of the author that writes and I implicate myself in the political struggles that the war of imagery involves. I involve myself as an image, personally and professionally, invested in dismantling damaging myths about Mexicans.

The dissertation of Leonard Melchor is approved

Juan Gomez-Quinones

Donald Cosentino

Peter Sellars, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2014

## Dedication

This is dedicated to both the positive and negative situations I have lived through and the people who populated those situations. I have tried to make this, as Peter Sellars would constantly insist, a work of love honoring the past. But love and hate have a mystical relationship and to know one is to know the other. I have come to experience intense manifestations of both, but love conquers all. Love always wins. The greatest is love.

To my wife, Annie, and my children, Amanda and Thomas, this could not have been possible without you. This is your victory. Our shared love of soccer, through experiences as players, coaches and spectators, has been the anchor of this research.

To my parents, Antonio Melchor and Mercedes Ruesga, I offer this in gratitude for doing all that was within your reach for me, even when I acted like I just miraculously appeared out of nowhere in this world. Additionally, I now perfectly understand how culturally profitable it has been for me to have lived in Juchitlan, Jalisco, after graduating from middle school. I certainly didn't understand this as a 14-year-old kid about to enter high school. But now I am eternally grateful to them for exposing me to life in Mexico, as a resident not as a tourist. Through this experience I have been able to appreciate life as an American, a Mexican and a Chicano.

*Gracias.*

To Monico Sevilla and Honorato Benitez, as well as their families, for opening their doors to me. Thank you.

To my brothers and sisters, any one of you could have written this. We all grew up with soccer in the background of our Westside Mexican childhoods, and within each other, we created ourselves. Thank you for a magical and empowering childhood. This is for you too.

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I am fortunate to have met Juan Gomez-Quinones. I immediately knew that I could learn much from him. I am forever grateful for the guidance, the friendship and mentoring I have received from him. His commitment to scholarship and community has been my biggest admiration.

Donald Cosentino has shown me with the utmost brilliance that the fewer words one chooses, the more one speaks. His honest friendship and frank talks when things started to take turns for the worse have made the completion of this work possible. I must mention how his sense of humor allowed this work to materialize.

Allen Roberts and Mary “Polly” Roberts have been like parental figures to me even though we have the shared experience of having children of the same age. Together and individually, they have shown patience and kindness that went beyond anything expected.

I thank Michael Owen Jones for bringing me into the department. He convinced me that this was the place for me by calling a meeting at The Cow’s End coffee shop next to the Venice pier. That was a perfect move.

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## Chapter 1

### Chew On This!

#### *Know Truth- Truth?- No Truth*

*Jesus said, "Have I been with you so long, and yet you have not known Me, Phillip? He who has seen Me has seen the Father; so how can you say, 'Show us the Father'?" (John 14:9)*

*"I and My Father are one." (John 10:30)*

#### **Where to start. Where to start. Where to start.**

Where to begin? What is the beginning of this story? Where did this all start? In essence, this is really just a story, a simple task. But it's too complex to just step into this as if the right beginning did not matter. Beginnings do matter. The beginning has to be appropriate; it has to be fitting for this occasion. It has to be right. Okay, this is making me nervous. Is this making YOU nervous? Beginnings determine endings, right? Am I right about that? Or am I wrong? Wait, that's wrong, that's very wrong. That's what this is all about. Beginnings don't predict endings. Beginnings are simply beginnings. And endings just signal the end, right? I am not sure about this. Actually, I am not sure of much here at this point. So why is this so difficult to start? Is it that I have too much to say? Or, is it that the things I want to say are not in their proper context? This is a dissertation. I have to be sure. I have to be the expert, *the* one who really knows how to talk about this subject. I can't be so insecure about really capturing the truth of the matter. I have to boldly announce that I know more about this than anyone else out there. Right? That's how dissertations work. Otherwise, what's the point? All those loans, all those grants, all those hours studying, all that effort didn't mean much if I don't declare with the loudest voice *I am the expert in this subject and I have the right ideas about my subject*. Now I am sure that I really don't like the way I started here. Let me start over. Can I start over? Is that ok with you? Wait, a witty story is always a good way to make

an entrance. A scenario! Yes that's it, a scenario. That makes me sound intelligent. I have a great scenario to start with: a Mexican graduate student proving himself to his advisors.

### **Chew On This!**<sup>1</sup>

*(Setting: Typical university conference room. A graduate student sits at a table facing members of his committee and several other friends that have decided to be witnesses to the event.<sup>2</sup> The room has recessed lighting, light tan décor and has prints of past academic conferences neatly adorning the walls with ethnic iconography. Not too ethnic, just enough to signal recognition of other cultures but vague enough to not signal allegiance or material support to their political struggles. Lights fade to black. The room is silent. He is nervous. They are nervous too, he thinks. It runs through his mind that the computer he is using was purchased used off some girl in Venice Beach and he laughs to himself at what that means. He laughs to himself that he is about to present his work as a "performance." Only a couple of years ago he thought performers and performances were just a bunch of artist wasting their time and talent. Everyone is silent. Time to start. Time to begin. A handout is distributed. A black screen is projected above for everyone to see. At the press of the spacebar of his outdated computer the presentation begins with the following sentences. These are faded into each other and appear in white block letters.)*

This is my first performance.

(Fade)

This will be my last if things don't work out.

(Fade)

I have been thinking about the following sentence for a very long time.

(Fade)

**I want to blur the lines between who I am, what I study and what I do.**

(Fade)

---

<sup>1</sup> see fig 1.1 Chew On This! Presentation Handout and fig 1.2 Chew On This! Advertisement presented at the end of this chapter.

## Station 1 - Know Truth

“The role of the intellectual is to define culture...” Juan Gomez Quinones in *On Culture*.

*(This title transitions into the following video clip that features a disembodied narrator speaking over historical images of Venice, California )*

“Mexican Surfers of Venice: Mexican Surf Association”

The long history of Venice, California has its roots in the vision of one man: Abbott Kinney, a millionaire casino owner. He designed Venice of America to be reminiscent of Venice, Italy, complete with beachfront walkways, gondolas gliding down ample canals within a luxurious residential atmosphere. Venice drew wealthy individuals from around the world in the 20<sup>th</sup> century until the Great Depression put a damper on development. During WWII Venice saw further decline as it slowly turned into a working class neighborhood. Returning soldiers settled into affordable Venice bungalows as Venice transformed itself into a multi-ethnic, blue-collar community by the sea. Skating and surfing became the main hobbies for Venice youth from the 60s to the 70s. During the late 70s and early 80s youth banded together to form surf and skate associations, as was the case in Santa Monica, a.k.a. *Dogtown*. At the same time Mexican youth in Venice, such as Jaime Perez, came together to form the M.S.A- the Mexican Surf Association. *(Jaime Perez appears on screen and talks until the end of the clip)* “The MSA was a little club just to, you know, to have parties and getting all the Latinos together and just have fun and go surf and cook *carne asada* and some *frijoles* and all that good stuff. We just got together to be a part of Venice basically, because there is a lot of surfers from Venice that just got together and started the MSA. And it was just fun, surfing and eating. I started shaping surfboards because I wanted to get a board faster than what other people could. So I started shaping boards and they were done the same day I got a blank. And the other way I would be waiting two to four weeks for a board. So this way I could shape them however I

wanted and how many I wanted. On the boards I try and use bright colors because that's kind of our culture, we use bright colors. From low-riders to houses to just, you just go in extremes- the brighter the better, I mean that's what I think. And my wife has always said, you know, God gave you the colors so use them, so I never try and use anything that's not bright, like, for a clear board. I just don't like clear boards. That way, the brighter the better!"

*(He stops the video projection and reads the following aloud.)*

When I first came to this department several years ago I thought I had it all planned out. I would knock out the coursework, hone my video editing skills and get out there and produce documentary films that would have interesting subjects. I still plan on doing this, but much has changed inside of me when I think of the politics of research, the morality of obtaining an interview and the multiple contingencies of displaying / representing other cultures. I had a firm idea that I could know truth. I really didn't think much about how complicated this is. I was firmly rooted in the idea that the most difficult thing about making representative films was being able to handle the technical details of equipment and software. I wasn't aware that the philosophical conception of a film is just as important as the material manifestation of the final product.

I brushed through the first year at WAC (Department of World Arts and Cultures) like this, not making many social connections, staying focused solely on the classes I was taking and the classes I was teaching. Then I met Don Cosentino, and nothing has been the same.

His "Fiction / Fieldwork" seminar opened my eyes to a whole other world in terms of academic representation. I began to see what I was doing with fresh eyes. The most important thing to come out of that experience has been the idea that to tell an honest story sometimes you have to make a couple things up.

The following video clip engages with this academic concept through an interrogation of one of the most intimate situations where representation is involved: the family unit.

*(He starts the video, which is a progression of still pictures of his family and friends in various social settings. A disembodied narrator guides the visual experience with the following transcription.)*

### **Station 2- Truth?**

The child looks... before it can speak. John Berger in *Ways of Seeing*

“I can’t represent the Mexican surfers of Venice. They have their own voice. I, as a subject, only exist as a social fact. So what is my social context? I can be recognized by some of my greatest accomplishments but I can never truly represent myself, only a subjective selection of images and voices. Am I who I think I am? Or, am I who people think I am- the stories they tell themselves about me, and the stories I told them about me. Am I the person I have convinced myself I am, the stories I have told myself? Am I a construction of powerful lies of exclusion and rhetoric? This representation of myself can only represent itself and never represent me.”

*(He stops the video and proceeds to read the following aloud.)*

During the second year at WAC, as I engaged with this notion that truth may not even exist, I began to look at a wider range of literature in consultation with Don Cosentino. The work of Junot Diaz made a heavy impression on me. I realized that my true voice can make its way into my work. The idea that research and the products of research can be intimately tied to the researcher is now a central idea for me. I no longer worry about critiques centering on concerns of objectivity because the concept itself, objective research, is an academic myth.

Conversations with Polly Roberts and Al Roberts along with Juan Gomez Quinones kept my work steadily moving forward.

I began to make more social connections with other graduate students. These relationships have proven to be just as important as the texts I have read while at WAC. Ideas such as community, mutual welfare and friendship have taken on powerful new dimensions as time has passed and this has certainly impacted the way I have moved forward with my research.

“Multi-Vocal Historical Fiction” might be one way to characterize what I am trying to do. The fact is I do have a cultural subject and I am trying to represent that as honestly as possible, despite the intimate connections to “my subjects.”

My subject: Mid 20th century Mexican soccer leagues in West Los Angeles and the community that formed around Sunday matches. Since the 50s, Mexican soccer leagues existed on the Westside. They were formed by Mexican migrant field workers who were commonly known as *Braceros*, those who stayed in the United States after having been contracted during WWII to meet the demands of the labor shortage in agriculture during the war. Whether the labor shortage was real or not, agribusiness was able to profit from the cheap labor and used their influences in government to extend this program into the 60s and many of these migrants wound up in West LA. Not having the cultural connections that exist today, this small community of ex-farmworkers came together and networked on weekends in local Catholic churches and in local parks, where multitudes would gather to see soccer matches. Soccer team owners, such as Antonio Melchor, were the people who facilitated this communal creation. The following video clip features him.

*(He starts the video clip, which is in the traditional documentary format shot, which has the person being interviewed looking slightly off to the side of the camera, giving the viewer the impression that*

*the camera is not present. Antonio Melchor speaks for himself on screen answering the question posed.)*

### **Station 3 – No Truth**

“The tango tongue tells interwoven tales.” Marta Savigliano in *Tango and the Political Economy of Passion*

What type of social events were organized with the Progresso Soccer club, the one you started?  
“We mainly held dances to support the team. We would mainly hold them at St. Marks Parish in Venice. We like to use that parish hall to help that particular church. It was a small hall but we packed it whenever we had our dances. We also organized dances in the Miramar Hotel in Santa Monica. We also held dances in Memorial Hall in Culver City. We would raise funds to pay league dues and other thing such as membership in the California soccer league, to pay for referees and to pay to have lights on at night when we practiced. We also had to pay for security and off-duty policemen whenever we held dances in Culver City. These dances also financed all of the players expenses that were on the team. They never had to pay for uniforms, soccer balls or any other equipment. Additionally, they never paid to get into the dances, neither them nor their partners. Moreover, this all led to a larger gathering and meeting of people. Sometimes we would have meetings in private homes just to get together. These were the type of social activities that we engaged in with regards to the soccer club.

*(He stops the video projection only to mention that the subject is speaking for himself. And immediately follows this by playing the last video that is part of the performance.)*



#### Stage 4 – Dissertus Incognito

What sort of animal is this? Its tail is where its mane should be and it's mouth has been replaced by  
an anus.

*(We now have a camera shot of him biking down Venice Blvd in the dark of night. It is from the riders perspective as if the viewer were riding as well. The video sways smoothly back and forth with the timing of the peddling. Cars are parked along one side of the bike lane and an occasional car passes on the other side as the following narration emerges.)*

“I like to ride my bike through the neighborhoods I am studying through the middle of the night when there are not that many people are around. It just gives me a pretty interesting perspective on what this place means to me now, what it meant to me back then. These rides also let me reflect on what I have been reading and how people like Norman Klein see this city. Also how people like Mike Davis, D.J. Waldie, Reynier Banham, Juan Gomez Quinones- how different people see the same city through very different lens. And I try to make sense with the way I see this city, growing up here.”

*(He pauses the video projection and reads the last piece of text, a poem.)*

Voices... voices...

I am searching for the perfect voice.

You see, my project is full of voices  
and I want to pay attention to all of them.

My voice,  
my fathers voice,

the voice of my community, my neighbors.

Voices from the past,  
voices from the grave,  
disembodied voices,  
voices that float around,  
and haunt you with their silence.

I want YOU to hear  
the voice of my family  
the voice of my advisors  
the voice of my subjects  
the voice of my friends and  
the voice of my detractors

I want to hear  
all these voices converge  
into a momentary and thundering chorus  
that celebrates and rejoices in  
being  
right here, right now.

*(His hands are trembling as he finishes the last sentence. He can't believe he just "performed" his academic work. He can't believe he just read aloud one of his poems either. He smiles confidently, closes his computer and asks, "any questions?")*

How was that for a beginning? How did *I* do? Did *I* tell you where this is all going? How did *I* perform? I am now satisfied that we got over the false pretense of introductions and over the staging of what is to follow.

The above textual representation of my performance serves here as a point of departure to launch into aspects of the image making / breaking process that is about to occur. It is also an entry point to work backwards, to historicize the creative process of that performance and performer- which in essence is the heart of this dissertation, making evident the connections between knowledge production (researched subject), author and context.

I have intentionally inserted myself into this narrative as I make no effort to hide the fact that this work is extremely personal to me and to the community that I come from. I have experienced on a personal level the negative effects of Mexican stereotyping and I have dedicated myself to prove those stereotypes wrong. To identify myself as a “scholar / activist” at the outset also serves to announce this dissertation as a work of political commitment.

Before moving into this image-building/destroying venture together there is something to say about purpose, organization, theoretical influences and methodology. To begin conceiving the methodology employed here, I would like for us to conceptualize this entire text as a museum exhibition. In this imaginary exhibition the guiding theme is that images, real and imagined, are connected to one another through social experience aided by collective and personal imagination. Imagine the exhibition to have four halls, each dealing with a different grouping of Mexican imagery. The images in those four halls are the themes of Chapters 2 through 5; the Mexican image in Hollywood cinema, the anti-Hollywood imagery in Chicano cinema, an historical image of a community of soccer-playing Mexican migrants in West Los Angeles and the image of the creator of the exhibition. The latter hall would be controversial for a museum exhibition, as the organizing

hand in any exhibition is supposed to be invisible. The purpose here is the opposite in this respect. I have endeavored to make my hand as visible as possible as an organic way to understand why I have proceeded the way I have. I have written more on methodology below. The following are details on the subject and the purpose.

### **What I Study**

Early in the process of writing this dissertation I knew that if I were to invest a huge portion of my time, effort and sanity, I ultimately had to produce something of significance that was beyond my own personal research desires. I did not come to higher education alone, I arrived to graduate school accompanied on this voyage by not only Annie, my wife, and Thomas and Amanda, my children, but I was riding on the back of a long line of support from family members and close friends. I had to choose a subject and methodology that would involve as many of those loved ones as possible. This personal aspect of choosing a subject made it extremely difficult to decide which way to proceed.

I started off with the grandiose idea of revisiting the history of Los Angeles on a scale that had not been done before, including an indigenous past that is all too often ignored. I quickly realized that being married and having two teenage children was not the right situation in regards to the investment of time needed to complete this task. I then decided to get more specific, to narrow down the subject. I made tentative investigations into other aspects of my life that could be a good fit. I researched my surf past- of which I produced *Mexican Surfers of Venice* in the above performance. But I found that, in that venture, I was embarking on a marketing campaign on behalf of a group of people that I might not otherwise be too fond of. Surely I could have found ways to write around my own intimate knowledge of some of the possible interlocutors but, again, I had to choose a subject that was close to my heart and mind in a deeply emotional way. Indeed, as I

previously stated in the performance, I was looking to blur the lines between who I am, what I study and what I do. I had to find the right slice of Los Angeles history to be my subject and me its researcher, as I see myself as an organic part of the city I was born and raised in.

I decided to focus my attention on a set of images I had of my father playing soccer in Mexico and in the United States. I also obtained some pictures of him in the capacity of soccer coach and team founder. I remembered how special it was for everyone involved when the entire family would go on Sunday drives to soccer matches in various parks across West Los Angeles and simultaneously see a soccer match and engage in Mexican culture. The cultural aspect was virtually non-existent beyond the weekend performances. It was never only about the actual game of soccer that was to be played. Sure the players of our teams won and lost matches, but to myself, and most people involved, it was an opportunity to get together. It was a time to catch up on news from the “Mother Country” as well as to mutually figure out how to best navigate the newly adopted country. The starting soccer players were heroic figures off the field and more time was spent socializing before and after the game than the duration of the match itself. There was shared food, shared friendships and shared histories of a past left behind in Mexico. As Peter Sellers once told me, “Soccer was the excuse for everything else to happen.” I have come to wholeheartedly believe that this is absolutely right. Soccer was the catalyst for creating a new community in a new country.

I thought how much it would mean to my father, to my family and to my Mexican community to use this dissertation as an opportunity to capture that time and turn it into my research subject. Besides being a good fit personally, the history of Mexicans on the Westside of Los Angeles is a severely under-researched subject, even among scholars of ethnic communities. East Los Angeles is always what comes to mind when thinking of Mexicans in LA. Selecting and writing on this subject also contributes in substantial ways to the ever-growing literature regarding Los

Angeles in general, the transnational Mexican community and American immigration. It touches upon the local, regional, national and international.

I knew I had the right topic in mind when I solidified my research subject to be soccer as a community-building activity. I then sketched out a research plan. I knew I had to include not only my own personal history but also that of my parents, my brothers and sisters and other close family friends. Additionally, I would give voice to all those extended community members that also found themselves creating their own identities as we all engaged with each other every Sunday. This choice of subject has also allowed me to honor the border-crossing hardships that most of my research participants had gone through since most of them are first generation immigrants. The total transition from one country to another is not always a pleasant experience. As I quickly found out and was able to document, most of the research participants experienced alienation not only from mainstream American culture on the Westside, but also from earlier generational Mexicans. To a certain extent there was also some resistance among other ethnic groups residing in West Los Angeles.

Once the topic selection process was finalized, I moved onto formulating research tactics and methodologies. This is where I really struggled for years to clarify exactly how I was going to do what I wanted to do. As I came to clarify the path, I also came to see that I was embarking on a war of imagery, both real and fabricated. The initial image I had in mind was one of a specific group of Mexican immigrants (WWII-era) performing a specific cultural practice (soccer) for a specific end (building community). But in my mind this always seemed to be mediated by the historical metanarrative of what it meant to be Mexican- the images I had witnessed on the big screen, the small screen and in my personal experience growing up. I had very positive memories and images of hard-working Mexicans playing soccer and enjoying each others company, but this was in stark

contrast to the stereotypes I witnessed of Mexicans in film, in television and other mass popular culture. I could have ignored this war of imagery that was going on in my mind but instead I decided to face it head on.

I remembered Aristotle's words in *De Anima*, "Never does the soul think without phantasm." The efficacy of modern imagery correlates to ancient phantasm. In the Aristotle's ancient Greek world, a phantasm was an abstraction of reality held in the mind as truth. In their world a mental image constituted what the person had been told to be true and what the person had experienced and could be known as true. With this image in mind one proceeds to act in certain manners. This relates to my work because contemporary social stereotypes operate in the same manner. Race and class differences are fabricated mental perceptions that have been legitimized by those in control of the media. The difference today is that now we are subjected to intense image circulation and live through a barrage of symbolic interactions on a daily basis. The modern image is not merely the surface picture that we see but it is a deep ideological statement that references the psychology of those that produce it. This robust consideration of the term image is the one used throughout this work. It is being used here specifically within the context of historical American race and class issues with a sharp focus on the ideology of images in film, as well as images that arise from oral interviews and autobiography.

Long before I ever took a film course in college, I'd had an intense fascination with the movie-going experience since childhood. Through film, I was quickly made aware that people (Mexicans) that looked like myself were rarely visible on the big screen, and when they were, they were continuously presented as negative stereotypes. I had no historical reference or any sort of theoretical framework to understand the absence / negative imagery so, like most filmgoers, I psychologically naturalized and internalized that aesthetic. I came to see it as simply the way it was

in film. I saw this as a natural reflection of the way cinema operates. In other words, that's just how Mexicans have to be in films. But I also remembered contesting images of Mexicans in a very different light that I had formed through real experiences. Without any sort of political consciousness I let both worlds exist in my head in discreet corners. That is the only way it really made sense to me. It dawned on me that this is how it made sense to many more Mexicans as well. Through this sort of internal debate I found that in order to make a stronger case for the importance of the positive images arising from the soccer community, I also had to bring into relief the negative images of Mexicans in mainstream US film. Therefore, cinema analysis is an integral part of this study.

Through further meditation, I also came to understand that it was necessary to include research on ways that segments of the Mexican community encountered and resisted these stereotypes of Mexicans in the media. This leads to Chicano cinema.<sup>3</sup> I understand Chicano cinema to be a counter cinema in that one of its primary concerns is the rectification of Mexican stereotypes that Hollywood has circulated for many years. The umbrella term "Chicano Cinema" is traditionally understood as films by, for and about folks of Mexican-descent. For this research I have focused on that part of Chicano cinema that is actively engaged in the creation of an imagery that not only is in contrast to Hollywood stereotypes, but is also interested in creating alternative imagery as well. By excavating the works of these Chicano cineastes we move beyond well-worn Hollywood caricatures and discover alternate ways to understand not just the Mexican experience on screen but to understand the complicated relationship between real people and the images that speak for them. Therefore, what I deal with here are two distinct, yet not entirely discreet, screen images of Mexicaness: the Hollywood version, and the Chicano version. Hollywood has a history of creating

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<sup>3</sup> A Chicano or Chicana is a person of Mexican descent with a leftist political orientation.



unflattering images of Mexicans while Chicano cinema's history starts when Chicanos and Chicanas get access to filming equipment and begin to create their own imagery based on their own experiences.

I propose that the reader have these contesting celluloid versions of "Mexican" interact with the organic images that are culled from the oral histories of the Mexican soccer players. The personal testimonies taken witness Mexican immigrants hard at work, leading goal-oriented lives, and enjoying Sunday soccer matches while (re)creating community outside their birthplace.

To flesh out this organic Mexican image, I identified founding members of the three local Mexican teams that used to play on the Westside from the 50s to the 80s; Honorato Benitez of *Club Libertad*, Monico Sevilla of *Club Juchitlan* and Antonio Melchor of *Club Progreso*. By focusing on three informants from the three major soccer clubs, I was able to get a cross-sectional view of the community's leadership instead of focusing solely on one club and only one point of view. To my delight all three were not only willing to share their connection and participation within their respective soccer club, but they also shared many personal anecdotes and photographs as well. Their experience as farm-working immigrants, beyond their soccer activities, helped create a more robust image of all three. Indeed, their lives as temporary guest workers in the rural context was influential to understanding their lives as urban blue-collar workers and weekend soccer players in Los Angeles. Their labor life was in symbiosis with their life as soccer player. The interviews of all three detail their shared experience of leaving their small town in Mexico for America.

I employed open-ended questions, in line with oral history methodology, in getting the data that would allow me to create the image of a real group of Mexicans in a real social setting. I found that they were very interested in community, social advancement and honorable work- an image that is in contrast to Hollywood's vision of being Mexican.

Personal testimonies play a major role in this work due to the thin supply of historical documentation regarding Mexican soccer activities in West Los Angeles. Participants were extremely willing to historicize not only their experience but they were also excited to see this obscure part of the Mexican experience in America be touched upon by an academic. There are no precedents in this area of research. No one has asked how WWII-era Mexican immigrants made themselves welcomed on the Westside of Los Angeles. Through oral interviews I was able to acquire the historical data that makes up this narrative. This facilitated pleasant memories by all interviewees as they all relived some of the best times of their lives. I was able to understand just how important soccer and community were for them when they were younger and physically able to play the game. I witnessed how those experiences continue to anchor their identities as fans of certain Mexican soccer teams, as Mexicans living abroad, and as participants of continuous community-building efforts. Furthermore, research that entails locating and reading documents and texts about a subject cannot compare with obtaining knowledge about their past through storytelling. These oral testimonies create an image that, along with Chicano cinema imagery, rebuffs the negative Mexican stereotypes that are often found in mainstream American films.

### **Exposing the Invisible Hand**

As was evident in the above description of my performative talk, the very notion of truth is also being interrogated here. I want to give wings to the images I am creating and let them have their own life, their own path. I have to make myself evident in order for this to happen. The reader has to know that someone with personal biases is creating this document in order to remove the status of authority from author to reader. I have to show my hand. To this end, I create and present an image of myself. This image also circulates and engages with the Hollywood images, the Chicano images and the oral history of images.

The question arises, what is the image of myself? Deconstructing my self-image has also been part of the research agenda. I present myself not only as part of the soccer and community narrative but also as a young consumer of distorted Mexican images. I was an American-born Mexican youth that experienced culture-shock when I was moved back to Mexico at the age of 14. Other facets of myself are explored as well. I detail myself as a Mexican, as an American, as a Mexican-American, a Chicano, an academic and as orchestrator of this entire drama. In the struggle to create an image of myself, conceptualized by myself, the problems of representation arise. To repeat from above, “I can never truly represent myself here but only an image of myself.” I have chosen the text and images carefully to represent who I am, where I come from and what I am doing. This tactic has allowed me to put an image of myself in conversation with the images of stereotypes, archetypes and my soccer community. I desire for this dissertation to move beyond simple cultural description and to be work that honors my Mexican community.

This method of academic shape-shifting allows me to turn inside out one of my own personal fears as an academic: killing the significance of my project at the expense of theorizing it. As is too common in academia today, theoretical models and the (sometimes forced) application of these to research data has become the marker to gauge intellectual competency. It seems as though graduate students are now required to know theoretical frameworks in equal measure to actual data collected through research. The theory, or systems of explication, has encroached upon the terrain of the actual research subject. The mission here is to obtain and present useful knowledge that can transform society while not getting lost in theory.

As becomes evident in my methodology, theorizing takes back seat to actually presenting the research data. It is a minimalist approach that is fully aware that any writing is already

intrinsically theoretical. I note here that this approach is taken despite having spent over a decade in higher education and having read a decent amount of theory and theory-driven research.

There are major outside influences at work here. These inflections come from scholars working in such disparate disciplines as Museum Studies, Anthropology, Chicano Studies, Comparative Literature and Cultural Studies. I will outline this below in the chapter summaries. Other influences have been museum exhibitions, as well as non-academic people and places. I actively seek out and embrace referential sources of knowledge that have nothing to do with traditional scholarly sources. I am not trying to produce a traditional dissertation, I am trying to produce one that critiques the authority of a dissertation by looking critically at its sources. This work highlights the tension between traditional academic sources that are “objective” and personal testimony that is too subjective to be a legitimate academic source.

### **Display Theory and Tactics**

As the above performance hinted at, and was subsequently clarified, this work is dealing with four images that arise from each chapter’s contents and four ways to conceptualize those images. The chapter / images are; stereotypical Mexicans in Hollywood creations, idealized Mexicans in Chicano cinema, immigrant Mexicans playing soccer and the image of myself as (hyphenated) Mexican. As is diagrammed in fig 1.2, I consider three categories to understand these images; as “objective” truths, as questioned truths and as non-truths or mystical truths. These are the three categories of inquiry adjoined to the academic writing that secretes meaning of each chapter’s data.

I have devised a conceptual apparatus to make these four images of Mexican speak to one another in their objective to inform the reader. Instead of creating a closed narrative that directs and forces the reader into a very defined line of thinking I have opted for an approach that allows the

reader to understand the images both on their own terms as well as in relation to one another. To be more specific, I propose the reader conceptualize that he or she is about to enter a museum exhibition as reading is commenced and to conceive the sum total narrative of each chapter as the images of sectional halls of the same exhibition. Each chapter is able to stand alone in their conceit to transmit knowledge but they also relate to one another. The metanarrative of this textual exhibition is presenting research data understanding the Mexican experience in America, but the sub-narrative is questioning the truth or authenticity of the images used to convey that knowledge.

As any museum curator knows, the assemblage of images determines perceptions and meaning-making. The physical placement of an image on a museum wall or floor may reveal the theoretical arguments being made. Different arrangements of the same item have different cognitive outcomes for viewers. That being said, I struggled to decide on the chronology of the chapter subjects. Had I placed the last chapter first there may have been alternative readings. How does one decide on the image schema? For this study I was provided with insights into the tactics of display while visiting *The Museum of Jurassic Technology*<sup>4</sup> (MJT) in Los Angeles.

As part of the requirements for a graduate seminar in culture, led by Allen Roberts, this visit made major mental shifts occur in my thinking. To the unsuspecting visitor the MJT is a museum that looks like most others; it has a name referencing a long line of Western thought always at the vanguard of technology, there is a building adorned by a columned entrance, red carpeting with velvet roping directing viewers to vitrines as well as the requisite gift shop entrance that sells academic works of “important” Western thinkers. But beyond this façade of “realness” we quickly discover that the museum itself is making an anti-museum statement: truth is fabricated. This is accomplished by using the traditional imagery of a museum to display “fake” objects. The objects

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<sup>4</sup> For a sample of *The Museum of Jurassic Technology* display tactics visit [www.mjt.org](http://www.mjt.org).

are real in that they are real things but the narratives that accompany each object range from the outrageous to the plausible to those containing partial truths. The museum effectively contextualizes the “truths” on display and because we are accustomed to take as true what we see in museums we struggle to make sense of a museum displaying falsities. One such “false” display is an antique notice announcing the appearance of “The horn of Mary Davis of Saughall,” which is part of the museum’s “permanent collection”. We are led to believe that a lady grew a goat-like horn out of the top of her head. To convince us we are presented with a drawing on vintage paper, dated 1688, representing what Mary Davis may have looked like as the unsightly horn is protruding from her head. It is very convincing that this is true since we are in a real museum and we are presented with traditional evidence in the form of a drawing that looks like other 17<sup>th</sup> century drawings.

Additionally, there is text referencing where Mary Davis lived. Surely she must have lived, we think, we can go and verify these facts if we wanted to. But could we? Who would go to this small countryside hamlet in England and search the archives to verify the existence of this woman? We are left to wonder if this is true. All the traditional constructs of truth are in place; a name, a drawing, an artifact. The sum total of the context, where this artifact is and how it is presented, leads the visitor to believe that a horn actually grows out of the head of a woman. The point of this display is to disrupt notions of truth and how we construct truth. The museum tactics are ultimately leading the visitor not to truth through imagery, as is the case in most “real” museums, but it brings the viewer to a heightened critical awareness about how truth is constructed. Truths are always constructed and contextualized to be believable, even if they are false!

It is in the spirit of the MJT’s critical display tactics that I am presenting here my own dissertation chapters as images in a museum display. Akin to unsuspecting visitors of the MJT, the reader should be aware of how the images are presented. What is the argument behind the ordering

of images? Are false images always false? Can an image be both true and false? Who is presenting the image? What is the context of the delivery? Does the meaning of an image change once it escapes the context of its initial appearance? What is true? What is authentic?

The above questions are the same ones that I asked myself as, through researched, I came to understand the Mexican image in Hollywood films, the Mexican image in Chicano films, the image of Mexicans on the Westside and the image of myself. These are also the same questions I asked of myself as I sought the appropriate form to present my research on those images. Presenting my research as a textual exhibition turned out to be the most appropriate form because the meaning that results from witnessing any exhibition is always an internal dialogue of imagery and never a scientific practice. In other words, the museum visitor, and in this case the reader, engages with the materials by using a subjective lens of knowledge and comes away with a unique take. This process is not a universal experience. The viewer is unique as is the perspective of the curator, or in this case the writer. As such, I present my research here as only one particular vision in the never-ending dialogue to understand the Mexican image in America.

I went through many trials and errors to make sure this particular topic and methodology was in synchronicity with my professional activities as an educator. As stated in my opening performance, my goal in this entire academic process has always been to “blur the lines between who I am, what I study and what I do”.

### **I Am the Research**

I have been teaching in both the History and Chicano Studies departments at East Los Angeles College (ELAC) for 9 years now. I always feel great satisfaction sharing with my students alternative perspectives on U.S. history and the Mexican experience. I have learned this while doing undergraduate and graduate level research while at UCLA. Teaching at ELAC is an intentional

choice as I see myself, and my own experience, in the mostly working-class student population. Many students are young parents, single parents or students facing economic hardships to stay in school. Therefore, to better understand the Mexican experience through imagers is to understand myself better, to understand my students better, to understand my community better and to prepare myself as an educator and activist. My research subject is an organic part of myself. Traditionally, people study a culture that is very foreign to their own, I acknowledge I am studying my own culture.

I also understand that my role as an educator in a classroom also includes being a resource to students working their way up the academic ladder. I understand they will ultimately be bringing that knowledge back into their own communities while developing themselves economically and politically. This is the praxis of Chicano Studies. Additionally, I actively participate in public manifestations for causes on behalf of immigrant movements, labor movements, anti-police brutality causes as well as always being ready to join allies in other social justice movements.

This research also organically compliments what I do in that it is producing educational material that can be used in any classroom, including my own at ELAC. The story of Mexicans in West L.A. is a fertile research field. This research data is at the service of the Mexican community at large, as well as the more geo-specific Mexican community that I come from. It also broadens the mainstream narrative about Mexicans in American history. This way of organically engaging my research was not of my own invention, I have patterned myself on the working model of Juan Gomez Quinones. As a scholar, an educator, an activist and a friend, his ways have substantially influenced the form and content of this research.



I came to know Juan Gomez Quinones, and his body of scholarly work, both as an undergraduate and graduate student. His influence on this study started with my topic selection and includes his writings and his actions. I've already written about the reasons why I have selected my research subjects. My thinking has been heavily influenced by Gomez-Quinones' essay, "On Culture" which was published in 1977. In this essay he insists the Chicano intellectual always be conscientious of his or her class origins and that research should always be at the service of community. This was the first time an academic spoke directly to me, my class background and why I was in higher education. He further states in the same essay that, "the (Chicano) intellectuals role in regard to culture is one of clarifying values and introducing ideas in order to bring about progress by establishing meaningful patterns of historical judgment or relationships. They shape ideological weapons by providing information and analysis." From this last quote, I take my research objective of defining how American mass culture, the Hollywood film industry, has historically created and circulated distorted images of Mexicans. These words have also made me attentive to the ways I can incorporate as participants as many members of my community as possible and to create work that is at their service. Gomez-Quinones' historical publications have always been at the service of his community as well as being important educational resources for those outside of the community looking to understand the Mexican experience across time and space.

Outside of the intense commitment to social justice through texts, Gomez-Quinones' commitment to street-level activism is impressive and serves as model for action. He was a contributing participant, as a graduate student, in the 1969 conference held at the University of California, Santa Barbara that produced *El Plan de Santa Barbara: A Chicano Plan for Higher*

*Education*<sup>5</sup> - an important manifesto and plan of action that has been foundational in the creation of Chicano Studies as well as, M.E.Ch.A., it's campus student component, programs across the nation. His continual commitment to social justice is evident in his ardent support, physically and spiritually, of *Academia Semillas del Pueblo*<sup>6</sup> (ASDP). The ASDP is a charter school in the Los Angeles Unified School District that was started in 2001 and co-founded, among others, by a former student of his, Marcos Aguilar, and Juan Gomez Quinones. The mission of the school is to create leaders of tomorrow by preparing them with a culturally-relevant education that includes receiving instruction in the worlds most prolific languages; English, Spanish, Mandarin as well as in Nahuatl, the language of the Aztecs. A major feature of this school is that Indigenous history is highlighted. In Gomez-Quinones, I see a manifestation of what it is to seamlessly combine who you are with what you research and what you do. This is the blueprint for myself personally, professionally and academically.

### **Exhibition Brochure: Chapter / Image Summaries**

The theme and purpose of this research as exhibition is meant to critically engage with several images that mark the Mexican experience in America. Through the analysis of these images a better understanding of the community is formed. Each specific image that arises from each individual chapter is then set into dialogue with the images of other chapters as well as with the image the reader has constructed while reading the text. In essence, I have endeavored to not create a seamless dialogue across the chosen subjects. I prefer to consider the disjunctures that make visible my subjective selection of subjects in hopes of denaturalizing the research writing process. Traditionally, the writing outcome is a clean narrative where everything seems to be in perfect

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<sup>5</sup> For complete plan see <http://www.nationalmecha.org/documents/EPsB.pdf> accessed 12/12/2013.

<sup>6</sup> The schools mission statement can be found online at [www.dignidad.org](http://www.dignidad.org) accessed 12/12/2013.

harmony. Here, I strive to make evident the fact that even though each chapter is related they are very much their own subject. With this I bring into relief just how contrived a dissertation is and I open a dialogue about what a dissertation is. I consider an alternative use of a dissertation, a dissertation not as simply a source of knowledge but as an ideological weapon. The practical application of this thought is explored in the last chapter.

The following chapter (2) is focused on the advent of the negative Mexican image in early Hollywood studio film productions and the persistence over time into contemporary films. Starting with silent era films such as *The Birth of a Nation* and *Ramona*, two D.W. Griffith classics, I historicize how both of these films give birth to the racialized image of a dangerous Other that threatens the moral and racial purity of white mainstream America. This nefarious image is subsequently imposed on most subsequent Mexican characters. I move along a chronological timeline to monitor and document how the Mexican stereotype goes through changes over time, yet ethical flaws persist. The Mexican is frequently presented as lazy, culturally-backwards, morally suspect, in need of salvation and unable to control his or her sensual impulses. After reviewing several seminal films I make the argument that these negative images aren't just abstractions in an obscure artistic practice but that these images played, and continue to play, a major role in modeling real social interactions among disparate social groups in America. I use an historical context of race relations in America to find the correlations between the relationships on the big screen and actual social conditions.

In Chapter Three I bring attention to the Mexican imagery produced by Chicano/a filmmakers since the Chicano movement (1960s). These images were meant to rectify the negative imagery of the Hollywood studio system. I first outline the genesis of this film genre and then proceed to examine how select filmmakers have created alternative visions of Mexican community,

history, gender and identity formation. I document how Chicano cinema has been used as a tool to push a leftist political line by introducing film samples that date from 1969 to 2009.

In Chapter 4, I present how a group of Mexican immigrants that settled in West LA used soccer activities to form a thriving community. I detail how soccer came to be the major social activity that allowed this community to recreate, re-enact, reestablish and reinvent that home culture that was brought with them across the border. A vibrant image of a Mexican emerges from this research that is completely counter to the Mexican stereotypes in Hollywood films.

They all came from a small town called Juchitlan, which is in the central state of Jalisco. I document their experience coming to the United States looking for work in the agricultural fields of Central and Northern California by recording oral histories of some of the people in leadership roles. I propose that this community remained intact through the many social interactions that occurred during the weekly Sunday soccer match. Through these soccer activities I am able trace the development of this specific group of migrants within the larger backdrop of the drama that is American history. The oral history testimonies taken provide authentic first-hand accounts of this time period. Their lives as immigrants and soccer players were inseparable as they sought to make meaning of their new home. You cannot understand one dimension of their life without the other. I present both aspects of their lives as one.

The last chapter, Chapter 5, is a self-created image of myself. I employ a personal, stream-of-consciousness, existential take on what it meant growing up, and what it still means to be, Mexican in West L.A. I employ this autobiographical approach to undermine the “invisible hand” that orchestrates most dissertations. I put myself front and center, speaking in both first-person as well as the role of narrator- undermining notions of distance between writer and narrative as well as the notion of truth or academic objectivity. I transition back and forth between non-fiction and

historical fictional that has elements of truth, half-truths and fantasies. This tactic allows me the freedom to document a long history of personal influences, both real persons I have met and other persons I have met through the texts and films they have created. I reconstruct my life living on the Westside from the late 70s to the present so that the reader may better know who I am and why I have chosen to write this dissertation.

Writing from the personal is also a political choice. Historicizing this trend among Chicano academics, Chon Noriega states, “By using the ‘I’ the Chicano scholar made particular claims within a field of study or discipline, often in sharp contrast to the general and more stereotypical arguments put forth by some non-Chicano scholars” (Noriega viii). He writes this in relation to the struggle Chicano writers felt as they tried to find their voice in 1960s America, continuously excluded from mainstream academic publishing. Although academic publishing now includes many Chicano contributors, finding a true voice through the Personal still rings true. This is especially true when one considers the near absence of academic writing in relation to Mexicans on the Westside. Not only have mainstream academics neglected this area of research but it has also been overlooked by those operating out of Ethnic studies departments.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, it seems fitting to start from the personal as this appears to be only the second dissertation that approaches the subject.

The last chapter is also inspired by the conversation between Michel Foucault and Roland Barthes in relation to authorship. In the essay *What is an Author?* Foucault argues that one cannot truly know a work without knowing its author while Barthes, in *Death of an Author*, makes the opposing claim, that an author ceases to exist once a work is put into the world. I take methodological clues from both. As a researcher contemplating his own experience and members of his own family as research subject I speculate that Foucault would agree that I include as much of

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<sup>7</sup> A dissertation submitted by Miguel Chavez at UCLA in 2010 is the only one known to approach this specific subject.

myself as possible in order to fully understand the work that is presented. I also believe that Barthes is right in that once an author completes a work and presents it to the world, ownership of it's meaning transfers onto the reader, signaling the death of the author. As Barthes himself puts it, "To give an author to a text is to impose upon that text a stop clause, to furnish it with final signification, to close the writing" (Barthes 5). I think that this entire text would mean more if the reader knew more about me but at the same time I also consider that this act of translating experience into text can only really represent itself and upon completion becomes an object subject to interpretation by its reader. Upon completion and dissemination this dissertation will have transferred into that ownerless realm of floating images that was described earlier and, as such, will both recognize me and deny me as author. This presents particularly pointed problems for me since one of the many objectives here is to claim an alternative Mexican identity among the falsities in cinematic images and to claim my own personal identity as a member of that community and to use the appearance of this dissertation as proof that a more dynamic version of Mexicans exists, that we are interested in knowledge production.

TRUTH AND REPRESENTATION THROUGH SELECT WEST LOS ANGELES MEXICANO CULTURE. MY RESEARCH, MY CROSS.

CHEW ON THIS PRESENTATION

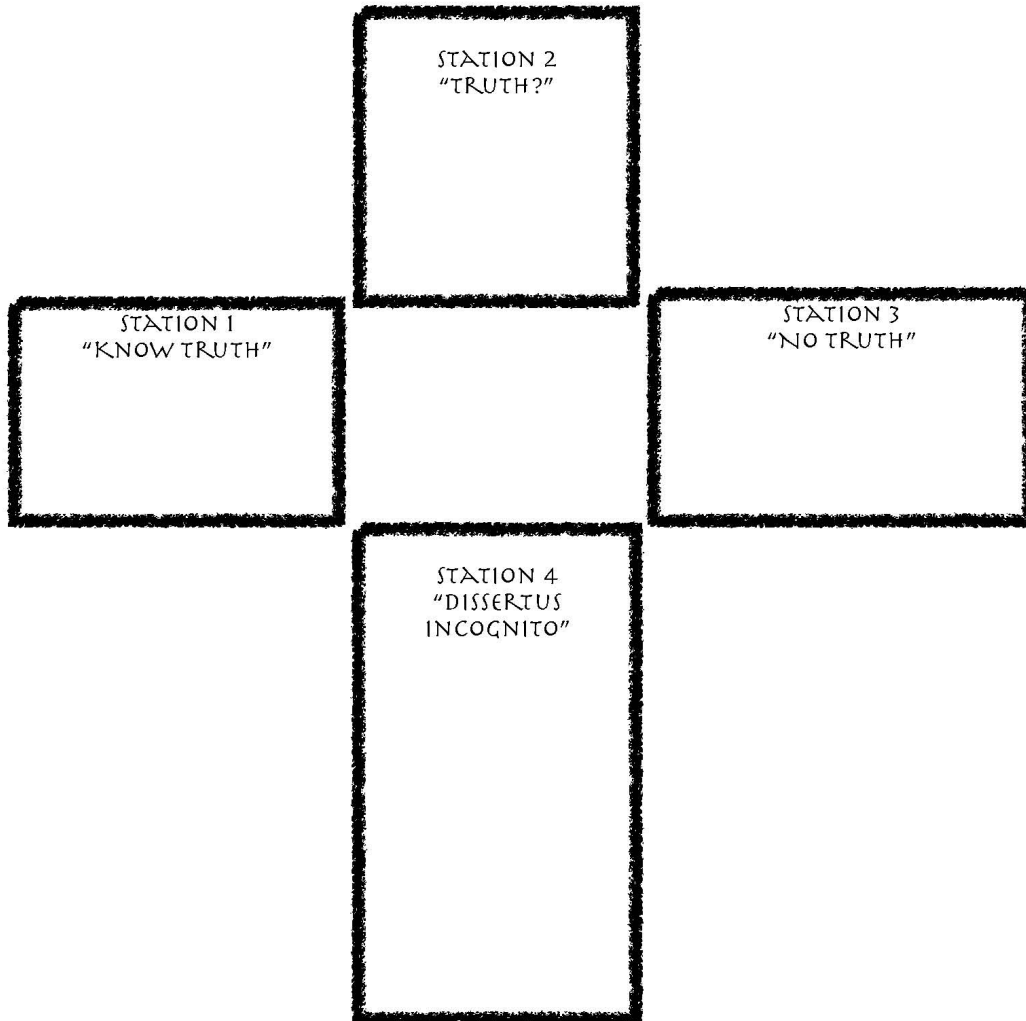


Figure 1.1 Chew On This! Handout.

**CHEW ON THIS  
"WHEN MEXICANS PLAY"**



**A PERFORMATIVE TALK  
BY LEONARD MELCHOR  
THIS TUESDAY, MAY 10 • WAC CONF. ROOM**

**WHO I AM IS WHAT I STUDY IS WHAT I DO**

At the crossroads of Chicano Studies, History, Ethnography and Performance Studies this short presentation explores one vision of post-disciplinary work focusing on the complications of Truth and Representation. What happens when one Mexican engages with surf, soccer and academia? Come and find out.

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Figure 1.2 Chew On This! Advertisement



## Chapter 2

### Birth of an Image: Imagining Mexicans in American Cinema

#### *Image 1, Their Voice*

“I think this is the strongest medium ever created in the history of the human species, bar none. I think it attacks the subconscious mind in a way that we have no idea what it is.”

Edward James Olmos in *The Bronze Screen*

“The territory no longer precedes the map, nor survives it. Henceforth, it is the map that precedes the territory- PRECESSION OF SIMULACRA- it is the map that engenders the territory...”

Jean Baudrillard in *Simulations*

#### **Introduction**

In the above quote by Jean Baudrillard we are instructed to pay close attention to the efficacy of simulacra in society. A simulacrum is the trace of the real, the reflection of some truth or past action. To him, hyper-mediated contemporary culture is a simulacra, it is but a reflection of constant reflections upon themselves and in this circular cultural loop, we can never truly know the past or the real, so the simulacra that we have left becomes the authentic (Baudrillard 4). He paints a picture of us wading through life thinking it is an authentic life but instead we have been constantly encountering only the simulations, the simulacra, of life. This idea is fitting to open this chapter because it is racialized simulacra, a stereotype of Mexicans in American cinema, which is the object of analysis here.

It doesn't take long for the critical observer to discover that indeed most of the tangible world that we engage in actually has been conceptualized, pre-packaged and delivered to us in easily digestible, simulated and unreal, forms by local and transnational commercial enterprises enabled by their governments. But how do we come to conceptualize the production, distribution and consumption of the non-tangible, of cinematic stereotypes? Where is the origin,

or at least a possible source, upon which “Baudrillardian” images can then be simulated over and over? We have to search for that origin matter through an excavation of the past in order to understand the present simulacra.

In the absence of direct personal contact between mainstream and ethnic America we have come to rely on surrogate images of both parties to mediate the encounter. Digital social platforms have been fundamental routes in this encounter. The impact of the internet highway transporting these images cannot be ignored, but in the following pages I will focus my attention on how cinema, the big screen, has historically been a major delivery system of images that defines who Mexicans are, where they live and how they live. These celluloid images are often fictional fantasies and nightmares for a general public understanding what being Mexican entails. And there are real social consequences in relation to these fabricated images when the imagery constantly reinforces negative stereotypes. The simulacra is constantly repeated to the point that the authenticity of the negative image is not questioned. In other words, Hollywood has consistently been denigrating to the Mexican and the distorted image has been normalized by mass distribution. The result is an ominous Mexican character in American film that is lazy, violent, primitive, promiscuous and in need of constant surveillance.

Stuart Hall reminds us in *Encoding/Decoding* that we should constantly be vigilant of the relationship between form, function and ideology in making sense of any imagery arising from systems of mass cultural production such as Hollywood. Hall’s ideas are useful to unravel deeper meanings of the production and dissemination of Mexicans in film. To him, understanding representation in media goes beyond simply looking for “the gap between the fabricated and the real” but looking at representation as an integral part of the mirroring act. In doing so, we can look further into the dynamics of representation. According to Hall, we should

consider cultural products, such as films, as a shared language that speaks to the shared ideology of those involved. And since the filmmaking process is so expensive and thus relegated to those in the higher levels of social status, films reflect the ideology of the upper class.<sup>8</sup> By employing this theoretical understanding of representational film images we are able to bring into relief the ideological underpinnings. We might understand the images as reflecting deep-seated cultural biases, evidenced by the fact that the negative racial stereotypes have largely stayed the same since the very advent of moving images in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. I suggest that by understanding the images in American cinema we can also simultaneously trace mainstream racial attitudes in American history.

But how do we document, disentangle and denaturalize the historical stereotypes attributed to the Mexican? Through select films, I will document Mexican stereotypes by looking at the trends of their behavior, their function and their agency. I will follow a chronological sequence contextualizing these images historically, constantly rendering meaning from this process.

As we will see, films have conveniently used Mexican characters as stand-ins for societal ills that need to be eradicated. The Mexican is usually portrayed as a drinker, a philanderer, an amoral person that is usually unkept and goes about life without stable work. Very few images of an upstanding Mexican exist in the early days of American cinema. But in unraveling the dynamics of this false depiction we find that this imagery actually points to the racist tendencies of the Hollywood studio system rather than any Mexican shortcomings.

### ***Hollywood's Race-based Formula***

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<sup>8</sup> For a more detailed explanation of Hall's ideas on the media see his seminal essay "Encoding, Decoding" as well as *Representation and the Media*.

As the nascent film production enterprise grew out of its initial fascination with simply documenting life, it trained its focus on turning this expressive art into a moneymaking venture. Like all economic enterprises, there is a formula for success as there is one for failure. For the Hollywood studio system success depended first on finding the appropriate location to operate out of. The move from early New York and New Jersey production facilities to Hollywood, California was facilitated by the existence of a large malleable workforce and temperate climate on the west coast of Southern California. This allowed for a more profitable and longer production season.

The physical move to California was one part of the equation for success but the other part was the ideological question. In order to effectively sell a product it has to stand for something. What was American cinema to stand for and how was it going to achieve this identity? The answers to questions like these were probably not directly pondered by studio heads, but they subconsciously manifested themselves in their thematic production decisions. The formula that Hollywood found successful was one of a racial dichotomy, a Black and White paradigm. But it was not simply a matter of choosing the sellable context; it became a matter of creating alluring content.

Evidenced in early literature, oral testimonies, mythologies and folktales, society has always cherished good moral stories that revolve around good versus evil and hero versus villain. This may subconsciously point to the major religious paradigms of the Western Judeo-Christian tradition; God versus Satan, good actions versus wrong action and the omnipresence of a ruling father. This meta-narrative tradition of understanding the world intertwined with the microcosm of American race politics and the result can be witnessed in early American silent films.

The Hollywood studio system had to populate their films with roles for specific ethnic groups. A celluloid society was created in film that oftentimes contained a strict distribution of roles based on a racial hierarchy that had white Anglo Saxon Protestants (WASP) on top and black and brown America on the bottom. Other non-WASP communities of color fell into this racial hierarchy based on the shade of their skin. For African Americans, Native Americans and Mexicans, this meant playing the recurring role of the evil one, the bad one and the one to be educated, disciplined and civilized by the WASP male characters. Two films that drive this point home are *Ramona* (1910) and *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), both directed by the influential filmmaker D.W. Griffith.<sup>9</sup>

***These (Celluloid) Lands Belong to Us Too!***

It is fitting to start this birthing of a Mexican cinematic image with the film *Ramona* (1910) because here we see the blueprint for the stereotypes that have persisted for over 100 years. Produced by the Biograph Company and directed by D.W. Griffith this silent film is based on the 1881 novel of the same name penned by Helen Hunt Jackson. In many ways it is the classic tale of two star-crossed lovers; Alessandro, a “common” Indian ranch hand, played by Henry B. Walthall, and his lofty attempt to live a romantic life with the upper caste Ramona, played by Mary Pickford. Their first problem arises with their different racial backgrounds.

Ramona’s aunt, the matriarch of the ranch where the story takes place, forbids Ramona from accepting the advances of the brown-skinned Indian, Alessandro, and even comes to slap her to her senses when she discovers them in close proximity to each other in the garden. In the aunt’s mind, there is a strict social hierarchy in place, with European blood dominating all others,

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<sup>9</sup> I should note here that *Birth of a Nation* is a very complicated film to make definitive statements on. It is being used here specifically for one dimension of the film, its maltreatment of Others.

and it is unthinkable to break with these social norms and “marry down” the social ladder. Enter Felipe, a man of status and white European ancestry, who is also suiting Ramona, but she rejects him and instead follows her heart and elopes with Alessandro. She would pay dearly in the end for this perceived race betrayal. At times the film reifies the social structure outside the cinema house and serves to maintain the dominant Anglo political ideology.

The time and place in the film is supposed to be California shortly after the Mexican American War (1846-1848). The release of the film is a scant 60 years after that event and in the public consciousness the very territory of California is still being experienced as new, as are race relations with Indians and the Mexicans that stayed after the war. It is now common knowledge that post-war race relations between whites and Mexicans were oftentimes violent throughout the southern border.<sup>10</sup> Add to this tense social drama another major historical event unfolding in Mexico, the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920), and we find that in real life, to some, the image of a Mexican represented memories of a recent wartime past. The image of a Mexican may have also signaled to some in mainstream society an erratic people in constant violent revolt. Surely Mexicans, half Indians themselves, represented many uncertainties. Following this uncertainty in the real world it is no surprise that in the film Alessandro’s interracial love for Ramona is forbidden. A case of life imitating art which in turn imitated life. The film can be seen as a reflection of reality as some Anglos may have held real life fears of the Indian, and by natural extension Mexicans, and felt they had to be kept at a distance. And for those like Ramona that failed to heed this call, only bad things could follow.

In choosing an Indian mate on screen, Ramona subverted the perceived societal and racial norms of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and is therefore left unprotected. Her aunt disowns her and

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<sup>10</sup> For a detailed account of the cultural clash between whites and Mexicans see David Montejano’s *Anglos and Mexicans In the Making of Texas, 1836-1986*.

banishes her from the homestead. She is forced to live on Alessandro's traditional lands. She leaves her home as an outcast and she and Alessandro arrive at his land to fulfill the romantic quest society has denied them, they find that Anglos have burned his village down. They are left to live in a small shack that escaped the fire. But even this small patrimony is taken from them at gunpoint by a marauding band of villains. There is no legal recourse for them, he is Indian and she has relinquished social power by choosing to be with him. Those seeing this film in the theater at the time must have wondered why she would choose such a difficult life.

As an ideological statement, the film ends with Alessandro and Ramona, landless and with a recent newborn, wandering through the countryside in search of their humanity, wondering why life has treated them so badly when all they wanted to do was be in love. They could not figure out why they had to suffer, and with the sudden death of their child, Alessandro starts to go mad. He jumps up and down like a lunatic, waving his blanket in despair. They are neglected by society and in need of a savior.

For Alessandro, a cruel "salvation" comes when a gun-toting Anglo unexpectedly encounters him in a fit of dementia and mistakes his erratic movements as a violent attack and shoots Alessandro dead. He is put out of his misery. It may be seen that the film cautions those that dare betray societal norms. Alessandro becomes another dead Indian in the way of perceived progress. Although Alessandro was a fictional character he can be seen as a stand in for the thousands of natives and Mexicans who died anonymous deaths as America expanded into the West, devouring any resistance.<sup>11</sup>

But how was Ramona to be saved? Hall would predict that a white savior would appear, expressing dominant ideology. And Hall is right. Immediately after Alessandro's death Felipe

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<sup>11</sup> For an historical sketch of the destruction of Native life in the context of Anglo western expansion see Ward Churchill's *A Little Matter of Genocide*.

enters on screen again, a white knight in shining armor. Felipe never gave up on Ramona; he knew she could not truly fall in love with Alessandro. Felipe wins back Ramona as she cries over Alessandro's dead brown body. She looks up at him and she realizes where she went wrong. She should have chosen Felipe from the beginning. She kneels next to him, weeping because he came back for her. Her salvation is complete, Felipe returns her to take her rightful place in society. With this scene the film concludes and to some Anglo audiences, ideas about proper race relations are confirmed. The film also serves as a warning to those that choose to break tradition.

There is a deep sense of historical irony in the whole situation involving *Ramona* for the violent disowning of Indian land by encroaching whites was not just escapist fare on the big screen, it was a historical reality.<sup>12</sup> In fact, Helen Hunt Jackson wrote *Ramona* as a way to make popular the nasty and hidden history of the dispossession of Indian land by both the U.S. government and unscrupulous individuals that had moved west into Indian country after the war. Before *Ramona*, Jackson had written a non-fictional account of this same history, this was entitled *A Century of Dishonor* (1881). This work fell on deaf ears. It was not published widely nor was it able to break through mainstream perception that Indians and Indian land had to fall into line with the goals of American expansion. She felt that the topic was too important to just let go so she embarked on another writing genre, the romance novel, to get into the hearts and minds of the American public, thus the appearance of the novel *Ramona*. It is ironic then that the film, based on novel with a social justice tinge, worked towards the darkening of the Indian image and not to their benefit.

### **The Birth of a White Nation**

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<sup>12</sup> An insightful historical work on this topic is Leonard Pitt's *Decline of the Californios: A Social History of the Spanish-Speaking Californios, 1846-1890*.



Five years after *Ramona*, D.W. Griffith directs the seminal film *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), a film that was met with praise for its technical achievements in narrative composition but was also protested for its glorification of both the Confederacy and the racist “lost cause” organization, the Ku Klux Klan (KKK). The KKK arose on the heels of the Southern defeat in the Civil War (1861-1865). Not only does the film make a hero of a Confederate soldier, who is portrayed as a founding member of the KKK, but there is also glorification of the mistreatment of former slaves that dared to demand their rights after emancipation. The film had a working title of *The Clansmen*, the same name as the novel upon which the film is based, written by Thomas Dixon.

Although this is not a film that can be seen as containing Mexican stereotypes it is relevant here because it is the blueprint for understanding race relations in film through the black and white paradigm. In America, we often come to the reductionist understanding of all race relations through the black and white binary.<sup>13</sup> It follows then that all other communities of color are constantly being understood within this context regardless of the fact that the Latino population in 2014 is numerically larger than the African American community. Therefore in cinema, an African American image can be understood as the precursor to Mexican imagery. With this in mind we can consider how *The Birth of a Nation* isn't merely entertainment, it is a cultural production that has in its imagery ideological statements on race. Further, due to its ubiquitous presence in American film history, we should also consider *The Birth of a Nation* as

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<sup>13</sup> The election of half-black President Barack Obama signaled to many the end of racism in America, unfortunately this has not been the case as argued several major black intellectuals, including former Harvard Professor, Cornel West. A transcript of these conversations between journalist Amy Goodman, Cornel West and Tavis Smiley is available at [www.democracynow.org/2012/11/9/tavis\\_smiley\\_cornel\\_west\\_the](http://www.democracynow.org/2012/11/9/tavis_smiley_cornel_west_the)

an example of race-based thinking of early cinema in general.<sup>14</sup> In an attempt to fully understand the appearance of this film we should also understand the man that imagined its creation: David Wark Griffith (DW Griffith).

In many ways Griffith's own life was portrayed in *The Birth of a Nation*. For example, Griffith's own father was not only a Confederate soldier during the Civil War, but was a Colonel. He did not merely choose to fight for the landing he was standing on, he chose to lead the charge. The Griffiths were a slave-owning family and although Col. Griffith died when the younger Griffith was ten years of age, there is no doubt that many conversations between father and son revolved around the thorny social issues pertaining to the Civil War. For example, "proper" race relations must have been among the topics as was identifying the culprits for the South's demise.

Although the elder Griffith had been a man of social stature and a wartime Colonel, the family fortunes quickly declined following the Civil War. By the time the young David was in the picture, the family was in dire straights economically and existed as a faint shadow of their former glory. The family moved around often. There was no stability in the home and a very young David had to work early in his life to contribute to the family expenses. But through it all, Griffith maintained his Southern sense of nobility and pride. He was well read and engaged in the traditional Southern sense of masculinity, despite the world crumbling around him. This agony was buried deep in the mind of the young Griffith and when given the chance to make a film on this topic, he let loose all the demons that he had been harboring in his thoughts. He came to the creation of this film with a racial bias that was predicated on his personal experience.

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<sup>14</sup> The film was used as a recruitment tool for the KKK until the late 70s. see Xan Brook's online "*The Birth of a Nation: A Gripping Masterpiece ...and a Stain On History*" at [www.theguardian.com](http://www.theguardian.com) accessed 3-12-2014.

It was not an objective approach to a subject. But he was not the only one that felt this way; audiences rushed to see the film making it an enormous financial success. Based on the popularity, it would seem that Griffith accurately brought to life the images of the defeated South and the perceived decline of Southern culture.

In order to make an argument for a positive, a negative has to exist. Extremes only exist in relationship to another extreme. In this film, the white race is presented as an orderly group of people and as a civilizing agent while the black community is portrayed as violent, lascivious and having no understanding of proper etiquette. This message is presented symbolically when we first meet the “kindly Master” of the Southern family, the Camerons, and he introduces a kitten to his puppies and a fracas ensues. A letterbox appears on screen announcing “Hostilities.” As the director, Griffith toys with the viewer’s subconscious in setting up the logic of the film: that the black and white race, as represented by these two animals, are different and can’t get along as equals. There has to be a dominant one. For Griffith, it was evident that the white race is the dominant one as the story develops. This is represented by two families, one from the North and the other from the South.

The Cameron family is presented in opposition to the Stonemans, who are Northern folk. Pre-war connections exist between the two families. These relationships are destroyed as each family chooses sides during the Civil War (1861-1865). A friendship exists between a Stoneman boy and a Cameron boy, announced by a letter-box: “Chums- the younger sons. North and South.” As the war engulfs the country this relationship is destroyed. Symbolically, the relationship between the emancipatory North and the slave-holding South is destroyed as well.

The romantic connection in the film also falls along these binary lines. This is portrayed by Lillian Gish as Elsie Stoneman and Henry B. Whitehall as Col. Ben Cameron. What we see

is another set of star-crossed lovers, as in *Ramona*. While in *Ramona* it was the class and race of the characters that caused the chaos, in *The Birth of the Nation* it is sympathies with, or hatred towards, the black community that draws distinctions and ultimately ruins their chances of a life together. Griffith draws on these racial antagonisms, highlighting the impossibility for Anglos to be romantically involved if they have differing views towards African Americans.

Both *Ramona* and *The Birth of a Nation* serve as foundational films in creating audience expectations for Other, non-WASP and non-black, characters to come. From these two films, we discover the base material for subsequent racialized stereotypes in American film. Silent era films that followed these two movies consistently cast negative images of Mexicans time and time again based on the African American model. The stereotypes to come were directly drawn from the fiery racial furnace of D.W. Griffith's turbulent imagination.

To Griffith's credit, his subsequent films, *Intolerance* (1915) and *Broken Blossoms* (1919) were pleas for social harmony as well as respect for racial differences. Nonetheless, the first two films permanently cast the negative images of the non-Anglo presence in cinema and it is a matter of debate whether that cast has yet to be fully broken .

### **Here Comes the Greaser!**

As Mexican actors started to enter the world of cinema in front of the camera, a familiar character began to emerge, the Greaser. The Greaser was one of American cinema's first bad guys. He was usually an untrustworthy Mexican who was always looking to double-cross the Anglo characters and have his way with their women. The direct relationship between the Greaser and to the non-Anglo characters in *Ramona* and *The Birth of a Nation* is undisputable. The term "Greaser" had its origins in the working-class nature of Mexican society in early 20<sup>th</sup> century California. Chon Noriega in *The Bronze Screen* explains that it originates as "Mexicans,

by and large, worked on the shipyards of California loading hides onto boats and would get the tallow all over themselves and become greasy.” The false connection made by Hollywood between what a group of people do for an honorable living and their supposed corrupt morals can only be understood by referencing back to Hall’s words on ideology-driven images: The Mexican greaser character emerged based on popular assumptions about Mexicans, not on accurate sociological data. As the Mexican enters the cinematic dialogue with viewing audiences his character may have already been judged by some and deemed untrustworthy

The charge against the Mexican Greaser in most of these films invariably includes rape. In the 1914 silent film *Bronco Billy and the Greaser* we are shown a Mexican, billed as a “Half-Breed” in the opening credits, who is constantly drinking alcohol and may have rape on his mind when he stumbles into a store and starts to harass a young Anglo woman. He is confronted by the hero, Bronco Billy, and thrown out of the store in front of everyone. For thwarting his nefarious efforts, the Greaser kidnaps Bronco Billy and prepares to murder him. An Anglo mob bursts in the door to save the day right in the nick of time. The Mexican is then taken away by the angry mob behind the building for sure justice. We don’t see what happens but we can imagine that the Mexican is not reappearing anytime soon.

It comes as no surprise that the Mexican character has to be corrected by the Anglo character for displaying improper behavior towards white women. Bronco Billy, as a signifier for the social hierarchy has to lay down the law for the “half-breed.” It can also be construed that in Bronco Billy’s cinematic actions audiences are reminded that in real life they should make sure that Anglo women in danger always have the white man to protect her. Bronco Billy reinforces the racialized patriarchal attitudes towards non-whites of some of the viewing audience.

In the film *The Gunfighter* (1917) the male Mexican character, a Greaser, is shown mishandling a white woman and he doesn't hesitate to kick a small child to the floor in order to carry off the white woman to her moral doom. The Mexican in this film is portrayed as an immoral rapist with an insatiable desire for white women. As another cautionary tale against unethical Mexicans the film also sends out the message that Mexicans are in need of constant surveillance or else they will rape and plunder if left alone.

Film titles with Greaser characters from 1911 to 1917, clue the viewer in to the corrupt moral compass of the Greaser; *Tony the Greaser*, *Licking the Greasers*, *Bronco Billy and the Greaser*, *Guns and Greasers* and *The Greasers Gauntlet*. Certainly the Greaser character was of utmost disgust to most Mexican audiences. In 1911, a Texan newspaper *La Cronica* issued a protest Op-ed regarding this dubious Mexican stereotype. Not only did this type offend Mexican audiences in America but it also offended the Mexican government. In 1922 the Mexican government announced a ban on the importation of American films with negative stereotypes of its nationals. As the voiceover in *The Bronze Screen* states "even President Wilson himself felt it necessary to intervene by asking the Hollywood movie people to please be a little kinder to the Mexicans." With time the Greaser begins to disappear from the big screen but some of his deviant behavior never completely goes away. Parts of his corrupt morals are parlayed onto a smoother, less violent stereotype, the Latin Lover. The Latin Lover replaces the Greaser for Mexican actors but retains the over-the-top lust for women.

### ***The Latin Lover: Tall, Dark and Handsome***

As a departure from the low-life Greaser, the Latin Lover character encompassed some positive psychological attributes, such as self-confidence. But what the Latin Lover gained in this arena was not complimented by other moral traits that could add depth to the Mexican

character on screen. In other words, the transition into this new stereotype for Mexican actors was but a little step forward in the right direction.

What is the Latin Lover? The Latin Lover stereotype is constantly on the hunt for women and has a penchant for having a picaresque attitude towards life. Seldom is he portrayed as a serious person with long term goals. On the contrary, he lives in the moment and although most of his romantic gestures are ill-advised, he continues to be happy with his decisions whatever the consequences may be. As long as there are women, music and a festive atmosphere, the Latin Lover is happy. This stereotypical character emerges between the late 20s and early 30s and continues to circulate.<sup>15</sup> What the Latin Lover image does is take away the ability for Latinos to see themselves onscreen as people with goals, a future and as true members of American society despite their accents. Instead, the stereotype announces the Mexican as a person that is not future-oriented and prefers to satisfy his physical senses instead of expanding his mental capacities. The Latin Lover is usually a pale comparison, psychologically, to both the male and female Anglo characters he shares the screen with.

Modeled after the likes of the Italian actor Rudolph Valentino and the Spanish actor Antonio Moreno, the Latin Lover first becomes Mexican with Ramon Novarro. Along with thousands of other Mexicans fleeing revolutionary Mexico, Novarro lands in Hollywood in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and perfects the Latin Lover type: dark eyes, dark slicked hair and an excellent conditioned body. He becomes such a popular Hollywood star in the silent era that he is offered the lead role in one of the most successful silent films of all time, *Ben Hur* (1926). Not surprisingly, it is the sex appeal of his revealing costumes that cause a sensation in the American

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<sup>15</sup> A brief review of Antonio Banderas filmography, as actor, quickly points to a long career playing the exotic Latin Lover stereotype.

public. Novarro used his physical appeal to become one of the leading romantic roles of his time.

In 1931 Novarro stars opposite Greta Garbo in *Mata Hari* as Lieutenant Alexis Rosanoff of the Imperial Russian Air Force. Displaying his fierce sex appeal, he, of all people, is able to get Mata Hari (Garbo), a sought-after exotic dancer, to spend a night with him. Novarro is able to portray a Russian officer by relying on his Spanish accent. In those days audiences could not easily match a foreign accent to any particular country. All foreign accents just sounded "foreign," they were not specifically Mexican or Russian. This worked for Novarro's career, as the Latin Lover stereotype spread. As a constant romantic lead, Novarro's presence marks the arrival of the West Coast Mexican-Spanish lover. Although he is able to woo women, and star as an exotic character, the Latin Lover is never seen moving up the social ladder. At this time, it is not within the cinematic expectations of the Latino image to be interested in the trappings of high society but this slowly starts to change.

Perhaps nowhere in American cinema during the 30s does dominant ideology get displayed as in *Bordertown* (1935). In this film Paul Muni is Johnny, a Mexican from East LA who goes to law school but quickly has to leave the country due to his fiery temper. He loses his cool in his first court case and is disbarred. He decides to give a Mexican border town a chance as the house manager of a popular casino. He quickly rises to the top and has all the material trappings he could want. He epitomizes the smooth-talking, hair-greased and sharp-dressed Latin Lover. While in Mexico he falls for one of the wealthy patrons, an Anglo socialite named Marie, portrayed by Bette Davis. He finally decides to step up the racial social ladder and offer his hand in marriage, but he has a surprise in store. The following is dialogue between the two:

Johnny: I am asking you to marry me.



Marie: Well that's out of the question, you must understand that Johnny

Johnny: No, I don't understand. Why?

Marie: Because you belong to a different tribe, Savage.

With a bat of her famous "Betty Davis eyes," she hurls Johnny back to the bottom of the social hierarchy and, ideologically, puts him back where he belongs. The film's message is clear: the Latin Lover is not meant to climb the social ladder. As a fictional character that is maintained only through mass social approval, the Latino Lover materializes strictly as entertainment for Anglo characters on the screen. He repeatedly entertains Anglo women who are looking for a little spice in their life and in his disinterest of social power, he is also seen as a non-threatening curiosity for some audience members.

*Bordertown* further makes the case that Mexicans should not aim high as Johnny did. Rejected and broke, Johnny eventually makes his way back to East LA and is asked by the local priest where he is going. He responds, hunched over with a sad face, "back where I belong Padre, with my own people." Johnny's story can be seen as a cautionary tale for 1930s Mexicans that dared to venture outside of their barrio in hopes of social empowerment. The film sends the message that Mexicans should stay in their neighborhood.

To this day, the Hollywood studio system has not stopped casting Mexicans, and other Latinos in Hollywood, as passionate Latin Lovers with "exotic" accents. Although the Latin Lover stereotype recast the Greaser in a slightly better light it left some of the Greaser's moral faults intact, especially his over-obsessive sexual needs. The Latin Lover is an image that some Anglo audiences have internalized as truthful. The image still exists because audiences are still willing to consume the imagery. Some may still believe that Mexicans are in constant need of

guardianship and surveillance because, if left to their own devices, they are unable to lead productive lives in a monogamous relationship.

### **Don't Speak**

As silent films transitioned into “talkies,” the moving image gained another dimension, the aural. While Griffith mastered the camera and editing techniques that made mute images come alive, this new era demanded new techniques to keep the Mexican stereotypes alive, Hollywood had to decide what the Mexican actor would sound like. The negative stereotype had to be logically backed by speech that supported, rather than challenged the image. The dark Mexican figure was paired with an equally denigrating sound. Enter the broken English, Spanish-inflected accent: the “brown-tongue.” Heavily accented, non-standard English became the logical extension of the Mexican stereotype. As is discussed in the documentary film *The Bronze Screen*, Mexican actors had to “talk like deez instead of this” otherwise a cognitive dissonance would occur in the viewing public. Through extreme repetition over time, the Hollywood “brown tongue” became synonymous with the negative brown image. I personally believe this still holds true today as it still happens that actors who speak perfect standard English have to revert to speaking broken English as they continue to play the historical stereotypes that, arguably, still exist today.<sup>16</sup> This became the norm for both male and female early Mexican actors working in Hollywood and only until very recently has this started to change.

### ***Let Your Body Do the Talking!***

The negative image of the Latina in American cinema has been more inhibiting than that of the Latino. While male Mexicans have seen some improvements over time in the ways that

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<sup>16</sup> One of the most well known Chicano actors by mainstream audiences, Cheech Marin, has made a career out of “brown-tonguing” in such films as *Up in Smoke* and *Born in East L.A.*

they have been portrayed, for females, it has been a constant uphill struggle. We can trace this condition by taking a historic survey of the Latina image on screen and her repetitious characteristics; fiery, sensuous, temperamental and in need of a strong man to be quieted down and made complete. While Mexican men have been asked to use smooth language to identify themselves, Latinas have been repeatedly asked for their body to do the talking.

One of the earliest depictions of a Mexican female character having these flaws is in the silent Western *Bronco Billy's Mexican Wife* (1912). In this film the Western genre icon, Bronco Billy, meets his match in the form of his Mexican wife, Lolita. She dances with other men when he is away and ultimately falls for a Mexican singer. She has insatiable sexual desires and is willing to resort to trickery to get what she wants. She has Billy unlawfully arrested for assault in order to clear the way for her illicit romances. For Lolita, life is about satisfying the senses and she is uninterested in assuming a traditional spousal role. In many ways Lolita is the female counterpart to the Greaser and the Latin Lover. As such, she unfortunately cast the mold for subsequent roles Mexican actresses would take. Audiences were able to easily incorporate this image of a Mexican woman into their frame of thought as Mexican men in cinema had already set the foundation.

During the early 40s and through the war years (to 1945) a young actress who changed her name from Margarita Cansino to Rita Hayworth emerges on the national film scene. A favorite pin up model for men serving overseas, not many were aware of her Hispanic heritage due to her Anglicized looks. Her hair was dyed and makeup was applied to portray an Anglo heritage. But more than her facial features, her "sensuous" Latina body was called upon to do the talking. Her initial film career began in "B" pictures under the Cansino name, playing mainly "Mexican Señoritas" (Rodriguez 76). As her popularity began to rise her ethnicity was

downplayed and she was asked to dye her hair dark red to appeal to mainstream audiences. In 1941 she starred in *The Strawberry Blonde* flaunting her new identity. She subsequently became a national Hollywood star by hiding her identity. But before her arrival in Hollywood she had been part of a family-run, dancing troupe called “The Dancing Cansinos” that frequently performed in Tijuana, Mexico. Hayworth’s career path, in relation to her distancing of Latin culture sets the benchmark for many Latinas entering the Hollywood studio system. The hair-dyeing, makeup techniques, name-changing and exposure of body, until very recently, was still an accepted way to gain employment in the studio system.

Indeed, it was difficult in the early days of cinema to be a female actress and not be caught in the pitfalls of typecasting. Katy Jurado, a Mexican actress whose impressive acting career spanned just over 50 years is best remembered in Hollywood as the dark Helen Ramirez in *High Noon* (1952). Ramirez appears in this film as a boisterous Mexican woman who is the sinister corner of a love triangle that includes characters played by Gary Cooper and Grace Kelly. Despite her breadth and depth of acting abilities, the film reduces her to the flat image of a deranged character that can’t keep her hands off another woman’s husband. As Clara Rodriguez notes in *Heroes, Lovers and Others: The Story of Latinos in Hollywood*, “the range of Katy Jurado’s acting abilities were subsumed to her appeal as a sultry Latina” (Rodriguez 116). On the same page Rodriguez notes that Jurado’s obituary in *The Boston Globe* described her roles as a “sultry wildcat in American films of the 60s.” Her onscreen lament in a scene in *High Noon*, “To be a Mexican woman in a town like this!” aptly describes the frustration she must have felt being reduced to the negative image of what other people thought she was, not who she truly was. If Mexican actresses wanted to act, they had to take the roles offered, even if they were offensive. How could they resist the system?

One of the most memorable Latina characters in American film history is hot-tempered Anita in the musical *West Side Story* (1961). Rita Moreno, playing the role of the fiery Anita, won an Oscar for this character and thought this meant she would get less stereotypical roles but quickly found out that despite her earlier roles in theater and film, she was offered the same stereotypical roles after winning the Academy award. In a brave and defiant move, she refused to take on those rolls. She proudly stated:

"Ha, ha. I showed them. I didn't make another movie in seven years after winning the Oscar... Before *Westside Story* I was always offered the stereotypical Latina roles. The Conchitas and Lolitas in Westerns. I was always barefoot. It was humiliating, embarrassing stuff. But I did it because there was nothing else. After *Westside Story*, it was pretty much the same thing. A lot of gang stories."<sup>17</sup>

Moreno's story proves that the expectations of studio heads for Latina actors trumped any acting abilities. It also points to the lack of imagination for studio heads to envision Moreno in other roles besides the stereotype. The stereotype sells and audiences expect that from Latinas and that is what Hollywood delivers.

The distorted image of the Latina up to the 60s was well known and accepted by mainstream audiences. In particular, the fabricated dark image of the Mexican woman in Westerns was particularly hurtful to young ladies that were trying to make a career in Hollywood portraying honest characters. Precisely at this moment, Chicano filmmakers began to enter the film industry and quickly get to work dismantling the distorted image of the Mexican man and woman.

### **Conclusion: Mute Mexican, Still?**

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<sup>17</sup> "Rita Moreno overcomes Hispanic stereotypes to achieve stardom" in *The Miami Herald* describes stereotypical accent demands. September 14, 2008.

To conclude, the contemporary image of a Mexican in American cinema is precursored by a powerfully negative and ideologically driven image birthed by *Ramona* and *The Birth of a Nation*. The denigrating discursive approach to non-WASP's in these two 19<sup>th</sup> century silent films has had a profound influence on subsequent treatments of Mexicans in film. Additionally, for some, these two films were seen as acts or performances of national racial politics as much as they were cultural productions- art and life imitating each other in an infinite loop.

By historicizing the creation of the Mexican image in Hollywood we find that the images are ideological reflections of popular sentiment: Mexicans in American cinema represent the type of Mexican that Hollywood feels audiences want and this has nothing to do with what Mexicans really are. Through this dismantling process we can come to understand not only Mexicans in film, but how Others have been represented in American cinema as well. A convenient and powerful stereotype was born early in film history and, through repetition, has now come to be viewed as true.

Taken as a whole, the Mexican image that American cinema has presented has been, for the most part, negative. Whether it be early depictions of Mexican men of questionable motives, or images of even more questionable Mexican women, American cinema has unfortunately treated images of Mexican men and women with great disregard until recently. Women were often presented as incapable of controlling their innermost sexual desires or as violent law-breakers in some fashion. The Hollywood studio system has created an impenetrable mold of falseness surrounding the image of a Mexican man and woman.

Indeed, to refer back to the opening quote by Baudrillard, it would appear that the simulation has become more "real" than the real. The image, the simulacra that circulates, is

more credible than the reality because the simulacra circulates much more effectively through society in the form of a film, than does the reality of actually meeting a Mexican. But in paying close attention to the way these images have been constructed and to the function that these images serve, we come away with the understanding that these falsehoods actually tell us more about historical, mainstream racism (ideology) in American society, rather than disseminating any accurate information about Mexicans. The image may speak louder than what it originates from but only to those not paying attention to the image packaging and delivery system as a whole.

The story of the Mexican stereotype does not end here. It is not a hopeless cause to confront, combat and eradicate those negative images. In the next chapter we observe that the Chicano film genre emerges primarily to aggressively combat the negative imagery of mainstream Hollywood productions. Chicano cinema searches out positive stories about the Mexican community and highlights overlooked historical events and figures. Additionally, Chicano cinema provides a platform to diffuse social activist messages of the continuous Chicano Movement as the advent of this genre goes hand in hand with grassroots-level activism on the streets. But in this lofty endeavor Chicano cinema also places itself outside of the mainstream commercial film circuits. In other words, effective Chicano cinema subverts what mainstream cinema practices and is therefore largely incompatible with the expectations of mainstream cinematic audiences. This is one of the reasons why Chicano cinema has retained its independent spirit.

### Chapter 3

#### Resistance Cinema: The Efficacy of Chicano Cinema

##### *Image 2, Our Voice*

*“No weapon that is formed against thee shall prosper; and every tongue that shall rise against thee in judgment thou shalt condemn.”*

-Isaiah 54:17, King James Version.

*“You gotta fight, for your right, to party!”*

-Beastie Boys in *Fight for your right*

*Who are you going to believe, me or your own eyes?*

Chico Marx in the film *Duck Soup*

#### **In Memoriam: Lupe Ontiveros, 1942 – 2012, Rest in Peace. We remember you. Lupe’s**

##### **Story**

In an Op. Ed. posted online at the HuffingtonPost website, Chon Noriega, UCLA film scholar and Director of the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center, posed a question in response to the controversial omission of the prolific Mexican American actress Lupe Ontiveros from the *In Memoriam* section of the 2012 Academy Award presentation show. He asked “What do you do when your longtime maid dies?”<sup>18</sup> Of course, this is in reference to the many times Lupe Ontiveros played the role of a maid in Hollywood films. In her own words she is often quoted as exclaiming that she has played a maid over a hundred times. But Noriega’s choice of words digs deep into unearthing an understanding of the ways that the mainstream studio system not only casts Mexican American actors but also the possible treatment of a real person, an actor, to the treatment of that person through the roles that actor has repeatedly played. Indeed, Lupe

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<sup>18</sup> Noriega, Chon. “The Academy’s Conundrum: Lupe Ontiveros” [www.huffingtonpost.com](http://www.huffingtonpost.com)  
Posted: 03/01/2013 6:41 pm.



Ontiveros may have played a maid on numerous occasions in the fabricated reality of film but in her very real untimely death, she was treated with indifference in the same manner that maids are treated with indifference on a daily basis in Los Angeles. The real and the fabricated became one. The myth of the Mexican became *the* Mexican. Noriega continues, “So do you send flowers to her family? Does she even have a family? Do you mention it in your year-end letter to friends and relatives? After all, she worked for you for almost 40 years.” She was after all just an actress that played maids, right? And she was paid, she didn’t perform for free. She was paid to play a maid over and over and over. But how much was she paid for playing the stereotype over and over and over? How much was she paid to perpetuate the myth? Her omission from the televised Oscar awards program tells us she wasn’t paid enough, on either fronts.

Unbeknown to most audiences watching the show, and certainly to many of the Academy voting members, Lupe Ontiveros can rightly be called the “Queen of the Brown Screen” by any account. She appeared in almost every major Hollywood production involving southland Mexican American topics in the **106** roles she played in an extensive career that started in 1976.<sup>19</sup> She was nominated for 11 awards, including a Primetime Emmy for Outstanding Guest Actress in a Comedy Series for her work in *Desperate Housewives*. She won the Special Jury Prize at Sundance in 2002 for Dramatic Acting for her role in *Real Women Have Curves* (2002). And one of my personal childhood favorites was her role as Rosalita, a housekeeper, in *The Goonies* (1985).

Despite Ontiveros prolific Hollywood career, the event of her death went unnoticed by the same system that had used her to play the convenient role of maid, always asked to use fragmented English despite having a university degree and speaking standard English.

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<sup>19</sup> For a complete list of films that Lupe Ontiveros participated in search “Lupe Ontiveros” at [www.OMDB.com](http://www.OMDB.com)

Unfortunately, this mistreatment highlights not only Hollywood's mistreatment of Mexican American actresses and actors, but her story, her disappearance, is fundamental to understanding Chicano cinema and its preoccupation with materializing and making visible characters that counter these same Hollywood stereotypes. Through an understanding of the political dynamics of her disappearance we can understand the need for the appearance of a counter cinema, Chicano Cinema.

### **What is the Image of Chicano Cinema?**

Born during the turbulent 60s in America, a time that saw the political rise of neglected communities<sup>20</sup>, Chicano cinema appears as a cinema of resistance, a movement cinema. In a symbiotic relationship with street-level Chicano activism, this genre of film has been used as a tool for diffusing political messages. Its desired net effect was, and still is, social change, more so than the traditional use of film as entertainment within a capitalist system. It charges itself with producing moving images of the Mexican American community that are in contrast to the negative stereotypes of the Hollywood studio production system, as were described in the previous chapter. Its goal is to produce films that portray a dynamic and diverse ethnic American community. The moving images portray a community dealing with its internal issues. These issues, among others, include: institutional racism, a trenchant Macho patriarchy, false images of the female body and supposed apathy towards education.

On occasion, this cinema turns the camera lens on itself for constructive critical reflection. Always political, this particular genre of cinema is concerned with revisiting and correcting historical discrepancies as pertaining to the community. In essence, film is used to go

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<sup>20</sup> The Black Power Movement, the American Indian Movement as well as the Women's Movement all exerted public displays of growth during the sixties.

beyond simple entertainment and enters the symbolic realm to diffuse contemporary political messages.

Jason Johansen on page 2 of “Notes on Chicano Cinema” succinctly summarizes what films of this genre should do. This list includes the following six points:

1. The Demystification of Film.
2. The Decolonization of Minds
3. (Be) Reflective and Open-Ended
4. The Altering of Consciousness
5. Effect Social Change
6. (Have) A Chicano Film Language

Although this is far from being a definitive list it does give an entry point to begin theorizing what Chicano cinema is by defining what Chicano cinema should be doing. According to Johansen, “Chicano filmmakers must and will broaden their filmic perspective by questioning form and content and the ideology inherent in the relation” (Johansen 3). Certainly the conversation in the previous chapter about the presence of ideology when dealing with Mexican stereotypes in mainstream Hollywood productions is and always will be a major concern for the Chicano filmmaker. All of the following films satisfy the majority of the qualifications above to be considered as part of the Chicano cinema genre.

Another film critic / theorist that circulates in this field is Chon Noriega. In his essay “Between a Weapon and a Formula: Chicano Cinema and Its Contexts” he compliments Johansen’s comments by adding that Chicano cinema also has to contend with finding the right economic formula for Hollywood success (Noriega 149). This presupposes that the natural progression of this genre is to move from a cinema of resistance (ironically against Hollywood

stereotypes) to an ethnic cinema that could circulate heavily in mainstream film distribution systems. The Chicano cineaste must therefore at some time ask himself, or herself, if the final objective is to use film as a weapon that puts forth strong social commentary or is the objective to produce a film that sells tickets at the box office. It is in these two streams of thought that Chicano cinema exists and oftentimes these two arenas are mutually exclusive. What seems to have been the case so far with this genre is that the path of “film as weapon” has been chosen most often, resulting in a near complete absence of Chicano films in major chain cinemas.

The imagery of Chicano cinema, with rich and vibrant Mexican characters rooted in reality, is not compatible with the Hollywood studio system, as the Hollywood version of a Mexican is usually a flat, one-dimensional and apolitical character that serves to perpetuate grossly distorted myths about being Mexican. But Hollywood has never charged itself as being an outlet for social critique. To the point, Samuel Goldwyn, a founder of the Hollywood system, once enthusiastically stated, “If I want to send a message, I’ll call Western Union” (Fawell 158). So how do we understand the imagery of Chicano cinema? Taking a chronological approach we can extract the social implications of these films through an analysis of the relationship between the moving images and their social, political and historical context.

### **Aztlan Nation(s): The Chicana/o Movement and Birth of Chicano Cinema**

Any discussion of Chicano cinema has to start with the seminal film *I Am Joaquin* (1969), produced and directed by Luis Valdez of “El Teatro Campesino,” the cultural branch of the United Farm Workers Union (UFW). This is the first Chicano film produced and it is based on the epic poem of the same title written in 1967 by Rodolfo “Corky” Gonzales. Although the theme of the film is focused primarily on labor politics in the agricultural fields it also touches

upon the larger struggle for social equality that the Chicano community was involved with in both the rural and urban context.

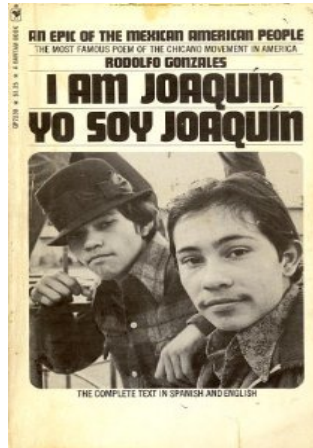


Fig. 3.1 Cover for manuscript of *I Am Joaquin*

Another major theme in the film is the contemplation of a homeland, Aztlan, that could provide a location for an Indigenous nationalism that was unavailable to the community then in mainstream history. In other words, as revisionist historians of the early 60s and 70s began to rethink the narrow national narrative, they inserted Aztlan into the American historical consciousness by making clear the connection between the Southwest (where they lived) and Mexico (where they came from). Aztlan is the mythical homeland of the Aztecs. No one knows exactly where Aztlan was, only that it existed somewhere in the Southwest, bordered by great mountain peaks and a large lake. This has led to speculation that the location could either be somewhere near the Salton Sea in California or in the vicinity of Lake Tahoe. By bringing Aztlan into relief, the Chicano activists cemented the right to exist in the Southwest without discrimination because this was the original mythical homeland from which the Aztecs emigrated to Mexico. In the poem *I Am Joaquin* Corky Gonzales invites Chicanos to embrace

themselves as Indigenous people and as part of the original inhabitants of the American southwest, of Aztlan:

And I am the Eagle and the Serpent of the Aztec civilization  
I owned the land as far as the eye could see under the crown of Spain  
And I toiled on my earth and gave my Indian blood to the Spanish master  
Who ruled with tyranny over man and beast and all he could trample  
But...  
THE GROUND WAS MINE.<sup>21</sup>

The poem was widely circulated among Chicanos because it spoke directly to many of the youth that grew up confused never having read much about their own history in school. Now here was a poem telling them you not only belong here but you have been here before the European invasion. These were powerful words as Chicano youth started to enter the university system and question why the history of Americans of Mexican decent had been only minimally researched. All of these factors made this poem prime material with which to make a film.

When released as a film in 1969, *I Am Joaquin* quickly spread like wildfire amongst activist groups. The film was not only powerful in animating an already fiery poem but it served to diffuse the message of an Indigenous identity. For many it was the first time they saw images of Native leaders like Netzahualcoyotl or Cuahtemoc. It was also the first time a film tied a political Mexican identity (Chicano) to the historical effects of neglect of the Chicano community, making people aware of institutional neglect. The narrator in the film speaks:

In a country that has wiped out all my history and stifled all my pride  
In a country that has placed a different weight of indignity  
Upon my age old burdened back  
Inferiority is the new load  
The Indian has endured and still emerged the winner

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<sup>21</sup> *I Am Joaquin* was written by Rodolfo Gonzales in 1967

In this scene the narrator shifts his voice from sadness in the opening words to a voice of triumph as the last words are read, cueing the viewer to focus on the ability of the Indian to endure almost any situation.

The Indigenous identity inculcated by *I Am Joaquin* in the sixties is still felt today among activist circles and is certainly the primary theme among Chicana/o Studies departments across the nation.<sup>22</sup> The poem and the film have become standard material to understand not only the genesis of the Chicano movement but of Chicano cinema as well. Identity politics were the driving force for *I Am Joaquin* as that is what was needed at the time. As the 60s passed, other community issues were confronted by Chicano filmmakers.

### **The Diverse Chicana Body**

The voluptuous Latina body has been used time and time again to drive home the point that a Latina's presence on screen is equated with the viewer seeing images of exaggerated busts, hips and invariably a fiery temper. This was the topic of the previous chapter. This claustrophobic vision of a Latina woman is the topic of a documentary video covering the work of Laura Aguilar. The U.C.L.A. Chicano Studies Research Center (CSRC) has released this compilation of Aguilar's work under their *Chicano Cinema And Media Art Series*,<sup>23</sup> filmed and produced by Michael Stone. In the film *Laura Aguilar: Life, The Body, Her Perspective* we encounter a Chicana artist hard at work dismantling the traditional expectations of the female body. She uses her own nude plus-sized body in her photography to critique the way the female

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<sup>22</sup> UCLA, UCSB and Berkeley, some of the major Chicana/o Studies departments are intimately linked to MEChA student organizations. MEChA's are student groups that adhere to the *Plan Espiritual de Aztlan* as produced by the youth of the Crusade For Justices' 1969 National Youth Conference in Denver, Co.

<sup>23</sup> In their own words the Chicano Cinema and Media Art Series "showcases important and rare Chicano films and videos." See <http://www.chicano.ucla.edu/publications/dvds>

body is exhibited. This is a documentary film with chapters that portion off various aspects of her artistic practice.

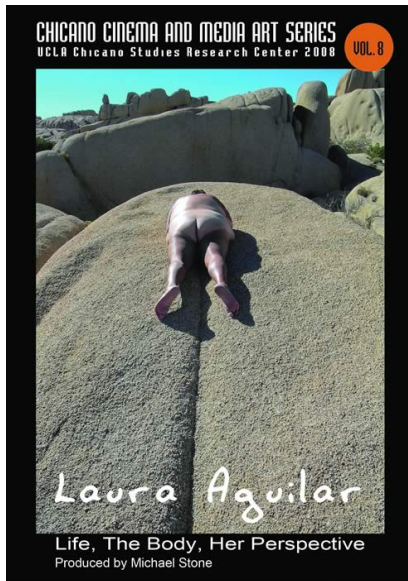


Fig. 3.2 *Laura Aguilar* DVD



Fig. 3.3 Laura Aguilar in forest.

In the opening scene of the chapter *Laura in the Desert* we find Aguilar reversing the roles Hollywood has traditionally assigned to women based on their looks. In other words, it is understood that the more “good-looking” a woman is, the more important and larger the assigned role. But Aguilar makes us think twice about this. In this case the scenario is a photo-shoot out in the desert of Joshua Tree National Park. It is a barren landscape dotted by large granite boulders. Aguilar is out searching for locations to place her totally nude body in synchronicity with the desert landscape. But first she has to give instructions on how to operate the camera to her assistant Laura Sternad, who incidentally is a voluptuous red-head in a tube top. The irony in the imagery runs deep as Sternad, the traditionally “sexy” woman is clearly not the one in control. As Aguilar explains to Sternad how to operate the camera, she undresses and exhibits



what would be taboo in any Hollywood production: full frontal nudity of an overweight woman. Aguilar undresses casually and places her body on one of the large granite boulders. Sternad takes pictures of Aguilar. The viewer, because of the stereotypical ways the Latina body has been exhibited, is left wondering why the roles aren't reversed. This is where the power of the imagery lies and the bravery of Aguilar to use her own body emerges. In the "Interview" section of the same video, Aguilar herself comments on why she uses her own overweight nude body in her work, "When I look at that image I seem so peaceful and that's not how I perceive myself." With her nude imagery, Aguilar empowers not only herself but other women that may not be at peace with their self-image. Additionally, the imagery challenges the body that Hollywood has ascribed to Latinas on the big screen.

### **Mas Macho?**

"If you are asking me if you think God is punishing you homey, God doesn't have to punish us, we do that good all by ourselves." This is the response Che Rivera (Benjamin Bratt) gets from his cousin as he finds out that his only son Jesse (Jeremy Ray Valdez) is gay. Che can't come to grips that he has a gay son. Che is a recovering alcoholic, ex-con, street-smart product of the Mexican, San Francisco, working-class neighborhood "*la mision*," the Mission district. The tension between Jesse and Che in the film *La Mission* (2009) is the classic generational tension between father and son but for the traditionalist Che, Jesse's sexuality seems too much to accept. As a character, Che is the stereotypical, hard-core, urban Mexican American that is into lowriders, has prison tattoos and listens to oldies. He grew up learning how to handle situations using his physical presence and violence. He also has no tolerance for weakness, much less what he perceives to be a weakness in his son's homosexuality. He is the epitome of Mexican machismo. He even wonders if his sons orientation is a punishment by a

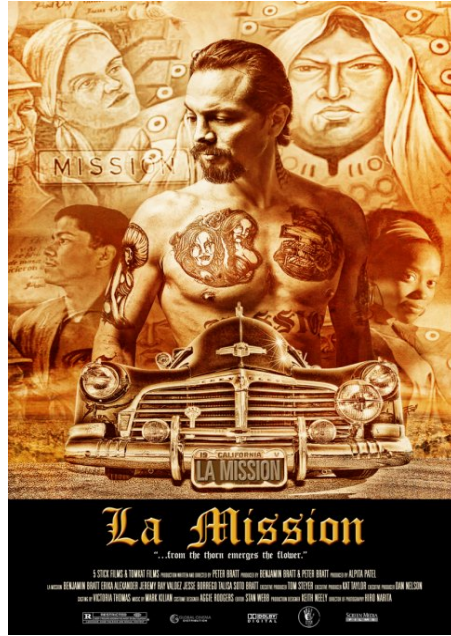


fig 3.4 Movie poster for *La Mission*

Catholic God that has witnessed his violent past. To Che, being gay is a curse. In this film Che represents the anti-gay stance that the majority of Catholic Mexicans embrace. And it is Che that has to be moved if the film is to succeed in its pro-equality message. But Che won't budge.

Jesse, on the other hand, is content to let go of his stubborn father. He decides to let go of his roots to his neighborhood, his culture and move in with his Anglo lover to get away from it all. In this action, the film leads us to believe that people like Che and the culture that they belong to aren't capable of change, capable of tolerance. Only when Che truly realizes that he has lost his son forever after violently kicking him out in front of all the neighbors does he begin to soul search for a way to reconcile his beliefs with those of his sons. At first he tries denial and accepts his son back with the disclaimer that he will never truly accept his homosexuality. He takes a "don't ask, don't tell" mentality which quickly degenerates into a tense home situation. But when Jesse is shot by a local juvenile thug that was out gay-bashing, he begins to see Jesse's situation in a different light. He still struggles to see Jesse's lover visit him in the hospital and

resorts to breaking his sobriety to make sense of it all. He also becomes violent towards Jesse's partner in the hospital. This forces Jesse to spend the last few days before leaving for college at his partner's house. Here we witness the film portraying contemporary Mexican culture as too rigid and out of synch with reality to confront homosexuality with acceptance. The film also highlights the changing face of the Mexican community, not only in San Francisco, but in the entire United States as well. Mainstream films have yet to address gay issues in the Mexican community but here it is the main topic.

Che eventually has an epiphany when he passes an Aztec dancing ceremony taking place on the sidewalk in remembrance of a murdered youth. Upon closer inspection he finds that the youth being honored was the same young man that had shot Jesse. Dazed and confused by the swirling dancers, the alcohol in his system and the despair of his son being shot as well as this other young man being murdered, he decides to accept his son. In the end, we see Che driving down the coast towards UCLA in search of Jesse in a low rider he has built especially for him.

As an affront to Hollywood Macho stereotypes *La Mission* works to reimagine what it may be like in a traditional Mexican family to have a son come out as gay. The film challenges the notion that to be gay is to be weak or unworthy of love by a very street-smart father. In this tactic, the film speaks not only internally to the Mexican community but also to the outside filmmaker community that continues to portray people like Che as unable or unwilling to change.

In fact, *La Mission* serves to create an alternative role model for Mexican men that may face that situation in their lives. The traditional Hollywood Mexican would have been incapable of the transformation that takes place in Che.

## Diversity in Community

The traditional film location for movies that depict Mexicans in Los Angeles is the Eastside. Indeed, East Los Angeles is where the highest concentration of Mexicans reside in Los Angeles. But if we are to believe the imagery of such films as *Zoot Suit*, *Boulevard Nights* and *American Me*, the Eastside is an extremely dangerous place where only gangsters reside, the walls are covered in graffiti and everyone drives a lowrider.<sup>24</sup>

The reality is that East Los Angeles is home to a community of diverse socio-economical backgrounds and not all Mexicans in East Los Angeles grow up joining a gang. What may come as a surprise though is that for many decades Mexicans have been calling other parts of Los Angeles home as well. Compton, once a traditional Black neighborhood has seen an extreme shift in its demographics as Mexicans have aggressively been moving into that part of the city. The San Fernando Valley is another part of Los Angeles county that has seen a large influx of Mexicans. The Westside of Los Angeles has also been the destination point for Mexicans since California was part of Mexico. And it is here on the Westside where the film *Vicious Circle* takes place.<sup>25</sup>

Billing itself as a “tragic punk-rock love story” the film revolves around the tumultuous relationship between RJ (Paul Rodriguez Jr.) and Angel (Emily Rios). RJ and Angel defy many of the cinematic expectations of Mexicans in Los Angeles; they both live in an ethnically diverse Venice Beach, he plays chess and is an accomplished visual artist and she sings in a punk rock band while still in high school. Additionally, RJ is of a mixed-race background. His Mexican

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<sup>24</sup> Although these films do highlight Mexican gangster life in Los Angeles, very seldom do ordinary working-class people make their way into the imagery. Instead the stereotypical Mexican barrio is always present.

<sup>25</sup> The Westside is that part of Los Angeles which is south of the San Fernando valley, yet north of the Los Angeles International airport and west of La Cienega Blvd. to the shoreline.

mother is the school librarian while his Anglo father is a petty criminal with a penchant for chess. Having a tinge of Greek tragedy, the drama is set into motion when drug-addicted Angel falls for her Anglo pusher who turns out to be RJ's half-brother. Both young men were unaware of this growing up as friends and it isn't until Angel comes between them that the secret is revealed.

From the beginning *Vicious Circle* shifts focus away from East Los Angeles and all the stereotypes of the cinematic barrio described above. Instead of the expectations of Mexican youth in head bandanas and creased Dickies we see an alternative: RJ and his friends like to hang out in beach trunks, they enjoy skateboarding and occasionally gather under the Venice pier to kill time. This departure from Hollywood's script earned the Best Film Award in 2008 at the New York Latino Underground Film Festival. Certainly this change of scenery was welcomed by critics and audiences alike.

Unable to completely shake off the shackles of Hollywood stereotypes a tattooed, and bald "cholo" does make an appearance in the film as Angel's brother. It is no coincidence that he is the only stereotypical character. Angel's brother is presented as the most blood-thirsty and problematic character. When Angel's brother finds out that RJ accidentally hit Angel in the head with a pistol he immediately flies into a fit of rage and picks up a gun and a machete and heads out to look for RJ after stopping for a couple of tequila shots at the local bar. When he finds RJ he kidnaps him and takes him to an automobile chop shop where he proceeds to tie him up to punish him with a flaming torch. He is unable to comprehend that it really was an accident and instead of using reason he uses pure emotion to avenge his sister. Angel's brother is presented as a ticking time bomb and someone that needs to be removed from the streets.

In one scene he is driving down the streets looking for RJ with one hand on the steering wheel and another on a 2-ft. machete laying across the front seat, creating in the viewer the sense of danger one might encounter if you pull up next to someone like him in real life. Contrasting the negative behaviors of Angels brother with her own quest to fulfill her artistic desires, the film makes a strong statement against gangster youth and also contests Hollywood's constant portrayal of Mexicans as gangsters and proud of it. Instead, the true diversity of the Mexican community in Los Angeles is portrayed in a different part of town, with different activities and in a different light.

### Self-reflection

In *Come and Take It Day* (2001) Jim Mendiola, the director, takes the viewer on a subconscious journey of exploration into the mind of the Mexican community. Although the surface plot of the film is a case of murder and hidden treasure, the films dialogue and unconventional characters serve as launching points for discussions about types of knowledge, agency and power in the Mexican community.



Fig. 3.5 DVD Cover



Fig. 3.6 Miguel and Jesse posing for the camera.

Set in a south Texas restaurant along the highly commercialized River Walk in San Antonio, the films characters include Jesse- an angry Marxist dishwasher who has intentionally

chosen to work in the back of the kitchen and Nena- a recent Brown graduate who is about to enter grad school at Berkeley. Meanwhile she decides to take on a summer job waitressing. Miguel, Jesse's simpleton cousin, who is also a dishwasher, is into heavy-metal and infatuated with Richard Ramirez, the serial killer. Carlos is a white-washed Mexican waiter whose primary concern is connecting with female summer employees like Nena. They all come together in the *Café Ole* restaurant that according to Jesse is just, "some Hispanic chamber of commerce words justifying minimum wage jobs for Chicanos while pimping mariachi songs, puffy tacos and Selena's dress at the River Walk Hard Rock Café... the living caste system." They work in the real equivalent to Los Angeles' Placita Olvera. The film immediately empowers those that work in kitchens by presenting a workplace that looks like their own. For audiences that wouldn't normally socialize with people that work in kitchens, the film presents folks that think for themselves and understand the larger economic system they are trapped in.

The main ideas emerge once a romantic triangle starts to emerge. Nena starts to fall for Carlos fully knowing that she will be gone at the end of Summer anyways and Miguel falls for Nena. But Jesse, who treats Miguel like his lackey tries everything to sway him away from Nena. It is in these power dynamics that the film makes its strongest statement. Miguel is caught in the middle of Nena and Jesse. Nena represents academic knowledge while Jesse is self-educated and suspicious of any state institutional relationships. Miguel, representing the common man, has to choose which path to follow.

Jesse, the self-imposed dishwasher and autodidact quotes his influences as including Galeano, Fanon and Baca. His lifelong goal is to move to Thailand, a place that he is proud to say, has never been colonized by Europe. He wants to take Miguel with him to Thailand. He

states his highest level of education as G.E.D. but he is clearly an intelligent person in other ways than traditional university education.

Nena, on the other had, is a strong feminist woman who corrects Jesse from using the word “girl” when he means “woman.” She also reveals that her undergraduate degree from Berkeley is in English. She can’t help herself from using words like “post-colonial” and “subaltern” in everyday conversations. She is a young lady on the rise that is only temporarily visiting this world on her way up. She can be seen as a positive Chicana role model.

Miguel, not quite capable of thinking for himself, is unsure who to follow. His infatuation with Nena ultimately overcomes him as he tells Jesse he doesn’t want to move to Thailand because, “I don’t even like Chinese food.” What we see symbolically is that Miguel, as representative of working-class folks, prefers to endure his dead-end job and stay in good ol’ San Antonio even though an opportunity to broaden his horizon is before him. The relationship between Miguel and Jesse continues until they go looking for buried treasure on federal property and Miguel is shot dead by Texas Rangers.

But before Miguel dies he has an honest discussion with Nena in which he discovers that they have very deep communication issues and probably have no future together. Symbolically, this conversation shows that people cannot trust those that go away to college and return. This conversation happens when he tells Nena of his decision not to join Jesse in Thailand.

Nena: So Thailand, huh?

Miguel: Nope.

Nena: What!

Miguel: Staying here in San Anton’

Nena: No living large. No Gaughan. No indulging in that old, reverse-colonial lifestyle?

Miguel: Why do you talk like that?

Nena: Like what?

Miguel: You know. Gaughan. Show-off words.

Nena: Do I sound condescending?



Miguel: You mean, do you make me feel stupid? Sometimes, but I know you don't mean it

Nena: I don't.

Miguel: I know. You know, Jesse's pretty smart too. You ever talk to him?

The film comes to a conclusion for Carlos as he is shown smooth-talking to a bright-eyed young lady that takes over Nena's job. He has no transformation and is seen as simply living in the moment. In this, Mendiola points to the boring repetitive nature of the unexamined life of people like Carlos. In the end, *Come and Take It Day* works to complicate the lives of kitchen workers as all too often they are usually just a backdrop to the narrative taking place on the dining floor

### **Indigenous Knowledge**

As previously stated, the film *I Am Joaquin* was effective in providing the impetus for widespread engagement with Indigenous culture amongst the Mexican community during the late 60s and early 70s. This re-examination of cultural priorities continues to this day.

Culturally relevant, Indigenous philosophy has been used as an alternative motivator in schools where students might not be buying into the idea that a solid educational foundation can lead to a more productive life. In the film *Precious Knowledge* we see how this has been implemented with astounding success. But just as *I Am Joaquin* ruffled societies feathers by questioning the infallible American historical narrative that this is the place where a true democracy exists, *Precious Knowledge* documents how mainstream society still, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, is apprehensive about re-examining our past and the ways we teach it. This film is about the struggle to keep the Mexican American Studies (MAS) program alive in the Tucson Unified School District (TUSD).

The historical backdrop to the film is a battle between a group of MAS high school educators and the TUSD Superintendent, Tom Horne, who is bent on dismantling the MAS program. The year is 2011, when the self-proclaimed "Tea Party" movement was in full swing

nationally. In Arizona, this movement decided to take up issue with the TUSD for providing much-needed government funds to maintain minority outreach programs, such as the MAS program. As Tom Horne states in the opening scenes of the film, “Raza Studies, African American Studies, Asian Studies, its about their race, and that is contrary to American ideals.”

The battle quickly took on complicated race dynamics as some TUSD council members made public red-baiting statements that the MAS program was being run by radicals who used communist educational models, that they wanted to overthrow the government and were inculcating terrorist ideas to the students, and that a possible connection to comrades in Mexico was being devised.<sup>26</sup> The idea was to put fear in the publics mind as to what was really going in these classrooms so that it would be easier to dismantle it.

The MAS instructors responded with claims that the real reason the program was being targeted was because they were teaching accurate American history that did include a history of abuses against the non-Anglo world. They also claimed that some council members were afraid of the tactics being used because they did not know anything about them.<sup>27</sup>

The film shows how MAS teachers used Indigenous concepts of self-awareness and community consciousness to bring the students to understand why they were being educated. This proved extremely effective as MAS program participants were graduating at a much higher rate than those not in the program at the same school, as much as 16% higher. In one scene a teacher, Curtis Acosta, leads MAS students in following motivational chant before class begins. It is both in Spanish and English and explains the Indigenous concept of In Lak’ech:

In Lak’ech  
*Tu eres mi otro you*

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<sup>26</sup> The film portrays testimony given to a TUSD council hearing regarding these issues.

<sup>27</sup> A complete list of claims is laid out on the website [www.saveethnicstudies.org](http://www.saveethnicstudies.org) that was created by teachers of the MAS program. Accessed 4-3-2014.

You are my other me  
*Si te haga dano a ti, me hago dano a mi*  
If I do harm to you, I do harm to myself  
*Si te amo y respeto, me amo y respeto*  
If I love and respect you, I love and respect myself

Although the MAS program was eventually shut down and all the teachers were fired the struggle did not end. In *Precious Knowledge* we have a film being used as a propaganda tool in the form of a documentary. As a propaganda tool, *Precious Knowledge* was taken to university campuses around the nation to make the case for the MAS program.<sup>28</sup> The film spread national awareness and it circulated through word of mouth. The diffusion of *Precious Knowledge* proved effective, in 2013 the MAS program was reinstated by the TUSD and classes were to be offered again under closer inspection by the district. The program continues to be mired in controversy as both sides still harbor bad feelings. The previously quoted words of Chon Noriega ring true here about Chicano films ultimately being weapons of social critique. This film was able to circulate and document a pressing issue for the Chicano community and was able to cut through the media confusion and offer a clear statement on the need to properly educate youth, on the need to maintain Indigenous culture and on the value of critical historical consciousness. This film brings Chicano cinema full circle with the aims of the Chicano Movement and the core ideas of Chicano Studies departments nationwide- form following function.

## **Conclusion**

Through a survey of the imagery of significant Chicano films we observe that this particular genre was born out of a particular social context: 60s America that saw the rise of

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<sup>28</sup> I personally attended a screening of the film at UCLA and hosted MAS instructors at a cultural event at East Los Angeles College that was meant to spread awareness of the issue.

politically active, ethnic voices. Film was used, and still is, by Chicano filmmakers to convey political messages, to create community and to educate the community. A frontal attack on negative Hollywood stereotypes was initiated and to some extent maintained to the present. Initially, historicizing narrow identity politics was the impetus but with time, the scope was opened to broaden the identity question and venture into other issues facing the community. Oftentimes, questions and answers were presented in regards to internal community issues and the commitment to accurately portray the diversity and vibrancy of the real community has been a guiding light.

Although this particular genre of film is not entirely suitable to circulate in the Hollywood system, the films produced have circulated heavily as effective pedagogical tools. These films have become companions to lesson plans in classrooms from K-12 to graduate school. Presently, Chicano cinema not only pays attention to the needs of the community, but it has also been presented as an effective tool for intercultural communication, as a portal to understand the contemporary exigencies of being Mexican. Chicano cinema courses are offered across the nation as part of a media literacy movement so that those outside the community see alternatives to the stereotypes as well as for members of the community to fully understand how impactful negative stereotypes can be on unsuspecting members of the community portrayed. Chicano cinema continues to do what it was meant to do when it was initially theorized by activists filmmakers in the sixties.

## Part Two: The Image Incarnate

### Chapter 4

#### Soccer on the Move: From *Braceros* to the Other Pitch in Mexican West L.A.

##### *Image 3, The Community's Voice*

“The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. I am the truth and the light.” - John 1:14

“Once they gave (our skating) moves a name, then we existed! Before that we were just kids messing around on a piece of wood.”  
- Rodney Mullen in the film *The Bones Brigade*.

“Soccer was the excuse for everything else to happen.”  
- Peter Sellars

#### Opening Court: Imagining a New Image

“You know, in the end, I really came looking for an adventure. Yeah, sure things were much better on this side of the border but I just wanted to experience the world. I wanted to go out on an adventure and see for myself what everyone was talking about.”<sup>29</sup> As soon as those words left Antonio Melchor’s mouth I knew that was to be the thread that runs through this chapter: adventure. I immediately knew that adventure, whether in crossing borders or moving from farm to farm as migrant farmworkers or on the soccer field, it was adventure- with aspects of danger, discovery, profit and peril- that was at the core of their story. This is the story of a group of Mexican immigrants that traded their peaceful future of rural village life for one constantly on the road and across the US / Mexican border. Little did they know that they were not simply on an adventurous road trip but embarking on a journey that would take them across the American west during harvest season ultimately to settle in the most unlikely of places, the west side of Los Angeles. On the

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<sup>29</sup> Antonio Melchor interview, January 9, 2012.

surface there is no logical reasoning for immigrants and farmworkers to have settled in West Los Angeles due to high rents and a small Mexican population, but upon closer inspection we find that they followed the most obvious pull factors of immigration: higher paying and less physically demanding jobs.

But how did this group of young men make this extreme transition complete? How did they react to the new environment and to the new social context in which they found themselves living under? They had to find ways to maintain the memory of their past as well as ways to reconcile this with their future. In order to maintain a sense of identity they had to imagine and put into practice a new cultural paradigm. They quickly discovered that in this country, traditions of the old country weren't always welcomed. I argue here that it is through soccer activities that they were able to attend to the questions posed above. Further, it is imperative to understand their life as Braceros intertwined with their life as soccer players. One facet of identity is intimately tied to the other.

Through it all, the hard-working and adventurous immigrant spirit afforded them the ability to adapt to their adopted new home and thrive. This tenacious migrant spirit always strives to be first, the first to be bold enough to leave the small town, the first to go off to a strange land and then the first to recreate cultural practices, soccer, in America that resembled the ones back home. The constant drive to be first and succeed becomes a lifelong mantra. Ultimately, they were also among the first to send their kids to American schools and colleges and to live in multicultural households. This is the story of those that left Mexico behind geographically but did everything possible to remain Mexican, culturally.

The net sum of these efforts is the creation of a social image of the Mexican individual and community that is self-determined and actively works hard towards achieving goals. The individual stories below are representative of the thousands of Mexicans that have crossed the border to lead

positive, productive and fruitful lives. This image, based on reality, is in direct contrast to the negative image Hollywood constantly portrays of Mexicans; that they are only interested in getting things done the easy way, that they are primarily driven by sexual conquests, that they are living aimless lives usually involving low-paying blue-collar jobs. This story of real honorable men and women is in direct contrast to these distortions of what it means to be Mexican. Instead they offer images of an organic community based on mutual aid in times of need and individuals that are able to sustain lifelong marriages.

The larger image that arises from the following narratives is also one of cultural resistance and agency. This specific group of migrants did not arrive and incorporate into an established Mexican cultural network, such as East Los Angeles. On the contrary, they had to create the cultural infrastructure to maintain the social network in order to survive economically and politically. As such, they had to intentionally take control of their lives if they were to lead the type of lives they desired. Nothing was given to them; they earned it all through effective social mobilizing.

Soccer became one of the primary cultural activities out of which the social engineering took place. As Peter Sellars succinctly put it; “Soccer was the excuse for everything else to happen.” Soccer activities come to bear on all sectors of society and in a transnational context, soccer becomes the vehicle to transmit cultural memory for a displaced community. Men, women and children were all impacted in some way or another with the soccer activities. As players and as spectators they all become co-creators of a new culture based on the ways of the old country and the limitations of the new.

In the end, I argue that through a close read of the efficacy of soccer activities on the meta-social level, we come to encounter a more realistic image of what it meant to be a migrant Mexican

and what it means to be Mexican American today. The strong will to take charge of their lives in many dimensions is in contrast to the Mexican image in American cinema, often portraying the Mexican as passive and slumbering under his sombrero when not chasing women or plundering the system.

### **Of Specific Origins: Place, People and Soccer**

Although the story of the people under study here is similar to many other Mexican immigrant experiences it is worth mentioning the specifics of the community under review. All of the immigrants interviewed were raised in the small town of Juchitlan, which is located in the flatlands of western Jalisco.<sup>30</sup> This rural area of Jalisco is noted for its active farmlands as well as a healthy livestock industry. The uniquely Mexican *charro* tradition of horseback riding and skills competition is pervasive in the region. The production of corn, pork and cattle dominates the activities of the large and small *ranchos* dotting the countryside. Small scale production of tortillas, baked goods as well as corner markets round out the local industry. The quiet, small town atmosphere of Juchitlan is typical of the many other surrounding municipalities.<sup>31</sup> This is the small town culture in which the principal informants were raised, and almost all of them worked in these activities at one point or another during their early years. A strict work ethic pervades this small town where perceived laziness is shunned and the population as a whole constantly engages in competition with one another in an effort to be seen as the hardest worker.<sup>32</sup> It is from this milieu that the immigrants emerge, as they begin to contemplate what the world outside of their limited traditional activities could offer them.

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<sup>30</sup> For a more detailed description see "Juchitlan" in *Enciclopedia de los Municipios de México*. Instituto Nacional para el Federalismo y el Desarrollo Municipal. Retrieved April 16, 2009.

<sup>31</sup> The unique sense of a tranquil place can be felt in the poem "There's a Place" by Cesar Cruz. The full text is in the addendum section.

<sup>32</sup> I witnessed these tendencies first-hand as I lived in Juchitlan from 1983 to 1985.



Another major social feature of Juchitlan was, and still is, the complete devotion to the sport of soccer, which plays a central role in the weekly routine of the town. During the week, men are expected to perform a vocation, but on Sundays soccer reigns supreme, after the obligatory Catholic mass of course. The weekly soccer match on Sunday against other local teams is the social highlight of the week. This respected tradition has a long history in the town. All of the town's citizenry converges on the soccer field for the communal spectacle. Despite the historical class distinctions in the community, all classes come out to enjoy the match. Spectators range from those whose family name goes back to the actual founding of the town to those whose family just migrated a few years back. The concrete grandstand in front of the field becomes a snapshot of the entire social spectrum on a weekly basis. This also becomes an opportunity for robust food and beverage vending activities.

The soccer match itself intensifies with the proximity of the opponent's team. Many soccer teams exist along the highway corridor from the town of Cocula to Autlan. Juchitan is located in between these two points. The regional leagues consist of 10 teams that have historically played each other. Because each pueblo is territorially separated from another, distinct identities emerge. With these distinctions also come rivalries among the towns over reputation. The soccer teams inherit much of the animosity between pueblos and indeed the soccer match can become a metaphorical battle over things that have nothing to do with the actual game itself. The closer two towns are to one another the more opportunities for problems to exist. A more ample rendering of what soccer means is below, but in this context of intense competition between towns, the starting players are accorded an elevated social status.

The starting line of soccer players is accorded local hero status. They often eat and drink for free in post-game celebrations since spectators usually join the players after matches, footing their

bills. All of the elder men interviewed, Antonio Melchor, Monico Sevilla and Honorato Benitez were starting soccer players on Juchitlan teams and speak of these experiences as fundamental to creating their sense of identity but also instrumental in anchoring their loyalty to the town as well. This identity and loyalty becomes a major guiding force in their activities once in America.

I chose these three men because they each had major influences on soccer activities involving the *Juchitlan* community in West Los Angeles. In conjunction with their soccer activities all three also actively involved in community development activities. Three major clubs formed on the Westside; *Club Libertad* (CL), *Club Juchitlan* (CJ) and *Club Progreso* (CP). Honorato Benitez was involved in the founding of the CL, Monico Sevilla was a founder of the CJ and Antonio Melchor founded the CP. Many of the original members of all three clubs are now deceased. This is the first time founding representatives of all three clubs have agreed to speak about their shared history (1950s – 1980s).

But what constituted that large matrix of ideas and material conditions that led to the decision of these men to leave the country lifestyle in Mexico to an uncertain future?

### **War and Labor Demands**

As the United States entered World War II following the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor, sending thousands of men off to war, a labor shortage ensued across many sectors of American industry. The government had to find new sources of labor to fill those vacancies. Large numbers of women, dubbed “Rosey-Riveters,” were recruited into the industrial work force to produce military equipment. In the agricultural sector Mexican farmworkers were recruited to raise and harvest crops, thus aiding in the war effort.

Originally signed into law by President Franklin D. Roosevelt and Mexican President Manuel Avila Camacho in 1942, a temporary law allowed for American agricultural interests to

offer temporary labor contracts to Mexican nationals. This program became known as the Bracero Program (BP). Recruiting strategies included sending representatives into Mexican states that had a tradition of agriculture to recruit laborers. The Mexican states of Jalisco and Michoacan had both the agrarian tradition and the men willing to take on these temporary contracts, so they became primary recruiting sources.

The contract laborers became known as *Braceros* which in Spanish, means “men who work with, and have, strong arms”. The Bracero Program went through many different phases, and existed from 1942 to 1964. Agricultural interests were able to lobby and extend the program to keep this cheap source of labor flowing until well after the war officially ended. In all, over 5 million Mexican nationals entered and exited the program until its demise in 1964.

On the surface, the entire process was a straightforward transaction between two governments on behalf of national interest groups. For Mexico, it was advantageous for a large number of unemployed farmworkers to go abroad and earn capital that would then be spent domestically. For America, a source of cheap, non-union labor helped not only agricultural interests but also aided the war effort. In theory, it was a “win – win” situation, but in practice the implementation of the Bracero program was not without controversy.

Many young men from Juchitlan took on the challenge and adventure of becoming Braceros. The obvious economic benefit of earning American dollars and bringing that money back to Mexico was the logic that drove the men to leave their rural life for one of uncertainty and possible danger. But for some, as was the case with Antonio Melchor, it was a sense of discovery that another world could unfold before them that drove them into the program. Both Antonio Melchor and Honorato Benitez had the social capital and material conditions to continue a decent life in Mexico but instead decided to leave, driven by youthful exuberance, more so than economics. A later arrival, Monico

Sevilla was recruited and financially sponsored to come to America by one of the existing soccer clubs in West LA, *Club Libertad*, due to his soccer abilities. All three never returned to live permanently in Mexico; they all married and raised their kids in America.

### **Entering and Exiting the Bracero Program: From Juchitlan to the Westside**

The experience of becoming a *Bracero* in Mexico varied from place to place. It was a different experience to enter the program in the urban context versus the rural context. In the cities, labor contractors opened offices and it was a more formalized process. Out in the country, the hiring process was more relaxed since representatives did not travel there but instead communicated to the municipal offices that a specific number of openings were available and that applicants had to present themselves in their offices on set dates. In Jalisco, the offices were located in the state capital of Guadalajara, which is 130 kms away from Juchitlan.

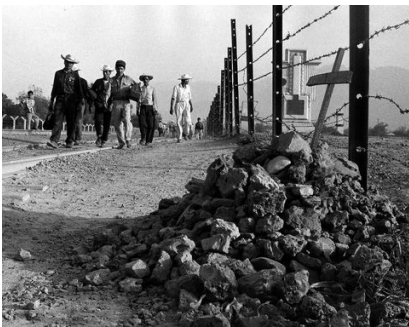


Fig. 4.1 Braceros walking to meeting points in Mexico.

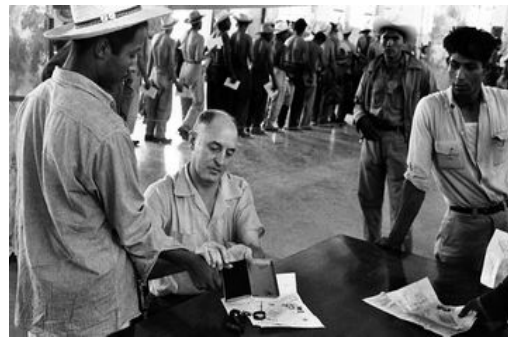


Fig 4.2 Braceros being processed in America

The first phase of the journey for any would-be *Bracero* in Juchitlan was to register your name in the town hall and wait to see your luck in the lottery style drawing. As Honorato Benitez recalls:

I remember that in the town square they would draw raffles to see who won a spot on a labor tour. For example, Juchitlan had say 50 spots and there were probably over 200 men that were willing to go, so they would raffle off the spots. Some people didn't even

have money to pay for their transportation but the ones that had money would pay for their spot, 100 or 200 pesos. You know what I mean. That's how it was.<sup>33</sup>

Although Juchitlan is a small *pueblo* that is not at the crossroads of any major industries, marked class divisions exist as they would in highly industrialized societies. In this context, the differences are referenced back to the deeper historical context of initial colonization. In other words, the families that are well off financially are direct descendants of the original Spanish families that came to populate the area.<sup>34</sup> Through the years some of these families have seen their fortunes fragmented along specific genealogical lines for various reasons. The interesting result is that, although an individual may be of a once-prosperous family line, the BP attracted men with varying degrees of material wealth. Some went in hopes of reinforcing the family's historical wealth while others went in hopes of initiating a history of wealth. The social attraction to the BP in Juchitlan was far from being uniform. The testimony of Antonio Melchor highlights this aspect:

I came into the country through the Bracero Program. They (US agricultural contractors) were looking for agricultural workers and even though I was not doing that type of work in Mexico I was able to pass off as one. I guess they saw me as pretty healthy and able to do this type of work. I had worked as a teacher and a bureaucrat in the local Juchitlan government but I told them my job was herding animals and they believed me... I went from being a teacher in Mexico and working for the government to working in the fields and I met all kinds of people. Those times taught me lifelong lessons but in the end I

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<sup>33</sup> Honorato Benitez interview, February 11, 2012.

<sup>34</sup> For a partial social history of Juchitlan refer to *Ensayo historico sobre Juchitlan* that I have translated and included in the addendum section.

think it was a positive experience for me overall.<sup>35</sup>

Honorato Benitez' story of crossing the border points to some of the same above class issues:

I came only once for a 45 day contract. I got the contract in Juchitlan at the town center. I won a space to come. At that time there weren't enough men to fill an order for workers and my friend asked me if I wanted to go and I thought about it. We had a bakery so we weren't doing too badly but I decided to give it a shot. So that is what I did around 1956 or 1957. We were taken to El Centro, California by Yuma, Arizona. We would pick onions and also trim the onions. It was contract work so they paid you depending on the amount of work you did.<sup>36</sup>

Although Monico Sevilla did not enter the BP himself, his brothers were in the program and sent money back to Monico, supporting him while in college. As stated previously, the decision to enter the BP was not always a simple question of economics. Not all Mexican farmworkers were destitute and in dire straits. To the contrary, some entered the program more out of a sense of adventure with economics in the background.

Antonio Melchor details the experience of traveling through Mexico once a Bracero labor contract was obtained:

A group of about 40 people from Juchitlan set out to come to the United States under this program. We were scheduled to meet with U.S. officials in the city of Enpalme, Sonora. We went there and had to wait for a couple of days for a work assignment to come up for our group. This was the city where all the Bracero's from Mexico went to in order to get

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<sup>35</sup> Antonio Melchor interview, January 9, 2012.

<sup>36</sup> Honorato Benitez interview, February 12, 2012.

into a contract to come and work in the fields. We waited there for a week and it was a powerful experience for me. There were thousands of men waiting around in this town and there was so much movement, so much going on. It was very exciting to meet people from all over Mexico. I was coming from a small town in Jalisco so this whole trip was a learning experience for me. Once we made it to the United States we were put to work in strawberry fields in Salinas, California. That is very tiring work. You have to be hunched over all day in the mud. By the end of the day you are down on your hands and knees and almost swimming in the mud. But all that was a learning experience for me.<sup>37</sup>

### **Sidestepping Uncle Sam: Entering Through the Exit**

While the BP offered many Mexican nationals legal entry into the United States there still existed non-formal ways of entering the country, especially if you planned on entering the country to reside in urban contexts since BP participants were sent out to farms. After participating in several labor contracts Antonio Melchor narrates one of those experiences:

That was a fun experience as well. I went in several times through several places. The first time was in Tijuana through a hole in the fence that led right into the Greyhound bus station. Then I got on the bus to San Diego and then a train ride to Los Angeles, making it to Oceanside. I went into the bathroom when the immigration officers came on board to check passengers. We got so used to doing this that we would go out to Tijuana to have fun on the weekends and we would come back in as if we were American citizens. It was so easy to cross the border back then. You just had to act like you had papers when you were crossing the border. You could not get nervous.

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<sup>37</sup> Antonio Melchor interview, January 9, 2012.

There was also a train that would go from Tijuana to Tecate and it would go into American territory at a certain point and it would slow down for immigration agents to get on board but we would jump off and once inspections were done we would get back on. They would catch a few people and then go away. It was a joke back then, they knew what we were doing but that's how it was. You would then catch another train to LA and go home.

I also went to Algodones, just ahead of Mexicali, to come in. You would just walk to Yuma and catch another train and you could catch a freight train all the way to Los Angeles. We heard many stories of people dying on those trips of asphyxiation when they would ride in a closed boxcar. You were lucky if a cattle transport was part of the train then you just rode inside and there was no fear of losing air. Some people would be so daring enough to get on board with wooden planks and set these across two points underneath the train and then lay down on the board as the train was moving. It was also well known that many people fell to their death doing this. We also heard stories of people accidentally getting locked in freight cars and dying because the boxcar they were in got parked in a rail yard and was left alone for days and no one knew to look inside for people.

The most dangerous thing that happened to me was in Yuma. I was one of those that got busted by immigration officers. The officers were chasing me from car to car on the moving train going towards the rear, like the movies, and I had cowboy boots on and I thought I was going to fall off the top of the train to my death at any minute. Obviously, I didn't fall but I did get caught. The detention center was a joke. They always lost the names of those that had been detained before so you didn't have to worry



about them remembering you. No one gave their real name. They had many Pedro Infante's and the names of Mexican Presidents. They knew that but I think that they just looked the other way since our labor was desperately needed so they just acted like they were doing their job but they weren't, and that was ok for us."<sup>38</sup>

This story highlights not only the personal risk an individual is willing to take to cross the border to be with his perceived community but also the complicated relationship between official border policy and the demands of agricultural interests. The agricultural branch of the BP lasted until 1964 but before it ended an effort was made to keep the illegal migration component to a minimum. In 1952 the Immigration and Nationality Act was implemented to slow down the influx of illegal immigrants. This marked a rise in detentions of Mexican nationals while at the same time almost 200,000 Mexicans entered the country that year under the BP. In 1954 the I.N.S. initiated what they called *Operation Wetback* and deported just over 1 million nationals in that year.<sup>39</sup> This overlap of detention and deportation opened the door for Mexican nationals, like Antonio Melchor, to come into the country legally to see what was available and then to come back in illegally to stay outside of BP work sites.

The testimonies of Antonio Melchor and Honorato Benitez are representative of not only hundreds of others that emigrated from Juchitlan to the United States, but they also give a personal account of the 4.6 million Mexican men that entered the BP.<sup>40</sup> Although for these two men things eventually worked out, that was not the fortune for many men that entered the BP. The Smithsonian's National Museum of American History in partnership with George Mason

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<sup>38</sup> Antonio Melchor interview January 9, 2012.

<sup>39</sup> Appendix A in Kitty Calavita's *Inside the State: The Bracero Program, Immigration and the I.N.S* cites the number apprehended in 1954 as 1,089, 583.

<sup>40</sup> More people originally from Juchitlan and their offspring now reside in the United States than in Juchitlan itself. Most youth, especially males, leave to America once out of high school. Despite the serene setting of Juchitlan economic opportunities are scarce.

University, Brown University and the University of Texas, El Paso created an online archive of Bracero oral histories ([www.braceroarchive.org](http://www.braceroarchive.org)). In a section of the website called “Tell Your Story” the general public can comment. I found the following entry titled “Help me find my Dad!” that speaks to some of the unexpected outcomes of this story. The post reads:

Hello, My name is Carla. I was given up at birth by my Biological Mother, Patricia Phares. She will not tell me who my father is. I only know a few things other than I look like him so here is the information I have about him:

1. My father worked on Herbert Phares Farm in Indiana planting & harvesting tomatos (sic)
2. He worked the 1965 tomato season
3. He & my mother dated a few times
4. He stayed in Indianapolis, Indiana at the housing unit
5. I was born in May of 1966

So I am looking for any information &/or records from this time period for this area.

Maybe I can find someone who knew of their relationship or possibly find my father.

I really would like to know him. No expectations other than knowing him. I have a lot of health problems and family information would be helpful.

Please lead the way to finding my DAD!

I present this particular entry to highlight the fact that many of these men, both married and single, must have started new relationships along the way. Just as in any mass migration of

people, many children must have either been left behind in Mexico or left fatherless in the United States.<sup>41</sup>

After facing and overcoming the obstacles of entering and exiting the country both legally and illegally many Braceros of Juchitlan decided to call the Westside home. Why the Westside? A handful of men from Juchitlan, among them the brothers Salvador and Daniel Ruesga, had made their way to Santa Monica during the twenties and initiated *Santa Monica Brickyard*. It was owned in common by a number of investors from Juchitlan. This brickyard was the social hub for the first-generation of Mexicans that emigrated to the United States during the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920). This was also the initial foray into the Westside for people from Juchitlan. While living in this new place some made permanent romantic connections like my maternal grandparents, Daniel Ruesga and Felicitas Hernandez. But the honeymoon with this new place that many Mexicans were calling the home, was cut short by the Great Depression (1930s).

One of the many consequences of the Great Depression was a reversal of immigration policy towards Mexicans. While the borders were wide open for Mexican entry during the two previous decades, the 1930s not only saw the door being shut but a fiercely active campaign was put into motion to not only detain Mexicans at the border but to deport Mexicans in any part of the country: including the Westside. It is at this time that the brickyard owned and operated by men of Juchitlan was forced to close its doors, sell the equipment and leave the United States.<sup>42</sup>

An interesting anecdote is that due to the sell off of the brickyards one of the main investors

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<sup>41</sup> It is now common knowledge that following the invasion of Mexico many children were born of American soldiers and Mexican women. The birth of many American-Vietnamese children during the Vietnam War is also well known.

<sup>42</sup> Antonio Melchor interview January 9, 2012.

purchased an automobile and drove it over 3,000 miles to Juchitlan, the first one to exist in that pueblo.

Although the majority of people from Juchitlan were either deported or left voluntarily during the 30s, some were able to stay behind and continue the history of emigration to the Westside. And for the men that went back to Juchitlan, they told fantastic stories of what was available to them in Santa Monica. The opportunity to return was brought on by the advent of the Bracero Program during and after WWII. This time around, despite the previously mentioned I.N.S. *Operation Wetback*, the Juchitlan community set roots and flourished based on the faint memories of the previous generation.

### **Back to the Westside! Returning to Santa Monica and Beyond, 1950s to 1980s**

Some farmworkers from Juchitlan decided to stay within the scope of the BP and went on to settle large communities in central California. Farming cities such as Patterson and Westley now have thriving communities that were initiated by *Braceros* from Juchitlan. The Westside of Los Angeles, Santa Monica in particular, became the main destination for men who wanted to settle in a city and outside of the BP. Just as important as the labor connections, it was through soccer activities that the community started to reconstitute itself on this side of the border.

Antonio Melchor recalls:

When I arrived in Los Angeles I had no idea about (existing) soccer teams and stuff.

With time, through work relations, I found out that in Santa Monica there was a team and that it was called *Libertad*. It was an open team that wasn't only for people from Juchitlan but also for people from surrounding towns. I knew the main social resources of the team were from Juchitlan but the leadership included people from other towns.

When I finally made it over there I saw that they were very well organized, there was a

great social environment and it was a functioning soccer club. They invited me to play for a couple of games and Antonio Ruesga and I played on the team a few times. Antonio Ruesga and I both worked in restaurants at the time. I started to look for different kinds of work because I wanted weekends off so I could play soccer. That's when I got a job at a jewelry factory in Culver City (Pacific Jewelry) and I was able to play on weekends. After a while I became in charge of the reserve team for the *Libertad* and Honorato Benitez was in charge of the major team. After more time I was named as a representative to the California League (fig 4.3) meetings on behalf of the team. While in the league I made connections and I was invited to form part of the leadership council for the league. That league was the strongest league at the time.<sup>43</sup>



fig 4.3 Antonio Melchor (far left) while serving on a California Soccer League committee, ca.1960s.

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<sup>43</sup> Antonio Melchor Interview January 9, 2012.



Figure 4.4 Club *Libertad*, Santa Monica. 1968. Honorato Benitez (Far left, standing)

Honorato Benitez tells the following story about arriving to the Westside:

When we got here we rented an apartment on Lincoln and Pico. I had worked in Tijuana and I would come to play with the *Libertad* (figure 4.4) on occasion. It had been founded about a year before. That was about 1955 or 1956. They called it *Libertad* because even though the majority of players were from Juchitlan, there were other players from El Valle, Tenamaxtlan, one was a horse jockey named El Peditos and Delfino was *Chilango* (From Mexico City) but the majority was from Juchitlan. David Lopez was from Union de Tula. The Sevilla brothers were from Juchitlan, Domingo, Jesus and Miguel. They would pay my way to come from Tijuana to play on Libertad and then I would go back to work to Tijuana on Sunday evening... I was about 25 years old. I was living in Tijuana. They would go see me play in Mexico, in Tijuana. Jesus Sevilla and La Milpa would go

down there. They would also hear the games on the radio. There were several teams in Tijuana at that time, the Pan-American, the Guadalajara, the Jalisco, there were a bunch of people from Jalisco living in Tijuana at that time. And finally they convinced me to stay in the United States. They told me that if I stayed they would get me a job. So I took up their offer and we all rented an apartment in Santa Monica on Lincoln and Pico for only \$50.00 a month. It was a two-story apartment. It was a really small apartment. There were times when up to 15 of us lived there! But the ones paying rent were only three. When it was rent time all of a sudden there were only three of us! Once rent was paid everyone came back. We only had one bed and we slept sideways to get as many bodies on the bed as possible. We slept with our Levi pants on and with a belt tightly wrapped! Some worked at night and some in the day so we would take turns sleeping, so then a new soccer team started to form from all these guys.<sup>44</sup>

Monico Sevilla, having been a professional soccer player in Mexico, arrived shortly after Antonio Melchor and Honorato Benitez. He experienced the transition in the following manner:

When I was in Mexico I was told through a friend that the soccer club *Libertad* in Santa Monica was willing to pay me if I went to play for them. A couple of friends from Juchitlan that had been detained and deported by American immigration officers told me they were coming back into the US and that I should join them. So I said let's go! That was November 20, 1967<sup>45</sup>

The commonality between all three is that they left Mexico searching for work and they all found it on the Westside through soccer connections. Labor connections and soccer activities operated

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<sup>44</sup> Honorato Benitez interview, February 11, 2012.

<sup>45</sup> Monico Sevilla interview, December, 13, 2012.

in a symbiotic manner allowing the opportunity for the newly arrived community to come together socially. How did soccer activities do this? An interpretation of what soccer is follows.

### **Soccer Communitas: From the Global Village to *Pueblo* Identities**

What is soccer? As a cultural activity- a sport- that has been adopted worldwide the efficacy of soccer varies from community to community. On a larger level, national identities can be created in the global mind through soccer, think Argentina and Brazil. The sport has been used for development in emerging nations.<sup>46</sup> Soccer has also been used as an outlet to diffuse tensions between countries.<sup>47</sup> Yasser Arafat is quoted as saying “One day when we had no voice, *Al-Wihdat* was our voice” (Tuastad 105). Arafat, along with fellow followers of their soccer team *Al-Whidat*, had to express their frustrations against the Israeli state through the choreographed drama of a soccer match before rising to political power.

In the case of the World Cup tournament, rivaled only by the Olympics in its immensity, soccer activities create temporary economies that can be both extremely beneficial as well as detrimental to the host country.<sup>48</sup> In a *Wall Street Journal* Article William Horobin outlines how the national economy of France felt a sharp spike as they won the World Cup, 3-0, over Brazil in 1998 on home turf. Consumer confidence in that country rose to a 20 year high (*France*). Indeed, on the world stage, soccer can dramatically alter the world we live in. But on a smaller scale, the social relationship to soccer doesn't involve massive economies, yet it does become an integral part of the social fabric itself.

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<sup>46</sup> A complete overview of soccer being used for development can be found in *Sport For Development and Peace: A Critical Sociology* by Simon Darnell.

<sup>47</sup> An analysis of the role soccer plays in the Middle East context see *The Political Role of Football for Palestinians in Jordan* by Dag Tuastad.

<sup>48</sup> For a political analysis of the economics involved in countries hosting the World Cups see “Economics: Neo-Liberalism, Inequalities and Transnational Clubs” in *Globalization and Football* by Richard Guilianotti and Roland Robertson.



For Westside Braceros that left Juchitlan and endured traumatic border-crossing experiences, soccer became the cultural activity that would allow them to reconstitute themselves as individuals and as members of a larger Mexican community. It allowed them to belong to something larger than themselves in a strange land by tapping into the communal historical consciousness. In Mexico, soccer was the cultural activity that led to their initial identity formation. Antonio Melchor responds to being asked why soccer was important to so many players and spectators:

Well, for one thing there is the physicality of playing soccer, the exercise. And then there's the adrenaline rush. Especially if you played goalkeeper like I did. In the old days the goalkeeper did not have as much defensive back up as they do now. The defense played with fewer players so the goalkeeper was left more vulnerable to attack and I liked the excitement of going one on one with an approaching forward of the opposite team. In those days you played two on the defense, three in the midfield and five forwards. You had to use all your physical resources to play in those games. It was very exciting. That was the physical aspect. Then you have issues of vanity. In a small town like Juchitlan the soccer players were considered sort of like idols. The girls paid attention to the players as did all the other spectators. They would praise you after a game and the fans felt pride in having shared that experience of the game with you and as a player you also appreciated that pride of representing your town. And another thing is the pride that we felt knowing that our town (Juchitlan) had a good reputation in these things (soccer).<sup>49</sup>

For them soccer was that very important act of *communitas*, the shared ritual, that binds communities together in unspoken and unseen bonds. Through soccer, the players formed

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<sup>49</sup> Antonio Melchor interview January 9, 2012.

themselves in the mirror of their spectators, who in turn were forming their own identity through the actions of the players. Soccer then, as the latent psychological bond keeping the community together in Mexico, gets re-activated as more and more Mexicans are drawn to the Westside through existing social connections.

Honorato Benitez describes how soccer worked upon the community at this time:

Everyone that came to the Westside (from Juchitlan) liked soccer already. And those that did not play liked to go and watch the games. So it became a communal thing. When someone would arrive from Juchitlan they were told where specific players were residing so that they could go and see them play. That is how people connected with each other back then. People that you might not have seen for a while, you knew you would see them at the soccer games as well as at weddings or funerals. Those were some of the things that got us as a community together...

You played in Juchitlan and played here. When we came here the soccer matches was a place to find work and also for girlfriends, everything. Lots of women also came to the matches but it was also a big family event too. Lots of kids would be there as well. There was also a playground where the kids would go play and the women would be there talking and the men playing soccer. There weren't many other options for people to get together so it was at the soccer games where everything happened.<sup>50</sup>

Antonio Melchor comments on the role of soccer in the community:

Soccer was the conglomerate of the community and the people that went became part of the total effort to get together as well as the players. It was through soccer that you could see the community and whenever a game was at the park people went and gathered.

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<sup>50</sup> Honorato Benitez interview February 11, 2012.

Many women that didn't understand soccer still went to the park to talk to their friends at that time, so in this respect, soccer was the thing that held the community together.

Soccer kept the relationships together.<sup>51</sup>



Fig. 4.5 Team *Progresso*, Juchitlan, 1931.

Monico Sevilla saw the role of soccer for Mexicans on the Westside during the 60s and 70s in the following manner:

The soccer match is different in Mexico because over there (Figure 4.5 and 4.6) it is the same group of people over and over while over here the soccer matches were always populated by different people. You never knew who you would see, people came and went. Here it was the reunion on a weekly basis of other immigrant teams as well but we

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<sup>51</sup> Antonio Melchor interview, January 9, 2012.



Fig 4.6 Team *Progresso*, Juchitlan, Mexico. Antonio Melchor (bottom center) Keeper, 1950.

all existed under the cloak of soccer within our own communities. We shared the experience as well. This made you feel like you were playing against your fellow Mexicans that you didn't know but in a sense you did know. If you played against a team in Oxnard it was like any other Mexican team. There was one Salvadoran team in the California League and their soccer was different, it was a lot more embattled.

Another thing is the danger of surveillance by immigration officers as well. You are on a field and knowing that maybe last week some people got picked up and deported and you still played. You had the real danger of being picked up on our way home from the field and deported, it happened to me once. So we had to find a way to entertain ourselves and feel the presence of others in our same situation. Soccer allowed that.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Monico Sevilla interview, December, 13, 2012.

The first Mexican soccer club that people from Juchitlan initiated on the Westside was called *Club Libertad*. It was started in 1956. The club was registered in the California Soccer League and quickly rose from the lesser ranks to the majors. The quick ascent solidified the team's reputation and the Sunday matches at Memorial Park in Santa Monica were attended by hundreds of people in the early days. The soccer matches reproduced a way of life that was known to them and it was a way to maintain cultural continuity through activities that were off the field; language, foodways, social relationships, etc. The significance of the soccer match was much more than the final score. Soccer became the community and the community was soccer. Additional cultural institutions, such as the Catholic Church, were also part of the existential process. Soccer matches were carefully scheduled around Sunday mass schedule so players and spectators would not have to sacrifice one for the other.

As more Mexicans immigrants arrived to Westside during the 60s so did the talent pool of soccer players. The club *Libertad* was unable to support the number of players that were available so additional teams were formed, the club *Juchitlan* and club *Progreso*. Additionally, a social club, *club Juchitlense*, was also formed. This later club was strictly a social club that organized community dances and fundraisers for development projects in Juchitlan. The social club operated in conjunction with the activities of the soccer club. But it was the expanding of Juchitlan soccer clubs that reveals the expansion of the community. *Club Juchitlan* was initiated in part by Monico Sevilla:

...so we decided we should start our own team. Jose Luis Flores was one of those persons. This was around September 1973. Jose Luis and I were the spark that started the club. Since both of us were serious persons that others respected we were able to do this. Besides we were backed by some of the older generation such as Poly Garcia, who

became the first president of the club. Your dad, Antonio (Melchor), was busy with his own team, *Progreso* in the Municipal League, at that time so we didn't approach him to join us. The main players were Aurelio Arreola, Chilo Flores, The Diaz brothers, Jose Manuel, Jode Covarrubias and Alvaro as a goalkeeper.<sup>53</sup>

By naming some of the older generation into the new clubs' leadership, the soccer club *Juchitlan* was able to amplify playing opportunities while not cutting off the social ties to the previous fan base. This allowed both clubs to flourish simultaneously, eventhough the advent of club *Juchitlan* was the demise of club *Libertad*. Referencing back to the way soccer was engaged with in Mexico, more people felt the need to support a team that was strictly started by people from Juchitlan so that a deeper sense of solidarity to the hometown was enacted while attending the soccer matches.<sup>54</sup> We should remember that *Club Libertad* was open to all Mexicans although it was primarily run by folks from Juchitlan. The third club that emerged, *Club Progreso*, was founded right before *Club Juchitlan* was established in an attempt to accommodate the growing number of players that were residing on the Westside. Antonio Melchor, the founder, remarks on the founding of the soccer club *Progreso*:

I started this team on my own since I wanted to manage my own team. Shortly after starting the team my friend, Jose Velasco, joined me. He owned a little bar in Venice called "Puerto Vallarta" on Lincoln Boulevard. He was more into the musical scene and managed a band called "Los Creyentes." Together with him we started to organize social events in order to raise funds for the team. We hired bands like Los Freddys, Los Solitarios, Indio and other local bands like Los Diablos, Los Blue Angels

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<sup>53</sup> Interview. Monica Sevilla. 12/13/2012

<sup>54</sup> The poem "There's a place" and the translated texts *Ensayo historico sobre Juchitlan* and *El Pocito: Testimonio de Nuestra Senora* are testimonies to the strong ties the community feels towards its hometown.

and others. We would hold these events and then use those funds for the team. I never let any of the players (fig 4.7) pay for anything. I had all the uniforms cleaned, paid the referee fees, bought all the equipment and paid any other fees to the city for park permits. This was all paid for by funds from these social events we organized...



fig 4.7 Soccer team *Progreso*, Venice, CA. 1970s.

...I named the team in honor of the team *Progreso* from Juchitlan. That was the very first team that I played on so I named this new team in that honor. But I also started it because I saw the need for another team since there were so many good players at the time and not enough teams. I wasn't playing anymore at the time but I still wanted to be a part of the soccer community. The team did well and we played at Mar Vista Park, Venice High School and other local fields. After running that team for a while I gave it

up and then was asked to be a coach with another team.<sup>55</sup>

Eventually all three clubs declined, as many in the community got married and began to look for more profitable work outside of Santa Monica. The community began to move south into Venice, then Inglewood and beyond searching for cheaper housing and job opportunities. Another soccer club *Juchitlan* was initiated during the early 90s in Inglewood which the author was a member of, but the community cohesiveness like that of the 70s and 80s was never matched.

### **Others Meeting Others**

Although the focus here has been outlining how soccer activities were fundamental for the creation and maintenance of a Mexican immigrant community also of importance is how race played a part in the equation. The difference of this work in comparison with other research on the cultural activities of Mexicans is that this community settled in an Anglo-majority community. But there was interaction with non-Anglos.

When Venice started to be populated heavily by Mexicans (1960s) there were conflicts with both African Americans and other white communities that lived close to the beach. But the (Mexican) community started to move away to look for cheap housing elsewhere. They went where others went, in other words following the same group of people and jobs. Lots of Mexicans moved away from Santa Monica when the 10 freeway was built. That was an all low-rent area where they put the freeway in so lots of Mexicans lived there... The majority of Japanese controlled the gardening work and they employed Mexicans as their helpers. This is before the Central American wars and the importation of lots of Salvadorans. The Japanese (who hired Mexicans) weren't very discriminatory

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<sup>55</sup> Antonio Melchor interview, January 9, 2012.



and slowly the Mexican workers started to displace the Japanese (in the gardening business). The new generation of Japanese didn't continue the gardening tradition so Mexicans took over that industry.<sup>56</sup>

Jack Fujimoto in *Sawtelle's Japantown* outlines the labor history of the Japanese community in West Los Angeles along the Sawtelle corridor from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century to the present but doesn't consider the connection with Mexican workers. Beginning in the 60s, Mexicans and Japanese formed an interracial network of labor that had Japanese gardeners hiring Mexicans to work on Westside Anglo lawns. Many Japanese garden supply outlets still exist on Sawtelle Blvd between Pico Blvd and Santa Monica Boulevard.

Another interracial encounter was experienced on the field. English and Irish soccer clubs held weekday practices at the same parks as the Mexican clubs. Encounters between these ethnic groups weren't always friendly. Honorato Benitez describes one such encounter:

...there were two English teams (that played on the Westside during the 50s) as well; *The Kickers* and *Santa Monica*. This is around 1957. Back then there were only two leagues, the California and the Gran Liga. These were semi-professional leagues. In the California league, there were two Mexican teams, El Salto and another one, I don't remember the name, but they were discriminated against so much that they decided to leave the league. There were also Irish teams, an Armenian team and a Jewish team that played as well. The Kickers were a Scottish team, I think, and Santa Monica an English team. Once we played at Santa Monica College against the English team because the city donated a trophy. We played a great match and went to penalty kicks... In them days, only one person shot (the penalty kick) and we went back and forth until 10 shots each were taken

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<sup>56</sup> Antonio Melchor interview, January 9, 2012.

by each team and (we won) on the 10<sup>th</sup> shot. David Lopez, was the keeper and he blocked it and then I scored the winning goal. A bad thing about this game was that the city didn't want to give us the trophy. They thought *The Kickers* were going to win the game for sure.<sup>57</sup>

All participants retold this same story to me with ire. The inability of the English players, and the Santa Monica city officials, to imagine that a Mexican team could beat an English team hints at the early antagonism the Mexican community felt as it endeavored to establish itself.

### **Conclusion**

Based on oral histories, a realistic vision of what the Mexican experience is and what it means to be Mexican emerges here. In contrast to the negative imagery that Hollywood continues to use, this story brings forth an image of the Mexican community that is brave, dynamic, caring, and very much interested in entering uncharted terrain in the quest to fulfill a long-term vision. Through this narrative we encounter a community that, despite grave danger, actively imagined and created the world they wanted to see themselves in.

The history produced here serves not only as an affront to the film industry but can also be an inspiration to other Mexicans interested in discovering their lives through real testimonies of their peers. Additionally, Mexicans in the United States have been slow to access the means to tell their own story, in their own way, behind the camera but have made large inroads telling stories through the written word.<sup>58</sup> This research intentionally enters the dialogue to fill in the

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<sup>57</sup> Interview, Honorato Benitez, February 11, 2012.

<sup>58</sup> One objective of the Chicano Movement (60s) was to historicize the Mexican experience since scholars rarely entered this terrain before then. Since then, an explosion of historical texts have emerged by authors from within and from outside the community.

gaps between the way Mexicans are portrayed in American cinema and the real experiences of being Mexican in America.

Newt Call is quoted in Ken Burn's documentary *Baseball*, "If anywhere in this world the social barriers are broken down it is on the ball field. There, many men of low birth and poor breeding are the idols of the rich and cultured. The best man is he who plays best." Indeed, the Mexican soccer clubs in West Los Angeles played well.

I present more pictures of the three soccer clubs (figs 4.8 - 4.15) and the three interviewees to add a visual dimension to the text.



fig 4.8 Soccer club *Juchitlan*, Santa Monica, 1970s.



fig 4.9 Soccer club *Juchitlan*, Venice High School, 1970s.



fig 4.10 Soccer club *Progreso*, Juchitlan, Mexico, 1950s.





fig 4.11 Soccer club *Juchitlan*, Juchitlan, Mexico, 1954.



fig. 4.12 Outside Libertad Soccer Club billiard hall, Santa Monica, 2014.



fig. 4.13 Inside Libertad Soccer Club billiard hall, Santa Monica Monica, 2014.



fig. 4.14 From right to left: Monico Sevilla, Honorato Benitez, Antonio Melchor and unidentified man.





fig. 4.15 Monico Sevilla and Antonio Melchor going through a collection of photos just before I interviewed Monico, Norwalk, 2012.



fig 4.16 Veteran players of *Progreso*, *Juchitlan* and *Libertad* gather in Juchitlan Mexico, 2010. Antonio Melchor (top left) Monico Sevilla (top, second from left) and Honorato Benitez (top row, second from right) made the trip from the US.

## Chapter 5

### In You, Me

#### *Image 4, My Voice*

*What do you know this house is falling apart,  
what can I say this house is falling apart,  
we got no money but we got  
heart,  
we're gonna rattle this ghost town!*  
-Anna Sun by Walk the Moon

“What surrounds me is my history, I repeat to myself. The words become my mantra: I must have a history.”

Ruben Martinez in *Sex, Death and God in L.A.*

“As a result, (of the contrivances a writer sets up between himself and what he writes) the mark of the writer is reduced to nothing more than the singularity of his absence; he must assume the role of the dead man in the game of writing.”

-Michel Foucault in *What is an Author?*

#### **What Is a Chicano?**

Me: You don't understand, this is not my dissertation I am writing my own *corrido*!<sup>59</sup>

Advisor: Take it easy baby!

Me: I thought you wanted excellence? You want me to give you the best that I have? You want me to exert myself until I feel there is nothing left? Well, we don't work that way. We never have and never will. You see, that means being vulnerable and you never want to be vulnerable. That's something you learn real quick, real fast or you just won't make it. And you won't be the first or the last to learn this until it's too late.

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<sup>59</sup> For a thorough explanation on the form and function of a *corrido* see Guillermo Hernandez's essay "What's a Corrido? Thematic Representation and Narrative Discourse" as well as the Smithsonian Institute's website "Corridos Sin Fronteras" located at [www.corridor.org](http://www.corridor.org)



Advisor: Please, go easy on the violins.

Me: Fine. No violins. I'll just have to blast on the tuba. You still want me to tell you about the Mexican Westside? Ok. I do want to tell you but it has to be told the way I have always wanted it to be told. My way. My voice. You got your way for the most part here. Now let me take control and see where this goes. It is impossible to say what I want to say with your rules so lets just put those aside for now. You know we have never have been good at staying inside the line. We don't care about the consequences most of the time. It's about honor and respect, even if it's at one's own expense. By the way, I can say that about us, you can't.

Advisor: Ok, so whatcha got?

Me: Let's start here. Let's start with me. Let's start with my body, my Mexican body, in my actions. That's were it always starts.

### ***Make This Mexican Body Move!***

The title of this short story is both a plea and an imperative and perhaps somewhat of a lamentation. You see, where I come from the Mexican body did move but those movements were conditioned not by a search for the perfect expressive form that embodies non-textual, non-verbal communication, but it was a body movement logic premised on flat out survival. This barrio dance of death played itself out daily and a failure to adhere to the unwritten rules of the performance produced bodies that would'nt move any longer.

In reflection, my youth in the Mar Vista Gardens housing projects of West LA was an exercise in mainstream acculturation. But what mainstream and what tributaries of that cultural stream are we talking about? A short contemplation on the recent deaths of pop cultural icons Michael Jackson and Farrah Fawcett can be of use to talk about my Mexican body logic. The era they come from is my own but, just like theirs, it is no easy task to talk about my roots. Memory

is never consistent and the mind has clever ways to trick itself to make sense of the present. The past is always changing as the present manifests itself. The memories of our childhood suddenly always seems to be in flux. Both Michael and Farrah will forever be known, not for what they said, but what their bodies did. Farrah's bodily performance oftentimes included staying perfectly still for the camera while Michael Jackson's body will go down in history as a moving in ways that no other body had moved before. Both of these body logics severely impacted my youth. Whether standing perfectly still or moving with force and intention I was able to perform in a way that allowed me to survive my environment.



fig. 5.1 Bobby Brady of *The Brady Bunch*



fig. 5.2 Leonard Melchor ca. 1975

Pop culture was always a fundamental part of me. Other bodies on television, the collective family body, also signaled to me survival strategies. I grew up thinking that my family was the real life Mexican version of *The Brady Bunch* and I envisioned myself as the youngest male of that fictional family, Bobby Brady. The Brady clan consisted of three boys and three girls. I have three brothers and three sisters so our family was just like them, plus one. I sat in

front of the TV for hours mesmerized by the Brady's daily quest to resolve one crisis after another with a morality that always emanated from the infallible Daddy Brady, the father body. In my own life, the patriarchal structure of my Mexican family made a direct psychological connection between the televised fantasy on the console RCA and our "quaint" housing projects existence. Obviously the use of the word quaint and housing projects should never be used in the same sentence but let me try and explain a bit here.

Just like the Brady family unit, my own large nuclear family was very close growing up and many of the dramas portrayed in the television series were the same ones we lived through. Like the Brady's we would take many family outings together as well. We piled into our Brady-like station wagon and we would go on camping trips to the Sequoias, to Leo Carillo State Beach and to Catholic Mass on every Sunday. Our dinner table on a daily basis was about as loud and lively as most festive Thanksgiving dinners. My family felt like a giant warm pillow back then. And in my world my father was not that different from the Brady father figure. In many respects I felt I had a perfect early childhood, never feeling poor or oppressed. I thought we were the Spanish-speaking version of the television series. In this sense, my Mexican identity was not in conflict with mainstream culture as portrayed by television. Pop culture was the lubricant that was comfortably moving my body back and forth between being Mexican and American. Early on, I really had no idea that in the comfort of my couch and the warm television rays I was insulated from the harsh reality just outside our door: gang murder, drug abuse, violence and despair. This was my early context but despite this, here I am, 25 years removed, sitting in a pretentious coffee shop on the Westside writing these words, with both undergraduate and advanced degrees from UCLA while many of my childhood friends have long turned to dust in graves or they have been in and out of jails or have formed broken homes just like the ones they

grew up in. What a long strange trip it has been. How did this happen? How did I run the gauntlet intact? Without a doubt, this body quickly learned “Ghetto Survival Tactics” and knew when to perform and when to dance the dance.

### **The Cholo Dance of Stance and the Gang Trance**

The barrio body logic had its repertoire of movements that created an aesthetic discernable to the violent enforcers that determined who belonged and who didn't. Among the arsenal of learned, and generational, body movements was the perfectly arched “C” comprised of the index finger and thumb. This is the hand gesture that signals the performer is a member of a Culver City gang. I learned this and perfected it at Stoner Elementary (what a fitting name for a school that teaches youth from a housing project) just like every other Black and Brown kid at the time.

But my experimentation with the use of these gestures was short lived, as I was not one of those that took the logical extension of joining the actual gang at the appropriate time (Middle School).

Another movement, a still performance, was the Cholo stance: body erect, the heels of the feet close together, feet at a perfect 45 degree angle with one hand in the front pants pocket and the other hand holding an extra bright white t-shirt. The only other way to convey this posture is to think of a penguin standing perfectly still with the hand gestures of a towel attendant at a posh health club. Again, the movement was recognized and practiced but never fully internalized as I only went through the imitation rituals and never consummated the actual initiation. For those that did take the full plunge it meant learning and employing an even deadlier set of body movements that demanded dexterity with a paint can, a knife, fists and if needed, an itchy trigger finger.



fig. 5.3 Myself in sixth grade. 1982.



fig 5.4 Junior HS Graduation,1984. The back row has been murdered.

And once these gestures were learned, they would most likely be performed over and over for the life of that body in between short stints of state-sponsored immobility or, as was often the case, the entire performance was cut short by an unexpected curtain call. It was a deadly spectacle to witness and an ontology. I found my body attracted to other types of movements.

### **Sweaty Soccer Bodies**

Another set of bodily movements that many Mexicans learn is soccer techniques. When soccer was unpopular, I was one of them rag tag youth that studied weekend soccer matches, always blaring through the TV on the local Spanish-language channels. The volume level of the television always managed to fill our entire house and came to be a ritual that signaled Sundays. The sound of the crowd and the game announcer comfortably reminding us all that it was the weekend and that we had to move into another set of movements. The end of the televised matches were always complemented by going out to the local parks to see either *Club Juchitlan* or *Club Libertad*, two of the local Westside Mexican teams- playing real games of soccer. Later on, this weekend ritual meant a family trip to see a team my father coached, *Club Progreso*, at Mar Vista Park or Venice High School.

I favored the soccer body over the gangster one. I favored a dynamic, living and physically fit body over one that was usually physically conditioned only while in Juvenile Hall or for an hour during Physical Education class. Soccer was on the rise. Pele was fast becoming a household name. Although I never really mastered soccer techniques to any superior level, it kept my Mexican body moving and my Mexican ass out of a gang and out of a grave.

### **Pop-Locking and the Rolling Stones Farewell Concert**

The advent of pop-locking and breakdancing in the projects sparked about as many

bodies to move as crack cocaine sparked bodies to slow down. These two movements overlapped and ended in a mixed bag of performances. At times the roles of dancer, dealer and user overlapped in my social relationships. I tried to stay within one discreet set of the equation: the break-dancer. In my hapless efforts to execute the perfect windmill, the head-spin or the hand-spin, I felt my body not being very good at internalizing the rhythm of the boom box. I could see where my movements needed work but I just couldn't make this Mexican body move in the way that some of my friends did. I figured if I wasn't going to be a dancer I would still be a part of the crowd by being a voracious consumer of the music. To this day, I have a strong attachment to music but not to dancing.

The only real dancing I witnessed in those days came to me by surprise. A neighbor of mine was lucky enough to get ON TV, the first cable network on the Westside, in his unit. The Rolling Stones were having a special cable broadcast of a live performance. It was going to be the first of their many subsequent "Farewell Tours" and I was invited to see it live. Out comes Mike Jagger, wearing the bottom half of a flashy yellow football uniform, dancing away like I had never seen males dance before. Beyond the dancing part of the performance I saw for the first time how a persona that comes through the radio, through song performances, can be very different from the embodied persona that performs (dances). This separation of the perceived and the actual was interesting to me in making sense of my existential dramas. Mick Jagger simultaneously presented oppositional signals of manhood, which made me think that it was o.k. to be different to dance to a different beat. This meant to me that it was ok to get into "weird" New Wave music and to listen to alternative radio stations like 106.7 F.M., and that it was ok not to join a gang. It was ok not to perform the expected. I moved my body into other public domains.

## The Pre-digital Barrio Experience

Belonging to a pre-cable TV, pre-personal computer, pre-internet, pre-Xbox, pre-Facebook generation has strange implications. It was an odd experience to grow up in a housing project, close to the ocean in West L.A., and to attend school with middle and upper class youth. I sought entertainment from both traditional sources as well as the non-traditional. Today, my own kids get a healthy dose of their entertainment in electronic form through Google, Yahoo, YouTube, and who knows what else they do, but for me at an early age I spent countless Summer hours in the surf, (fig 5.5) fishing and loafing around Venice Beach on my bicycle.



Figure 5.5 Myself getting away from the barrio and into the waves, 1985.



My version of the internet was the real environment and I had to do more than just click on a computer screen to make my mind and body move through space. I learned the body language of beach culture. I grew out my hair and I conditioned those specific muscles needed to "get barreled" in the surf and to haul in the most perfect Pacific Bonito using live bait on the Venice Pier. I disciplined myself into a beach body. I couldn't just change my browser window and be snapped into a different context, I lived those different contexts on a daily basis. At home I spoke Spanish with my parents and engaged in very traditional culture from Jalisco. Outside of this, I perceived myself as just any other Anglo youngster enjoying perfect Southern California beach culture. I still get flashbacks of my youth at the beach when I smell a salty breeze next to any coast or when I hear "I Wanna Rock With You" by Michael Jackson. This particular song always seemed to be wafting through the salty air in Venice, whether it was on hand-held radios on the pier or on boom-boxes on the Venice boardwalk.

When I saw an elderly Farrah Fawcett on *The David Letterman Show* shortly before she died in 2009 I thought of all the blonde, feathered-haired girls I had encountered in my youth- in school, at the Venice Boardwalk on roller-skates and on the television. Short shorts, long hair under headphones chewing bubble gum and the perfect smile- that was my image of perfect femininity. I never wondered why I never saw a brunette Mexican women in those roles, nonetheless, at the time, as a child, I thought that was just how it was. I didn't question it. I had internalized and normalized the politics of the imagery. I comfortably saw myself as an average American kid but I also saw myself as a Mexican, a surfer, a BMX'er, a Westsider, a fisherman and a number of other identities. All of these identities existed, and my body would not



Figure 5.6 Myself (on right) and two brothers- one murdered, one sent to Juvenile Hall.

have been possible had I not imagined this Mexican body to move in different ways than the rest of my friends back in the projects. (fig 5.6) I would not be alive today had I not learned to listen to a different rhythm. Some never had the chance I did and some just never wanted anything different. I dedicate this to them.

*Oh Glory to the Spring Fallen: A Mexican Westside Requiem*

We swung fearlessly from the highest vines  
falling on occasions,  
landing on our backs,  
with a mighty and thunderous thud  
only equivalent to the roaring of our laughter.

Lubricated by tears of joy  
glancing towards each other, promising eternal friendship  
without using a single word  
only to begin the process over and over and over.

Never knowing the glorious sun  
of Summers to come,  
nor the bittersweet Falls,  
nor the uncertain Winters,  
some stayed Down.

Oh Glory to the Spring Fallen!

Only on an occasional fleeting moment  
did we pause  
to think of the dangerous heights we soared  
yet we continued, over and over, into the vines.

Laughing  
crying  
looking  
learning  
promising

**This page intentionally left black. In memoriam. In protest. In solidarity. In love. Fuck Gangs.**

## **Childhood, Take Two: Between and Bewixed Being- Dancing with the Hyphen**

### *Getting Schooled*

The first day of kindergarten an African American teacher at Stoner Avenue Elementary read my name “Leonardo” on the roster and said to me, “Your name here is now Leonard.” And just like that I was split in two.<sup>60</sup> I came home and told my mom in Spanish that I was now called *Leonard*. No more Leonardo. I continued using this public name at school but at home, in private, I am still Leonardo to my mother, father and other Spanish-speaking relatives. I guess I still haven’t decided to go completely one way or the other. Occasionally, I would get a “Leonarr” from my parents as they twisted their tongues trying the English version, always ending with a rolling “r” instead of “d.” Truth be told, Leonard always came off as odd to me. Still does. Too white. Someone once told me upon meeting me in person after a phone conversation that they were expecting a 6 foot white guy. I guess this is what happens when you pronounce standard English, without any ethnic inflections, and you are a very Mexican-looking<sup>61</sup> guy named Leonard Melchor.

From 1974 to 1986 I went public schools in West Los Angeles; Stoner Avenue Elementary, Marina Del Rey Middle School and Venice High School. During my entire education in the *Los Angeles* Unified School District (emphasis added) I did not have a single Latino teacher. Things have changed since. The only Hispanic presence that I remember was Dolores, the Cafeteria Manager at Marina Del Rey Jr High School. My friends and I volunteered

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<sup>60</sup> For a detailed discussion of private / public identity in a Mexican context that I reference here see *Brown* by Richard Rodriguez. He details the dual existence of students that have to act and talk mainstream at school and ethnic at home.

<sup>61</sup> I use this here facetiously as there is no true image of “Mexican,” only cinematic stereotypes that feed off and reinforce politically-charged Mexican social stereotypes. My wife and daughter are routinely described as white.

with her to serve lunch to the other kids in exchange for free food. Free food for students that used meal vouchers was priceless.

Back then there was greater diversity in those schools than today. There were equal parts Japanese Americans, African American, White and Mexicans attending these schools. This was before the charter school and private school explosion on the Westside.

When I became of working age I found a job at *Wheel World* bicycle shop on Sepulveda Blvd. in Culver City and never got anything for free. I made \$3.65 an hour and came to hate taking unassembled bicycles out of their shipping boxes, put them together for the showroom and then see mostly white kids like my own age take them home. I could only dream of buying one of them bikes.

We assembled the bikes behind a partition. Spanish was the main language back there and English on the floor of the showroom of the shop. White guys out front and Brown guys behind the wall and out of sight. This is the typical business pattern in West LA. Was then and still is now.

### **My Mexican Father- An Image for Masculinity**

A friend once told me my dad knows how to get down. When I asked how he knew, he told me he saw him beat the shit out of some guy in the parking lot. I was very confused hearing this. I never saw my father in that light. This still confuses me to this day. I never asked him about that when his memory was good. No use asking now.

Growing up my father wore jeans, bad hippie shirts in turquoise and a constant on him was a down-filled ski vest in classic brown 70s colors- his favorite one was tan with brown corduroy trim. To me, he was the Mexican version of the Marlboro man or an easy substitute for any guy in a late 70s Coors commercial. He wore Mexican boots and a cowboy hat. He rounded

this outfit off with a full mustache and sideburns that would make Jim Morrison proud. This both embarrassed me and made me feel proud. This image still dances in my mind as I see him as an older man, shrinking with age. He is somewhere just above 120 lbs. at this point.



Figure 5.7 My father and I. 1977

I had a recurring dream, more of a nightmare, as a child. Heaven, in my mind, was some sort of a theatrical stage with intense lights facing the audience. In my nightmare, I entered this theater seeing a multitude of unfamiliar faces feeling very lonely. I searched frantically for my father and when I finally found him, I saw him staring silently towards the lights. But there were no more seats left for me to sit next to him! I felt suffocated as I looked for more seats. I felt like everyone was going somewhere and I was going to be left behind. On more than one occasion I

suddenly woke up in the middle of the night, frozen and mortified, hoping there was some way to tell my dad to save me a seat. I didn't want to sound childish to him but one day I finally told him in a trembling voice and he said in a reassuring manner that he would save me a seat. I stopped having that nightmare that day. My Dad saved me that day, he confirmed to me why he was my hero. I believed in him then and I still believe in him today. I also believed in my friends.

...

### **Imagining Big Blue Sky Futures on the Rotting Venice Canals**

Location: A hot Summer day in Venice, California. 1985.

Days like these are no good for school. Especially high school and especially if you live next to the ocean. Lets see, go to school and see the same thing over and over. Boring. Sitting in Spanish class already knowing Spanish. Boring. Sitting in A.P. English with a teacher that usually has alcohol on his breath and occasionally unravels a bull whip and snaps it down the center aisle. Kinda boring. Jocks and cheerleaders. Boring. Mexican, Black and White gangsters. Boring. Soccer practice with the E.S.L. coach and most of his students. Boring. Track and Field practice with off-season football players. Boring.

As a matter of fact, I really don't know what kept me in school. Maybe it was the free lunch. After 10 solid years of LAUSD school cafeteria food it's sad to think that the food was the one thing that kept me in school. *Fuck it, lets go to the canals.* Andre, my Egyptian neighbor and best friend, and I decide to head to the beach.

Drifting on a high-jacked barge on the Venice canals, floating on water that seemed to be a mixture of high tide sea water and good ol' fashioned stinky muck, two 14 yr. old, modern day



Huck Finn lay on their backs staring at the celeste sky, tasting the salt in the air, wondering what it all means and when it will all end.<sup>62</sup>

*Me: Do you think we will know each other when we grow up?*

*Andre: What do you mean?*

*Me: I mean, do you think when we are old and married and shit will we still know each other. I mean you can always move back to Egypt and me to Mexico. I can tell by all the tapes of Egypt that your dad has on the walls that he probably would like to go back. You know what I mean, do you think we will still know each other?*

*Andre: I don't know. Why are you asking me that now? This shit has got you tripping. Take it easy man. Enjoy this. The water smells and shit but this ain't a bad place to be right about now. Know what I mean?*

*Me: Yeah. I don't know why I keep thinking about the future. I mean we can't live in the projects forever, right? I sure as hell don't want to live there when I am old.*

*Andre: Hell no, me neither, who the fuck would want to live in the projects? Fuck that, I want to live in Marina del Rey or some shit like that. You know, like in them condos where those white kids live, you know, the ones that race bikes. Whats his name? The one with long hair that hangs out with that other goofy-ass white kid with curly hair.*

*Me: Yeah, I know who you are talking about. Lucky ass punks. One of them has a girls name like Shannon or Leslie or some shit like that. Only white people name their kids that way.*

*Andre: You know what, the projects wouldn't be too bad if there weren't so many dumb-asses that lived there.*

*Me: There's no future there. It sucks ass.*

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<sup>62</sup> These two modern incarnations of Mark Twain's imagination have no fictional runaway slave, Jim, to save, but have only begun to contemplate their own true freedom.

*Andre: You're right.*

(There is a sinking feeling you get when you realize for the first time where you truly stand in society. Sometimes this realization comes when you try to rent your first apartment and you see that you will never, ever, get ahead of your bills but for some people this epiphany comes way earlier- and it comes often. Sometimes you are too young to truly understand it, your just have a gut feeling that something is really wrong with the situation. I don't know where my childhood best friend, Andre, lives today or even if he is alive.)

### **Out of the Hood and Into Higher Education**

*You aren't going to amount to shit! You are just another dumb-ass Mexican. And they are going to eat your ass alive in there. You're just another statistic. They are going to play basketball with your shaven head you dumb motherfucker. Ha-ha-ha!* (Inspiring words said to the author by members of the San Diego County Sherriff's department.)

Thankfully, I am not just another statistic. Not just another *Mexican*. Not just another jailbird. I am not just another sad product of the public school system which has a 50% chance of even turning out a high school graduate and much less chances of being the birthplace of someone that will go on to graduate school- and an R-1 university nonetheless!

But I am part of another statistic. It is a statistic that has no measurement because there is no adequate unit of measurement. You don't write this in on your university admission application or brag about it in your personal statement. You keep this information to yourself. You trust your experience there is going to be different. This means you aren't going to be judged by your looks, that you aren't going to be corralled into ethnic enclaves and that you will be allowed to choose your own destiny and instead be judged on your abilities. In retrospect, I

was almost completely wrong on all fronts. At least I thought I was wrong until I met Peter Sellars.

### **To Peter Sellars**

I met you  
in the bathroom.  
After introducing myself  
you gave me a smile that  
fantastically lit up  
all the shiny white urinals and toilet paper holders.  
Shortly thereafter  
Your gifts unfolded:  
Storyteller.  
Of things that holds one's heart in their merciless grip.  
Gatekeeper.  
Knowing the precise moment to control or unleash wet torrents of emotions.  
Teacher.  
Modeling the sowing of seeds of hope and understanding.  
And Healer.  
Using wise and soft words  
that  
will transcend this life  
and help us understand what it is to be truly human.

When I entered graduate school at UCLA in 2004 there was a movement on campus by the Bruin Republicans to get rid of the Chicano Studies department. They held protests on the campus walkways. The undergraduate students from the Chicano Studies department were advised not to confront them. Several of us felt the need to confront the movement head on and we formed the Raza Graduate Student Association. We held protests on campus and then organized people to attend the largest immigration rights protest in Los Angeles history in 2006.

**ALERTA ALERTA ALERTA!!!**  
**JOIN THE**  
**RAZA GRADUATE STUDENT**  
**ASSOCIATION!!!**  
**(OPEN TO UNDERGRADS AS WELL)**

<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Current Projects</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Working in the community w/other orgs against CAFTA</li> <li>-Working on the creation of our own newsletter</li> <li>-Planning a trip to Venezuela</li> <li>-Bringing Revolutionary Omali Yeshitela to UCLA on April 28<sup>th</sup> at 6PM Royce 362</li> </ul>		<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Current Issues</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-- Stopping CAFTA!!!</li> <li>-- Attacks on Raza communities (i.e. Migra raids and the Arizona Minutemen/vigilantes)</li> <li>-- Criminalization of our schools/youth (JROTC)</li> <li>-- Attacks on Latin America!!! (Hugo Chavez, Cuba, El Salvador ... etc)</li> <li>-- Illegal war in Iraq</li> </ul>
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If you seek an organization that is **MILITANT, ORGANIZED, DISCIPLINED** and that brings a strong Latin American Leftist Political Line, check us out. We organize on campus as well as in collaboration with other progressive forces in our communities. **HASTA LA VICTORIA!! Venceremos!!!**

**RGSA**

**Meetings:**  
**When? Every Wednesday at 7pm**  
**Where? Student Activities Center (Downstairs in Rm. B11)**  
**Contact us at [razagradstudentassociation@yahoo.com](mailto:razagradstudentassociation@yahoo.com)**

Figure 5.8 UCLA Raza Graduate Student Association recruitment flyer, 2004.



Figure 5.9 Members of UCLA RGSA going to a street Protest for immigrant rights, 2006.

...

In 2010 the artist Nick Cave visited the UCLA campus and graduate students were asked to write poems about his artwork. This is mine. I read it to an audience at the UCLA Fowler Museum.

### Dream

I am alone in this park  
with nothing but trash all around me  
twigs, bottle caps, used condoms and blood- colored buttons.  
What would happen if I put all this  
into motion?  
Can I start a community?  
Can I start a movement?  
With trash?  
What sound would it make?  
What color would it be?

Cars honking, pastels blasting  
Tires screech, yellow stops.

What sound does it make?  
What color is it?

Grey pigeons, grey skies  
Dirty water and apple pies.

What sound does it make?  
What color is it?

Brown Eyes, grey feathers  
Arms flailing in black leather.

What sound does it make?  
What color is it?

People dancing, People moving  
People smiling, People grooving.

What sound does it make?  
What color is it?

It is the beating of my heart  
It is the color of my dreams.

I **FOUND** this sound and I **MADE** this color

.....

I met Rafa Esparza at UCLA. He was an art student at the time. The year after he graduated I invited him to present his work to my students at East Los Angeles College. It went as follows:

...

**Praxis: *Teaching Juan Doe, Performing History***

Location: East Los Angeles College, South Gate Campus

Performer: Rafa Esparza, Leonard Melchor

He walks into my classroom unannounced and sits at the back of the room with his hoodie sweater covering most of his face. Only the faint wet shine of his eyes can be seen. Other students turn around to look at him while I continue to lecture as if nothing is happening. I lecture as if he is just another one of those students that enroll in my class and shows up to 3 or 4 classes all semester long. I am performing Professor. I pretend to care by not making it a big deal. He bends down to open his backpack and takes out a plaster mask he made the night before. The mask was made using his own real face as a mold. He is wearing a mask of himself.

He puts on the mask, which has slits for his eyes and mouth. Then he proceeds to install 3ft quetzal feathers around the top until the mask resembles something that would be filed under “Aztec chief mask” in any given museum. He then pulls out from his backpack two large rocks that barely fit in each palm and proceeds to pound his mask, his “face,” with the rocks. Everyone is alarmed at him and look at me to do something but I am performing “caring Professor” that allows everyone to be who they want to be. It’s not my business. He continues to pound his mask with the rocks until it begins to crack and shatter and fall off. Beneath the mask is a bloody face exposing to everyone who he really is. He then reads off a list of names that are his influences. It is a list of people that have influenced him as a student, an artist, a gay artist, a Mexican, a son, a brother, a Chicano. I continue lecturing as if nothing is happening. This is a college class after all where students are expected to sit in front of a professor and hear him lecture and lecture and lecture and not question tactics. Students aren’t expected to challenge the dynamics of the traditional college classroom, the learning experience, even though this particular “classroom” is a windowless warehouse converted into an annex of the main campus. It is located on the main artery (Alameda Blvd.) of the Port of Los Angeles. This “campus” sits 20 feet from rails that drain the constant influx of rusting shipping containers from around the world and is aromatized by toxins from nearby heavy industrial activity. Is this a classroom? Is this a college experience? Back to the drama that is unfolding. No one moves. No one questions anything. When he is done reading his list of names he slowly covers his bloodied face with his hoodie, collects the fragments of mask and calmly gets up and exits. I pretend not to notice. I pretend that he has an excuse. That he has notified me about everything beforehand and I pretend that this is not disrespectful to me. I figure if I confront him he will never come back. At least this way I have another opportunity to captivate him with my words and make him

believe me when I say that personal transformation begins when you believe in yourself. I have to sell himself to himself. The performance concludes. I let everyone know it was a performance.

After having a class discussion on the interrelationships between history, identity, education, knowledge, art and reality, Rafa and I head over to Mariscos El Paisa on Long Beach Blvd. to continue this conversation over shrimp tacos. Additionally, we talk of the lack of Chicano performance artist that don't feel the urgency to engage with young adults.

I wrote the following words a day later as a personal reflection of what happened in that South Gate classroom.

***I Am Still Joaquin: Cara de Mil Putasos, South Gate's "Golden Boy"***

On a day like any other  
a day like every other day  
an Alameda wrecking yard spews its toxic dust onto Jordan High School students  
and the Jordan Downs housing projects stretches to life  
our Golden Boy sits in the back of the room  
he knows people are staring at him  
but he doesn't care  
he knows people think he is weird  
*"algo tiene este guey"*

But  
he hides  
behind his golden mask  
and  
his name brand hoodie.  
It's a day  
like any other day.

Roll call is just another routine  
say the names  
say the names  
say the names  
say the fucking names!  
tell me who I am supposed to be like



tell me who I am supposed to care about  
tell me who the fuck  
I am  
fuck you teacher I've got other things to worry about  
see my mask  
that's all you get.

But our Golden Boy cares  
rocks in hands, he shows how he cares  
he hits his face  
ooooof! again oooof!  
it hurts, it hurts bad  
but he hits  
again, again, again, again  
pounding his self into his self  
creating a microscopic layer of blood that binds the mask to the skin  
the world to the person

Am I bleeding? Is there Blood?  
Sorry teacher I didn't mean to messy this nice floor.  
This floor that is a converted warehouse turned into a college  
This college that sits next to an empty lot that  
was once the wet dream of that other Golden Boy  
That other boy that couldn't be who he wanted to be  
because his teachers told him the names of people  
who he was supposed to be like,  
who he was supposed to care about,  
and it wasn't who he wanted to be.

Golden Boy hits  
and is hit  
he is the face that has made millions, from millions of putazos  
he is a boy that hits himself to break the mask  
he hits and hits and hits  
and slowly the mask cracks, the golden facade cracks and fades and is pulled off  
to reveal  
himself to himself  
finally, "here!"

Chicano! Indio! Mestizo! Mexicanista! Artista! Puto!  
And any other words that you want to use to describe Golden Boy

I am still Joaquin,

I am still here  
I will endure,  
We shall endure.<sup>63</sup>

...

### **Dialogue with Ghosts**

Tiahui! To all my relations. To the living and the departed *gracias* for guiding me on this journey. I dedicate this work to the millions and millions of indigenous men, women and children who were slaughtered during the Spanish, British and French colonization of the Americas. It was the largest genocide in the history of humanity, I will never forget. They killed the body but never the will to survive. Anahuac presente! Corky Gonzalez, presente! Yolanda-Retter Vargas, presente! Gracias Ometeotl.

*Oh please! Don't start this shit off with all the ethnic stuff that makes you sound all badass, like you know your Native American heritage. Acting like some sort of modern day A.I.M. member or 60's hippie throwback. Whats next? Fuck the police and Raza power. Remember, I know you puto. I am you and you are me and I will call your ass out when I see you overstep your boundary. You better check yourself before you wreck yourself homes. Don't think that just because you learned a couple of things over at UCLA you have a right to change your face with that mask when you please. You were born with that face and it will be the same face on your death mask. Now get on with your shit before that other fucken' nerd comes on and starts talking all that bullshit about community this and corporeality that with his tan Docker pants all wedged up his ass and his Timberland shoes and taupe pique polo. Makes me want to puke. That*

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<sup>63</sup> This is modeled on the identity politics of the seminal Chicano poem *I am Joaquin*. It is also influenced by the recent behavior of boxer "Golden Boy" Oscar de la Hoya. Photos of Oscar in sexy women's clothing surfaced online and at first were denounced as altered images but, after release from a substance abuse recovery center, Oscar acknowledged he wasn't really who he was while under the influence.

*academic talk gets old after your first hundred books and I've read all your books: they don't impress me. Besides, you use Spanish to cement authenticity? I mean Spanish was the language of the conqueror. How idiotic is that to use Spanish as code for an Indigenous authenticity when the Spanish tried desperately to eradicate all natives of the Americas.*

Do you think your attitude helps? At least some of us have tried to better ourselves. Growing up the projects wasn't easy. Do you know what the educational statistics are for people like me? Do you know what it feels like to be in the back of a squad car and have the policeman up front say to you, "What a fucken' shame, just another statistic." Do you? Then maybe you will keep your mouth shut and respect what I have to say. You have a way of bringing out the worst in me. You are the reason some people see me as just another angry Brown man. Loosen up. Hang out with white folks more often like you did in your youth, maybe that will change something. By the way, this education has been no walk in the park. You should see my student loans!! Fuck. It could have been very different had I stayed working for Parks and Recreation of the city of Los Angeles. But THIS is the life I live. This is my choice and my path. So please respect it. Besides, no one wants to hang out with someone like you, with a chip on your shoulder and a thousand cynical remarks on demand.

*OK, I've heard that many times before. Poor brown kid and his horrible life. Boring. So what, lots of people have survived the projects. What makes you so special. Why don't you say a prayer for all your friends that were murdered in their teens? Richard, David, Carl, remember them? Now get on with your thing. Lets hear the good shit 'cause once "Leonard" starts talking, its gonna be all crickets. I mean, at this point, who in the hell still does that whole social science thing? Talk about the ghost of the Enlightenment. Empirical truth to be found only through the investigation of primary sources is about as relevant to any discussion of truth as Dr. Seuss is to*

*medicine: it sounds like there should be a connection but one is just a clown. And stop coming at the reader with this insinuation of being the projects poster boy. You were bad and you know it. You stole bikes, you stole from stores, you stole anything you needed to get to. Remember, I know you and your clepto' ways. Do you remember vandalizing state and public property? Do you remember your failed attempt to distribute drugs? Come on lets put it all out there if truth is what you are after. Dale Culero, be amongst the first to openly talk about yourself after you talk about your work, do you think your readers are ready for that?*

I like the idea but I'm not ready for that personally. Too many things to throw out there. Some of it is frankly no one's business but mine anyways. I mean how much is enough? Do you want to see my diary? Are you really looking for Margaret Mead's? Do you want me talk candidly about the people I interviewed? What do you want? This is just supposed to be a dissertation that explores the Mexican community in West LA at a specific moment in time. Why should I open the door and windows for everyone to see me naked?  
*I thought truth is what you were after?*

Not me. You have me confused with that other Leonard. He sure has been working on that for a while. Hopefully he doesn't come off as too boring. Because what he does can be very boring. You see, I see my research and work as part of another project that has nothing to do with proving to people I can read and talk like a UCLA Ph.D. Honestly, I do want the degree and the better paying job and I don't want to teach community college for the rest of my life. But I quantify my success through changes I make in the social structure that I am a product of. In other words, I want to touch people's lives with my education. I can't put that into a formula and prove to someone how effective I am at that. Some people I have impacted have never told me so and others have made it real clear that I was a major factor in them keeping at it. I want to

keep doing that and I think the more educated I am, the better I can do that. It is not about writing skills to further a career but writing skills to access resources for myself and for those I see in need. You see, for people like me, education is not a linear chronology with the traditional mainstream milestones. Sure, I can easily forget where I came from and be very successful. I know that if I play down my politics and initiate an academic publishing career, I quickly would be hired by a university. But that's not entirely what I want. I don't have the naïve vision that the university serves everyone in the same manner, it's not like that. By extension, neither does the dissertation process.

*Careful what you say, you never know who is gonna read this.*

I am not worried about who reads this. The university is supposed to be a place of learning. Period. Where we take that learning is totally up to the individual. Besides this dissertation is also an exercise to find my literary voice. I have to feel free to write what I feel in order to find that voice.

*Still, trucha, there is always a hater waiting for you to make a mistake and say, "see, I told you, some people just don't get what an education is all about."*

That's YOUR paranoid project upbringing and its remaining survival tactics. I choose the peaceful path, the path of community building and breaking of barriers between people. I choose this project to be a product of peace, love and unity.

*Shut the fuck up.*

Seriously, this dissertation is the work of all those ghosts who were my relations. I am the wisdom that was handed down from father to son, from mother to daughter through oral traditions that go all the way back to the origins. To them, I offer this work. Tiahui. To all my relations. Salud!



fig 5.10 Stationwagon full of my siblings. 1960s Venice, CA.



fig 5.11 My Family: Annie, Thomas and Amanda

## **Ecstasy**

Call me ecstasy

sweet ecstasy

pure abandon

unleashed

unbridled

untouched

Call me ecstasy

Call me liberty

Call me freedom

Free!

**Call me Mexican!**  
**Call me Chicano!**  
**Call me Mexicano!**

## Epilogue

### Where Do We Go From Here?

Two recent events seem to be haunting me for reasons that I have yet to fully comprehend in their totality. There is something to be said about situations that simultaneously add clarity to your thoughts yet quickly thereafter add additional layers of confusion and anger. On November 23, 2013, David S. Cunningham III, an African American judge for the Los Angeles Superior Court was pulled over by UCLA campus police. A victim of racial profiling he was handcuffed and thrown against the side of his car after being stopped for not wearing his safety belt.<sup>64</sup> This was the first event. The other event was the national release of the motion picture, *Cesar Chavez*, dealing with the life of the agricultural labor leader on March 28, 2014. In conversation with each other, both of these events would seem to not have much to do with this dissertation but in reality they speak to the very essence of everything that has been written here.

If the analysis of “real” and “imaginary” Mexicans has been a problem of distinguishing between derelict Mexican stereotypes in film and the actual lives of Mexicans then the circulation of the positive Mexican imagery in the Chavez film has begun to do the necessary work. But the arrest of Judge Cunningham has cast a dark cloud over that abstract, screen victory. Moreover, due to the location of Cunningham’s arrest, seeds of doubt have been laid in my mind regarding the value of this work. *What* (researching stereotypes) I have spent the last six years of my life doing and *where* (UCLA) I have been doing it has become an issue far

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<sup>64</sup> See online Los Angeles Times article “Black judge says UCLA cops used excessive force in seatbelt stop.” <http://articles.latimes.com/2013/nov/25/local/la-me-ln-black-judge-ucla-police-20131125> downloaded 4/1/2014.



outside of the traditional concerns of completing a dissertation. It is extremely fitting as well that these events coincide with the conclusion of my life as a graduate student as this has tempered what is usually a time of optimism and opportunity for a recent graduate. Allow me to lay out the connections that run through these events and clarify what is the issue.

As I approached the tail end of my academic work moving towards completion of a Masters degree in Latin American studies on the UCLA campus I had an unpleasant introduction to a member of the campus police force. I was pulled over less than 50 ft. from the campus exit, red lights flashing and all, by an overzealous officer that seemed to not understand that campus police exist to protect students and not to harass them. I had no idea why I was being pulled over in such dramatic style although outside the university borders I had been shown over and over again why people like myself constantly get pulled over for no apparent reasons.<sup>65</sup> The campus officer used the patrol car loudspeaker to tell me to pull over, I heard him, as did the multitude of other students that were walking by wondering what all the fuss was about. As the officer with dark sunglasses approached my car I knew I had to keep my hands visible, I knew this was not just any routine stop to alert someone of their broken tail light or something like that, I knew this was a fishing expedition. I had been there before many times.

Can I help you officer?

License and registration!

Can you tell me what I did wrong? Why did you pull me over?

License and registration!

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<sup>65</sup> On numerous occasions I have been pulled over by the L.A.P.D. as well as other police departments under the guise that I fit the description of someone they were looking for. I came to understand this not as coincidence but as code for “you look like a guilty Mexican, guilty of something, we just have to find out what it is.”

Ok, we are at a university and I am a graduate student here and I think this whole Robocop attitude has no place here.

License and registration!

Really? That's all you can say, you didn't get trained to talk to people like people and not machines? This is a university and I am a student here, not a criminal.

Can you tell me what I did wrong?

If you don't give me your license and registration I am going to have to arrest you.

Obviously this situation was quickly going bad yet it was genuinely predictable to me. I had been in this situation many times before. It was naïve of me to think that at a place like UCLA officers would receive training that is specific to the population they are policing, mainly students. I was naïve to think that being at a university I would be able to talk to a police officer as someone that exists to protect me, not to abuse me. I was wrong. I was naïve enough to think that being a graduate student with excellent English skills would make an officer realize that perhaps he had misjudged my intentions on campus based on his perceptions of my so-called race. To him, I was out of place and to me it was just another incident that confirmed the unmarked boundaries of Mexican social circulation, even if this was taking place at a public institution like UCLA. The officer decided to actually talk to me.

You aren't wearing a seat belt.

Sorry about that. I just started my car and I was about to put it on, I was parked about 100 meters from here. I know that's not why you pulled me over and I know you racially profiled me but you know what, I don't care about that, that's your problem. Just give me the ticket so I can go.

I understood that all it took was one false move to become just another Mexican that goes crazy on campus police. I didn't want to go down in UCLA history as just another angry ethnic minority on campus. Because the stereotype of the angry minority on campus is so pervasive, I constantly and intentionally try to act in ways to defy it. I figured I would just let this slide with

the campus officer. I figured that maybe this situation might change his thinking the next time he sees a Mexican that looks like me driving through campus. He returned to give me my citation.

Sign the citation.

Sure will. (I sign.) There you go, can I leave now?

Sign it over. With your real signature.

What? Are you kidding? That is my real signature. You have my drivers license, you can see that it is my real signature. I am not signing it over just because you want me to.

Sign it over or I am going to have to arrest you.

What! For not signing the way you want me to. You are crazy man. Who do you think you are? Where do you think you are? You are at UCLA, and I am a student don't you get that?

Are you going to sign it again or not?

I will but instead of going home I am going to see the watch commander, this is crazy.

I signed the citation again, twice, to prove that it was my real signature. I immediately went down to the campus police station with my blood screaming and immediately asked to file a complaint. Just then the citing officer entered the room and the watch commander appeared from behind the front desk. All three of us were in the lobby. I could barely speak I was so angry. I was trembling and just barely able to control my physical self. I was so close to the point of doing something that I would regret but a voice inside of me kept telling me it wasn't worth it. As the commander stood between the officer and myself, I told them both that I knew exactly what had happened and that it was an abuse of power. I also made it clear to the commander that both the officer and I knew that if the officer had no gun that I would surely inflict some serious physical pain onto him. At this point the commander asked me not to make threats and I had to remove myself from the situation before I lost control. I had rehearsed this

scene many times before and I knew that I had more to lose than anyone involved. For the officers an incident like this means transferring to another department and more of the same ensues. For me, an altercation with campus police can have lifelong consequences, especially with a career in education in mind. I knew the limits of the situation, I fully understood the power dynamics and I knew then, as I do now, that I was a guilty Mexican way before any words were even exchanged.

I will never forget that situation. I will never forget that even at a place like UCLA, Mexicans that look like me, working class Mexicans in working class vehicles, are still seen with suspicious eyes. Even though the same institution that gave me the gift of knowledge is the same institution that also gave me the gift of reality, I remain optimistic.

To that campus officer I was that very same “imaginary” Mexican stereotype that I wrote about in Chapter 2 even though I thought of myself as more of the “real” and caring version that I wrote about in Chapters 3 and 4. As I discussed, Chicano cinema was created to debunk and destroy the Mexican stereotypes that the Hollywood studio system peddles in hopes of changing the way we actually treat each other in real life. As was written, the very mission of Chicano cinema is also the same reason why Chicano cinema does not circulate in Hollywood, the studio system exists to help people forget about the problems of society not to show people that Hollywood is actually part of the problem. To this end, the release of the Chavez film, with no traditional Mexican stereotypes, in major theater chains signifies a victory on the abstract level of minority cinema. It signifies that Hollywood is finally opening its doors to other versions of Mexicans on the big screen. But this is far from considering the film as an indicator of the absence of racism in society. The recent arrest of Judge Cunningham at UCLA makes this point loud and clear. Indeed, we are ages away from a racism-free society. The irony is that the same

location of knowledge production, UCLA, was also the same location that reified the Hollywood stereotypes. This has caused extreme anger and frustration for myself. It is confusing to simultaneously witness the joy of the release of *Cesar Chavez* and the brutality of UCLA campus police racial profiling as part of standard police tactics. The abstract victory has not been enough to erase the real abuse that constantly takes place at places like UCLA.

In the end, the efficacy of this dissertation is wide and far. This is not simply a testimony of the ability of a person to understand his or her object of study. While it does open up a broader dialogue about Mexicans in general, and Mexicans on the Westside in particular, it also documents a transition in my life. This marks the next step in my life's work to try and better the world one student at a time. With a Ph.D. I enter the realm of authority, of elder. I take this seriously. The responsibility of elder weighs deeply on me and motivates me to be a lifelong advocate on behalf of my community. I am this completed dissertation and now its time to take my advocacy to another level. Stereotypes and hatred will persist long after I am gone but the love, compassion and solidarity that comes out of struggle will prevail. It always has and always will. Indeed, love always wins.

Addenda

Note: I have translated from Spanish addenda no. 1 and no. 3.

1. Historical Essay On Juchitlan (Jalisco) 1907-1957 by Gabriel Agraz Garcia De Alba

This edition is dedicated to Juchitlan being the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the construction of the church. (1907-1957)

**Topography**

In the Southwestern part of Jalisco, along the highway that leads to the unexplored and fertile Pacific Ocean, on kilometer 136, to the left, the travelers eyes will meet upon the vista of a quaint pueblo situated within an indentation of the earth. It sits on the left flanks of the mountain named La Coronilla (The Crown) and its name is Xochitlan which signifies “place of flowers” from “xochitl” meaning flowers and “tlan” meaning place of. In historical texts this place is referred to as the following: Xuchitlan, Asuchitlan, Juchitlan, Suchitlan, and now remains as JUCHITLAN.

Pedro de Avila, during the 16<sup>th</sup> century, in reference to this pueblo said: “Suchitlan has this name because there is in this town many types of roses and rose in the Mexican language is Juchitl, from which the name Juchitlan derives from, which means a town with many flowers or place of many flowers.”

The Justice of Tecolotlan, Commander D. Jose Abundio de Mendina, in his topographical notes sent to the Real Audiencia of Guadalajara in 1819 stated: “The town of Juchitlan, subject to this *Tenencia*, is located to the south of us at a distance of five *leguas* and from the town of Autlan, it is fifteen *leguas*. It is located among wavy plains that border our town. It has a river that maintains a stream but can dry up during the dry season. There is a natural spring that keeps the water flowing that is located on the eastern part of the town near the Hacienda of Santa Maria.”

The head ranch, or cabecera, of Juchitlan is located at 20 degrees, 4' north latitude and at 104 degrees, 6' western longitude and at 1250 meters above sea level. The climate is usually hot.

The total area of the municipality is 208 square kilometers; bordering on the north with Tecolotlan, on the east with Chiquilistlan, on the south with Ejutla and on the north with Tenamaxtlan and Union de Tula.

### **Precortesian Epoch**

During this epoch Juchitlan, as its name indicates, was inhabited by indigenous tribes specifically, as Davila Garibi states, the Cuyotecos; this was a *cacicazgo* that was subject to the *Tlatoanazgo* of Amula (now San Juan de Amula) which in turn was under the *Hueilotanazgo* of Colima, in the Chimalhuacan empire.

On the character and way of life of those Indians during that time period and that region, the Councilman of Tenamaxtlan Don Pedro de Avila describes in his writings in 1578: "In those times the people and pueblos were divided and every pueblo tried to subdue his neighbor so that there existed perpetual warfare, never having decidedly gone in any direction and never having benefited any particular pueblo...."

He further states that these people worshipped stone idols and that polygamy was very usual amongst them.

### **Conquest**

Juchitlan was conquered by the Spanish in 1524, in that year the Marquis of the Valley (Don Hernando Cortes) sent his nephew, the Captain D. Francisco Cortes De San Buenaventura to "Colima and Chimalhuacan". They left the Villa of Colima with 100 selected Spaniards and the missionaries Fr. Juan de Pandilla and Fr. Miguel de Bolonia. The itinerary that Francisco Cortes

De San Buenaventura probably took was Autlan-Juchilan-Tenamaxtlan-Tecolotlan and then Ameca.

Don Jesus Amaya in the appendix of his work, “Ameca Protofundacion Mexicana”, under the title “Bioteca de Occidente”, in reference to Juchitlan states: “with the original name being Asuchitlan it was one of the 16 *estancias* of Tenamaxtlan, the province which in 1525 Francisco Cortes gave as an encomienda to Pedro Gomez and Martin Monje. In 1579 it was a subject of Ixtlahuacan, according to the Report on Tenamaxtlan written by Martin Monje de Leon.”

On February 10<sup>th</sup> of 1541 there as a reunion of the representatives of the surrounding pueblos that belonged to this province at the town of Tenamaxtlan to come to an agreement as to what the amount of tribute the indigenous people would have to pay the king. Juchitlan was responsible for: “Five loads of maize that must be planted, five sheets of *enequen* (a cloth-producing fiber of the maguey plant), produce a field planed with cotton, four chickens and five *jicaras* (bowls).

### **The Building of a Municipality**

The decree that created this municipality is not known. It already existed in 1835 as is noted in the decrees maintained at the State Congress on the 9<sup>th</sup> of July of the same year. This date is given by the State Planning Commission and it is made clear that on this date Juchitlan ceased to exist as a municipality. A newspaper article that appeared in Guadalajara on February 19<sup>th</sup> of 1835 talks about a feud between Victoriano Perez, owner of the hacienda “Santa Maria”, and his lawyer Vicente Gonzales Castro. Castro, with eyes on Victoriano Perez’s property, publicly declared that Juchitlan did not have even half the population to exist as a municipality under the current laws and that it should cease to be a municipality.

On July 9<sup>th</sup> of 1835, Juchitlan ceases to exist as its own municipality and is appointed a Commissioner and a Syndicate Coordinator who is to report the Municipality of Tecolotlan.



On March 13<sup>th</sup> of 1837, Juchitlan belonged to the Party of Ameca, District of Ezatlan.

The 1840 Census of Tecolotlan states that it controlled the following localities: 3 Pueblos: Tecolotlan as the head township; Juchitlan and Ayotitlan.

On May 13<sup>th</sup> of 1885 Juchitlan belonged to the Department of Cocula, 5<sup>th</sup> Canton.

### **Territorial Division**

As has been stated previously, this pueblo belonged to the province of Tenamaxtlan, which was owned by Martin Monje and Pedro Gomez until 1600, at which time it became a part of the Tecolotlan municipality, which in turn was part of the larger province of Autlan. Since 1600 Juchitlan was a dependant of Tecolotlan until it became its own municipality again, which was during the middle of the last century. (1800's)

Once a municipality it flourished and in 1880 the ranches that were part of Juchitlan were the following, followed by a population count: Molino, 950; Corrales, 486; Huajes, 479; Pozol, 194; Santa Maria, 131; Camichines, 141; Candelaria, 93; Barranca, 90; Limoncito, 86; Cofradia, 86; Juntas, 82; Corcobado, 84; Piedras Amarillas, 64; Ojos de Agua, Joyita, Ahuacate, Coloma, Agua Escondida, Otates, Tolima, Rancho de Arriba, Puerta, Higueras, Rancho Viejo, Tinaja, Trigo, Palos Blancos, Tempizque, Cuates, San Ignacio, Agua Caliente, Santa Rosa, y Lima; the following ranches were only populated during the rain season by one or more families in order to work their farms: Nacuhil, Huisache, Mineral de San Carlos, Limones, Maestranzas, Peon, Comingalo and Loma Larga.

According to the 1940 census, the following ranches were part of Juchitlan: Aguacaliente, with 24 inhabitants; Aguacate de Abajo, 15; Aguacate de Arriba, 147; Agua Escondida, 4; El Amole, 12; Barranca de Flores, 16; Hacienda de Camchines, 102; La Candelaria, 73, El Ceron, 5; Cofradia de Abajo, 102; Cofradia de Arriba, 47; Cofradia de Jalpa, 7; El Colomo, 11;

Comingalo, 5; Congregacion de los Corrales, 345; Dos Llanos, 9; Los Encinos, 7; Gargantillo, 6; Congregacion de los Guajes, 952; Las Higueras, 3, Huisache, 7, Joachin, 18; Las Juntas, 44; La Laja, 16; Lima, 32; Limoncito, 24; Los Llanitos, 15; Llano, 29; Mastranzo, 23; Mezcalera, 14; Molino, 65; Ojos de Agua, 17; La Palma, 9; Piedras Amarillas, 8, Platanar, 6; Pozol, 31; Ranchito de Arriba, 21; Rancho Viejo, 75; Hacienda de Santa Maria, 99; Tamazula, 49; and La Tinaja with 110 inhabitants. On this date the following ranches were unoccupied: El Aguaje, Algodonal, Amachuil, La Bolsa, La Candelaria, El Cocobado, Divisadero, La Estancia, Ojo de Agua, Otates, Pandito, Paso Hondo, El Patilon, Placeta, Presa Caida, Real, Santa Rosa and Tolima.

2.

**There's A Place By Cesar Cruz**

There's A Place  
Dedicated to Juchitlan, Jalisco, Mexico

There's a place  
where a roosters crow  
serves as local alarm clock  
education comes while  
milking an overprotective cow  
who'll strike you  
if you approach her child

There's a place  
where Catholic saints come alive  
and the holy ghost gives  
Grandma's arthritis  
entire days off

There's a place  
where grandpa  
works another man's land  
and still smiles after 16-hour days

There's a place  
on an unpaved road called memory  
where having "nothing"  
becomes a blessing.

And in that place  
callous hands salt tortillas  
and Holy Ghost believers crawl  
adorned with crowns full of thorns

somewhere in that place  
a man forgets INS 'migra' raids  
television's hypnotic rays  
and the constant spit in the face  
for being broke and uneducated

That place  
where roosters crow  
cows protect their young  
and hope grows faster than weeds  
I once called home.

### **3. Devotion to a Miracle: Pilgrimage to Our Lady of Talpa**

“El Pocito: Testimonio de la Renovacion de Nuestra Senora de Talpa”

Pbro. Agustin Falcon Ocampo

Pbro. Manuel Carillo Duenas

Approved by the Bishop of Tepic: Alfonso H. Robles

#### **Origin of *El Pocito***

To remember is to live. It is appropriate for human beings to preserve the memory of a loved one and if it is not possible to have a loved one physically present we should comfort ourselves with something that will require us to remember them.

The memories of the loved ones awaken different emotions such as happiness, sadness, pain, nostalgia, devotion, etc. Then the memories are for us, good or bad. Speaking of this, the story of *El Pocito* that we will speak of, we can be sure that it is not a simple memory of a simple event.

We are referring to El Pozo that was destined to be the tomb of an effigy that resulted being famous for her miracles in favor of many Christians.

It is the miracle of the renovation of the sacred image of Our Lady of the Rosary of Talpa, which gave origin to El Pocito. September 18, 1644, when the priest of Guachinango was in Talpa celebrating the festivities of the patron saint, he observed that an effigy of our Lady of the Rosary, that was brought to Talpa in 1585 by a priest named Manuel de San Martin of the province of Michoacan, hung by the altar of the humble and only chapel that the town had.

It was a simple and humble chapel made by the indigenous of the pueblo, with walls of tree trunks, plastered with mud, and consisting of a grass roof that was common to this area at that time.

Naturally, the insects and bugs and other small animals that lived in the chapel made out of this effigy their food. It deteriorated to the point where it did not have a human form. For this, it was not good that it remain on the altar for public viewing, it was not worthy of religious praise.

The mentioned priest of Talpa, seeing how deteriorated the effigy was, called the choir leader of the church named Francisco Miguel and his daughter, an indigenous man named Maria Tenanchi. He explained the reason for calling them, so that they could bury the sacred effigy. And he ordered they dig a hole in the courtyard to the side of the altar and then to wrap the effigy along with other images de Jesus Christ and other saints that were also in deteriorating conditions. He ordered them to be buried in the hole that was dug and that they be covered with dirt so that there would be no sign of that burial.

In the town of Tlallipan, after having a breakfast of corn and milk, the choirmaster ordered his daughter along with her companions to go the chapel to carry through the orders that the priest Rubio Felix had given them a day before.

The natives prepared with much happiness to complete these orders. They prepared with jugs of river water that passed very near the chapel. They also had brooms and dust fans because they were going to do a general cleaning of the chapel.

They also gathered a tool (indigenous instrument that consists of an iron point with a wood handle and is used also to plant corn in the hilly fields) with which they would dig the hole were they were to bury the sacred effigy.

The first thing they did was to dig the hole in the courtyard, where the priest had ordered them to place the destroyed effigy. The Indian friends of Maria Tenanchi swept with enthusiasm the sacred chapel. Meanwhile, Maria Tenanchi went to the altar to wrap in old table clothes the effigy she had to bury. To her surprise, a miracle happened when she extended her arm to pick

up this sculpture of the Queen of the heavens. Suddenly the image was filled with light in such a manner that she fell to her knees, unconscious at the feet of the heavenly effigy. The other Indians, seeing Maria on the floor, went to aid her and ask what happened. Maria Tenanchi replied: "Have you not seeing the image of the Virgen that was shooting the rays of light that put me in this state?" The Indians, frightened and scared, went running from the altar. They went to tell their families and the authorities. The hole that they had dug was left open in the courtyard in order to remember this event and as a testimonial as to what had happened on that memorable day.

The Indians of the locale, scared but filled with happiness with what was happening at their chapel, sent out a posse to tell the priest Rubio Felix that was at the time in the neighboring town of Mascota, that was located in what is now know as the hacienda del Ataxo.

The priest had a grand surprise and to give testimonial to what had occurred he organized a committee that included a Notary and other distinguished persons of the place.

The priest then returned to Talpa Monday September 22, 1644. Upon return to Talpa, the first thing he did was go to the chapel where the miracle of the renovation had occurred. A fiesta was celebrated and was witness of the first miracles that the Lady of the Heavens worked, after the great miracle of renovation.

This event, and the devotion of everyone who lived in Tlallipan and the vicinity, occupied completely the attention that the hole, that was to be the burial site, was left in abandon. Shortly thereafter, some Indians tried to cover the hole because it was no longer necessary, but other Indians were opposed to covering it up because they said it should be left they way it is, as testimony to the miraculous renovation.

As the years passed, the Miraculous Virgin of Talpa gained popularity in the surrounding towns, her fame grew and also grew the number of pilgrimages that came to visit her every year.

This remained as such for many years. This humble chapel, of tree trunk walls and grass roof, which was taken care of by the people of Talpa with much care and veneration. In this manner, the hole was maintained because the pilgrims liked to visit it.

As the years passed, the devotion to the hole grew. Pilgrims liked to take dirt from the hole to take back to their homes as relics. They called it “Dirt of the Virgin of Talpa”

Since the pilgrims numbers very high, the hole grew until it grew to be of great size. The years passed by and the relic continued to be famous. The devotion continued to be celebrated at that sacred site. The Indians, with their primitive devotion, filled the altar everyday with flowers and fruits of the fields such as squash, green beans, cucumbers and corn, in order to honor the heavenly mother. The indigenous continued to bring wild flowers from the field such as lilies, and other wild flowers that were highly prized by them.

In this manner, the hole became a relic of religious character without stopping to be a memorial to the miracle of the Queen of the heavens.

In 1650, the pilgrimages gained in numbers on a daily basis and the festivities of the Virgin grew until it was insufficient space in the small chapel. From this grew the necessity to build another temple and another altar that would result worthy of the venerated image. The bishop of Guadalajara, Juan Ruiz Colmenero, had the privilege of initiating this new construction.

A vacant lot that was nearby was selected as the new site, on the south side of the basilica. On this site, it is the actual property of the family Agraz Valera.

The devotees and Indians dedicated much enthusiasm, devotion and love to the construction of the new building in such a manner that in just a few years it was completed. The new church



resulted wider; we could say double the size of the previous one. Doors and windows were placed but a grass roof was kept in place, the walls were made of adobe, which were inferior to the materials used in surrounding villages that were more advanced. On September 19, 1651, the image was moved to its new home, along with all other items. In this manner, in this new temple, the sixth anniversary of the glorious renovation was celebrated.

To cater to the Indians, benches made out of tree trunks were installed, the floor was still of dirt, yet slowly as the years passed it was updated. In 1782 the chapel was demolished, at which point new construction took place that resulted in its modern presence.

The original chapel, witness of the great miracle, was not demolished, it remained standing being protected by the Indians of the place, as well as the burial hole.

#### **Some notes on the dimensions of the burial hole.**

To think about the size of the burial hole in the modern sense, maybe it is interesting to those that get close to it ask, “How is it possible that to bury such small items in such a large bricked wall hole?” This is why in order to clear up any questions we will give a short explanation of this.

In its original form it was a small hole, made by women’s hands, completely by Maria Tenanchi and her companions, because only a small hole was needed. We can say that the original depth was around one meter.

The inhabitants of the town closely guarded this burial hole but this did not prevent pilgrims from taking the dirt when they visited the location, to take as souvenirs to their home for medicinal purposes. This is why the hole kept gaining in size. This made the Chaplain of the Sanctuary build a wall around the hole in order to prevent the hole from growing in size. Since

1651, it has been the size as it is known today, which dimensions are 1.43 meters of depth, 0.90 length, 0.79 meters width.

This wall did not prevent pilgrims from visiting the site with much faith. The years passed, 1641-1651, in which the effigy was put in her new temple. The inhabitants continued to closely guard it as never before.

### **The Burial Hole from 1855 Until the Revolution**

The years went by until November 9, 1855, when the chapel was demolished and the construction of a new temple was started, it was dedicated to San Jose.

The chapel was destroyed but the hole survived and continued to be visited by the pilgrims from the surrounding areas. In this time period, as pilgrims visited the burial hole, people started to enter the temple with the intention of destroying the place. During the chaos of the Revolution, people entered the temple under the pretext of paying tribute but instead engaged in sacrilegious acts.

This brought great disgust to the person in charge of attending to the maintenance of the temple. He decided to completely close down the temple until the situation normalized itself.

The hole was not covered with dirt but instead was covered up with wooden planks until the Revolution was over.

During this time many things happened in favor of this temple that served to instill in the believers great faith. This was proof that indeed the Virgin Mary was looking over them and also served to cement devotion to the relic of the Virgin.

The faith was supported despite the disgraces that the people of Talpa and the devoted pilgrims suffered. They suffered drought, hunger, disease outbreaks and earthquakes.

## **Resurrection of the Faith and Devotion to the Burial Hole**

In 1970 the priest Don Antonio Corona Ramirez remodeled the temple consulting with people that were familiar with the history of the burial hole. He sent a plaque to be engraved with the following words: “On March 24<sup>th</sup> of this year, having finished the construction on the temple, the burial hole was re-discovered that, according to testimonials and documentation, was to be the burial site of the effigy of Our Lady of the Rosary of Talpa on September 19, 1644.”- D. Antonio Corona Ramirez, Priest.

The remodeling of the temple was in the hands of the construction chief Catarino Torres Contreras, who was lucky enough to have found the burial hole. The hole was covered by pieces of wood and the task of confirming its authenticity ensued.

Father Corona built a steel cage around the hole and reopened the site to the public.

As news spread of the reopening people again began to renew the pilgrimage to this site. The faith of the local Christians grew as more and more pilgrims began to visit the site. In the remodeling, no fancy construction was made in order to keep the site as historically correct as possible. The burial hole continued to be a mystery because since its reopening since access was limited to its viewing, it was kept being behind closed doors.

October 9<sup>th</sup>, 1995 the temple suffered great damage due to an earthquake. Father Cecilio Estrada Sing had to embark on another remodeling of the temple and included an arch that allowed access to both the temple and the burial hole. In this manner, the public was able to have easier access to both. The actual priest, Agustin Falcon Ocampo, in 1997, had the idea to give life to the burial hole. It was determined that they would build a small temple around the hole that turned out to be in the liking of the people. A copy of the original effigy of the Virgin Mary of Talpa was made, to the liking of the people. This image was later know as “Our Lady

of the Hole” and a festival was planned to be celebrated on the 18<sup>th</sup> of September, a day before the day of the original miracle, so that the people can celebrate both. This new image is adorned with 18k gold and the complete remodeling of the new temple was finished in 2001.

The actual priest prepared, with great care and devotion, a celebration that was to be the first celebration of the new image. He prepared all aspect, material and spiritual, so that all would be, and was, a success.

**The following are the words of Father Falcon Ocompa describing the celebration:**

“It deserves special mention the construction of the new altar to the Virgin of the Burial Hole in the town church. We say that this deserves special attention because it is the fruit of 3.5 years of hard work of the people of Talpa, and the surrounding communities, that have taken importance the significance of this place to them, of the love of God and of the Virgin Mary, that was manifested in the miraculous renovation of the effigy of Our Lady of the Rosary, venerated by not only the locals but by people around the world. Venerated not only by the locals, but also by all the people that not only bring happiness to this town but also are the manner that this town supports itself. This great celebration, prepared with much care and anticipation, has its first celebration in 2000. In this festival that I have named “Parochial Community.”

The current temple was directly placed on the site of the previous indigenous teocalli.

“On the day of the celebration, the effigy was adorned with new clothes, this done by persons that have been elected beforehand of all religious groups of the area. This is done with great devotion and respect. Then a daylong prayer session is held in the rectory. At 8pm the effigy is presented to the town to be crowned Queen of the Parish. At 9pm, a great pilgrimage is undertaken in which all people of Talpa are on the streets with enthusiasm and devotion, feeling that this celebration is indeed their own. This is the festival of the miracle, the festival of history.

In this pilgrimage we find men, women, children, seniors and all schools with their marching bands, the men singing without being embarrassed, the women dressed as Maria Tenanchi and more than 100 couples with flowers that have helped organize the festival. The charros, taxidrivers, carpenters, butchers, hoteliers, restaurant owners, taco stand owners, construction workers and all other people participated in this celebration. The parade was long and tiring, all the temples of Talpa were visited to finish in the main temple. Despite the tiredness, there was no sadness since all wanted to manifest their love of the Virgin Mary and the patron saint San Jose.”

This is where the priest’s words end.

It is impossible to determine value of their act of happiness and devotion since all locals were left in awe at the devotion and love toward their town by outsiders.

The labor of the actual priest was hard and difficult, but since God blesses what is hard to achieve, we hope that the heavens continue to grace this site.

Prayer to Our Lady of the Burial Hole that is venerated in the temple of Talpa de Allende:

Loving Mother that one day  
You wanted to manifest your power and  
Your love to your children, when  
You were to be buried in this  
Hole that was to serve you as  
Tomb, renovating yourself in your  
Sacred Image to be  
The source of hope for those that suffer  
Support and strength of those that  
Suffer, by the great love  
That you have for your children and to all  
Mortals of earth.  
We come to ask for your maternal  
Protection. Now that our  
Heart suffers we have confidence in your  
Powerful intervention. Come to our aid  
And help us with your grace that we look for.  
We ask this in the name of the heart

Of your loved son and our heart, humble sinners.

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Note: This study was devoted to understanding the Mexican experience in the United States by analyzing images in film and performing interviews. Particular attention has been paid to Mexicans living in West Los Angeles. The Mexican Westside is a severely under-researched topic with minimal academic literature existing on the topic. As such, a comparative approach was taken in terms of referential material. The following represents materials that have impacted the conceptualization and the writing of this dissertation.

In regards to the oral history interviews for Chapter 5, the digital files are in my possession. I have personally transcribed all the interviews and translated the interviews from Spanish to English. Every participant was asked the same questions and allowed to expand wherever they felt necessary.

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