WHEN THE LATINO FAMILY GOES HOLLYWOOD

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Prepared for delivery at the 1997 meeting of the Latin American Studies Association, Continental Plaza Hotel, Guadalajara, Mexico, April 17-19, 1997.

I. Introduction: Towards a historical and theoretical background

I would like to start this paper paraphrasing my own title in the form of a question: Should the Latino Family go Hollywood? Or, from another angle, why is Hollywood interested in the Latino Family? Or even a more urgent question, should historical Latinos still have to rely on the "family metaphor" in order to achieve (mainstream) representation? The response to the second question is arguably the clearest one. The Chicano film critic and scholar Chon A. Noriega provides us with an answer that at the same time restates the question:

> Between 1987 and 1988, Hollywood released four Chicano-Latino feature films: *La Bamba* (1987), *Born in East L.A.* (1987), *The Milagro Beanfield War* (1988), and *Stand and Deliver* (1988). The success of these films, and *La Bamba* in particular, led studio executives and others to predict a "Hispanic Hollywood." The proof of that claim, however, was attributed to "Hispanic" demographics and market studies on "Hispanic" movie attendance, and not to the two-decade Chicano film movement. (147).

Hollywood, therefore, had perceived a new market. There was no genuine concern regarding the emergent Chicano culture and its efforts to achieve a filmic representation. My paper will posit the same question almost a decade later. In 1992, three Latino films reached the mainstream: *Like Water for Chocolate*, *El Mariachi* and *The Mambo Kings*. And in 1995, three new films have had a significant theatrical release: *The Perez Family*, *A Walk in the Clouds* and *My Family, Mi Familia*. Most significantly, for the purpose of this study, these three last films share not only the general "family metaphor" but a specific plot component: a marriage of convenience, that, as I will argue, will allow for the thematization of the encounter with and assimilation of otherness in the three films.

Let me return, for a moment, to my initial questions. Should the Latino Family go Hollywood? And should Latinos still have to rely on family metaphors to have their stories and their histories represented in the big screen? Again, I will let Noriega's words speak to these questions:

> Studios have yet to commit themselves to the grass-roots marketing strategies that ethnic and other specialty films require. And, more often than not, traditional saturation campaigns -- especially the television trailers -- have played into stereotypes that alienate the films' potential viewers. In their trailers, for example, *Zoot Suit* came across as a gang film, and *The Ballad of Gregorio Cortez* appeared to be yet another "macho" western -- the very expectations the films sought to critique and change. (147).

The problem of cultural stereotyping is at the very heart of the matter. In my view, it serves a double function. On the one hand, it helps Hollywood's purpose to flatten and/or assimilate cultural

otherness in order to appease the fears of white Anglo-Americans; and, on the other hand, it becomes a narrative staple that helps to identify, and, therefore, to commercialize the Latino films as pertaining to a specific representational type, more often than not, labelled under the by now domesticated rubric of "magical realism." The following comments from Richard Schickel's review of Alfonso Arau's *A Walk in the Clouds* are particularly revealing of that narrative and critical bind:

> Magic realism dictates, moreover, that they be archetypes: Grandpa (Anthony Quinn) is a lusty old windbag; Dad (Giancarlo Giannini) is an uneasy martinet; Mom (Angelica Aragon) is full of soft romantic sentiment. They also, of course, have a fierce, primitive, mystical relationship with the land that nurtures them. The stranger must embrace the acreage before he can embrace their daughter. (69).

Thus, in the words of another Latino film critic, Jerry W. Carlson, Hollywood is more interested in portraying and perpetuating "mythic projections" than in representing "social documents" about the true historicity of the Latino subjects. [1] Carlson himself calls attention to another crucial theoretical issue, what he terms, "useful hybridity." Despite the specificity of Carlson's essay on the representation of Puerto Ricans in commercial feature films, I think that his remarks may be of general value in the context of Latino Images in the United States. And, especially important in the context of this essay, is his account of the three different traditions at work:

> In general outline, there are three traditions: films in which Puerto Rico and/or Puerto Ricans are represented and portrayed dominantly by Americans (here the classic example is *West Side Story*); films which are co-productions controlled by other Spanish speaking peoples (here the melodramas of the 1950s produced with Mexican capital are pertinent); and those films made by, with, and for Puerto Ricans such as Marcos Zurinaga's *La Gran Fiesta* and Jacobo Morales' *Linda Sara*. (34)

Concerning the last two films mentioned, Carlson argues that they "open the possibility of a useful hybridity, a space where the Puerto Rican elements of a production need not be subsumed to other interests." (36). It is in this space that he analyzes Sidney Lumet's *Q&A* (1990) and Brian De Palma's *Carlito's Way* (1992):

> Here -- I wish to claim -- is where Q & A and Carlito's Way fit. Their accomplishment, which is far from perfect or ideal, is based in the fact that Edwin Torres' novels never relinquish their narrative authority over the scripts. ... Torres thus inserts his Puerto Rican characters into a popular genre whose distinction has been its dissection of the American dream. (36).

It is the concept of the American dream, ultimately, that provides the crucial answer to Hollywood's interest in the Latino Family. Even the films that contribute to that "dissection" are encoded by the master narrative of the American dream. Charles Ramírez Berg establishes the historical relevance and continuity of this narrative:

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[1] See Jerry W. Carlson's "Down the Streets of Time: Puerto Rico and New York City in the Films *Q&A* and *Carlito's Way*," where he shows how Hollywood tends to appease Anglo fears more than to accurately reconstruct Latino heritages and/or locales.

> *Bordertown* (1935), the first Hollywood sound film to deal with a Mexican American's attempt to enter the mainstream and participate in the American Dream, is the prototypical Chicano social problem film. ... Containing all the major elements of Chicano social melodramas, *Bordertown* also demonstrates Hollywood's contradictory attitude about Chicano assimilation in particular and out-group assimilation to the patriarchal WASP mainstream in general. Moreover, its story of Johnny Ramírez's quest for success and his subsequent realization of the vacuity of the American Dream constitutes the rough outline of the "assimilation narrative." This familiar formula dramatizes the trade-offs involved when first - or second-generation immigrant protagonists (or sometimes class, race, or gender Others) set out to better themselves in the American system. In this formula, success is defined in upwardly mobile, professional, and socioeconomic terms and goes hand in hand with mainstream assimilation. (There is no success outside the dominant). (31-2).

Thus, from its very inception, the "Hispanic" Hollywood superimposed the master narrative of the American dream onto the representation of Latinos in the United States. In the films by Mira Nair and Gregory Nava that I will analyze in this essay, that master narrative is still clearly encoded and, in some cases, even reinforced, despite their self-conscious "useful hybridity." There is, however, a larger critical framework related to the very concept of hybridity and its role within the post-colonial theoretical discourse. It is in this context, I believe, that the last representations of Latinos by Hollywood should be viewed. Thus, Homi K. Bhabha, alluding to the work of Guillermo Gómez-Peña, writes:

> The Western metropole must confront its postcolonial history, told by its influx of postwar migrants and refugees, as an indigenous or native narrative internal to its national identity. ... Such cultures of a postcolonial contra-modernity ... also deploy the cultural hybridity of their borderline conditions to "translate," and therefore reinscribe, the social imaginary of both metropolis and modernity. ... The borderline work of culture demands an encounter with "newness" that is not part of the continuum of past and present. It creates a sense of the new as an insurgent act of cultural translation. (6-7).

Bhabha's call for the inclusion of the "migrant subject" in the very social fabric of the postcolonial metropolis is spelled out by Gómez-Peña himself in his Warrior for Gringostroika, where he writes:

> The social and ethnic fabric of the United States is filled with interstitial wounds, invisible to those who didn't experience the historical events that generated them, or who are victimized by historical amnesia. Those who cannot see these wounds feel frustrated by the hardships of intercultural dialogue. Intercultural dialogue unleashes the demons of history. ... Fear is the sign of the times. ... They are scared of us, the other, taking over their country, their jobs, their neighborhoods, their universities, their art

> world. To "them," "we" are a whole package that includes an indistinct Spanish language, weird art, a sexual threat, gang activity, drugs, and "illegal aliens." They don't realize that their fear has been implanted as a form of political control; that this fear is the very source of the endemic violence that has been affecting this society since its foundation. Border culture can help dismantle the mechanism of fear. Border culture can guide us back to common ground and improve our negotiating skills. ... The border is all we share/ *La frontera es lo único que compartimos.* (47)

This cultural and political fear within the shared space is thematized in *The Perez Family* by Angel, Carmela's paranoid brother, who literally locks her up in an attempt to protect her from all the violent illegals in Miami. Mira Nair's parodic take on such an endemic gesture is just an illustration of how the problem resides inside the very "family." A fact also addressed by Gómez-Peña in what he terms the "border wound:"

> Bicultural Latinos in the United States (be they Chicanos, Nuyoricans, or others) and monocultural citizens of Latin America have a hard time getting along. This conflict represents one of the most painful border wounds, a wound in the middle of a family, a bitter split between two lovers from the same hometown. (47).

This quote brings us full circle to the last of my initial questions. Should Latinos still have to rely on family metaphors for their cultural representation? Gómez-Peña himself seems to rely on them. And, if they should, why shouldn't they be portrayed as alternative families? Again, let me recall *The Perez Family* and what I consider its most interesting element: the reconstruction of a family not on biological and patrilineal grounds but on spatial and emotional ones. Before entering the specifics of textual analysis, however, I want to summarize the theoretical issues and/or the critical contexts outlined so far. First, if not foremost, is the question of Latino representation and agency in Hollywood productions. Do the films analyzed in this study achieve a degree of self-representation beyond stereotypical figurations and reductive master narratives? Second, do these films contribute to the progressive multi-cultural dialogue implicit in the concept of border culture, as stated by Bhabha and Gómez-Peña, among others? Last, but certainly not least, keeping in mind the three traditions outlined by Jerry Carlson, one should ask whether these films aspire to a new historicity, one in line with the most interesting developments perceived in Latin American cinema in general, namely, the (gendered) shift from the "revolutionary" to the "revelatory," from the epic to the everyday. [2] Or, to say it

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[2] This shift is accurately described by B. Ruby Rich in her essay "An/Other View of New Latin American Cinema." Especially relevant to my discussion is the following passage: "If the period of the early New Latin American Cinema movement was strongly identified with the reclaiming of the dispossessed and with the portrayal of the sweep of history, ... then it is fitting that the current phase of the New Latin American Cinema should follow the lead of these films, turning away from the epic toward the chronicle, a record of a time in which no spectacular events occur but in which the extraordinary nature of the everyday is allowed to surface. Its films mark a shift from "exteriority" to "interiority." In place of the explicitly and predictably political, ... we often find an attention to the implicitly political at the level of banality, fantasy, and desire, and a corresponding shift in aesthetic strategies. Such a shift has also, not coincidentally, opened up the field to women. The move from exteriority to interiority holds implications for our sense of individualism and

differently, do these films create representations of new Latino historical and desiring subjects or do they contribute to Hollywood's process of global commodification of otherness?[3]

II. *The Perez Family*: The (Multi)-Cultural Construction of a Familiar Dream

> My family moved to Miami in 1982, just two years after the Mariel boatlift brought thousands of Cuban refugees, many of them former political prisoners, to the southern tip of Florida. Miami's a funny place, practically everyone is from somewhere else. Just a few streets separate the diamonds in the American consumerist crown, Saks and Nieman Marcus, from the cramped import shops and open markets of Little Havana. (Steed, 1).

Thus starts a review of *The Perez Family* entitled "Ripe and Juicy" and written by Tonia Steed. Three aspects stand out from this initial passage: the universal appeal of the family metaphor, Miami as a quintessential contemporary "bordertown" and the Cuban/American cultural clash mapped out onto the sociosymbolic geography of Miami itself. " A Family Affair," written by Lavonne Luquis, is another revealing review, whose initial passage also contains a critical statement in a nutshell:

> Families are rarely perfect but often both exasperating and endearing; *The Perez Family* is no exception. When Marisa Tomei sashays on

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collectivity. ... The films of the New Latin American Cinema are engaged in the creation, in cinematic terms, of what I would term a "collective subjectivity." (176).

[3] In formulating this last question I allude to two different and yet rather converging post-colonial critical discourses, those of Homi K. Bhabha and bell hooks. Specifically, I am referring to Bhabha's call for a "revisionary time" from a border culture perspective that finds in a "Chicano hybrid aesthetic" one of its current historical models: "Being in the "beyond," then, is to inhabit an intervening space, ... But to dwell "in the beyond" is also, ... to be part of a revisionary time, to return to the present to redescribe our cultural contemporaneity; to reinscribe our human, historic commonality; to *touch the future on its hither side*. In that sense, then, the intervening space "beyond," becomes a space of intervention in the here and now. ... To engage with such an invention, and intervention, ... requires a sense of the new that resonates with the hybrid chicano aesthetic of "*rasquachismo*" as Tomas Ybarra-Frausto describes it: "the utilization of available resources for syncretism, juxtaposition, and integration. *Rasquachismo* is a sensibility attuned to mixtures and confluence ... a delight in texture and sensuous surfaces.... self-conscious manipulation of materials or iconography ... the combination of found material and satirical wit ... the manipulation of *rasquache* artifacts, code and sensibilities from both sides of the border. (7). Concerning bell hook's position, I am thinking especially of her chapter on "Eating the Other. Desire and Resistance" within her volume Black Looks. Race and Representation. Especially significant is this passage: "The commodification of Otherness has been so successful because it is offered as a new delight, more intense, more satisfying than normal ways of doing and feeling. Within commodity culture, ethnicity becomes spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture. ... When the dominant culture demands that the Other be offered as sign that progressive political change is taking place, that the American Dream can indeed be inclusive of difference, it invites a resurgence of essentialist cultural nationalism. (21-26).

> camera and strikes up an English conversation with a sugar cane field guard in Cuba -- the cinematic moment falls flat. Why not go for the real thing and use English subtitles for scenes on la isla? And then there's the fact that Tomei's character Dorita is a prostitute-turned-field worker. Why is it that when Hollywood deigns to film a Latina character she so often must be a whore? (1).

Finally, a third film review, written by Ton Keogh is entitled "The American Dream. *The Perez Family*." Its first line reads as follows: "Mira Nair (*Mississippi Massala*) directs this tale of Cuban immigrants and their pursuit of love, happiness, and the American Dream." (1). Thus, as it was perceived by most critics, the film stages yet again the familiar story of Latino immigrants crossing the border in pursuit of the American Dream. Moreover, they are once again represented as stereotypes. Is that all there is to Mira Nair's *The Perez Family*? Yes and no. Before attempting my own critical interpretation of the film, I would like to quote a few interesting comments from actors and producers, as they appear in the casting and production press kit. The first belongs to Alfred Molina, surprisingly chosen to play the male lead role, that of Juan Raúl Pérez, the ex-landowner who spent twenty years in prison for having burnt his sugar cane farm before giving it up to Castro's revolutionary government, and who now travels to Florida in one of the last Mariel boatlifts. Molina, in a statement more revealing than his opaque interpretation in the film, states: "I suspect she kind of hates being labeled as someone with a style, but part of Mira's way of working is that she loves to play with conventions. The film is a wonderful mosaic of images that will delight the senses of the audience. It is a sort of feast for the eye, ears and also taste. There are moments where you can almost taste it." (4) To translate Molina's words into bell hooks' critical frame of reference, one might say that Mira Nair is "eating the other" self-consciously and with playful gusto, that is, offering Hollywood's dull menu a "spicy" dish of commodified otherness. This reading seems reinforced by the very introduction of Mira Nair and the film in the same press kit: "From Mira Nair, the acclaimed director of the ***spicy*** romantic hit *Mississippi Massala* and the Oscar-nominated *Salaam Bombay*!, comes a freewheeling epic that examines the mystery of life and inexplicability of love." (1, emphasis mine). It is the film's alleged "epic" historicity, however, that I want to address here. In this sense, the words of the renown Cuban-American singer Celia Cruz, who has a cameo appearance in the film, are particularly revealing of the producers' attempt to provide historical
legitimacy and credibility to Nair's project:

> This film is about the people that came here via Mariel from Cuba, which for me has been the greatest invasion of political refugees in any country of the world or time. Mira doesn't like to lie in her movies. The world will believe what happened between Cuba and United States, when 125.000 people escaped. Only with that credibility attributed to this woman and her films, will people come to know what actually is happening in my country. With her sensibilities, Mira is also a political refugee. She can see between black and white, the grey areas and where the humor lies, (6).

In my view, Celia Cruz's words belie more an ideological position than a historical truth. I do not think that *The Perez Family* will significantly contribute to the world's knowledge about Cuba or about its historical conflict with the United States. At its best, Nair's film simplifies history and, at its worst, it distorts it. Beyond the controversial issue of historical credibility, Celia Cruz's words vividly remind us

of Nair's capacity to create and/or keep a sense of humor, of playfulness, amidst her politically fraught stories. It is interesting, in this sense, to emphasize how Mira Nair seems to be able to enlist producers who not only have faith in her projects but also see her as someone who is capable of crossing Hollywood's cultural borders, as these words by producer Lydia Dean Pilcher clearly suggest:

> I read a screenplay for *The Perez Family* about three years before Mira called me and said she had been offered to direct it. I immediately saw what I wasn't able to see when I had read the early version. Working on *Mississippi Massala* in Mississippi and Uganda had been a treasure-riddled experience for me. To work with Mira is to climb on board for an inspirational odyssey into deep realms of passion, humor, politics and humanity. I knew the material would be explored, challenged and created in a way that Hollywood could never imagine. (8).

Does Mira Nair's *The Perez Family* challenge and/or expand the limits of the "Hispanic" Hollywood outlined in the introduction? Again, my answer is a qualified yes and no. If one considers it from the vantage point of Nair's "play with conventions," I think her film constitutes a step ahead inasmuch as she is able to "delight in texture and sensuous surfaces... in self-conscious manipulation of materials or iconography ... in the combination of found material and satiric wit (Ybarra-Frausto in Bhabha, 7), as the hybrid Chicano aesthetic suggests. On the other hand, if one regards it from the vantage point of its stereotypical figurations and its master narrative encodings, Nair's representation of the Mariel migration never goes beyond the borders of Hollywood's commodity culture. And yet, as Alfred Molina's words suggested, the film is indeed a sensual feast. In fact, its very narrative is framed by two feasts spoiled by (historical) violence. Nair's initial credits sequence is literally framed by an old-fashioned party invitation card with flowery laces at the four corners. It is a postcard invitation to look back into a Caribbean paradise: a scene on the beach with the family of Juan Raúl Pérez partying amidst the placid walk of Christian nuns and their pupils, Cuban "guaracheros" serenading and Afro-Cuban servants happily cooking. After having invited the viewer into that undisturbed Cuban paradise, Nair cuts to Juan Raúl's worrisome gaze while he stares at his family walking to the sandbar wherefrom they are to be picked up and transported away from the outburst of the Cuban revolution. Suddenly, the placidity is broken by heavy winds that blow away Juan Raúl's hat. The camera then focuses on his shoes covered by the rising tide and finally closes up on a crab crawling on his right foot, in an interesting visual metaphor that foregrounds Juan Raúl's physical and emotional metamorphosis to come. Next, Nair jump cuts to a sequence where Juan Raúl is being dragged by prison guards into the sunny patio of the Calvario Prison, where we can see a big poster of Ernesto Che Guevara, the mythical revolutionary commandant. Then, the next abrupt cut takes us to the Coral Gables home of Angela Pérez (Anjelica Huston). She is watching the TV newscast of Fidel Castro announcing the liberation of political prisoners in what will become the Mariel exodus. Yet another sudden cut takes us to the Matanzas Sugar Cane Farm where we witness the dialogue between Dorita Pérez (Marisa Tomei) and a farm guard. This is indeed more than a common dialogue since Dorita's reply to the coarse and sexist "You were a whore" of the guard will establish her archetypal status in the film: "I am like Cuba, used by many, conquered by none. You keep changing uniforms, first Batista, now Fidel, I'm siempre La Isla." The mythical continuity of the island beyond the historical realities of Batista's dictatorship and Fidel's revolution is allegorically figured in this larger-than-real archetypal character. Once again, Hollywood's predilection for "mythic projections" is reinforced. Nair's mythical take does indeed flatten out the historical realities of the two opposing regimes while transforming the class struggle into a mere accident of history. In leaving the sugar cane fields behind, Dorita not only escapes from her working

class persona but projects herself into a patriarchal myth: the woman as land.[4] Contrary to the traditional de-sexed earthly mother figures, Dorita's archetype is patterned after the sea-goddess myths. She is obviously portrayed as a sensual life-affirming force that relates her to the Yemayá Yoruba deity, so central to the Santería faith, one of Cuba's most pervasive popular religions. Her Yemayá-Aphrodite archetypal status is visually emphasized in the sequence of the Mariel boatlift, when, after a shot of Dorita's wild dance and a few close-ups of aged women holding Christian religious icons, she jumps into the water to swim her way into freedom. Later, almost at the end of the film, in the Varadero Festival sequence where the contrived reunion of the family is staged as the second framing party of the narrative, we see the rebaptized Dottie Pérez leaving the scene in her majestic lonely walk by the water. The overtones of such a sequence captivated the imagination of producer Lynda Pilcher, whose recollection highlights Dorita's mythical status: "Or finishing our last shot of the Varadero Festival at dawn with Dottie tearfully striding away as a massive steamer appears and soars down the river as if to escort her departure back into the world." (9). Metonymically, once again, Dottie connotes the aquatic continuity that links her to the island, to the Cuba she allegorizes. And yet, there is indeed a positive impulse embodied in Dorita's sensual archetype. Marisa Tomei, who brings a remarkable degree of spirited immediacy to the role, was acutely aware of its cultural dimensions when she stated:

> What appealed to me about the role was her sensuality and I thought it was rare for that to be celebrated in film today. It wasn't like something lurking on the side or a draw for the audience as some weird titillation. It's a life force that's beautiful and celebrated and I knew that Mira would enjoy and respect that quality in Dottie. ... There is a lot of visual humor in the film and a lot of characters. The Cuban culture is so ripe and intimate at the same time. It can get to you right away and it's almost too intimate for some of the more puritanical elements of our culture. That's where the clash and the humor come in. (2-3).

Certainly, it is the celebration of sensuality that gives the film its progressive layer, while connecting it slightly to the hybrid border culture practices described above. It is, moreover, Mira Nair's

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[4] The same archetypal projection happens in Alfonso Arau's *A Walk in the Clouds*, as pointed out by Richard Schikel's Time review quoted above. Victoria (Aitana Sánchez- Gijón), the pregnant young woman becomes an embodiment of the land that the stranger and estranged war veteran Paul (Keanu Reeves) will embrace wholeheartedly. In a very recent essay, Juan Bruce-Novoa, the prominent Chicano critic, analyzes the same reductionist gesture in Robert Redford's adaptation of John Nichols' novel The Milagros Beanfield War. Bruce-Novoa writes: "But the promising beginning does not prevent Ruby (Sonia Braga) from degenerating into the stereotype of the Latin woman. ... In the film she is effectively de-sexed, held aloof from any male interest. In addition, from her first portrayal as one of the agents of action, an active subject of empowerment, her role shifts her into one of the basic stereotypes of women within the Patriarchal imaginary: woman as land. From the point at which Ruby goes to see the beanfield being irrigated by Joe, she and the field are linked as images. They are both brought from dormancy to fertility by the actions of others, and in the end they both are communal property, not to be had by any man in particular. This decision to make Ruby politically correct in her sexual habits, traditionally Hispanic in her passivity, and patriarchally archetypal in her symbolic Earth-Motherness, severely limited her character in comparison to the Ruby of the novel. (58-9).

most distinctive trademark, as seen in Janet Maslin's The New York Times review of *Kama Sutra. A Tale of Love*, Nair's recently released last film.[5] To return to Marisa Tomei's words, I think that they resonate with those of Maslin and other critics in highlighting Nair's visual talent. Indeed, the cultural clash between puritanical America and sensuous Cuba is brilliantly inscribed in the very color scheme of the film. The narrative, as it were, may be read in the colors. This is perhaps best summarized in the sequences where Dottie is selling flowers to the drivers of a popular Miami Beach avenue. For Americans, in general, Miami is already a symbol of color; in Nair's film, the traditional pastels of the city are just the background color against which she films the vivid and lush reds, yellows and greens that Dottie, herself a flower-girl metaphor, emblematizes.

Besides her sensuality, as suggested by Marisa Tomei's and Celia Cruz's words, Mira Nair's cinematic talent relies largely on her sense of humor. Indeed, much of the film's comedic tone is achieved through a series of ethnic games in which self-referentiality plays a crucial role. To illustrate this point, I will briefly summarize the plot line as it appears in the press kit:

> After being released from captivity in a Cuban jail, Juan Raúl Pérez (Alfred Molina) goes to Miami in hopes of reuniting with his wife Carmela (Anjelica Huston) and now grown daughter, Teresa (Trini Alvarado). On the boat over, he meets Dottie Pérez (Marisa Tomei), a voluptuous free-spirit who dreams of rock and roll and John Wayne. However, once they arrive in the United States, an immigrant official erroneously lists Juan and Dottie as married. Anticipation turns to disappointment for Carmela, who thinks Juan is not among the final Mariel boatlift of refugees. Bewildered by his wife's apparent abandonment, Juan tries to adjust to the situation. Sensing his frustration, Dottie -- an inimitable survivor -- quickly finds out that if they want to stay in America, they'll need to become a family. She finds a "son" who isn't related and a "grandfather" who doesn't have a clue to reality. All they have in common is the last name -- and a dream. Juan tries to maintain his long-held hope of reuniting with Carmela, despite the attraction he feels for Dottie. At the same time, Carmela finds herself drawn to the charms of police officer John Pirelli (Chazz Palminteri). With destiny calling the Pérez families once more, only the watchful eyes of Cuba's patron saint San Lázaro knows which heart true love will finally call its home. (1).

What the press kit summary doesn't say, however, is that the immigration official is an Indian born immigrant like Mira Nair herself. Thus, the diegetic and extra-diegetic creators of this constructed family overlap. His "mistake" is Nair's excuse to inscribe her first and foremost ethnic self-referential

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[5] Particularly revealing, in Janet Maslin's review, is the following passage: "In a visually lovely film that summons an alluring impression of her native India, Ms Nair concentrates so deeply on sensual detail that the audience can almost smell the incense wafting from the screen. Shining silks, brilliant colors, Sufi music, intricately adorned bodies and languid movements all conspire to create a seductive mood. The film's atmosphere becomes so palpably inviting, in fact, that its story seems only an afterthought (B19).

game. The film is, in this sense, Nair's humorous portrayal of her own American dream in the making, that is, her successful arrival to Hollywood's big dreamscreen. That *The Perez Family* is not essentially about Cuba's history or about the politics and historicity of the Cuban-Americans but about the traditional American Dream master narrative is clearly suggested in Nair's comedic version of Dottie's first encounter with the "American Other," which constitutes a playful mise-en-abyme of Nair's own trajectory. Replicating Nair's own cultural construction, the good-hearted Indian immigrant officer will reconstruct Dottie's dream. At first, by inviting her to the screening of an old John Wayne film, even if he tells her that John Wayne, her dream-hero, is dead; and, later, by giving official status to her newly encountered "family." The fragile, film-like quality of Dottie's dream will be ironically enacted in the sequence where the Anglo security guard literally "comes out of a movie" when he appears suddenly on stage and tears apart the screen where John Wayne's film was being projected. Instead of collapsing with that abrupt awakening, Nair shows us how Dottie's eyes immediately follow this new embodiment of her American fantasy just to discover, a few sequences later, that her newly found "United States freedom hero" reduces her once again to her initial pre-revolutionary status of prostitute. The predatory quality of the Anglo officer is ironically reinforced in the tragicomic Varadero Festival sequence, where Dottie's ex-freedom-hero is the one who accidentally guns down Angel Pérez, the schemy brother who is the only other predator of the film and of the "family." This shooting has the temporary effect of breaking/killing the dream of the newly found family. A family reunion, moreover, that ultimately happens under the "shooting flashes" of the police reporters. In spite of its comedic distortions, however, *The Perez Family* constructs a "post-revolutionary" dream, where Nair stages the reunion of the old patron, the ex-landowner Juan Raúl with Dottie, the ex-sugar cane worker. Thus, "true love" and the providential mistake of the American other, in the guise of an Indian immigration officer, achieve what the Revolution could not: the amorous encounter of the opposing classes. Or, to interpret it from the perspective of Dottie's allegorical and archetypal status, the film shows how Juan Raúl Pérez, and with him the new Cuban-American family of ex-Marielitos, can imaginatively regain their lost territory, their "Cuba," whose mythical presence is constantly inscribed in the figure of the "grandfather" Armando, the crazed ex-commandant who is always looking for it from atop. Nair's final sequence intertextually emphasizes this allegorical consciousness. In it, we see Armando staring at the sea from the top of the palm tree that presides over the final embrace of Juan Raúl and Dottie; the camera, then, adopts Armando's mythical viewpoint and projects the loving couple and the viewer into a magnificent aerial shot over "the landscapes of water, royal palms and sugar cane, always looking for Cuba," (9), as producer Lynda Pilcher tells us. The fact that this beautiful aerial shot is clearly reminiscent of the initial sequences of the landmark *I Am Cuba*, the Russian/Cuban astonishing film directed in 1964 by Georgian director Mikhail Kalatozov, only reinforces this mythical projection.

Mira Nair's *The Perez Family* is, more than anything else, a festive reinscription of the American dream master narrative. Nair's comedic talent, however, allows her to construct a few genuine moments of comic release which temporarily subvert her ultimately reactionary tale. Perhaps the happiest of such moments occurs at the end of Nair's cultural (de)construction of the Pérez family. Playing with the religious undertones of the rebirth motif spread throughout the film, for instance, Nair invites the viewer to witness an accident that nearly kills Felipe Pérez, the street wise kid who, while running for his life from the threat of a gang member who will ultimately kill him, literally bumps into Dottie Pérez. She immediately adopts him and nurtures him back to life, with the ulterior motivation of adding another member to her "constructed" family. The rebirth of this son, a true orphan and smart kid of the Little Havana streets, is another of Nair's self-referential moments, since Felipe's presence sends us back to the Bombay street kids, whose touching representation in her acclaimed 1988 *Salaam, Bombay!* established her international reputation. The motif is wonderfully exploited in a comic vein when we see the first

reunion of this constructed family. A bus has already taken away Juan Raúl and Felipe, while Dottie was out in her frustrating date with the Anglo officer. Grandpa Armando, the mythical figure who plays Guardian Angel to his new family, has stayed behind waiting for Dottie to come back. He leads her to the bus that is going to take them all to the Orange Bowl stadium. There, in the first intimate indoors scene of the family, we see Juan Raúl awakening to Dottie's affectionate caress, while , at the same time, answering to his quasi-existentialist question "Where am I? with a prosaic, down to earth and matter-of-fact: "You're lying on a cote in the Orange Bowl," to which he will reply: "You always know where you are! A reply suddenly followed by the happiest editing moment of the film, the cut into a sunshine washed facade of a Mission-like temple where two black robbed priests bow to the astonished Pérez family, while saying: "Welcome to the Church of the Resurrection. We're your sponsors!" This comic rebirth of the family will lead to a series of intimate scenes inside the Mission premises which reduplicate the resurrection motif in a serious vein. It is inside these walls that Felipe will come to sleep in "mum's" room; and it is in that room that Juan Raúl and Dottie will mourn his death only to reemerge into life through their passionate embrace. It is in the cloistered courtyard of the Mission , moreover, that we see Armando, naked on top of the tallest tree, again staring away, into that lost paradise beyond the seas.

The mythical status of Cuba as a lost paradise is also narratively inscribed in the Penelope role played by Carmela Pérez, as suggested in the words of Anjelica Huston, her interpreter in the film:

> Carmela's a refugee. She's somebody who's well-born, yet her husband has been lost as a political prisoner for 20 years. She comes to Miami and has to work for the first time in her life. So, she took a job at Saks and educated her brother, eventually put her daughter through school. She's kept the family together. ... Carmela's been waiting for this idea of her husband. God knows after 20 years things get misty. You don't know quite who you're remembering. She's kept herself on ice for his reappearance and has been constantly disappointed by his not showing up. When Pirelli comes into her life, he's very kind to her. He's very understanding, has humor and flirts with her. She has not been flirted with, I feel, in a very long time She is still there surviving, waiting for her husband religiously. When Pirelli comes on the scene, it comes as a complete surprise to her. But he draws her out. At this point, it's a salvation. (4).

It is quite significant that this "salvation," this new rebirth in the film and in the Pérez family, occurs thanks to the good will of a law enforcer that happens to be an Italian-American. In fact, the ethnic allusion here is a double one, since the two law enforcers who come to the rescue of Carmela Pérez are officer Ross, played by an African-American actress, and lieutenant John Pirelli, played by an Italian-American actor. The fact that these two minorities are presented in the guise of completely assimilated immigrants -- how could they otherwise represent American legality? -- resonates with the sociocultural situation of Carmela and her Miami based family. To recall Tonia Steed's words: "Miami is a funny place -- practically everyone is from somewhere else. Just a few streets separate the diamonds in the American consumerist crown, Saks and Nieman Marcus, from the cramped import shops and open markets of Little Havana."(1). And yet, this multicultural bordertown, a sort of postmodern version of the traditional melting-pot model, has clear sociopolitical and ethnical boundaries, as indicated in Steed's street mapping. Carmela Pérez owns an apartment in the affluent suburb of Coral Gables and

she has managed "to keep the family together" by means of her work at Saks, at the heart of "the American consumerist crown." In other words, she has outgrown her Cuban identity by locking herself up in her luxury apartment, always protected from the possible attack by illegal aliens, as his paranoid brother puts it, and by keeping herself distanced from those Little Havana streets where the Cuban-American encounter really takes place. Thus, waiting for her true Cuban love, she has in fact given up the "Cuban" reality around her. It is, therefore, almost logical that her process of acculturation be revealed to Carmela not by Juan Raúl, her legal and estranged Cuban husband, but by John Pirelli, the completely assimilated Italian-American who can offer a safe passage into a reality which she already, albeit unconsciously, occupies. By means of this familiar rebirth, Mira Nair is, in fact, conflating two versions of the American Dream: the successful cultural assimilation of different immigrants into the common melting pot of America as a consumer's society and the multicultural dream of different ethnical groups coexisting and keeping strong traces of their own cultural identities, as the Cuban-Americans in Miami exemplify. In an ironic narrative twist, Nair inscribes those two dreams at the expense of the "return home" or Ithaca-dream that had supposedly led both Carmela's Penelope-like waiting and Juan Raúl's Ulysses-like endurance to travel back to his estranged wife. This is what the final exchange between the two characters fully reveals: "Thank you for keeping the family together!," says Juan Raúl; "we should stop dreaming!," answers Carmela. [6] And yet, as the happy ending of the film suggests, the dream goes on, both for the characters and for the viewer.

Does Mira Nair's film, therefore, constitute an "insurgent cultural translation," to recall Bhabha's formulation or does it, in fact, reenact the "third world allegory," to invoke Fredric Jameson's polemical characterization?[7] Or, to go back to my own initial question: do historical Latinos still have to rely on the "family metaphor" to achieve mainstream cinematic representation? Has Mira Nair achieved and/or attempted such a representation? That Nair's team relied on the "family metaphor" is obvious from the words of producer Michael Nozik:

> Very much like the characters in our story, our creative team was a *disparate family* gathered together: an Indian director, two American producers, an American writer, a cinematographer from New Zealand, a Mexican costume designer, an editor from the hills of Holywood and a

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[6] At this point, I would like to quote Tonia Steed's allusion to Christine Bell's novel on which the film is based: "The narrative itself, based on the novel by Christine Bell, is a vivid and compelling variation on the "home is where you hang your hat" theme. The real protagonist is Little Havana itself, a landscape built out of dreams and cultural memory, social and economic marginalization, and the stubborn survival tactics of uprooted transplants. Blood ties become an analogy for cultural ties in Bell's story as the various Perezes reinvent themselves and their conceptions of family, Cuba reinvents itself in its new American context." (2). Now, does it? Not having been able to read Bell's novel yet, my own interpretation will remain suspended. Suffice to say, for the moment, that Cuba, as a historical reality, has been left outside the film, in that space beyond the sea where Armando's longing stare takes us.

[7] I am referring to Fredric Jameson's "Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism," where he writes that: "All third-world texts are necessarily allegorical, and in a very specific way: they are to be read as what I call *national allegories."*

> production designer from the island of Manhattan. Our challenge was to capture the emotional and physical scope of a story that was native to no one in the group. (7, emphasis mine).

Does this "disparate" and "multicultural" family add up to an "alternative" family or to an "insurgent translation" of familiar narratives? Does the film achieve a representation of Latino historical subjects beyond its mostly American casting and cross-cultural antics? I will let one of the film reviewers with whom I started this section answer those questions. Thus, Cuban born Tonia Steed writes:

> Because Nair is so caught up in painting colorful characters into a predictable love quadrangle, the characters become types and the context grows irrelevant. The fact that she chose to cast big American stars, rolling their r's with Berlitz precision, instead of Latino or Latino-American actors also upstaged the bigger picture. (2).

In other words, to recall once again Jerry Carlson's three traditions, Nair seems to have chosen the traditional Hollywood "big picture" format, emblematized by *West Side Story* and its all American cast, at the expense of the "bigger picture," that is, the representation of the historical realities of the Latino subjects in the United States.

III. *My Family, Mi Familia*: Border Crossings and/in Hispanic Hollywood

> Director Gregory Nava describes his film as, "A life-affirming drama about family. I see the film as universal, intended for anyone who comes from a family. "Familia" is at the heart of the Latino cultural experience and I wanted to capture it with all its color and life like a novel by García Márquez." *My Family* is a natural extension of the director's passion for the modern-day immigrant experience and the American dream, a subject he first explored in his Academy Award-nominated, critically acclaimed debut feature, *El Norte.* "Greg wanted to do a story about a Mexican-American family that really painted *the big picture* and captured a feeling of how things are passed from one generation to the next, and how they change. (Nava, 1, emphasis mine).

In order to consider Gregory Nava's *My Family, Mi Familia* in the light of the critical framework of this essay, I feel compelled to repeat Tonia Steed's question regarding *The Perez Family*. Are we in front of "the bigger picture" or is this another of Hollywood's "big pictures."? Or, to put it in Bhabha's and Gómez Peña's radical terms: does this film constitute "an insurgent act of cultural translation" or another "Latino domesticated, Mexicorama look" on the Chicano experience? [8] The answer to these

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[8] These words are quoted from the section "The Multicultural Paradigm" in Guillermo Gómez-Peña's volume: Warrior for Gringostroika. Gómez Peña's manifesto constitutes an urgent call to a branch of border culture that opposes the ongoing American media commodification of Latino images, what he terms "The Latino Boom."

questions will depend largely on one's own cultural location and ideological positioning. In fact, this is a film whose reliance on spectatorial identification is almost absolute. If we consider Nava's own invocation of the universality of the family values and his claim to a Latino culturally specific treatment of those values, together with the distributors'emphasis on how the story retells the"immigrant experience" and "the American dream," it seems hard not to view this film as yet another Hollywood co-option of the Chicano historical reality. On the other hand, it is also quite clear that the goal of Gregory Nava is to produce and distribute films about the Latino/Chicano experience that may achieve a successful theatrical release in the United States. The trajectory established by his three major films so far, *El Norte* (1983), *My Family, Mi Familia* (1995) and *Selena* (1997) clearly points in that direction. Nava's work puts him in the forefront of the Hispanic Hollywood. And that is no easy task. His work may ultimately be seen as a filmic representation of the Latino cultural "crossover" that is still in the making. This cultural crossover is emblematized in *Selena*, in the recording sequence of Selena's concert in front of El Alamo, in San Antonio. "Are you guys ready?" is the question posed by the Anglo producers of Selena's new big time record, her crossover to the American mainstream. Abraham Quintanilla's answer, in the voice and the persona of Eddie Olmos, is "of course, we're ready. We've been ready for a long time!. Visualized against the shining facade of El Alamo, with all its symbolic connotations, that response seems to contain both the proud historical claim of belonging and the readiness to accept the cultural crossover. It is within the creation of a Hispanic Hollywood "crossover audience," precisely, that Nava's enterprise finds its own logic and its most defined social and ideological basis.[9] How did *My Family, Mi Familia* actually do in terms of this cultural crossover? As I mentioned before, the response to Nava's film depends almost entirely on cultural and/or cinematic identification. To judge from some of those responses, the crossover was both a success and a failure. Linda López McAlister, for instance, writes:

> *My Family, Mi Familia* is the first big mainstream film by and about Mexican-Americans in all our diversity (not just as gang members and spitfires as we are so frequently depicted on film). ... My own emotional connection to this story is so deep that I can't begin to assess how others will perceive this film. I grew up in L.A. in the forties and fifties, just a few miles south of the East L. A. barrio where this film takes place. My mother and grandmother escaped the barrio by marrying Anglos. So with my Anglo surname and light skin I was never perceived as a Chicana, but I know what my less assimilable cousins went through and how hard it was for them. Not surprisingly, I cried all the way through this film -- from the early shots of the L.A. skyline looking the way it looked out of my bedroom window as a child when the 12 story City Hall was the tallest building in town, to the closing credits. I'd never experienced this

[9] I am borrowing the concept of "crossover audience" from David Rosen's essay: "Crossover: Hispanic Specialty Films in the U.S. Movie Marketplace." Specially significant to this paper is his definition of that term: "The second important source of support grows directly from the organic group that is the film's subject matter or primary appeal. This group is usually called the "crossover" audience and is often composed of a high proportion of people who would only occasionally or not normally be drawn to an "art" film. Such "crossover" groups are drawn from individual ethnic groups ... or other demographic groups, ... regional groups, ... or people who share particular social or political convictions." (246).

> broad sweep of Chicano life on screen before, presented with such deep knowledge, love, and respect -- though not dishonestly sugar-coated or without critical awareness. (1).

At the other end of López MacAlister's almost unselfcritical identification with the film's local and its cultural representation, there is the response of those who look at the film from a critical distance, such as the one written by Mark R. Leeper:

> What is right with this film is that it is a moving look at a community under-represented in film. What is wrong is that the writing is several notches below *El Norte*. Too often the film tries to be whimsical when a more serious approach would have been more effective. Nava undercuts the realism of the drama scenes that are just a bit funnier than they should have been, occasionally even unkindly turning characters into caricatures. And even the light dusting of the supernatural does not help the credibility either. And it seems to me that when an old couple look at each other and sum up saying "It's been a good life," it has to be because either they expect their lives or the film to end in the next few minutes." (2).

Leeper's ironic last remark describes the final shot of José and María Sánchez, sipping coffee and looking into each other's eyes and to the camera. A shot that I also find too close to the stereotypical representations of the "wholesome Latino family" so frequently used in TV commercials of Latino products. And yet, a critic as solidly established as Roger Ebert writes in his Chicago Sun-Times review of Nava's film:

> Gregory Nava's *My Family* is an epic told through the eyes of one family, the Sanchez family, whose father walked north to Los Angeles from Mexico in the 1920s, and whose children include a writer, a nun, an ex-convict, a lawyer, a restaurant owner, and a boy shot dead in his prime. Their story is told in images of startling beauty and great overflowing energy; it is rare to hear so much laughter from an audience that is also sometimes moved to tears. Few movies like this get made because few filmmakers have the ambition to open their arms wide and embrace so much life. This is the great American story, told again and again, of how our families came to this land and tried to make it better for their children. ... Through all the beauty, laughter and tears, the strong heart of the family beats, and everything leads up to a closing scene, between old Jose and Maria, that is quiet, simple, joyous and heartbreaking. Rarely have I felt at the movies such a sense of time and history, of stories and lessons passing down the generations, of a family living in its memories. Their story is the story of one Mexican-American family, but it is also in some ways the story of all families. Watching it, I was reminded of my own family's legends and heroes and stray sheep, and the strong sense of home. (1-4).

For Ebert, the universality of the family narrative effectively crosses over the cultural specificity of the film and allows a cinematic identification without which, as I mentioned above, the film's effectiveness is lost. I want to dwell on Ebert's extremely sympathetic review for a while more, in order to recall how his plot summary emphasizes the house and the bridge as the two central visual metaphors in the film:

> The story begins in the 1920's with a man named Jose Sanchez, who thinks it might take him a week or two to walk north from Mexico to "a village called Los Angeles," where he has a relative. It takes him a year. The relative, an old man known as El Californio, was born in Los Angeles when it was still part of Mexico, and on his tombstone he wants it written, "and where I lie, it is still Mexico." El Californio lives in a small house in East Los Angeles, and this house, tucked under a bridge on a dirt street that still actually exists, becomes a symbol of the family, gaining paint, windows, extra rooms and a picket fence as the family grows. Jose (Jacob Vargas) crosses the bridge to the Anglo neighborhoods to work as a gardener, and there he meets Maria (Jennifer Lopez), who works as a nanny. They are married and have two children and she is pregnant with a third in the Depression year of 1932, when government troops round her up with tens of thousands of other Mexican-Americans (most of them, like Maria, American citizens) and ship them in cattle cars to central Mexico, hoping that they will never return." (2).

They did return. And so did Gregory Nava whose cinematic trajectory from *El Norte* to *Selena* constitutes the most emblematic representation of this historical and mythical return. History and myth, or to recall Jerry Carlson's formulation, "mythic projections" or "social documents," these are the two narrative poles that provide the framework of Nava's entire production to date. Nowhere is this conflation of history and myth clearer than in *Selena*, Nava's recently released film about the life and death of Selena Quintanilla Pérez, the queen of *tejano* music born in Corpus Christi, Texas. In this film, Nava creates both a "social document" of Selena's artistic career, in the vein of a Hollywood musical biopic, while, at the same time, contributing to establish Selena as a Chicano myth that emblematizes the historically dignified crossover Nava himself has always endeavored to portray. The success of his attempt may be illustrated by these words published by Javier Valenzuela, in the Spanish daily El País:

> Dirigida por Gregory Nava, producida por Moctesuma Esparza, Bob Katz y la familia Quintanilla, interpretada por Jennifer López, en el papel de la cantante, y Edward James Olmos, en el de su padre, *Selena* es el acontecimiento del año para los hispanos de EE UU. Para comprender las expectativas que despierta hay que pensar en *La Bamba*, el filme sobre Ritchie Valens, y multiplicarlo por todo lo que ha prosperado en número y en conciencia desde entonces la comunidad latina. Para cientos de miles de muchachas, Selena representa el nuevo patrón de mujer latina en EE UU: segura, por primera vez en la historia, de su físico y de su cultura. Una mujer definitivamente norteamericana en su reivindicación de la libertad y la igualdad, en su búsqueda del éxito social y económico, pero que no quiere disfrazarse de gringa. Selena era una belleza mestiza: de ascendientes españoles y cherokes, pregonaba con orgullo. ... "Era

morena y con cuerpo latino, y no intentaba ocultarlo," dice la actriz Jennifer López. "Se subía al escenario y decía: "Esto es lo que soy y me gusta. ¿Por qué tengo que aspirar a ser rubia y delgada? (16-17).

It is indeed very rare to find a positive female figure at the center of a Latino film produced by Hollywood. Dottie Pérez, in Mira Nair's *The Perez Family*, as we have seen, provides another example. And yet, the archetypal projection of Dottie into a "national allegory" of Cuba returns her to the land of patriarchal myths. Selena, on the other hand, benefits from her historical counterpart and has the potential to become a myth for an entire community, beyond gender and class restrictions.[10] There are two moments, in particular, in Gregory Nava's *Selena* that highlight the singer's capacity to heal what Gómez Peña calls the "border wound," that is, the conflict between bicultural Latinos from the United States and monocultural Latin Americans. The first one is during the sequence of the press conference before the Monterrey concert. Both the manager and Selena's father are terrified of the reactions of the Mexican journalists when they discover that Selena does not speak "perfect" Spanish . Selena's capacity to simply be herself in the most charming and disarming way wins everybody over. This capacity to heal the "border wound" is projected into mythical and religious proportions at the end of the film, in the funeral sequence when we see how thousands of flickering candles with Selena's iconography merging with that of the Virgin Mary illuminate the faces of the enraptured mourners.[11] Interestingly, Nava chose the return from the mythical concert in Monterrey to include the most self-referential moment in the entire film. At the moment of the actual border crossing, we see the family bus in its way across the Río Grande bridge, then there is a cut back into the interior of the bus where the camera closes up on Abraham Quintanilla, played by the emblematic Eddie Olmos, who is holding a newspaper called El Norte. Nava's own cinematic journey is thus telescoped in this sequence. Indeed, this sequence recalls Enrique's and Rosa's dramatic bus journey across Mexico from their lost home in Guatemala and their terrifying border crossing through the rat- infested abandoned tunnel. This is a dramatic crossing that will be reenacted in "My Family, Mi Familia" when María has to cross the rapid waters of a river in a makeshift bridge of dangling ropes, just to fall into the furious waters that literally swallow her and her third son, Chucho, until they miraculously reemerge. Needless to say, the crossing of the bridge is the most crucial visual metaphor in "My Family, Mi Familia." Finally, in the context of *Selena*, this sequence also anticipates the mythical proportions of the singer's cultural crossing. This mythical

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[10] As Javier Valenzuela reports: "Selena", escribe Larry Rohter en The New York Times, "lleva camino de convertirse en un mito para los latinos de Estados Unidos semejante al que Elvis Presley representa para los amantes del rock y Marylin Monroe para los cinéfilos." (16).

[11] That this religious stature is no invention in Nava's script may be illustrated by the words of Celia Gutiérrez, a hotel receptionist from Corpus Christi, Texas, as Javier Valenzuela reports: "La tumba consiste en una pieza de granito negro con una inscripción en blanco: el nombre Selena rubricado por una rosa. Ningún apellido, ningún dato biográfico, ninguna fecha. "No es necesario," dice Celia, "todo el mundo conoce a Selena. Fue grande en vida y ahora todavía es más grande. Selena no está muerta, se sienta ahora en el cielo al lado de la Virgen de Guadalupe." (16) In the film, this religious undertone may be read in Selena's "intercession". Those who identify with her may be able to imagine a peaceful and proud crossover between the clashing cultures that they inhabit. By being loved in both sides of the border, Selena achieved in fact that social healing that is still a historical nightmare for many Mexican-Americans.

undertone, embedded in her moon-like name ,is fruitfully explored by Nava in a series of sequences where her image is split in two, as if to invoke, like he did in *El Norte,* the Mayan dualistic concept of the universe. [12] The constant counterpoint between images of the moon and the solar colors emerging from Selena's shining face is another mythical reference that highlights how Selena transcends her historical death in a mythical afterlife that the film itself emblematizes.

My Family, Mi Familia is Gregory Nava's most self-conscious exercise in social, visual and narrative crossings. As suggested by Roger Ebert's review, the house and the bridge become the two all-encompassing symbols. From the first sequence to the closing credits, these two symbols frame the tension between uprootedness and belonging, between social property and social marginality and between stasis and kinesis, the constant movement across the literal and metaphoric bridges that separate that mythical house from the world beyond. The family house of El Californio, the old uncle who "didn't want anything to do with the pinche Church or the pinche government "and whose tombstone's legend read "When I was born this was Mexico. Where I lie this is still Mexico" constitutes an unequivocal claim to a territorial basis for the family, and, given the allegorical nature of the narrative, for the entire Chicano community. One of Nava's most difficult crossings, however, is his attempt to create a film that actually manages to criss-cross three very different film genres, namely, social melodrama, family epic and romantic comedy. His major technique in order to achieve this is the inclusion of the self-conscious, metafictional voiceover narration of Paco Sánchez, the eldest son who is telling us the story while he is actually writing it. In what follows, I will concentrate my reading on the implications and the shortcomings of such a framing technique.

Paco's voiceover narration and his frequent authorial intrusions have the double goal of providing comic relief and establishing the spectatorial position in a quasi-Brechtian way, that is, making the viewer constantly aware of the "constructedness" of the story while, at the same time, helping them identify with his position as a close witness to the events described. This double, contradictory effect of intimacy and defamiliarization, relies heavily on the persona of Eddie Olmos, whose legitimacy in the Chicano community allows him to adopt this "comic" distance. Moreover, in Paco Sánchez's (Eddie Olmos)'s self-effacing character and yet intrusive narrative, Nava finds his cinematic self-embodiment. Indeed, Nava wants to tell a very personal and intimate story and yet he needs an epic canvas and a multiple style in order to encompass the largest possible experience. As suggested above in the quote from Mark Leeper's review, however, Nava's constant undercutting of the seriousness of many of the events narrated works only at times. And when it doesn't, it seriously unbalances the general impact of the film. When it does, on the other hand, it provides for great entertainment, as it happens in the hilarious 'soap opera' sequence that starts with the middle-aged mother María admonishing earnestly the characters of a Telemundo soap opera broadcast. In one of Nava's best examples of overlapping narratives, this soap opera will soon become the real story when we encounter Toni, the youngest daughter, who has just come back home from Central America where she

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[12] I am referring to the mythical level used by Nava in structuring his film *El Norte*, as Mario Barrera recalls: "What lifts this film [*El Norte*] above the ordinary and gives it its extraordinary lyrical quality, however, is its connection to myth. The story of Enrique and Rosa, and much of the symbolism of the film, comes from the creation myth of the Maya, the Popol Vuh, and other Mayan texts. As in the Popol Vuh, there are twin heroes who must undergo a series of trials and tests before reaching their goal. The twin heroes represent an inherently dualistic concept of the universe." (233).

was doing missionary work. She astonishes everybody with her statement that she is no longer a nun. In fact, she has married David Ronconi, an ex-priest whom she has met in Central America. "Un sacerdote!," says her mother María before she faints. Then the camera closes up on María's pained face only to cut into a flashback of the love-making between David and Toni in the Central American jungle. A few minutes later, when Toni brings in David to introduce him to her shocked parents, the melodramatic tension is heightened by the father's words: "If it's okay with God, I guess it's okay with us! Toni's marriage to David, the Anglo ex-priest, is indeed the first "successful" cultural crossing in the family. And yet, that very night, the viewer is invited into the parents' bedroom in order to witness their troubled questions: "What happened to our children? Antonia married to a priest? Paco still unmarried and he wants to be a writer... What did we do wrong?" This "private"conversation will soon be comically glossed by Paco's voiceover intrusion highlighting his parents' reference to Guillermo, to Memo, their fifth kid who has made it all the way to law school: "Thank God for Memo, going to law school or they would have never gotten a good night sleep!" Paco's humouristic undercutting of the moment's gravity is then reinforced by his next remarks: "So, what's wrong with wanting to be a writer? Besides, my crazy family always gave me a lot of good material!"

Next, I want to discuss one of the most significant pieces of "crazy material" afforded by Paco's emblematic family. I am referring to the story of Jimmy Sánchez's marriage to Isabel Magaña, the Salvadoran political refugee. This marriage, like the one between Juan Raúl and Dorita Pérez in *The Perez Family*, constitute the clearest connecting subplot between the two films.[13] As was the case in Nair's film, Jimmy's arranged marriage to Isabel is the result of political circumstances. Isabel, convincingly portrayed by Elpidia Carrillo, is trying to avoid deportation back to her country El Salvador, where her family had been involved in the guerrilla movement and her future is totally at risk. Toni and David decide to help her out by plotting a marriage of convenience with Toni's youngest and troubled brother, Jimmy. Almost predictably, that artificial union grows into a love story with deep implications to all the parties involved. Unlike Nair's falsifying image of a class-conflict resolution via the "artificial" union of the Cuban ex-landowner with the ex-sugar field worker, Nava never allows the union between the furiously introverted Jimmy and the exuberantly anxious Isabel to become a romantic idealization of a historical conflict. In fact, that union constitutes the film's best example of the "inner crossing" between different Latino groups, one of the few moments of genuine healing of that "border

[13] The 'marriage of convenience" between two cultural and/or political others is the clearest linking element also with Alfonso Arau's *A Walk in the Clouds*, the third Latino "family" film released by a big studio in 1995. Arau's film shows the highest degree of idealization in the portrayal of this encounter with the other, as Richard Schickel's Time review notes: "It's the year's cutest meet: she throws up on him, and it's love at first hurl. Victoria (Aitana Sánchez-Gijón) has reason to feel queasy: she's pregnant but unmarried and is taking a bumpy train ride home to break the news to her very traditional family, proprietors of a vast Napa Valley vineyard. Paul (Keanu Reeves, whose blankness is used to good effect) has reason to be open to any romantic possibility: it's 1945, he's just been mustered out of the army and has discovered that his hasty wartime marriage was a mistake. ... After two more accidental meetings, he agrees to pretend to be her husband just for a night, to grant her respectability in the family's eyes, then to disappear. That, you know, is not going to be easy. She is beautiful (and meltingly portrayed by Sánchez-Gijón), her relatives are entertainingly fractious, and he, we discover, is an orphan with a life-long need for the kind of noisy warmth they generate." (69). Arau's film, unlike Nair's *The Perez Family* or Nava's *My Family, Mi Familia*, never problematizes that melodramatic structure.

wound" alluded to by Gómez Peña. It is quite significant that Nava manages to stage this dramatic story in the midst of one of the film's most comedic moments, just after the soap operatic episode of Toni's return home with David, her ex-priest husband. Again, the double function of Paco's narrative voiceover is crucial here, as his comment illustrates: "In my house, the difference between a family emergency and a family party wasn't big enough." In retrospect, these words resonate throughout the entire film. Thus, just like Mira Nair did in *The Perez Family*, Nava also frames his narrative as an interrupted family party, as if to suggest that historical violence can only be overcome by the mythical perspective of the happy family.

In *My Family, Mi Familia*, we first see a family party during Irene's wedding to Gerardo. She is the oldest of the two girls and her wedding becomes a memorable occasion that is celebrated with the inclusion of a whole Mariachi band. The family party, however, will soon turn into a quasi-emergency with the arrival of Butch Mejía, the Pachuco gang leader and rival of Chucho Sánchez. Chucho, forcefully played by Esai Morales, is the third son, the one who was born in Mexico when his mother was illegally deported by government troops in the Recession backlash against immigrant workers. Despite being an American citizen, María found herself in central Mexico. As I mentioned above, this historical circumstance is used by Nava to include a retelling of the dramatic journey of Enrique and Rosa in *El Norte* and to substantiate María's mythical knowledge. Now, once again, Paco's voiceover narration provides the mythical account of Chucho's death: "Everybody knew the police killed Chucho, but my mother never believed it. She knew that he was meant to die at the river. Chucho's whole life had been on borrowed time, but you cannot cheat fate for ever. The spirit of the river had come back to claim what was rightfully his." The sequence of Chucho's death is also presented as the disruption of a family party. The occasion now is the return home of Paco, the eldest son who is enlisted in the Navy and has been stationed in nearby San Diego. Nava will alternate the shots of the happy family watching the Lucy Show on TV, with the man hunt scenes under the concrete bridge that looms over the Sánchez's abode. Only two members of the family are not in the house. Chucho, the estranged son who has been expelled by the father because of his drug dealing and his rejection of the "dignity and work" ethic embraced unremittingly by José Sánchez and Jimmy, the youngest kid who prefers to play ball in the street. Nava places this man hunt "under the bridge" as if to emphasize Chucho's ill-fated crossing. He also uses a bluish filter and successive freezing frames to create a sense of the social and spiritual underworld inhabited by Chucho. Perhaps unnecessarily, Nava interjects the image of the white owl which has been used to visualize the spirit of the river haunting Chucho's life. Chucho's death becomes Jimmy's primal scene. After a series of cuts back and forth from the family to Jimmy's ball game to the man hunt, we see how Jimmy runs under the bridge trying to catch a flying ball just to catch Chucho's desperate stare, while he is fatally shot by the rejoicing Anglo police officers who yell "that was a hell of a shot." Jimmy will never truly emerge from that shooting hell under the bridge. In one of the film's most brilliant ellipsis, Nava telescopes the narrative twenty years ahead in order to show us Jimmy's footsteps on the water puddle in front of the prison gates, in a visual metaphor that recalls Chucho's fated water crossing. Jimmy's imprisonment is both real and psychological, as the narrator's voiceover reminds us: "You never really knew what was inside of him, except the anger." It will be this anger that Toni will tap into in order to persuade Jimmy to accept her plan to marry Isabel. The interaction between Toni and Jimmy in this sequence is another illustration of Nava's wise blending of the comedic and the dramatic. The bossy sister, intensely played by Constance Marie, approaches Jimmy with her plan. Jimmy, almost unconcerned, replies: "You still need the famous *baboso* citizen who's stupid enough to do it." After a few sour exchanges, Toni finds the right path into Jimmy's heart through his anger and his misused macho code: "If I was a man, I would do it!" With one little act you can say "fuck you" to the whole establishment!" Later, during the court wedding, Jimmy will indeed simply "go

through the motions" and, as Roger Ebert writes: "Instead of kissing the bride, he mutters "you owe me' ominously at his activist sister." (3). Jimmy's request for a payback is to ask Toni to justify that arranged wedding to their bewildered parents. After having listened to her kids' long tirade about political survival, María, the mother, interrupts the discussion with her admonishing words: "Do you want to tell me something about survival? ... Let me tell you this. There are certain things in life that are sacred. *Sagradas*! And we don't spit on them! Because without them, it doesn't matter if we live or if we die. Marriage is something we don't spit on. And Isabel believes that she's married." María's role as the harbinger of tradition, of the sacredness of family values is thus established beyond any historical distortion. She does not accept "alternative" family models. Does the film as a whole sustain the same position? Does it stage the cultural collusion between Anglos and Chicanos in terms of opposing family representations? Or does it open up alternative representational spaces where the family metaphor is less univocal and all-encompassing? To answer these questions is to position oneself politically, as Patricia Gonzales's and Roberto Rodríguez's words illustrate:

> Anyone from an immigrant family, or even a large family, should see a part of their own lives in this film. We did. We saw our families who were here in the United States long before pilgrims or conquistadors; grandparents who crossed the border back and forth when there was no Border Patrol; an imprisoned uncle, who, like the character Jimmy, seemed to bear all the wounds of being different for the entire family like the fallen corn, so the rest of us could flourish. Our family grew milpas. We live in a society of divisions, of disintegrating families of races, and people divided into legal and illegal populations. *My Family* is about how one family withstands those divisions. It is not a Disney family. (2).

At the heart of this "anti-Disney' family, there is the portrayal of a kind of social death that can neither be assimilated nor dismissed. At best, it can be figuratively healed. It is this cultural healing, ultimately, that fuels Nava's narrative. The scene that better dramatizes the reaching out gesture and the entrenchment in the social death of the historical wound is the one between the oldest brother, Paco, and the youngest, Jimmy. Paco is visiting Jimmy in jail, after Isabel's death. To his pleas, Jimmy will only say: "You just think of me like I'm dead!. Later, Paco's voiceover will summarize Jimmy's scapegoat position: "To me, Jimmy carried a lot of shit for the rest of us. All the hate, all the rage and all the injustice." Interestingly, the only character who successfully reaches out and crosses over to Jimmy's isolated heart is Isabel, the Salvadoran refugee whose arranged marriage he had reluctantly accepted. As Paco tells us: "Isabel kept coming back no matter what Jimmy said. And then something appeared in his apartment that no self-respecting *vato loco* would ever have in his *cantón*." What appears is a poster of Julio Iglesias, the Spanish singer who epitomizes a Pan-Latino sentimental crossover. And later, in a rather unconvincing and yet effective sequence, the viewer witnesses how Isabel lures Jimmy into listening to some current music, instead of to his boring oldies. Then, with the aid of the Dominican Juan Luis Guerra's erotic voice, she proceeds to teach him a *salsa/merengue* lesson that becomes a sexual seduction. The outburst "*que viva la raza*!" uttered by a casual onlooker underscores their symbolic status and becomes a celebratory anticipation of the couple's inner crossing, of their "border wound" healing. This encounter with the (Latino) other as a process of self-recognition is dramatically and beautifully highlighted in the love- making scene in which the "marriage of convenience" becomes the meeting of two troubled and lonely spirits. Isabel and Jimmy are both silent witnesses and victims of political brutality. Their union comes from this shared trauma. The sudden transition from social strangers to lovers and to spiritual intimacy, however, seems to anticipate the very fragility of that union.

And yet, the healing takes place. Jimmy, the narrator tells us, "finally joined the parade of workers crossing the bridges." We indeed see Jimmy crossing the emblematic bridge separating his house from the wealthy side of the city. To no avail, though, since Nava's next twist in the plot, Isabel's death in the delivery of her son Carlitos, reinforces that vulnerability and suggests the historical impossibility of a "happy end" for the children of forced migration, social injustice and political violence. Significantly, Gregory Nava inscribes the tragic flaw in the American dream narrative by means of the death of a crucial female figure. Rosa, the brave Guatemalan sister, dies of the infection brought on by the rat bites suffered during their dramatic border crossing in *El Norte*; Isabel dies of childbirth because she lacks the services "of the fancy hospitals of the West side" in *My Family, Mi Familia* and Selena dies by the gunshot of a supposed admirer who had betrayed her, in *Selena*. The ultimate significance of this narrative recurrence seems to rest on Nava's own mythical projection. As the mother tells her son Jimmy and the spectator: "the souls of the women who die giving birth become "sinateteo," the spirit that helps the sun to set, without them, the sun would never rest." The life cycle of death and rebirth is thus invoked in María's syncretic faith in the Mayan and Christian myths that provide the historical continuity of "*la raza*."

Nava's inscription of that mythical projection, however, does not close the narrative, as it did in Nair's *The Perez Family*. In fact, his last episode becomes a caricaturesque reenactment of the dramatic collusion between families, between cultures. It also dramatizes the crossing motif that has structured the entire narrative. The occasion yet again is a party, this time to celebrate the first visit of Memo's future in-laws. Memo is the successful lawyer, the "pride" and "joy" of the family, as the bittersweet irony of Paco's narration reminds us. Memo is coming home to introduce his girlfriend Karen and her parents to the Sánchez family. The arrival of the green Mercedes Benz through the dusty path is framed by the old concrete bridge that separates the two sides of town and the two cultures. After finding their way among chickens and a sleepy dog in the porch, the Anglo family from Bell Air makes its way into the house. The first question asked by Karen's father is "so, you folks are all from Mexico?" "Yes," says Paco, "my father walked here from Mixoacán in 1926. He was 18 years old! Alarmed by the path the conversation is taking, Memo exclaims: "Actually, I've never been to Mexico. I've always lived here in Los Angeles, just like yourselves!," as if to reinforce the fact that for him Mexico is so far away as East L. A. has been to this Anglo family, who, as the narrator reminded us, had never been there before. When Paco retells the story of the old uncle, El Californio, being buried in the backyard of the house, Memo, terrified, pleads to his father to confirm that it is not true, "that it is an old family story." In order to please his shocked in-laws, Memo is ready to deny the family's historical roots. He is now William Sánchez, attorney-at-law. His cultural crossover is complete. Memo and this caricaturesque Anglo family embody the big gap still existing between the two sides of the bridge. Nava exaggerates the cultural clash even further with the inclusion in the scene of Carlitos, Isabel's and Jimmy's son, who, half-naked and donning an Aztec warrior helmet, jumps onto the table shouting furiously in front of the horrified guests, as if he had become a reembodiment of the fighting spirit of *la raza*. This scene is the one that Mark Leeper must have had in mind when he wrote that "Nava occasionally even unkindly turned characters into caricatures." (2). Indeed, despite the obvious intention to play with stereotypes in both sides, the scene becomes a quasi-farcical staging of the film's self-consciousness. And, as I have suggested before, the comic relief does not ultimately undermine the stereotypical representation. Too often, as in the film's final sequence of the old couple sipping the *"cafecito*," Nava's "defamiliarization" succumbs to an idealized and sentimentalized representation. Ultimately, therefore, I have to agree with the Tucson Weekly reviewer who wrote:

> My Family is the type of film that plays out better in one's memory than in an actual theater. A bountiful melodrama covering 50 years of a Mexican family in East Los Angeles, the story has important things to say about Hispano-American history, cultural evolution and assimilation, the unending fight to hold on to traditions, and much more. But the entire picture is swathed in an unrelentless sentimentality that often waters down its effectiveness. (1).

IV. Epilogue: The Limits of a Hispanic Hollywood

> Our art is being described as "colorful," "passionate," "mysterious," "exuberant," "baroque," etc., all euphemistic terms for irrationalism and primitivism. These mythical views only help to perpetuate the colonizing notions of the South as a wild and exotic pre-industrial universe ever waiting to be discovered, enjoyed, and purchased by the entrepreneurial eye of the North. It is mainly the artists who voluntarily or unknowingly resemble the stereotypes who end up being selected by the fingers of the Latino boom, but where are the voices of dissent who delineate the boundaries of the abyss? (Gómez-Peña, 51).

In terms of mainstream, big studio films, I think that the answer to Gómez Peña's question has to be: they are elsewhere. The dissenting voices whose representations directly undermine Hollywood's dream factory are indeed elsewhere. Hollywood even invented a term for their "independent" cousins: the mavericks. And yet, a large segment of the American cinematic production has moved outside the boundaries of Hollywood, as this year's Oscar nominations clearly showed. Is this, therefore, the time to try and pursue the dream of a Hispanic Hollywood? Should the Latino family keep going Hollywood? And should it go at all as a family? The price to go Hollywood is still that of being reduced to a narrative cliché, as Víctor Valle writes concerning the success of *La Bamba:*

> In an industry that thrives on Cinderella stories, La Bamba reaffirmed Hollywood's favorite narrative clichés. Ritchi Valens (née Valenzuela) was the minority outcast who ascended into the rock'n'roll heavens, which is almost the same as becoming a movie star. Clearly, director Luis Valdez had tapped into those aspects of Valens' life that reaffirmed one of the bedrock storylines upon which the movie moguls built Hollywood into the world's dream factory. ... But this was not the film I saw weeks before in a Columbia Pictures screening room. It became apparent to me that Valdez, like other Latino bricoleurs adept at juggling several languages and cultures, was capable of telling several stories simultaneously. (262).

Ultimately, it is this possibility of telling a multiple story through the Hollywood cliché that justifies the cultural need not to forego the opportunities to use Hollywood's enormous infrastructure to extend the territorial and figurative limits of Latino cinematic representation. And yet, to insist on Gómez Peña's admonition, there is the obvious danger of giving in to a marketable Latino boom whose

entire economy is based on cultural othering and commodification. The films I have studied in this paper walk this thin line with different degrees of resistance to this reductive process. They have, nevertheless, extended the semantic field of Latino images in the United States. Never before, for instance, had we seen powerful female figures in leading Latino roles that were not completely stereotyped. Moreover, in Gregory Nava's case, I think Hollywood has found a true Chicano "auteur," whose trajectory, from *El Norte* to *My Family, Mi Familia* and *Selena* , if read as a continuum and despite its own stereotypical self-consciousness, does indeed create a new representational space that begins to question Hollywood's own limited cultural borders.

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