

## Latinos and Otherness: The Films of Gregory Nava

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### Resumen

Este ensayo presenta a Gregory Nava como un cineasta chicano ejemplar que ha movido a los Latinos estadounidenses de la posición de objetos a sujetos en la cultura norteamericana. En su trabajo de más de dos décadas ha reducido el grado de “otredad,” “extranjería” o “exoticismo” de sus personajes latinos interpretándolos no como estereotipos, sino como seres humanos individuales que tienen sus propias historias de vida. Reflejando los desarrollos nacionales en los Estados Unidos en décadas recientes (con los Latinos ocupando cada vez más posiciones centrales), Nava muestra la presencia latina en los Estados Unidos como lo cotidiano, más que la excepción, como lo central, más que lo marginal y como merecedora de empatía, más que de tener que permanecer alienada. El cineasta valora las contribuciones que los Latinos han venido haciendo a la cultura de los Estados Unidos y cuestiona la primacía de una narrativa norteamericana anglosajona y protestante. En su defensa por la diversidad norteamericana, Nava también sugiere la necesidad de considerar la dimensión transnacional de la cultura norteamericana para de este modo colocar en primer plano el componente interamericano de la identidad nacional de los Estados Unidos.

Responding to a remark by filmmaker Lourdes Portillo, film scholar Chon A. Noriega has pointed out that “Chicano filmmakers and media activists exemplify the complex and even paradoxical search for possibilities in the face of infinite limitations” (*Shot* 195). Recapitulating the early history of Chicano film and its evolution from an “underground and personal cinema” of the 1960s, to avant-garde groups, the social autobiography of Chicana video art, and the Chicano and Latino gay and lesbian cinema with its community-oriented concerns, Noriega observes that

By 1983 [the] practitioners [of Chicano cinema] had gained a toehold in noncommercial circuits (public television, national endowments, and foundations), had directed studio-released feature films (*Zoot Suit*, 1981; *The Ballad of Gregorio Cortez*, 1983; *El Norte*, 1983), and had become regular participants and manifesto writers in a modified New Latin American Cinema. (199)

Noriega concludes that despite the limitations of financing and marketing faced by Chicana/o filmmakers, they have maximized their options concerning content, form, and funding of their work. He believes that what unites the history of Chicano<sup>1</sup> film “resides in neither a cultural essence nor a cinematic style, but rather in a political imperative,” namely to overcome the exclusionism of Hollywood and of communications networks (201).<sup>2</sup>

The motivation (or “political imperative”) that unites many Chicanas/os and U.S. Latinas/os in filmmaking is the desire to use cinema in order to combat the long-standing Hollywood stereotypes of the violent, dumb or lazy Latino man or the alluring, mysterious or treacherous Latina woman.<sup>3</sup> By assuming a subject position in intercultural discourse (taking the on-screen representation of Latinos into their own hands), U.S. Latino filmmakers go against the prevailing objectification of the ethnic Other. Michelle Cliff explains that

through Objectification – the process by which people are dehumanized, made ghost-like, given the status of Other – an image created by the oppressor replaces the actual being. The actual being is then denied speech; denied self-definition, self-realization; and over-arching all this, denied selfhood – which is after all the point of objectification. Only certain elements are chosen, recast, co-opted, and made available to the definition of these people. (141)

In recent decades the work of a growing number of U.S. Latino filmmakers from Lourdes Portillo to Sylvia Morales, from Sandra Vasquez to Edward James Olmos, from Jesús Salvador Treviño to Luis Valdez, and from Cheech Marin to Efraín Gutiérrez have offered counter-narratives about Latinos in the United States that explore the diversity of Latino experiences and that put Latinos in subject positions.<sup>4</sup> The work of these filmmakers tries to give to exemplary Latino characters the self-

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<sup>1</sup> The terms “Chicano” and “Latino” are used throughout this essay to refer to both genders. I am, however, well aware of the longstanding exclusion of Latina and Chicana filmmakers from festivals, distribution channels, anthologies, and handbooks of “Chicano” or “Latino” cinema (cf. Fregoso, “Chicana Film”).

<sup>2</sup> Stressing the importance of mainstream formats, Noriega quotes Rosa Linda Fregoso, who wrote that “In a society where feature-length films signify mastery and cinematic practice and in which 35-mm symbolizes power, the accumulation of ‘cultural capital’ becomes a self-generating process. In other words, making a Chicano 35-mm feature film translates into a certain prestige that virtually guarantees greater critical and scholarly attention as well as film reviews in the mainstream media” (“Chicana Film” 169-70).

<sup>3</sup> Charles Ramírez Berg summarizes that “The history of Latino images in U.S. cinema is in large measure a pageant of six basic stereotypes: *el bandido*, the harlot, the male buffoon, the female clown, the Latin lover, and the dark lady. Sometimes the stereotypes were combined, sometimes they were altered superficially, but their core defining – and demeaning – characteristics have remained consistent for more than a century and are still evident today” (66).

<sup>4</sup> A very useful introduction to their work can be found in Part III of Charles Ramírez Berg’s *Latino Images in Film: “Latino Self-Representation,”* (183-261).

hood that Hollywood had long denied them. In the process, it also gives to Latino communities in the United States a more authentic voice than the U.S. motion picture industry had traditionally conceded to them.

In the context of U.S. Latino filmmakers moving over the past four decades from occupying marginal niches to participating in major venues of production and distribution, Charles Ramírez Berg speaks of three waves of Chicano cinema: a first one (in the 1960s and 1970s, exemplified by El Teatro Campesino's *Yo Soy Joaquín*, 1969) that was male-dominated and closely associated with the Chicano Movement and that relied on documentaries with "separatist" politics; a second one (since 1977, exemplified by Edward James Olmos's *American Me*, 1992) that managed to tap into PBS, AFI and NEH funding, that moderated its politics to "rebellious," and that also included women filmmakers; and a third wave (since the late 1980s), in which "political content is embedded within the deeper structure of the genre formulas the filmmakers employ rather than being on the surface" (186-87). Berg explains that this third wave

for the most part consists of genre films, made either within the Hollywood system or, if not, adhering closely to the Hollywood paradigm. As such, Third Wave films do not accentuate Chicano oppression or resistance; ethnicity in these films exists as one fact of several that shape characters' lives and stamp their personalities. This does not mean that the films are consequently nonpolitical, devoid of commentary about Otherness, or that their makers have sold out. On the contrary, the critique mounted by some of these films at least may be just as pointed, if more subtle, than Second Wave films. (187)

While Berg extensively discusses Robert Rodriguez (the director of *El Mariachi* [1997] and *Sin City* [2005], among others) as a representative of this third wave, I would like to suggest including Gregory Nava (mentioned as a representative of the second wave by Berg) in this group, to which Gary D. Keller refers as "Hispanic Hollywood."

Over the past four decades, the social and demographic developments of U.S. Hispanics have effected a profound change in Latino film. Once relying on independent productions as proclamations of radical, separatist politics, much work is being done by Latinos nowadays 'within the system' of the Hollywood industry, with its traditionally more moderate (and often conservative) politics (cf. Scott). With Latinos in prominent political positions, with the rise of a Hispanic middle class, and with an ever-increasing number of Latino college graduates, Latino filmmakers are responding to a new social reality. Shifts in the U.S. Latino population are accompanied by shifts in the cultural presence of Latinos in the contemporary United States: this includes TV, the cityscape, the music industry, the literary marketplace, and many other cultural arenas, where Latinos are increasingly taking on subject positions.

My essay explores the work of an exemplary figure in this process of U.S. Latinos assuming a subject position, namely the Chicano filmmaker Gregory Nava. I will not try to give an assessment of his whole oeuvre but I will concentrate on five of his works – one from the 1980s, two from the 1990s, and two from the current

decade – to illustrate a development in his work, in which we see a continuing decrease in the degree of Otherness or foreignness or exoticness with which Nava invests his Latino figures. I argue that over the past twenty-five years the film and television work of Gregory Nava has mirrored national developments in the United States, where we also see U.S. Latinos assuming increasingly more visible and more central roles from TV news anchor to justice secretary. Nava is moving the Latino presence in the United States from the margins closer to the center, making it the norm rather than the foreign or subaltern that it had been in classic Hollywood. His films attempt, on the one hand, to fit Latinos into the U.S. ethnic and cultural mosaic and, on the other hand, to offer new narratives of U.S. American identity that concentrate less on white Anglo-Saxon protestants and more on a diversity in which Latinos play a central role. It is not surprising therefore that he shifts from a focus on Latino immigrants to one on Latinos who are second- or later generation U.S. Americans. In this process, there is also an increasing space for transnational elements of U.S. identity, which is why Nava's later work also presents U.S. Latinos abroad – especially in Latin America and Iraq – mediating national identities. In decreasing the Otherness of Latinos in the United States, Nava stresses the heterogeneity of this group (thus resisting stereotyping), he creates individual life stories that invite audiences (regardless of their own ethnic background) to empathize with them, and he presents Latinas and Latinos as sharing in the universally human.

### 1. Latina/o Subjects

The writer, director, and producer Gregory Nava is of Mexican-Basque heritage; he was born in San Diego, California in 1949. He became interested in filmmaking at an early age. While attending UCLA Film School, he made his first film, which was based on the life of Garcia Lorca and entitled *The Journal of Diego Rodriguez Silva*. In 1973 *The Confessions of Aman* followed – a tale of a wandering medieval scholar. After these early forays into diverse topics Nava soon concentrated on Latino issues in his films. *El Norte* (1983) earned him an Academy Award nomination for Best Screenplay.

While his television show *American Family* was on in 2002, Nava was asked by Bill Moyers: “When you look at prime time America and see so few if any Latinos, does it make you angry? They’re invisible.” Nava’s optimistic answer:

I think we’re reaching a point right now where Latinos are moving from the fringes into the mainstream of American life. And our time has come right now for us to make our contribution to this country. That’s what groups always do when they come here, it’s what keeps this country ever young and ever fresh. So it doesn’t make me angry; I just see it as a challenge. And I think that as a population and as a community we have to rise to that challenge. (Moyers)

And that is what Gregory Nava has been doing in his career as a filmmaker – rising to the challenge of making Latinos visible in the U.S. cultural imaginary. In his work he puts Latinos in the position of subjects through whose eyes we, the

audience, experience plots and who speak for themselves rather than making Latinos the objects perceived voyeuristically by characters from outside the Latino community, who tend to stereotype them negatively.

Homi Bhabha writes that for marginalized groups self-determination is a defensive reaction to oppression, the active process of identity construction is reduced to either conforming to an enforced role or to struggling against it. So there seems to be an inevitable passivity because the marginalized subject remains in an untimely and belated historical moment, when the roles are already fixed and the recognition of otherness is connected to an innate inferiority. Minority voices, according to Bhabha, can therefore only *re-act* and they can establish only partial views of their group's identity. Still, this partiality of the marginalized is also the link between majority and minority cultures for it represents differentiation and assimilation at the same time. Bhabha maintains that a member of a partial culture has to develop strategies of hybridization to cope with the label of the "internal other" within a larger group or nation. For a member of a marginalized group to assume an autonomous subject position, writes Bhabha,

makes possible the emergence of an 'interstitial' agency that refuses the binary representation of social antagonism. Hybrid agencies find their voice in a dialectic that does not seek cultural supremacy or sovereignty. They deploy the partial culture from which they emerge to construct [a] vision of community, and versions of historic memory, that give narrative form to the minority positions they occupy; the outside of the inside: the part in the whole. (58)

Bhabha refers to the dual function of any discourse of a marginalized group. On the social level, voices from the margin might introduce an appreciation of divergence without hierarchy by questioning the hegemonic practice of the privileged and by providing a glimpse into the position of the supposedly inferior. On the personal level, voicing the problematic task of being "the outside of the inside" is an important outlet for the ambivalent emotions evoked in the process of self-determination through heterogeneity. Hybrid discourse is then a means of negotiation between the roles of outsider and insider.

I will now illustrate how Gregory Nava, in his negotiation between the roles of outsider and insider, has been decreasing the degree of Otherness of Latinos in the U.S. by shifting from a concentration on Guatemaltecan migrants in *El Norte* to a focus on third- or later generation Mexican Americans in *American Family*, and most recently to the interplay of ethnic, professional, national, political, and gender identity in *Bordertown* (2006). In this process and in always highlighting the general humanity of his Latino characters, Nava tries to sublimate dichotomies of "outside" and "inside," "Self" and "Other," "center" and "periphery." He said in an interview:

I've always seen two ways to make movies, to make money at movies. One is building up the barriers that exist between people. Violence against women and whatever. Or you take down the walls that exist between people. Audiences will pay for both of those experiences. I've always seen myself in the category of those who try to take down the wall between people.

And I don't mean just between cultural groups like Latino and Anglo, but between father and son and husband and wife. Just bringing together [is a] concept which I ...

feel real strongly about in movies, that needs to be done, and [that is] what I want to do. (Béhar)

In other words: you either create a group to hate as outsiders or you love a group because its members – on second sight – seem much like yourself. We can relate this intention to Nava's desire to reshape constructions of national and transnational identities in the Americas. Especially in *El Norte*, *American Family*, and *Border-town* – all of which include significant portions set outside the U.S.A. – Nava tries to relativize concepts of “outside” and “inside,” to look at the inside from the outside, and to stress that on any side of a border there are *people*, whom he presents as ‘speaking subjects’ and who share concerns and dreams with people elsewhere in the world.

## 2. *El Norte* (1983)

*El Norte* gives a subject voice to two Guatemalan Mayan Indians, a brother and sister who flee their country and head for the North after their father, a spokesman for land reform, has been murdered and their own lives are in danger. Leaving lush but oppressive Guatemala, Enrique and Rosa encounter the poverty of Mexico and the glaring contrast of wealth and squalor on the U.S. side of the border. The protagonists cross into California through a rat-infested sewer tunnel that connects Tijuana and San Diego. After initial difficulties the two seem to be doing fine: Enrique is working as a bus boy in a restaurant and Rosa as a maid. In the end, however, she dies from typhus, with which the rats in the sewer tunnel had infected her and he loses his job after an envious Chicano co-worker calls the migra on him, landing Enrique back on a street corner looking for work.

The film is unusual (for the early 1980s) in affording its Latino protagonists a speaking position, which makes the audience experience Guatemala, Mexico and especially Southern California through their eyes and which thus invites a higher degree of audience empathy. One aspect of this subject position is that when Enrique and Rosa speak to each other, they do so in Spanish and in their Mayan Indian language with English subtitles rather than having their conversations dubbed in English. While this feature heightens the degree of foreignness of the couple for mainstream U.S. audiences, using them as the film's centers of consciousness invites English-speaking American audience to accept this foreignness or even to see a version of their own struggling immigrant history re-told in the story of Enrique and Rosa and to identify with them on that basis. In a *New York Times* interview Nava remarked that “in order to get films made about Latin America, you have to have Americans in the center of the story. ... You don't get to know the people to whom things are really happening down there” (qtd. in “Hispanic Heritage”). It is as a statement against this Hollywood practice that he saw his own film back in 1983. Whether Nava chose a melodramatic ending to the film as a concession to mainstream tastes I am unable to say.

What concerns us here is the portrayal of the outsider within. As mentioned above, the outsider status of Latinos in the U.S. is stressed in the film – mainly

through the two migrant characters but also through two Chicano characters who are probably third- or later generation U.S. citizens and who speak little or no Spanish: the envious co-worker of Enrique who calls the immigration authorities when Enrique gets promoted and the manager of the run-down motel where Enrique and Rosa live. While – socially and culturally – these occupy less of an outsider position than do Enrique and Rosa, we are not invited to empathize with the manager or the co-worker, although they have become Americanized. Our sympathies are directed toward the speaking subjects – in spite of or maybe because of their degree of foreignness. In this way they become, in Bhabha's words, "the outside of the inside."

In his representation of Rosa and Enrique, Nava manages to strike a successful balance between depicting them and their world as Other and eliciting viewer empathy for them by showing their dreams and actions to be universally human. This two-ness of "outside" and "inside" underlies, for example, the scene leading up to the siblings leaving their Guatemalan village. Rosa is seen in a room with dozens of lit candles and torches while packing her suitcase; when she talks to her brother and tells him that she is coming with him to "el norte," the two switch between Spanish and their Mayan language; when she walks to a chapel, there is a close-up of an animal skull on the ground; as she leaves the house in the morning, two old women call out Rosa's name and the doors mysteriously close behind them in a scene accompanied by indigenous flute music and followed immediately by a shot of the full moon with mysterious clouds moving in front of it. These elements of foreignness are interspersed with elements of "the inside," i.e., of aspects that invite the empathy of general audiences: the siblings share a dream of the good life in "el norte" ("Pero no nos vamos a morir. ... Vamos a vivir. Y en el norte ya no seguiremos ... el abuso. ... Vamos a tener todo lo que deseamos.") and of the even better life after their return. Depicting brother and sister in each other's arms in a back-lit scene inside the room brimming over with candles and torches gives their decision an air of serenity and makes their departure an almost sacred act. This latter quality is underlined by having Rosa go to a shrine of the Virgin Mary right before their departure to light a candle each for their dead father and mother. Through their dream of a better future and the value they place on family the protagonists are depicted as representatives of universal humanity.

The ethnically and locally specific "outside" element goes hand in hand with the universally human "inside" status. As Christine List points out,

unlike in other Chicano films, in *El Norte* indigenism is not developed as a political rallying point to unite Latinos. The film is about a specific Mayan ethnic group, not a symbolic heritage as it functions in other Chicano films. Indigenous ethnicity is foregrounded as concrete and local. The director structures the three episodes in *El Norte* to highlight cultural differences among Latinos, creating three distinct identities in the narrative; Mayan, Mexican and Chicano. The journey of Rosa and Enrique is a device for showing these three identities as stages in a process towards greater and greater mixing of ethnicities or *mestizaje*. (106)

However, the result is not a homogeneous Latino group that could then be typified/stereotyped. There is a world of difference, for example, between the protagonists and the two (non-Spanish-speaking) Chicanos with whom they interact in Los Angeles. By presenting individuals rather than a group, Gregory Nava seems to heed Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's later warning that by reclaiming a collective cultural identity subalterns will in fact confirm and perpetuate their subordinate position; only if the heterogeneity of the subaltern group is acknowledged can the subaltern move toward a true subject position, writes Spivak. And this is what Nava does.

This differentiation of the subaltern also includes gender. Rosa Linda Fregoso has rightly pointed out that while Enrique functions as an exemplary victim of cultural practices like political repression, economic exploitation, military might, and the envy of a co-worker, Rosa

figures as the allegorical Maya-Quiché Indian, the embodiment of culturally specific codes of apprehending social reality that derive from an alternative logic to that of bourgeois reason. The film visually incorporates the blocked and prohibited realms of the subject, those manners in the individual that are usually regarded as "hallucinations" and "superstitions," but it does so only through the agency of Rosa. (109)

In this way Rosa becomes not a victim of culture but of nonhuman nature, writes Fregoso; foremost, of course, she becomes a victim of the rat bites that infect her.

Despite or in fact because of the high degree of foreignness with which Nava invests his protagonists he lures us to adopt their point of view, and so renders the U.S. the "culturally Other" that is being examined. The migrant viewpoint questions the primacy of the mainstream culture, it problematizes the distinction between "inside" and "outside," and it asks whether practices like a labor market depending on illegal workers or a medical system denying immediate attention to a patient without a social security number should really be characteristic of the "inside."

### 3. *My Family/Mi Familia* (1995)

Especially in his multi-generational family epic *My Family/Mi Familia* and in his television series *American Family* Gregory Nava continues his project of decreasing the perceived Otherness of U.S. Latinos. *My Family* tells the story of the Sánchez family from East Los Angeles in the 1920s, 1933, 1958, and in 1978. The events of the 1920s leading up to the departure of José Sánchez from his village in Mexico to walk to "a village called Los Angeles" in order to live there with his great-uncle (a journey that takes him a year) are related as episodes of family lore: historical truth does not matter, but the versions told by family members do because those characterize the people who tell them. Again, those tellers – chiefly among them the narrator Paco (José's oldest son), an aspiring writer whose voiceover accompanies the events on screen – are differentiated Latino speaking subjects. As speaking subjects they get to revise commonly held stereotypes like the one of all Mexican Americans being immigrants. As the voiceover informs us when José leaves for California after the Mexican Revolution: "In those days the border was just a line in

the dirt. ... They called the old man [José's great-uncle] 'El Californio' because he didn't come from anywhere else. He was born right here in Los Angeles when it was still México." Another little-known tragedy of U.S. history that the film recalls is the deportation of U.S. citizens of Mexican ancestry after the 1924 Immigration Reform Act and during the Great Depression.

Like in *El Norte*, Nava does not try to erase the difference or distinctiveness of Latinos. He uses indigenous flute music and talk of a "river spirit" that has a hold on the life of José's son Chucho after Chucho and his mother almost drowned crossing the Rio Grande as well as references to a spirit that claims women who die while giving birth. But at the same time *My Family* reduces the degree of Otherness of the Sánchez family. For example, when the youngest son Memo brings his blonde Anglo fiancée Karen and her parents to the family's home in East L.A., he translates his nickname for his prospective parents-in-law as "Bill." Later he tells them: "Actually, I've never been to Mexico. I always lived here in Los Angeles, just like yourselves."

Family is the central link between positions of Otherness and sameness, outside and inside, between past and present as well as between Mexico and the United States. In terms of the film's imagery this link is represented through the central leitmotif of bridges. The bridge across the Los Angeles River that connects East L.A. to the rest of the city appears frequently: José and several of his children cross it to make a living, Memo's prospective in-laws cross it for the first time in their lives to meet the Sánchez family. Gregory Nava pointed out in an interview that

the film is very much about bridges – the bridges that bridge Los Angeles with East Los Angeles. The people from East Los Angeles cross the bridge, but the people on the western side don't cross into East Los Angeles. And the bridges need to be crossed in both directions. But the image of the bridge extends beyond that. It is the bridges that exist between us and our past, as Latinos, our roots, and the bridges that then, understanding that, lead us to our future. The bridges that we have to build between people and members of the family, between fathers and sons, and mothers and daughters, and brothers and sisters. So the images of the bridges have tremendous use in the film to show all kinds of things within the family, the community, the neighborhood, and, finally, the city of Los Angeles. (West)

Bridges also relativize the assignment of insider and outsider status, of center and periphery. *My Family* places its center in Latino-dominated East Los Angeles, whereas downtown, West L.A. and Beverly Hills are used as the periphery into which members of the Sánchez family venture to earn money but from which they always gravitate back to East L.A.

This questioning of center and margin goes hand in hand with a more general questioning of the alleged center/norm. It is in the center of L.A. that José's wife Maria gets picked up by the immigration authorities and is deported to Mexico despite her U.S. citizenship. It is presumably also there that son Chucho picked up his values, which he presents to his father thus:

This [bundle of money, probably from drug deals] is all they respect in this country, not *la dignidad*. And it don't matter how you get it as long as you get it. I don't want to be like no Mexican. Huh-uh. If you think for one minute I want to spend all fucking

day pulling up weeds and mowing lawns, you got another thing coming. *¡A la chingada con eso!*

His rejection of the Protestant work ethic comes from the (center's) lure of easy money as much as from his rejection of the establishment that deported his mother from the U.S. and that has turned his father into a Latino version of Uncle Tom. But Chucho's way leads to his execution by police dispatched by this same establishment to hunt him down and "shoot to kill" him, when in fact he had acted in self-defense as he stabbed a rival.

Differentiating the Latino experience and presenting the Sánchez family as a family with its own ethnically specific as well as universally human characteristics decreases its Otherness for non-Latino audiences, as can be observed in the comment made by Roger Ebert:

Few movies like this get made because few filmmakers have the ambition to open their arms wide and embrace so much life. This is the great American story, told again and again, of how our families came to this land and tried to make it better for their children.

The ticket out of otherness – as Ebert and Nava realize – is to identify the history of the outsider with that of the insider and thereby question the parameters of assigning outsider status (cf. Bhabha).

#### 4. *Selena* (1997)

Another very "American story" is told in the biopic *Selena*, which chronicles the life of Mexican-American Tejano singer Selena Quintanilla Perez, who was known at the time of her death (at age 23) in 1995 as a crossover artist between Latino and other music traditions. This is the American tale of a 'rise to fame and fortune' – but with a Mexican American twist. Immigration plays no role in this film, but heritage and history do. Artistically, this is certainly not the best of Nava's films. It tends to preach rather than to stir the imagination of audiences. Still, the film is interesting as a stage in Nava's project of normalizing the Latino presence in the United States.

Nava's artistic freedom in making the film was probably hampered by two main factors: (1) the film was done by a big studio, Warner Brothers, and (2) the father of Selena Pérez, Abraham Quintanilla, exerted strict control over how his daughter and his family were to be represented. So he himself becomes in the film a good-natured dreamer who nurtures his family's ambitions, when the actual person is a far less positive figure, if we can believe those who have had to deal with him (cf. Patoski).

Despite the limitations of what he could do with the material, Gregory Nava was interested enough in Selena's life story to want to make the film. In an interview he said:

I never met her personally but if you're a Chicano, the barriers that she was getting through were extraordinary. Being a woman in the Tejano music world, which is a male-dominated world. Being accepted in Mexico as a Mexican-American, which is a great point of pride to any[one] of us who is Mexican-American. Crossing over into

the mainstream of the United States... We were all very proud of her. ... One of the reasons why our community loved her so much was because she was a real natural person. She became important to us because she crossed barriers no one had ever crossed before, and she did it without sacrificing her identity. (Béhar)

Nava presents Selena as both ethnically distinct and general American.

Not far into the film there is a scene which opens with a shot of the family home and garden at night. Young Selena, about eight years old, has sung in a concert to great applause. Asked by her sister what she is doing, little Selena answers: "I'm looking up at the moon and I'm dreaming ... When I'm up on stage I feel like I can be anything I wanna be." Next we see Selena's father (whose own band had not been able to make it outside of the Mexican American community because of race prejudice) trying to teach Selena a song in Spanish. "But I don't know Spanish," his daughter tells him. "Dad, I don't wanna sing in Spanish. I don't even like music in Spanish. I like Donna Summer. That's who I like." Then her father tells her of his own experience performing with a band: "I did learn something. You gotta be who you are. Can't change it, no. You're an American; I'm an American. ... But you're also Mexican, deep inside, and that's a wonderful thing. You can't be anything if you don't know who you are, especially if you want to be a singer. If you want to be a singer, you have to sing to people from deep inside here [touches her heart] and you know what's in there: ... tu corazón." In Homi Bhabha's terms the father's words constitute a recognition of the interstitial position in which he and his daughter find themselves. They are both Mexican American (in terms of heritage) and American (in terms of their dreams and situations).

Right after the father-daughter conversation the American quality of the Quintanilla family's situation is stressed when we find out that – like other small businesses – their family restaurant is negatively affected by Reaganomics. Elements of foreignness like the Mexican-style murals in the restaurant are integrated into a U.S. American reality, where they become decorative rather than culturally defining.

In making Selena the all-American girl and woman Gregory Nava seems to have tried too hard to take this character out of her interstitial position. He told an interviewer:

To me Selena is in one way as American as apple pie. She's all-American. Selena could no more come out of Mexico than Frank Sinatra could come out of Italy or Ella Fitzgerald from Africa. In a way, much smaller way, the same thing applies to me. (Béhar)

In making Selena "all-American" Nava – whether consciously or not I cannot say – replicates a scene from the movie *Pretty Woman* (1990): in the earlier film the scantily clad prostitute Vivian Ward goes into a boutique on Beverly Hills's Rodeo Drive to get nice clothes, is refused service because of her transgressive looks, buys clothes for much money elsewhere and goes back to the boutique, where she is not recognized because of how nice she now looks, just to tell the unfriendly saleswomen that since they work on commission it was a bad mistake not to serve

her. In Selena's case the cause for refusing service is skin color. Apart from that the staging of this 'Cinderella with a vengeance' scene is identical in both films.

Given Abraham Quintanilla's agenda of putting Selena and company in the best possible light, we do not get an authentic life story. The film leaves out, for example, Selena's rumored involvement with the married designer who helped her with her chain of boutiques or her father's domineering manner. It also does not mention Selena's possible lesbian relationship with the manager of her fan club, her eventual killer.<sup>5</sup> A fairly different account of Selena's life can be found in the unauthorized biography by Joe Nick Patoski. But Nava's intention was probably less biographical accuracy than the creation of a tribute to a fellow Mexican American who had achieved success with mainstream U.S. audiences.<sup>6</sup>

Asked whether in making a film about Selena only shortly after her untimely death there was not a danger of "sanctifying Selena and turning her into a perfect human being," Nava answered:

That is exactly what I didn't want to do. I wanted to put up a real human being up on the screen. In fact, very early on, I had a lot of back and forth with the family about what I wanted to put up there on the screen. I wanted to tell the truth, ... Initially, I thought, "My God, she's a role model to the Latino youth, we can't show her running off against her father's wishes and marrying this guy."

But Selena was an independent, very strong willed young woman. She didn't always do what her mom and dad told her to do. She did what she wanted to and she fought for her independence, which is what the struggle of the film is. She fought for her dream. (Béhar)

Trying too hard to fashion his protagonist as a "role model" fighting "for her [American] dream" may be the reason why Nava's Selena comes off too much as a type and not enough as an individual.

### 5. *American Family* (2002-04)

Gregory Nava was careful to evade typecasting in his next major success, the television series *American Family*, which aired for two seasons – 2002 until 2004 – on the Public Broadcast System (PBS). But here, too, he makes the Mexican American experience the "American" experience, as the title suggests. The Gonzalez

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<sup>5</sup> The *New York Times* reviewer complained that the film "doesn't contain a single word or image that suggests the Queen of Tejano music was ever anything less than a perfect angel. ... And what kind of person was Selena? Well, she just loved pizza and could stuff herself with junk food day after day without putting on weight. That's the only quirk revealed in a screenplay that piles on the saccharine clichés. When Selena muses on her success, she gushes like a fairy-tale princess living happily ever" (Holden).

<sup>6</sup> Joseph Milicia points out that "Nava elects not to show the murder of Selena onscreen, and gives only glimpses of the family's grief, not just out of tact but because the film is clearly intended to be a celebration of Selena's life and a memorial gift to her fans, with the advantages and drawbacks that such an approach is bound to have."

family represents what Homi Bhabha calls “the outside of the inside.” They find themselves in between belonging and alienation, in between being just another *American* family and being a distinctly *Mexican American* family. Nava himself said about his plans for the show’s second season:

Instead of doing an episodic series, I wanted to tell one epic story that unfolds like a mini-series over 13 parts. The topical story lines will be based around events of the Iraq war, and will show how the Gonzalez family came to America during the Mexican Revolution. *American Family* will depict all the sacrifices they have made through the years to achieve the American dream. In every household in America, there is an epic story – this year *American Family* will tell that story. (PBS)

*American Family – Journey of Dreams* is told from the perspective of the father, Jess Gonzalez. His eldest son is a doctor who is serving with the Army in Iraq, his second son is putting his life back together after a jail term, his eldest daughter is a progressive attorney with whom Jess is constantly squabbling, his other daughter is a clothing designer, and his youngest son is constantly filming his family and posting the footage on the Gonzalez family website. Jess’s grandson Pablito and his flamboyant sister Dora, a former aspiring entertainer, are also seen much around the house. The characters and their professions, their use of English rather than Spanish in the home, their non-Mexican American friends, and their everyday issues and problems characterize them more as part of the “inside” than the “outside.” Creator and director Nava said: “PBS has allowed me the freedom to create what I need to create, to do a show that I think will both touch the hearts of everybody in the United States and also allow me to be true to my world and my culture” (PBS). His expression “everybody in the United States” can be read as designating the “inside,” while his use of “my world and my culture” can be seen as referring to an “outside of the inside.”

In the episode “La Casa” the central issue is that Jess’s children decide to repaint the family home. When it comes to choosing the colors, different approaches become apparent: one character wants colors chosen by a “color psychologist,” the next one goes by feng shui, yet another wants to use the same colors that the house is currently painted in, and one wants “colors of a Mexican blanket.” Identities and preferences overlap here: while the last-mentioned option is guided by ethnicity, the other three options are inter-ethnic. What emerges in the scene is what one character calls “the new Latino reality,” a reality where ethnicity is just one of many elements that factor into identity and where an individual’s membership in an ethnic group is no more important than her membership in, say, an age group or a professional group.

Relativizing the importance of ethnicity probably contributed to the show’s audience appeal. Bill Moyers, for example, told Nava in an interview, “Well, when I look at *American Family*, I think hey, that could be the Moyers family. That could be my family... growing up on Long Island except that I liked bacon and eggs and Jess Gonzalez likes tortillas for breakfast.” This is apparently exactly the viewer reaction that Nava was trying to elicit. He answered Moyers:

Basically I think that the human experience is universal. And as a filmmaker that's what I've... in *El Norte*, *Mi Familia*, *Selena*, and now with *American Family* ... what I've always put in the front seat, is the universality of the human experience. You know, I'm just trying to tell stories. I see myself as a storyteller.

While the stories are ethnically specific (i.e., situated on the “outside”), they seek to speak for and appeal to inter-ethnic U.S. audiences (i.e., the “inside”) and modify perceptions of this “inside” in the process.

The positioning between “inside” and “outside” also extends to the show's medium and ownership. Originally, Gregory Nava had developed *American Family* for CBS, which also financed the pilot episode. After seeing the pilot, however, the CBS executives decided to abandon the project but they did allow Nava to take it (along with the pilot) to PBS. So in 2002 the CBS officials apparently did not feel that a drama series about a Mexican American family in Los Angeles would have sufficient market potential. How much their decision had to do with considerations of ethnicity is not known. Gregory Nava, on the other hand, does see his entrance into the medium of television (although public rather than commercial) as a step similar to his entrance into independent filmmaking in the 1970s and 1980s. He said in an interview:

When we started the independent film movement, we did it because we felt that studio filmmaking was getting very stodgy, and it needed to be shaken up. New kinds of subject matter needed to be dealt with, and new storytelling techniques needed to be used. We started that movement and it made an impact with movies like my film, *El Norte*, which dealt with undocumented immigrants. Spike Lee and John Sayles ... all of us were trying new things. To me, I see a parallel with television today ... television has gotten very stodgy, and needs to start changing. It needs to start dealing with new things, doing more stories about Latinos, African-Americans and Asian-Americans, bringing in new themes, talking about what's really going on in America today. With my show, I'm trying to bring the kind of energy and vision that made the independent film movement so interesting. (PBS)

Apparently, however, CBS was not ready in 2002 for this kind of “shaking up.”

## 6. *Bordertown* (2006)

Gregory Nava's latest work to date is the independently produced crime thriller *Bordertown*, which deals with the unsolved murders of hundreds of women working in maquiladoras in Juárez, Mexico. Since this is a topic that the Mexican government and business interests remain eager to suppress, it may come as no surprise that after receiving death threats Nava was obliged to shoot the majority of the film elsewhere. The writer and director said at a press conference at the Berlinale film festival in 2007 that he wanted to tell “a human tragedy that can touch people” and make known the suffering of women working in the Juárez maquiladoras (cf.

Buhre).<sup>7</sup> Appropriately, the film is dedicated “to the missing and murdered women of Juárez.”

*Bordertown* tells the story of Chicago newspaper reporter Lauren Adrian who, in order to get promoted to foreign correspondent, accepts an assignment to go to Juárez to write about the rape and murder of hundreds or thousands of women there. Lauren is especially to talk to one Eva Jimenez, a young factory worker who was left for dead after being assaulted but who lived. Lauren and Eva bond; at a party Eva recognizes her rapist (a man in high places); with the help of former lover Alfonso Diaz, who now runs an oppositional local Juárez newspaper, Lauren uncovers the identity of the bus driver in league with the attackers; because of business interests her Chicago newspaper does not print her story; Diaz gets killed; the rapist is knocked unconscious by Eva and dies in a fire; Eva testifies in court against the bus driver; Lauren stays in Juárez to take over Diaz’s newspaper.

On the political level, the transnational connections of business, power, and crime that the film highlights are of interest. When Lauren asks a suave, young, Harvard-educated Mexican businessman whether he is Mexican or American, he tells her, “Mexican, American, these are antiquated terms. They don’t really mean much in the modern world.” But later Lauren sums up the effect that the concerted action of U.S. and Mexican power, political, business, and social elites has on the workers when she tells her boss, “It isn’t Free Trade. It’s slave trade. It’s a goddamn scam. And everybody is making too much money to give a shit about these women.” The boss’s honest reply: “Corporate America is running the show now and their news agenda is Free Trade, globalization, and entertainment.”

On the personal level, the most interesting connection is that between the U.S. American reporter Lauren Adrian and the indigenous Mexican factory worker and rape victim Eva Jimenez. At first the two are presented as living in different worlds. However, the developing bond of trust is soon underlined through a recurrent flashback, in which a plane sprays an orange orchard, a man throws a girl an orange before being shot. Only two thirds into the film do we realize that this flashback refers to Lauren rather than to Eva (although early on Eva has had a vision of seeing her mother dead in a field). While Lauren had told her boss before her departure for Mexico: “I don’t speak Spanish. I don’t know anything about Mexico,” she finally informs him after the above-mentioned confrontation:

My parents are from Mexico. ... I’m one of these women, George, don’t you understand? My parents came here as migrant farm workers. They were killed. I was adopted. ... You see when I met Eva, I saw myself. I’ve been running away from who I am my whole life. You don’t want to be a Mexican, not in this country. You see, I could be one of the women in those factories. It could be me in one of those graves. I can’t let this go.

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<sup>7</sup> It is fitting, therefore, that before the picture starts a text on the screen informs audiences about the emergence of maquiladoras as a result of NAFTA and of their production for the U.S. market.

To begin with, only Lauren is a speaking subject – career-driven, taking charge, and distanced from Mexican realities. But her gradual avowal of her own Mexican ancestry enables her to facilitate speaking roles for Eva and others like her. Nava suggests that shared values are much more important than a shared ethnicity. While Mexico is constructed in the film as Other (through images of squalor, slums, police brutality, a drive-by killing, the repeated shot of a corpse’s foot sticking out from the dirt, an apocalyptic fire as well as through the occasional use of an indigenous language and through the superimposition of images), this Otherness is gradually linked to power mongers in the U.S., who make a profit from those conditions in Mexico. In this way, it is the perception of the “inside,” i.e., the United States, that is being revised for U.S. audiences, who are invited to empathize – through the mediation of Lauren – with the “outside” suffering of Eva, as Eva moves from being silenced (being left for dead) to gaining a voice (that has an impact in court).

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As Clara E. Rodríguez points out, the entry into major studios and national and international distribution networks by filmmakers like Gregory Nava, Moctesuma Esparza, Lourdes Portillo, Ana María García, and Robert Rodriguez has been changing concepts of national cultural identity:

What is most remarkable about these filmmakers is the dialogue they inaugurated. For many, this dialogue began in opposition; yet it has resulted in opening up the American experience and adding to the history of American film. These filmmakers and their films are part of the ongoing redefinition and expansion of American culture. In the same way that U.S.-Latino writers and poets express their birthright through their writing, these filmmakers bring to the screen their own unique and individual visions of what it means to be a Latino in the United States. In the process, they (like most filmmakers) have had particular messages to convey. ... The individual and collective vision of these filmmakers in many ways counter past views, but they also have introduced new connections and new understandings of universality. As these films air around the world, they extend the story of America. (199-200)

In his “ongoing redefinition and expansion of American culture” Gregory Nava does not quite share the radical vision of Guillermo Gómez-Peña, who imagines “a great trans- and intercontinental border zone, a place where no center remains. It’s all margins, meaning there are no ‘others,’ or better said, the only true ‘others’ are those who resist fusion, *mestizaje*, and cross-cultural dialogue” (7). But Nava does question borderlines – between individuals, ethnicities, nations. In this process he questions the Otherness of Latinos inside and outside the United States by creating Latina/o characters with whom general audiences can empathize and in whom viewers can recognize trans-ethnic, trans-cultural, and trans-national concerns of the *conditio humana*.

What Chon A. Noriega has written about Lourdes Portillo also holds true for Gregory Nava: he “reveals how the liminality within the nation relates to liminality across nations; in short, how the national and the transnational are not alternatives to each other but rather part of an interrelated set of cultural and economic structures”

("Introduction" xxii). Nava has contributed significantly to the perception of national and transnational identities in the Americas by questioning the extent to which ethnicity should figure into definitions of Self and Other.

Some people say I make "ethnic movies." Well, I don't see it that way. To me, *Mi Familia* is no more ethnic than *Home Alone*. Everybody has a cultural underpinning to their lives and their families, so I just see them as good stories about people. I'm Latino, so naturally, I'm attracted to Latino stories. But I see my films as films about people and myself as a filmmaker. Not a Chicano filmmaker. Just a filmmaker. (Béhar)

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