## Chapter 11 - The Mexican-American Experience Onscreen

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This chapter will provide a brief history of the Mexican-American community followed by an overview of Chicanx cinema’s stylistic elements and cultural influences, and will conclude with three case studies—*Stand and Deliver* (Ramón Menéndez, 1988), *Selena* (Gregory Nava, 1997), and *Under the Same Moon* (Patricia Riggen, 2007)—calling attention to the influence of Mexican culture on American history, media, and identity.

A unique link exists between the Mexican community and the United States, one which differs from the history of many other groups. Mexico has shared a border with the United States since its independence from Spain in 1821; and today, they coincide at one of the world’s busiest borders (Southern Border Communities Coalition). For centuries, the two nations have shared important transnational elements of culture, commerce, migration, among others, and their relationship has been inextricably tied by their shared “multicultural, multiracial, and multilingual history” (Newman 67).

Despite the connection and cooperation between the United States and Mexico, the Mexican community residing within the United States has endured state-sanctioned discrimination and a status of second-class citizenship. Its presence has been continuously contested by public opinion. For instance, California Superior Judge Gerald S. Chargin has referred to Mexicans as “lower than animals…miserable, lousy, rotten people” (Salazar). More recently, former President Donald Trump referred to Mexicans as “criminals and rapists.” Ruben Salazar, a Juárez-born journalist and activist writing in the 1960s, wrote that “Mexican” has been “vilified” and “dragged through the mud of racism since the Anglos arrived in the Southwest.” He further wrote, “all this, and more, has contributed to the psychological crippling of the Mexican-American when it comes to the word Mexican. He is unconsciously ashamed of it” (Salazar).

The term “Mexican-American” is also challenged within the community. Like all identifiers, its definition is as limited or expansive as one chooses. It has been used to describe US-born Americans of Mexican heritage, whether their ancestors lived in the Mexican states of the southwest prior to their annexation into the United States, or arrived in the US in later centuries. (For simplicity, “American” is used in this context to describe individuals born and/or living within the United States of America). Likewise, the term may also be used by Mexican-born individuals who have resided in the United States (independent of residency status) and/or have become naturalized citizens. Furthermore, beginning in the 1960s, “Mexican-American” became increasingly rejected by activist youth who associated the term with assimilation into Anglo culture. Instead, “**Chicano**” became popularized among the young politically active and socially conscious. (“Chicano” will be replaced by the gender-fluid term “Chicanx” unless the term is used in a quote or title.)

Ruben Salazar famously asked, “Who is a Chicano?” He answered, “A Chicano is a Mexican-American with a non-Anglo image of himself” (Salazar). The roots of the term are contested and the word itself has been associated with descendants of Aztlán, a region believed to be the ancestral home of the Mexica (known as Aztecs in western historiography) and located in the US southwest.

### A Brief History of the Mexican-American People

In spite of the inflammatory commentary on the Mexican-American identity, the community has greatly and positively contributed to the history of the United States. Decades before Manifest Destiny became a dominant political ideology in the United States, Mexicans and Native people were living in the states of Texas, New Mexico, California, and others. Westward expansion and the prominence of Manifest Destiny prompted the United States to instigate a war with Mexico. The Mexican-American War (1846-1848) concluded with the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo which demanded the Mexican succession of California, New Mexico, Arizona, Utah, Nevada, and Colorado, and parts of Oklahoma, Kansas and Wyoming (National Constitution Center). The Mexican people living in these territories were subject to the agreements of the treaty and were extended US citizenship, and a promise that their culture, property, and language would be respected. Through time, Mexican land owners were forced to renounce their property to white settlers and between 1929 and 1936, roughly 60,000 US citizens of Mexican descent were deported to Mexico (National Public Radio).

Shortly after the Mexican-Repatriation campaign, World War II erupted. The conflict caused a labor shortage in the United States which was resolved through the Bracero Program (1942-1964), a bilateral agreement that extended approximately 4.6 million seasonal visas to Mexican agricultural workers. To date, it is the largest US contract labor program (Bracero History Archive). While the governments of Mexico and the United States worked in partnership to resolve the economic and labor concerns of the mid 20th century, tension between youth of color and white servicemen were at an all-time high. During this period, **zoot suits** were popular among Mexican men as a form of self-expression and cultural pride. However, popular media represented the suits as gang-affiliated, leading to their negative perception among the public (Library of Congress, “1942: People v. Zamora”). During the Los Angeles’ summer of 1943, racially-motivated violence erupted between Mexican youth and white service men resulting in injuries and arrests.

In 1946, a brave Mexican-American family defied school segregation in the state of California and helped pave the way for the Supreme Court’s 1954 landmark decision in *Brown vs. Board of Education* *of Topeka.* Three short years after the Zoot Suit Riots of Los Angeles, the US Court of Appeals ruled that forcible segregation based on Mexican ancestry, skin color, and the Spanish language was unconstitutional and unlawful. The historic case, *Mendez vs. Westminster*, was brought by the Mendez family, who sued several California school districts for denying children entry based on their ancestry and physical appearance (United States Courts).

The 1960s was an exciting and revolutionary decade for many Americans including racially marginalized groups, women, and LGBTQI+. The Mexican-American community, principally through the Chicanx Movement (also known as The Chicano Movement, *La Lucha*, *La Causa*, and *El Movimiento*), made important contributions to the changing social and political landscape. The community established grassroots organizations such as the United Farm Workers (UFW), Brown Berets, and the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC). César Chávez and Dolores Huerta, founders of the United Farm Workers, led nonviolent protests that demanded higher wages and improved labor standards for domestic agricultural workers. Their organizing efforts extended across the nation and established one of the country’s most effective agricultural labor campaigns.

The Brown Berets were established in 1967 in Los Angeles and were modeled after Oakland’s Black Panther Party. They fought against police brutality and racism, and demanded better conditions for Mexican-Americans. While they began in California, they later expanded to other states such as Texas and Michigan (University of Washington). LULAC has served as a champion for the rights of Mexican-Americans and Hispanic people since its founding in Corpus Christi, Texas in 1929. As the country’s largest and oldest Hispanic organization, LULAC has influenced landmark legislation and lawsuits in favor of the Hispanic community. The organization was an important legal ally of the Mendez family during the *Mendez vs. Westminster* case (League of United Latin American Citizens). The 1968 East L.A. Walkouts, one of the largest student protests in the history of the United States, united over 15,000 Mexican-American students, their families, and community organizers, in protest of the unequal, discriminatory, and subpar educational resources available to the city’s Mexican-American youth (Library of Congress, “1968 East Los Angeles Walkouts”).

The fight for greater civil, political, and economic rights continued into the 1970s. The Chicanx Moratorium of August 29, 1970 was a mass broad-based coalition in opposition to the Vietnam War and the disproportionately high deaths of men of color. The legacy of the Chicanx Movement continues to impact the community today. The Mexican-American and Latinx communities carry on fighting for the rights of the collective as demonstrated by the 2006 immigration marches and the founding of new Latinx organizations such as the Georgia Association of Latino Elected Officials (GALEO) and the Latino Community Fund (LCF).

The decades that followed the 1980s witnessed consistent surges in the country’s Latinx population. Arguably, political and economic policies, such as the militarization of the southwest border, the 1986 Immigration Reform & Control Act which granted amnesty to undocumented immigrants, and the 1994 North American Free Trade Agreement which strengthened the economic ties between the United States, Mexico, and Canada, played a role in the demographic transformations of the 1980s, 1990s, and present day.

### Chicanx Cinema

The social movements of the 1960s and 1970s left a profound and lasting impact on American civil rights legislation and society. Importantly, they also impacted the artistic expression of a generation and gave rise to the “Decade of the Hispanic.” The 1980s witnessed a surge in the representation and recognition of Chicanx and Latinx actors (Noriega xvii). The ideologies of Chicanx leaders crept into art, music, and influenced such films as *Zoot Suit* (1981), *Born in East L.A*. (1987), *Chicano Park* (1988), and *Stand and Deliver* (1988). According to Kathleen Newman, these and other similar films were an attempt by Chicanx filmmakers to reorient the “anglocentric US film industry” (Newman 68). A short list of notable Chicanx actors includes Emmy and Golden Globe winner, Edward James Olmos, and comedian, Cheech Marin (although Marin’s work was initially dismissed by Chicanx activists due to its negative portrayal of Chicanx) (Tatum 111-112). Chicanx directors have included Sylvia Morales, one of the first Chicana filmmakers, Luis Valdez, popularly known for his work on *Zoot Suit* and *La Bamba*, and Gregory Nava, who directed *Selena* and *El Norte* (Tatum 89).

However, the construction of Chicanx Cinema surfaced earlier and in parallel to the Chicanx civil rights movement (Noriega xviii). While its definition has been a subject of debate among filmmakers, Chon Noriega defines the genre as “films (or videos) by and about Chicanos” (Noriega xviii) that center Chicanx production, participation, and signification (Noriega xviii). Noriega further proposes a conceptual framework for analyzing Chicanx thought and artistic expression. Noriega’s framework utilizes three Chicanx cultural elements introduced in *Arte Chicano: Annotated Bibliography of Chicano Art, 1965-1981*: resistance, maintenance, and affirmation (Noriega 168). According to Noriega, these “culture-based concepts” operate within a larger strategy of Chicanx pride or “Chicanismo” that respond to “political, economic, legal, and social oppression” (Noriega 168). The elements overlap, work in unison, and construct the Chicanx cultural identity. Noriega’s framework includes a fourth element of *mestizaje* which “incorporates or engages rather than resists or denies the dominant culture” (Noriega 169). However, this analysis is incomplete without the four cinematic practices of production, exhibition, signification, and reception (Noriega 170). According to Noriega, we must identify if and how cultural elements interact with cinematic practices. Firstly, in their interpretation of Chicanx films, critics should consider the financial and ideological limitations often present during the production of Chicanx films and the *movidas* (innovative coping strategies) employed by filmmakers under these constraints (Noriega 170). The exhibition of a film refers to its distribution and audience, where it will air (film festivals, theaters, community centers, etc.) and who it will reach (American, Chicanx, Latin American audiences). The goal of Chicanx filmmakers is to reach greater audiences and to “put Chicano film into discourse” (Noriega 171). By signification, Noriega proposes a reclaiming of the Chicanx past through narrative cinema (as opposed to documentary) that offers a “counter-image” to the often distorted and racialized Chicanx image popular among mainstream cinema (Noriega 171). Noriega’s fourth cinematic element of reception reminds filmmakers and critics of the diversity within the Chicanx community. The community is diverse in its identifiers (“Hispanic”, “Chicanx”, “Tejano”) and in its critical reception of a film (Noriega 174). Importantly, he notes the need for “a more complex conceptualization of the Chicano spectator and of Chicano culture, and to avoid to a certain extent the essentialism that pervades scholarship on cultural and sexual differences” (Noriega 174). Finally, to the conceptualization of Chicanx Cinema, Noriega highlights its “bicultural and bilingual” context that should be recognized as a formal element, a style unto itself, or a substructure for a counter-narrative (Noriega 172-173).

### Representation of Mexican-Americans in Film

The 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s witnessed a surge in films for and by Mexican-Americans that contest false clichés, assert the community’s belonging within American society, and humanize the immigration narrative.

### Stand and Deliver

*Stand and Deliver,* directed and co-written byRamón Menéndez, recounts the true story of mathematician and educator, Jaime Escalante (played by award-winning Chicano actor, Edward James Olmos) who accepts a teaching position at under resourced Garfield High School in East Los Angeles and successfully guides a group of Mexican-American students to pass the A.P. Calculus exam and obtain college credit. The early *mise-en-scène* portraits of the film capture Mr. Escalante driving through the colorful and Chicanx mural-dominated streets of East L.A. Inside the school, he encounters a predominately Mexican-American student population; the scene is adorned with young men dressed as ***pachucos****,* Spanish written across the board and shouted across the classroom. While other teachers may have seen a rambunctious group of students, he saw untapped potentiality.

The movie develops inside East L.A.’s private and public spaces, areas where Mr. Escalante and his students negotiate their culture and homelife against the constraints of white-dominated spaces. For instance, while meetings with the Math Department, the department’s chair states, “you cannot teach logarithms to illiterates,” to which Mr. Escalante replies, “students will rise to the level of expectations” and that all they need is *ganas*. Through his philosophy of *ganas*, he challenged negative stereotypes surrounding students of color and empowered his pupils to believe in themselves.

*Stand and Deliver* is also astute in discussing the racial and ethnic discrimination faced by the Mexican-American community of East Los Angeles. For example, after successfully passing AP Calculus exam, the Educational Testing Service launches an investigation against the students, thus questioning their membership within academic spaces. As Mr. Escalante perfectly notes, “…those scores would have never been questioned if my kids did not have Spanish surnames and come from *barrio* schools.” Similar to Chicano leaders, Mr. Escalante understood that structural inequalities and prejudices, not a student’s heritage or class, damanged their educational outcomes. After retaking the exam, the students once again prove that *barrio* students were worthy and capable of taking up space in academic arenas.

<Fig. 11.1 here> *Mr. Escalante confronts ETS administrators for discriminating against his students.*

Based on true events*, Stand and Deliver* attempts to “reclaim a forgotten past” and build a “culture-based alternative form of history” (Noriega 171). The film employs culturally-relevant content to establish a connection with its audience, including historical references (the Mayan conception of zero), the use of Spanish, and the adoption of popular Mexican words (*orale, chale, burro*). Furthermore, the film serves as a historical reflection of the inequalities and discrimination experienced by the Mexican-American community and its enduring struggle for cultural recognition and validation.

*Stand and Deliver* has been described as “culturally, historically, or aesthetically significant” by the Library of Congress. In 2011, it joined The National Film Registry, a distinction granted to movies deemed to be of “enduring importance to American culture” (Library of Congress, “National Film Registry”). Its underlying theme of the American Dream, which promises that everyone has the potential to improve their circumstances (albeit with various degrees of struggle across groups), may explain its entrance into The National Film Registry. Its message of *ganas* will continue to speak to Latinx audiences for decades to come.

### Selena

*Selena* (1997), like *Stand and Deliver*,is a narrative feature film based on historical events. The movie fuses Mexican and American cultures and is a remembrance of the life of Selena Quintanilla-Perez, *la* *Reyna de la Música Tejana*, through her childhood, rise to stardom, and tragic death. The film can be described as the beginning of *Selenidad*, a concept coined by Deborah Paredez, which she describes as “the creative endeavors that constituted the dynamic and vibrant afterlife of the Latina superstar” (Paredez xii). The film was directed by Gregory Nava and produced two years after the heartbreaking death of the late artist. *Selena* starred ***Boricua*** actress, Jennifer López, as Selena and Edward James Olmos as the patriarch of the Quintanilla family. Through her story, the film captures the duality of growing up Mexican-American in the southwestern United States. The complexity of her identity – gender and ethnicity – were central to her persona on and off stage.

The film begins backstage moments before Selena greets a sold-out Houston Astrodome in February 1995. She is greeted by screaming fans, many of the which are dressed in sparkling bustiers, and across the stadium her fans carry signs labeled “La Reina.” She opens the concert with an English-language disco medley before singing in Spanish. It is the film’s first example of Noriega’s bicultural and bilingual element (Noriega 172-173). The Quintanilla’s bilingual and bicultural experience is the film’s most salient theme, and the tension between the Mexican and American cultures a reoccurring drama. In the earliest scenes of the movie, a young Abraham Quintanilla and his band, *Los Dinos*, are refused by Anglo and Chicanx clubs; *Los Dinos* were considered too Mexican for the Anglo club and too white for the Chicanx audience. However, this roadblock does not deter Mr. Quintanilla and he eventually forms the family band, *Selena y Los Dinos*.

Selena encounters the cultural tension and begins exploring her identity the moment her father asks her to sing in Spanish, to which she replies, “I don’t know how to sing in Spanish” and “I don’t like music in Spanish, I like Donna Summer.” Her father explains that while she is American, she is also Mexican. In this moment she understands that she does not have to choose between two parts of herself. The influence of both cultures follows her throughout her music career; on stage, she sings and dances *cumbia* while mimicking the fashion of Madonna and Janet Jackson.

<Fig. 11.2 here> *A young Selena bonds with her father as he introduces the concept of biculturalism.*

The path to forming a sense of belonging within seemingly opposing cultures can be an arduous process for bicultural individuals. Mr. Quintanilla’s script perfectly captures the pain of this process while discussing a tour to Monterrey, Mexico when he describes being Mexican-American as “tough.” According to Mr. Quintanilla, their family had been in the United States for centuries but continues to be treated “as if we just swam across the Rio Grande.” Mexican-Americans have to be “twice as perfect as anybody else,” and “know about John Wayne *and* Vicente Fernández.” “We have to be more Mexican than the Mexicans and more American than the Americans, both at the same time. It is exhausting. Nobody knows how tough it is to be a Mexican-American.” As the idiom states, “*no somos* *ni de aquí, ni de allá*” (“we’re from neither here nor there.”)

The film also evidences the balance between the Mexican and American identities through the dynamics of the Chicanx family. It stereotypes the Quintanilla family as a unit highly dependent on the will of the patriarch. However, Mr. Quintanilla’s demands are challenged by Selena, who marries her band’s drummer, Chris Perez, against his wishes. She also refuses to censor her body and sexuality. Throughout the film and career, her choice of bright and colorful bustiers was contested by her father, who felt she was showing too much skin. As a Mexican-American woman with strong family values, she was torn between seemingly traditional Mexican customs and more liberal American practices. She was also caught between the wishes of her family’s patriarchy and her blossoming sexuality. In the end, her eye for fashion led her to design many of her own outfits, launch her own clothing line, and open a chain of boutiques.

The stress between seemingly opposing cultures is resolved through Selena, her image and music. She was a *revolucionaria* who epitomized what Guillermo Gómez-Peña calls a “border culture” (Noriega 169). As the Queen of Tejano Music, she was the first woman to break into the male-dominated genre and the first Mexican-American to bring *música tejana* to the top of US music charts (Tatum 30). Selena’s *mestizaje*, her embodiment of the two cultures, brought visibility and a sense of belonging to the community; she taught Latinx and Mexican-American people across the country how to navigate the intricacies of hyphenated identities and to refuse contracted definitions of self.

The film *Selena* captured the spirit of the late artist and her profound impact on the hearts of Mexican-Americans and Latinx communities. Her career and unfortunate death “reveal how, through the collective expression of grief, Latinas/os assembled themselves as a political and cultural constituency in the United States at the close of the twentieth century” (Paredez xiii). Thanks to Selena, the Mexican-American community felt seen and valued, and she reminded them that you can proudly be *Mexicana* and *Americana*, and that biculturalism deserves to be celebrated.

### Under the Same Moon

In the early 1990s, the attitudes and policies toward immigrants began to shift, particularly as the United States experienced a growth in the populations of Mexican immigrants and immigrants overall (Migration Policy Institute). California’s 1994 Proposition 187 sought to limit undocumented immigrants’ access to public services. While unsuccessful, Proposition 187 waged a powerful campaign that ultimately influenced public attitudes toward undocumented immigrants (Kil XVI). Alongside changing public attitudes, the southwest border became progressively militarized. The implementation of border control policies, such as the 1993 Texas Operation Hold the Line and 1994 San Diego Operation Gate Keeper, closed safer, urban crossing paths and forced migrants into the dangerous Sonora Desert (Kil XIV). As crossing became increasingly dangerous, **circular migration** patterns decreased and individuals began to lay down roots north of the US-Mexico divide (Massey et al. 1588).

*Under the Same Moon* offers a counter-narrative to the criminalizing and dehumanizing discourses surrounding Mexican immigration during this period. The film *(*directed by Mexican director, Patricia Riggen) tells the story of Carlitos (played by Mexican actor, Adrián Alonso Barona), a young boy who risks his life crossing the southwest border to reunite with his mother, Rosario (played by Kate del Castillo). The film (narrated in Spanish with a few exceptions) features a long list of renowned Mexican actors; Eugenio Derbez, America Ferrera (Honduran-American), and Carmen Salinas, play noteworthy roles in Carlito’s odyssey to reach Los Angeles.

The relationship between Carlitos and his motherevidences the open veins of family separation, the trauma of the migration journey, and the hardships of undocumented life in America. Each Sunday, Rosario calls Carlitos from a payphone in L.A. He tells her about school, his birthday, and how much he misses her. As he begs her return, tears roll down her face. While she desperately misses him, she must remain in the United States to work and send money home. Her return is indefinite.

<Fig. 11.3 here> *Rosario speaks with Carlitos every Sunday in* Under the Same Moon*.*

Through the film’s montage, their stories unfold in parallel; as Carlitos encounters the precarious experience of border crossing, his mother endures the abusive labor conditions common among undocumented workers in the United States. To cross the border, Carlitos has no choice but to trust his life to inexperienced coyotes. He travels through the scorching desert underneath the seats of their unairconditioned van. Once he is across the frontier, he makes his way to a bus terminal where he unfortunately meets an addict who later sells him for drugs. Luckily, he is saved by a kind woman who introduces him to a group of undocumented agricultural workers. An iconic scene follows when the Immigration and Naturalization Service (today known as Immigration and Customs Enforcement, ICE) arrests the men in a workplace raid. Carlitos and Enrique (played by Mr. Derbez) escape but are left stranded. Meanwhile, Rosario desperately confronts a sudden job loss and a limited labor market. A white employer dismissed her without cause, notice, and pay and threatened Rosario with deportation if she reported the abuse. This scene is a sharp critique of the pervasive exploitation of undocumented workers.

After escaping *la migra* (INS), Enrique and Carlitos are picked up by a musical group. While the musicians are not named, the group is likely identifiable to the Mexican community. They are *Los Tigres del Norte*, a popular folk band, who sing “*Por Amor*.” The *corrido’s* (folk ballad) lyrics salute the love and courage behind migration; they sing, “*a mí no me asusta el peligro, la vida sin riesgo no es vida/* I don’t fear danger, life without risk is not a life” and “*y por amor es que voy a cruzar la frontera sin miedo/* I will cross the border for love and without fear.” (Los Tigres del Norte). The inclusion of cultural elements such as the *corrido* is a common technique among Chicanx filmmakers, aiming to connect with the audience through the construction of a “minority cultural identity” (Noriega 168). It is also employed as a form of resistance and to “affirm a political stance on both historical and allegorical levels” (Noriega 168).

When they finally reach Los Angeles, Carlitos and Enrique explore the colorful and Chicanx mural scene of East L.A., a *mise-en-scène* dressed like the scenery of *Stand and Deliver*. It is depicted as an immigrant neighborhood containing crucial services such as laundry mats and Latinx grocery stores. Near the climax of the film, moments before Carlitos reunites with his mom, Enrique is arrested by law enforcement and presumably deported. The movie’s bittersweet ending, like migration, is beautiful and painful. In conclusion, by telling the courageous stories of immigrant mothers and children, the film affirms the humanity of immigrants and counters xenophobic narratives.

The Mexican-American community is one of the country’s largest and most historic. While white supremacy ideologies and colonial-settler practices have attempted, and momentarily succeeded, to erase and disguise its contributions, they are irrefutable. Moving forward, American leadership must recognize the economic, political, and cultural contributions of Mexican and Chicanx people and stand up to anti-**BIPOC** discourses. Likewise, community leaders and educators must incorporate Mexican-American history, and the history of other racialized groups, into the K-12 and higher education curriculums. A greater understanding of shared histories will result in great equality for all.

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