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With His Guitar in His Hand: Representations of U.S. - Mexico Border Masculinity in Robert Rodriguez's “El Mariachi”

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WITH HIS GUITAR IN HIS HAND: REPRESENTATIONS OF U.S. - MEXICO BORDER MASCULINITY IN ROBERT RODRIGUEZ'S *EL MARIACHI*

A Thesis

by

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis closely examines Robert Rodriguez's film *El Mariachi* and its portrayal of border masculinity - the masculine identity which exists on the physical space between the U.S. and Mexico, but also the masculinity created by the melding of cultures. The film ignores this complexity and instead dichotomizes maleness along the traditionally Western lines of hard versus soft masculinity. Further, the film glorifies violence, the exploitation of female bodies, shows women as only useful agents of man, punishes transgressive women, and depicts men as only possessing or aspiring to possess individualistic, economic, phallocentric, and patriarchal power which reinforces a variation of hegemonic masculinity. This thesis explores the larger implications of these representations in terms of gender, race, sexuality, and border culture.

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And, of course, I must express special appreciation to my mother, Elva, whose unconditional love and support I could not live without and who slapped my hand away from the McDonald's application each time I thought graduation was not within my reach. *Te quiero mucho.*

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INTRODUCTION

Only now someone asks
About you
Wants to know the truth
And insists on loving you –
Myth, legend, lie. All.

But all the truth
Is buried deeper still
--within your dust.

-- Teresa Palomo Acosta, "Chipita" from *Nile & Other Poems*

While subjugated peoples cannot readily control what emanates from the dominant culture, they do determine to varying extents what they absorb into their own, and what they use it for.

-- Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*

Perhaps the old macho image has to die when it does not engender the community. The essence of maleness doesn't have to die, it merely has to be understood and created anew. To re-create is evolution's role. We can take an active role in it, but to do so we have to know the history of false behavioral conditioning.

-- Rudolfo Anaya, "I'm the King": The Macho Image from *Muy Macho*

Reflecting on an Idea

Les voy a hablar sobre los hombres de mi vida. To understand the purpose of my project, I must first introduce the men in my life. My paternal grandfather crossed the U.S.-Mexico border in the early 1950s and settled in Monte Alto, Texas - a small border

town with a population of about 1200 people. With him came his recently impregnated and even more recently than that wedded wife. That child whose conception forced the union of my grandfather and grandmother was my father. Three more children would follow. My grandfather joined the US Military to gain citizenship and later found employment at a small produce packaging company in Monte Alto. This afforded my grandfather's family some luxuries not available to other South Texas families at that time. His permanent position gave the family a steady income and neither my father nor his brother or two sisters ever had to work in the fields or migrate like so many of their neighbors. There was even money later for a television set, one of the few in town, which fostered in my father and later me, an intense interest in images of popular culture.

My grandfather was the patriarchal, masculine ideal. Strong and silent. A military man. The provider. He was a man's man. And my grandmother was the ideal companion to this patriarch – religious, domestic, and submissive. She was my grandfather's property – along with their house, car, and children. Strong and macho, my grandfather exerted his masculinity both sexually and economically. Not allowed to work nor learn to drive, my grandmother was further required to turn the other way when my grandpa's eyes wandered and his body strayed into the house of the town widow. My grandmother was the embodiment of a woman of *Marianismo*[1]. Not particularly warm, she believed in following cultural mores so meticulously that anything other than "perfect" appearances was secondary. Her daughters were required to follow her example. They were taught to master the domestic space, trained in cooking, cleaning, and all things feminine. Her

[1] *Marianismo* designates a Roman Catholic derived valorization of feminine chastity, purity, obedience, sacrifice, and nurturing maternity. It stems from and underwrites the associated cult of the Virgin Mary. The importance of *Marianismo* when discussing machismo was introduced by Evelyn Stevens in her 1973 essay "Marianismo: The Other Face of Machismo in Latin America," *Female and Male in Latin America*, ed. Ann Pescatello.

daughters were also required to remain pure—meaning, sexually virtuous. They were allowed to date men. *Only* men. *Catholic* men. My father and my uncle, on the other hand, were socialized to value patriarchal masculinity. They worked helping my grandfather outside, killed chickens and *cabrito* for Sunday dinner, worked on old cars, and as soon as they were old enough, got jobs of their own. My grandfather was a strict disciplinarian. If there is a monolithic standard of border masculinity, he embodied that. Always stoic, he never showed love or affection toward my uncle or my father.

As a child in school, my father learned shame. None of his teachers had Spanish last names. If caught speaking Spanish, he was slapped on the hand with a ruler. He desperately wanted to take a "normal" lunch in his lunch bag to school. He wanted a white bread sandwich slathered in mayonnaise instead of the taco he hid away and ate out of a brown paper bag so no one could see. One of his most heart-breaking stories involved him going home one day after school, sneaking into my grandmother's kitchen and covering his arms and face with flour, praying it stick to his skin so that he could appear even slightly lighter.

My father came of age - when Chicano identity did - during the Chicano Movement of the late 1960s. My mother met my dad when she was 14-years-old and he was 16. Monte Alto was so small they bussed their students to Edcouch-Elsa High School every morning (and they still do to this day). This is where they met each other. A new generation paved the way for new social and socio-economic circumstances as well as made room for subtle shifts in gender roles. My dad grew his hair and sideburns long and was present for the Edcouch-Elsa Walkout when students rebelled against what Gloria Anzaldúa referred to as "linguistic terrorism" (58). The Chicano Movement was

one of the pinnacle moments in defining a Chicano identity—and by extension my father's identity as well. Traditional gender roles became increasingly difficult to maintain not just because of political change, but because of changes in sexual identity and sexual expression, changes economically, changes in definitions of the family. But, in Edcouch, Texas these changes appeared in more understated ways.

As this youthful revolutionary spirit died down, my dad's generation grew up and made their homes in Edcouch and the town shifted from the "white side" and the "brown side" to being all "brown side." [2] My parents were married in 1976 and purchased a small house in town. They were ready to start a family.

As far back as I can remember my father was an example of a man not usually exalted in a traditional patriarchal society. Quiet, reserved, and oftentimes shy, my dad possesses a keen sensitivity and whole-hearted sense of compassion. Unlike my grandfather's, my father's family's survival depended on both my parents working. Both working late hours, they divided the household chores. I cannot remember a night when my father did not cook dinner for the entire family. Several times throughout my childhood, my mother was forced to work extra hours while my father was "between jobs." Traditional gender roles definitely took a backseat in my household. In part, I think because socioeconomic conditions made them harder to enforce. But, also, I think because my parents did not feel a cultural pressure to abide by them.

My brother was born in 1978. Fed up with life-long sentiments expressing "Eres prietito, pero chulo," or "You're cute, even though you're dark," my dad said, "I hope he has dark skin like I do." And he did. However, my older brother returned to the

2 Officially, the law enacted in 1931 separating the Spanish/Mexican side of Edcouch from the "American" side was not repealed until 2008.

masculine ideals of my grandfather. The height and color of the average Aztec warrior, my brother stands at five feet and five inches and is a police officer – a bronze fighter in his own right. Traditional gender roles are followed in his household to a tee. My sister-in-law is a middle school teacher (a profession I've been told on several occasions is "a good career for a girl"). When she comes home from school, she washes and irons his clothes and has dinner ready. When he arrives home he regales her with stories of the latest perpetrator he subdued or what community members he helped that day. Together, they have a seven-year-old daughter. Once I said of my niece, "I want her to be a feminist." To which my brother replied, "I want her to be *normal*." These words had a profound, reverberating affect on me. It forced me to ask myself what is normal in this border culture in which I've grown up. Normalcy seems to be a recurrent theme in each of these stories and has left me with many questions – questions I used as the starting point for this project.

My Purpose

All of these family stories and experiences have brought me to this point in my academic career and this place in the exploration of my culture: how it defines itself, and how it perceives gender and masculinity. In order to arrive at some answers in this thesis, I look at how Latinos are represented in popular culture, how they define and represent themselves in self-authored images, and the incongruities that exist between the two. What I have found is how inextricably linked gender and cultural identity are in Chicano, Mexican, and border culture. I have also found that myth and fact are intertwined in Chicano and border culture, so much so that you can only accept this link and look at the messages being told and their consequences.

With the discussion of self-definition comes the need to discuss labels used by groups within the same community for different reasons and the associations connected with each term. In an interview with Michael Guillén, Chon Noriega differentiates the terms Latino from Hispanic claiming that Latino is

> … a pan-ethnic term meant to include Chicano, Cuban American, Puerto Rican, Dominican and all of the other Latin American descent ethnicities and—in itself—is a contrast typically to the term 'Hispanic', which has been a census term for thirty-some years now (Guillén par. 3)

Further, the terms Chicano and Mexican-American are sometimes used interchangeably; however, Chicano is more closely associated with a political atmosphere in reference to the civil rights struggles and the Chicano Movement of the 1960s (Oboler 177) whereas Mexican-American refers to a population living in the U.S. but whose heritage primarily hails from the other side of the Rio Grande River. To use the term Chicano brings along political connotations of struggle and resistance. The word is a statement in and of itself. Mexican-American, however refers only to ancestral background.

Though these terms carry a lot of cultural significance in this region, I use the terms border and *mestizo* masculinity in this project because the space (both physical and social) in which *El Mariachi* was filmed is not *just* Chicano or Mexican-American. This space is a border space where cultures (sometimes violently) diverge and meld and form something new entirely. Each of these terms has been constructed in different ways by scholars, particularly by the theorist at the forefront of border theory, Gloria Anzaldúa. She refers to a border inhabitant not as a person who simply exists on a certain patch of

land between two countries or the product of two different cultures, but as someone who exists in a "place of contradictions" where "keeping intact one's shifting and multiple identity and integrity is like trying to swim in a new element" (20). While I consider Robert Rodriguez a Mexican-American, Tejano, and Chicano, the representations in his film(s) do not reflect these masculinities, but more specifically reflect a border one. In his film *El Mariachi*, the Mariachi's masculinity is not fixed, not static. It is a masculine identity in transition influenced by his male predecessors, the context of his surroundings, and of course, the women in his life. Further, the film does not exist in a bubble, but in a historical and social context that also affects its representation of this particular masculinity. Because regions along the U.S.-Mexico border belonged to Mexico but were "won" by the U.S. in the War of 1846, masculinity in these regions is still largely influenced by Mexican masculinity. It is these specific regions that have captured a lot of scholarly attention and that Rodriguez depicts in his films *El Mariachi* (1992), *Desperado* (1995*)*, *From Dusk Till Dawn* (1996), and *Once Upon a Time in Mexico* (2003). Therefore, I use the terms mestizo, border, and Mexican masculinity to describe the men in Rodriguez's film.

With a deep interest in popular culture inherited from my father, I inherited images and representations that were often contradictory or confused my lived experiences of being Chicana and residing on the U.S.-Mexico border. Because of my personal experiences living on the border, I have come to appreciate the importance of looking at these images and the identities they construct in terms of masculinity and femininity. How do these images reflect or misrepresent my experiences? Moreover, what do these images say about the border men and their female counterparts whom I

love and have grown up with? Exploration of these issues is important, not just to me, but to the people whose lives these representations have consequences. As I stated before, border masculinity refers to the male essence possessed by those who physically inhabit the space between two countries; but, it also refers to the melding of cultures. This thesis looks at how Robert Rodriguez constructs this particular type of masculinity in his film *El Mariachi*. Rodriguez portrays the melding of two cultures to form a border masculinity. He does so by presenting the character of Azul as the indigenous masculinity and the character of Moco as the European conquistador masculinity, which is the first type of masculinity accepted as a symbol of hegemonic masculinity for Europe (Connell 607) including Spain (which colonized Mexico) and England (which settled in the U.S.).

In my first chapter, I review the literature involving representations of Latinos in popular culture, particularly representations of the figure of the Mariachi in order to argue that Rodriguez re-establishes the figure of the mariachi as a contemporary variation of hegemonic masculinity. Mexican culture fashioned the masculinity connected to mariachi in films of the 1930s and 40s – a masculinity associated with drinking, music, sex, etc., etc. American popular culture has re-fashioned this image as either the "male buffoon" or has separated the figure of the mariachi from the masculine essence completely by depicting him as a soft, sentimental musician. However, Rodriguez's re-establishment is complicated by issues involving border and Mexican masculinity. It seems Rodriguez is playing with a double-edged sword of sorts. Rodriguez hopes to return the Mariachi's identity to one which possesses more "authenticity" and transgresses dominant American images. However, ultimately, Rodriguez's representation offers a confusing, simplistic,

and violent portrayal of border masculinity to both those who live on the border and the mainstream U.S. culture for which he now makes his films.

Using the premise that Rodriguez is reclaiming the figure of the Mariachi, my second chapter closely reads the three major masculine figures in the film - Azul, the Mariachi, and Moco as representations of the indigenous, *mestizo*, and Spanish figures that shape(d) masculinity along the U.S.-Mexican border. I read the Mariachi as the birth of *mestizaje* and representation of border masculinity in that he crosses a literal border both at the beginning and conclusion of the film, entering and exiting the city limits of Cuidad Acuña. Further, through the linear, narrative progression of the film he "crosses the border" from soft masculinity into hard masculinity. And, finally, the Mariachi is meant to portray the masculine resultant of the mixing of two cultures, the indigenous and European masculinities. I ultimately argue that Rodriguez's cinematic perceptions of border masculinity are simplistic and confusing and reinforce a one-dimensional, hegemonic masculinity, as well as negative stereotypes of *machismo* all of which is both outdated and harmful to his intended audience of the film.

Following my discussion of the men in the film, my third chapter focuses on how these representations of border masculinity translate into and affect representations of border women. I look closely at the portrayals of masculinity on the female body as well as the objectification of female bodies. I analyze the performances of a female police officer in the film, the women Azul and Moco surround themselves with, and the central female figure, Domino and look at how they represent different mythical and historical standards of women, particularly La Virgen de Guadalupe and Doña Marina/La Malinche in order to ultimately argue these images further reinforce a hegemonic masculinity.

My ultimate purpose is to determine *El Mariachi's* place among the literature, film, and scholarship that explore border culture, but also to add to the discussion of border theory a conversation that explicitly addresses the complexities of border masculinity, its relationship to *machismo*, and the reconstruction of these images in popular culture in both positive and negative ways.

CHAPTER I

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Latinos in Popular Culture

My father grew up watching television and movies with a limited amount of brown role models. While these rare images on television provided my father the sneaking suspicion that somewhere out there, beyond the South Texas border there existed similar cultures, they did not reflect his lived cultural experience on the U.S.-Mexico Border. The few examples that existed for him include Ricky Ricardo from *I Love Lucy* (played by the Cuban actor Desi Arnaz), Jay Silverheels (who portrayed Tonto, the Lone Ranger's Native faithful companion on the short lived 1950s television series) and Carmen Miranda (a Portugal-born actress known primarily for her stage work and television guest appearances). Because they were immigrants, dominant Anglo-American culture (along with the popular culture machine) quickly relabeled Arnaz and Miranda as *Latin*, or referred to them as *Spanish*. As for Silverheels (who was born on the Six Nations of the Grand River First Nation, near Brantford, Ontario, Canada), his television portrayal of "otherness" made it easy to put him in a non-white category of actors.

While these images were confusing for my dad, this "lumping" of Latin-ness can be wounding to *all* viewing audiences. In his book *Jose, Can You See: Latinos on and Off Broadway* (1999), Alberto Sandoval-Sanchez describes Arnaz and Miranda's

performances as "loaded with political and ideological practices, maneuvers, and strategies" which were part of "a conscious and premeditated mode of representation and stereotypization of 'Latinidad'" (21). He later writes, "In the absence of words, critics confuse race and ethnicity" (39). *Latinidad* seeks to create a standard of being Latin by combining cultures, ideologies, physical, and psychological traits of different, diverse groups of people. This confusion can have both benefits and consequences. In terms of popular culture Alicia Arrizon notes, "While a demographic revolution is indisputably under way in the United States, the volatility of globalization affects the current state of *Latinidad* tremendously, especially in the way transnational capital is contributing to the materialization of *Latinidad*" (32). She continues, "The marketing of contemporary notions of Latinidad" has caused heightened visibility of Latinos in popular culture (television, film, and advertisements) but "more often serve the ad's target audience than *Latinidad*" (34). She argues *Latinidad* has been transformed into a commodity, a commodity historically loaded with images and stereotypes ripe for mainstream utilization. The most obvious and easiest to exploit being gender relations in Latino culture in order to sell everything from beer (think exotic women serving *Tecate* or *Corona*) to movie tickets (think almost any film starring Penelope Cruz, Antonio Banderas, or Jennifer Lopez). It is when these exploitative images begin coming from Latinos themselves that these images become the most risky.

The exploitation of *Latinidad* by Latinos can have negative ramifications in how American audiences view the culture; but, more dangerous is how this affects how Latinos view themselves. In his book *Latino Images in Film: Stereotypes, Subversion, Resistance* (2002), Charles Ramirez Berg examines archetypes of *Latinidad* that have

emerged in American film. The most notable include: *El Bandido*, the Harlot, and the Male Buffoon. To quickly overview: *El Bandido* has taken many forms in film as early as the 1914 appearing as the "greaser" (in films such as, *Broncho Billy and the Greaser*) up until the 1990s (in films like, *Clear and Present Danger* and *Desperado*). He is "dirty and unkempt" and "vicious, cruel, treacherous, shifty, and violent" (68). The Harlot is a "slave to her passions, her conduct is simplistically attributed to her inherent nymphomania…she is basically a sex machine innately lusting for a white male" (71). The Male Baffoon's comedy is based on "characteristics that separate him from Hollywood's vision [of] the WASP American mainstream" (71-72). Ramirez Berg offers an example of the male buffoon in Ricky Ricardo's famous line "Lucy, you got some 'splainin' to do!" as he childishly regresses into emotionality, speaking almost indistinguishable Spanish (72).

While there has been extensive scholarship on the above stereotypes in television and film, the representation of border masculinity in television and film have yet to be fully explored and theorized. Rosa Linda Fregoso's essay "From Il(l)egal to Legal Subject Border Construction and Re-construction" examines how the border is rendered in mainstream films, such as *Born in East L.A.* (1987), *La Bamba* (1987), and the not-as-mainstream, but still important to border studies – the cinematic version of Americo Paredes's *The Ballad of Gregorio Cortez* (1984). While she focuses on gender, her analysis centers on the construction of the border in these films in terms of U.S. politics, law, immigration, and assimilation. Her discussion of the few big-budget Chicano/a authored films provide an excellent starting point for a discussion about border masculinity and my analysis of Rodriguez's *El Mariachi*. She illustrates that even Latino

directed films, which seek to counter the previously discussed stereotypes, still present problematic representations of masculinity.

Most pertinent to my discussion of border masculinity in Rodriguez's film is the representation of the Mariachi. Taking a cue from Anzaldúa herself who implored the "use of new symbols" and the "shape of new myths" (31-33), Rodriguez hopes to reclaim the image of the Mariachi. However, while Chicana feminist scholarship seeks to "resist the oppressive yoke of the sexist Chicano culture" (Saldivar-Hull 72), Rodriguez instead focuses on the racist yoke of American popular culture. While creating new (or re-creating old) symbols of Latinos in mainstream film is an important project, it cannot be at the expense of the men and women who inhabit border spaces and whose actions are influenced by large-scale representations of themselves. When discussing Tejano history, Sonia Saldivar-Hull notes that traditionally Chicano (male) historians have "done much to expose the realities of violent acts against" men, but have been "reluctant to voice the perhaps unspeakable violence against Tejanas" (75). She offers an example from Americo Paredes's *With His Pistol in His Hand*. She asserts the text "cannot articulate the violence that Gregorio Cortez's wife, Leonor Díaz Cortez, must have suffered in the four months she spent in a Texas jail, incarcerated for her husband's alleged crime" (75). Rodriguez, like his male historical predecessors, engenders portrayals of border men, even if they valorize violent, negative stereotypes and ignore how these stereotypes are harmful to the men and detrimental to the women of the culture.

El Mariachi focuses on the figure of the Mariachi, an icon deeply embedded in the Mexican national consciousness. It is a representation of masculinity unique to Mexico. While American audiences have mostly been exposed to Mariachi only in

caricature form, it has a history of representing a particular type of machismo, a masculinity representative of the Mexican identity. In her article, "Mariachi, Myths, and Mestizaje: Popular Culture and Mexican National Identity" Mary Lee Mullholland writes,

> Images of moustached mariachi musicians wearing sombreros and silver-studded cowboy outfits while strumming guitars and drinking tequila have long penetrated the production of 'an authentic national type' in Mexico and, at the same time, been criticised for producing an image of a "false Mexicanism." (249)

In an effort to create a sense of nationalistic pride and a memorable identity to nations outside Mexico, images that presented the mariachi as a suave, hyper-masculine male dressed in black silver studded cowboy outfits with a sombrero and swigging tequila. Each detail of the mariachi's wardrobe adds to his performance of Mexican masculinity. However, the image has now become distorted in non-Mexican cultural imaginations. In this way, the figure of the mariachi is a social construction much like the masculinity it represents. Images that are constructed can be re-constructed, re-negotiated, and re-defined. Of the figure of the mariachi in particular Mullholland writes,

> Mariachi is a performance that quotes and cites previous performances ad infinitum creating this illusion. Mariachi does not exist a priori or a posteriori of *mexicanidad*, rather they are co-constitutive, constantly drawing on each other in an impulse to move forward and create a sense of past. It is this seemingly metonymic link between mariachi and a perceived Mexican

> ‘essence’ that allows mariachi to perform idealised and, at times, hegemonic representations of Mexican identity. This essence is characterised as mestizo, macho and rural. (250-251)

To the Mexican national identity, a Mariachi and groups of mariachi are symbols of masculinity. Their guitars as every bit a masculine and phallic symbol as a gun or a sword. While American audiences may see a guitar a symbol of softer masculinity associated with the sensitive artist of musician, *Mexicanidad* views artistic ability as an addition to a man’s masculinity. After all, there is nothing more manly than belting out a song about lost loves and past sexual conquests while drinking tequila.

However, perceptions of the Mariachi in U.S. culture as a caricature of masculinity are sometimes excessive, oftentimes cartoonish and silly. An example of the “male buffoon,” U.S. television and film have interpreted the mariachi as a cartoon-like character. A 2008 Taco Bell commercial running during the Super bowl depicts a mariachi composed of three men in black, studded outfits, wearing oversized sombreros, carrying guitars and delivering tacos to an office building. One declares that “New Taco Bell Fiesta Platters” are meant to be *enjoyed slowly* as they put office workers into chairs and proceed to serenade them with mariachi music and loud yelps. While this is going on another mariachi entices a female office worker with a seductive “Hola.”

Figure 1. From the 2008 Super Bowl commercial, Taco Bell: Hola, Fiesta Platters!

The figure of the mariachi has a long history of U.S. television depictions. For example, Speedy Gonzalez, a popular *Looney Tunes* character plays on many Mexican stereotypes including occasionally picking up the guitar and strumming along with his fellow mice (all of whom *talk like dees)* to a version of "La Cucaracha."

The most mainstream depiction of mariachi as comic foil is in the 1986 film *Three Amigos!* starring Chevy Chase, Martin Short, and Steve Martin.

Figure 2. Chevy Chase, Steve Martin, and Martin Short in Three Amigos!

The film depicts the three men as silent film actors who are about to be fired from their Hollywood studio. After receiving a genuine plea from a woman from Santo Poco (a fictional Mexican city) to deliver the town from the tyrannical El Guapo, the three amigos make their way to Mexico in their studio costumes (full Mariachi garb) and have several comedic misadventures taking every opportunity to mock nostalgic notions of the romantic, debonair image of mariachi. All these images interpret the figure of the mariachi as comical, a source of entertainment. Their images are caricatures – their dress is over the top, over-sized hats, large red ties, and bedazzled outfits. Their personalities are over the top as well. They are romantic and suave to the point of being silly and the music they sing is more about the yelling of "Aye!" and "Ariba!" in high pitched screams than about the words or composition of the song. These images of the mariachi have added fuel to the fire of bad Mexican stereotypes.

However, originally Mexican cinema had different intentions for this image. According to Mullholland,

> In Mexico, the image of the mariachi is inseparable from the images of movie stars of the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s who sang ranchera music (country music) backed by famous mariachis in the wildly popular singing cowboy films of that era..[these films helped created] a national symbol and myth associated with machismo, regionalism and mestizaje. (249)

These films largely intended for Mexican audiences established the figure of the Mariachi as the macho, rugged musician who possessed a romantic and charming quality – a sentimentality associated with music, but the suaveness of a Don Juan, and a strong male

essence reminiscent of his ancestors – both indigenous and Spanish. Mullholland notes that these images "are virtually interchangeable with the stereotype of the Mexican macho" (Mullholland 249). A Mariachi possesses a strange contradiction, a masculinity distinct and yet very much a part of more traditional Mexican masculinity.

Aside from masculinity, the figure of the Mariachi is also closely associated with tradition and *mestizaje*. Mullholland refers to the figure of the mariachi as "mythic" in that it is an archetype that is perpetuated in representations of a Mexican national identity both in Mexico by Mexicans and in other parts of the world by non-Mexicans. American images I discussed earlier are a testament to how far-reaching this figure is. However, in Mexican cinema and scholarship, the mariachi is a character closely related to Mexican masculinity.

Rodriguez brings back the figure of the Mariachi in his film as a dominant image of masculinity – the film is a taking back of the figure that was stolen and misrepresented in U.S. mainstream film and television and reconstitutes/redesignates/reassigns it in its original form and recaptures/reasserts ownership of the masculinity that is so melded with a Mexican national identity. The film itself is a reconstruction of the mariachi as a masculine figure intended for those who need this sense of identity the most. With so many social and economic changes occurring on the border, a reassertion of border masculinity was necessary to the border psyche. In *Desperado*, Rodriguez takes this reassertion one step further, making the hyper masculine figure of the Mariachi into a superman for mainstream U.S. audiences.

Robert Rodriguez: With His Culture in His Hands

Some scholars have argued self-definition fights the stereotypization of *Latinadad*. Issues related to arguments about Latino-made images are: (1) what role, if any, does internalized colonization play in the creation of Latino-made images? And (2) if *Latinidad* is a commodity, do Latino artists who gain mainstream approval run the risk of feeding the stereotype to demonstrate Latino success? Robert Rodriguez's *El Mariachi* is an example of the dangers of not looking at these questions in mainstream images and representations.

Robert Rodriguez is currently one of the most prominent names in Latino film-making. He gained notoriety in the 1990s for his films depicting border violence and glamorized images of masculinity. A San Antonio native, he is arguably the most well-known and most influential contemporary Latino filmmaker. His first major full-length film, *El Mariachi* (1992), was filmed in Cuidad Acuña, (which borders Rio Bravo, Texas) and was followed by his first major full-length Hollywood production, *Desperado* (1995). Both films detail the journey of a Mariachi, first played by Robert Gallardo and later by Antonio Banderas. In *El Mariachi*, Gallardo lacks the type of masculinity possessed by the Spanish, white, blue-eyed drug cartel, Mauricio (aka Moco) and the indigenous, dark haired, dark eyed recently escaped from prison drug dealer, Azul. While in *Desperado*, Bandera's cup overflows with manliness.

Rodriguez has received much acclaim for his films, both by scholars and critics. Latino film scholar Charles Ramirez Berg views Rodriguez as a member of "a New Wave [of] Chicano filmmakers [who] have stirred the tangy zest of ethnicity into their

films" (220). In a brief analysis of *El Mariachi,* Ramirez Berg argues the film is actually "anti-machismo." He writes,

> A hero need not have the physical capabilities of a Mr. Universe or a martial arts masters, nor does he need to be looking to save the world (and prove his masculinity); he can simply be a balladeer looking for a receptive audience. (235)

I must admit, upon my first viewing of *El Mariachi several* years ago, I too saw the protagonist as a softer masculinity than what Latino culture is known for. However, I think this analysis fails to see the subtle nuances of the plot, setting, and all the historical, social, and political associations invested in each image Rodriguez chose. While I respect all the contributions Ramirez Berg has made to the conversation about Latinos in film, the second the Mariachi picked up his first gun and shot four men, he fulfilled the traditional definitions of hard masculinity. And, this is worth a much closer analysis of the film's true politics.

El Mariachi is a "hybrid exploitation film" - a combination of two Mexican film genres – the Mexican *narcotraficante* film and the transnational actions genre he likens to "the warrior adventure film" (Ramirez Berg 226). Ramirez Berg writes,

> Border films have flourished on the lowest end of the economic and aesthetic Mexican moviemaking scale for decades. The *narcotraficante* film, a Mexican police genre, is the most popular type of *cine fronterizo*. (226)

At least forty *Narcotraficante* films were made between 1979 and 1989, mostly small, independent and released to Spanish-language home video markets in Mexico, Latin America, and the United States (226).

Desperado, advertised as a sequel to *El Mariachi*, is in many ways a retelling of the same story. Carrying the same guitar case in his hand, this time containing both a guitar *and* a gun, Banderas enters a new town preceded by a reputation of mythic proportions as the pinnacle of masculinity. He self-describes just how much of a *machisto* he is in his opening song. Banderas sings:

> Soy un hombre muy honrado,
> que me gusta lo mejor,
> a mujeres no me faltan ni el dinero ni el amor.
> jinetiendo en mi caballo,
> por la sierra yo me voy,
> las estrellas y la luna ellas me dicen donde voy.
>
> Me gusta tocar guitarra,
> me gusta cantar el son,
> el mariachi me acompaña,
> cuando canto mi canciòn.
>
> Me gusta tomar mis copas,
> aguardientes lo mejor,
> tambien el tequila blanco con su sal de su sabor.

Loosely translated, the song states he is a good man who requires the best in life. He is not lacking in money or in women. He rides his horse, carries his guitar, is accompanied by his mariachi and is navigated by the stars and the moon. He's sure to mention that his drinks of choice are brandy and tequila. All these characteristics are romantic staples in the definition of a true macho, a real man.

This form of excessive masculinity is so common in representations of Mexican men, it has garnered a lot of attention from scholars. Sergio de la Mora coined the term

"cinemachismo" in his 2006 book *Cinemachismo: Masculinities and Sexuality in Mexican Film*. He writes,

> What I mean by the term is to identify the particular self-conscious form of national masculinity and patriarchal ideology articulated via the cinema. Cinema is the modern technology that enables the invention, reinvention, and circulation of national models of manhood and womanhood. (2)

De la Mora implies a certain responsibility on the part of these circulating images. *El Mariachi* won the Audience Award at the 1993 Sundance Film Festival and the 1993 Deauville American Film Festival and Best First Feature at the 1994 Independent Spirit Awards. With the acclaim from several prominent film festivals, along came Columbia Pictures. In stark contrast to *El Mariachi*, *Desperado* was made for $7 million and grossed over $24.6 million in US theaters. The shift did not go unnoticed by critics. In a *New York Times* Film Review from August 25, 1995, Janet Maslin wrote:

> So in a sequel called *Desperado*, here is Antonio Banderas, taking on the hero's role and looking his red-hot best. Mr. Banderas is shown off during an opening title sequence that finds him striding atop a nightclub bar in tight, silver-studded black. This limber, long-haired new Mariachi cuts an even more dashing figure thanks to a guitar-shaped wall of light bulbs beaming behind. Progress can be a wonderful thing.

Progress is indeed a wonderful thing. However, with more money and more recognition comes more responsibility. It is unclear whether Rodriguez saw this responsibility to his

original audiences or to his new American ones. Monetary enhancements brought a change of cast – more professional, more beautiful, and better-known actors including Salma Hayek (nominated for Best Supporting Actress at the 1996 Saturn Awards and for the Bronze Horse at the 1995 Stockholm Film Festival), Cheech Marin, and Steve Buscemi were all present. From beginning to end, the film is an excellent example of exuberant Hollywood excess. Maslin continues,

> Seen in the film's poster cradling what may be one of the meanest looking guns in captivity, Mr. Banderas's Mariachi arrives on the scene toting a guitar case full of firepower. [The film] includes profanity, lots of gunplay, messily graphic violence and one gentle, soft-core sex scene that involves the use of a spur.

In all its Lacanian[3] glory, the film provides a break from the harsh reality of border masculinity and instead transforms these violent images into spectacle. The film was released when men needed this boost in confidence and image. Not only this, but it presents an image that hides away any signs of impotence and magnifies masculinity to extraordinary extremes. If *Desperado* is read as anything but "anti-machismo" a re-reading of *El Mariachi* is in order.

Throughout both *El Mariachi* and *Desperado*, the character faces many trials and tribulations which deal with love, sex, drugs, guns, fights, liquor, and of course…music. *El Mariachi*, filmed with a budget of $7000 was intended for the Spanish home video market whose target audiences are northern Mexican and U.S.-Mexican border populations. Concomitantly, *Desperado* was given a large budget by a major motion

[3] See Laura Mulvey's essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." She discusses Lacan's concept of the *mirror phase* as it relates to cinema.

picture production company and was intended for an American audience. Each film's intended audience was different and therefore, the portrayal of the same character was extraordinarily different as well. These circumstances beg the question of whether Rodriguez was trying to make money from American audiences by exploiting cultural stereotypes of a hegemonic, hard masculinity or truly trying to bring "positive" self-representations of Latinos into mainstream movie theatres.

Machismo and the Border

Excessive masculinity is not something unique to Latino culture. In his book *Manhood in the Making: Cultural Concepts of Masculinity* (1991), David Gilmore discusses a common ideology of masculinity that is concerned with the state of being a "real man" or "true man" in a large number of societies throughout the world (1). Furthermore, he discusses how historically disenfranchised groups possess similar interpretations of masculinity. For men who are not part of the dominant group, the power of patriarchal society and the value it places on enforcing a hierarchy of gender and sexuality forces these men to exert their masculinity in dominant ways (16). They are forced to create and define masculinity in terms that are valued by white patriarchy. While circumstances are indeed different for various disenfranchised groups, standards of "excessive masculinity" often are frequently displayed.

While similar standards exist in many cultures, Latino culture has received the reputation for the origination and perpetuation of the standard of excessive masculinity, or *machismo*. Alfredo Mirandé discusses the genesis of Mexican masculinity in his book *Hombres Y Machos: Masculinity and Latino Culture* (1997). He divides his discussion into three theories: *machismo* was a response to colonization, masculine practices were

carried over from Spanish customs, and/or these masculine displays now associated with Mexican culture have origins in pre-Columbian traditions. He writes, "By far the most prevalent and most negative explanation for the Mexican preoccupation with masculinity is that it is the direct result of the Spanish Conquest, an event so devastating that it produced a form of 'masculine protest,' an almost obsessive concern with images and symbols of manhood, among Indian and mestizo men" (34). It is a response to intense and persistent feelings of powerlessness and weakness.

However, Mirandé's theories are debatable. As I stated before, border masculinity refers to the male essence possessed by those who physically inhabit the space between two countries; but, it also refers to the melding of two cultures. Related to the concept of border masculinity is what constitutes good macho and bad macho. These terms may seem confusing as macho is predominantly associated with excessive manliness related to patriarchal and phallocentric masculinity. Further, these terms add yet another binary to a multifaceted identity. Much like my own father, Anzaldúa describes her father's masculinity as defined by "being strong enough to protect and support my mother and us, yet being able to show love" (105). However, Anzaldúa agrees that a "loss of a sense of dignity and respect" contributed to the Mexican's masculine identity and "leads [them] to put down women and even brutalize them" (105).

If some scholars can agree that feelings of powerless and weakness are at least, in part, causes of *machismo*, these feelings were heightened on the U.S.-Mexico border by what can be seen as the second conquest. In 1846, (over 300 years of the initial colonization of the Aztecs) the U.S. went to war with Mexico over the geographic region of the American Southwest. With American victory in the war, the Texas border was

pushed down 100 miles from the Nueces River to the Rio Grande River. Anzaldúa discusses this conflict in her book *Borderlands/La Frontera*. She writes,

> The border fence that divides the Mexican people was born on February 2, 1848 with the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo. It left 100,000 Mexican citizens on this side, annexed by conquest along with the land. The Gringo, locked into the fiction of white superiority, seized complete political power, stripped Indians and Mexicans of their land while their feet were still rooted in it. (29)

The conflict between cultures existing along the U.S.-Mexico border can be seen almost explicitly in the film *El Mariachi*. A reenactment of colonization takes place between two of the three major masculine characters – Azul and Moco. However, examples of "good macho" are deemed weak in the film and characteristics of "bad macho" that result from oppression and violence are romanticized.

Relating to this glorification of "bad macho," since the production of *El Mariachi*, other changes have occurred on the border with significant influence on border masculinity. The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) was implemented on January 1, 1994. With its implementation came the promise of 1.2 million jobs in Mexico. However, job creation has consisted mostly of an increase in jobs in Maquiladoras for women. In Jessica Livingston's 2004 article "Murder in Juarez: Gender, Sexual Violence, and the Global Assembly Line" she writes, "Male unemployment has been particularly high, and workingmen are often underemployed. NAFTA promised jobs and prosperity, but in 1995 Mexico lost more than a million jobs,

and the peso devaluation cut the standard of living in half for most workers" (6). This forced shift in household gender roles left a bad taste in the mouths of Mexican men which has caused "a displacement of economic frustration onto the bodies of the women who work in the maquiladoras" (2). Rather than compromising, men see their replacement as breadwinner as something that compromises their manhood. The effects of NAFTA can be seen as a third conquest of the internal kind. It is interesting that Livingston notes unemployment statistics from 1995, the same year *Desperado* was released. It is as if, in order to compensate for an emasculating reality, the film increased its efforts to portray border masculinity in an over the top spectacle of *cinemachismo*.

How this context translates into cinematic masculinity becomes problematic when it encourages negative aspects of macho. Rosa Linda Fregoso writes, "The mobilization of various forms of masculinities underscores the extent to which multiple, often contradictory, masculine identities are available to members of the dominant culture. As part of a heterogeneous body of masculine identities, each may be positively or negatively valorized, depending on the social and cultural configurations" (143). Rodriguez mobilized this particular archetype of Mexican identity by negatively valorizing it, reaffirming American stereotypes of what constitutes a border identity while attempting to correct American stereotypes of the mariachi as a buffoon. He associates the mariachi in his films with phallocentric, hypersexuality, the objectification of women, and excessive violence. Not only this, his refashioning of the figure of the Mariachi now puts forth a clear and definite association with a specific geographic region, the U.S.-Mexico border. The films socially and culturally configure the mariachi to represent border masculinity. Rodriguez hopes to return the Mariachi's identity to one which

possesses more “authenticity” and transgresses dominant American images. However, ultimately, Rodriguez’s representation offers a confusing, simplistic, and violent portrayal of border masculinity to both those who live on the border and the mainstream U.S. culture for which he now makes his films.

CHAPTER II

MAKING THE MASCULINE: AZUL, MOCO, AND MARIACHI

El Mariachi opens on the scene of the border city of Acuña, Coahuila, Mexico. Public perceptions of border cities have gained notoriety on both sides of the Rio Grande as places of devious acts and subterfuge. Border cities are perceived as spaces inhabited by drugs, sex, poverty, exploitation, and various other illegal acts of desperation – a product and amalgamation of hundreds of years of social, economic, and political decisions that trickled down the U.S. and climbed up from Mexico. Gloria Anzaldúa, Chicana author and poet, wrote that a borderland is a "vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary" (25). Not Spanish and not Native, not Mexican and not American, it is no wonder she calls the U.S.-Mexico border "*una herida abierta* where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds. And before a scab forms it hemorrhages again, the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country – a border culture" (25).

This space between two countries, once part of Mexican territory but claimed by the U.S. in the U.S.-Mexico War of 1846 was once Atzlán – home of what Mexican and Chicano scholars call *La Raza Cosmica*, or the Cosmic Race. Along this physical border lives the borderlander, or the mestizo, whose identity has also for so long been left vague

and undetermined. The construction of this identity has historically led to several myths to be represented, created, re-created, perpetuated, and re-perpetuated, creating archetypes - some false and deceptive, some comical, some dumb and harmless, some dangerous. However, for a space that has undergone so many shifts in power, depictions of the *mestizo* in art, literature, music, film, and scholarship show the construction of an identity that attempts to engender this region's population. Octavio Paz wrote, "…a work of art or a concrete action would do more to define the Mexican – not only to express him but also, in the process, recreate him – than the most penetrating description" (10). This rejection of passive contemplation and encouragement to instead actively create their own identity through art and through images is an intriguing one and is part of the reason so many archetypes are still at the forefront of Mexican folklore. These prominent characters that are imprinted in the cultural consciousness and have captured the imagination of several artists, musicians, writers, and filmmakers include La Virgen de Guadalupe, Hernan Cortes, Doña Marina/La Malinche (sometimes depicted as La Llorona) and the mighty Aztec warrior. However, Latinos are at a crossroads in popular culture representations – we can continue myths hundreds of years old that are unrealistic and hurtful to our identity, or we can choose to let them go and recreate them more usefully.

In this chapter, I explore the representations of Azul, Moco, and the Mariachi as indigenous masculinity, Spanish masculinity, and the *mestizo* to argue *El Mariachi* is a re-telling of some of Mexico's most famous historical and mythological events in Rodriguez's way of reinforcing a hegemonic masculinity. Through this extended metaphor, Rodriguez asserts that a hegemonic, hard masculinity is the *mestizo's* fate.

First, I look at Azul and Moco through historical accounts of the socialization of Aztec men and what characteristics Spanish males valued. After I establish the two images Rodriguez is presenting, I discuss how the Mariachi is the *mestizo* resultant of these two hyper masculinities. At the beginning of the film, he struggles with this masculine identity and through the course of the film he fulfills what Rodriguez considers his masculine destiny.

While I am critical of his discussions of gender, Octavio Paz's influence in defining a Mexican national identity has been immeasurable and provides a helpful framework for discussing Rodriguez's perceptions of border masculinity in his films. His most noted work, *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, describes, "The history of Mexico is the history of a man seeking his parentage, his origins" (20). Using Paz's view that it is man's history that is most important to Mexican (and border) history, the Mariachi's journey to find his origins ultimately leads him to find his hyper masculine status. It is the Mariachi's destiny to fulfill this type of masculinity. He must cast off his child-like, soft masculinity and realize the identity that is in his blood, the production of both Spanish and Aztec male dominance, *machismo*. The audience sees the Mariachi transform from a modest, weak, impressionable, baby-faced, struggling musician into a true artist, then into an assertive, strong, powerful male who stands up for himself, and finally a murderer seeking revenge. In his portrayal of the Mariachi as a hero, Rodriguez makes it clear to his audience that soft masculinity has no place in border culture. In soft masculinity, there is no honor, tradition, or power.

Moco & Azul

Rodriguez's film begins by introducing two male characters who are familiar with each other – Azul and Moco. Their respective origins are completely unknown to the audience, but their intentions are blatantly clear – each one seeks to establish himself as the major masculine force in the city of Acuña. There can only be one.

Rodriguez's depictions of these men are not solely his, but have been indoctrinated (even unconsciously) into Mexican and border men through years of re-tellings. The most often re-told include Mirandé's assertions that Mexican masculinity was a result of possibly three theories: (1) feelings of powerlessness caused by colonization, (2) cultural emphasis on masculinity was a characteristic of Spanish society prior to the Conquest and was "imposed on the Indian in the same way that Catholicism, horses, pork, and deadly diseases" were and that (3) "excessive masculinity displays were a party of Aztec society long before the arrival of the Spaniards" (Mirandé 34-35). Evidence indicates that both the Spanish and Pre-Hispanic American cultures were male dominated societies that divided men and women into separate spheres. While Mirandé has received criticism for some of his discussions of gender, his notions allow a readership (if nothing else) the ability to understand the difficulty involved in resolving issues with gender identity. It is difficult to claim definitively where *machismo* originated; however, it is interesting (and perhaps even more important) to look at how artists have interpreted these different theories.

Mirandé notes that in Mexican folklore *La Chingada* [4] is not "our real mother but our mythical, violated, metaphorical 'mother,' who is symbolized by the thousands of native women raped by the conquistadors" (36). He goes on to describe La Chingada's male counter-part "the great macho" *or El Gran Chingon*. He writes *El Gran Chingon* is, "powerful and aggressive and goes by committing *chingaderas* and ripping up the world. [He] is wounding and penetrating" and "always to be distrustful of others *para que no se lo chinguen* (so that he is not 'fucked over') (36). Mirandé bases his discussion of this mythical character on the works of two men who tremendously influenced the creation of a Mexican national identity – Octavio Paz and Samuel Ramos. Both Azul and Moco embody the characteristics Paz identifies as those related to El *Gran Chingon* and those that Samuel Ramos identifies as related to *el pelado*. Paz writes,

> The macho is the *gran chingon*. One word sums up the aggressiveness, insensitivity, and invulnerability and other attributes of the macho: power. It is a force without the discipline of any notion of order: arbitrary power, the will without reins and without a set course. (81)

Paz describes macho as the equivalent of *chingar*. He claims both words have subtle connotations involving sex, aggression, and even humor all dealing with assertiveness and revenge that stem back to feelings of distrust and inferiority from the Spanish conquest of the Aztecs in 1521.

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[4] I explore a deeper analysis of Doña Marina/La Chingada's role in the representation of this story in my next chapter. For now, I focus on her masculine counter-part, *El Gran Chingon* and her lover Hernan Cortez.

El Mariachi begins en media res. What previous events resulted in the film's beginning is entirely unknown to viewers. The audience knows Azul and Moco are in neighboring cities; Azul is conducting business with his men while in the confines of the city's prison and Moco is living in a mansion, sitting pool side, sipping tequila, surrounded by bikini-clad women. Rodriguez juxtaposes these two images while Moco and Azul carry on a telephone conversation:

> MOCO: Good morning, Azul. Do you know who this is?
> AZUL: Moco…What the hell do you want after all these years?
> MOCO: We've got a lot to talk about. I'm just a few towns away with a whole new gang. I heard you were nearby so I thought I'd give you a call, amigo.
> AZUL: That's sweet of you, asshole. I don't suppose you could get me out of here, and then maybe hand me over my share of our money.
> MOCO: Yes, I figured you'd want your money, my friend. That is why I have called you. I heard you were getting out soon, and figured I should deal with our situation. But do you really need me to help you get out? From what I hear, you are running quite the business out of your cell with a phone and some loyal men. It keeps you well protected I hear. Not a bad idea. I may try that myself sometime.
> (Rodriguez 215-216)

Morning implies new beginnings for Azul and Moco. A shift is occurring and it begins with these two men. Based on this short interaction between Moco and Azul, their sordid past becomes apparent. Azul and Moco were, at one point, business associates. Moco attributes a large part of his success to Azul; however, the circumstances surrounding that are unclear; but, based on their current relationship, it can be deduced that Moco's exploitation of Azul's assets brought him financial success and then Azul took the fall for Moco's shady business deals. Moco is responsible for Azul's incarceration and Moco now owes Azul money. There exists an animosity thinly veiled by sarcastic friendly salutations. They each refer to each other as "friends" in one instance and then refer to

each other as “assholes” in the next. Their relationship has a long history and in speaking to each other, their current state remains ambiguous.

Figure 3. Moco (left) and Azul (right) conversing on the telephone.

In their conversation, Moco brings up the illegal business Azul is running from prison and offers Azul help in getting him released from prison.

> AZUL: I could stay in here and earn peanuts compared to what you owe me if I were to get out. So, yes, I want you to help me…friend.
> MOCO: Soon my friend, soon. I’m sending some people in a few days to get you.
> AZUL: Really? Well, that’s more like it. Just like the Moco I used to know.
> (Rodriguez 216)

Rodriguez establishes these two men as symbols of dominant Aztec and Spanish men. Azul, representative of the indigenous seeks help from the Spanish, Moco. While he has been wronged by him, he still refers to him as friend and is comforted by the idea that Moco is offering him help. Their relationship is one of ambivalence. In this context, Moco purports himself to be a “white savior” bailing the indigenous out of the trouble with seemingly apologetic, but ultimately false promises. Moco has sent his men to the prison to murder Azul and his cohort. However, Moco did not anticipate the strength of Azul’s men in prison and in a turn of events, Azul executes all of Moco’s friends.

In representing indigenous masculinity, Azul is dressed in all black throughout the film, has dark hair and dark eyes and possesses a certain element of familiarity and permanence with Acuña. He is violent, aggressive, and overtly sexual. He is the leader amongst his men and therefore has leeway to do as he pleases whenever he pleases.

How males were socialized in Aztec culture reveals some of the logic behind Azul's character. Culturally, Aztec codices reveal that at "the *telpochcalli*, or training school for the military reserved for boys" physical work was stressed, moral discipline was lax, and after school, the boys repaired to the "house of singing and revelry" and were encouraged to indulge in sex" (Nash 356). In several ways, the prison that houses Azul is similar to the *telpochcalli*. Rodriguez implies moral laxity within the prison because Azul and his men are allowed to conduct business as usual. Azul is provided his own desk, chair, telephone, his own remote control for the light switches within his cell (there is a brief moment of comedy when the cell guard turns on the lights to wake the men up, and Azul picks up his remote and turns them back off), and finally he possesses a guitar case full of guns, one of which the script specifically calls for is a MAC-10. This moral laxity is stressed when after Azul executes Moco's men, he is free to walk out of the prison by simply throwing a large amount of money at the prison guards.

In Rodriguez's depiction, Moco represents Spanish/European masculinity. More specifically, Moco is meant to portray a Spanish conquistador/Hernan Cortes-type figure. Moco is white-skinned, blue-eyed, with light brown hair and is dressed in all white throughout the film. Further, he controls Ciudad Acuña as well as neighboring cities. He establishes himself as a dominant power on the U.S.-Mexico border as a drug cartel.

When recounting Spanish masculinity, Mirandé asserts that the conquistadors "committed numerous atrocities and *chingaderas* in the name of God, crown, and king." He describes their brand of machismo as "an extreme form of pride (*dignidad*), wrath, lust, anxiety, callousness toward women, an obsession with the number of conquests, and belief in male hypersexuality" (143). He argues this type of masculinity was reserved solely for the conquistadors – a trait brought over with the Spanish and imposed on men in Mexico. This popular belief of a Spanish masculinity that was possessed by Cortes holds true when describing Moco. Azul follows an overtly hard masculinity still preoccupied with his sexuality, however he is only violent when provoked and takes great care to preserve a hierarchy amongst his men – closely resembling Aztec militaristic characteristics. Moco, on the other hand, possesses a narcissistic version of hard masculinity. He cares for people only insomuch as they can provide him with money, power, or sex.

Both men battle for dominance, typical of a common notion amongst *machos*. Paz writes, "To the Mexican there are only two possibilities in life: either he inflicts the actions implied by *chingar* on others, or else he suffers them himself at the hands of others" (78). Paz argues all Mexicans are *los hijos de la chingada*, or the sons of *la chingada* (La Malinche/Doña Marina). In doing this, he sets up yet another binary: El Chingado/El Chingon. In other words, you either get fucked or you do the fucking. This applies strictly to men dividing them into the active, assertive, macho or the passive, soft, child-like or feminine man. Both Azul and Moco consider themselves *gran chingones*, even when their actions are self-destructive. The Mariachi, however, seems to be on the other side of this binary at the beginning of the film.

Rodriguez's Nameless Mariachi as Construction of Mestizo Masculinity

The film's first image of the Mariachi features him entering Cuidad Acuña by foot. He sticks his thumb out at a passing blue truck in hopes of being picked up. He is not. Not coincidentally, the truck is carrying Azul and his arsenal. They do not even give the Mariachi a second glance indicating that the Mariachi is insignificant and unworthy of recognition from a powerful man and depicting on a larger scale how border culture views soft masculinity. In his work "Pinks, Pansies, and Punks," James Lon Penner discusses the term "masculinity in crisis." He writes,

> The catch phrase is often misleading because it implies the one form of masculinity is approaching its end and that a new form of masculinity will somehow emerge and replace the previous form of masculinity…the phrase is often inappropriately used as a blanket term for describing opposing types of masculinity that coexist in the same historical moment. (1)

While an inaccurate and inadequate term for describing "specific gender formations and understanding complex historical situations," (1) the term does come in handy for understanding what functioning framework Rodriguez used to create the character of the Mariachi, who seems to be undergoing a masculinity crisis himself. That the term "masculinity crisis" is so frequently misused and misunderstood lends credence to how destructive Rodriguez's film is and can be to male viewers who identity with this *mestizo* hero. Through the course of the film, the Mariachi works through this "crisis." He gains and builds his own masculinity, one that conforms to established definitions of border masculinity as markedly excessive and brutal.

It is the figure of the mariachi, his experiences, and his journey that puts Azul and Moco's masculinity into its true context. Through his representations of masculinity, Rodriguez is claiming that man's origins lie in a hegemonic, hard masculinity. It is their destiny to fulfill this. The Mariachi's first voiceover of the film is very telling:

> MARIACHI: That morning was just like any other. No love. No luck. No ride.

His introduction in the film establishes the Mariachi as a character not possessing the traditional traits associated with border masculinity. He has none of the economic, romantic, or sexual status markers that Azul and Moco possess. Penner writes that particular traits on the soft side of the Hard/Soft binary consist of: leisure culture/idleness, emotionally open, attracted to the irrational, mutable, penetrated/receptivity. All these characteristics are contrasted with: labor/breadwinner, emotionally closed, rational, fixed/static, and penetrator. Further, Rodriguez includes another symbol of Mariachi's lack of hard masculinity. Further, the Mariachi mentions luck, implying that his circumstances are not of his own volition, but something uncontrollable and out of his hands. As he walks into the city limits, he walks side by side with a turtle. He says,

> MARIACHI: I came across a turtle walking on the highway. We were both taking our time getting to where we were going. What I didn't know was that my time was running out.

He likens himself to a turtle – a passive animal, associated with the fable of the tortoise and the hare as well as the adage "slow and steady wins the race." He is not a man of action, but a man of thought and contemplation, characteristics Paz criticizes when describing the construction of a Mexican identity. Evidence of his soft masculinity

includes the infantalization of the mariachi from the beginning. Examples include: he is young and baby-faced. His physical features are softer than Azul or Moco's.

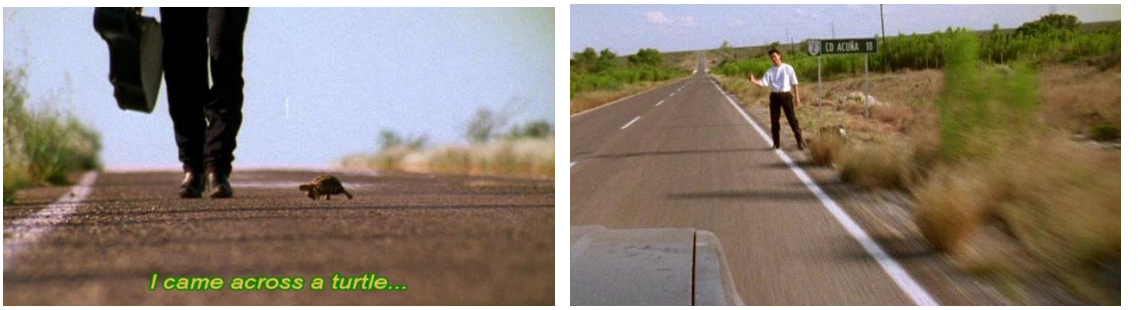

Figure 4. The Mariachi enters the city.

The Mariachi says he was taking his time to get where he was going – his final goal being to gain love, luck, a ride, and change, all things that would bring him closer to a more traditional, established Mexican masculinity and fulfill his masculine fate. However, his "time is running out," evidence that indicates his "masculinity crisis" foreshadowing his development as a man – a greater, newer, masculinity that represents two cultures, or *mestizaje*.

The Mariachi understands the tradition associated with mariachi and accepts it as part of his identity. In his mind, mariachi translates into masculine tradition as well as masculine identity. At one point, the Mariachi states,

> MARIACHI: I've always wanted to be a Mariachi like my father, my grandfather, and my great-grandfather. I'm not as good as them yet, but I'm improving. My plan was to follow their footsteps to the end and die with my guitar in my hand.

He states he cannot play as well as his father and grandfather, but he hopes to one day. This indicates feelings of inadequacy and inferiority due to his current state of masculinity. Therefore, when he states he is not as good as his ancestors, he acknowledges his crisis and his soft masculinity.

Throughout the film, the Mariachi's soft masculinity is frequently put beside Azul's. In particular, Rodriguez includes a running joke throughout the film of how both the Mariachi and Azul enter bars. When Mariachi enters the city, he enters the first bar he finds to seek work. He orders a soda pop, a drink more associated with children and adolescents. The Mariachi is later teased by Domino for drinking too much soda pop. He is not capable of persuading the first bar owner to give him a job. He is meek in his dealings. Not taken seriously by neither men nor women. Not forceful. Modest. Accepts defeat and criticism. Bar owner says to him, "If you want to earn a real living, get a real instrument, asshole." Perhaps a reference/advice for him to get a gun.

Azul, on the other hand, orders a beer. Each time a bar tender brings out a glass and starts pouring the beer out of from the tap, Azul remarks, "In a bottle, asshole" or some variation of this statement. When Azul enters the bar, he inspires fear and respect from the bar tender and the men sitting in the establishment. The Mariachi inspired ridicule. The bar tender is ready to dismiss Azul as another mariachi looking for work. However, he is grossly mistaken. He assertively orders the bar tender to bring him a beer. While the Mariachi leaves that first bar dejected, a failure, Azul leaves with the blood of six men on his hands.

The Mariachi then moves on in attempt to secure a place to stay. He is naïve when it comes to the possession of money. He allows the hotel clerk to take away what little money he has left. When he enters his hotel room after a day of searching for work as a mariachi, he is exhausted. He washes his face off with water and is reminded about his current status in life. After rinsing the water off, he looks up to gaze at his reflection only to find there is no mirror there. This is symbolic that he still does not possess an identity.

It has not been fulfilled yet. As he lies on the bed, he notices that on the wall is a ball with two swords, a reminder of the past and the brutal warfare that went on between his predecessors.

Figure 5. The Mariachi on his bed alone/Azul with three women.

Azul on the other hand managed to find a house to live in despite having just escaped from prison. While the Mariachi is alone in his room, Azul shares his house and his bed with three women to which the script refers to as his "body guards."

Luck and fate is also recurrent themes in the Mariachi's discourse. He is under the impression that luck and fate dictates his success as a mariachi. He believes that his crisis of masculinity will be resolved by the gods or through luck. His masculinity starts off soft, but only because it is a child-like, developmental stage. Once he picks up that gun for the first time, truly feels and understands his music, and loses that first love, the hard masculinity is fulfilled and his identity is completed.

Fate and luck are relayed throughout the film in the form of dreams. Three distinct times the audience is led directly into the Mariachi's psyche. It is after each dream that a stage in the progression of the Mariachi's masculinity seems to be satisfied. His first dream contains the following images and actions: a freestanding door frame through which only the camera goes through, a little boy holding a ball, the little boy

walks through the door, the Mariachi lies in the dirt clutching his guitar case. Without delving too deep into a psychoanalytic analysis of the Mariachi's dream (Freud did after all refer to dreams as the royal road to the unconscious), dreams indicate that the events and actions taken in our lives are innate, something we are born with not something we can determine ourselves through our choices or actions. The Mariachi's dreams are cryptic ways of relying to the audience how the mariachi sees his current status in life. He sees himself as a child. In the dream, he is literally watching himself as a child. The child approaches him to pass him the ball but when it reaches the Mariachi the ball is no longer a ball at all but a severed head. A childhood plaything is replaced with violent imagery. His softness replaced with fierce hardness. The Mariachi is ripped from his sleep with a trembling shock. Mariachi's hard masculinity is something he was born to assert and his nightmares are his unconscious trying to relay this fate to him.

When he awakes from his first dream, the hotel manager (who had quickly taken his money because he believed the Mariachi to be Azul and feared not being paid) alerted Moco's men that a man with a guitar case, dressed in all black was staying at his hotel. In reality, the Mariachi had black pants, a white, striped shirt, and a black jacket – his vestige displaying both colors, outwardly symbolic of the melding of both Spanish and Aztec. The Mariachi flees when he realizes these men are chasing him. Almost instinctually he ducks in corners, jumps off balconies, jumps on and off moving vehicles, and outruns these men despite him not knowing why they are chasing him. And then comes the pinnacle moment in the development of the mariachi's masculinity – the first time he kills two men holding guns by outwitting them, uses his guitar case as a weapon (reaffirming it as a symbol of masculinity) and the first time he picks up a gun and kills a

man by his own hand. He quickly dropped the gun and runs away frightened toward the sanctuary of Domino's bar. Although this has frightened him, he received his first boost in masculinity.

His first encounter with Domino, the owner of the one of the bars he sought employment in, he was meek and child-like.

> DOMINO: What can I get you?
> MARIACHI: A soda.
> DOMINO: Soda? Are you a kid, or what?

He politely asks her for a job to which she quickly refuses claiming she can not pay him. He mumbles "I guess I woke up with bad luck" as he walks out the door. This second time, however, after having murdered four men, he is willing to take more risks. He asks her for her name, aggressively explains the situation that just occurred, assertively asks for a place to stay and work, and in a brazen sexually charged move, he tries to kiss her. Though he fails, this is his first attempt at exerting his romantic masculinity. It is also with Domino that the Mariachi finally grows into his musical and vocal skills. For the first time he is able to play his best, another sign that he is asserting his hard masculinity.

It is not longer after his stay with Domino that the Mariachi has a second dream. The imagery and actions of his second dream: once again, the child appears hold a decapitated head, the child is sits on the pavement under the hot border sun, the door is present once again and the camera pans as if to pass through it, Rodriguez then jumps to a shot of the Mariachi running through a cemetery. Once again, the Mariachi wakes up in a sweat, this time in Domino's home. There is a shift in tone in the movie after the Mariachi awakes from his second dream. There is a sense of finality drawing near. The Mariachi is ready to finally fulfill his destiny of being a *machisto*. He strongly declares to

Domino he is going back to the hotel room he was pushed out of by Moco's men to retrieve his things. She responds in silence. She does not try to dissuade him from going back to an obviously dangerous place. She merely runs to her window to watch him leave – watching over him from her second floor apartment window like a protective mother.

He returns to the hotel and retrieves his money from the hotel manager. He is strong, assertive, powerful, and brazen. It is here that the Mariachi discovers he has been mistaken for Azul. He remarks "He doesn't look anything like me" which is ironic considering his growing masculinity is starting to match Azul's. In one final twist of fate, the Mariachi's guitar case gets switched with Azul's and Mariachi ends up with a case full of guns. Now, he his hard masculinity is completely fulfilled. As he walks down the street holding Azul's MAC-10, he passes by the little boy from his dream carrying a ball.

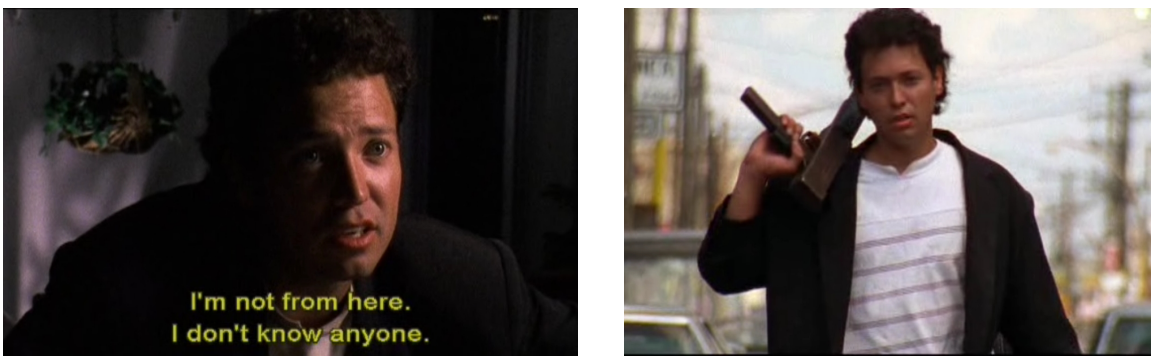

Figure 6. Baby-faced Mariachi/Gun-toting Mariachi.

Now that he has claimed his manhood, he has also staked his claim on Domino as his sexualized mother (which I explore more in Chapter 3). It is then that he discovers Domino is Moco's lover. He feels betrayed by Domino for accepting gifts from Moco, the man trying to kill him, in exchange for sex. Unable to deal with his anger and no longer resorting to contemplation, Mariachi responds with aggression and violence. He

equates Moco wanting to kill Azul with Moco wanting to kill him, demonstrating a kinship with the *indio*.

It is in his final dream where his fate is finally sealed. The imagery and actions of his third dream: the mariachi walks through the door without hesitation. The little boy with the ball disappears into thin air. He chases Domino through the cemetery. She is covered in blood. He awakes.

In the final climactic scene of the film, Azul has kidnapped Domino in an attempt to use her life as leverage to get Moco to pay him his money. This is evidence that women are expendable creatures whose lives can be bartered for money. At first, Azul's intended affect on Moco work until in one final protective act for the Mariachi, Domino asks where he is and pleads for Azul to not hurt him. Realizing Domino and the Mariachi have a relationship, Moco tells her,

> MOCO (staring at her): So that's why you hung up on me that night…
> *Azul is glancing between Domino and Azul.*
> MOCO: …you had that little monkey climbing all over you.
> AZUL: Give me my money or I'll kill her now.
> MOCO: After all I've done for you; this is how you treat me?
> (Rodriguez 281)

Moco's ego has been wounded. His property "fucked" by another man. Domino has turned Moco from *El Gran Chingon* to *El Chingado*. To exact his revenge, Moco kills Domino. Upset, Azul says, "All I ever wanted was my share. But, you had to kill everyone." Moco responds, "That's why you'll never be as big as me. You have too much heart." Moco then shoots Azul in the heart.

In one final showdown between the Mariachi and Moco, Moco asserts his dominance by mocking Mariachi, talking to him like a child and symbolically castrating

him by shooting him in his left hand – a symbol of his musical and artistic talent, leaving Mariachi unable to produce that which has helped him become a real man. But, there is no turning back for the Mariachi and he picks up a gun with his right hand (symbolic of action, reason) and shoots Moco in the right. In Hamlet-esque fashion, all of Mariachi's parentage is now dead. Only he survives. None of the mythological figures are still there, only their offspring, the *mestizo* remains. However, his story is not over. In the Mariachi's final voiceover, he states,

> MARIACHI: All I wanted to be was a Mariachi like my ancestors. I lost my guitar, my hand, and her. With this injury, I may never play guitar again. Without her, I have no love. But…I'm prepared for the future.

In the last scene, the Mariachi drives off in a motorcycle with a pit bull. He has fulfilled his fate, his masculinity and has realized his identity. Though he has been wounded, it only opens the doors for greater compensation. As audiences will see in the film Desperado, his masculinity grows exponentially asserting that the mestizo's fate, the borderlander's fate is this hard, hyper masculinity known as machismo. While Chapter 2 has sought to argue the Mariachi is a symbol of the birth of *mestizaje* and the continuance of the tradition of hard masculinity, Chapter 3 will extend this idea further by exploring the female images in the film and how they too represent mythical historical figures, particularly to reinforce the Virgen/Malinche binary.

CHAPTER III

THE DOMINO EFFECT

Border masculinity cannot be separated from a discussion about its female counterpart – border femininity and the less frequently discussed female masculinity. Masculinity exists in a socially constructed binary; it cannot function without a constructed femininity whose definitions counter the masculine. Because masculinity is associated with reason, rationality, stasis, and aggression, "softness is inevitably wedded to mythic notions of femininity" including nature, emotion, and mutability (Penner 1). Simply put, society recognizes what is feminine by what is not masculine.

A border identity by its very definition includes two sides, sides separated by a *border*. In order to combat hurtful binaries, Gloria Anzaldúa imagined a border or *mestiza consciousness* which consisted of a tolerance for contradictions and ambiguity (101). Unfortunately, Anzaldúa's dream has not yet been realized. In actuality, when these lines blur, and borders are crossed, and the space between feminine and masculine fails to adhere to socially accepted definitions, the repercussions can have destructive affects. Issues concerning gender identity on the U.S.-Mexico border are complicated by the fact that on this physical border between two countries, institutions of power still indoctrinate what is traditionally considered masculine and what is feminine into its

inhabitants. When one of these imaginary borders is crossed or blurred in mainstream representations, it threatens an entire hierarchy, a larger cultural social structure.

As discussed earlier, border masculinity has its historical roots in Mexican masculinity (which has its roots in pre-colonial tradition and Spanish Catholic orthodoxy). Anzaldúa asserts that "the culture and the Church" are the major institutions of power that perpetuate patriarchal and misogynistic ideologies (39). They control perceptions of women and keep them in inferior, submissive, subservient positions. One of the reasons they have been such a pervasive aspect of border culture is that they establish a sense of protection for women from threats of violence – enforcing the idea that you are safe with a patriarchal presence to protect you. In Spanish culture women were simply "transferred" from father to husband in order to ensure their safety (and purity). However, ultimately, these institutions function to prevent rebellion against the established norms of the culture – to keep the definitions of gender clear and in easy to control roles.

Rooted in the history of these institutions of power, two women in particular have made their mark in the cultural consciousness as standards for Mexican femininity thereby extending their reach into the identities of border women. These two figures are La Virgen de Guadalupe and Doña Marina/La Malinche.[5] Dominant ideologies attempt to protect the power structure that exists and keep women submissive and "safe" through the formation of a binary structured around these two women. They are representative of two opposing sides of a gender identity. Women, specifically Latinas, are made to believe

[5] Norma Alarcón describes in more depth the "opposing mediating figures of Guadalupe and Malintzin" (61) in her 1989 essay "Traddutora, Traditora: A Paradigmatic Figure of Chicana Feminism," *Cultural Critique.*

they can only inhabit one side. The binary works to the same effect as the Eve/Madonna dichotomy. Both are identified as mothers. Rudolfo Anaya writes, "Oedipal complexes and fears aside, we are our mother's creation, and so early macho behavior will be shaped actively and by nuance by the mother." (68) While this philosophy helps understand the value of family in Mexican culture, it also emphasizes how controlling and maintaining certain images of mothers strengthen definitions of masculinity.

La Virgen de Guadalupe is the "good" mother while Doña Marina/La Malinche is considered the "bad" and sexualized mother. Guadalupe is considered the mother of Mexico in that her image is loved by all. To the indigenous, she was recognized as the earth goddess *Tonantzin* (Anaya 72). The Spanish Catholic presence used this as an opportunity to convert her into Guadalupe. Her maternity represents chastity and fidelity. Anaya asserts, "Her role remains the feminine sensibility with which we identify" (73). Doña Marina served as translator and mistress to the Spanish conquistador Hernan Cortes and acted as a mediator between the colonizers and colonized. She is often referred to as *La Chingada* (or the fucked one) because of her betrayal to her natives and her collusion in taking away their culture. The binary then frequently suggests that women are either chaste, pious, and loyal or hypersexual, deviant, and treacherous in mainstream film depictions of women.

However, in literature, art, and scholarship, images of these two women have been renegotiated into more engendering definitions of border femininity. Scholars such as Anzaldúa argue that the inclusion of these women in shaping definitions of masculinity and female masculinity would help to tear down binaries and empower the mestiza consciousness for both men and women (100). Further, the masculine female

(sometimes referred to as "marimacho/a") is gaining attention as a form of female representation within the Latino community. In her book *MeXicana Encounters: the Making of Social Identities on the Borderlands*, Rosa Linda Fregoso discusses the figure of the pachuca as a figure with traits of masculinity or possessing masculine prowess and writes,

> Pachuca and homegirl identities deliberately challenge sexual and gender norms, transgress gender roles, thwart behaviors and expectations, and defy dominant (Chicana/o and mainstream) boundaries of domesticity and femininity. (96)

She does, however, note that these masculine female forms have "limited resonance" in portrayals in popular culture forms like film. An example she offers includes the film *Zoot Suit* (1981) which was written and directed by Luis Valez. The pachuca Berta is portrayed as a promiscuous, sexually dangerous female delinquent whose mother tells her "Pareces puta…pachuca" (You look like a whore…a Pachuca) (96). The pachuca is an alternative representation of female identity, but has yet to have positive images and representations in mainstream film.

In this chapter, I delve deeper into representations of alternative femininity as I discuss the three categories of women represented in *El Mariachi*. I closely read the women who play seemingly insignificant roles in the film and how they reaffirm the Virgen/Malinche binary - the masculine female and the over-sexualized/objectified female. I then look at the major female figure of the film, the character of Domino. All three representations, while different, help maintain the standard of hegemonic masculinity in border culture. Where scholarship indicates that female masculinity is a

way to recreate and renegotiate gender and sexuality, in film, particularly *El Mariachi*, it serves as another vessel for which to maintain the traditional masculine power structure on the border. In Rodriguez's portrayal, they are not included as a subversion of masculinity or rebellion against tradition. Instead, Rodriguez uses a masculine symbol to create a fantasy that begs male erotic pleasure or performs masculinity in a way that is helpful to the men in their culture (a new form of the virgin). Further, Rodriguez sets up the character of Domino to represent a mother and traitor to Azul, Moco, and the Mariachi explicitly reinforcing the Malinché side of the binary and furthering reinforcing the importance of current definitions of hard, hegemonic masculinity.

The Other Women in *El Mariachi*

From the beginning of the film, Rodriguez establishes the power structure that exists in the border city of Acuña by introducing the audience to Mexican law enforcement. The first shot of the first scene depicts a police car pulling up to the station and a female police officer stepping out of the car. Rodriguez writes in his director's notes,

> The 'officers' were played by the real guards of the jail so that we wouldn't have to rent uniforms or find actors. Since this was a real jail, they were there already. There was a female guard and a male guard. I let the female guard do the main stuff because she was the only one wearing her full uniform that day. The other guy was slacking off in a regular shirt so he got the supporting role. (214)

Although Rodriguez would have us believe the gender of the major and minor police officer in the scene to be incidental, the fact that the police officers in the film were actual city police force employees makes clear that the politics played out on screen are directly related to real life, especially gender issues associated with male dominated fields like law enforcement on the U.S.-Mexico border. The female police officer, played by Maria Castillo (listed in the credits as a jail guard) wears her assigned uniform to work because the clothes she wears are symbolic of a masculine status. In order to achieve the same level of respect as a male officer, she must "perform" as and possess the same physical markers as a male officer. Female performance of masculinity is a complex issue. Oftentimes, its purpose is twofold: it challenges conventional understandings of femininity and masculinity and it carves a space for women in a culture dominated by men. But, more than that, "being an imitation of maleness, female masculinity affords us a glimpse of how masculinity is constructed as masculinity" (Halberstam 1). In this way, the "mask" is taken out of masculinity and we're able to see its construction as performance rather than inherent. Rodriguez offers his audience an excellent opportunity to examine the construction of border masculinity through a feminine form.

The fact that the male officer that day was wearing only a t-shirt to his place of employment is humorous, but is also an indication that he doesn't feel the need to "perform." Why should he? It is likely that, just the fact that he is a biological male reduces his need to perform masculinity on a day-to-day basis. Whereas, this gender performance is crucial to Castillo's character and in real life, it is important to her employment. Therefore, the construction of the masculinity of a police officer in Acuña in the film is dependent on Castillo's portrayal of it.

For the purpose of the film, it worked to Castillo's advantage that she was wearing the clothes that symbolize the status of power and law enforcement because it placed her in what Rodriguez called the "main role" and her male counter part in "supporting role." Her style of dress now places her in the more dominant position in the scene – making the female police officer the head of the jail, the power to be reckoned with. But, as we'll see later, this complicates the message Rodriguez is trying to send about law enforcement in the border city and about gender in border culture.

Figure 7. Castillo performing masculinity.

Castillo is dressed in slacks, a light blue-collared shirt with the city's law enforcement logo on it; her hair is pulled back in a ponytail and covered by a cap (also possessing the logo). As far as accessories, she wears a pair of blue earrings to match her uniform. Her hair and earrings are the only subtle signs of femininity she allows and it is likely that without these subtleties she would be mistaken for a man. It is also interesting to note that the color blue carries connotations of *both* masculinity and law enforcement.

At the beginning of the scene, she is the first to step out of the patrol vehicle, the first to enter the jail and is respectfully greeted by the guard who is wearing a t-shirt: he puts down his newspaper and offers her a gesture of reverence. And with that simple

gesture, it is clear to the audience that her respect is demanded and acknowledged because of her masculine exterior.

A few moments after this, it becomes clear this is the prison that is harboring Azul, the Mexican drug cartel. Although he is in prison, he is still conducting business as usual. The two officers in the scene demonstrate their malaise and the ordinariness of the business conducted in the prison by sitting on a couch in the next room. Written in the script, but cut out of the actual film: one officer eats while the other reads a magazine. Their disinterest is contrasted with the conversation Azul is having on his cell phone with Moco – the dialogue that jumpstarts the film's action.

Corruption of law enforcement on the Mexican side of the border is something frequently depicted on news coverage of border violence. Rodriguez includes this aspect of Azul's incarceration to add realism to the film – an un-sugarcoated representation of what money and power get you in the Mexican legal system. Taking a "ripped from the headlines" approach to this scene, Rodriguez comments,

> I got the idea for the following scene from a real event that I had read about in the San Antonio newspaper. In Matamoros, a Mexican border town, a drug dealer was running his business from his cell with a cellular phone. When a rival gang sent a hit man in to kill him, he had armed bodyguards in there with him that shot up the place, burned some of the inmates that belonged to the rival gang, and impaled the hit man on a post outside the jail. I just thought the basic idea would be cool for the opening of a movie. (214-15)

As this plays out on screen, it becomes evident that Castillo is working both sides of the situation and maintaining loyalty to both Moco and Azul. Although she receives payment from Moco and Azul, to each man, the only thing that matters is her appearance of fidelity (however false it is). Castillo's costume plays the macho; but, her actions perform the virgin. Moco sends men to kill Azul while in prison in an attempt to both break ties with Azul and eliminate competition in the area. Members of Moco's gang bribe Castillo to get into the prison with guns to murder Azul. However, Azul is prepared and murders his would-be assassins. As Azul escapes, he throws a wad of cash at Castillo. The money has been paid for her cooperation with both gangs and silence about the whole situation. She has fulfilled a silent loyalty comparable to perceptions of the ideal woman.

While not explicit in the film, a challenge to traditional gender roles in Latino culture is oftentimes not easily accepted. Women who perform masculinity without the physical markers of status are subject to hostility and women who perform masculinity *with the* physical markers are subject to hostility as well as ridicule because a woman's outer appearance is so closely associated with her sexuality. A woman whose sexuality does not rely on a man is immediately seen as threatening and subject to ridicule (at its "best") and violence (at its worst). According to Halberstam, "Female masculinity seems to be at its most threatening when coupled with lesbian desire" so that queer female masculinity is usually discussed to the exclusion of heterosexual female masculinity (28). However, in the film, and in a term used by Latino scholars, "marimacho/a" sexuality does not play a role. This is evident in the film as any aspect that would represent queer or lesbian sexuality is left out. Castillo is almost asexual in the sense that neither the characters in the film nor the audience is given any erotic cues or develop sexual desires

for her. She is sex-less, in the same way a virgin is. In the scene, Castillo's masculinity only works to garner respect from other guards. Her femininity speeds the immediacy of her submission to Azul and Moco's will.

Rodriguez complicates the corruption of law enforcement by including an officer who is a masculine female. A female in law enforcement is a relatively new topic in scholarship. In her article "Shades of Blue: Female and Male Perspectives on Policing" Joan C. Barker writes,

> Policing has long been perceived as a male occupation. Yet, in the last few decades, women have been taking their place among the 'fellowship' of law enforcement officers. In a self-defined male domain, this represents quite an adjustment. For a subculture with a richly documented and well-earned reputation for clannishness, machismo, and solidarity, the adjustment is cataclysmic. (349)

Interestingly enough, Barker uses the term "machismo" to describe law enforcement fields. Add this struggle to the history of misogyny in Latino culture and the violence against women committed on the U.S.-Mexico border amidst drugs, crime, and economic unrest, the concept of female law enforcement officers is likely to have a rocky (an understatement) reception. Rather than rock the boat, Rodriguez fulfills the virginal aspects of the binary in his portrayal of the female guard. In this way, it is easier to accept masculine performance from a female because her sexuality has been removed and she is there to help and submit to the masculine presence.

If Rodriguez's goal is to maintain realism in *El Mariachi*, then it logically follows that female police officers have a difficult time adjusting to the field of law enforcement.

Performing masculinity is likely the least of their worries. They likely fall victim to the same pressure of the organized crime committed on the border to remain silent in the face illegal activity. They may submit to these pressures perhaps more quickly than their male counterparts on the police force because they are women attempting to navigate their way through both a culture and employment field that has a history of gender inequality. If they do not conform, they are betraying both the history of their culture and chosen profession. A masculine exterior, then, allows them access to this field, and a *marianismo*-like demeanor allows them acceptance.

To this end, Rodriguez's female officer is a depiction of a woman performing masculinity in Latino culture, but who still submits to its history of female inferiority despite her performance. Rather than the subvert traditional gender roles in her performance, Castillo maintains feminine gender roles while dressed up in "mask"ulinity and reinforces the Virgen de Guadalupe side of the binary. In his discussion of *marianismo*, Paul Allatson asserts,

> Women's social functions are values encoded and located in private and domestic spaces, which are the spaces of familial and communal reproduction, as opposed to the masculine domination of the public realm, the site of economic production and political power. (153)

Interestingly, a prison like the one in Acuña seems to be a modern private and domestic space where Castillo works as warden. Here, she becomes almost a mother to the inmates – protecting them from external sources, offering them shelter and food. She even wakes inmates up in the morning. And in a humorous, mother-like gesture, will turn on the

lights if they do not awake at the sound of her "alarm." Further, a prison is a place removed from society and the public spheres. Economic production and political power ceases to exist in this realm (in this case, as punishment) but still creates a more private sphere that would allow for a feminine authority. In this way, Castillo fulfills the ideologies of *marianismo* in her role as prison guard – mother figure of the prison-domestic sphere.

A mother of this alternative domestic space, Castillo further fulfills the role of Guadalupe in her obedience. Allatson continues, "women are passive social actors whereas men are regarded as active social agents" (154). Interestingly, Allatson uses the phrase "passive social actors." While it is Castillo who allows Azul to escape from prison and Castillo who financially benefits from turning a blind eye to his escape, she is merely a female figurehead, as she would be inside a more traditionally domestic space and in the end, must submit to the men with more substantial power (a power not just in artifice) for protection. Castillo reenacts a new form of the maternal/virgin side of the binary. She is maternal in that she rules over this private space of the prison and "takes care" of the men in her care. Further, she is chaste and virginal in that she lacks any sexuality or erotic prowess. She is not there to be used by men for erotic pleasure or as a symbol of status, but as a modern motherly figure. Rodriguez has subverted this role superficially in order to better suit a culture that includes the pachuca and marimacho/a in film representations as reinforcement of established female identities.

Rodriguez also includes in the film women who serve as subservient figures to the major male roles, but adds visual sexual pleasure to the list of how they serve their men. As Castillo makes her rounds around the prison cells, Rodriguez juxtaposes Castillo in

her uniform which hides most (if not all) her femininity with a scene outside Moco's mansion, by his pool, where a woman in a purple bikini is swimming while Moco sits in a lounge chair conducting his business. As shots go back and forth between these two locations, dialogue between the two men takes place over the phone, but the juxtaposition of women who serve the same purpose through different means is made abundantly clear. The script's direction states, "a gorgeous bikini-clad babe struts slowly into a tightly framed glamour shot" (214). Not only is this woman not a character, she is not even a human being in the scene. She is an accessory. Like the suit and badge Castillo wears in the jailhouse, she is a symbol of masculine status.

Figure 8. Moco with his bikini baby/Azul with his three body guards.

Similarly, Azul surrounds himself by a group of women. However, there are some slight differences from Moco. As they spend the film battling for power over the territory of the border town (complicated by the mistaken identity of the mariachi) these women are constantly by their masters' side. They are the epitome of loyalty to their respective men. But, while Moco's women serve more domestic duties (bringing him food, bringing him the phone) Azul's women are referred to as his "body guards." The double-entendre of this statement is not lost. In his director's commentary on the DVD of the film, Rodriguez states the actor who played Azul (Reinol Martinez) explicitly asked that he be

surrounded by three women at all times. While Rodriguez deemed this excessive (not because of the image it would portray of Azul, but because it would be difficult to hire three actresses in such a low budget film) it was ultimately agreed the three women would be hired and armed with guns to serve as Azul's entourage/protection.

Figure 9. Azul's three armed body guards.

These three women perform the same duties as the women whom surround Moco. However, they are given the extra task of "protecting" Azul – another maternal act – while holding a gun – a masculine symbol which adds an erotic element to these women. Most often they are seen lying in bed with Azul or pointing guns at those who seek to invade his home – again, a domestic space.

But, whatever duties the women Moco and Azul surround themselves with perform, ultimately their greatest task is that of status symbol and eye candy. They are not so much women as signifiers of status – representative of a certain standard of power and masculinity Moco and Azul possess. In this way, these women are reaffirmations of women as loyal, but sexualized. They satisfy all the needs of their men; they do not serve as mother figures, but rather as owned property, a role thought to be of a "wife" in definitions of border masculinity.

Domino: Mother, Mistress, Transgressor

The character of the Mariachi does not have the same female counterparts as Moco and Azul: no woman to fetch him drinks or dial his phone. As he enters the city at the beginning of the film, he states he does so with no love in his life; thus, no patriarchal or sexual status to affirm his manliness.

When the intended audience of the film (i.e. as Mexican and U.S.-Mexico border audience) views female protagonists, they "wrestle with Mexican icons of sexuality and motherhood that, internalized, seem to impose on them a limited and even negative definition of their own identities as women" (Wyatt 243). So pervasive are the images of these women that many scholars[6] have spent a large amount of their scholarship devoted to exploring these images. Chicana scholars, in particular, have devoted scholarship to renegotiating the image of Dona Marina in order to help women make peace with these images. Cherríe Moraga writes, "there is hardly a Chicana growing up today who does not suffer under [La Malinche's] name" (142). Norma Alarcón further argues, "the pervasiveness of the myth is unfathomable, often permeating and suffusing our very being without conscious awareness" (qtd. in Cypress 130). However, through the depiction of Domino, Rodriguez alludes to these pervasive images and perpetuates the myth of La Malinché as betrayer rather than negotiator.

Domino is introduced to the audience as the owner of a bar the Mariachi goes runs to in order to seek refuge from all the chaos involved with Azul and Moco, two drug

[6] In his book, *the Labyrinth of Solitude*, Octavio Paz refers to all Mexicans as "hijos de la chingada" or sons of the 'fucked one."

cartels the town's major masculine powers. The Mariachi has been mistaken for Azul because of the guitar case he carries.

The most common association with the name "domino" is a game popularized in Europe played with pieces originally made of ebony and ivory. The tiles are reminiscent of a binary. Domino resides in a space between fidelity to two men – the Mariachi, her symbolic son and Moco, her lover and white "savior."

"Domino" is of Latin origin and means "Lord or master." By many historical accounts, Dona Marina was born of nobility. Further, historical accounts state that among the conquistadors, she was known as "the angel of the expedition" and that *indios* "first took her as a *diosa* [goddess] because she could speak their language fluently and because her communication served to mitigate violence between themselves and the white strangers" (Del Castillo 124). In her time, Doña Marina was associated with god and religion. Domino serves a similar purpose as that described of Doña Marina, not only to mitigate violence between the native and the white presence, but to protect her symbolic son, the Mariachi a symbol of mestizaje.

Domino's first impression of the Mariachi infantilizes him. She refers to him as "a kid" and makes fun of him for drinking soda pop. Uncharacteristic of a machisto, a man who traditionally drinks beer or liquor. Their second interaction occurs after his first violent encounter with Moco's men, he returns to what he now considers a safe, maternal space – Domino's bar.

> MARIACHI: I just killed four guys.
> Domino reaches for her gun under the counter. The camera is on Mariachi when she brings it out and points it at him.
> MARIACHI: (exhausted) Wait a minute…what's your name?
> DOMINO: Domino.

> DOMINO: So why do you come here? You want to get *me* killed?
> MARIACHI: I need a place to stay until I figure this out. They've mixed me up with someone else.
> DOMINO: I have a room upstairs. *My room*. Don't touch anything. I'll be up after awhile and we can call a friend of mine.
> (Rodriguez 243-244)

However, for reasons that Rodriguez does not indicate, on film, she reaches for a phone instead of a gun. On screen, this creates a contrast between Domino and the other women in the film – an indication that she will not perform masculinity for the same purposes – to exploit her sexuality by having her carry a gun or to have her possess a level of respect reserved for men like Azul and Moco. Instead, she hears a crime has been committed and she reaches for a different weapon – the phone. A more honest, sincere, even protective reaction. This is the beginning of Domino's motherly affection for the Mariachi.

Figure 10. Domino.

We see Domino as stern yet comforting with Mariachi. She offers him a place to clean up, a place to sleep, and later a place to work. This is also similar to Doña Marina in that "accounts seem to indicate that Doña Marina was indeed a sensitive and loving woman. She sincerely cared for people and continued to love those who had caused her the most pain and, as such, it is not surprising to read that both indios and Spaniards alike loved her dearly" (Del Castillo 124). Note how in a gesture of gratitude, and an attempt to exert his romantic masculinity, Mariachi reaches for her hand for a kiss. She is accepting of an

embrace of hands, but quickly corrects unacceptable behavior and slaps him. While she has offered him a maternal safe space (her room, her bed, her shower), she vehemently denied him any romantic entry. It is clear that Domino will not necessarily be Mariachi's romantic interest, but still a major figure in his journey to achieve a more masculine form.

One of the men chasing Mariachi enters Domino's bar shortly after Mariachi goes upstairs. She is alarmed when the man tells her the Mariachi killed ten of Moco's men (really, it was four) an exaggeration to not appear weak to Domino and Moco. If this stranger had the capability of killing ten strong men, there was nothing he could do to stop him, he must submit to his greater masculinity.

Upset by this new (although false) revelation, Domino confronts the Mariachi. When she enters her bedroom, he is in the bathtub in the middle of the room. He has made himself at home in her bedroom. He is naked, soaking, bathing, perhaps basking in the comfort of her metaphorical womb. She quickly grabs what appears to be a knife and holds it to his throat yelling for him to prove he is indeed a mariachi and not Azul.

> DOMINO: You're very modest, Mariachi…You told me you killed four men, when you really killed ten. Or were they still breathing even after you shot out their hearts?
> MARIACHI: I'm a mariachi…not a murderer…

Nervous and unable to produce, she moves the knife from his throat to his crotch and he immediately belts out a song. A translation of the song in English is as follows:

> I've been caught with my pants down and there may be a castration.
> There were several assholes who tried to rip me to pieces.
> And now I'm with this princess who's armed with a knife, big northern eyes, and a ferocious body.

The song, although brief, is described by the mariachi as the best he has ever sung or played. The song is important for several reasons. It takes a near literal castration for the mariachi to assert himself as man to Domino. And it is in that near castration that he is the most honest and vulnerable with his words.

He refers to her as a princess with big northern eyes and a ferocious body. Though the Mariachi is hardly in a position to know Domino's history (neither is the audience), it is a brief re-telling of Doña Marina's history. Sold into slavery after her noble father passed away and her mother bore a male heir to her second husband, "the young Aztec princess was in fact, betrayed, dethroned…one can only speculate as to what she experienced as a Mayan slave and what effect these experiences had on her character" (Del Castillo 123). As Adelaida R. Del Castillo wrote, the story of Doña Marina's childhood has the "simplicity of an evil fairy tale" (123) and is ripe for film re-tellings. Forced to fend for herself, Doña Marina has been reconfigured to represent a woman of decisive action. And it seems in that instant of forcing the exposure of the mariachi's talent, Domino has chosen her figurative mestizo son over her white lover.

Soon after his serenade, Domino hires the Mariachi to work in her bar and works to protect him from Moco. However, the fact that she is Moco's lover is still unknown to the Mariachi. Domino and the Mariachi prepare to play a game of (none other than) dominoes when she receives a phone call from Moco asking her to come see him. Shots of her on the phone with Moco are juxtaposed with shots of Mariachi setting up the game of dominos. Rodriguez sets up perfectly Domino's place between these two men. She hangs up on Moco in order to finish her game with Mariachi. Domino has chosen her figurative mestizo son over her white lover.

> MARIACHI: Boyfriend?
> DOMINO: No.
> MARIACHI: Gringo?
> DOMINO: Yes.
> MARIACHI: I can't figure something out. You tell me you're poor. Poor family. Yet you've got this place.
> DOMINO: (sighing) This place is a gift.
> MARIACHI: From who?
> DOMINO: From Mauricio.
> MARIACHI: From El Moco? The man trying to kill me?
> DOMINO: He's not trying to kill you. He's confused you with Azul.
> MARIACHI: It's the same thing.
> (Rodriguez 271).

The Mariachi equivocates the death of Azul with the death of himself, the symbolic mestizo, indicating a closer tie to the indigenous. Domino attempts to explain the situation from her perspective – Moco was trying to court her so he would give her gifts. The gifts escalated from traditional courtship (flowers and candy) into things that benefited Domino more long-term. Impoverished, she needed a job. In need of more stability, Moco gave her the bar. The Mariachi is outraged by her manipulation of the situation and her use of her feminine wiles for monetary gain.

In the final climactic scene of the film, Azul and Moco meet face-to-face. Azul has kidnapped Domino to use her as a catalyst to get Moco to repay the debt in which he owes.

> AZUL: Give me my money or she's dead!
> MOCO (to Domino): After all I've done for you? This is how you treat me?
> AZUL: I swear! I'll kill her!
> MOCO: You won't kill her. I will.

Moco kills Domino and then kills Azul. The Mariachi arrives late to the scene and is devastated by the sight of these two corpses. Before he can fight back, Moco shoots the

Mariachi in his left hand castrating him and preventing him from furthering his musical career. In revenge, the Mariachi kills Moco.

As feminist scholars renegotiate the figure of Doña Marina in border culture, figures such as Domino become all the more important for analysis. Del Castillo writes, "Because history is notorious for depicting the female as being one of the main causes for man's failures, it's extremely important that we understand the ethics with which historians, most of whom have been men in the past, distribute blame and justice" (125). Domino's story as a reenactment of the life of Doña Marina, ultimately had to die for her transgressions against her culture and collusion with the Spanish border presence and the malinche part of the binary was reinforced. Further, the deceptive inclusion of a masculine female and sexualized females with weapons reinforces this same binary.. For the time being, border women are still living with the film versions of the antiquated perceptions of Doña Marina and La Virgen de Guadalupe that reinforce a hard, hegemonic masculinity.

AFTERWORD

CHANGING FACES/CAMBIANDO CARAS

My analysis of *El Mariachi* in the preceding chapters exposes the need for a reconstruction of masculinity and positive portrayals of alternative masculinities in popular culture, particularly in film. In her essay "Reconstructing Black Masculinity," bell hooks asserts that only through reconstructing masculinity can we provide men with "ways to save their lives and the lives of their brothers and sisters in struggle" (113). Anzaldúa goes a step further in discussing just how we may begin to do so. She writes that perhaps we must

> …disengage from the dominant culture, write it off all together as a lost cause, and cross the border into a wholly new and separate territory. Or we might go another route. The possibilities are numerous once we decide to act and not react. (79)

Scholarship on similar issues has already made tremendous strides. The 1996 book *Muy Macho: Latino Men Confront their Manhood* is a compilation of essays written by Latino men who discuss living with machismo as the monolithic standard of masculinity. In his introduction to the book, Ray Gonzalez writes,

> These writers do not depend on the old stereotype of the dark, brooding head of the household, as some of their fathers may have

> done, to define their domestic life. The caricatures of the rebellious street punk and the Latin lover, who beds as many women as he can, no longer fit the mold being shaped by the 'fruitful' time Bly talks about. (XIII)

He refers to a passage from Robert Bly's *Iron John* in which he states "images of adult manhood given by the popular culture are worn out; a man can no longer depend on them" (XIII).

A beginning can be marked through our cinematic role models. Gonzalez writes "good role models among Latino men…get overlooked in favor of the sensational notions of the tough guy or the destructive father figure" (XIX). Representations of Latino men in mainstream culture decide who younger Latinos will mimic. If these examples are hurtful and unrealistic (as they appear to still be) how can we change perceptions? It is my goal to continue this project and extend it to include analyses of Rodriguez's other border films including *Desperado*, *Once Upon a Time in Mexico*, and *From Dusk Till Dawn* in terms of *Latinidad* and gender stereotypes in Latino culture as commodities exploited by Rodriguez for American audiences. It is my whole-hearted belief that in looking at current popular images and joining the discussion about border identity, scholars can influence the future representations of border masculinity and save, as bell hooks wrote, our brothers and sisters in battle.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Marlene Galvan was born in Edinburg, Texas in 1985. She graduated from the University of Texas-Pan American summa cum laude in 2007 with a baccalaureate degree in English and in 2010 with her master's degree in Literature and Cultural Studies. Throughout her studies at UTPA, she taught first-year-composition and co-authored three children's plays, *Golden Cobwebs* (2006), *The Piper and the Rats* (2007), and *What Mothers Do* (2010) with Dr. Brian Warren.

The daughter of Mexican-American parents, sister to one brother, and aunt to a beautiful seven-year-old girl, she is nobody's mother and nobody's wife. She currently lives in Edcouch, Texas, and plans to pursue her doctorate in gender and literature.