Title
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Permalink
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Publication Date
2012-04-25

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PANEL TITLE
Mumbling, Stuttering, Yelling: Gender Inarticulation in Argentina, Chile, Brazil and… Downtown Los Angeles

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ABSTRACT
Representations of “pocho/a” (Chican@) experience are complicated not only by relations of dependency and domination between the United States and Mexico, but also by colonial legacies and histories. At the heart of this relational dynamic is the question of agency, which manifests itself in film in part through the ability of characters to articulate their subjectivity to others. This paper will address how representations of speech acts capture the contradictions of Mexican American identity in two Mexican films, México de mi corazón (1964) and Del otro lado del puente (1979). Both films share Los Angeles as a setting and both feature popular Mexican ranchera singer Lucha Villa. Portraying a young vibrant pocha singer in the earlier film, Villa has a more circumscribed role in Del otro lado del puente as the mother of Berto (played by flamboyant Mexican musical icon Juan Gabriel). As Berto unearths his family history, he discovers that his mother is brain dead in a mental hospital. Catatonic and speechless, Berto’s mother is unable to recover from the trauma of having had to support her children and drug habit with sex work after her husband left the family to fight in the Second World War. Villa’s performance in Del otro lado del puente can be read as a critical reinterpretation of earlier optimistic portrayals of Mexican American identity. How does communicative agency in these films reflect perceived shifts in economic and social possibilities for Chican@ mobility in Los Angeles?
Introduction

Today I’ll be talking about México de mi corazón (Dos Mexicanas en México)/ Mexico of My Heart (Two Mexican Women in Mexico) from 1964, directed by Miguel M. Delgado; and Del otro lado del puente/ From the Other Side of the Bridge from 1978, directed by Gonzalo Martinez Ortega. In this presentation I will use these two Mexican films – which both feature pocha or pocho characters – to trace changing representations of feminized Mexican Americans living in Los Angeles before and after the Chicano Civil Rights movement. And while I do not have sufficient time today to review further, I want to note that these films belong to popular film genres, and as such provide rich examples for exploring the connections between cultural hegemony, fantasy and citizenship.¹

The Mexican world of Los Angeles

To provide some context for my exploration of these themes – my larger project Marquee Survivals focuses on repurposed movie theaters mostly located in Downtown Los Angeles on South Broadway. With this project, I am working toward an alternative media historiography of that street, and to some extent, of the historic district of Downtown Los Angeles more generally. While the majority of México de mi corazón is set in Mexico, the film actually advertised itself as “the first great Mexican movie filmed in Los Angeles and the beautiful places in Mexico City” (Riera 1976: 373). Del otro lado del puente, on the other hand, takes place entirely in Los Angeles - using East LA, as well as UCLA and USC’s campuses, as a backdrop.

Representations of pochas in two Mexican films

In this presentation, I will be using “pocha” perhaps more generally than it is commonly understood to mean. On its own pocha, or pocho, is a highly contested designation. Used to signify alignment with ‘American’ cultural values, the word has previously been synonymous with “agringada” (meaning something like Americanized) and it has shifted in intensity as an insult throughout Mexican American history (Allatson 2007: 192). Rather than simply taken to mean “American born” or “Americanized” I am using the label to consider a feminized Mexican

¹ For an example of how these concepts can be applied to “representation” and the place of the border in visual media, see Norma Iglesias’s “Border Representations: Border Cinema and Independent Video” (183-213) in Postborder City: Cultural Spaces of Bajalta California, Eds. Michael Dear and Gustav
American belonging or, on the other side of the spectrum, alienation as depicted in these particular films. Therefore, I am concerned here with the construction of its meaning in relation to the periods during and after WWII, and during the Chicano movement in the late 1960s and 70s. I’m also concerned with how it resonates specifically in Los Angeles, thus distinguishing it from other historical periods and regional contexts. Broadly, I am interested in expanding pocha beyond a description of failed Mexican-ness by exploring its history as a feminized state of transnational identity.

*México de mi corazón* (1964)

*México de mi corazón* is a musical romantic comedy about two pocha cousins – Lupe and Maria (played by ranchera singers Lola Beltrán and Lucha Villa) – who return to Mexico. Despite being a nationalistic film enamored with Mexico City, the film actually begins in Los Angeles. The film’s opening locates the North American city as a center of the glamorous world of cinema, which is described in the film’s voice over as one of “the greatest dreams created by Man.” It goes on to explain: This is the city of Los Angeles, where “dreams and golden fantasies” are made.

Throughout the film, *México de mi corazón* offers a unique interpretation of an Angeleno dream. Ultimately, it adjusts focus, away from the entertainment industry and toward “the Mexican world in Los Angeles” – whose members (the film narrates) “feel an irreplaceable love for their Mexico.” The two main characters desire, more than fame and celebrity, a homecoming. After winning a singing contest at the Million Dollar Theater, Lupe and Maria’s shared dream is cinematically realized as they are awarded a trip “home.” From the start of their return to an unfamiliar country of origin, the two cousins are effusive in their deep respect and love for Mexico. Eagerly singing “Soy Puro Mexicano” (“I Am Pure Mexican”) on their drive across Los Angeles’s freeways en route to the airport, the cousins embark on a journey that will fulfill their “golden fantasies” of national reunion.

The film indulges just such a fantasy, a return to Mexico that is absent of rejection or ridicule. Villa and Beltrán as “pochas” will experience no problems returning to a homeland they have never visited before and their reunion with Mexico becomes the film’s true love story. So intense
is the main characters’ love for Mexico that the individual romantic love stories pale in comparison, even as the formation and security of these heterosexual relationships predicate the cousin couple’s authentic return to their true beloved - Mexico.

As David Maciel puts it in his essay “Pochos and Other Extremes in Mexican Cinema; or, El Cine Mexicano se va de Bracero, 1922-1963” this “apparent strength” of the cousins’ admiration for Mexico “is the film’s main problem” (Maciel 1992:105). Portrayed by popular ranchera singers (as I mentioned earlier), the actresses playing Lupe and Maria are well known to be Mexican - and represent their pocha-ness through the occasional use of Spanglish and American English slang. As superficial linguistic markers of difference, these gestures toward pochismo hardly begin to demonstrate the complexity of transnational citizenship negotiated by Mexican American women, in any historical period or American region. The utterances of “okay,” “Thank you, familia,” and “cara de gangster” instead appear as pretense, used to create a shallow depiction of the pocha only to show how quickly its subjects can be re-integrated it into Mexican nationalism.

Del otro lado del puente (1978)

Del otro lado del puente was released the same year as Arturo Ripstein’s critically acclaimed El lugar sin límites (Place Without Limits). That award-winning drama (Lugar sin límites), like the other films I am discussing today, also features Lucha Villa, who plays “La Japonesa,” a well-known madam of a brothel in the Mexican countryside. However, Del otro lado del puente received (and continues to receive) far less attention than Ripstein’s film. As a film partly belonging to the genre of border exploitation, the film stars illustrious singer / composer Juan Gabriel and accordingly includes many musical numbers (a couple of which are disco) that showcase his talent.

I place Del otro lado alongside México de mi corazón in this discussion of the pocha, as it resembles and diverges from the plot line of that more optimistic film in revealing ways. In the differences, one can perceive the influence of the Chicano Civil Rights Movement. The fantasy of returning wholeheartedly to a welcoming motherland (as a tourist who in her heart is “puro Mexicano”) is deflated, Del otro lado reveals the true home of the Chicano to be the
southwestern United States, Los Angeles, and implicitly Aztlan. For my analysis today, what’s especially significant in the film’s depiction of Chicano ideals is how it reshapes and reframes history, and how this intersects with representations of a pocha mother as violated mother.

In Del otro lado del puente, the main character Alberto Molina, played by Gabriel, discovers that he is not a Mexican but a Chicano. For Berto, this is a traumatic discovery. Throughout the film Berto struggles with his new identity, and at first reacts with horror, rejecting the name “Chicano.” Berto wishes to return to his hometown of Juarez, and along with it security in his Mexican-ness. Ultimately, Berto accepts his role as a Chicano leader, and his position within the national family, by engaging the political moment through community involvement and activism.

**Screening familiar tropes**

While Berto’s decision to stay in Los Angeles is a conscious one that he arrives at through deliberation portrayed within the film’s narrative arc, the role of the pocha, and her agency, is far more circumscribed. But what would happen if we centered her representation and utterances? Foremost, we would notice that the film relies on familiar female stereotypes in order to develop its Chicana characters.

For example, Estela, Berto’s love interest, is a young, innocent woman studying social work at USC. She represents the virgin. She spouts the rhetoric of Chicano nationalism (as do many of the film’s Chicano characters who are not Berto), illuminating the path to Chicano righteousness; at one point she re-assures Berto that in Los Angeles “estamos en México” (“We are in Mexico”). Meanwhile her character performs minimal narrative agency while she enables Berto’s integration into the Chicano family, saving him from a romantic relationship with a clumsily ignorant white UCLA student from Bel-Air.

On the other side of the spectrum, Berto’s mother (played by Villa) represents the whore, or
some variation of Malinche (*La Chingada*, the conquered or the mythic “fucked one”). A confession from Berto’s older brother, Danny, reveals a dramatic, hidden family history. Berto learns that his mother performed sex work so that she could support her family while her husband was serving in the U.S. Armed Forces during the Second World War. Berto also learns that upon returning from service, his father plunged deep into alcoholism, unable to cope with the knowledge of his wife’s enterprising deeds. In the end, the Molina patriarch ends up dead “en el downtown” while La Madre suffers a far worse fate — she is brain dead, living alone at a convalescent home. Now catatonic and mute, as La Madre, Villa can only sing (“Nunca, Nunca, Nunca”) to her child within her own memories. However, even in her flashbacks she is denied subjectivity, the scene is shown from the film’s main point of view, through the eyes of her son.

(*At this point in the presentation, I showed a clip from Del otro lado del puente in which Berto sees his mother for the first time since childhood. He approaches his mother, played by Lucha Villa, but his calling out to her receives no response. Then the film flashbacks to an intimate moment shared between mother and son during Berto’s childhood. “La Madre” is shown hanging laundry and quietly singing a lullaby.*)

With Villa rendered speechless, the film perhaps unintentionally highlights the silencing of pachucas, pochas and Chicanas that many have accused the Chicano movement of the 1960s and 70s of reproducing. However, there are guides for tracing the “contours and textures of [this] silence” (Ramírez 2009: 103) in the work of scholars like Catherine S. Ramírez and Rosa Linda Fregoso. For instance, Ramírez in her 2009 book *The Woman in the Zoot Suit* re-inscribes the pachuca into Chicana/o history, finding her images and stories even in the silence of neglected court transcripts. And, while Fregoso, at the end of her immensely influential *The Bronze Screen* (published in 1993), provides a glimpse of one potential narrative for the under-served female protagonist in her reading of Edward James Olmos’ *American Me*, with *Mexicana Encounters* (published in 2003) Fregoso devotes the entire book to exploring the “symbolic role of Mexicanas and Chicanas in culture” (Fregoso xiii) and how that role has historically been imbricated with the practices of “making of social identities on the borderlands.” *México de mi*

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2 In *The Woman in the Zoot Suit: Gender, Nationalism, and the Cultural Politics of Memory*, Catherine S. Ramírez provides a fuller exploration of “La Malinche” and the figure’s role in Chicana feminist theory, see “The Violated Mother” on pp. 38-40 for further reference.
corazón and Del otro lado del puente are two filmic examples that reveal aspects of the “symbolic role[s]” Chicanas have performed in Los Angeles culture, including roles as possible assimilated Mexicans, long-suffering Chicana caretakers and violated pocha mothers.

**Conclusion**

In briefly analyzing these two films, I have only begun to consider representations of the pocha and how they might reflect her historical relation to imaginative possibilities of agency, expression and articulation. In future work, I hope to elaborate on these topics while also pursuing how they are connected to, and determined by, itinerant notions of Chicana/o mobility, hybridity, nationalisms and transnationalisms. There are many questions left to explore, including how fantasy negotiates ethnic identity and national belonging in these two films, and how sexuality is crucial to that formation. For México de mi corazón this fantasy is enacted through the cousins’ freedom and mobility in choosing Mexico, however this dream is based on their primary identification as heterosexual Mexican women. Fifteen years later, in the world of Del otro lado del puente a magical return to Mexico and the national family is no longer tenable. Recognition of the importance of the Mexican diaspora via Aztlán and the Chicano movement influenced how the Mexican filmmakers of Del otro lado could depict Los Angeles as both the United States and Mexico. And while both films present fantasies of Chicano belonging, its availability in Del otro lado del puente is tellingly dependent on the impurity of the violated mother, and it is from the sacrifice of her mind and body that the Chicano family can emerge and thrive in the United States. But what to do with the queer configuration of this family - with Juan Gabriel as the patriarch? Gabriel being the same entertainer who Ramón García has described as “a Mexican George Michael and Liberace all rolled into one” (García 2006: 217). This presents only one compelling aspect that makes a text like Del otro del lado, a low budget film presenting a discouraging portrait of pocha mobility, still worth researching further.
Works Cited


Films

