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Chicano Communities' Cinematic Representations

in Los Angeles From the 1980s to Today

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Abstract

With the film industry having long been rooted in Los Angeles both historically and economically, it is ironic that there have not been nearly as many quality representations of Chicanos in cinema. Despite having the largest population of Mexicans in the United States, Los Angeles and Hollywood are severely lacking in both quantity and quality concerning cinematic representations of Chicanos throughout history. And, although recent decades have seen greater popularity surrounding Latinos in media generally, any accompanying representation in film does not often carry meaningful and complex portrayals of this marginalized community of color. However, I study this gap in representation by analyzing several films from the 1980s to the present moment. I begin by looking at the decade of the 1980s and the films that made up the Hispanic Hollywood phenomenon that took place during that time. From there, I analyze four films of the 1990s that were often characterized by their portrayal of gangs on screen. Finally, I look at the 2000s up until the present to examine the emerging divide between mainstream and independent Chicano cinema. Ultimately, I investigate as to why this split in cinematic practice arises as well as the difference in representation between the mainstream and independent modes. In the end, I posit that independent cinema has significantly more accurate portrayals of Chicanos, whereas mainstream Chicano cinema often relies on misleading stereotypes about this community.

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Introduction

There is a future, as proposed in Ridley Scott's 1982 sci-fi film *Blade Runner*, where an open-door immigration policy of the past has ushered in a multicultural amalgamation of language, technological advancement, and urban squalor. Set in 2019, the film presents a version of Los Angeles that has been deteriorated by its multiethnic inhabitants and assaulted by a bio-engineered race of humanoids called Replicants who, having been used as slave labor, become self-aware and rebel. The significance here, as film studies scholar Charles Ramírez Berg points out in *Latino Images in Film: Stereotypes, Subversion, and Resistance*, is that "the teeming, multicultural makeup of the people in the streets is depicted as the dark side of the melting pot: chaos, filth, overcrowding, disorder." In other words, the acceptance of outsiders, of aliens, of these Replicants who can be read as Latino immigrants welcomed and milked for their services, has ruined Los Angeles (173).

It is through films such as this that I have been inspired to question the nexus of Chicano representation and how their various cinematic portrayals fit within the larger depiction of Los Angeles on the big screen. Being Chicana myself and born and raised in the San Fernando Valley, I am personally interested in exploring the relationship that exists between the film industry that is so historically and economically rooted in L.A. and the ever-increasing population of Latinos in this cultural space. I argue, ironically, that as this population steadily grows, authentic Hollywood representations of Latinos have dwindled in tow with rooted stereotypes reaching back to early cinema. Focusing on the time period of the 1980s to the present day, this thesis examines how cultural, economic, and historical trends of the past four decades present themselves through Chicano cinema and both reinforce and transcend preconceived notions of Chicanos in this sphere. Additionally, I claim that the emergence of two

distinct branches of Chicano cinema—that of a mainstream practice influenced by Hollywood dominant styles of filmmaking and a more independent tradition that diverges from conventional cinematic modes—lead to two opposing ways of dealing with representation over time. While mainstream Chicano cinema does eventually incorporate Chicano actors and filmmakers, it is the independent productions that convey more culturally and politically engaging representations of the Chicano identity.

To complicate and extend current scholarship on this topic, I also investigate how Los Angeles as a backdrop to these films supports a separate identity that may not be found in other films of the Chicano or Latino cinematic practice. According to the 2020 census, Los Angeles has the largest Mexican population in the United States and has long been a haven and hub for immigrants, natives, and newer generations of Chicanos. In this way, El Pueblo de Nuestra Señora la Reina de Los Ángeles has been a place of both pride and prejudice for its Chicano inhabitants as riots, protests, discriminatory laws, and a myriad of cultural movements have made their way through L.A.'s vendor-filled, Spanish-speaking neighborhoods and streets. Consequently, the City of Angels poses a unique identity for its Chicanos as the vision for a better life and new opportunities are supposed by the American dream in California. However, the existence of poverty, racism, and gang-related violence among other matters illustrates the simultaneous struggle that the Mexican population faces on a daily basis. But it is under these circumstances that I am interested in studying the diverse renditions of Los Angeles on screen and what they reveal about the Chicano identity and presence in this multicultural hub.

Of course, given this focus on Chicanos in the cinematic space, I would like to turn my attention to addressing what specifically I mean by using the term "Chicano." Once used as a slur to denigrate low-class Mexican-Americans or Mexican immigrants in the early twentieth

century, the Mexican-American civil rights movement of the 1960s and 1970s reclaimed the word to represent and empower this same population in the United States. For my purposes, I am choosing to utilize this term as a means of extending this empowerment to my research on Mexican-centered film in the U.S. However, many of the stereotypes present within Chicano cinema have roots and appear beyond just Chicano film. In this sense, I will refer to general "Latino" stereotypes that signify representations and depictions of people of Latin descent, whether they live in the United States, or Central or South America. My reasoning in using this term—even if I am solely examining Chicano media—finds bearing in the racist generalizations of the past that have conflated images of unique Latino identities into one sweeping conception. As a result, these stereotypes have come to represent all Latino identities in various films and television series, including the Chicano and Mexican portrayals that I will analyze in this paper.

In terms of gender, I use the terms "Chicano" and "Latino" as opposed to "Chicana/o" or "Latina/o" to refer to all genders within these ethnic groups. However, when necessitated by the specific content that I will be discussing, I may defer to using the terms "Chicana," "Chicanx," "Latina," and/or "Latinx" based on the filmic nature and practice of the film or show in question, and to make a distinction between Chicana and queer Chicanx media from other modes of Chicano cinema. To explain the rationale behind my choices, I'd like to quote Chon Noriega from his introduction to *Chicanos and Film* in that "Like many Chicana feminist critics, however, I use Chicano as a cultural and political self-designation vis-à-vis the dominant culture, but (I hope) avoid the implicit male emphasis usually given the term" (Noriega).

In regards to how I will refer to the dominant social population in the United States, I want to cite Charles Ramírez Berg once again as I agree with his stance on the topic and aim to utilize the same term myself:

> "White" is the oft-used term, but as much as possible I shy away from using it because doing so, in my mind at least, reifies crude and essentialist racial categories— white, black, brown, yellow. As Richard Dyer has so convincingly shown, the idea of an essential white category (and by implication any racial classification) is a convenient—and divisive—social construct. 10 I use the term 'Anglo' instead—not because it is any less problematic denotatively, but it seems to me to be less charged connotatively.

Thus, I will also participate in the usage of the term "Anglo" when referring to appearances of "white" representation, practices, and influences within and surrounding the films and series investigated here.

Additionally, before delving into the deeper historical context that foregrounds and contextualizes the decades following the 1980s, I'd like to situate the Chicano filmic tradition amidst what is termed "world cinema." Thomas Elsaesser in his book *European Cinema: Face to Face with Hollywood* defines world cinema as a nexus of "fusion and hybridity of national and international, ethnically specific and globally universal characteristics" in which there are three different types: first, second, and third (496). Traditionally, Hollywood has been referred to as "first" cinema as it encompasses a mode and style of filmmaking that is both commercial and mainstream. With Hollywood as this dominant category that promotes bourgeois philosophy and reproduces ideologies, Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino—Argentine filmmakers and pioneers of the Grupo Cine Liberación film movement—also delineated two alternatives in their manifesto "Towards a Third Cinema" in 1969. The first of these alternatives is that of "second" cinema which points to a European mode of auteurist filmmaking "inasmuch as it demanded that the film-maker be free to express himself in non-standard language and inasmuch as it was an

attempt at cultural decolonisation" (Getino and Solanas). The other alternative is specified as "third" cinema, a style that is known for its political and revolutionary themes with an agenda to criticize and demystify neocolonialism, capitalism, and the oppression of Latin Americans and other marginalized communities.

With these classifications in mind, I propose that Chicano cinema is two-fold in its position amongst world cinema. To begin with, Chicano cinema is a direct product of a movement centered in the United States even if its pride honors roots and origins from Mexico. On top of that, there have been various films that were produced or distributed by major Hollywood studios—namely *La Bamba* (Valdez, 1987), distributed by Columbia Pictures, and *Stand and Deliver* (Menéndez, 1988), produced and distributed by Warner Bros. As a result, Chicano-centered films made under the modes and systems of dominant Hollywood practices must fall under the division of "first" cinema. On the other hand, many Chicano films are produced by Chicano or Mexican filmmakers and independent companies that exist outside the realm of huge, commercial Hollywood studios and production companies. Thus, even if such films aren't made in Latin America, they may still adopt techniques and themes central to the "third" cinema classification. In fact, Chicano cinema will often attempt to provide a voice to its marginalized population via the presentation and education of the Chicano identity, life in the barrio, and successful and positive stories of Chicano characters, all while touching base on the sometimes brutal realities of Chicanos' everyday lives. Seeing this, it's also evident that there are certain films of the Chicano cinematic practice that challenge the dominant culture through its own advancement of a Chicano filmic aesthetic. Here, too, is where it becomes evident that there is a difference between mainstream modes of Chicano cinema and the independent branch, which would overlap with the classifications of a first and third world cinema, respectively.

It is at this point that I would like to now define specifically what Chicano cinema is as well as the criteria by which scholars determine what constitutes a Chicano film. Though the definition can be, at times, broad, scholars generally agree that Chicano cinematic practice entails films made by, for, and about Chicanos (Johansen 303). More specifically, however, Hispanic studies scholar Gary Keller identifies two key criteria that dictates whether or not a film is of the Chicano tradition or not: first, that Chicanos have control over the material being produced, and the second being that there is "authenticity or relevancy" present within the content and style of the film in question (Keller 208). Keller also expands on Chon Noriega's definitive elements of Chicano film in a way that I feel Henry Puente aptly lists in his article "US Latino Films (1990-1995): A Three-Tiered Marketplace":

> He identified the following characteristics: 1) It subverts Hollywood genres and formulas; 2) uses Spanish and English in innovative ways; 3) demonstrates innovative use ot music; 4) includes mise-en scene and montage to incorporate cultural elements; 5) deals with relevant Chicano issues at the expense of box office considerations; 6) shows willingness to employ Chicano talent and production personnel; 7) is designed for Chicano audiences; and 8) is produced in authentic settings (Keller 208-09). (Puente 51)

In this sense, and in conjunction with how I've situated Chicano cinema amidst the various categories of world cinema, Chicano cinema can be looked at as an alternative to mainstream Hollywood cinema based on these factors. Yet, I'd like to emphasize the function of authenticity in this filmic practice since there are films that, for the most part, fall under the umbrella of Chicano cinema despite the fact that the material set forth may not be judged authentic or accurate by my research. What I mean by this is that, as part of my overarching topic and question, I will make it a point in my analysis to find films that portray inaccuracies concerning

the Chicano identity even if the film itself is of the Chicano cinematic tradition. My purpose in doing so is to ascertain why exactly these misrepresentations are present in such media and how the trends and historical context of the time periods in which these films were produced lead to these kinds of portrayals.

With this prerogative in mind, it would make sense to ground what research I carry out here in the historical roots of Chicano cinema, and even the broader class of Latino film production that traces back to the inception of cinema itself. Latino voices have always existed in the world of film, whether that be on-screen as portrayed through racist stereotypes or behind the camera in positions that advanced the narrative of Latino empowerment in Hollywood. Since Latinos were often barred from the financial and production aspects, however, subsequent Latino images were forced to succumb to representations that did not accurately exemplify the diverse range of cultures and individuals of the Latino community. For instance, Raul Rosales Herrera explains in the 2013 book *Latinos and American Popular Culture* that "representations of Latinos were limited to stereotypical renderings in which Mexican nationals came to stand in for all Latinos" (Rosales Herrera 110). Such a practice presents an early dilemma in cinema where, already, Latinos were being misrepresented by generalized images that led audiences to believe that there was one common type of Latino. Another adjacent result stemming from the absence of Latino and Chicano voices in early Hollywood films was that depictions of these communities were starkly negative. Without any input from Chicanos and Latinos themselves, related characterizations appeared to be "hypersexualized, dumb, and violent" as they appeared throughout this early cinematic time period prior to the 1960s (Rosales Herrera 110).

In the years leading up to the advent of the sound film in the late 1920s, Latino cinema experienced its first boom due to what Berg theorizes as the "Latin lover craze" in which a

variety of films portrayed a masculine figure filled to the brim with primal and dangerous sexuality. Though this persona was often played by and owes much of its rendering to Italian-born actor Rudolph Valentino, the phenomenon fostered a market for other types of Latino depictions and offered Latinos a stepping stone into Hollywood productions. Yet, this surge in Latino cinema, albeit rife with harmful stereotypes, dwindled into the 1930s as sound film rose to prominence and Irish cinema underwent its own boom.

With the onset of sound films during the late 1920s, several complexities arose in concert with Latino cinema. Whereas the silent film allowed Latino actors to move easily between roles merely by switching their appearance or costumes, the sound film complicated matters in that these actors and actresses were now required to speak English clearly and without an accent. Those who couldn't conform to this new expectation were either forced into purely ethnic roles or lost hope of pursuing a career in Hollywood altogether. In addition to that, sound cinema "made it possible for other countries to produce their own films in their respective languages, therefore compromising Hollywood's global domination and endangering its financial profitability" which, in turn, prompted Hollywood to create its own departments and productions focused solely on foreign-language films (Rosales Herrera 110). Not to mention, Latin American countries had begun to protest and even ban Hollywood films since many of the resulting productions depicted Chicanos and other Latinos as the stereotypical villain. Adding insult to injury, the new practice of speaking in sound films made it so that the now apparent accents of Latino actors and actresses amplified already existing stereotypes, like the Latin lover. For Latinas, the term spitfire gained prominence as their accent became the most significant aspect of their performance with actresses like Lupe Velez relegated to sexualized, loud, and fast-speaking roles due to an emerging demand for this type of character.

Aside from the spitfire and Latin lover characters mentioned above, there exist a myriad of other stereotyped representations of Latinos and Chicanos in film. Though many scholars have assigned different labels to the same general characteristics, I will look to Berg's six types which serve as "a condensation of Keller's eleven types down to three male-female stereotype couples" and include el bandido, the harlot, the male buffoon, the female clown, the aforementioned Latin lover, and the dark lady (Berg 282). Additionally, although these types emerged and appeared frequently in films leading up to the early 1930s, variations of these portrayals continued to live on in films following that era. In fact, when I examine the rising prominence of gang films from the 1960s onward, we will see how el bandido was reincarnated into the modern-day gangster.

In the past, however, el bandido came to represent a typical Mexican bandit and villain that was dirty, cruel, irrational, incapable of forming intelligent thoughts, inept at speaking English, and wildly violent and dangerous. In direct correspondence with this figure is the harlot, whose prevalence also stems from the American Western. This sensual and hot-tempered incarnation of the Chicana lacks deeper motivation for her passions and is often only centered around the white male she lusts after. An alternative pairing to these explosive depictions is that of the comedic couple: the male buffoon who provides a childish and bumbling form of humorous relief and the female clown who matches the buffoon's simplemindedness with her frivolity and exoticism meant to garner laughs from the audience. It is under this latter category that the Mexican Spitfire falls, as her ditzy and bold personality opens the doors to ridicule from other characters and the viewers themselves. Finally, as the counterpart to the Latin lover persona I discussed earlier stands the dark lady—resolute and cool in her purity and inscrutability which makes her "erotically appealing precisely because of these characteristics" (Berg 76). She is

fetishized for her virginal status and distanced from the protagonist so as to attract his attention away from her often rowdy and sexualized Anglo female equivalent.

It is these stereotypes that were so present throughout the 1930s, a decade where Latino audiences were beginning to be recognized as a viable source of economic spectatorship by Hollywood. With the help of Franklin D. Roosevelt's Good Neighbor Policy in 1933, United States industries, including that of film, began to reach out and utilize Latin American markets as a means of establishing positive ties and influence in this region. More films were tailored to Latino audiences, though Hollywood's reliance on stereotypical roles like the ones described above seeped into such productions, illustrating the American film industry's ignorance of Latin American cultures, customs, and realities.

Outside the world of film, Los Angeles saw the emergence of a form of Chicano subculture throughout the 1930s and 1940s with individuals known as "pachucos" characterized by their zoot suit style. Known for their greased-back hair, fedoras, long suit jackets, and baggy, high-waisted trousers, these pachucos served as this era's equivalent of the modern-day cholo or gangbanger. As a deviation in social conformity to that of Anglo modes of style and dress, Chicano youth used their zoot suited-look to represent their cultural pride. However, the combination of racist undertones and their distinct style of dressing made pachucos a target for harassment and discrimination, eventually culminating in what became known as the "Zoot Suit Riots." As Richard Griswold del Castillo describes in his 2000 article "The Los Angeles "Zoot Suit Riots" Revisited: Mexican and Latin American Perspectives," the zoot suit riots took place in June of 1943 when "hundreds of U.S. military personnel went on a two-week rampage in Los Angeles, California, attacking scores of Mexican American youth who wore the Zoot Suit style of dress" (367). As a prominent historical instance of racially-fuelled discrimination and assault

towards the Mexican community in Los Angeles, this gruesome event stood out as inspiration for the Chicano movement that came later in the 1960s.

Arriving at the 1940s, World War II further increased Hollywood's focus on Latin American markets as those in Europe became inaccessible. Resulting from this, Latino Hollywood is said to have experienced its "Golden Age" during the 1940s and early 1950s as Latino talent became more and more popular and recognizable—albeit within the restraints of the misrepresentations that continued to plague filmic depictions of Latinos. Hispanic names either flourished based on the conventional roles they played and were forced into time and time again or dissolved into an Americanized version if the actor or actress in question managed to abandon their Latin accent and other such ethnic markers. Yet, increased visibility did not equate to accurate representation as Latinos were still largely kept separate from any sort of swaying power in the production of Hollywood cinematic images. In this way, stereotypes continued to be perpetuated by the dominant Anglo culture in American cinema and became even more ingrained in the faulty interpretation of Latino culture.

In the post-war period preceding the 1960s, the United States turned its attention to European markets once more, partly resulting in the subsidence of the Latino Golden Age in Hollywood. Furthermore, American media began to reflect on rising social tensions and ills following the second World War, as issues pertaining to the status and treatment of African Americans, Native Americans, women, and other such marginalized groups prejudiced by dominant Anglo society were finally being exposed through simmering unrest. Though Latinos and Chicanos both would come to find this genre more prevalent in their own cinematic practices in the years following the 1950s, the social problem film did start to take root as the realities faced in a multicultural American society were finally being depicted by Hollywood productions.

Films like *Bordertown* (Mayo, 1935) and *Salt of the Earth* (Biberman, 1954) are early examples of the way in which Hollywood treated social melodramas with a focus on Latinos, yet other such films at the time boomed with narrative portrayals of racism, inequality, oppression, and other troubles present in the United States.

The Chicano movement of the 1960s, however, sought to counter such misrepresentations through the advancement of cultural nationalism and empowerment. Though this movement intended to overcome inequalities relating to workers' rights, voting, and other such civil issues, a burgeoning Chicano film culture also emerged alongside this crusade as Chicanos advocated for more positive and accurate alternatives to the harmful stereotypes portrayed on the big screen. The Chicano Power movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s was thus determined to strengthen and promote a proud Chicano identity in all areas of life, whether that be within the political realm or through American social and cultural practices. In this sense, film as a medium was utilized to facilitate ideas pertaining to the liberation and empowerment of a unified Chicano identity. In fact, Berg delineates three distinct waves in the history of Chicano cinema, the first of which appeared around this time with a radical focus on recording the events of el movimento through the documentary format:

> The First Wave (roughly from 1969 to 1976, or from El Teatro Campesino's Yo Soy Joaquín to Luis Valdez's El Corrido) was the radical documentary era. The cinematic expression of a cultural nationalist movement, it was politically contestational and formally oppositional. Recognizing that the Latino experience had been denigrated and stereotyped by the dominant cinema and that Latino talent was largely ignored by the industry, the First Wave turned its back on Hollywood and found inspiration in revolutionary Cuban documentaries. Fashioning itself as a kind of Third World Cinema in

> the First World, its audience was La Raza, the Mexican Americans in the United States, and its goals were to: (a) decolonialize consciousness, (b) educate us Chicanos about our heritage, (c) give voice to our silenced history, (d) instill ethnic pride by celebrating our culture, (e) mold a self-determined identity, (f) expose the conditions of our oppression, and (g) mobilize La Raza politically, socially, and culturally. (Berg 185-186)

Exemplified here as well is the duality of Chicano cinematic practice in that its earliest form was inspired by and stood alongside the oppositional spirit of third world cinema, while the environment it grew out of was decidedly first world. Additionally, Berg goes on to highlight that, following the 1960s and 1970s, Chicano cinema gravitated towards more mainstream practices, further positioning Chicano film as a first world cinematic form despite its previously resistant politics and ideology. This development is exactly what I center my attention on throughout my research as I investigate whether "true" Chicano cinema can still exist in a mainstream Hollywood environment. Though films of the 1980s and 1990s may support the idea that this is potentially attainable, a more clear-cut division ultimately emerges throughout the 2000s onward that demonstrates how mainstream cinematic representations of Chicanos are not as politically and culturally oriented as independent films.

This shift towards a mainstream mode of filmmaking also coincided with a rise in the number of gang films being produced. Whereas the social problem films of before included just a few films about the realities of Latinos, the 1960s saw the gang film as a subtype that now centered predominantly around Latinos and Chicanos in positions of violence. This genre trend owes much of its existence to the loosening of censorship and social values which subsequently led to more forward and striking depictions of graphic violence and sex. Combined with other aspects like increased urban violence and "fear of the alien," the gang film invited the ongoing

portrayal of Latinos in fiendish, degenerate roles that continued to perpetuate wrongful notions concerning Chicano life and community (Keller 161). So, while the Chicano nationalist movement actively attempted to dismantle media stereotypes and reclaim a Mexican-American identity through film and other methods, the lean towards mainstream Hollywood production over the years following the height of this movement actually worked to frustrate this aim.

Still, there were certain factors and developments throughout the 1960s and 70s that contributed to a form of cinema made by and for Chicanos. With its own growing cinematic practice, the Chicano community sought opportunities for self-determination and found openings within an increasingly globalized film industry. Filmmakers who would come to define Chicano cinema in later decades, particularly during the Hispanic Hollywood phenomenon of the 1980s, gathered experience and training in the world of film production. This rising generation of Chicano writers, producers, and directors would be part of the effort bringing bold Chicano voices and stories to the mainstream as they entered Hollywood and adopted its customs. Besides that, the Chicano population within the United States began to increase significantly which resulted in an appreciation for Chicano audiences and their power as theater-going consumers. Such recognition prompted a sensitivity and regard for Chicano images and filmic portrayals as their culture received heightened importance in Hollywood narratives and feature films for national audiences (Keller 151).

Various elements attached to the second wave of Chicano cinema, which spans from 1977 to the early 2000s, paved the way for a more legitimized, mainstream film practice in which a larger number of spectators actively participated in the production and consumption of Chicano-centered film. One of these factors relates to the increase in institutional funding from mainstream sources like PBS and the American Film Institute (Berg 186). With the help of such

institutions, Chicano cinema's second wave came to be characterized by feature-length films that marked a departure from the radical and revolutionary films that defined the previous wave. Instead of making films that were oppositional in their form and politics, films of the second wave tended to gravitate towards more digestible modes of filmmaking for audiences of all kinds. Of course, films that were made to appease such audiences suffered from less pointed critique and commentary that advanced a Chicano sense of being in favor of widely known and accepted stereotypes.

Not surprisingly, the 1980s saw the rise of the Hispanic Hollywood phenomenon in large part because of the factors and preconditions mentioned above. The following chapter, "The Hispanic Hollywood Phenomenon of the 1980s," will go in depth about the trends set forth during this decade as well as the most prominent themes that appeared throughout the films that belonged to this grouping. In analyzing the films *Zoot Suit* (Valdez, 1981), *El Norte* (Nava, 1983), *La Bamba*, *Born in East L.A.* (Marin, 1987), and *Stand and Deliver*, I plan to illustrate how each film demonstrates the theme of generating family through community and/or the reality of the American Dream.

Next, I will concentrate on the subsequent Latino Boom of the 1990s and four films that exemplify the connection between family and gang life in the barrio as well as the historical role of the Chicana and her modern-day incarnations: *American Me* (Olmos, 1992), *Blood In Blood Out* (Hackford, 1993), *Mi Vida Loca* (Anders, 1993), and *Mi Familia* (Nava, 1995).

My last chapter will chart Chicano cinematic progress from the 2000s to the present day using a combination of both films and television shows of that time period. In my examination of such media as *Tortilla Soup* (Ripoll, 2001), *Real Women Have Curves* (Cardoso, 2002), *Spanglish* (Brooks, 2004), *Walkout* (Olmos, 2006), *A Better Life* (Weitz, 2011), *Mosquita y Mari*

(Guerrero, 2012), *Vida* (2018), and *Gentefied* (2020), I intend to elucidate themes relating to the depiction of Chicano pride and identity in contemporary times, generational struggles, and the usage of stereotypes despite the rapid growth of a powerful Chicano audience. Although my main focus throughout will have focused solely on film, my purpose in incorporating television is to round out my research since there seems to be a lack of Chicano film set in Los Angeles in recent years. This development also mirrors my overarching claim that the lack of a strong, political, and cultural Chicano voice in mainstream cinema inspires the creation of a distinctly independent mode of Chicano film.

Though this thesis is built on the scholarly foundation laid by numerous works, I want to address those that most influenced my research and findings. In using these sources, I began to construct a framework for approaching the various films and television shows that populated my watchlist. Knowledge of common stereotypes, economic forces behind Hollywood production practices, in-depth analyses of particular pieces of media, and more granted me the wherewithal to advance towards a possible conclusion to my topic.

Starting chronologically with Carlos E. Cortes' article "Chicanas in Film: History of an Image" as published in T*he Bilingual Review/La Revista Bilingüe* in 1983, this work charts the cinematic progression of the Chicana image since the inception of film around the turn of the nineteenth century to the then-current state of on-screen Chicanas in the years following the 1970s. Split into four temporal categories: (1900-1930, 1930-1945, 1945-1960, and the 1970s onward), Cortes argues that the various global and economic trends that existed at each of these time periods contributed to the rise and fall of specific stereotypes, genres, and roles that the Chicana was expected to fulfill. Cortes also grapples with the inherent issues surrounding content analysis of Chicana depictions as well as the major idea that mediated images of Chicanas have

considerable power to "create, reinforce, weaken, or eradicate" such images perceived in the minds of viewers. And, although Cortes' article stands near the opening of a time period that I plan to focus on, he makes note of a crucial and burgeoning trend—and one that will be expanded on in the subsequent chapters—concerning the appearance of the Chicana in film: both her role in the contemporary urban gang film and/or as a "moral force" in other films centering around an Anglo character (Cortes, 104). In focusing on images of the Chicana, specifically, I use Cortes' work to connect with other scholarship that builds off the examination of these stereotypical representations in reference to contemporary Chicano films.

Scholarship of the 1990s begins with Chicano studies and media scholar Chon A. Noriega's "Chicano Cinema and the Horizon of Expectations: A Discursive Analysis of Film Reviews in the Mainstream, Alternative, and Hispanic Press, 1987-1988" and explores the Hispanic Hollywood phenomenon of the previous decade. Emerging around 1987-1988, a surge of Hispanic filmmakers broke into the mainstream with soon-to-be popular images of Chicano characters and stories. In concentrating on this time period and the four films that came to represent this trend—*La Bamba*, *Born in East L.A.*, *The Milagro Beanfield War* (Redford, 1988), and *Stand and Deliver*—Noriega grounds these films in the context of the film criticisms that they received. Brief focus on the discourse surrounding each of these films and the resulting production of meaning on audiences' part gives Noriega the chance to investigate whether interpretations regarding the authenticity of the Chicano portrayals were positive or not. Consequently, Noriega's research has informed my reading of the three films that fall within my category of study as *La Bamba*, *Born in East L.A.*, and *Stand and Deliver* all take place at least partly in Los Angeles while voicing Chicano stories and tales. It's important to note as well that

Noriega tends to focus more on press and audience reception as opposed to other scholarly works I discuss that pay more attention to analysis of the films themselves.

Building off of Noriega's research—and influential to my own—is Rosa Linda Fregoso's 1993 book *Bronze Screen: Chicana and Chicano Film Culture* which provides critiques and analyses of Chicano cinema throughout history. Similar to Cortes, Fregoso roots each of the films she discusses in a social and cultural context of common stereotypes that often inform Chicano filmic representation to investigate themes of cultural identity in *Zoot Suit* and *La Bamba*, subversive humor in *Born in East L.A.*, gendered subjectivity in *El Norte*, and the cinematic construction of border crossing in many of the films previously mentioned. Fregoso additionally offers criticism towards Edward James Olmos' 1992 film *American Me* as a brutally dystopic vision of East L.A. and the barrio in which its residents hopelessly spend their gang-ridden lives. Such in-depth analysis of the films I too plan to examine from scholars like Fregoso and Cortes in terms of their themes and representations guided me through my own individual understanding of Chicano cinematic portrayals from the 1980s into the early 1990s.

Gary D. Keller's *Hispanics and United States Film: An Overview Handbook* also greatly informed my knowledge of the history, trends, and representations from the inception of cinema to the moment in time that this book was published in 1993. From charting the general depiction of minorities since the advent of motion pictures to investigating both the types of films and characters that populated them, Keller lays a foundation for the cultural and historical context necessary to understand contemporary Chicano cinema from the 1980s to today. Moreover, his last two chapters, "Films Since 1960" and "The Emergence of U.S. Hispanic Films," specifically investigate the developments of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. For example, Keller discusses the gang film's close association to Hispanic personages beginning in the 1960s and how this genre

has grown considerably since with films like *Colors* (Hopper, 1988) and *Blood In Blood Out*. In conversation with Noriega, Keller also goes on to detail how the previously mentioned Hispanic Hollywood phenomenon came about due to conditions that precipitated its arrival during the 1960s and 1970s. Finally, Keller's delineation of the criteria needed for a film to be classified as Chicano cinema outlines a framework by which I have organized and selected the films I plan to consider here.

Seemingly combining all of the themes and topics prior discussed by foundational scholars such as Noriega and Keller, I refer to Charles Ramirez Berg's previously mentioned 2002 book *Latino Images in Film: Stereotypes, Subversion, Resistance* for its discussion of the practice of stereotyping in Chicano cinema and/or Hollywood portrayals of Chicanos. Specifically in relation to Chicanos, Berg lists the six main stereotypes that have proliferated Latino media since its inception: el bandido, the harlot, the male buffoon and its counterpart the female clown, the Latin lover, and the dark lady—some of which are corroborated by Cortes' look at the Chicana figure throughout cinematic history. Using these conventional classifications in my analysis of the films I intend to study, I hope to illustrate the authenticity and connotations of Chicano representations on-screen as a means of revealing broader, underlying trends from the 1980s to the present. Given the extensive findings in this book alone, I was also heavily influenced and informed by Berg's overview of three waves of Chicano cinema, as well as the phases of Chicano film theory and criticism that closely parallel these waves. Additionally, Berg focuses a copious amount of research on the social problem genre in Chicano film which will substantially characterize my findings on such films as *Mi Vida Loca* and *Walkout*.

In subsequent chapters, I intend to touch on a number of themes including the role of family—both biological and communal, the absence of the mother in Chicano familial

portrayals, and the negotiation between older and younger generations concerning practices, traditions, and values. Though the texts I've already discussed provide some insight to these topics, there are three standout texts that directly support my commentary: "Changing of the Guard: Pinche Pintas and 'Family'/Familia in Contemporary Chicano Film" by Scott L. Baugh from 2003, "All About My (Absent) Mother: Young Latina Aspirations" by Deborah Paredez from 2010, and "Mi Familia Rara: Why Paco Isn't Married" by Daniel Enrique Perez from 2009, respectively. More precisely, I will utilize these articles to help better inform my analysis and takeaways of the films *American Me*, *Mi Familia*, and *Real Women Have Curves*.

While much of the above scholarship centers on analyzing a variety of films, more recent scholarship like Henry Puentes' "US Latino Films (1990-1995): A Three-Tiered Marketplace" provides a historical examination of the economic forces at work that allowed for the production and distribution of Chicano films. Focusing on the first half of the 1990s, Puentes grapples with the effects that resulted from Hollywood industrial practices and how Chicano filmmaking responded to such developments and obstacles. For instance, Hollywood marketers realized the growing purchasing power of Latino audiences as this population expanded, but did not spend much time advertising Chicano or Latino films despite this. Viewing this development from both a film analysis and socio-cultural lens, Raul Rosales Herrera's article "Latino Representations in Film: From the Latin Lover to the Latin Boom" similarly notes the historical and cultural trends that appeared throughout Latino cinema from its early days to the present. In referencing the "latino boom" of the 1990s, or how "the significant U.S. Latino presence coalesced with the explosion and increased popularity of Latin culture nationwide," Rosales Herrera touches on the complexity of modern Latino portrayals on-screen as the Latino experience in the U.S. has also developed over the past few decades (Rosales Herrera 107).

Drawing on all of these texts in tandem, I utilize the context mapped by these scholars to inform my understanding of the inner workings of Chicano cinematic production from the 1980s to the present moment. Since each text is often in conversation with one another and tends to draw on foundational scholars like Keller, Noriega, and Fregoso, my own research will contribute to this exchange by seemingly bridging the gap between decades of Chicano filmic tradition and production. Additionally, I use this scholarship to arrive at conclusions about the current state of Chicano cinema as well as patterns that have arisen over time. Namely, that there is a clear divergence between mainstream Hollywood cinema's take on Chicano film that emerges in opposition to an independent tradition that seeks to maintain cultural and political engagement with the Chicano identity.

Chapter One: The Hispanic Hollywood Phenomenon of the 1980s

Following the Chicano empowerment movement of the 1960s and 1970s, Hollywood seemed more inclined to recognize the growing viability of a population that continued to increase in large numbers into the 1980s. With a newfound embrace of Latino storylines, characters, and themes, studios and other such institutions realized the economic appeal Chicano and Latino films could have. Chicano viewers wanted to see strong representation of their community on the big screen and with a larger market gearing towards these depictions, Hollywood began to ever so slightly integrate productions that were made by, for, and about Chicanos. As a result, the Hispanic Hollywood phenomenon was born and marked by films such as *Zoot Suit*, *El Norte*, *La Bamba*, *Born in East L.A.*, and *Stand and Deliver* among others. It is these same films that I choose to focus on and analyze within this chapter as a means of discerning how the advent of a mainstream Hollywood practice affected Chicano filmic productions during this time and whether or not subsequent representations were portrayed either authentically or in a more harmful manner.

Alongside this Hispanic Hollywood sensation was the onset of Chicano cinema's third wave which, as theorized by Charles Ramirez Berg, extends at least to the early 2000s (Berg 187). Here, mainstream Hollywood formulas become, in large part, essential to the production of Chicano films and any political message or themes are buried within rather than remaining accessible on the surface of the film. As a result, the characters present in these films are often represented in stereotypical ways that mirror prior Latino cinematic portrayals of the past. With the support of its funding, Chicano films of this period ultimately succumbed to technically inauthentic depictions traditional of Hollywood modes of filmmaking as the directors, writers, and producers had been forced to relinquish some measure of control over their creative means.

Take Luis Valdez's *La Bamba*, for instance—though the film puts forth a strong Chicano character with a narrative that captivated Latino audiences with its themes and air of authenticity, Valdez's collaboration with Columbia Pictures and New Visions (Taylor Hackford's production company) managed to temper the production with an assimilationist ideology despite the fact that Valdez maintained most of his artistic control (Noriega 7).

Still, *La Bamba* and other films of this period—namely, *Stand and Deliver* which benefited from Latino creative command up until its distribution by studio giant Warner Bros.—attempted, if nothing else, to advance and depict a relatable Chicano experience and voice. This, as I mentioned in my introduction, was thanks to a cadre of up-and-coming Chicano filmmakers such as who Luis Valdez and Gregory Nava, having been trained during the 1960s and 70s at the height of the first wave of Chicano cinema and amidst the Chicano civil rights movement, were now beginning to oversee their own productions. And, with opportunities to create Chicano-centered powerful films and images due to attention from a national audience, many of these filmmakers worked from within the Hollywood production system to present Chicano life, community, and culture the best they could. However, those who operated independently from large production studios and companies, like Gregory Nava and his PBS-funded film *El Norte*, seemed to find more notable adherence to preserving Chicano values and allowing political tones to present themselves naturally. Already, then, it becomes evident that there is a contrast between what mainstream and independent filmmakers set out to do as well as the creative control that they are granted depending on major studio oversight.

Nevertheless, an immense increase of the Latino population in the United States did help to spur Hollywood to produce more films revolving around Latino and Chicano narratives from the 1980s onward. In 1970, members of the Hispanic community made up 5%, or 9.6 million

people, of the U.S. population which continued to grow to 14.5 million in 1980, according to the Pew Research Center. Additionally, the National Library of Medicine reported in 1970 that, due to factors such as population growth in their countries of origin, political and economic turmoil, and lack of opportunity for work, there was a rise in the number of Latinos in the United States as immigration intensified. Aside from boosting stories concerning immigration—which I will no doubt touch on especially in regards to films like *El Norte* and *Born in East L.A.*—this rapid surge of the Latino community within the U.S. also attracted Hollywood profit motive. This upward trend in demographics meant that Latinos were now situated as their own viable market and positioned as consumers who could be appealed to with ethnic genres, cultural narratives, and empowering characters. Power in population also signified importance in the appreciation of a Latino culture which subsequently encouraged the production of an onslaught of Latino and Chicano films during this decade. And with a number of actors and actresses making a name for themselves around this time—Edward James Olmos, Jimmy Smits, and Rosie Pérez among others—combined with filmmakers like Luis Valdez and Moctesuma Esparza now in a place to control production methods, Hollywood saw the rise of major Latino and Chicano productions as a part of this so-called Hispanic Hollywood (Keller 151).

Despite this apparent forward progress, though, issues of representation still simmered below the surface of the media produced at this time. For starters, some productions caused controversy due to the actors that were hired to play and represent Chicanos. Lou Diamond Phillips, for instance, notably portrayed the famous Chicano rock 'n' roll artist Ritchie Valens in *La Bamba* as well as a young Chicano student in Ramón Menéndez's *Stand and Deliver* despite his Filipino and Cherokee ancestry (Noriega 4). Due to this, questions of misrepresentation arose from casting methods of this sort that were clearly based on physical characteristics shared

across multiple ethnicities and races. Thus, generalized depictions continued to surround films at this time and well into the future. Furthermore, the overall shift to mainstream practices presented drawbacks as some Chicano filmmakers were positioned as “selling out” to Hollywood modes and interests. Any resulting films tended to succumb to generic stereotypes that had been seen time and time again in the past and conformed to genres that garnered profit through sensational and typified portrayals of Chicanos.

In fact, there are a couple of genres in particular that were prominent throughout this decade. Building off of the greaser films of the 1930s where the stereotypical el bandido was often seen, the 1980s saw the rise of a similar genre in which these greasers transformed into the modern day gangbanger. Following the onset of social problem films in the 1950s and 1960s, this “gangxploitation” genre erupted with images of Chicanos as dangerous criminals succumbing to violence on the streets of Los Angeles (Fregoso xvii). Typically targeting Latino youth, gang films assumed certain ideas that misconstrued actual reasoning about how young Chicano kids wound up in gangs. Attached to this category of Chicano films was the incorporation of illegal drug trafficking with Latino drug lords running rampant. The 1988 film *Colors*, for example, acts as a combination of the gang and drug film in that it attempts to provide insight into the world of L.A. gangs and the race relations that operate within this environment.

Colors also provides an entry point into understanding how certain ethnicities are often pitted against each other in gang films, oftentimes portraying Latinos and African Americans at war with each other rather than united. Certainly, a broader trend encompasses films of the 1980s and 1990s that make various marginalized ethnic groups the targets of what is known as the “hood” film genre. Latinos, African Americans, and Italians especially were represented in such

a way that limited their portrayal to a world of crime, violence, and bloodshed. Films like *Scarface* (De Palma, 1983), *New Jack City* (Van Peebles, 1991), and *A Bronx Tale* (De Niro, 1993), for instance, relegate their ethnic protagonists to dangerous criminals capable of outrageous acts of violence. In this way, mainstream film illustrates a sort of cultural overlap that these marginalized ethnic groups experience in common. Additionally, these communities of color were finally beginning to see an increase in their representation onscreen, having fought for so long to see themselves in their very own productions. However, in utilizing stereotypical elements and figures within this genre, gang and hood films more often than not served as a way for Hollywood to portray the horrors of urban violence in an injurious sense and further advanced a fear of Latinos and Chicanos as dangerous outsiders.

As it happens, it is the matter of immigration that brings me to another prevalent genre featured during this time: films that dwelled on the indocumentado, or undocumented worker. Productions that populated this category often received poor treatment from Hollywood as major studios contended with a growing debate surrounding the topic of immigration. Films like *The Border* (Richardson, 1982) demonstrate the approach Hollywood studios took as these productions often broached the topic of immigration and border politics from the perspective of Anglo American characters. Yet, there are those independently-funded films that stand out due to their dynamic narratives and characters, as well as because of their emphasis and prioritization of the point of view of the immigrants themselves—namely, *El Norte*. Cheech Marín's *Born in East L.A.* also deals with the subject of immigration and crossing the border, albeit satirically, but does so by blending Chicano experience and perspective with Hollywood modes of filmmaking.

With these genres at play throughout this decade, I contend that there are two major themes that films of these categories revolve around: that of the importance of family through

community and that of the so-called American Dream. Regarding the first of these themes, I posit that the films I plan to focus on in this chapter all support the idea that a prominent aspect of the Chicano community in Los Angeles is their ability and willingness to support each other, even if its members aren't tied to each other familially. Oftentimes, the protagonists of these films will find themselves in some sort of struggle that is in some way alleviated by the help provided to them by other Chicanos. In addition to this, several films of this era promoted the idea that Chicanos could achieve a new, successful way of life "through a didactic portrayal that promoted Latinos as fully deserving of the American dream and in no way alien to it" (Rosales Herrera 121). The gang genre discussed earlier also fits into this idea as gangs can actually be taken to signify the ways in which Latinos and Chicanos create their own version of the American Dream. Within this genre stand portrayals of a found family, success, and the overcoming of hardships that serve as a pathway of sorts for Chicanos to reach the American Dream in their own way. *La Bamba* and *Stand and Deliver* are notable examples of this theme as the protagonists transcend the odds to bring about their own sense of victory in the face of an Anglo society. And, despite their tragic endings, *La Bamba* and *El Norte* demonstrate the hardships and realities that Latino immigrants or Chicanos face in their everyday experiences as they risk everything to realize their dreams. My approach in examining these films specifically is to demonstrate that these Chicano films show how one enters the fabric of the American Dream, all while trying to avoid celebrating whiteness and/or critiquing any sort of whiteness imposed by this ideal.

On the subject of family, it comes as no surprise that Chicano filmmakers attempt to incorporate this proclivity towards community in their own cinematic practice. In fact, all of the films I analyze in this chapter demonstrate the filmmaker's commitment to concentrating on the

influence that has on an individual's life and that support from the surrounding community can effectively lead to success for the Chicano character in question. However, it then becomes critical to understand this comparative significance that Chicanos place on the family in comparison to other cultures and ethnic groups, particularly Anglos. One method of reasoning points to the sociological term familism and its relation to Chicano and Latino culture as explained by Bron Ingoldsby in his 1991 article "The Latin American Family: Familism vs. Machismo":

> Familism places the family ahead of individual interests and development. It includes many responsibilities and obligations to immediate family members and other kin, including godparents. Extended family often live in close proximity to each other, with many often sharing the same dwelling. It is common for adult children to supplement their parent's income. In many ways, the hispanic family helps and supports its members to a degree far beyond that found in individualistically oriented anglo families. (Ingoldsby 57)

Here, it becomes evident that, because of its significance within the broader Chicano cultural landscape, Chicano cinema then tends to highlight family as a major component within its films. In the narratives I focus on in this chapter, the incorporation of family by Chicano filmmakers works to signal to audiences the significance that familial and communal support have on Chicano individuals living in the barrio. With family featured at the forefront of these films, characters put their families first and/or are aided in their paths to success based primarily on support from their community. For the protagonists in all five films discussed here, it is their families and communities that keep them rooted in their culture, grounded in their morals and ethics, and encouraged to follow their dreams even when times get tough. For Chicano cinema,

family is a means of staying connected to and rooted in this ethnic and cultural identity, working as a force of good to access the American Dream, overcome the struggles of immigration, and avoid succumbing to an Anglo sense of living and domination.

The Ideal of Chicanismo in Zoot Suit

In an effort to progress chronologically, I move to analyze the presence of family and community in Luis Valdez's 1981 film *Zoot Suit*, starring Daniel Valdez as 1940s Chicano gangster Henry Reyna and Edward James Olmos as El Pachuco, the mythical and idealized narrator who provides a model for the desired Chicano masculinity. Adapted from the stage production also written and directed by Luis Valdez, the musical—based on the real-life Sleepy Lagoon trial in 1942—tells the story of a group of Chicano youth who have been wrongfully charged for a murder amidst the backdrop of Los Angeles' racist Zoot Suit Riots that I discussed in the introduction. In focusing the narrative around Henry and his interactions with both the characters of the diegetic world and Olmos' El Pachuco, the film advances a Chicano nationalist outlook that empowers its Chicano characters while highlighting the racial injustice of the early 1940s. This film also exemplifies that manner in which film production in the 1980s was informed by historical moments of the past, with these riots informing the Chicano sense of pride that Valdez attempts to convey within this narrative. Here, Valdez is giving audiences a chance to think of that moment in time from a different perspective, thus framing the Anglo sailors as the villains rather than the Chicano youth who have typically been targeted historically. Furthermore, although the film does fall within the gang genre that was so prevalent in the 1980s, Luis Valdez worked to exercise his artistic control over the film in order to challenge typical representations of Chicanos up until that point in time.

Thus, in its subversion of Hollywood modes of production and its utilization of Chicano music and dance—two of the criteria that Puente sums up as the definitive elements of Chicano cinema—*Zoot Suit* proves itself to be a proper addition to the Chicano cinematic body (Puente 51). As a matter of fact, Valdez manages to reverse typical portrayals of Chicanos by offering an alternative representative identity of sorts. He uses cinematic techniques and the perspective of his Chicano characters to openly critique and counter purported events like the Sleepy Lagoon trial and the Zoot Suit riots. Rosa Linda Fregoso argues that in "representing the Chicano victims of hegemonic racism as historical agents, the film subverts "objective" (media and state) accounts of these events" which not only comments on the racist politics in action at this time, but also positions Chicanos as the targets rather than the stereotypical villains (24). Though I discuss this in more detail later, the scene in which the heroic El Pachuco is chased and assaulted by Anglo Navy officers precisely illustrates this reversal in perspective, thereby placing the blame on racist actions taken by Anglo men at the time of the riots. Because of this, Valdez marks a shift in Chicano filmic tradition that goes to subvert historic understandings of the attitudes of the Anglo American community towards Chicanos by pointing out the past racist and discriminatory attacks against the Chicano community in Los Angeles.

The film also goes to emphasize the Chicano point of view by featuring several dance and music numbers characteristic of a standard Hollywood musical. This nexus demonstrates Chicano cinema's shift toward mainstream practices, while also maintaining a cultural relation to a distinctly Chicano identity. In its incorporation of 1940s boogie woogie and swing genres, *Zoot Suit*'s soundtrack expertly relates the story to the time period in which it was set at the same time that it encapsulates Chicano customs through Latin musical influences and employment of the Spanish language. Indeed, the soundtrack incorporates music by Eduardo "Lalo" Guerrero, an

activist and guitarist also known as the "father of Chicano music."[1] It is these elements that advance the film's commitment to an authentic depiction of Chicano life and culture as "dance is central to the everyday life of Chicano and Chicana working-class culture" (Fregoso 26). That being said, Valdez's film situates itself as a distinctly Chicano production, even if it does technically fall under the genre of gang films which have a tendency to demonize the Latino community as a whole. I would argue that, in tandem with the alternative perspective that the film works to illustrate through historical critique and a subversion of stereotypes typically associated with gang films, this display of Chicano cultural practice and identity ultimately succeeds in portraying a historically accurate and thoughtful representation of Chicanos.

Zoot Suit accomplishes its reversal of stereotypes through its theme of community and its importance to the Chicano characters' lives. To fully understand how the film does this, however, it is crucial to first comprehend the figure of El Pachuco and what Edward James Olmos' mythical embodiment symbolizes for Henry Reyna and his 38th Street Gang. In Valdez's film, though, the character El Pachuco comes to stand for much more as he captures "essentially all of the identities of the revolutionary subjects envisioned by cultural nationalism" (Fregoso 36). As I briefly discussed in my introduction, zoot-suit wearing pachucos of the 1930s and 1940s actively challenged Anglo influence and norms through their distinct style that was both a way of expressing their cultural pride and was also in opposition to popular modes of dress of the time. The film directly addresses this idea mentioned by Fregoso when Anglo Navy officers chase El Pachuco, catch him, and subsequently tear his clothes from and beat his body during several other assaults against the Chicano community in the Zoot Suit Riots. Once the young Navy officers take off hooting and hollering in joy, Henry is left to discover El Pachuco curled up in fetal position, rid of any clothes barring a loincloth. In an almost dream-like manner, Henry goes

[1] See https://www.npr.org/2005/03/18/4541859/lalo-guerrero-father-of-chicano-music-dies-at-88

to help El Pachuco only for the body to turn and reveal that Henry's brother, Rudy, has taken the place of the man on the ground. In tears, Rudy explains how he had been beaten and stripped of his clothes all because Henry had left him alone. But when Henry moves to offer his help once more, El Pachuco returns to occupy the body on the ground, standing and stalking off defiantly with the loincloth still around his waist and red light bathing his muscular figure. This visual calls on that of the Aztec warrior, especially as rhythmic drumming and indigenous instrumental sounds enhance the scene. As a result, El Pachuco clearly cements himself as the symbolic Chicano warrior who rises despite adversity and triumphs over Anglo discrimination and violence.

Operating as an omniscient narrator who constantly intervenes in scenes to communicate with Henry, El Pachuco also acts as the embodiment of the kind of agency that Henry wishes he could assume himself. When Anglo woman and journalist Alice Bloomfield (Tyne Daly) offers to help Henry and other members of the 38th Street Gang clear their names from the crime they've been accused of, El Pachuco instructs Henry to act of his own autonomy and reject Bloomfield's aid. Therefore, El Pachuco also advocates for a sense of Chicano nationalism on behalf of Henry so that he can realize empowerment comes from within himself; he reimagines Chicano gang members as opposite of what they have typically been represented as: violent, sexually rampant, and appallingly subversive, traits commonly associated with the stereotype of el bandito (Fregoso 37). Instead, El Pachuco flips these depictions of gang members on their heads by halting scenes to keep Chicano characters from advancing narratives of violence and interjecting with his own commentary to defiantly correct historical events that have been skewed by both the media and Anglo institutions.

Given the symbolism of El Pachuco and his ability to present a Chicano gang member in a positive light, I conclude that the film supports and advances a strong Chicano nationalist identity with its theme of solidarity in community. A large part of the favorable qualities of the gang in *Zoot Suit* is that its members stick together to not only uphold one another, but to promote a shared cultural identity that collectively lifts them up as a unit. In fact, Rudy even tells Henry in the scene described above that had they stuck together during the riots, Rudy would not have been taken by the Anglo Navy officers and beaten. It is because he was separated from his gang, from his Chicano brothers, that he was cornered and attacked. Thus, in centering the masculinity of his characters as a means of uplifting one another, Luis Valdez highlights and focuses the audience's attention on the collective strength of a Chicano community (Fregoso 37). Centering the young Chicano characters' hopes on embodying the myth of El Pachuco and all of his honorable masculine qualities illustrates how this collective desire fosters a brotherhood founded on a shared culture. Doing so not only upends stereotypes that have negatively depicted Chicanos in the past, but also puts forward a true Chicano film that recognizes the plight of its community and showcases an authentic representation of Chicano men. Thus, Valdez's film stands as a prime example of the ways in which independent modes of cinema can thoughtfully facilitate political commentary that promotes a sense of Chicano pride and culture.

El Norte *and Immigrant Struggle*

As an ideal to inspire immigrants from all over the world to cross borders and seas, the American Dream stands as a prominent feature in several Chicano films, especially those set in Southern California and even Texas. This is in large part due to proximity to the U.S.-Mexico border which focuses many of the narratives seen within Chicano cinema on border politics and whether or not characters are able to realize success through the process of crossing the border.

Even beyond this decade in particular, films focusing on the border have long been and continue to offer the general movie-going audience depictions of immigrants, drug-trafficking, and relations between Americans and Mexicans—whether that representation is harmful or true. Films like *Touch of Evil* (Welles, 1958), *El Mariachi* (Rodriguez, 1992), *Traffic* (Soderbergh, 2000), *Babel* (Iñárritu, 2006), *Frontera* (Berry, 2014), *The Absence of Eden* (Perego, 2023), and more illustrate the expansion of the border film genre throughout the years, but with particular focus on the American Dream. Although these films are not discussed in detail here due to my personal attention to narratives set in Los Angeles, they still stand as pertinent examples of the various ways in which the American Dream has been addressed in wider cinema outside of strictly Chicano film.

Additionally, a survey conducted by political scientists Mara Cohen-Marks and Christopher Stout found that Latinos in particular believe in the eventual success promised by the American Dream:

> What would account for Latinos' optimism given their lower levels of socioeconomic status? The answer may lie in their large immigrant populations and a self-selection effect of immigrants who choose to migrate and stay in the United States. Many Latino immigrants who settle in to the United States do so because they believe that the United States provides better social, economic, and political opportunities than their home country (Wampler et al., 2009). In effect, those immigrants who stay permanently and those who leave may be voting with their feet, rendering their verdicts regarding their opportunities in the United States (Wampler et al., 2009). (Cohen-Marks and Stout 828)

Given this optimism as distinct from other ethnic groups, it is not surprising that a myriad of Chicano films incorporate themes centered around the American Dream into their narratives.

There also seems to be a fair bit of flexibility concerning the approaches filmmakers take in relation to this ideal. There are those success stories, *La Bamba* and *Stand and Deliver* for example, that see the protagonists achieve social mobility through the course of the film. However, other films, like Gregory Nava's *El Norte*, take a more tragic approach to the pursuit of the American Dream in that the characters do not always reign triumphant in their quest for personal fulfillment, freedom, and mobility. In opposition to success stories like the two mentioned previously, *El Norte* instead works to present an alternative perspective on the plight of Latino immigrants while evoking themes of family through community and the pursuit of the American Dream.

Before progressing with my analysis of the film, I would like to justify my decision to include *El Norte* in my examination of Chicano films as the narrative does happen to track the journey of two indigenous Guatemalan siblings as opposed to characters of Mexican origin. For starters, the film was directed and co-written by Chicano filmmaker, Gregory Nava. Furthermore, Mexican actor and actress David Villalpando and Zaide Silvia Gutiérrez play brother and sister Enrique and Rosa Xuncax, respectively, as well as a myriad of other actors of Mexican ancestry. Furthermore, *El Norte* is considered by Gary Keller, who wrote the first academic exploration into Chicano cinema, to exemplify two major criteria that he sees as definitive of a Chicano film: "the deconstruction and subversion of Hollywood genres and formulas" and "the innovative use of Spanish and English (and sometimes indigenous languages)" (Keller 208). For Keller, *El Norte* "is not merely the alternative, but in fact the antithetical border immigration film" precisely because it adopts Chicano modes of cinematic practice to counter stereotypical depictions of Chicanos that exist within the Hollywood mainstream (208). Additionally, because Nava's film uses Spanish as its primary language and

even features indigenous peoples and their language, *El Norte* designates itself as a veritable Chicano film at its core. To this point, as well, it's perhaps important to recognize that many Guatemalans can trace their indigenous lineage back to the Mayans who used to inhabit that area of Central America, just as many Mexicans can do the same. As a result, I argue that *El Norte* qualifies itself as a Chicano film in the sense that the Mayan ancestry that characterizes many Mexicans and Guatemalans both transcend geopolitical borders and unites the people of both nations under one umbrella.

The film itself tracks these two siblings as they make their way from a small village in Guatemala, through Mexico, and finally to the bustling barrio of Los Angeles. As they escape political violence in their home country, Enrique and Rosa encounter a myriad of other dangers: a deceitful coyote (someone who smuggles migrants across the U.S.-Mexico border for a fee), a sewer pipe crawling with rats, and la migra (INS) among other perils. In featuring such threats to the siblings' wellbeing, *El Norte* "deals with the social condition of inequality" through its focus on the everyday lives of immigrants and the hardships they must contend with in order to survive (Fregoso 87). In doing so, the film also showcases the faulty ideal of the American Dream in that Enrique and Rosa will do practically anything to reach the United States, only to be bogged down by a society that doesn't want them there and ultimately leads to their separation by means of Rosa's death. Despite being held at knifepoint and bitten by hordes of rats on their way to the States, Anglo American society makes life even harder for the siblings when la migra is constantly on their tail and Rosa receives limited medical attention due to her immigrant status.

In fact, *El Norte* deconstructs the American Dream by relating the horrors of the siblings' trek to audiences who may not have considered what immigrants must encounter in attempting to make a better life for themselves. Aside from the arduous journey Enrique and Rosa endure to

get to the States—they must leave their family behind so as not to be killed for their political associations, ride on extremely hot buses, disguise their identities and pretend to be Mexican, avoid being robbed and stabbed by the coyote who betrays them, and crawl through sewers while being bitten by rats—the two must also deal with a slew of other hardships once they actually accomplish their goal and arrive in L.A. Take, for instance, the siblings' unsavory living conditions once they make it to Los Angeles, or the constant raids by immigration officers intent on sending them back beyond the border all while Enrique and Rosa are simply trying to make ends meet with various jobs. As a result, the siblings' experiences with "abuse, betrayal, and isolation" when they journey to and arrive in the U.S. render the American Dream to be false, representing all immigrants' plights and sacrifices towards a reality that fades just as soon as it's achieved (Rosales Herrera 119).

Despite all of these obstacles and the fact that the American Dream remains unattainable for immigrants, Enrique and Rosa still stick together in the face of everything that is thrown their way. With their solid bond at the center of the film, the significance of family within Chicano cinema is once again illustrated as the siblings survive by relying on each other for strength, hope, and the willpower to go on. When the rats begin to gnaw at their limbs in the sewers, it is the company and presence of one another that spurs the Xuncax siblings onward, and when la migra comes for them while they're each away at work, it is their return to a common place that allows Enrique and Rosa to help each other regain the courage to brave their new surroundings again and again. Besides their own familial obligation to each other, Enrique and Rosa also receive help from kind-hearted characters like Don Ramón (Rodolfo Alexandre), a friend of their father's who helps them find a way to successfully cross the border, and Nacha (Lupe Ontiveros), a woman that Rosa meets who helps her find work in the States. The aid provided by

these characters and others throughout the film also demonstrate the importance of community as a theme since Enrique and Rosa would not have been able to go as far as they did without the help of others. Consequently, even though the siblings ultimately did not achieve the American Dream in that they failed to find success and happiness—rather, their journey resulted in Rosa's death as she succumbed to typhus from the infected rats and Enrique doesn't receive a green card because he turns down a job in Chicago—their eventual arrival in Los Angeles is buoyed by the support offered to them by others.

As a result of these themes and the cinematic modes of which Nava employs, *El Norte* cultivates an authentic, albeit tragic, representation of Latino immigrants' lives as they try to make a life for themselves in Los Angeles and the United States, in general. By charting Enrique and Rosa's journey from Guatemala, through Mexico, and into Southern California, the film "give[s] subject voice to immigrants from south of the border, recounting the obstacles they confront on a daily basis" (Fregoso 87). Doing so allows Nava to advance an alternative perspective to such films as *The Border* and *Borderline* (Freedman, 1980) that focus on border politics from the point of view of Anglo characters and narratives. Nava instead utilizes *El Norte* to reveal the inequalities inherent in the immigrant plight and show how the United States, long known to be a melting pot of various identities, cultures, and ethnicities, would rather see the death and despair of immigrant newcomers than provide them with the blessing to start a new life. As I've discussed throughout, Nava showcases the struggles of migrating into the United States with this film as a means of pointedly critiquing Anglo Americans' exclusion of immigrant outsiders. It's important to note here, too, that Nava is much more able to advance this critique throughout this film than he will be later with *Mi Familia*. Focusing on more digestible themes and portrayals of a multigenerational immigrant family, *Mi Familia* is a product of

creative limitations forced upon Nava by mainstream Hollywood companies. In opposition to that, *El Norte* stands as a purely independent film production that allowed for an immigrant story of this nature to be told in a realistic and almost brutal manner.

La Bamba*'s Shift Towards the Mainstream*

The 1980s also saw a shift towards the mainstream as Luis Valdez worked with Taylor Hackford's New Visions production company and Columbia Pictures distribution to produce *La Bamba*—a biopic about Chicano rock 'n' roll star Ritchie Valens. Similarly sporting a tragic ending with similar themes of the American Dream and strong family ties, this film stands in juxtaposition to *El Norte* in that Valdez wasn't able to assert as much creative control compared to his previous film, *Zoot Suit*. Set in the 1950s with the backdrop of the San Fernando Valley, the film charts Valens' rise to fame, his death by plane crash, and the cultural and spiritual relations he had with himself and those surrounding him. Despite his death, *La Bamba* incorporates an uplifting take contrary to *El Norte*'s portrayal of the American Dream as Valens ultimately does achieve celebrity status—albeit by masking his Chicano identity with the stage name "Valens" as opposed to his more ethnic sounding and real last name, Valenzuela. In highlighting this true story, Valdez does essentially promote an assimilationist ideology due to the fact that Valens must hide his roots in order to become a famed figure. In changing his name and adhering to Anglo styles of popular music, the film demonstrates that the only way to achieve success is to change one's identity and tastes. As I referenced earlier, other issues of representation present themselves, as well, since the Mexican-American Valens is portrayed by Lou Diamond Phillips—an actor of Filipino and Cherokee descent—in the film. Thus, there are traces of the mainstream influence of Hollywood production and distribution companies that surface in misrepresentations of this kind.

Nonetheless, *La Bamba* still qualifies as a Chicano film given that it checks off at least two of Keller's aforementioned criteria. For starters, Valdez demonstrates "the innovative use of Spanish and English (and sometimes indigenous languages)" in that he complicates Ritchie's use of Spanish throughout the film (Keller 208). In fact, despite his Chicano identity, Ritchie doesn't speak Spanish and only does so when he adapts a traditional Mexican folk song into a rock 'n' roll hit. When Spanish is used outside of the titular song of "La Bamba," the audience only hears it from Ritchie's mom, Concepcion or Connie Valenzuela (Rosanna DeSoto), or brother, Robert "Bob" Morales (Esai Morales). And, even then, Valdez weaves together Spanish and English so that select Spanish words pop up throughout (e.g. "mijo" or "carnalito"). It is important to note here that Ritchie's limited use of Spanish also supports the idea that success in the United States is only obtained through the adoption of the English language. While Connie and Bob speak Spanish more frequently, Ritchie does not and is the sole character to become famous. *La Bamba* also fulfills Keller's specification that Chicano films exhibit "the innovative use of Chicano music" and "diverse styles to express both Chicano culture and cultural conflict with Anglo culture" (Keller 209). Valdez expertly achieves this through the film's exploration of Ritchie's American identity with that of his Mexican one. It is his trip south of the border to Tijuana with Bob that finally merges the two when Ritchie hears the traditional rendition of "La Bamba" (as performed by Chicano rock group Los Lobos in the film). Following this and his subsequent spiritual awakening with a local curandero—a Mexican healer— Ritchie unifies his Mexican-American identity, thus illustrating the significance of Chicano music within the film.

In addressing the first of its themes, I argue that *La Bamba* presents the American Dream as a possibility to be attained through the denial of one's Chicano roots in favor of an Anglicized identity. Differing from *El Norte* in that the American Dream may actually be achieved, Valdez

offers up an assimilationist ideology in his portrayal of Ritchie Valens' rise to celebrity. Exemplifying more mainstream modes of production in line with Hollywood commercial cinema, Valdez shifts from a stark cultural nationalist approach to one that promotes the idea that "social mobility is barred for Chicanes who, like Bob, have resisted incorporation into dominant culture, for those who have retained their ethnic and cultural beliefs and values, their 'Chicanismo'" (Fregoso 46). Therefore, those who deny their cultural roots and identity, as Ritchie does when he assumes the faux surname Valens, are given the opportunity to rise above their station and create a path to success. On the other hand, characters like Bob—who also happens to embody the negative stereotypes that many Chicanos and Latinos have been represented as (i.e. violent, criminal, abusive) due his hostile treatment of his wife, tendency to start brawls, and reference to time spent in jail—never amount to that same level of prosperity. In this sense, the film emphasizes how mainstream practices complicate authentic portrayals of Chicanos: because Valdez's work utilised filmmaking methods that made *La Bamba* more easily digestible for a wider audience, efforts to represent an accurate and genuine Chicano representation faltered. So although *La Bamba* offers Chicano audiences a chance to take pride in a successful historical figure of their community, the film offers skewed depictions of Chicano figures due to the manner in which it tackles the American Dream.

Despite the binary between Ritchie and Bob's characters and the subsequent rivalry that results from their stark differences, the theme of family ultimately shines through as a crucial factor in Ritchie's life and ambitions. When asked by his record producer and manager Bob Keane (Joe Pantoliano) whether Ritchie's friends or his music is more important, Ritchie instead replies "my family." Therefore, with his family constantly at the forefront of his mind, Ritchie's Chicano family and community come to represent a large part of his identity—many of the

actions or decisions he makes in the film are spurred on with his family in mind or done for them. Furthermore, by factoring in scenes that simultaneously show the Chicano community's encouragement of Ritchie's musical career, Valdez proves that *La Bamba* is still, at its core, a Chicano film that features authentic elements in certain aspects. For instance, scenes throughout the film feature moments in which the Chicano community in San Fernando come together to support Ritchie's endeavors: several young kids in the neighborhood gather round to hear Ritchie play his guitar; Bob's biker friends help distribute Ritchie's posters; and Connie throws a party to welcome Ritchie home after he successfully plays to live audiences in Philadelphia and New York City. Given these instances and the devotion to which Connie, Bob and his girlfriend Rosie (Elizabeth Peña) help Ritchie accomplish his dream, I posit that Valdez's emphasis on family contributes to a more authentic portrayal of the Chicano identity as family and community have always been a major component of Chicanos' lives. Therefore, despite the presence of misrepresentation as a result of mainstream influence, Valdez was still able to exercise enough creative control to incorporate a distinctly Chicano sense of identity reminiscent of his prior independent filmmaking styles.

Humor as Subversion in Born in East L.A.

As a kind of middle ground between *La Bamba* as a mainstream film and *El Norte* as a politically-engaged independent film, another film that exemplifies both of the themes I've been discussing is Cheech Marin's 1987 *Born in East L.A.*—a satire that follows the protagonist Rudy (also played by Marin) as he is wrongly deported to Mexico and makes several attempts to get back to the States. As an indocumentado film itself, Marin's comedy deals heavily with themes of immigration and "renders a depiction of Chicano social reality through humor as opposed to the more serious political style" to showcase the hardships that immigrants face in their pursuit

of the American Dream (Fregoso 50). Thus, rather than use a strictly political approach to the subject matter at hand, Marin instead utilizes comedy to critique the institutional racism that plagues American governmental bodies like INS. Furthermore, the film qualifies itself as a Chicano film partly for this reason; Marin's use of humor subverts Hollywood cinematic modes and incorporates Chicano music and the Spanish language in original ways. In fact, the film's shift towards a "strategic use of 'universal themes' characterizes the manifestos of radical, alternative Chicano filmmakers of the 1970s," thereby demonstrating the inherent Chicanismo in Marin's work and the interplay between mainstream studio production and independent cinematic style (Noriega 9).

It seems that such an adherence to Chicano pride and representation actually manifests itself as a factor for the protagonist's own self-discovery and understanding of immigrants' search for the American Dream. Throughout the film, there is a division between Chicanos as L.A. natives who aren't connected to their ancestral homeland and Mexican immigrants whom Rudy comes to empathize with and understand during his unplanned excursion south of the border. Quite humorously, Rudy points out that even his grandmother was born in L.A. rather than Mexico and that, in referencing celebrations on the streets of Los Angeles, he has no idea why Cinco de Mayo is celebrated. Yet, because Rudy is forced to cross the border and find his way back to the States, his resulting experience in Mexico allows him to not only recognize, but endure the same hardships that any immigrant would. This newfound position thus places Rudy as someone who is also attempting to achieve the American Dream, only he is trying to return to the life he had rather than create one from nothing. As a result, it is only through Rudy's transformation and self-realization of his Chicano identity and Mexican heritage that he is able to comprehend the struggles that arise from pursuing the American Dream.

Apart from its focus on a distinct Chicano identity, *Born in East L.A.* also advances an emphasis on the collective aspect of Chicanos and Latinos and how community can uplift individuals like Rudy both internally and physically. Featuring a multitude of scenes in which Rudy, as part of his enlightenment in political and social consciousness, helps others during his time in Mexico, the film demonstrates how important community can be. In one sequence, Rudy takes up a job teaching a group of Asians how to act like Chicanos in order to earn enough money himself to cross the border. It is because of Rudy's tutelage and assistance that this group is able to arrive in Los Angeles with Rudy at the end of the film. In another scene, Rudy finally has enough money to pay a coyote to take him across the border. However, when Rudy sees that a husband doesn't have enough money himself to also pay for his wife's fare, Rudy ultimately gives up his spot on the truck for the woman. Given Rudy's commitment to helping others in this scene, Marin illustrates that "this sacrificial act on the part of an individual leads to a collective resolution for the narrative" as Rudy ends up leading a large band of immigrants across the border himself (Fregoso 61). Proving that a focus on the collective aspect of community results in triumph for all individuals apart of that community, this part of the film also symbolizes Rudy's personal transformation since he has technically become an immigrant himself, having struggled like the rest of the Latinos who flank him atop that hill.

Keeping in mind how the film's theme of community supports its representation of the pursuit of the American Dream, I argue that *Born in East L.A.* subverts typical Hollywood representations of Chicanos. Although the film does experience fits of misogyny towards its female characters and other such ethnic stereotyping, Marin still manages to critique the politics surrounding the border and the institutional inequalities tied to immigration and deportation. Additionally, the film "paints a partial portrait of the border experience" in that it features a

metamorphosis on Rudy's part as he begins to understand the immigrant perspective through his own struggles in Mexico (Fregoso 91). In positioning Rudy as distinct in his Chicano identity, Marin ultimately allows for a change to be made as his protagonist develops his own connections to his seemingly separate Mexican heritage, thus bridging the two subjectivities to overcome any racial and prejudicial actions by the American government. And, in its status as more of a mainstream film, Marin uses his comedic wit to both criticize the powers that govern border politics and portray authentic Latino realities. As a film that "shines as a Hispanic Hollywood exception to the bleakness of the rest, precisely because it combined Hispanic scriptwriting and acting expertise and Hollywood production values," Marin's political commentary is itself akin to independent filmic tradition which subverts the mainstream Hollywood influence that comes to dominate Chicano cinema in later years (Keller 172).

Stand and Deliver *and Chicano Success Stories*

The last film of this decade that I'd like to discuss is Ramón Menéndez's 1988 drama *Stand and Deliver*. Based on the true story of math teacher Jaime Escalante's successful attempts to get 18 Latino students to pass their Advanced Placement exams, the film takes place at James A. Garfield high school in East L.A. and depicts a group of Latino students rising above their circumstances and struggles (Noriega 19). As a prominent work of the Hispanic Hollywood phenomenon, *Stand and Deliver* also counts as a Chicano production in that it actively set out to upend certain negative stereotypes and portrayals of the barrio as gang-ridden and rampant with drugs. Rather, Menéndez made "efforts to dispense with 'expected clichés' and depict instead 'the Latino experience'" as a Cuban American director himself (Noriega 21). In fact, in highlighting a real and empowering story about students who transcend their situations to garner

academic success, the film avoids depicting East L.A. as a crime-infested area and instead focuses its attention on characters who break the traditional Hollywood mold for Chicanos.

One of the ways in which the film upholds positive representation of its Chicano and Latino characters is through its emphasis on community support, whether that's through teachers like Escalante, parents who actively allow their children to focus on their academics, or the students themselves who act as supportive classmates to one another. *Stand and Deliver* uses its theme of community to paint the barrio as "a place of pride and achievement despite institutional racism and neglect," rather than an area that suffocates its progeny with endless crime and urban suffering (Noriega 19). Although various parents in the film may actually encourage their children to make their schoolwork a secondary priority—Ana (Vanessa Marquez) almost drops out of school because her father wants her to work at the family restaurant and Lupe (Ingrid Oliu) must constantly take care of her siblings and the household since her mom works long hours—students' efforts are ultimately congratulated by the greater Los Angeles Chicano community as parents and faculty come together to recognize their kids and award Escalante a plaque. Furthermore, aside from Escalante's constant and unwavering belief that his class can and did succeed in passing the AP exams, the students themselves hold each other accountable for their studies and even go to bat for one another when authorities question the validity of their scores. For instance, when Escalante suffers from a heart attack, Javier (Patrick Baca) attempts to lead the class in instruction to stay on top of their coursework. And, as a means of having each other's backs in the face of racial discrimination, students either stand firm in their story or, like Lou Diamond Phillips' character Angel, take part in ridiculing the two men who come to investigate their class. Seeing as there are constant instances of support such as this, it's clear that

Menéndez's film helps to dismantle negative portrayals of Chicanos and their environment through its stress on community as a theme.

Another resulting effect of the previous theme is its ability to promote the American Dream simultaneously. Even more of a success story in comparison to *La Bamba* and especially *El Norte*, *Stand and Deliver* "present[s] positive Latino characters capable of achieving the American Dream and of leading others to do the same" (Rosales Herrera 121). While *La Bamba* demonstrates that one must assimilate to dominant Anglo culture to achieve success, *Stand and Deliver* tells a slightly different tale in that one does not have to change their ethnic identity to prosper. It is made apparent once again here that the film's demonstration of helping others achieve their academic goals plays an extremely important role in the realization of the American Dream. It is the students, with the steadfast determination and support of their teacher and each other, who fundamentally alter their station in life by working hard to overcome their social circumstances and racial discrimination. With this in mind, Menéndez evidently produced a film that carved space for positive representation of Chicanos and Latinos without blaming or using typical forces (e.g. gang associations, drug trafficking, absent family members) for his characters' suffering. Actually, his characters are not made to suffer as the times that they do encounter obstacles, the students and Escalante eventually conquer them while upsetting surrounding expectations and improving their own lives at the same time. As the final film I examine in this chapter, *Stand and Deliver* exemplifies the emerging exchange between independent cinematic practices that uphold a powerful Chicano voice and the incoming influence of mainstream studio control.

Given the weight of these themes in the films I have discussed, it's also important to note that Los Angeles also plays a vital role as the backdrop for these narratives and the ideas they

touch on. As I mentioned in my introduction, L.A. stands as a bustling intersection for many immigrants and the origin of their new lives in the United States, even voting to become a sanctuary city in 2024[2]. As a result, the city has dually acquired symbolic status as one of the geographical incarnations of the American Dream. Seen in films like *El Norte* and even *Born in East L.A.*, immigrants make it their mission to arrive on the streets of Los Angeles, hungry for a better life and job opportunities. Of course, those who have established themselves here often give birth to entire families whose identities largely rest on the fact that they are Angelenos. Generations of Chicanos now search for success of their own, especially with a continuation in rising populations of Mexicans in the greater Los Angeles area during the 1980s. Oftentimes, family becomes a central part of immigrants', as well as their children's, lives since all they have is each other. Seeing as this is so, it makes sense that Chicano filmmakers tend to incorporate these same themes into their work, thus allowing audiences to understand essential aspects about Chicanos' overall livelihood.

However, following the awareness brought on by the Chicano Power Movement in the 1960s and 1970s, Los Angeles also happened to become "a rival to New York City as filmland's primary movie site" (Cortes 104). As I happened to allude to at the beginning of this chapter, the coexistence of these two developments subsequently led to a rise in gang films that focused primarily on Chicano activity. And although several films of the 1980s do factor into this genre—namely *Walk Proud* (Collins, 1979), *Boulevard Nights* (Pressman, 1979), *Zoot Suit*, and *Colors*—the 1990s seem to explore this category of Hollywood and Chicano cinema more extensively, as I will discuss in the following chapter.

[2] "City Council Votes to Establish Los Angeles as a 'Sanctuary City.'" *LA City*, Nithya Raman, 19 Nov. 2024, cd4.lacity.gov/press-releases/city-council-votes-to-establish-los-angeles-as-a-sanctuary-city/.

Mainstream Hollywood and the Latino Boom of the 1990s

Seeing ongoing growth of the Latino community into the 1990s, Hollywood was pushed even further to produce films circling around Chicanos through a variety of channels. Films like *American Me*, *Blood In Blood Out*, *Mi Vida Loca*, and *Mi Familia*—the four main films that I analyze in this chapter—were all either produced and/or distributed by major production companies or their divisions such as Universal Pictures and Sony Picture Classics. As Puente explains, "motion picture marketers were increasingly attracted to US Latinos after the 1990 census reported that this ethnic group had grown from about 15 million in 1980 to more than 22 million in 1990," meaning that the Latino movie-going audience also experienced an increase in numbers (53). With more productions that catered ethnic narratives for such an audience, there began to be a break between films picked up by major studios and those handled by independent production companies and distributors. This just burgeoning divide signified a difference in representation, as well, with more mainstream productions succumbing to more problematic depictions of Chicanos on the screen. *American Me* and *Mi Vida Loca*, for instance, both feature stereotypical and misconstrued portrayals of gang members as I explore later on in this chapter.

With a rapidly growing population, Latinos possessed a considerable amount of purchasing power and represented a dedicated movie-going audience compared to other ethnic groups in the 1990s. Consequently, Hollywood studios began to realize that the Latino and Chicano communities stood as a valuable audience and provided a niche market just as other films and television shows began to focus more on diverse representation on the whole. Studios like Disney, for instance, started to direct more money toward Latino productions and advertising as a means of catering to this demographic. In fact, as Rosa Linda Fregoso reports, "the $20 million that Universal Studios gave Olmos to do the film makes *American Me* the most

expensive studio production by a Chicano filmmaker," thereby illustrating the new levels that Chicano creatives rose to in a film industry that had ignored this population's presence for so long (124). Additionally, studios developed "specialty divisions like Sony Pictures Classics or purchase[d] successful independent distributors like New Line Cinema in order to acquire and distribute niche-market films like My Family/Mi Familia (1995)" as a means of strategically addressing this audience through distribution and advertising (Puente 51). With the fair amount of success that films featuring diversity—like *Mi Familia*, or even Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing* (1989) and John Singleton's *Boyz n the Hood* (1991)—Hollywood realized that taking on low-risk independent projects could yield positive results, both financially and in terms of audience reception. Setting the foundation for a continued focus on culture- and ethnic-specific films, these productions demonstrated that there could be a market for non-Anglo films.

Independent filmmakers, on the other hand, faced difficulties as globalization continued to rise throughout this decade. In fact, PBS's independent production company American Playhouse created an independent film imprint in 1994 with Samuel Goldwyn that never quite took flight due to internal industrial issues. Having produced key Chicano films like *El Norte*, *Stand and Deliver*, and *Mi Familia*, American Playhouse's end signified a loss in the effort towards manufacturing powerful Chicano stories without the overbearing creative input of larger studios. And, with limited funds compared to these studio giants, independent companies could not direct more money towards advertising their films to the greater public. Independent productions did manage to pick up publicity through reviews by critics and newspapers, but still competed fiercely with larger blockbuster films since many critics tended to focus their attention on those. Plus, any films that received low box-office earnings after premiering on the big screen

would ultimately be removed from theaters at a higher rate, leaving smaller-budget independent films at a disadvantage when it came to exhibition, too (Puente 55).

As a result, these independent productions were forced to find ways in which they could garner some measure of success. Aside from crafting extensive marketing campaigns which included running advertisements around Spanish-language television programming, Latino filmmakers also took advantage of specific components within their films, like music.

> Mi Vida Loca used its soundtrack as an additional publicity tool in order to overcome its limited advertising budget. The soundtrack featured Los Lobos and Funkdoobiest in order to target young potential moviegoers between the ages of 18 and 23 (Toumarkine, "Goldwyn"). The film's print advertisements highlighted the artists on the soundtrack. The publicists also conducted co-promotions with youth-oriented music stations that could incorporate these songs in their rotations, and several songs were featured on MTV (Toumarkine, "Goldwyn"). Sony Pictures Classics used this synergy to publicize both the soundtrack and the film in malls, local clubs, community centers, and boutiques (Toumarkine, " 'Loca'"). (Puente 58)

However, *Mi Familia*'s advertising campaign ran in a different direction. Relying heavily on the actors involved in the project as it had no notable soundtrack like *Mi Vida Loca*, Nava's film also utilized support from Latino organizations to gain publicity. Producers Nancy De Los Santos and Danny Haro "developed a grassroots marketing campaign that consisted of pre-screenings and attempted to get important community representatives on camera" with help from groups like the National Council of La Raza, Teatro Campesino, and Latino Pride (Puente 58). By emphasizing the film's focus on a Chicano immigrant family and its resulting "authenticity," the marketing

team behind *Mi Familia* attempted to foster identification from audiences with that of the family on screen.

Aside from its consideration of the dynamics of an immigrant family, *Mi Familia* and the other three films that I analyze here also deal with two other major subjects: that of how the Chicana is represented within the narrative and the prominence of gang associations in the Chicano community. In reference to the first of these ideas, the figure of the Chicana in contemporary cinema has often appeared in two ways—either as a plot device in gangxploitation films or as underdeveloped characters who "serve critical moral functions and create interethnic film linkages" reminiscent of the stereotypical harlot incarnation of old westerns (Cortes 105). With these representations in mind, I deconstruct the ways in which the films of the early 1990s fall into these categories or rise above these unsatisfactory delineations to advance a strong portrayal of Chicanas in cinema. Additionally, I dive deeper into the genre of gang films as continued into this decade as all four films that I examine incorporate gang life as a substitute or parallel for family. Though I spoke about the emergence of the gang film genre in the previous chapter, the machismo of Chicano gang associations permeates these next four films fiercely and creates standards for audiences to look upon Chicanos with as a result. As I demonstrate in my analysis of the films in this chapter, there are those like *Blood In Blood Out* and *Mi Familia* that actively attempt to demonstrate the genuine realities of life in a gang while others, such as *American Me* and *Mi Vida Loca* simply confine Chicanos to a modern embodiment of el bandido once again.

American Me *and Hopelessness in the Barrio*

Premiering in 1992, Edward James Olmos' directorial debut *American Me* serves as one such film of the gang genre that puts forward misleading ideas about gang life for Chicanos. The

film follows Montoya Santana, also played by Olmos, from his introduction to life in a gang to his time in prison where he winds up as the formidable leader of the Latino prison gang, La Eme. In his efforts to caution younger audiences away from gang-related crime, however, Olmos' film "equates the 'cancer' of the barrios with the dysfunction of the Chicano family" due to the way in which he portrays street and prison gangs (Baugh 3). The issue here lies in the fact that audiences are led to believe that the reason young Chicano men join gangs is due to the unstable and toxic father figures in their lives. When, in reality, it's the systemic poverty and widespread unemployment in communities like East Los Angeles that tend to attract youths toward gangs (Castañeda et al.).

Recalling the Zoot Suit riots of the 1940s once again in this film and stressing the importance of this event's lasting impact on Los Angeles Chicanos, *American Me* opens with Santana's parents amidst these racially turbulent times. In this glimpse to the past, Santana's father, Pedro, is beaten while his mother, Esperanza, is raped by multiple Anglo sailors. Because Santana is born of this encounter, Pedro "would always wonder which of those sailors' blood ran through [Santana's] veins" (Olmos, *American Me*, 1992). Demonstrating the lasting impact that stems from this systemically racist act in that Santana's family is forever "colonized" by this assault, Pedro never grants Santana enough fatherly love or guidance which sends Santana on a downward spiral into gang violence and crime (Fregoso 127). And although Olmos attempts to use his directorial reasoning by showing the dangerous nature of this lifestyle to touch on the effects of colonization on the Chicano community even in recent times, this narrative choice falls into stereotypical depictions of Latino gangs: there exists a myth that the emotional and/or physical absence of a parental figure is to blame for the participation of Chicano youth in gangs. Since Santana's father emotionally abandoned his son because Esperanza was raped, Santana

becomes a delinquent. This is in opposition to reality, however, since it's actually the lack of opportunities in their communities that lead young Chicanos toward gang associations due to poverty, racism, and other such systemic factors. So while Olmos attempts to incorporate a critique of colonization and its detrimental effects on the Chicano community, his use of the absent parent trope via Santana's father ultimately undermines and defeats this idea.

And, although the film was made to expose the horrors of gang violence and condemn the machismo spirit that reinforces it, much of *American Me* ends up leaving a negative impression for viewers of what a Chicano barrio truly looks like. Any scenes that take place outside of prison are a portrait of hopelessness, rampant drug activity, and death. After Santana is released from prison and enters into a relationship with Julie (Evelina Fernández), her brother Neto (John Rangel) dies from a drug overdose after pure heroin has been pushed in the community by an Italian drug lord retaliating against La Eme's rape of his son in prison. What's more is the one potential time and space given for a joyous celebration—Little Puppet's (Daniel Villarreal) wedding—is subsequently ruined by the appearance of drugs as Santana is dragged off to prison once more after the police find him carrying heroin when talking to Julie outside the wedding. Although Santana only had the heroin because Little Puppet had received it as a wedding present and Santana took it to keep him from having it, this scene still demonstrates how the barrio is depicted as a place where drugs are a commodity and any events that allow Chicanos to celebrate their lives and culture are guaranteed to be ruined by things like crime and drug trafficking.

Furthermore, in many films of the gang genre, women are relegated to either insignificant or unfavorable representations in their roles. *American Me*, though slightly altering these representations, still advances a negligent portrayal of the two main female characters in the film, Esperanza and Julie. Esperanza, having been raped by Anglo sailors during the Zoot Suit riots

"serves as the mythic origin of Santana's deviance" where the all the protagonist's flaws can be traced back to (Fregoso 132). Not only does this cast a sort of misplaced blame onto her character, but this narrative positioning solely consigns Esperanza as a woman violated with no other remarkable traits. Here, too, it seems that Olmos tried to frame the sailors for wrongdoing, but nevertheless ends up blaming Esperanza anyway since Santana's deviance is framed to have stemmed from her rape. Julie, on the other hand, comes across as a much stronger character—perhaps partly because of her own experiences in an East L.A. gang. Yet, her persistence in abandoning gang associations in order to protect her family from the hopelessness of the streets situates her as the alternative to detrimental machismo attitudes. Here, Cortes' aforementioned idea that Chicanas appear to be "moral core[s]" who support the male protagonist in their hardships stands true as Scott L. Baugh explains in his article "Changing of the Guard: Pinche Pintas and 'Family'/Familia in Contemporary Chicano Film."

> Before his experiences with Julie, Santana thought it a sign of "weakness to listen to a woman," but Julie's strength of character, her hembrismo, endorses a hopeful, positive future for La Raza not dominated by the negative aspects of machismo. However, the solution Julie represents falls short of explaining, as Gutierrez-Jones acknowledges, how she would "manipulate her historical situation," and more specifically, how she would overcome the male-patterned hegemony of physical abuse reigning in the Chicano family and community. Comparable to the binarism underlying the myth and the reactionary views of the Chicano family, Julie only begins to create a social system that offers an alternative to the one figuratively imprisoning Santana's mother. Fregoso encapsulates this point: Santana's "story ends before hers can begin." (10)

Therefore, even though Julie does represent a strong, independent Chicana who symbolizes hope for Santana and the barrio as a whole, the film still positions both herself and Esperanza as stereotypical depictions of Chicana figures. Julie may carry the potential of a future in which Los Angeles does not succumb to dangerous machismo beliefs, but the audience never sees that potential take root and blossom. As a result of this and her moral relation to Santana, her status as a contemporary urban Chicana presents itself as the modern embodiment of the Latinas who provided the same moral encouragement to Anglo protagonists in westerns of the 1940s and 1950s. With these factors in mind, I posit that *American Me* stands as a harmful representation of Chicano life and culture. Even in its distinction as a Chicano film based on an actual Chicano figure, Olmos' film ultimately falls short in its attempt to portray the root causes of why Chicanos tend to lead lives as part of a gang. Instead, *American Me* plays into stereotypes and typical Hollywood depictions of violent Chicanos running rampant on Los Angeles streets with drugs and guns in hand. Such accordance with mainstream cinema's demonization of gangs marks a burgeoning shift away from an independent practice that works to advance positive and politically conscious representations of Chicanos.

Hollywood's Embrace of the Gang Film with Blood In Blood Out

Unlike *American Me,* which was not received well by Chicano audiences, critics, and filmmakers for its vision of hopelessness, another film of the 1990s was actually viewed as a better representation of Chicano life through its "use of credible Chicano speech and characterizations to evoke gang, family, and prison life" (Keller 162-163, 210-211). Taylor Hackford's 1993 film *Blood In Blood Out*—also renamed *Bound By Honor* due to Disney's concern that the original title was too violent—follows the lives of three Chicano cousins, Miklo (Damian Chapa)—who is half-Mexican and half-white, Paco (Benjamin Bratt), and Cruz (Jesse

Borrego), as they each come to terms with gang life and the law over the course of twelve years (Puente, 60). Written by Jimmy Santiago Baca, who drew inspiration from his own experiences with gangs, and from the same real-life Mexican Mafia leader that *American Me*'s Santana was based off on, the film stands as an example of Chicano cinema that resonated with the Chicano community of Los Angeles precisely because of the way it portrays different facets of life in a gang, such as brotherhood, honor, and sacrifice.

With a runtime of three hours and its focus on three different characters, *Blood In Blood Out* manages to cover a span of 12 years of life in or affected by a gang. In comparison to *American Me*, the audience does not receive a hopelessly negative depiction of East L.A. barrios but instead watches how Miklo, Paco, and Cruz find comfort in each other through gang life and hope outside of it, though their gang associations reap detrimental consequences on their lives. Miklo, who is constantly torn between his racial identities, often faces life or death situations and must make his choice based on the options presented before him. Not only does this represent the limited amount of opportunities for other residents of an impoverished Los Angeles, but this also gives Miklo a chance to rise above his situation when given the option to (e.g. when La Onda prison gang leader Montana (Enrique Castillo) encourages Miklo to fight for parole). On the other hand, Paco represents another path when he turns away from gang life after his little brother Juanito dies of a drug overdose and joins both the Marines and the police. Here, Paco stands for assimilation into the Anglo institutions that circulate violence through their corrupt system and prompt Paco to wage war against his own community, even shooting Miklo during an armed robbery. Lastly, Cruz represented the potential and hope for Chicanos by leaning into his artistic talent, but ultimately demonstrates the fall from grace as a result of the bad influences of his gang buddies.

With these various paths in mind, the film expertly shows the sacrifices that each character must make in the face of their gang associations. Although *Blood In Blood Out* itself stands as another example of a Hollywood gangxploitation film, I would argue that the film operates in a way that does not corner its characters into the el bandido stereotype completely. Yes, Miklo, Paco, and Cruz all acted as gangbangers at one point in the film and succumbed to violent deeds in the name of their gang, Vatos Locos, but I argue that the ways in which each character reacts to their choices and lives thereafter presents a complex spectrum that is not typically seen for on-screen Chicanos: Miklo goes to jail and finds honor and family there, Paco becomes a cop trying to hamper drug-dealing and violence in his community, and Cruz is celebrated for his art, but falls victim to drug addiction. Additionally, *Blood In Blood Out* does not blame absent parents or other such myths for the characters' deviance, but instead looks to the limited opportunities from poverty for pushing the characters to act as they do. Finally, the ending of the film presents an uplifting conclusion not typical of Chicano films in which Paco takes responsibility for his actions, resolves any hostilities with Cruz, and is reminded of his "carnalismo," or brotherhood.

This last scene examines the three cousins' past choices as Paco and Cruz consider their motives for joining a gang. Aside from showcasing Chicano male vulnerability as Paco breaks down in tears after realizing that his commitment to gang rivalries spiraled into Miklo's time in jail and Cruz's time in the hospital with a damaged back, the scene also highlights how gangs are comparable with family. When Paco sees Cruz's mural of the three of them in their youth, he protests that the spirit captured in that art is an innocent "fantasy" taken from them by gang violence. Cruz defends their young innocence and belief in each other: "Loco, we stood by each other. We trusted each other. Orale, that's worth believing in! We were familia, homes!"

(Hackford, *Blood In Blood Out*, 1993). Cruz's commentary here touches on the idea that, when caught up in a reality produced by poverty and systemic racism and deprived of opportunities for a better future, young Chicanos turn to each other to form a collective sense of community and well-being. As a result, those who join gangs end up feeling like they are surrounded by family, by brothers who will go to great lengths to protect each other, even if that means succumbing to violence. In fact, Cruz reminds Paco in this scene that the reason Miklo went to jail was for killing rival gang member Spider (Ray Oriel) when Paco decided to lead an attack on Tres Puntos for injuring Cruz. Considering these narrative developments, it's clear that *Blood In Blood Out* advances the connection between gangs as a form of family for Chicanos. So, although the film can be looked to as another example of a mainstream studio cornering Chicanos to the gang genre and classification, the foundational reliance on a Chicano screenwriter's creative voice and real-life experience helps balance the more stereotypical aspects of the film.

Mi Vida Loca *and Chicana Gangs*

Like many films of the gang genre, *Blood In Blood Out* lacks any major focus on the Chicana experience. Allison Anders' 1993 film *Mi Vida Loca*, however, offers an insightful intersection into the lives of Chicanas and their own participation in Los Angeles gangs. The film follows the lives of five leading characters who are all interconnected through their ties to the Echo Park Locas gang: best friends turned rivals, Mousie (Seidy López) and Sad Girl (Angel Aviles); Sad Girl's sister, La Blue Eyes (Magali Alvarado); drug-dealer-in-training, Whisper (Nelida Lopez); and Giggles (Marlo Marron), who is fresh out of prison. Although written and directed by an Anglo woman, some critics and film scholars applaud *Mi Vida Loca* for its representation of Chicana gang life, especially given that this is the first mainstream Hollywood

film to do so. Still, Anders structures the narrative around her own experience interacting with Echo Park homegirls, prioritizing her own perspective over that of actual Chicanas. As a result, the film falls into classic stereotypes that have constricted Chicanas for decades even while attempting to showcase the powerful sisterhood that pervades Chicana gangs.

In terms of those heavily relied upon stereotypes that have shown up time and time again since the 1930s, *Mi Vida Loca* features both the harlot and el bandido stereotypes—a sensuous, lustful Chicana and a violent villain figure, respectively. For starters, Mousie and Sad Girl both become involved with and pregnant by the same man, causing a rift between the two women. Not only does the film pit these Chicana best friends against each other in a show of exaggerated and potentially even violent drama, but both characters also embody traits of the stereotypical harlot of old westerns. These characters' actions (e.g. ending their friendship, challenging each other to a gun fight to the death) are driven only by their lust for Ernesto (Jacob Vargas), and their hot tempers almost cost them their lives. In opposition to this take, many Chicanas critiqued this part of the film's plot since they felt it did not accurately represent their codes of honor and sense of sisterhood for each other (Fregoso 37). Furthermore, Ernesto exemplifies the modern-day bandido in that he is a part of a gang himself and deals drugs on the street to support both Mousie and Sad Girl. In fact, all the characters depicted in this film are members of a gang and behave in ways that support the myth that all Chicanos and Chicanas are violent, drug-dealing gangbangers. So although *Mi Vida Loca* attempts to display the hardships and consequences that arise from being tied to a gang, the film still works to confirm widely accepted ideas about the Chicano community.

Nonetheless, the film's focus on the Chicana way of life in an Angeleno neighborhood like Echo Park signals a change in mainstream Hollywood cinema towards Chicano stories. The

1990s' supposed focus on gang culture among Chicanos may have channeled historic stereotypes concerning the Chicano community, but it did so in an effort to make known the harsh realities of this environment. And while films like *American Me* or *Blood In Blood Out* neglect or skew representation of the Chicana in their narratives, *Mi Vida Loca* seeks to advance "a feminist expression of social politics" through an aestheticized depiction of Echo Park homegirls (Baugh 17):

> Formally, the film is shot in a style Anders calls "romantic realism," where camera movement follows character's emotions. The film's cinematographer, Rodrigo Garcia (son of novelist Gabriel Garcia Marquez) effectively mixes low angle close-up with opalescent and luminous shots. Into its episodic narrative structure, Anders weaves a tapestry of music, death, and melancholy, attending meticulously to the stylistic nuances of Chicano gang culture. Like Chicano cultural producers (José Montoya, Edward James Olmos, Luis Váldez), Anders estheticizes a lifestyle which has, for too long, been demonized by mainstream culture. In contrast to her male counterparts, Anders focuses on a much ignored segment of Chicano gang culture: the female members. (Fregoso 37)

In doing so, Anders contributes to the beginning of a foundation for Chicana cinematic expression and identity. Rather than conforming to other frequent stereotypes pushed onto Chicanas like the maid, Anders' characters assume their own macho identities and become independent as a means of supporting their kids and themselves. Although the film demonstrates the consequences of succumbing to this machismo, *Mi Vida Loca* still allows the female perspective to shine through as told through the stories of five main characters. In fact, cast member Nelida Lopez was part of the Echo Park Locas herself and several other gang members were invited by Anders to provide commentary on the film, albeit concerning "style, music, and

speech" (Fregoso 37). Therefore, even though the film maintains several flaws in the way it portrays Chicanas, it still stands as a stepping stone towards future widespread representation of Chicanas in film.

Furthermore, the film supports the idea that gangs serve as a stand-in for family when there seems to be no other hope or opportunity for Chicano, or in this case, Chicana youth. When life on the streets and even their time at home offers them nothing but instability, the Chicanas of Echo Park turn to each other for support and protection. For instance, even though Mousie and Sad Girl originally find tension between them at the cost of a man, they both later connect as teenage mothers and friends once again later in the film. And, when La Blue Eyes ends up heartbroken after realizing the man she is in love with is a player, it's her sister and the Locas who rush to comfort her. Thus, throughout all of the intersecting plotlines, *Mi Vida Loca*'s theme of sisterhood holds strong. Moreover, this theme proves once again that the bonds between gang members can be just as strong, if not stronger, than even familial bonds as the gang comes to constitute family for many youths in Chicano cinema. Yet again, however, Anders' film displays the misrepresentations that arise as a result of mainstream influence from so-called arthouse and independent divisions of major Hollywood studios.

Multigenerational Stories in Mi Familia

The last film that I examine within this decade is Gregory Nava's 1995 *Mi Familia*. Covering three generations of a Mexican family based in Los Angeles, Nava's film explores the intersection of gender, tradition, and culture through its focus on several members of the Sanchez family. With themes relating to that of immigration and the American Dream, the film begins by telling the story of a young José Sanchez (Jacob Vargas) who immigrates to California and stays with his Mexican nationalist relative El Californio (León Singer) before meeting his wife María

(Jennifer Lopez). Narrated by Paco (Edward James Olmos), the Sanchez family's eldest son, the film goes on to follow María's wrongful deportation to Mexico and her treacherous, yet spiritually revelatory journey back to the States with her newborn son, Chucho. Twenty years later, the story shifts to cover Chucho's (Esai Morales) downfall and subsequent death as part of his association with a gang following the wedding of his older sister Irene (Maria Canals-Barrera). Having witnessed his brother's death, the story jumps ahead another twenty years to reveal that Jimmy (Jimmy Smits) similarly turned to a life of crime and went to prison as a result. This third era of the narrative therefore focuses on Jimmy and his siblings' assimilation to life in the United States as first generation Chicano children of immigrants and the familial issues that arise due to cultural differences between the Sanchez parents and kids.

In terms of its status as a Chicano film, *Mi Familia*'s ability to cover so many themes pertinent to the Chicano community as well as represent multiple generations and their unique struggles positions Nava's work as a cornerstone of Chicano film. Though the film may make use of certain stereotypes, the diversity between characters and their individual motivations and actions ultimately allows Nava to transcend and even critique historical practices that have trapped Chicanos for decades in film. Plus, *Mi Familia*'s relatable portrayal of intergenerational conflict of a family that must struggle with forces both within and outside of their control lends a much-needed addition to Hollywood's stock of Anglo-dominated films. With this film, however, Nava preserves such compelling aspects of Hollywood's mainstream family drama model while highlighting fundamental facets of Chicano culture (e.g. spirituality via Catholicism, emphasis on tradition and family, Spanish music).

As I mentioned, *Mi Familia* does indeed feature stereotypes in its representation of a Chicano family and its many members, partly because Nava had less creative control compared

to his independent film, *El Norte*. For instance, Chucho and even Jimmy work as a form of el bandido since they both turn to crime in their young adult years, with Chucho selling drugs and operating as part of a gang and Jimmy in and out of jail for petty crimes and even armed robbery after his wife's death. It's also worth pointing out that rather than just appearing this way to the audience, these two characters even receive judgment based on their choices from their own neighbors and family members. With this in mind, however, the film then attempts to humanize Chucho and Jimmy to provide complexity that often isn't granted to characters trapped within this stereotype. Chucho, for starters, turns to selling drugs because he believes there are no opportunities to be found otherwise and is later shot by cops in cold blood as Jimmy watches on. Even earlier, too, Chucho is shown in a positive light as he shows the kids of the barrio how to mambo, presenting an alternative side to what Paco calls his "macho bullshit." Jimmy, on the other hand, also plays into the absent father role frequently seen within media focusing on Chicanos and people of color, in general. But even as Jimmy falls back into his patterns of criminality and leaves his son to be raised by his parents, the film still features moments in which Jimmy abandons his cholo tendencies to be a supportive and stable father to the son he once neglected due to grief over losing his wife, Isabel (Elpidia Carrillo).

Unlike other films that feature gang associations, *Mi Familia* treats its characters who engage in this activity as turning to an alternative lifestyle due to their perceived dissatisfaction with the hardships of living in the barrio. Nava deliberately avoids glorifying gangs, but still manages to treat Chucho and Jimmy's criminal choices as a reaction to lack of opportunities that multiple generations of Chicanos have faced in Los Angeles. For Chucho, drug dealing and gangs provide an effective way to earn money in a society that refuses to acknowledge the hard work and manual labor of immigrants like his father José. Chucho's waving of a fistful of money

as he shouts “Fuck la dignidad. This is all they respect in this country!” at his father demonstrates this idea that Chucho is turning away from the traditional towards a life of crime purely as a means of finding some form of success. Still, Paco’s narration at Irene’s wedding points out that Chucho and other barrio pachucos engaging in gang rivalry “were full of hate and anger, and nowhere to put it except into each other,” reinforcing the view that gangs serve as an outlet for young Chicanos with nowhere else to turn. Jimmy, too, turns to burglary after Isabel’s death because, as Paco also notes, “he knew that if Isabel had been at one of the fancy hospitals on the West side, that she would be alive.” Again, the film doesn’t excuse Jimmy’s resulting behavior since his absence as a father influenced his own son’s mischief and poor manners, but it does highlight the institutional forces at play that compel various Chicanos like Jimmy and Chucho to pivot towards crime and gang life as a substitute or alternative.

Nava’s film *Mi Familia* also subverts traditional stereotypes concerning Chicanas, especially in regards to Toni (Constance Marie), the Sanchez family’s youngest daughter. Though one could argue that all the four women depicted in this film—María, Irene, Toni, and Isabel—exhibit tendencies typical of many Chicanas depicted in media in that they often assume the role of the caretaker, it’s important to note that none of these women are submissive in this undertaking. Rather, their devotion to family, and even tradition regarding María and Irene, drives their individual trajectories. Toni, for example, is the complete opposite of submissive and bases her choices on what she feels to be right. Due to her bossy nature, however, the film frames her as a hot-blooded Latina reminiscent of the Mexican Spitfire. Still, Nava transcends this stereotype by portraying Toni’s domineering passion as a result of her radical leftist beliefs, instead of being driven by a jealous lust for her white partner. After surprising her family by becoming a nun and subsequently leaving her order to marry a priest some time later, Toni

instead decides to devote her life to fighting for immigrant rights and never has any children thus "never succumbing to the roles designated for women in either Chicano or Anglo culture" (Perez 107).

In Toni's advocacy for political refugees, she comes across the Salvadoran Isabel whom Toni convinces Jimmy to marry in order to save her from deportation. Jimmy does so begrudgingly, but later opens his heart to his new wife as Isabel makes it her mission to become an active part of his life. Given Isabel's insistence here as a sort of caretaker for Jimmy—she resolutely cooks and cleans since she believes that to be her role as his wife, it would make sense to label her as befitting of the dark lady stereotype. Such a devotion to gendered household tradition marks her as pure, while her ultimate function in the film raises Jimmy from his machismo turmoil just as the Chicanas of old westerns served as moral guidance for Anglo protagonists. Be that as it may, *Mi Familia* grants Isabel more complexity in character than many dark ladies have in past media featuring Chicanas. Though she does end up dying in childbirth, Isabel's empathetic ability to "root their love in their mutual pain, anger, and memory of loss" highlights her own methods of survival as a refugee contending with government crackdown on immigration in the 1980s (Baugh 17). And not only does Isabel represent yet another perspective of immigrant plight in this film, she also grounds the story yet again in an air of spirituality unique to Aztec and Mexican culture. Paco explains that María calls those women who died during childbirth "Cihuateteo" and that their spirits necessitate the setting of the sun. Isabel's status as a Latina in *Mi Familia* therefore operates on multiple levels, demonstrating the thoughtfulness with which Nava's film approaches Chicana representation on the whole.

With films like *Mi Familia* that work to cover multiple facets of the Chicano identity in such a considerate manner, Chicano cinema of the 1990s laid the groundwork for more films,

both mainstream and independent, that attempted to authentically showcase what it means to be Chicano in contemporary Los Angeles. Additionally, an increase in globalization and a subsequent Latino boom in the late 1990s and early 2000s made it seem like the cadre of Chicano films would be expanding in a productive way. However, as I will explore in the next chapter, many of the films produced after the turn of the century actually happened to rely more extensively on reincarnated stereotypes of the six I defined at the outset mostly due to their mainstream cinematic overtones. And, although some films that came out were championed for their depiction of the Chicano way of life, it almost appears as if the film industry and Hollywood actually reversed what momentum they had built up during the 1980s and 1990s, resulting in the onset of more television shows compared to movies about Chicanos and more subtle representation overall.

The 2000s Onward: The Current State of Chicano Cinema

Moving into the 2000s, Latino media saw an immense rise in popularity as part of the "Latino Boom" that began to take shape in the later 1990s. Areas of Latino culture exploded with household names like Salma Hayek, Benicio del Toro, Jennifer Lopez and several other Latino celebrities recognized through nominations and awards (Berg 262). However, as Latino pop culture became more widely consumed, the ways in which Latinos were portrayed in film shifted to meet the demands of a multicultural society. Furthermore, a more vast departure within mainstream film appeared as Hollywood-produced films tended to feature more entrenched stereotypes, while independent filmmakers still strove to closely identify with Latino life, struggles, and culture.

Although certain Latino and Chicano stars like the ones named above achieved superstar status, there still remained issues concerning their representation as well as the relative exposure of other such Latino actors and filmmakers. A 1999 study commissioned by the Screen Actors Guild demonstrates that, despite the ample celebrity of a select few Latino actors, the amount of Latinos participating in Hollywood film and television remained comparatively low in regards to other ethnic groups. Moreover, the representations of these Latino actors tend to be generic in nature as Latino themes, culture, and identity tend to go unaddressed within Latino cinema in favor of more digestible and entertaining mainstream narratives as found in *Fast and Furious* or *Scream VI* (Bettinelli-Olpin, Gillett, 2023). On the other side of the spectrum, many films produced during this time relied on stereotypes when they did choose to showcase parts of the Latino and Chicano cultural identity. *Maid in Manhattan* (2002), *Spanglish*, and the television show *Devious Maids* (2013), for instance, all feature Latina protagonists whose occupation consists of them working as maids—a position which becomes essential to the goings-on of the

plot. A *New York Times* article published after renowned Chicana actress Lupe Ontiveros passed in 2012 states that her "signature role became that of the Hispanic maid, which she figured she had played more than 150 times in television and films," thus demonstrating the impact of this stereotype within recent Latino media. For so long, Latinas and Chicanas have been pigeonholed into this occupation in several films. Not only does this create a new type of stereotype and role for Latino actresses, but also a norm that upholds the oppressive idea that this is the limit to success for Latinas in the United States.

Developments like this support this chapter's argument that mainstream Chicano films and television shows produced since the early 2000s feature less and less empowering portrayals of Chicanos. In focusing on films and television shows like *Tortilla Soup*, *Real Women Have Curves*, *A Better Life*, *Mosquita y Mari*, *Vida*, and *Gentefied*, I demonstrate both the prevalence of a burgeoning Latino media gap and its interconnection with intersectional identities. Since Chicano film seems to fall off after *Mosquita y Mari*, I direct my attention to television series like *Vida* and *Gentefied* as a means of making up for the lack of recent Chicano film. Nonetheless, all of the texts mentioned illustrate the incorporation of Chicano bodies into a society that is widely diverse. Although there is a broader trend of multicultural representation in media taking place in the 2000s and the 2010s, I examine these texts specifically as a means of focusing on films that still convey a Chicano cultural identity at their core. While there are mainstream media during this period that do feature Chicano characters, the way in which these films deal with them gets subsumed under a general Latino identity where unique markers of Chicano culture are ignored. Whereas Mexico begins to see a specific auteurist cinematic movement with the rise of directors like Guillermo del Toro, Alfonso Cuarón, and Alejandro González Iñárritu, Chicano cinema is combined with general Latin American cinema in

Hollywood. As a result, Latinos and Chicanos both are looked at as one overarching ethnic group rather than consisting of several different Latin American origins.

With a seeming abundance in the number of identities covered in mainstream media nowadays, it appears that there has been progress on all fronts for all ethnicities, genders, orientations, etc. Asian director Ang Lee, for instance, won Best Director for both his 2005 film *Brokeback Mountain*, a romance film about two gay cowboys, and 2012 adaptation *Life of Pi*, which follows the survival of a young Indian immigrant at sea. More recently, Ryan Coogler's 2025 sensational film *Sinners* took home four Oscars at the 2026 Academy Awards with a record-breaking 16 nominations, proving that stories concerning people of color and those of other identities are finally beginning to receive recognition among the broader film industry. Especially in relation to Chicano cinema, however, the ways in which people of color are presented on the big screen changed in comparison to trends of the 1980s and 1990s. Rather than leaning into the didacticism so prevalent during these two decades, recent media "instead present Latinos] as part of the varied mosaic of American culture" (Rosales Herrera 132). In other words, much of the cultural cinema produced since the early 2000s portrays people of color, and in this case Chicanos, as integrated beings within a vast multicultural American society. Instead of operating within its own bubble of Hispanic accents, gang violence, and immigrant tales of survival, Chicanos and Latinos now see their everyday lives played out on screen in a manner that may explore more complex nuances of middle-class existence, workplace troubles, and identity-related matters.

In fact, a general latinization of pop culture occurs during this time period in which an appreciation of Latino culture, music, films, and other such elements was on the rise. In the early 2000s and even into the 2010s, there developed a shift in which more projects involving Latinos

were produced: the *Fast & Furious* franchise, *Traffic*, *Breaking Bad* (2008-2013), *Jane the Virgin* (2014-2019), *Narcos* (2015-2017), *In the Heights* (2021), etc. In regards to this shift, it should be acknowledged that there has technically been progress within Hollywood; the increase in popularity of Latino productions, characters, and celebrities (e.g. Benicio del Toro, Jessica Alba, America Ferrera, Michael Peña) illustrates the broader incorporation of Latinos in the mainstream film industry that had not been so expansive twenty years earlier. However, it's also worth noting that just because visibility has grown for Latinos, specific issues and voices within the Latino community are still being ignored or pushed aside to this day. As the film industry reached the 2020s, less and less projects focusing on socio-political and cultural themes were featured in favor of general narratives that simply provided audiences with uncomplicated entertainment. For example, Mexican and Puerto Rican actress Jenna Ortega may have starred in blockbuster films like *Scream VI* and *Beetlejuice Beetlejuice* (Burton, 2024), but the content of these films does not touch on themes or topics that affect the Latino and Chicano communities in our world today. Media like *Gentefied*, on the other hand, chooses to draw attention to issues like gentrification, intersectionality, assimilation, and commodification that are constantly at work within these communities of color.

This also points to a peculiar development where, despite the fact that Latino populations and audiences are growing, their apparent staying power and impact on the film industry actually diminishes instead of increasing. Julio Torres writes on this issue, or what is termed the "Latino media gap," in his 2025 article "Closing the Media Gap? Latinx Languaging at Queer and Race Intersections":

> In their 2014 report on the state of affairs of Latinos in U.S. media, Negrón-Muntaner et al. (2014) coined the term Latino media gap to refer to the observation that "as Latino

> consumer power grows, relative Latino media presence shrinks". More critically, according to their data, racialized Latinx actors—e.g., Afro-Latinos and Latinx indigenous actors—were not cast in any leading role and only represented a small percentage of supporting roles. As such, the lack of visibility of racialized Latinx bodies in mainstream media adds to the inaccurate cultural depictions of U.S. Latinx communities. This, in turn, reduces Latinx identities, experiences, and stories to stereotypes that are typical in U.S. media representations of Latinxs. (Torres 146)

And, while many of the major themes I've discussed in the first two chapters remain applicable to this new age of representation, there are two additional concepts that I concentrate on in this chapter: that of generational tensions between Mexican parents, typically immigrants, and their Chicano children as well as an implicit pride for the Chicano identity as exhibited by the characters featured in the movies and shows I examine here. Despite the fact that films prior to the 2000s explored the friction between different generations, namely *Mi Familia*, there seem to be a higher number of films in the past 26 years that more prominently deal with this idea. This is most likely a result of an evolving cultural identity that older generations of Mexicans and Chicanos are coming to terms with as their children carve out new paths in a multicultural American society. Since the older generations of Chicanos dealt with issues of immigration, displacement, and making a life for themselves in a new country, their perception of how lives should be conducted is vastly different from their own children's. Instead, the newer generation of Chicanos must grapple with issues of assimilation, identity, and other such factors that may not agree with the traditional standards of their parents. Additionally, the shift in modes of portrayal of the Chicano identity influenced the ways in which various aspects of Chicano life may not have been explored in previous decades. With the films explored in this chapter,

Chicanos now take pride in their sexuality, professional achievements, and appearance whereas several films of the 1980s and 1990s seemed more focused on expressing pride in a distinctly Mexican and/or Chicano culture rooted in Los Angeles. Although there may not be a straightforward answer as to why this shift occurs, it may be that the generation of Chicanos whose lives were told onscreen during the 1980s and 1990s experienced different struggles apart from their children, who now make up the focus of films from the 2000s onward.

Tortilla Soup*'s Look at Contemporary Chicanas*

The first of these films that I focus on is María Ripoll's 2001 film *Tortilla Soup*. Though the film touches on many of the themes I explored in previous chapters, such as the relative importance of family to Chicanos and the representation of the Chicana, *Tortilla Soup* also demonstrates themes of the Chicano identity in a multicultural society as well as generational discrepancies between the three Naranjo sisters—Maribel (Tamara Mello), Leticia (Elizabeth Peña), and Carmen (Jacqueline Obradors)—and their father, Martin (Héctor Elizondo). Based on the Taiwanese film *Eat Drink Man Woman* directed by Ang Lee in 1994, Ripoll's film also directs its attention to the inner-workings of a family of color, this time set in Los Angeles. In accordance with the more recent cinematic tradition of showcasing Chicanos as already having been assimilated into American culture and society, *Tortilla Soup* "centers on the lives of professional, middle-class women who are not celebrating their success as Latinas but are instead evaluating and negotiating with the complex components of their Latina identities amidst their achievements" (Rosales Herrera 127).

In touching on the generational divide between the three sisters and their father, these differences can oftentime be gleaned from their conversations around the dinner table—a tradition that Martin and his daughters make sure to adhere to every Sunday to honor their bonds

with each other. With that said, there are a few other rules that the daughters are expected to follow in accordance with Martin's respect for tradition. Upon entering the room for the first family dinner featured onscreen, Martin reminds Carmen that she must speak in "English or Spanish, one or the other" instead of resorting to a sort of Spanglish that he disapprovingly associates with younger generations of Chicanos. Later on in the conversation, Carmen points out that Martin neglected to add seeds to the soup he made, thus altering the flavor for worse. Martin, however, stays resolute in his actions arguing that "You would add seeds. I respect tradition." Slight interactions such as these hint at larger patterns within the film that reveal Martin disagrees with many of the decisions his daughters make concerning their lives, mostly in reference to their disregard for traditions he holds in high regard.

In fact, there are two instances in particular that showcase the discordance between Martin's beliefs around family and his daughters' desire for independence and success. It's during this first dinner, too, that Carmen announces her plan to move out of the house shared by the four of them. Though Carmen seems excited and even proud of her decision to move into a condo in Playa del Rey, Martin expresses disapproval that Carmen had not come to him for advice before going forward with her plan. In response, Carmen knowingly claims that he would have told her not to do it. Later in the film, Maribel also makes an announcement during dinner in which she tells the family that she has decided to postpone college. Martin communicates that he doesn't understand why Maribel would want to "find herself" before telling her that, because she's done the work of applying and getting accepted already, she will be going to college, "end of discussion." However, Maribel stands resolute in her decision, insisting that she should be able to maintain control over her own life. But when Martin asserts that she will do what he says while living in his house, Maribel impulsively declares that she will be moving in with her

Brazilian boyfriend, Andy (Nikolai Kinski), much to his surprise. This leads to an argument on all fronts of the dinner table, demonstrating the constant tug of war between Martin's steadfast expectations for his daughters and their own inclinations to live life they each want to.

Even so, Martin does not exhibit a toxic sort of masculinity that drives his opposition to his daughters' lifestyle choices. Rather than falling into machismo stereotypes often associated with Latino and Chicano men in which much of the rationale behind their actions is meant to force women into more submissive roles, Martin only disputes his daughters' efforts on the grounds of not complying with tradition. In fact, the film demonstrates Martin's commitment to supporting his three daughters' success in whatever way that manifests itself. For instance, when Carmen announces her plan to move to Barcelona for a new job offer, Martin asks whether this is a good opportunity as that's what matters. Carmen responds that "It's the kind of opportunity you've always wanted for me, Dad," implying that Martin does indeed want his children to succeed in whatever way possible. Though he appears uncomfortable following Carmen's expansion on the position, this discomfort on Martin's part seems to stem more from the fact that he is losing his daughter to geographical distance rather than distress over the fact that she is finding success in her field.

Tortilla Soup further avoids stereotyping by inherently taking pride in the Chicano identities presented onscreen. For starters, all three of Martin's daughters embody wildly different personalities, interests, and goals that go to illustrate the diversity of character that Chicanos inhabit. This is fairly crucial given that much of Hollywood's film repertoire showcasing Chicanos tends to corner both Chicanos and Chicanas into the same types of portrayals over and over again. And, although Carmen, Leticia, and Maribel all explore various aspects of their sexuality within the film, they are never once typified as lustful harlots or dark

ladies waiting to be liberated by an Anglo protagonist. Additionally, the film presents a modern Chicano family living in a relatively middle-class setting without featuring violent crime or gang activity often seen in Chicano media. Instead, *Tortilla Soup* highlights the everyday aspects of interpersonal relationships operating just as a middle-class Anglo family might, while still featuring fundamental aspects of Chicano culture like food, religion, language, and music. Though technically a product of mainstream Hollywood production and distribution, this film's limited theatrical release and low box-office earnings mark a trend in that lesser-known mainstream films—or even independent films as I explore later—tend to have more faithful and respectful representation of Chicanos as opposed to higher-grossing films with inaccurate representation like *Spanglish*.

Tradition and Body Positivity in Real Women Have Curves

Another strong film of the independent Chicano cinematic tradition is Patricia Cardoso's 2002 film *Real Women Have Curves*. Starring America Ferrera, in her feature film debut, as Ana García, this independent film offers a realistic depiction of Chicanas who feel comfortable in their own skin—a departure from previous films focusing on Chicanos that frame any Chicana characters as objects of desire or support for male characters. Constantly at war with her own mother, Carmen (Lupe Ontiveros), Ana comes to terms with her appearance, sexuality, and career aspirations despite the traditional expectations placed upon her by Carmen to act as a respectable, submissive Chicana woman. As a result, the film exemplifies the themes I've been discussing in that there are unmistakable generational struggles between Ana and Carmen as well as contemporary interpretation of Chicana pride. In dealing with these themes in addition to representing Chicano everyday life and hardships, Cardoso's film champions what it means to be a Chicana while accentuating "Latino subjectivity within the wider spectrum of issues that Ana

has to confront as a typical teenager" (Rosales Herrera 128). In doing so, *Real Women Have Curves* subverts both stereotypes and tradition using an uncharacteristic protagonist who remains resolute throughout as a plus-size Chicana who finds pride in her body and identity.

In first discussing the generational tensions within the film, Ana and Carmen are consistently at odds with each other in almost every aspect of their lives: Carmen despises Ana's bodily appearance while Ana begins to take pride in the way she looks, Carmen believes that women should adhere to traditional, submissive roles in the household while Ana works hard to get into Columbia University to make a life for herself, etc. Because Ana's experience becomes a key battleground between herself and Carmen, it must be acknowledged that Carmen's disapproval is rooted in historically entrenched and confining beliefs placed upon Chicanas. For Carmen, Ana's appearance is unflattering and should be worked on in order to attract a man and future husband. Thus, Carmen's traditional beliefs are rooted in patriarchal and sexist assumptions that women must conform to male gaze and desire. However, Ana comes to rely on a mindset of body positivity to parry her mother's attacks on her appearance. One of the key scenes that serve as a culmination of sorts of all these disagreements comes when Ana is working in her sister's dress factory alongside many other Latina women. Tired of the hot climate of the factor, Ana removes her shirt which causes Carmen to chastise her actions while also implying that both Ana and her sister Estela (Ingrid Oliu) should lose weight in order to attract men better. Encouraging each other in a friendly competition, Ana and Estela are joined by the other Latina factory workers in comparing cellulite, stretch marks, and more to declare that they are all still beautiful. Appalled, Carmen does not join them, representing the "old world" traditions that she so firmly stands by.

Because Ana feels she cannot approach Carmen about issues of sexuality, academics, or other teenage qualms, she often turns to the male figures in her life for guidance and support. Though this does not inherently present any issues, the film plays into a common trope used in both Latino and Chicano media that of the absent mother. Seen in several pieces of Latino media and beyond (e.g. *Selena* (Nava, 1997) and *Crash* (Haggis, 2004)), this trope depends on a maternal figure who is missing or sidelined from the plot in order for the protagonist to achieve their goals with help from their father figure. Much of the reason this trope exists, however, is because of societal anxieties about womanly power. In this way, the trope mitigates this threat by relegating the mother as nonexistent and unavailable, while the father stands to liberate the protagonist by instilling more masculine ideals of selfhood.

Several instances throughout the film showcase Ana's reliance on the men in her life as Ana's abuelito covers for her when she makes plans to go on a date with a boy and Ana's father ultimately encourages her to attend Columbia after her male teacher advocates on Ana's behalf. Latina poet and scholar Deborah Paredez speaks about this trope in her article, "All About my (Absent) Mother," explaining that "given that Ana's mother reinforces patriarchy, traditions of the 'Old World' are gendered feminine, while her father's, grandfather's, and teacher's support of her pursuit of higher education genders the progress of the 'New World' as masculine" (133). In doing so, *Real Women Have Curves* ultimately positions the blame on and antagonizes Carmen for creating tensions based on generationally held traditions that she continues to live by and force onto Ana. So, though this trope does result in Ana's own self-realization by the end of the film, she is only able to achieve this awareness at the cost of another Latina and her own mother at that. Circling back again to the logic of this trope, films that incorporate this plotline are able to blame the older Chicana for the protagonist's struggles and unenlightened state. As a

result, patriarchal intentions to uphold domination and power over women's bodies and minds is maintained as the father, not the mother, receives the honor of allowing the protagonist to be uplifted.

Nevertheless, Cardoso's film is still lauded for its feminist depiction of a contemporary Chicana in relation to her body image, self-worth, and hardships. Similar to *Tortilla Soup*, *Real Women Have Curves* is "less concerned with Latino identity than with celebrating womanhood for a coming-of-age Latina whose choices are never dependent on compromising her real sense of self, cultural or otherwise" (Rosales Herrera 128). And, in addition to its incorporation of generational tensions between Ana and her mother Carmen, the film still confronts the everyday struggles Chicanas face even in a supposedly more accessible and multicultural society. For example, Ana does in fact have the potential and academic merit to have been accepted into Columbia University, but still faces challenges in going there due to her family's economic and social position. For much of the film, Ana is expected to labor alongside her mother, sister, and other Latinas in order to support her family financially whereas Ana's Anglo crush, Jimmy, doesn't have to worry about those same concerns. In portraying this aspect of Ana's life, the film positions the differences in privilege between Chicanas and Anglo men even in today's modern and apparently progressive society. Finally, in providing a compelling addition to Chicano cinema's coming-of-age genre with a protagonist who embarks on a path of self-realization amongst her cultural upbringing as a Chicana, *Real Women Have Curves* exemplifies the marked division between an independent practice that seeks to elevate Chicanos with socio-political commentary versus stereotypical representation of Chicanos in mainstream films.

Chicano and Anglo Differences in Spanglish

Despite these relatively strong cinematic contributions to Chicano cinema on the independent side, the past 25 years or so has also seen a decline in the quality of Chicano cinema being produced in mainstream Hollywood. In reference to the shift I discussed earlier in this chapter regarding broader Latino media, recent Chicano cinema lacks a level of political and cultural engagement that used to be starkly present in Chicano-centered films of the 1980s and 1990s. Ridden with stereotypes and often failing to advance a narrative that reflects the true nature of Chicano culture, these films exemplify the gap between Hollywood as a geographical industrial center and its surrounding Latino population in and around Los Angeles. *Spanglish*, a 2004 film directed by James L. Brooks, is one of those films that I want to highlight as an example of this disconnect. What appears as an effort to tell the story of an immigrant mother-daughter duo struggling to adjust to Anglo, upper middle-class Angelenos' ways of living turns into a messy comedy that relies on stereotypical conventions that continue to hamper Chicano representation in film. The film centers around Cristina Moreno (Shelbie Bruce) and her mother, Flor (Paz Vega), who finds a job as a maid for a chef and his dysfunctional family living in an affluent Los Angeles neighborhood. Though it attempts to portray themes of assimilation and sacrifice that give rise to tensions in Cristina and Flor's relationship, *Spanglish* does not wholly focus on these two Latinas but instead centers their experience around that of a privileged Anglo family. Throughout the film, in fact, Flor and Cristina grapple with wanting to resist the influences of the Claskys and a fascination, or even desire, with the Clasky's wealthy lifestyle and privilege, respectively.

The film works to juxtapose Flor's loving and caretaking nature with that of Deborah Clasky's (Téa Leoni) controlling and often offensive disposition, but creates tension between

Flor and her own daughter when Cristina becomes fascinated by the Clasky family's wealthy lifestyle and yearns to be part of that Anglo-typical world. In one scene, Deborah purposely gifts her daughter clothing that's too small to fit as a means of encouraging Bernice (Sarah Steele) to lose weight. Seeing Bernice's pained reaction, Flor decides to alter the clothes to fit Bernice, presenting a much more kind approach than Deborah. However, once Cristina and Flor come to live with the Clasky's later on in the film, it is Deborah who drives a wedge between the Latina duo. After Deborah procures a scholarship for Cristina to attend the same private school as Bernice, Flor becomes worried that Cristina will change and "become like them." After quitting her job at the Clasky house at the end of the film, Flor ultimately tells Cristina that she will no longer attend Bernice's school to which Cristina has a public meltdown, screaming at her mother that "you ruined everything!" However, the film culminates with Cristina's acceptance of Flor's decision, as Cristina realizes through her college essay that she would have to work hard to earn a comfortable life like her own mother has. Still the film adheres to this ongoing theme of generational tension, but only because it positions Flor as the antagonist to her child's happiness.

Aside from this narrative situation of Flor's character, the film also complies with historical stereotypes concerning its portrayal of Chicanas. In addition to making Flor a maid, which I mentioned previously has long been a common occupation for Chicanas in media, director Brooks also renders Flor as the modern incarnation of both the dark lady and female clown stereotypes of old—such as Lupe Vélez's "Spitfire" character from the 1930s and 1940s. For the patriarch of the family, John Clasky (Adam Sandler), Flor represents the innocent and loving mother to his children that his own wife cannot embody. Coupled with her sexual appeal, this quality of Flor's offers John an emotionally enticing alternative for which he develops forbidden feelings. In this way, John views Flor as a sort of dark lady who steals his attention and

affection away from Deborah. Later on, though, Flor intentionally makes the decision to interrupt any thought of a possible affair or relationship with John as she tells him they can't have a relationship. This way, the film positions Flor as able to reinstate her own agency over John's lustful view of her.

Flor dually operates as the female clown, however, in that many of her actions result in comedic moments for the audience to laugh at. Her innocence and unfamiliarity with upper middle class Anglo culture makes her the subject of ridicule for much of the film. When John offers to drive Flor home after Deborah purposefully gifts Bernice clothes that are too small, he experiences a fit of outrage that frightens Flor. As a result, she humorously attempts to leave the car while John is still driving it simply because she is not used to a man being so overtly emotional. In a later scene, Flor also accidentally engages in fetch with the Clasky's dog, Chum, even though Deborah told her vehemently that Flor should never do such a thing. However, Flor finds out exactly why Deborah cautioned her earlier when she must comically deal with the dog's persistence to keep playing. For this reason, Flor's personality becomes something that the film intends the audience to find humor in, equating her character to the female clowns throughout Latino cinematic history that audiences could rely on for entertainment and laughs.

Much of the humor within the film, though, revolves around her use of the Spanish language and the various lengths that she or the Clasky's will go to to understand each other. Oftentimes, Flor uses Cristina's knowledge of Spanish and English to translate for her in situations that require communication. Towards the beginning of the film, Cristina relays her mother's scolding rejection of drinks from two men at a restaurant to their waitress, resulting in a comedic reaction from the men and the waitress thereafter. Similarly, when Flor becomes increasingly upset with the Clasky's conduct, Cristina translates her mother's anger quite

expressively to John. This arduous and complicated method of communication results in Flor's motivation to learn English which, as Cristina states in her narration, "assimilation gets expensive." Not only does the film require Flor's assimilation, but *Spanglish* paints this process as humorous, too, with the Clasky grandmother Evelyn (Cloris Leachman) even joining Flor's instruction despite already being proficient in English herself. Thus, in adhering to these stereotypes of the dark lady and the female clown while also ridiculing the aspects of Flor's Chicana identity to the point where she must change to fit the Clasky's lifestyle, *Spanglish* exists as a poor representation of Chicanas in Hollywood cinema. Even barring reliance on detrimental stereotypes from the past, the film positions the Chicanas in the film as revolving around an Anglo family. In opposition to this, I posit that quality Chicano cinema should advance a wholly Chicano perspective without resorting to plotlines primarily centered around an Anglo way of life. However, the 2000s still saw productions outside the realm of mainstream film that provided alternative portrayals of Chicanos and their everyday lives.

Walkout *and a Modern Look Back at Chicano Activism*

Another film directed by Edward James Olmos and produced by activist and filmmaker Moctesuma Esparza is *Walkout*. Having aired on HBO in 2006 rather than in theaters, this film represents the more subtle channels that Chicano filmmakers utilized in order to advance their own cinematic representation. As a breach from other films discussed in this chapter in terms of its modes of Chicano portrayal, *Walkout* marked a slight return to the didactic nature of the previous two decades in that it provided fictionalized insight into actual historical events. Based on the true story of Chicano student walkouts across East Los Angeles in 1968, this seemingly obscure film still deals with the themes of generational tension and the Chicano identity while overriding certain stereotypes at the same time.

Since the actress playing *Walkout*'s protagonist Paula Crisostomo, Alexa PenaVega, is most known for her role in the *Spy Kids* film franchise, I'd like to take a moment here to speak on Robert Rodriguez's work and the cinematic activities occurring in Texas at this point. Though Robert Rodriguez stands as just one filmmaker emerging from Texas, his narrative style greatly resembles and contributes to Tejano cinematic tradition on the whole. With films like *El Mariachi*, *Desperado* (1995), *From Dusk Till Dawn* (1996), and *Spy Kids* (2001), Rodriguez worked to advance specific "qualities of Latinx kinship: expansive, non-nuclear families; humor and playfulness; wordplay in two languages; and a rooted (if often obscured) history and culture in the United States" (Lozano 142). As it stands, Rodriguez acts as another person who carved a path for Latino filmmakers (e.g. Guillermo del Toro, Alfonso Cuarón, and Alejandro González Iñárritu) just as Luis Valdez and Gregory Nava had come to do in their own right and time. Bridging this geographical gap between Texan Latinos and Chicanos and the Hollywood filmic mainstream, Tejano cinema originally grew with additions like *The Ballad of Gregorio Cortez* (Young, 1982) and *Selena* and continued to evolve with Rodriguez's previously listed creations. Even recently, Tejano cinema persists with films like Julio Quintana's *The Long Game* (2024), which follows a young Chicano who takes up golf amidst discrimination in the 1950s. In general, the development of Tejano cinema and filmmakers like Rodriguez served as another point of access for Latinos to enter mainstream Hollywood and see themselves both on and behind the screen.

Returning back to my discussion of the film *Walkout*, however, there exists a stark generational divide between Paula and the rest of the students her age and her father, Panfilo (Yancey Arias). Throughout the film, Panfilo acts as the angry, domineering Mexican father who constantly clashes with Paula over her newfound realization of Chicano pride. Representative of

a vast tide of students who also found themselves amid this cultural awakening in the 1960s, thus resulting in several protests that would come to characterize the Chicano movement and popularity of the term "Chicano," Paula and her fellow classmates are not only at odds with Anglo society and institutions, but also their parents' skepticism in challenging authority. Even Paula's mother Francis (Laura Harring), who seems to succumb to the traditionally submissive incarnation of Latino wives and mothers, worries and attempts to stop Paula from her revolutionary goals. Similarly, when Panfilo learns of Paula's plan to walkout in protest of her school's discriminatory policies and attitudes towards Chicano students, he expresses his disdain for Paula and her compatriots by labeling them as "agitators." Following the walkout, Panfilo even casts Paula from their family's house for her actions. At the end of the film though, both of Paula's parents demonstrate their ultimate support of her mission: Francis joins other parents and community members in physical protest while Panfilo restores hope in his daughter after several student leaders and Brown Berets are arrested, telling her not to give up despite the fact that he may not agree with Paula's actions. In this way, *Walkout* advances a narrative centered on unity while simultaneously dealing with generational disagreements.

As a film that focuses on the Chicano Civil Rights Movement, it's almost inherent that *Walkout* features effective instances that depict Chicanos in a respectful and authentic manner. In its basis on true events, the film attempts to showcase the obstacles Chicano students faced in the 1960s, such as getting beat for using Spanish in school, confronting police brutality during peaceful protests, and generally dealing with the lack of opportunities and low expectations offered to them by Anglo teachers and educational institutions. In an effort to empower, however, Olmos' film includes these students' fight within society and their own families. Paula, as the protagonist, must not only grapple with the gendered expectations set upon her by her own

family, but must also realize her Chicana identity in order to inspire other young minds to fight back against discrimination. In fact, multiple instances throughout the film, particularly the leadership conference in Malibu, open Paula's and the other students' eyes to La Raza, or a shared sense of experiences and culture among Chicanos and Latinos. And, just as Francis and Panfilo set aside their differences for the sake of advancing a united front against Anglo forces of authority, Paula and her classmates dig deep within their Chicana and Chicano identities to communally rise above their situation. For this reason, *Walkout* acts as another example of the ways in which more independent styles of filmmaking tend to deal with political commentary, and thus a more exemplary representation of Chicanos, in comparison to mainstream films that relied on detrimental stereotypes to portray Chicanos or completely neglected to feature aspects of the Chicano identity on screen.

A Better Life*'s Generational Divide and Immigrant Hardship*

Moving into the 2010s, another film of the independent tradition is Chris Weitz's 2011 film *A Better Life*. After having his truck stolen, immigrant father Carlos (Demián Bichir) and his son Luis (José Julián) trek around Los Angeles in pursuit of this vehicle that represents Carlos' means of income. As a commentary on immigrant work and the hardships faced by undocumented immigrants simply trying to get by and support their family, *A Better Life* also considers the generational divide between a father and the relationship with his son. Rosales Herrera speaks on these tensions while highlighting the importance of the immigrant experience in recent films of the past twenty years or so:

> Underscoring the familial and generational tensions between undocumented Mexican immigrants and their assimilated children, the films examine the personal trials and tribulations of undocumented workers beyond the solely political ideological arenas.

> Moving away from the didactic successes of the 1990s, recent Latino films like *August Evening* and *A Better Life* engage in the heated national debate over illegal immigration by offering nuanced depictions of their protagonists' daily reality in the United States, including the literal and figurative divisions affecting immigrant families. In doing so, these films succeed in requestioning an American dream that seems to separate families, while also affirming the humanity of the Latino immigrant who is determinedly in its pursuit. (Rosales Herrera 126)

As immigration increasingly becomes a topic of national concern and contention, Chicano cinema has come to reflect this trend in an effort to show an alternative side to the anxieties felt by a rising portion of the United States. However, seeing as the film is written, directed, and based on a story by three different Anglo men, *A Better Life* unintentionally advances harmful stereotypes about Chicanos and Mexican immigrants while trying to humanize them. Still, Demián Bichir grounds the film with his authentic performance, even earning an Academy Award nomination for his role.

Other films of the past two decades or so have also attempted to deal with immigrants and the lives of their children in similarly sensitive ways. Patricia Riggen's *La Misma Luna* in 2007 tells the story of a young Mexican mother, Rosario (Kate del Castillo) who immigrates to the United States in order to send money back to her son Carlitos (Adrián Alonso) in Mexico. After the death of his abuela, Carlitos is driven to reunite with his mother and embarks on a journey to the States. In depicting Carlitos' difficult trek to Los Angeles, the film highlights the harsh realities that immigrants face when forced to separate from their families in order to survive financially. With its incorporation of strong, supportive female characters like Doña Carmen (Carmen Salinas), a businesswoman who employs Carlitos to help him earn money, and

Reyna (María Rojo), who takes Carlitos in after an Anglo man tries to sell Carlos to a pimp, *La Misma Luna* takes care to depict Latinos and Mexicans in a positive, humanizing light while avoiding detrimental stereotypes and conventions. With a team of Chicanos behind the scenes and in front of the camera, the film effectively demonstrates the political, economic, and social forces working against undocumented immigrants while taking steps to highlight the lengths the Mexican community will go to in order to help each other in the long run: two coyotes try their best to stow Carlitos across the border, Enrique (Eugenio Derbez) begrudgingly looks after Carlitos and even sacrifices his own life in the States in order to ensure Carlitos reunites with his mom, and U.S. citizen Paco (Gabriel Porras) offers marriage to Rosario so that she can obtain her green card and live in the U.S. legally.

On the other hand, there have been mainstream films that attempt to deal with immigration in an encouraging manner, but succumb to typical conventions most likely due to the Hollywood studio power behind them. Disney's *McFarland, USA* (Caro, 2015) operates as one of these films that's based on the true story of a Southern California high school cross country team whose Anglo coach leads several Latino students to win the state championship. Throughout the duration of his new job, coach Jim White (Kevin Costner) comes to familiarize himself with and respect his students' lives, culture, and struggles as Chicano teenagers. As a white savior narrative, however, the film also falls prey to several stereotypes such as gang violence that implicates White's daughter Julie (Morgan Saylor) and Thomas's (Carlos Pratts) macho, abusive father and pregnant teenage sister. And, instead of treating elements of the Chicano lifestyle with care and detail, *McFarland, USA* exoticizes traditions like quinceañeras and barely delves into the hardships of Latino manual laborers in the fields.

Shifting focus back to *A Better Life*, though, the film emphasizes the differences between Mexican immigrants and their Chicano children, but ultimately conquers this dissension with harmony in mutual understanding—similar to Olmos' *Walkout*. For Luis, this search for Carlos' stolen truck works to spark appreciation towards his father's efforts. From the very beginning of the film, there exists conflict between Carlos and Luis due to Luis's commitment to school. When asking his father for money, Carlos responds that Luis would need to earn it through work, but that "school's important" and Luis should stop missing class. Throughout the entire film, in fact, Luis is opposed to Carlos in several ways even though he agrees to help his father find the truck, which is further expressed when Luis and Carlos attend a rodeo: Luis makes fun of the workers' traditional dress attire, claims to hate ranchero music, and thinks that there's no point in "all these poor people hav[ing] kids." Later on, Luis also objects to Carlos' methods of finding the truck, complaining that his father needs to be more aggressive and cold in his search if they want to realize their dreams of finding the truck and improving their state of living.

However, when Carlos is arrested for stealing back his truck from a garage, Luis visits his father at a detention center as he awaits deportation back to Mexico. In this scene, Carlos expands on his love and hopes for his son, causing Luis to see that it's him and his future that has inspired Carlos to live and work. With the thought of having failed Luis as a father, Carlos is brought to tears and garners comfort from Luis through a song that Carlos used to sing to his son when he was younger. When an ICE officer abruptly ends their conversation, Luis promises Carlos that he'll stay with his Aunt Anita (Dolores Heredia) and attend school only on the condition that his father makes it back to the States somehow. This emotional parting between father and son fundamentally bridges the rift in their relationship seen throughout the film. Through Luis's understanding of his father's lifelong struggle to provide, work, and take care of

his son, the film cultivates respect and empathy for immigrants like Carlos who are trying to do the same throughout Los Angeles and the rest of the country.

As I mentioned earlier, though, this film was directed by Chris Weitz, written by Eric Eason, and based on a story by Roger L. Simon; in other words, three Anglo men who have no firsthand experience with Latino immigration or come from a Latino background themselves. Like many other films that focus on Chicanos but are written and/or directed by Anglo individuals—*Spanglish* having been another example of this—*A Better Life* is almost bound to make use of certain stereotypes as a result. Sure enough, the way in which gang members are portrayed within the film fits el bandido to a tee. When Luis is in danger of joining an East Los Angeles gang because of his friends' interest in membership and his girlfriend's relation to established gang members, the film depicts these men as tatted-up cholos—Chicano men who adhere to a style of khakis, flannels, and wife-beater tank tops along with Mexican street slang—who have chosen this lifestyle because the education system neglected them. Though this does touch on the lack of opportunity that often pushes Chicano youth to join gangs, these men are still depicted as violent and aggressive with crime being a prominent and given aspect of living in East L.A. Additionally, when Luis and Carlos trek to South Central to find the man who stole their truck, the Black men, presumably gang members based on the way Luis describes this area as "Crip-Land," seem confrontational towards Luis and Carlos saying things like "Come on over here," "What's up with y'all," and "Long way from Boyle Heights." While they're walking, too, graffiti on a wall behind them reads "Too many Mexicans not enough bullets," thus pitting Latino and Black people against each other like too many other films (e.g. *Colors* and *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever* (2018)) have done.

On the other hand, the film challenges typical macho stereotypes in regard to Carlos' approach as a father. While many fathers in Hollywood films focusing on Chicano stories tend to paint Latino fathers as violent, drunk deadbeats who are never there to support their children, *A Better Life* turns this convention on its head by portraying Carlos as a devoted father whose main mission in life is to provide for his son and make sure Luis has the best future possible. In fact, Carlos is fairly tame when dealing with the matters of his stolen truck, refraining from taking advantage of people and even stopping Luis from beating the man who stole his truck. And, although the film also complies with the absent mother cliché that Deborah Paredez describes, Carlos continues on with his life even after Luis's mom abandons them. The film also incorporates various aspects of Chicano culture throughout, from the rodeo that featured caballeros and traditional ranchero music to its notable use of the Spanish language. These authentic facets within the film are nonetheless weighed down by its previously examined conventional stereotypes, making the film a flawed representation of Chicanos even if its effort to humanize immigrants was well-intended.

Chicana Sexuality in Mosquita y Mari

One final prominent independent film of this period is Aurora Guerrero's 2012 coming-of-age film, *Mosquita y Mari*. As an exploration of two Chicanas' youth, friendship, and queer bonds with each other, this film acts as a landmark for conversations surrounding these topics within Chicano cinema. Though films before this had already begun to investigate these intersections of identity, *Mosquita y Mari* stands out for the purposes of my research in that it also applies to the themes I've been examining within this chapter. The protagonist, Yolanda (Fenessa Pineda), faces tensions with her parents' and their expectations as they strictly mandate her academic progress towards going to college. And, when Mari (Venecia Troncoso) moves into

Yolanda's neighborhood, these pressures become exacerbated. It's the relationship between these two Chicanas, however, that carries the film as Yolanda and Mari try to help each other cope with their lives academically, socially, and familially.

As I mentioned, though, other films within the independent Chicano cinematic tradition broached the topic of intersectional identities in major ways, too. Richard Glatzer's and Wash Westmoreland's *Quinceañera* (2006), for instance, tells the story of two Chicano cousins who become outcasts due to Magdalena's (Emily Rios) pregnancy—though she is still a virgin—and Carlos' (Jesse Garcia) status as a gay man. In examining the gendered expectations placed upon Chicanas and the sometimes harsh nature that Latino families will adhere to simply based on tradition, the film attempts to showcase an aspect of the modern Chicano lifestyle for these two cousins. And although the film is written and directed by two Anglo men, *Quinceañera* does a surprisingly solid job of overcoming stereotypes while showcasing the detrimental effects of gentrification—an ever-evolving problem for people of color trying to afford a living on the streets of Los Angeles and so many other urban centers. More specifically, Carlos still maintains a macho countenance despite being gay, whereas many films and television shows at this time and previously tended to frame any gay male character as effeminate merely because of their sexuality: Nathan Lane as Albert Goldman in *The Birdcage* (Nichols, 1996), Damian (Daniel Franzese) in *Mean Girls* (Waters, 2004), and Kurt (Chris Colfer) from *Glee* (2009-2015) among others.

Mosquita y Mari seems to have a similar approach regarding Yolanda's and Mari's burgeoning intimacy with each other. Because the film is set within the past twenty years and touches on issues of sexuality, Guerrero's work actively strives to emphasize an aspect of Chicano identity that much of Chicano cinema up until this point in time has neglected to cover.

For instance, Yolanda and Mari must both contend with their parents' expectations as well as that of their Chicano friends in navigating their own friendship and affection for each other. And, in acknowledging the hardships and disproportionate scholastic opportunities that Chicanos in L.A. face on a daily basis, the film also depicts how two young Chicanas try their best to uplift each other out of their situations. In particular, Yolanda takes it upon herself to help Mari with schoolwork since Mari often gets caught up with paid work or household duties to support her own family. For Yolanda, getting into college and doing well in school provides a source of empowerment and acts as a "fuck you" to a system that chooses not to believe in them. Thus, in positioning both Chicano culture alongside Yolanda and Mari's queer sexuality, the film finally makes it apparent onscreen that these two identities can coexist with each other rather than separately.

Another key aspect of the film are the struggles between Yolanda and Mari and their respective parents due to the expectations set for the young Chicanas. Within the first fifteen minutes of the film, it's made clear that Yolanda's parents prioritize her academics over everything else: when Yolanda asks if she can go hang out with Mari across the street, Mrs. Olveros (Laura Pataleno) only allows her to do so on the condition that the girls will be studying together. And when Yolanda asks about the first time her parents met and that sort of "life stuff," Mrs. Olveros replies in Spanish that "We've made it perfectly clear that the only thing you need to worry about is school" and that she's not working hard just for Yolanda to somehow give up her education. By closing off any sort of further conversation with her daughter, Mrs. Olveros demonstrates the difficult relationship some Chicano parents and kids must navigate due to standards that the older generation believes their children should meet. Later on, when Mrs. Rodriguez (Dulce Maria Solis) confronts Mari about working, Mari defends herself by arguing

that without rent wouldn't be made without her contributions. However, Mrs. Rodriguez immediately counters that, explaining that Mari's father and her wanted her to go to school rather than worry about finances. "Having a green card," Mari counters, "gets you an education"—once again portraying this constant battle between child and parent and how each generation's outlook on life offers a root cause for their ongoing disagreements.

Of course, if both parents can barely accept any delineation from their expectations and hopes for their children, it would make sense that Yolanda and Mari might be apprehensive about exploring their sexuality and feelings for each other. In fact, when Yolanda and Mari do finally physically consummate their affection for each other by kissing at Yolanda's house, they immediately spring apart to opposite ends of the couch when Yolanda's parents arrive home. This is where films like *Quinceañera* and *Mosquita y Mari* begin to carve their own paths within Chicano cinema; by taking this common theme of generational tensions to another level and bringing a complexity to it that other Chicano films may not, these works attempt to examine other sorts of conflict aside from those already discussed so far. As more independent filmmakers strive to make this sort of representation a reality, Chicano cinema in general will be better equipped to advance in the larger mission of dissolving stigmas surrounding various intersections of identity.

Streaming Carves a New Path with Vida

The next couple pieces of media that I analyze also surround representation of the modern Chicano as well as aspects of intersectionality and, in particular, queer identities in Chicano communities. However, due to the relative absence of Chicano films within the past ten years or so, I intend to utilize two different television series for the purposes of applying the themes I've been discussing to recent Chicano media, in general. Though films like Miguel

Arteta's *Beatriz at Dinner* (Arteta, 2017) and Damien Chazelle's *Babylon* (2022) portray Chicano characters at the forefront of their narratives while meeting my criteria of being set in Los Angeles, I do not feel that these films provide a strong enough source to analyze the representation within. Even though both of these works attempt to confront immigrant struggle in their own ways, in my opinion, neither properly ground their focus on the main Chicano or Chicana protagonist and instead base the protagonist's reactions and progress based on the surrounding majority of Anglo characters. Rather, series exhibited through modes of streaming like *Vida* and *Gentefied* have the potential to do the opposite. In fact, as independent filmmakers struggle to attain funding for their films and battle with dominant Hollywood studios in today's times, streaming has emerged as an alternative route for independent cinema to showcase their stories. In this way, shows like *Vida, On My Block* (2018), and *Gentefied* among others mirror independent cinematic styles in that the creators of these series offer more politically and culturally engaging narratives and representations of Chicanos.

With that now established, I specifically turn my attention to Chicana filmmaker Tanya Saracho and her series *Vida*. Centered around two sisters' return to their the Boyle Heights neighborhood upon the passing of their mother, the show navigates the intersection of multiple different aspects of Emma (Mishel Prada) and Lyn's (Melissa Barrera) identities as well as that of the Chicano community at large. With a particular focus on sexuality (Emma is queer and so was her mother Vidalia), gender (Emma and Lyn both identity as female and provide another modern look at Chicanas), and race (most of the community in East Los Angeles is made up of Latinos and/or Chicanos), *Vida* uses intersectionality as a jumping off point to deal with other crucial issues affecting the Chicano community such as gentrification and colorism. Still, while

dealing with this wide myriad of complexities, Saracho's work manages to touch on the core themes of generational divides and the Chicano/a's rendering in modern multicultural society.

From the very first episode of the series, it's made clear that tensions between Emma and her mother persist even after Vidalia's sudden death. After discovering that their mother was married to Eddy (Ser Anzoategui), a butch lesbian woman, the sisters storm out of the house and Emma does not hesitate to call her mother a "cunt" for being a liar and a hypocrite about her sexuality. Later on in episode 4, Emma reveals to her old friend and love interest Cruz (Maria Elena Laas) that the reason she spent so much time away from Los Angeles was because Vidalia would send Emma to live with her tía in Texas every time she was caught engaging with her queer feelings in her youth. Thinking back on it, Emma attributes Vidalia's actions to her mother's own closeted "gay shame," underscoring the generational divide between Emma and Vidalia and the source of their differences. Despite the fact that both Chicanas are queer, Vidalia's internalized homophobia kept her from allowing both her daughter's and her own sexuality to flourish. As a result, the show demonstrates complex emotions while considering cultural pressures through the generational conflicts seen between Emma and her late mother.

Furthermore, *Vida* does an exemplary job of also touching on critical matters such as colorism and gentrification within the Chicano community in L.A. In the first episode, outspoken activist Mari (Chelsea Rendon) calls Emma and Lyn "gringas" and "whitina," not only making fun of the sisters' lighter skin color but also hinting that their attitudes don't align with the Boyle Heights community any longer. Because Emma and Lyn have distanced themselves from their neighborhood in East L.A. both physically and culturally, many of the members who do tie their identities to the Chicano community—Mari, for instance—see them as outsiders. Even before this, Emma establishes herself as apart from the community, condemning her mother's "pocho

Spanglish" as inferior to her own more proper spoken Spanish. In positioning each character, who are mostly Chicanas or Chicanx, as different from one another based on their language, cultural, and lifestyle practices, *Vida* portrays the vast array of identities and distinctions that can exist under the Chicana/x umbrella. In doing so, Saracho "underscore[s] the tension these characters confront of feeling both a sense of belonging and exclusion from these different physical and imagined communities," while simultaneously confronting underlying and implicit colonialist and Anglo tendencies—as seen through Emma's disdain for Spanglish slang and lack of fluency by other Chicanos—that detract from a united Chicano community (Torres 164). Such complex representations of Chicanos supports my claim that modern-day streaming acts similarly to what independent Chicano cinema attempts to accomplish in providing political and cultural commentary from a Chicano perspective.

Contemporary Chicano Issues in Gentefied

Moving on to my final piece of media, *Gentefied* (2020-2021) is a series created by Marvin Lemus and Linda Yvette Chávez that follows three Chicano cousins and their efforts to support their grandfather, or "Pop," Casimiro Morales (Joaquín Cosío). With prominent actress, filmmaker, and activist America Ferrera operating as both executive producer and director of four episodes, the series makes it a point to celebrate various aspects of the Latino and Chicano identity and community. Along the same lines as *Vida*, *Gentefied* contends with similar issues of gender, race, class, and sexuality as well as the intersection of all of these characteristics. As is implied in the title, too, the series also works to emphasize gentrification and the detrimental effects it has on urban communities and businesses, especially those populated and run by people of color. With its refusal to adhere to certain stereotypes, *Gentefied* also goes to demonstrate the lifestyle and representation of Chicanos in the modern era, with its use of bilingualism,

appreciation of Latino music and food, and incorporation of revolutionary Chicano ideals. Finally, though the series advances a theme of solidarity and unity, there still exist several different dynamics of tension between the younger generation of Morales cousins and the traditional attitude taken up by Casimiro after his wife Delfina passed.

As a study of sorts of the varying ways Chicanos can present themselves as in modern society, *Gentefied* incorporates both dimension and complexity in its depiction of the Morales cousins and the myriad of other Latinos surrounding them in their Boyle Heights community. For Ana (Karrie Martin) and her Afro-Latina girlfriend Yessika (Julissa Calderon), their identities are layered in that they are both women, Latina, and queer. Though they experience conflict later in the show, this couple provides a healthy and communicative queer couple in the first episode with Yessika supporting Ana's artistic career and with hard, heartfelt conversations. Much like *Mosquita y Mari* and *Vida*, this series' efforts to explore the intersection of queer and Latina identities marks new territory for Chicano media. In carving out a space for Latina women to explore their sexualities onscreen, these films and television series provide new opportunities for audiences to connect and identify with the characters projected before them.

Aside from such foregrounded queer representation, the show also investigates the push and pull between inclusion and exclusion. For Chris (Carlos Santos), the cousin who went off to become a talented chef, he is constantly made fun of by the other Morales family and Latino community members for his lack of Spanish and complicity with Anglo figures and systems of authority. Just as *Vida* utilizes Emma's character to contend with similar issues of superiority via assimilation, *Gentefied* frames Chris as a "gringo" while the rest of the family rest as true Chicanos. Touching on a common issue within the Chicano and Latino community, the series makes light of the various socio-cultural delineations that decide whether someone is truly

Chicano or not. *Blood In Blood Out* similarly uses protagonist Miklo (Damian Chapa), who is half-white and half-Mexican, to also investigate this theme since gang culture often determines allegiances based on factors of identity such as race. With such a pattern established throughout a myriad of different Chicano cinematic works, this idea of exclusion within one's own cultural community proves prominent and critical to be discussed.

More recently, the development of gentrification has also become a crucial topic of discussion seeing as communities and neighborhoods of color are primarily affected by this process. Defined by the National Institutes of Health as "the influx of capital and upper-middle class residents into formerly disinvested urban neighborhoods," several urban centers like Los Angeles witnessed a rise in gentrification since the 1990s with predominantly Latino and Chicano neighborhoods like Boyle Heights and Echo Park suffering from its harmful effects.[3] Seeing as East L.A. serves as the backdrop to both *Vida* and *Gentefied* with characters actively dealing with ownership of a family-owned business, it makes sense that gentrification becomes a central idea to both narratives. In *Gentefied* specifically, the Morales cousins work tirelessly to help Casimiro manage their beloved taco shop, Mama Fina's—which also happens to be filmed at the same location that Emma and Lyn eat birria at in *Vida*, and where Mari verbally ambushes two Anglo influencers trying to publicize traditional Mexican cuisine. As both a key place that brings the Morales family together and as a business that stands at the root of many of their problems due to the encroaching threats and rising costs of gentrification, Mama Fina's presents the many ways in which Chicanos suffer from this incursion. In one scene as the Morales cousins and Yessika chat over tamales at Mama Fina's, Yessika points out that "white folks love

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[3] See Agbai, Chinyere O. "Shifting Neighborhoods, Shifting Health: A Longitudinal Analysis of Gentrification and Health in Los Angeles County." *National Institutes of Health (NIH)*, U.S. National Library of Medicine, 30 June 2021, pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC8505760/#:~:text=As%20housing%20becomes%20increasingly%20expensive,unique%20to%20this%20metropolitan%20area.

dropping money on authenticity; tamales, serapes…our hoods" and that "they may love all our shit, but they don't love us." Dialogue such as this as well as several plot developments throughout the series directly address gentrification in this way, politically advocating for Chicanos in much the same way that other recent Chicano media has carved new ground for openly addressing topics around sexuality and gender.

As I mentioned earlier, *Gentefied* explores generational tensions between family members while still advancing a narrative of unity and support. For Ana, especially, the issues between her and her mom stem from her mother's expectations and desires for Ana to get a "real" job. Though Ana is intent on pursuing a professional career in art—even sneaking around at night to attend a gallery showcasing her works—her mother chastises her for not making any money to support herself and only relying on Casimiros' financial help to make rent. Similarly, Chris clearly has troubles with his own father whose calls he declines and who is labeled "El Cucuy" (a Hispanic bogeyman). At the end of the first episode, too, when Chris finally does answer his dad, he tells him "fuck you too" after his father compares Chris's culinary school education to "chingaderas" (or bullshit). The Morales cousins face opposition even from their grandfather, although not nearly in as harsh of a context as with their parents. When Erik (J.J. Soria) jokingly suggests finding a girlfriend for his abuelo, Casimiro points to his banded finger and says in Spanish "She's still here and nobody's changing that" before flipping Erik off in a teasing manner—referring to his ongoing commitment to Delfina and older Latinos' typically strict adherence to marital tradition. It should also be noted that Casimiro speaks strictly in Spanish while the younger Morales family members code-switch between Spanish and English frequently. With all this in mind, it's evident that there are clear differences between the younger

and older Morales generations, once again touching on a recurring theme in Chicano media that relates to cultural matters that Chicanos often encounter in their own lives.

Considering these innovative works that contribute to the ongoing cadre of Chicano cinema, there exist opportunities to pave new paths for authentic and realistic portrayals of Chicanos in media without necessarily falling prey to harmful stereotypes. However, as my focus on these last two series demonstrates, there are not nearly enough Chicano films in the past ten years that have sought to achieve this creative intersection of identity, culture, and real-life issues. Of course, several forces work against Chicano-centered media, some external to or internally operating within the general Latino community. Nonetheless, more filmmakers should be actively working to showcase the realities, livelihoods, and customs of Chicanos given our distinct presence around Los Angeles and the rest of the world.

Conclusion

As my research concerning the past four decades indicates, there is an ever-growing divide between mainstream and independent Chicano cinema. And while the overall presence of Latino and Chicano actors and filmmakers has grown in cinema, the ways in which these Chicano subjects and aspects of the Chicano identity are represented are not sufficiently authentic in portraying the culture, issues, and themes of a Chicano existence. In fact, the incorporation of Chicano films into the mainstream mirrors the socio-political assimilation that takes place for many Mexican immigrants and Chicanos living in the United States today. As Chicano films, actors, and filmmakers become absorbed in the mainstream Hollywood mode of filmmaking and production, their cultural identity is lost and no longer becomes a point of pride but is buried beneath the surface of digestible and mass-marketed narratives. I mentioned in the last chapter that blockbuster movies like *Scream VI* and *Beetlejuice Beetlejuice* may feature

Latino and Chicano talent, but do not make a clear effort to touch on cultural or political matters that would affect these characters in real life. Instead, any political themes or messages must be examined under a magnifying glass and arduously rooted out in order for mass audiences to simply sit back and enjoy the film at hand without having to consider or worry themselves with socio-political matters of importance.

Series that have emerged as a result of the entertainment industry's recent turn towards streaming, however, may present a more engaging alternative to this decline in subversive and political themes in film. Part of the reason I directed my attention to television shows like *Vida* and *Gentefied* was to address this development. As a parallel to independent trends and productions in Chicano cinema, streaming has become a way in which Chicano creators can facilitate their commentary on contemporary issues. Operating as productions that are made to specifically target niche audiences like the Chicano community, these series are much more culturally and politically engaging just as independently-oriented projects like *Zoot Suit*, *El Norte*, and *Born in East L.A.* had been in the 1980s.

Nevertheless, it's more imperative than ever to take note of the gap that exists between Hollywood as a historic and cultural hub for cinema and Latinos' and Chicanos' continued presence in the Southern California region. If this population only grows larger in this area of the country, then why do the films that emerge from this localized industry not reflect their culture and experiences? Though it has been thoroughly acknowledged, just as *Fortune* reports in "The Oscars Make It Clear: Hollywood Is in a Death Spiral," that overall Hollywood production rates have been steadily declining since 2022 primarily due to rising production costs, it still makes no sense as to why mainstream Hollywood is not working to actively cover issues affecting the Chicano community at large through the films that are being produced. And even with film

production moving to other states and countries like New Jersey with prominent Latino and Chicano populations, there is still no increase in the general number of Chicano-centered films produced and distributed. Given this decline, it is vital that any and all forms of media and cinema are utilized going forward to write, direct, and produce films that feature, represent, and give voice to Chicano stories and identities. With such a conservative political climate on the rise and actively working to upend Chicano presence in the United States, the need for more Chicano films is needed now more than ever.

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