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Just the Tip of the Iceberg: The Truncation of Mexican American Identity in *My Family/Mi Familia*

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> CHUY: [I'm] Chicano.
> CHE: Chicano? What is a Chicano?
> CHUY: I don't know!
> Culture Clash, "*A Bowl of Beings,*" 1998[1]

> Eager not to disappoint, i try my best to offer my benefactors and benefactresses what they most anxiously yearn for: the possibility of a difference, yet a difference or an otherness that will not go so far as to question the foundation of their beings and makings.
> Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Woman, Native, Other*, 1989[2]

A social gest is an overdetermined moment in the mise-en-scene of a live dramatic performance that reflects and refracts the various social relations that are at play within, around, and outside of the performance. As defined by Brecht, it is fundamentally "the mimetic and gestural expression of the social relationships prevailing between people of a given period" (103). Elin Diamond explains that every element in the mise-en-scene in the gestic instant contributes to the gest's significance. "Words, gestures, actions, tableaux all qualify as gests," she says, "if they enable the spectator to draw conclusions about the 'social circumstances' shaping a character's attitude" (537N). Diamond also mentions that a gest may imply the author's status within his/her own social matrix and the influence of the author's social standing on the production of the text. She therefore describes a gest as "a moment in performance that makes visible the contradictory interactions of text, theater apparatus, and contemporary social struggle" (519).

Although the remarks of Brecht and Diamond pertain specifically to live theatre, they enable an understanding of the beginning of the Gregory Nava film, *My Family/Mi Familia* (1995). After a few opening shots of the Los Angeles River and some of the bridges that span it, the audience of *My Family* is taken to a humble home in East Los Angeles. Inside, Paco (the narrator, played by Edward James Olmos) is working on an old mechanical typewriter. When the archaic machine jams, he gets up and heads outside. At this point, the most revealing social gest of the film occurs. Paco steps onto the front porch of his East Los Angeles abode, crosses his arms, and looks out (and up) at downtown Los Angeles. He is an outsider who is not even looking in, for his gaze cannot penetrate the fortification that the buildings create. He can only take in the distance between him and downtown, which from his vantage point is a far off, separate, and imposing world. Looking at the bastion of skyscrapers, Paco begins to tell his family's story.

Paco's outsider racial identity and subordinate social standing are registered in this scene vis-a-vis the visual implication of an alienated relationship between him and the cityscape. Specifically, the mise-en-scene suggests Paco's exclusion as a Mexican American from the social life, economic institutions, and civic power that the buildings represent. Nava thereby represents metonymically through Paco the marginalized and disempowered condition of Mexican Americans in the United States. When Paco takes up his outside position and proceeds to tell his family's story, he defiantly asserts and embraces Mexican American outsider identity. His crossed arms and stern facial expression convey at once a sense of dignity and autonomy while his demeanor betrays indifference to his marginalized social and political standing. Indeed, his air of dignity and autonomy seem to stem from his marginalized status.

Since Nava directed and co-wrote *My Family*, one may follow Diamond's lead and read the film as the filmmaker's response to his own social and creative context. By "social and creative context," I mean the racial politics in U.S. society in general as well as the racial and economic politics in the U.S. film industry in particular in which Nava was mired. As I will explain in the course of this essay, the overall matrix within which *My Family* was produced can be seen as inflecting the film's final look. Thus, as much as the film stands as an artistic intervention into mid-1990s understandings of Mexican American identity, it also contains clues about some of the challenges that tripped up Nava, an "ethnic" filmmaker, as he crafted this "ethnic" feature film.

Notably, the assertion and embracing of Mexican American outsiderness which Paco/Nava perform feature the same emphases characteristic of early Chicano cultural nationalism. *My Family* asserts Mexican American difference as countercultural identity clearly in ways that rearticulate the Chicano nationalist work that appeared in the 1960s and 1970s. Given the growing rate of Mexican Americans' assimilation, Nava's recapitulation in 1995 of Chicano nationalist formulations of Mexican American identity constitutes a very timely gesture. Unfortunately, as occurs in some Chicano nationalist discourse, *My Family* defines and delimits Mexican American identity in disturbingly narrow and outdated ways. Consequently, the recuperation of Mexican Americans' citizenship and membership in the American national community that the film otherwise accomplishes—and which in 1995 was sorely needed—is completely undermined. Although I deliver this criticism of the film to highlight the necessity for more diverse imaging of Mexican American identity in film, I believe we must consider, too, how a flawed film such as *My Family* is a product of a misguided (but perhaps well-intentioned) "ethnic" filmmaker contending with an array of challenges within the U.S. film industry.

The More Things Change, the More They Stay the Same

Chicano Studies scholar Juan Gómez Quiñones has pointed out, "Between 1966 and 1978 the Mexican American community faced ... a juncture between integration or self-determination" (101). The Chicano cultural nationalist work that emerged during this period overwhelmingly espoused self-determination by privileging nonassimilation and the uniqueness of Chicano history, experience, and identity. Richard Olivas's poem "The Immigrant Experience" reflects the Chicano nationalist ethos. Told from the perspective of a Mexican youth in an American History class, the poem ends:

> It sounded like he said,
> George Washington's my father.
>
> I'm reluctant to believe it,
> I suddenly raise my mano.
> If George Washington's my father,
> Why wasn't he Chicano?

"The Immigrant Experience" carries the stamp of Chicano nationalist politics with its resistance to "the socialization process of institutions such as schools, the church, and media" (Fregoso 4). As occurs repeatedly in Chicano literature, Olivas figures school as an institution that threatens to indoctrinate Chicano students with white American ideology. A resentment of the failure of hegemonic constructions of history to acknowledge Chicano history, experience, and identity specifically underlies the poem. In response to such erasure, early Chicano cultural nationalism represented Chicano identity as unique due to the Chicano's distinct yet suppressed history. As Rosa Linda Fregoso explains, Chicano nationalists felt that "[t]he constitution of the Chicano subject necessitated the unearthing of repressed histories [and] the re-discovery of a lost genealogy" (20).

Invariably, assertions of the uniqueness of Chicano identity turned upon the invocation of Mexico as part of Chicanos' past (Fregoso 69). While nationalists made it a point to reaffirm Mexico as the source/homeland for Chicanos not born in Mexico, they especially reasserted Chicanos' connection to pre-Columbian Mexican history. A pre-Columbian mythic past "served as a crucial master narrative for the [Chicano] Movement" (List 6) and functioned as the touchstone for resistant articulations and understandings of Chicano identity.

Etienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein provide a useful inroad for understanding Chicano cultural workers' commitment to staking Chicano identity to an ancient cultural/national lineage. In *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities*, Balibar and Wallerstein posit,

> Why does one want or need a past, an 'identity'? ... Pastness is a mode by which persons are persuaded to act in the present in ways they might not otherwise act. Pastness is a tool persons use against each other. Pastness is a central element in the socialization of individuals, in the maintenance of group solidarity, in the establishment of or challenge to social legitimation. Pastness therefore is preeminently a moral phenomenon, therefore a political phenomenon, always a contemporary phenomenon. (78)

Balibar and Wallerstein's sense of the direct relationship between "pastness" and present moral-political conditions leads them to conceive of pastness as "inconstant. Since the real world is constantly changing,

what is relevant to contemporary politics is necessarily constantly changing. Ergo, the content of pastness necessarily constantly changes" (78). With these statements in mind, the central importance of the past in Chicano nationalism appears to be a response to Chicanos' political and moral situation at a particular socio-historical moment. Specifically, the figuration and selective deployment in the 1960s and 1970s of Chicanos' Mexican heritage served as a device for mobilizing activism against their experience at the time with "the disease of cultural (and spiritual) conquest" (Pérez-Torres 47). Following the lead of Balibar and Wallerstein, one may ask, if not for experiences with socio-political disempowerment and the evisceration of the respectability of their ethnic identity, would Chicano cultural workers in the 1960s and 1970s still have invoked Chicanos' Mexican past in the same way?

The "rediscovery" of Chicanos' mythic origins thus appears to be fundamentally a self-conscious, strategic positioning (or re-positioning) of their present selves in relation to the past. Such maneuvering resembles Stuart Hall's idea that the ways "[we] position ourselves within narratives of the past" (Hall 224) are variables in formulations of ethnic identity. Utilizing Hall's understanding of ethnic identity as "not an essence, but a positioning" (226), Chicano nationalists' assertions of ties to an ancient past and a mythical homeland emerge as not "the rediscovery but the *production* of identity" (Hall 224). Invocations of the Mexican homeland and declarations of "connections to ancient ancestors" (Fregoso 10) basically represent strategic emphases that cultural workers foregrounded in an effort to generate *Chicanismo*. The connection of Chicanos to a mythic past enabled a sense of an "operational identity of personal dignity" which, Eugene García has noted, was needed "to serve as a rallying point" within the Chicano community (García qtd. in Pérez-Torres 47). Ultimately, through the integration of a mythic Mexican past into the (re)formulation of Chicano identity, Chicano identity was recovered from abject otherness and re-presented as a proud, autonomous identity.

My Family re-performs the work of Chicano cultural nationalists by denoting Mexico as a point of origin and as the source for a mythical past for Mexican Americans. The progenitors of the eponymous family are José and María Sanchez, and both are from Mexico. Because they are from Mexico, their children are unequivocally "Mexican" as well. The decision on the part of Paco/Nava to "go back," as Paco says, "a long long time ago to a small village in *México*" reveals

an explicit concern with re-establishing the birthplace of Mexican Americans. Amidst Mexican Americans' ongoing experiences with socialization into mainstream American society, the representation of the first generation of a Mexican American family reminds audiences of Mexican Americans' "Mexicanness." Since Paco takes us back to a small village in *México* as he stands outside of dominant social life and institutions, his/Nava's narrative move back to Mexico actually duplicates the sequence of events that precipitated Chicano nationalism's recuperation of Chicanos' Mexican origins. As Chicano nationalists did in the 1960s and 1970s, Paco/Nava transform Mexican Americans' present-day outsiderness/otherness into an autonomous identity via an invocation of proud ties to another homeland.

Nava further emphasizes Mexican Americans' connection to Mexico by suffusing the film with Aztec mysticism. For example, the mystical plot involving Chucho and a *buho* (owl) serves as an unrelenting reminder of the family's fundamental connection to Mexico. The Aztec "spirit of the river" plot begins in Mexico: When María crosses a treacherously swollen river on her way back to the United States, Chucho, her baby, should have died and been taken by the spirit (*buho*). Although the *buho* lets the baby survive the ordeal, it follows him to the United States where it takes him at a later date. Interestingly, at the end of the film, the *buho* is seen still looking down on the barrio. Through this omnipresence of the spirit, the Sanchez family ends up surrounded by a distinctively Mexican energy. Complementing this aspect of the film is the Aztec music that plays throughout the film. In the liner notes to the soundtrack, Nava explains that he uses this music to "transport us to an ancient past that still resonates today." In this explanation, we can see the ideas of Balibar, Wallertstein, and Hall at work. Nava effectively draws a line from the Aztecs to present day Mexican Americans, figuring the latter as the direct descendants of the former and thus as the survivors of Aztec culture. He assumes that Aztec culture and history should figure into any comprehensive understanding of Mexican American identity. With the work of Balibar, Wallerstein, and Hall in mind, though, Nava's insistence on the connection between the Aztecs and Mexican Americans in 1995 really constitutes a careful construction of Mexican American identity.

The film's East Los Angeles setting furthers its nationalistic theme of autonomous Mexican American identity. Using Hall's term

"position," one can think about the Sanchez family as being "positioned" in East Los Angeles (and not, for example, in Chicago or San Francisco). This decision is elucidated when one realizes that East Los Angeles is easily the most renowned Mexican American space in the United States. As evidence of this, one only has to consider how to be "Born in East L.A." is overwhelmingly understood by U.S. audiences of all backgrounds as signifying that one is Mexican American and not of some other Latin American lineage. Joseph Cunneen observes that in *My Family*, "the bridge between East Los Angeles and the gleaming city...dramatizes the split between the Mexican-American community and the dominant culture" (Cunneen 17). Hand in hand with the assumed geographic and demographic exclusivity of East Los Angeles is the popular understanding of its cultural autonomy. Because of East Los Angeles' status as a Mexican American enclave, the barrio appears to be a space that, culturally, keeps to itself and regulates itself.

Of course, East Los Angeles has historically existed in the popular imagination as an economically, socially, and morally impoverished space. Suzanne Oboler says that stereotypes figure Mexican Americans "as 'low-income people' who confront 'unusual poverty and unemployment'" (Oboler 13). At the same time, the Mexican American population is "perceived as welfare-ridden, drug-ridden, dropout-ridden, [and] teen-age-pregnancy-ridden" (Oboler 14). Due largely to sensationalist media representations, the East Los Angeles space has come to be envisioned as the site where such Mexican American depravity is most concentrated.[3] Rather than indulge the conception of the barrio as a place of decadence and frustrated containment, Nava presents it as a positive site of cultural autonomy. Whereas East Los Angeles' counterculturality and isolation have been traditionally imagined in luridly destructive terms, Nava teases out this counterculturality and isolation to affirm Mexican American difference and thereby affirm the dignified singularity of this identity. Over the course of the film, East L.A. comes to represent the place where "authentic" Mexican Americans live (and stay), and it stands as the place from which an "authentic" Mexican American subject can speak. In the 1960s and 1970s, the Chicano was seen as occupying a unique subject position that was privileged as the position from which alternative and authentic discourses of Chicano experience could be generated to counter the distortions produced by dominant systems of representation. When Paco crosses his arms in *My Family*, he (and Nava) claims this same

unique, "outsider" place privileged by Chicano nationalism. Requiring problematization, though, is the uncritical authority often given to the subject who speaks from a presumably unique place. *My Family* is a perfect example of the way someone (Paco/Nava) in a specific subject position—and thereby in the role of *raza* spokesperson—wields the dangerous capacity to delimit their own ethnic identity.[4]

Notions of authenticity consistently undergirded nationalist rhetoric of the 1960s and 1970s and work in counterproductive ways in *My Family*. During the Chicano Movement, these notions usually hinged on nonassimilation and resistance to inclusion in mainstream white American society (Fregoso 69). Most commonly, Chicano identity was arrived at through a process of negation, for cultural workers figured Chicano identity as not-Anglo (Huerta 48). The description of Chicano identity against Anglo identity demonstrates not only the problematic essentialization of both identities, but also the difficulty of setting down an exact definition of Chicano identity. Because "opinions about what constituted a 'real Chicano' varied" (Huerta 48), all that could really be done was to define it as not-Anglo. Chicano cultural and political workers tended to figure Anglo identity not only in terms of its distance from Mexico and the barrio, but also in terms of economic and social success in larger U.S. society. This then meant that the "authentic," not-Anglo Chicano was tied to Mexico very intimately and simultaneously existed outside of economic and social success in mainstream U.S. society. As it emerges in *My Family*, such notions of Chicano authenticity disadvantageously level off the parameters of "acceptable" Chicano identity.

While the differentiation of Mexican Americans from white Americans occurs in *My Family* through the geographic separation of the two groups, it is also portrayed through awkward interactions between them. Basically, Nava introduces whites into the film and barrio to throw into relief Mexican American difference. For example, in the meeting between the Sanchez family and the parents of Karen (who is Memo's white fiancée), the great dissimilarity between Mexican Americans and whites leads to the complete breakdown of the encounter. In the scene, the whites are distinguished by their Merecedes Benz car, their nice suits and dresses, and their rough, silly pronunciations of words such as "taquitos." Mexican Americans, on the other hand, are totally different from them. Taquitos, for instance, are common food fare for Mexican Americans. In addition, Mexican

Americans bury family members (El Californio) in their own backyards, some of them (Jimmy) go to prison, and all of them wear culturally-specific clothing (Toni is wearing a blouse with an Aztec design, Paco is wearing a guayabera, Jimmy is dressed as a standard vato loco, and Irene and María have on flowery dresses reminiscent of traditional/stereotypical Mexican garb). On top of all this, rambunctious Mexican American children (Carlitos) run around half-naked in Aztec costumes. Most of all, Mexican Americans are different because they have come from Mexico—a fact that visibly piques the curiosity of Karen's father. Thus, through a series of attributes represented as particular to whites on one side and another series figured as particular to Mexicans on the other, fundamental difference gets depicted. The extent of this difference emerges when Karen's family finally gets up to leave as they—and we—realize that the two families are totally unrelatable.

In this scene of fundamental difference, an important element of dignity is latent. Difference does not get represented as a cause for shame for the family nor, by extension, for Mexican Americans in general. Rather, there is a demonstration of Richard King's statement that "Self-respect is ... also [concerned] with asserting difference" (King 71-72). In *My Family*, Nava betrays a deliberate effort to represent Mexican Americans as "outside of the boundaries of the popular image of the national community" (Oboler 39), literally by positioning Mexican Americans inside of the East Los Angeles space, but also by proudly making visible Mexican Americans' distinct attributes. He deploys difference to delineate Mexican Americans for the purpose of affirming the *dignidad* of this identity. A problem, however, is the accuracy or result of such differentiation. Ultimately, the essentialist implication in the scene with the two families is that all Mexican Americans are different in the same way and/or similarly unrelatable to whites. In effect, the implication arises that to be able to relate to whites compromises one's authenticity as a Mexican American.

The portrayal of Memo shows starkly the problems inherent in Chicano nationalist constructions of Chicano identity. Memo, the youngest son, turns out to be a successful lawyer who has graduated from UCLA (that university on "the *pinche* ["fucking"] west side," as Paco derisively calls it). As part of our (re)orientation toward Memo, when we see him proudly walk out of his office, we discover that his office door is graced with a golden plate that reads "William Sanchez, Attorney at Law." Evidently, he has forsaken his birth name

of "Guillermo." As a child, Memo was studious, and according to Paco, "He was always doing homework. He did enough homework for the whole family." Initially, Memo's studiousness does not indicate a desire to forget his ethnicity or "act white" (Fordham and Ogbu 177). Rather, he just seems to be a smart Mexican kid who does a lot of homework. But by the time he is a lawyer, Nava casts him as "the son who is farthest from the family ... the one who becomes assimilated into the mainstream community and is half ashamed of his origins" (Cunneen 17). Memo's self-identification as "Bill" in the presence of Karen's family along with his shame over his Mexican family's dysfunction additionally position him as a cultural defector. His self-alignment is fully clear when he informs/assures Karen's family, "Actually, I've never been to Mexico. I've always lived here in Los Angeles like yourselves." Here, Memo has opted to distance himself from his Mexicanness by distancing himself from his Mexican family. According to the film's draconian criteria for ethnic authenticity, all that remains is for him to consummate his cultural "betrayal" with his marriage to a white woman.

Jorge Huerta's description of the *vendido* character in early Chicano theatre is fully applicable to the representation of Memo:

> The Chicano who attempted to be what he was not had always been the subject of satire in the barrio, and early twentieth-century performing troupes had presented sketches about these people who attempted to "pass." The darker the actor's skin, the funnier the representation, for it was obvious that the character was fooling nobody but himself. No matter how emphatic the assertion, the *vendido* would never be accepted as "white." (48)

The satirization of "the Mexican American who attempted to hide his identity or reject his background and blend into the proverbial melting pot" (Huerta 48) suited Chicano nationalist projects by affirming what Mexican Americans were not. The critical portrayal of Memo's assimilation has the same effect. Nava presents Memo, who has relatively dark skin, as trying to go white vis-à-vis the assumption of apparently "white" attributes, such as the valorization of success in mainstream America, a wardrobe that consists of suits and ties, and social circles that consist of white people. As the object of

satire, however, Memo functions to bring forth what authentic Mexican Americans supposedly are not. This in turn means that instead of embodying the possibility of the Mexican American's positive transcendence of traditional/stereotypical social places and identity categories, Memo is just a shameful traitor whom no self-respecting or proud Mexican American should aspire to resemble.

The obvious problem with the *vendido* tradition that carries over into the portrayal of Memo is the truncation of Mexican American identity that it performs. The problem lies in where the lines that delineate this identity are placed. With his handling of Memo, Nava makes no offer to "strike a balance between affirming and maintaining [Mexican American] identity and participating in a larger dominant culture" (Goldman 92). Instead, the prejudicial equation of Mexican American social and economic success with cultural abandonment suggests, disadvantageously, that cultural integrity requires that a Mexican American keep to certain social and economic places. Yet as Renato Rosaldo has pointed out, "Surely economic misery is not the only path to cultural vitality" (Rosaldo 43).

The Identity Politics of *My Family* Backfire Tragically

As James Moy, Suzanne Oboler, and Lisa Lowe observe, nonwhites' (real but especially constructed) differences from whites have historically positioned nonwhites as "foreigners in U.S. society" (Oboler 41) and left them "largely unacknowledged as 'fellow citizens' of Americans" (Oboler 38). Lowe says that Asian Americans' difference from "the cultural, racial, and linguistic forms of the nation ... constitutes Asian American culture as an alternative formation that produces cultural expressions materially and aesthetically at odds with the resolution of the citizen in the nation" (Lowe 6). Marrying understandings of Asian Americans' cultural and immigration "alienness," Lowe continues by saying that Asian American subjects have "a historically 'alien-nated' relationship to the category of citizenship" (Lowe 12). Because of the historical relationship between cultural difference and minorities' exclusion from citizenship/the national community, Chicano nationalists' well-intentioned efforts to establish the identity and presence of Mexican Americans as a proudly unique group in the national community actually risk complicity with the social, political, and economic marginalization of Mexican Americans. In *My Family*, such complicity is unfortunately realized via the extent and manner

of the film's effort to "establish the identity and presence of Mexican Americans *as a distinct group* in the 'national community'" (Oboler 60). Nava contests Mexican Americans' exclusion from the national community, but he does so with only limited success because he conjoins assertions of Mexican Americans' American citizenship and "legitimacy" as U.S. residents with a problematic insistence on their fundamental difference.

El Californio serves as a pointed reminder that the U.S. southwest used to be part of Mexico. According to Paco, "They called him El Californio because he wasn't from anywhere else. He was born right here in *Los Ángeles* when it was still *México*." Paco's/Nava's emphasis on the Mexican past of Los Angeles and California contests amnesia about this history and invites interrogation of American imperialism. In addition, it replies to the construction of people of Mexican descent as illegal immigrants by foregrounding the fact that they are actually "more native" or more legitimately present in the U.S. southwest than those who preach white nativism.[5] Nava then further challenges the construction of people of Mexican descent as illegal aliens through recurring references to Mexican American citizenship. The first instance of such problematization occurs with the deportation of María, who, despite being a U.S. citizen, is sent to Mexico. Making visible a suppressed history lesson, Paco narrates that during the Depression, "The politicians got it into their heads that the *Mexicanos* were taking up all the jobs." Consequently,

> *La migra* made big sweeps through the barrio, and they rounded up everybody they could. ... It didn't matter if you were a citizen. ... If you looked Mexican, you were picked up and shipped out ... all the way back to Central Mexico.

On one level, this portrayal of María's deportation overturns hegemonic constructions of history that nurture naïve assumptions about the United States as the land of freedom, opportunity, and equality. The presentation of this historically obscured event effectively reveals institutionalized racism toward people of Mexican descent, and it calls into question the (sanitized) versions of history that are taught in American schools. Moreover, the benevolence of the U.S. government is rendered suspicious since the roundup was government-sanctioned.

The deportation of María also dramatizes how Mexican Americans are "routinely bounced in and out of the 'national community' according to the ever-changing political and economic needs of the nation" (Oboler 38). This allows Nava to make obvious the racist and inherently contradictory exclusion of Mexican Americans from imaginations of the American national community and destabilize the construction of white Americans as "native Americans" or as the "real" American citizenry.

The logic of nativist rhetoric is especially stress-tested in the scene at the INS office when Jimmy picks up his detained "fiancée," Isabel. To save Isabel (an undocumented resident from El Salvador) from deportation and, therefore, certain death (her father was a union organizer), Toni arranges for Jimmy to marry Isabel. Inside the INS office—a space where issues of citizenship, legality, and nativeness converge and are defined—Jimmy is noticeably uncomfortable. Apparently, he is sensitive to the INS perspective in which all Latinos are "illegal aliens," and he feels himself to be as much a non-citizen as an undocumented immigrant might.[6] The conflation of all Latinos as non-natives is connoted by the immigration officer's Anglicized and indifferent pronunciations of both "James Sanchez" and "Isabel Magaña." Such pronunciations announce that from the INS perspective, which is all about regulating citizenship and presence in the U. S. national community, all Latinos (citizens or not) are simply non-native others.

Highly significant is the fact that the INS officer is African American. In this scene, an African American man represents and embodies institutionalized American nativism. Interestingly, in "National Brands/National Body: *Imitations of Life*," Lauren Berlant says that "American women and African-Americans have never had the privilege to suppress the body" (113). Consequently, they have been denied the "abstract" citizenship white males enjoy. In American society, "public embodiment," by which Berlant means the condition of being "marked" by/as an eroticized or colored body, "is in itself a sign of inadequacy to proper citizenship" (Berlant 114)—a statement compatible with Lowe's observation that cultural, racial, and linguistic differences impede respect for Asian Americans' citizenship. Yet in *My Family*, an African American male functions as the epitome of citizenship by appearing as an INS officer. In this situation, white nativist notions of citizenship fall apart via the contradiction of the visual underpinnings of these notions. Nativist conceptualizations of citizenship and the

national community basically turn on the opposition of whiteness to color. As Jimmy stands before the officer, the tension of the racist exclusion of Mexican Americans from citizenship plays out, but through the opposition of two nonwhites who in fact are both citizens. Now who is the "American"? Who is the citizen? Is one more a citizen than the other? Through these questions, and thus the scene, Nava successfully corners white nativism and forces a breakdown of white nativist logic. This results in the rupture of the categories of citizen and native, especially as visually determined categories.

The marriage of Jimmy to Isabel reiterates Mexican American citizenship and is thus supposed to challenge the imagination of Mexican Americans as non-Americans or non-citizens. While Isabel is at the mercy of residency laws, Jimmy can decide to wield his citizenship and marry her so she can stay in the country. Of course, the citizen privilege that Nava puts on display here is that which many U.S. military men have exercised in their marriages to foreign-born women. As occurs via the marriages of U.S. men to foreign women, citizenship ends up coded in *My Family* as masculine. In fact, one of the glaring problems with the film is that it recreates the male-centeredness that, as Fregoso points out, plagued the early Chicano cultural nationalist movement (Fregoso 6). Fregoso indicates that the cultural workers of the early movement championed "the pachuco (urban street youth), the pinto (ex-convict), and the indigenous (mostly Aztec) warrior as the new Chicano subjects of the counter discourse of Chicano liberation" (Fregoso 30). Incidentally, all three of these figures reappear in *My Family* with Chucho as the pachuco, Jimmy as the pinto, and Carlitos as the Aztec warrior. As Carmen Huaco-Nuzman observes in her review of the film, Mexican American female identity and subjectivity get lost as these masculine roles are again brought to the fore (Huaco-Nuzman 143-147). Furthering the masculinization of Mexican American identity in the film is the way in which Jimmy exercises and embodies Mexican American citizenship.[7]

Problematically, the only female who features prominently in the film is Toni. She fills two traditional roles, however, which have proven to be hallmarks of the masculinist/sexist orientation of early Chicano nationalist work. She first is the archetypal *virgen* when, to the dismay of the lusting men around her, she decides to become a nun. Shortly afterward, she fulfills the other role traditionally reserved for women, the *puta* ("whore"). In fact, Toni uncannily resembles *La Chingada*,

the archetypal whore in Mexican culture. Toni's fall from *virginidad* occurs when she leaves her order to marry a white priest. As a flashback of hers, we actually see her and David making love somewhere in a field in Central America. Although Huaco-Nuzman dismisses the sex scene as mere titillation for male spectatorship (Huaco-Nuzum 145), I think that it primarily functions (just as much at the expense of Toni's character development and respectability) as a recreation of the despised (by Chicano nationalist discourses) *La Chingada* primal scene. When Toni is on her back apparently enjoying sex with a white man, she not only forsakes her moral commitment to the church and to codes of decency for female (especially Latina) sexuality, she also implicitly betrays her commitment to *la raza*. In "The Female Subject in Chicano Theatre: Sexuality, 'Race,' and Class," Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano briefly describes *La Chingada* (literally "the fucked one") and her treasonous status within Chicano nationalism:

> During the conquest of Mexico, the noble Aztec woman Malintzin Tenepal (also known by her Spanish name, Doña Marina) acted as Cortés's mistress, translator, and tactical advisor. She becomes the mythical *La Malinche*, signifier of betrayal. ... Her sexual union with the white conqueror made possible the defeat of a people and the destruction of their culture. (135)

José Clemente Orozco even identifies *La Chingada* as a Mexican Eve (Orozco in Paz 87). Chicana feminist Cherríe Moraga suggests that today, *La Chingada* still constitutes the lens through which Mexican American women involved in romantic/sexual relationships with white men are often seen. Such women are seen as traitors whose "cultural integrity" (Moraga 157) becomes an issue because they refuse to reserve their sex for *la raza*.[8]

Interestingly, although Toni is represented as a transgressor for marrying a white man, she is not the assimilationist that Memo is. At no point does she express shame or denial of her Mexican ethnicity. In fact, presumably to indicate some honesty on Toni's part to her ethnicity, she predominately wears blouses that have indigenous designs. This detail is evidently supposed to keep her from meriting absolute criticism, for through this clothing she demonstrates some loyalty to her ethnic identity.

Signifiers similar to those that indicate Toni's ethnic authenticity are at work in the representation of Paco. Paco always wears guayaberas, and from what we can see of the interior of his house (which is in East L.A., of course), he has a *serape* covering his couch and a traditional Mexican religious altar in his living room. His status as a Chicano cultural worker implies that, if anyone, he exemplifies raza authenticity. As a result, the signifiers of his Mexicanness emerge as privileged. Of course, these signifiers embody the nationalist valorization of Mexican Americans' connection to Mexico and ultimately just contribute to the film's truncation of Mexican American identity.

Nava's strict circumscription of Mexican American identity and his myopic insistence on the restriction of it to marginalized places are counterproductive. The proud affirmation of difference in *My Family* depends on social and cultural separation to the point of complicity with the social, political, and economic containment of Mexican Americans. This problem is set in motion by Paco taking up the outside position at the beginning of the film, and it is then extended in the course of the film through the overvalorization of this outsider position. The shortcomings of the film are especially visible at the end of the film with the final camera move from the barrio to downtown Los Angeles. After José and María, who are drinking coffee in their kitchen, agree, "We have been very lucky," Paco voices over, "I remember *mi familia*." At this point, the camera moves outside, first to a close-up of the house, then to a long shot of the East Los Angeles barrio, then, finally, to a long shot that shows the juxtaposition of the barrio and downtown Los Angeles. The move is striking because it exposes the ultimate deficiency of the film as an identity affirmation project. As the camera tracks back to show the barrio and downtown next to each other, the barrio is noticeably dwarfed by the cityscape. In this image, the concrete structures of dominant society tower over the barrio and cast a shadow over it. In turn, the unequal relationship between the two spaces is the dominant impression. Nava probably wanted to put the barrio and cityscape together for the sake of showing the barrio's coexistence in the United States community and thereby represent Mexican Americans' membership in the American national community. However, Nava actually just makes visible Mexican Americans' separate and unequal citizenship. What emerges is a literal and figurative reminder of Mexican Americans' exclusion from mainstream social structures. This lets us see a

crucial shortcoming in rhetoric that privileges barrio-based identity. By backing Mexican American identity into possibly too tight a corner, such rhetoric tends to reinscribe the social marginalization and disempowerment of Mexican Americans.

On the subject of the filmic representation of ethnic identity, Fregoso says:

> Given that cultural identities are not handed down as essences, the task remains for an identity politics able to re-construct subjectivities in ways that empower people as creative subjects of history. Cinematic representations play a formidable role in such a project, for cultural identity is not an "already accomplished fact" but a "production which is never complete." One of the sites for its production is representational forms such as the cinema. (Fregoso 48)

Similarly, Christine List suggests, "Chicano features provide a public forum for Chicano cultural expression and articulate issues of Chicano identity on a national and international scale" (List 13). The fact that citizenship is "a site of contradiction for racialized Americans" (Lowe 24) means that is also potentially (but not automatically) the site from which "new forms of subjectivity and new ways of questioning the government of human life by the national state" (Lowe 29) can rise. By conjoining the statements of Fregoso and List with Lowe's, we can recognize that cinema represents a far-reaching medium through which identity can be asserted, re-presented, and re-imagined so as to deconstruct identity categories, the exclusion of racialized ("embodied") Americans, and the unchallenged power of existing social structures. How to capitalize on this potential of cinema is a vexing question, especially given the quotation from Trinh that serves as an epigram for this essay. While John Ellis indicates that "Cinematic capital is turned over, tickets are sold, on the expectation of pleasure" (Ellis 26), Trinh's statement prompts us to realize that the pressure that ethnic features face to turn over capital means that these features cannot really "go so far as to question the foundation of [their benefactors' and benefactresses'] beings and makings." If a film proves to be discomfiting to its financiers and/or its audiences because it overturns constructions of ethnicity or otherwise assaults their values, beliefs, and assumptions, it risks not being distributed or not being seen.[9]

Nava's tangled comments in an interview in *Cineaste* suggest the difficulties that the makers of ethnic features face. When asked about the potential of *My Family* to "teach Chicano audiences about their own history," Nava responds,

> I see *My Family* as a film to entertain people, not to teach them. I think that films need to entertain us, and I mean entertain in the broadest sense of the word, which is partially to enlighten us about who we are. So it is designed to be inspirational to people but it is also designed to give people a good night out at the movies. It makes you laugh, it makes you cry, it makes you feel dignity or pride, if you're a Chicano, to be a Chicano. (West 26)

Nava's distinction between teaching (which for him seems to involve the inducement of critical thinking) and entertaining reflects his sensitivity to the fact that the most successful Latino art is that which "can provide enlightenment without irritation, entertainment without confrontation" (Gómez-Peña 51). For Huaco-Nuzum—who decries the machinations of gender in the film and says it "circumvents the efforts of some Chicana/o, Latina/o writers, artists, cultural critics, and film theorists to break down established and dominant representations of Chicano, Latino patriarchy" (142)—Nava's remarks about his commitment to making an "entertaining" film are salt on the wound. Although in this essay I have been pointedly critical of *My Family* as well, I think Nava's comments in *Cineaste* reveal the bind he and other filmmakers are in. In order to receive funding and have a chance of having a successful picture, filmmakers have to commit to an ethos of entertainment. Confrontational politics are anathema in Hollywood. Curiously, Nava structures his film around some of the key tropes of the Chicano Movement, and one would think that this would render it "confrontational." Rather than rendering the film militant, however, the machinations of these tropes merely result in the containment of Mexican American identity. By 1995, twenty years after the high point of El Movimiento and militant Chicano politics, Chicana feminist criticism along with recent interest in the deconstruction or "postmodernization" of Chicano identity had rendered these tropes politically incorrect and obsolete.

Also in the *Cineaste* interview Nava says, "I do think more new kinds of [Chicano] images and films need to be made, I really do" (West

26). Incidentally, his own film, with its contained, if not regressive, representation of Chicano identity, fails to provide a new image of Chicano identity. In fact, his film demonstrates exactly the need for "more new kinds of [Chicano] images and films to be made." Features that pose as identity affirmation yet only strangle the possibilities for the identity category and reinscribe unequal social relations do a disservice, for they fail to rupture dominant notions of identity and citizenship—and these notions need to be ruptured, especially along lines of gender. For this reason, there is an ironic truth to Jimmy Smits' assertion in an essay that he wrote for *Entertainment Weekly* that "*My Family* is just the tip of the iceberg of Latino stories we have to tell" (Smits 41).

Notes

1. Culture Clash, "A Bowl of Beings" (1998), 84.

2. Minh-ha T. Trinh, *Woman Native Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism* (1989), 88.

3. This is why the reference to "East L.A. at midnight" in the song "Wild Side" by the rock group Motley Crue is supposed to evoke an image of absolute lawlessness, danger, and depravity. Chon Noriega indicates that Hollywood fuels such fantasies by conventionally representing East L.A. via "a montage of graffiti, gangs, drug deals, and so on that signify problem space" (Noriega 111).

4. An indication of the kind of authority and authenticity accorded to *raza* spokespeople lies in movie critic Liza Schwarzhaum's declaration that she prefers *My Family* over *The Perez Family* (which is about a Cuban family yet does not feature any Cubans in any of the starring roles). "Given a choice between the faux interpretation or the real thing," she says, "la verdad wins out every time" (Schwarzhaum 45). Curiously, Schwarzhaum overlooks the fact that three of the Sanchez family members are played by Puerto Rican actors (Jennifer Lopez, Jimmy Smits, and Esai Morales). This critic's slip as well as her faith in the verisimilitude of *My Family* demonstrates the ease with which an "ethnic" feature film may be taken by some audiences as a transparent, sociological document about a particular ethnic group. Such a collapsing of mimesis and reality throws into relief the stakes involved in the filmic representation of ethnic identity. Michael Omi cogently discusses this idea in his essay, "In Living Color: Race and American Culture."

5. In 1995, Voice of Citizens Together (today known as American Patrol) was perhaps the most visible and active white nativist group in the United States. For a sense of their thinking and a history of their activity, visit www.americanpatrol.org.

6. This is the same indiscrimination that results, for example, in Rudy (Cheech Marin) being deported to Tijuana in *Born in East L.A.* (1987).

7. The representation in Chicano films such as *Born in East L.A.* and *My Family* of Central Americans as undocumented immigrants in an effort to bring into focus specifically male Mexican American citizenship merits more critical attention. In *Born in East L.A.*, Rudy marries Dolores (Kamala Lopez)—a Salvadoreña—in order to save her from deportation. It seems that in the same way in which white American citizenship is frequently defined against Mexican illegality/noncitizenship, masculine Mexican American citizenship is being defined in *Born in East L.A.* and *My Family* against Central American illegality/noncitizenship.

8. In apparent reference to La Malinche, the term "*malinchista*" today denotes a cultural traitor. For example, the song "*Mis Dos Patrias*" ("My Two Homelands") by Los Tigres del Norte voices the perspective of a Mexican who has become a naturalized American citizen. The naturalized citizen must fend off accusations that "*yo soy un malinchista/y que traiciono a mi bandera y mi nación*" ("I am a malinchista/and I betray my flag and my nation").

9. The divergent fates of the contemporaneous films *Born in East L.A.* (1987) and *Break of Dawn* (1988) illustrate the idea that ethnic features must carefully avoid "question[ing] the foundation of [their benefactors' and benefactresses'] beings and makings." While both films indict white American nativism and foreground Mexican American citizenship, Marin's film received distribution and was a box-office hit, but *Break of Dawn* could not secure a distributor. Perhaps Marin's film was successful because its politics were somewhat occluded and its edge softened by its comedic content. On the other hand, *Break of Dawn* is a hard-hitting drama that is very forthright and confrontational in its politics.

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