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(De/Re)Constructing ChicanX/a/o Cinema: Liminality, Cultural Hyphenation, and Psychic Borderlands in *Real Women Have Curves* and *Mosquita y Mari*

Diana Alanis

Chapman University, alani108@mail.chapman.edu

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(De/Re)Constructing ChicanX/a/o Cinema: Liminality, Cultural
Hyphenation, and Psychic Borderlands in *Real Women Have Curves*
and *Mosquita y Mari*

A Thesis by

Diana Alanis

Chapman University

Orange, CA

Dodge College of Film and Media Arts

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Committee in charge:

Nam Lee, Ph.D., Chair

Erica Agüero, Ph.D.

Ruben Espinoza, Ph.D.

The thesis of Diana Alanis is approved.



Nam Lee, Ph.D., Chair



Erica Aguero, Ph.D.



Ruben Espinoza, Ph.D.

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ABSTRACT

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Borderlands in *Real Women Have Curves* and *Mosquita y Mari*

by Diana Alanis

When discussing ChicanX/a/o cinema, as situated in the United States, its relationship to “American” cinema is one of decoloniality that interrogates the contradictions of a diverse yet homogenous national identity. The formation of cultural identity in conjunction with national identity is inherently contradictory when nationalism requires allegiance that negates differences among communities. ChicanX/a/o identity is one of hybridization that rejects a fixed category of meaning in favor of a liminal landscape of potentiality— a psychic Borderland of identity. Contemporary ChicanX/a voices in *Real Women Have Curves* (Patricia Cardoso, 2002) and *Mosquita y Mari* (Aurora Guerrero, 2012) use feminist and feminine modes of storytelling to emphasize the multiplicity of ChicanX/a experiences within Los Angeles. This oppositional voice and assertion of agency is possible with the foundation laid by the first iterations of mainstream Chicano cinema, particularly *Stand and Deliver* (Ramón Menéndez, 1988). Although this first wave was focused on masculine figures that uphold patriarchal models of power, the dialogue that emerges when the past is carried into the present and beyond establishes a layer of intertextual context that enriches a bi-cultural identity. In this hyphenation of identity, the polysemy of voices coincides to fuse contradictions— not in the way that “American” identity seeks to ignore difference within diverse groups but to emphasize the liminal status of a psychic Borderland that maintains the fluidity of identity as an evolving entity. This thesis is focused on the contradictions present

within Chicana/o cinema as an undefined canon and its deeply “American” roots in the U.S. The three cinematic texts deconstruct the hegemonic structures of accepted meaning and how they reinterpret an oppositional reading of dominant culture while speaking from a position as Other to (re)claim centrality.

Keywords: Other; nationalism; Chicana/o cinema; feminist; feminine; assimilation; multiplicity; bi-cultural identity; liminal; stereotypes.

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“The new *mestiza* copes by developing a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity.”

— Gloria Anzaldúa¹

“Perhaps instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact, which the new cultural practices then represent, we should think, instead, of identity as a ‘production’, which is never complete, always in progress, and always constituted within, not outside, representation.”

— Stuart Hall²

Introduction

Chicano cinema reforms the threat of the Other by participating in the deconstruction and reconstruction of Mexican-Americans’ stereotypical images. By inhabiting a liminal territory with oscillating contradictions, Chicano cinema in the United States is positioned as both a subaltern and a rite of passage. It resides as a foreign cinema within an “American” context as it operates in dialogue with the hegemony of “American” cinema, which I place in quotations to destabilize its centrality and mythicize its foundation. The canonization of national cinema within the U.S. advocates for the homogenous construction of an “American” essence that establishes its own fallacy through mythical and contradictory positioning. Nationalism is a powerful force of unification that emphasizes a community’s allegiance to

¹ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987), 101.

² Stuart Hall, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” (*Framework*, no. 36), 222.

the nation as a cleansing force that obliterates difference. The “melting pot” analogy is frequently cited as a quintessential quality of the U.S. that endows a false narrative of voluntary national assimilation without considering the systemic violence of conformity.

While Chicano cinema inhabits an oppositional voice that can be easily mistaken as contrary to a uniform national cinema, it is overwhelming how “American” the films truly are. Emblematic films of Chicano cinema include *Stand and Deliver* (Ramón Menéndez, 1988), *La Bamba* (Luis Valdez, 1987), *Born in East LA* (Cheech Marin, 1987), *Selena* (Gregory Nava, 1997), *Mi Vida Loca* (Allison Anders, 1993), *Blood In Blood Out* (Taylor Hackford, 1993), *Real Women Have Curves* (Patricia Cardoso, 2002), *Mosquita y Mari* (Aurora Guerrero, 2012), and among others. However, this list is incomplete and presents a problematic “canon” that neglects to establish a preliminary definition of Chicano cinema. While a definition or criteria of Chicano cinema would provide the necessary context to create this “canon,” it would be reductive and fail to consider the fluidity of Chicano identities and their interactions with “Americanness.” As much as these films are radically distinct from “American” cinema, their place *within* “American” cinema centers the primary contradiction of being part of a national mosaic while being excluded from it. As a Mexican-American researcher, there is nothing to gain in leaning towards zealous praise for Chicano cinema or demonization of “American” national cinema. Theorizing Chicano cinema as the prime landscape for a liminal space to re-center marginalized voices does not exempt it from its own shortcomings, yet it is not automatically invalidated because of them.

As a social and geographical Borderland, Chicano cinema maintains its presence firmly rooted in its political conceptions to reclaim its voice within the “American” mosaic. As a physical subject straddling two seemingly opposing spheres— the U. S. and Mexico—

this cinema embodies the *mestizaje* identity of the people it depicts. However, when subverting the tragedy of displacement that is carried in being *ni de aquí, ni de allá* (from neither here nor there), a fundamental schism restructures the bi-cultural identity to assert the abundance of two worlds to lay claim to. In the examination of being Othered at home and the contradictions of a dual consciousness, ChicanaX/a/o cinema opens the gate for the periphery to “speak itself” into cinematic representation through its own voice. The multiplicity depicted in the aforementioned stylization with “X/a/o” intertwines politics of cultural identity, nationalism, gender, sexuality, and marginalized experiences. While its stylization with an “X” is contested as confrontational and illogical with the gendering of nouns within the Spanish language, the explicit denotation blends with the connotative engagement it asks of the spectator. In the subsequent textual analysis of ChicanaX/a cinema, the significance of ambiguity and an explicit voice (which I argue are complementary contradictions) functions as a subversive force to find (dis)comfort in what is deemed Other (particularly outside of a patriarchal and heteronormative narrative).

Representational images of *quality* stand on the precipice of transformational power as they oppose the one-dimensional stereotypes formulated by the dominant group. Since the early 1980s, Chicano cinema has functioned as an inherently political vehicle that grapples with the stereotypes of gangsters, sexually available women, and lazy workers imposed by the hegemonic modes of storytelling. It is also implicated in its *own* participation in reproducing these archetypes. The examination of *Real Women Have Curves*, *Mosquita y Mari*, and *Stand and Deliver* tracks ChicanaX/a/o cinema’s shift towards diverse representation of its own community with an emphasis on intersectional identities that reorientate the protagonists’ intrapersonal and interpersonal relationships. *Real Women Have Curves* and *Mosquita y Mari*

stand out as contemporary examples of the Chicana and ChicanX identity with their protagonists. These two films have set the precedent for reimagining the modern representation of ChicanX/a women on screen. *Stand and Deliver*, as a foundational text, is patriarchal in its focus on men, but it fought to vocalize the importance and value of a marginalized community. This film embodies a particular Chicano experience that is granted permission to be frustrated with the system of obstacles outside and within the Chicano community. *Real Women Have Curves* taught me to amplify my voice and *Mosquita y Mari* allowed me to empower myself rather than seeking external validation. Particularly, in comparison to *Stand and Deliver*, which has been a critical text in understanding my experience as Mexican-American, these films forged an understanding of cultural background and continue to refine that identity with new dimensions alongside the academic discourse I engage with. In these films' differences and idiosyncrasies, they achieve catharsis for the young ChicanX/a/o who actively navigates the intersections of gender, sexuality, class, and immigrant status, either as layers of her own identity or of those around them.

This thesis brings three main threads of analysis: (1) interrogating the mythical construction of "Americanness" as a "national game"³; (2) ChicanX/a/o cinema as a hub of simultaneous liberatory existence and oppression; (3) feminist and feminine storytelling within ChicanX/a cinema as a decolonial practice. These threads are united through the self-reflexivity of using theory and fictionalized lived experiences (as portrayed in the films' narratives) to ground these continuous and fluid issues of identity. My experience has defined the normalcy of a bi-cultural identity, but there is a contradictory set of goals that I reckon

³ Sara Ahmed, "Melancholic Migrants" in *The Promise of Happiness*, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010), 121.

with as I join the conversation on cultural identity and nationalism. While theories have often given me the language to articulate my own lived experiences, I continuously acknowledge that my academic analysis is situated within hegemonic structures of knowledge. It remains pertinent to disclose this research's intention as personal and academic in nature that extends beyond an argument in order to unroot further questions.

Sara Ahmed, Stuart Hall, and Benedict Anderson build the foundation for a critical examination of "Americanness" and the mythos of gaining access to this false notion, especially when the individual derives from a place of marginality. While these theorists are not explicitly addressing an "American" identity, the hegemony they engage with can be substituted, and subsequently tailored, to analyze in conjunction with a cinema birthed out of the U.S. Critiquing the complexity of an entity ("American" identity) that is defined through an entanglement of contradictions must come from a multilayered framework of cultural theory, feminism, and decoloniality (although it is not only limited to these theories). In this cross-referencing of theory with Gloria Anzaldúa and Gayatri Spivak, the internal schism that disrupts the external landscape of relating to a mythical identity is brought forth. In this revelatory experience, the Other discovers a new form of speaking that addresses their position as a Subject without neglecting their Othered status. At a minimum, a dual consciousness is awakened that contains the experiences of existing in the center and outside of it.

A decolonial framework is limited by its own contradictions but proves to be a catalyst to ignite additional probing for Chicana/o cinema and its place within national cinema. A decolonial framework that interrogates a bi-cultural identity within Chicana/o cinema prompts a liminal territory of contradictions and transformational potentiality to (re)claim subjectivity of Self, image, and voice among dominant cinematic representations of Mexican-

Americans in the U.S. As a decolonial practice of writing personal narratives, feminist and feminine modes of storytelling are foregrounded with *Real Women Have Curves* and *Mosquita y Mari* to build upon the legacy of *Stand and Deliver* to live in the center and speak in opposition to the pillar of adhering to a singular national identity.

In this thesis, I first address the mythos of the nation and the reimagined colonial ideologies that conceal the implications of conquest through conformity. The abstract impositions of being “American” and the complicity of individuals who adhere to a false claim of superiority as an inherently truthful construction. ChicanX/a cinema is situated as an oppositional voice to this hegemonic ideology through a feminist and feminine mode of storytelling that builds upon a patriarchal Chicano voice. The feminist and feminine are decolonializing that which stands as normal (the “American” identity). The dialogue of these feminist and feminine modes is then amplified with the inclusion of the physical and psychic Borderlands, utilizing East Los Angeles as an evolving landscape and state of mind. The transformational potentiality of cinema is triangulated with *Real Women Have Curves*, *Mosquita y Mari*, and *Stand and Deliver*, not as a comparative analysis between the three but how they craft liminal spaces of identification while being situated in a similar environment.

Refuting the Other’s America: Its Foundation and Falsehoods

Stuart Hall’s theory on cultural identity⁴ refers to being and becoming Afro-Caribbean, but its fluidity in rejecting a singular definition applies to the ChicanX/a/o identity and extrapolates the use of hyphenation. When Hall is placed in dialogue with Anzaldúa, hyphenation becomes a psychic bridge to assert self-identification in opposition

⁴ Hall, 223.

to the assimilation of a stand-alone “American” identity. If cultural identity is concerned with the process of being and becoming rather than the destination towards a homogenous community with a common history, then fluidity is an integral aspect for building and rebuilding identity. In triangulation with Anderson, the project of legitimizing a national identity is futile and a thin veil to conceal essentialist propaganda. This leads to many contradictions that plague the discourse on nationalism and national identity as unstable concepts that thrive in their lack of stable definition. If the very concepts that are placed under the microscope are unfixed, then how is it possible to interrogate them and find answers⁵? In turn, this concern applies to “Americanness” as both a “melting pot” of diverse identities and an expectation to perform a uniformed mode of patriotism. As a Mexican-American woman, “Americanness” has been imposed through English language (despite lacking the status as an official national language⁶), individualism (in contrast to a

⁵ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Rise of Nationalism*, (London: Verso Publishers, 1982), 3.

⁶ The H.R.997: English Language Unity Act of 2019 was reintroduced to the House of Representatives on February 9, 2019 by Steve King (R-Iowa). The official introduction states its purpose “To declare English as the official language of the United States, to establish a uniform English language rule for naturalization, and to avoid misconstructions of the English language texts of the laws of the United States, pursuant to Congress' powers to provide for the general welfare of the United States and to establish a uniform rule of naturalization under article I, section 8, of the Constitution.” That same day, it was referred to the Committee of Education and Labor and the Committee on the Judiciary. On March 22, 2019 it was sent for review to the Subcommittee on Immigration and Citizenship. This bill is one of many similar bills that have

community-based Mexican culture), and acceptance of the American dream. It is not confined to these three elements but serves as the first step in destabilizing structures of meaning.

“Nation building”⁷ is presented as an enthusiastic project that involves people within thenation to gain a sense of solidarity without the negative connotation of instituting a colonial attitude of allegiance. To become an “American” and a success story of the American dream, it requires a loyal submission to the nation but neglects to explicitly state that the trajectory into this identity is riddled with obstacles for those operating within marginalized identities to begin with. No identity or sense of self is left untouched or unproblematic— gender, sexuality, sexual orientation, citizenship status, race, ethnicity, skin color/white-passing abilities, and whatever else is considered an integral aspect of oneself. The fine print that becomes of significance is that the nation “is an imagined political community— and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign”⁸ in the same way that “America” becomes synonymous with the U.S. and not the continents in the Northern and Southern hemispheres. Anderson generously qualifies his use of “limited” as “elastic”⁹ for boundaries and Hall presents one possible definition of cultural identity as “one shared

been unsuccessful and connected with the English-only movement to limit any other language besides English the United States. <https://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/house-bill/997/text?r=3&s=1>).

⁷ Ibid, 113.

⁸ Ibid, 4.

⁹ Ibid, 7.

culture, a sort of collective”¹⁰ to acknowledge how this construction benefits those who stand in and alongside power. These counterarguments that they present before asserting the falsehoods associated with and perpetuated by the nation functions in their favor to deconstruct a condition that cannot be held or manifested. Symbolic representation through flags, ideological policing, and propagandistic regurgitation must take on that mantle to “legitimize” the “American” spirit and appear impenetrable. Through the repetition of imagery and teachings, propaganda is presented as an inescapable reality that promises to make the experience within the nation more comfortable when fully accepted and adopted.

Ahmed’s notion of the “national game”¹¹ applies to the American dream, especially when non-White or marginalized people are placed outside of that hierarchy and must climb (or play) towards it. The challenge of overcoming adversity deemphasizes the systemic and real-world obstacles that actively suppress the Other in the hopes that their focus remains on reaching the top of this faulty pyramid. This stunted upward mobility primes the stage for Anzaldúa to restructure the external forces that are highlighted and turn inward for a psychic transformation. While she never proposes a rejection of the real-world challenges to diminish the anguish felt in the exclusion of participation, her call for a transformational shift coincides with Hall’s support for the “critical points of deep and significant difference which constitute ‘what we really are’.”¹² Reclaiming narratives of self and subjectivity is the journey that Chicana/o cinema pursues rather than retrieving “authenticity” (another futile project).

¹⁰ Hall, 223.

¹¹ Ahmed, 121.

¹² Hall, 225.

All of the aforementioned theorists complement one another in exposing the flaws of centralizing one group as the exemplary institution for communities at large. Chicana/o cinema, with its own iterations of genres, rejects the “melting pot” ideology that supports hyper-nationalist sentiments and sanitization of colonial conquest. “Americanness” as an impenetrable wall ceases to be a formidable concept when situated among reasonable doubt. The instability of the nation’s self-promotion as equally diverse and homogenous becomes apparent when minority groups embrace the fluidity of personalized identities over a fixed category.

The lack of definition to categorize Chicana/o cinema facilitates an element of nuance and liminality that is often lost when describing what is quintessentially “American” cinema without a checklist to evaluate a film’s entry within this canon, the casual and academic discourse is enriched through the amalgamation of definitions. With regards to actors, directors, or screenwriters, there is a continued debate in the inclusion or exclusion of Chicana/o films that do not have an all-Chicana/o crew. It is a fairly reasonable criterion for Chicana/o films to utilize Chicana/o talent, but some of the earlier mentions of these films feature non-Chicana/o actors or directors. This is a gray area, especially when reconciling with the inconsistency that prevents a neatly defined cinema with representative narratives to highlight.

There is an insistence for national cinema to be seen as an authentic canon that is justified in endowing validation to those who reside within it. The pinnacle of “Americanness” cannot exist without an oppositional entity. Hyphenation takes on this mantle and Chicana/o cinema counters the myth of a singular national culture within confined borders. Hyphenated cultural identities counter assimilation by exposing its temporality and reliance to never

question its purpose. When reaching beyond the trials and tribulations of gaining “American” status for non-White people, ambiguity becomes a tool to explore identity as an intrapersonal and interpersonal experience. The layering of meaning (hence cultural hyphenation of bi-cultural communities) generates an abundance of potential for constructing a Subject.

The longevity of the “American” appeal is maintained through its dual construction as an ambiguous entity within popular culture and an unspoken specificity that is preferred above all else. “Americanness” cannot be defined through a single framework and that refusal is precisely the type of quality that characterizes it¹³. The rejection of labels defines the “American” spirit as one of individuality and self-determinism. However, it must not be weaponized against itself. The intrigue of what comes forth when “Americanness” is rejected or put into a harmonious alignment with another identity becomes the liminal territory worthy of examination. Using hyphenation presents a radical destabilization of national culture that prevails against the social contract of desire and unattainability— a desire to strive towards the privilege of an “American” identity and the strict gatekeeping that restricts its membership.

Anzaldúa’s conceptualization of *mestiza* consciousness relies on the understanding of Borderlands as psychic realms that transcend the physicality of demarcated borders. Shifting the landscape of borders from tangible sectors of visibility to the “struggle of flesh” and “inner war” bridges the visceral embodiment of *la mestiza* as a *real* dimension beyond physical description¹⁴. Striving towards a false creation of “Americanness” positions itself as one that can achieve a sense of completion while hyphenation offers pieces of an incomplete label (which is a false claim). The fight for recognition is measured through ideological structures

¹³ Anderson, 49.

¹⁴ Anzaldúa, 100.

and within the construction of Self¹⁵. Moving back in time when examining my chosen cinematic case studies will focus on patterns rather than finding the point of conception from which to begin the analysis. If liminality provides the analytic framework, then there cannot be a finite instance to begin charting ChicanX/a/o cinema.

Women Speaking: Feminist and Feminine Chicana/ChicanX Cinema

The distinction between feminist and feminine storytelling is intentional and one to emphasize difference between the two terms. Feminist storytelling provides an ideological and theoretical application of feminism in opposition to the patriarchal construction of women. Feminist stories reveal an active disruption to the patriarchal view of women and favor a vocal dissatisfaction, which is not always *apparent* with a feminine mode of storytelling. Feminine storytelling rewrites the body (beyond its materiality) and its expression of Self to embed an alternative to hegemonic forms of communication to *speak the experience* of woman¹⁶. As feminist films, *Real Women Have Curves* and *Mosquita y Mari* benefit from being placed in dialogue with Ahmed and Anzaldúa as intersectional women of color theorists. The two films are primary texts to infuse Ahmed's "national game" and Anzaldúa's *Borderlands*.

Real Women Have Curves follows Ana (portrayed by America Ferrera) as a recent high school graduate who is expected to fully assume her responsibilities as a providing member of her family to alleviate the burden on her mother (portrayed by Lupe Ontiveros)

¹⁵ bell hooks, "The Oppositional Gaze," (Cambridge, M.A.: South End Press, 1992), 119.

¹⁶ Hélène Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen (*Signs* 1, no. 4, 1976), 880.

and older sister (portrayed by Ingrid Oliu) at a garment factory. Reluctantly, Ana performs her role as a dutiful daughter, yet is unable to ignore the possibility of attending Columbia University against her mother's wishes. That transitional Summer is a catalyst for her awakening, not only of her desire to explore outside of her community but to finally see the exploitation and hardships of her mother and sister. *Mosquita y Mari* parallels this adolescent experience of transition, yet Yolanda/Mosquita (portrayed by Fenessa Pineda) grapples with a sexual awakening after tutoring and befriending Mari (portrayed by Venecia Troncoso). Both girls flesh out their relationship in intimate settings that isolate them from the external pressures of conformity. In their isolation (seen in abandoned car garages and alone in their rooms), the noise is filtered out to elevate their feelings towards each other and multiple definitions of love that become layered and entangled.

These films exemplify Ahmed and Anzaldúa's use of fluidity and liminality in their work yet contextualize the academic work with an additional level of transformational potentiality with the protagonists' lived experiences. The model of theory following lived experiences emphasizes the corporal element that transforms the abstract into a deeply felt articulation of an internal mode of processing. Especially with Ahmed and Anzaldúa, their approach to feminism as women of color begins with the multiple intersections of identity. The two films operate with an understanding of emotional turmoil, yet lack a precise language to vocalize this, which demands a layered framework of interpretation to include the emotional experience of another person that can never truly be known. This application foregrounds lived experiences and the use of theory as a tool to articulate that embodied feeling of womanhood and its disruption by external expectations.

Both forms of storytelling are concerned with emphasizing a gendered experience that should be understood outside of a dominant narrative that inscribes the body. Autonomy of Self and the process of that journey becomes the central focus, not the end result. While both feminist and feminine texts can overlap and fuse, feminine stories carry an added decolonial potential beyond a vocal application of feminism. *Mosquita y Mari*, while also a feminist text, exemplifies this feminine mode as it subtly subverts a heteronormative framework of desire to provide a liminal space in which two young women explore a friendship beyond the initial platonic implications. A coded language that uses the tropes of heteronormative desire masks the true intentions of the two protagonists as they straddle unfamiliar and forbidden territory. Since feminist and feminine stories are not primarily concerned with the destination or resolution of conflict, an “ending” will generate more questions and ambiguity that indicates the longevity of the text beyond the film’s credits. These feminist and/or feminine films have a clear continuation beyond the spectator’s position as a temporary nomad— privileged to briefly accompany the lives on screen.

The use of feminist and feminine is not interchangeable as they are better utilized as another exemplification of complementary contradictions. Meaning and application of these terms morph through multiple viewings and an individual’s shifting spectatorial positioning. *Real Women Have Curves* and *Mosquita y Mari* establish a feminist trajectory from which to view the growth of a once masculine Chicano cinema and are primed to deconstruct the associated representational images. Using the feminist and feminine analysis as a mode by which to decolonize this Chicano cinema into a ChicanX/a/o cinema brings forth the contradictions with a decolonial project. Any reinterpretation that functions *within* hegemonic structures is inherently flawed because “the master’s tool will never dismantle the master’s

house.”¹⁷ Yet its shortcomings as a framework that continues to exist within a hegemonic structure of interpretation should not overshadow the extent to which it encourages multiplicity. Forging spaces for alternative frameworks continues to be a necessary practice because it takes on an oppositional stance that imagines a world beyond what has been prescribed.

Ahmed discusses the Other’s desire for *more*¹⁸, and in this abstract destination (or journey), there is a false dichotomy that is presented between *more* and *not enough*¹⁹. This longing is meant to fulfill the *lack* that characterizes the present. In whatever is perceived as *more*, it almost always seems to be accessible in the future and away from the Othered community that never quite has *enough* of whatever the hegemonic culture deems as *normal* (read: assimilated). Ahmed is tapping into this question of what would have to be given up or gained in order to have *more* or to have *enough*. As Ahmed describes the “national game,” there is an illuminating discussion of assimilation or conformity on the dominant culture’s terms to expand the possibility of happiness. For those who exist outside of the dominant culture, happiness is achieved through playing the “national game” in order to avoid further

¹⁷ Audre Lorde, “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House,” in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*, (Berkeley: Crossing Press, 1984), 111.

¹⁸ Ahmed, 121.

¹⁹ Ahmed cites Gurinder Chadha’s *Bend It Like Beckham* (2002) with protagonist Jessminder “Jess” Bhamra as the bi-cultural adolescent in England who dreams of becoming a professional football/soccer player in the United States against her Punjabi parents’ wishes.

self-exclusion²⁰. What about those who inhabit a bi-cultural identity and live between and among cultures? *Real Women Have Curves* and *Mosquita y Mari* provide one possibility of enacting the movement towards *more* and the realization that in an impossible situation, the only way forward is to reject the “national game.” Rupturing the colonial mentality that demands a clearly defined identity and performance of identity fractures the false binary of *more* and *not enough*. Through the broken image of the “national game” comes forth the fluidity of identity that embraces an intersectional and layered (re)construction.

Hyphenation, liminality, and transformational potentiality are harmonious elements to deconstruct and reconstruct identity. By echoing the birth of Chicano cinema from Chicano theater, Josefina López wrote *Real Women Have Curves* for the stage before adapting the screenplay for the 2002 film. References to waves or cycles of ChicanX/a/o success are present in both practice and narrative. While the focus will remain on *Real Women Have Curves* and *Mosquita y Mari* as separate narratives that intersect with the protagonists' gender and other distinct identities, the comparison lies in the internal conflict that plagues both women. It is this question of, or longing for, *more* and how that it to be achieved. Wanting *more* for themselves and their communities takes on distinct meanings for both Ana and Yolanda. By differentiating the dichotomies of feminist/feminine and *more/enough*, the films serve to interrupt the narrative of ChicanX/a/o experiences on screen as “there is no one Chicano language just as there is no one Chicano experience.”²¹ A comparison is necessary to mark the films as complementary case studies, but it also serves to emphasize the diversity of experiences *within* and *among* two people of the same cultural community.

²⁰ Ahmed, 143.

²¹ Anzaldúa, 80.

As feminist films, *Real Women Have Curves* and *Mosquita y Mari* have “the potential fortelling women’s stories by combining and remaking genres”²². Yvonne Tasker discusses “real women” and how femininity expressed through the body is a recurring point of tension between both the protagonists and their mothers. Ana’s mother’s obsession with the right type of body is the policing of a literal image and a cultural imagining of women’s bodies. For Ana to express content with herself opposes this regulatory image of preconceived womanhood. The final scene of *Real Women Have Curves* subdues the impact of not receiving her mother’s blessing by demonstrating a newly confident Ana in New York. A similar “happy” ending occurs in *Mosquita y Mari* as the two girls make eye contact and mirror each other’s walk on opposite sides of the road. Although it is not an explicit moment of reconnection, it is a poignant moment to see them as complementary in their own ways. While Ana leaves and presumably adapts in New York, a lingering sense of bittersweetness remains. Both film endings play with varying degrees of that bittersweetness to ground the impact of external influences on the individual experience.

²² Yvonne Tasker, “Bodies and Genres in Transition: *Girlfight* and *Real Women Have Curves*,” in *Gender Meets Genre in Postwar Cinemas*, (University of Illinois Press, 2012), 94.



Figure 1: Ana awaits one of the multiple buses on her daily commute to Beverly Hills High School from East Los Angeles.



Figure 2: Ana's point-of-view as she arrives in the affluent suburb.

Director Patricia Cardoso tracks a scene early on in the film with Ana's daily journey to school. As she makes her way towards the lush suburb of Beverly Hills from East Los Angeles, the juxtaposing images along the way highlight the wealth disparity that exists within Los Angeles and its respective boroughs. As she walks and transfers on different buses on her last day of highschool, it is evident that this route has become second nature to her. Waiting at the bus stop, finding a place on the crowded vehicle, and ignoring the Spanish-language

advertisements establishes the normalcy of her environment. There is plenty of visual and aural stimuli as she walks through frames and rushes across town. The mix of urban and suburban landscape mirrors how she traverses different aspects of her identity as a daughter, employee, and student. It culminates in an oscillating performance when inhabiting those distinct spaces. When she is at home or picking up her last paycheck, she is unapologetic in her irritation with those around her. She lacks hesitation in speaking her mind regardless of how others will react. The constant push and pull while at home or briefly interacting with her boss implies a survival strategy being enacted. It is a constant battle to be heard and it does not always involve politeness. The brightly painted murals, the noisy bus ride that interrupts her concentration while reading, and the hustle of crossing the street on Hollywood and Vine are contained worlds that mark her journey towards school. When she finally arrives in Beverly Hills, she is greeted with uniformly trimmed bushes and Sunset Boulevard Plaza.

This stark contrast to the Latino suburb of East Los Angeles is further foregrounded when the students are sharing their college plans, and Ana is caught off guard when all eyes turn towards her. She lies about continuing her education and backpacking through Europe with no suspicions from her peers. The only person who sees through her thinly veiled façade is Mr. Guzman (portrayed by George Lopez), but Ana remains resistant to the resources he presents. The more he pushes her to think beyond high school, the more she retreats. In this environment, she lacks the confidence to desire and to speak. Her vulnerability when discussing college is evident from her shy voice as she explains that her family cannot afford college. Ana tugs on her backpack and ends the conversation when she thanks Mr. Guzman for all his help and hands him a small gift. This is the closure she needs in order to return home and begin working at Estela's garment factory.

The attention paid to her daily routine emphasizes the importance of the mundane and habitual experience. The implication of this quotidian cycle foreshadows the disruption that college presents to her and her family. A quintessential experience that is viewed as the next logical step for a high schooler becomes a radical and foreign assertion of independence for Ana. The prospect of moving to New York and attending Columbia University is more than an individual decision— it implicates her entire family. If the trek from her home in East Los Angeles to school in Beverly Hills is already a tedious process, then New York is an insurmountable journey. Not only would it be a prolonged absence from her family, but it is an uncharted territory to navigate. Columbia University presents a layered challenge of physical and emotional labor to get to that destination (all before stepping into her first college class). Ana's experience as a first-generation college student is riddled with serious obstacles before she even has the chance to formally begin the process of moving. While her father and grandfather never present explicit disapproval in the way that her mother does, they do not demonstrate their support for her. She has a greater imbalance of negative reactions to college that *should* immobilize her but, instead, ignite her.

In *Real Women Have Curves*, the disruption between mother and daughter occurs when Ana's definition of assimilation becomes one of *daring* to be a Subject and striving for the rites of passage that those within the dominant culture routinely go through. Similarly, Yolanda in *Mosquita y Mari* has the audacity to reject the predefined path that has been laid out for her. When her studies suffer due to her time spent with Mari and their dual avoidance of their family life, it grants Yolanda's mother permission to bring her back to reality and regulate her behavior. The mothers in these films align with Ahmed's theory on participation within the "national game" to achieve "happiness" through assimilation. The mothers'

performance of assimilation is that of willingness in becoming the Other and accepting that exclusion from the dominant culture. The cyclical trauma of playing the “national game” is recognized by Ana and Yolanda as they forge a new space to exist for themselves and not for others.



Figure 3: Yolanda (later dubbed as Mosquita) and her parents taking a family portrait during the opening credits of the film.



Figure 4: A similar image to Real Women Have Curves with locals on the streets and an abundance of visual stimuli from colorful advertisements layered on-screen.

Mosquita y Mari is given a similar depiction of Huntington Park in Los Angeles during the opening scene. The locals, crowded advertisements, and the working-class environment (seen with the industrial jobs) are present in both films. Guerrero's approach departs from Cardoso's with the pacing as *Mosquita y Mari* presents itself in alignment with the "national game" and the social script of each family member performing their prescribed role. The intermittent scenes of Yolanda and her parents posing for a family portrait capture that precise moment of conformity, but the film rejects to label this as a stifling act (yet). Instead, it foreshadows the disillusionment that will come in realizing the false promise of the "national game" in granting happiness. The tension and pressures of assuming traditional roles are present in both films, but the protagonists' attitudes shift the spectatorial positioning. Ana is immediately known as a frustrated young woman who yearns for an experience that is unknown to her. In turn, Yolanda has adopted her role as the studious only child (read: her family's hope) and thrives with the assurance that she will continue her education past high school. The doubts about her role in the "national game" will coincide with the unexpected romantic feelings that will emerge with Mari's arrival.

Unlike Ana who is encouraged to take on an active role that challenges her mother's expectations of her and for her, Yolanda unknowingly crosses a border. Yolanda's burgeoning understanding of same-sex desire prompts her to see what her community lacks in the pursuit of a mythical acceptance, only achieved by subscribing to dominant heteronormative and patriarchal institutions. Rather than a strict compare and contrast approach to these films, the degrees to which they present parallels and divert from them is what builds the larger framework as feminist and feminine storytelling. Through the visual storytelling that frames the city as an omniscient presence that threatens to expose their dissatisfaction and curiosity,

the young women are often forced to test the boundaries of their transgressions in private spheres. Ana sneaks away from her mother to go on a date with her White classmate and has her first sexual experience in his home. Yolanda and Mari hide in an abandoned car garage, away from their classmates, and share intimate moments in each other's company. When both Ana and Yolanda are not immediately caught, it gives them a false sense of confidence to further push the limits of their awakening.

Environments hold onto the cycle of the ChicanX/a experience and little changes without an internal schism that enriches the external world. Ana and Yolanda experience a tipping point in which they are confronted by others and themselves as inactive agents. This inactivity results from their lack of awareness, but the introduction to *more* presents itself as a catalyst to shatter that cycle of generational trauma. Ana is recognized as a stubborn person, but this escalates when she reaches her breaking point on a particularly hot day while working at her sister's garment factory. Ana undresses and encourages the older women to also undress. They all refuse and cite their weight, stretch marks, and cellulite, but Ana persists and "competes" for the "worst" body. This defiance becomes a liberating act to embrace their bodies in the presence of other women with the same insecurities. Yolanda's transgression of falling in love with her best friend echoes a similar failure of womanhood. The thought of a lesbian attraction is constituted as an abhorrent act to the extent that her parents choose to believe that her recent rebellion and wavering academic performance is the result of a secret relationship with a boy. Gossip runs amuck and the threat of public shaming distorts Yolanda's reality as well as her parents'. When Yolanda and Mari's behavior implies more than that of a friendship, Mari retreats to align within the "safety" heteronormative expectations.

Femininity and womanhood, especially at a critical moment of adolescent transition are as tangible as the people who recite a code of respectability for Ana and Yolanda. The weight of expectations in their personal and public lives is suffocating and paralyzing. The difficulty of conveying this for the spectator comes with a need for a distinct voice that is unique to the protagonists. Representing the community is secondary to the individual experience of these young women. Authenticity is not the goal, as it is an imagined ideal, but candor reveals their motivations and fears. The emotions prompted are the feminist point of entry for the spectator who exists outside of Ana and Yolanda's experiences. It is difficult to state whether or not universality comes from specificity, but it is an essential tool to witness the value of someone else's experience that does not mirror the spectator's.

Both films present this question of how to move forward when what you want is not easy to get and what you do not want is easier for everyone else to accept. The ending of *Mosquita y Mari* depicts how difficult and lonely that path can be as it is internally situated because it is "not only [about] wanting less but being less in the direction of [that] want."²³ Anzaldúa envisions a psychic identity in which hybridity and ambiguity unlock liberation. She writes for those inhabiting the new consciousness and finds subjectivity in what hegemonic structures deem as Other. Ultimately *Mosquita y Mari*, as well as other ChicanX/a films, are hopeful yet provide enough ambiguity to allow the spectator to *write in* the orientation of the women's leap into adulthood. Ana's confidence walking through New York and Yolanda's memory of inscribing her initials on the dirty car with Mari situates the endings as the fulfillment of their deep desires throughout yet are momentary and leave the future for the

²³ Ahmed, 136.

spectator's imagination to fill in the blanks. To be "plagued by psychic restlessness"²⁴ is the price to pay in this liminal Borderland of identity that builds opportunities to escape a cyclical life of expectations.

Modern Dialogue with the Patriarchal Past in *Stand and Deliver*

A feminist and feminine voice within *Real Women Have Curves* and *Mosquita y Mari* is contrasted when looking at the precedent of earlier Chicano cinema, such as *Stand and Deliver* and *La Bamba*. While these films ushered in a wave of Chicano cinema that found box office and critical acclaim, these biopics served (and continue to serve) as historical context to legitimize the Chicano icons of Mr. Jaime Escalante and Richie Valens. As staple films within the loosely defined "canon" of Chicano cinema, these films serve as semi-historical lessons that would not be found in textbooks. They remain ubiquitous within Chicano cinema and continue to be celebrated by younger generations of Mexican-Americans. While imperfect and littered with historically recurring tropes (*el cholo*, *pocho*, Virgin Mary, etc.), their impact paved the way for Chicano cinema to be part of the mainstream and gain authorship in destigmatizing (and sometimes legitimizing) these stereotypes from within the community.

²⁴ Anzaldúa, 100.



Figure 5: Mr. Escalante commuting to Garfield High School for the first time and navigating his surroundings in the opening scene of Stand and Deliver.

My focus will be on *Stand and Deliver*, and its opening sequence as one of entering a foreign territory. It offers yet another instance of East Los Angeles as a prominent entity that reveals the internal processing of the characters. All three films begin with tension, both evident (*Real Women Have Curves* and *Stand and Deliver*) and dormant (*Mosquita y Mari*) that will culminate into a confrontation that opposes conformity. As a biopic, *Stand and Deliver* is positioned from the beginning to produce a happy ending as a feel-good story about overcoming adversity. Jaime Escalante, a Bolivian-American math teacher, and his group of students at James A. Garfield High School defied the odds when their algebra/calculus class became the first to test in the College Board's AP Calculus exam and pass. They soon became the target of controversy as they were investigated for fraudulent activity in order to produce the passing exam scores. To follow the outlined discussion of feminist and feminine storytelling with *Real Women Have Curves* and *Mosquita y Mari*, *Stand and Deliver* will be

analyzed with the privileges of a masculine mode but how it also subverts tropes by emphasizing a cultural identity.

Mr. Escalante (portrayed by Edward James Olmos), while a Latino man (not specifically Chicano), is Othered in this entrance as he goes through East Los Angeles to find Garfield High School. “Escalante watches his surroundings like a tourist”²⁵ and is first seen in an old Volkswagen Beetle. From the initial images presented, the world that the spectator is privileged to enter is rich in color, sound, and texture. Undoubtedly a hot end-of-Summer day in Southern California, the heat radiates from the screen to mark the first of many seasons under Mr. Escalante’s instruction. There is an intensity that the beginning establishes and prompts a similar anxiety with Ana’s journey to school. The journey itself to get to school goes smoothly, but there is a lingering threat that the high schools present for the respective characters. Ana is an outsider because of what she lacks— wealth, connections, and confidence. Mr. Escalante is Othered due to his excess— *ganas* (or motivation), energy, and supportive family.

The visual overload that is initially presented in the city streets is paralleled inside Garfield High with graffiti on the walls, ripped posters, broken window blinds, two policemen writing a criminal report, and a general lack of interest from administrators. When Mr. Escalante is finally able to introduce himself as the new computer science teacher, he is told that there are no computers on campus. As an alternative, he is placed in a remedial math class with a group of students who behave as if they were in a homeroom or a free period. The blackboard is littered with drawings, students flirt with one another, and gossip runs amuck.

²⁵ Llenn S. Goldman, “Crossing Invisible Borders: Ramón Menéndez’s *Stand and Deliver* (1987)” (University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 86.

The foreshadowed tension between his authoritative presence and the students' "bare minimum" attitude comes into focus when he enters the classroom. Challenges are immediately foregrounded and indicate the intersectional identities that East Los Angeles (and by extension, the Chicano and LatinX community) embody. Student archetypes of popular stereotypes are exaggerated to quickly establish the interpersonal relationships with Mr. Escalante to come.

As more characters are introduced, the film is coded with the familiar clichés of *cholos* (gang members), dutiful daughters, a class "whore", and a surrogate father figure for the legibility of the dominant culture. While it maintains minority stereotypes, *Stand and Deliver* encapsulates the ethnoscape²⁶ of East Los Angeles and ultimately subverts these archetypes to reinscribe dignity for its characters. Math 1A is a battleground between Mr. Escalante and the students to define the power dynamics that, in most classrooms, should be strictly hierarchical and absolute as the instructor governing their class. Rebellious students and Spanish-speakers are quick to pounce and take a default oppositional stance to the new authority figure. Mr. Escalante has no option but to remain composed. Once everyone has a seat, and it appears that they will all resume their traditional roles, the early bell relieves the students and undoes Mr. Escalante's work.

Not only does the opening sequence of all three films craft the landscape and soundscape of the city, but it also proposes an inherently *lived-in* quality about this environment. For the spectator who lives outside of the LatinX/a/o or ChicanX/a/o experience, there is a confrontation with an image that may appear foreign yet has a deeply

²⁶ Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 33.

rooted sense of belonging. That is the first contradiction to witness in the films for that type of spectator who must accept an unknown territory as normal in order to understand the characters' comfortability within their town. If films slowly construct the environment that the spectator is asked to inhabit, then East Los Angeles is an ideal location that is animated as another character within *Real Women Have Curves*, *Mosquita y Mari*, and *Stand and Deliver*. The city has self-assured confidence for being real (an indisputable existence) and *real* (brutally honest). History has built this environment and requires little manipulation to showcase its own cultural significance among a larger Los Angeles imaginary.



Figure 6: A mural seen during Mr. Escalante's commute foreshadows the students' transition from Other to Subjects.



Figure 7: A representational image of East Los Angeles in *Real Women Have Curves*.

Arjun Appadurai's theory of imagined worlds, which I assert as a continuation of Anderson's imagined communities, charts the fluidity between public and private spheres. It is through this imagined world that the characters are allowed to pursue a collective goal and challenge the skepticism that seeks to invalidate their desire of existence beyond community expectations. There is a dual process of assimilation towards dominant culture and a rebellion within the cultural community that weighs on individuals who embody the bi-cultural experience. To be too much of *this* identity or not enough of *that* identity offers a limited perspective that infringes on the potentiality of an array of choice through rearrangement and/or a combination. Anzaldúa broadens structures of interpretation in order to bring forth the multiplicity of voices that exist within ChicanaX/a/o cinema. In amplifying the "voiceless" subaltern (how do you amplify something or someone who is voiceless?), ChicanaX/a/o cinema does not seek to *give* a voice to a disenfranchised community as much as it seeks to empower it to speak louder²⁷.

²⁷ Gayatri Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988), 271.

As an ethnic enclave, East Los Angeles is Othered from the perceived glamor of Hollywood and Beverly Hills, yet there are plenty of people who live entire lives within these miniature worlds. As much as college presents an opportunity out of that miniature world, it also threatens to burst that safety bubble. There is an argument to be had about the legitimacy of these Borderlands in granting a fulfilling life that provides more than enough for people to live happily. The protagonists from all three films exist in a liminal state as Other and Subject, not as a split consciousness but as two fully formed psyches that oscillate between, through, and among these identities. This reclamation of Self is not confined to domestic or private spheres, it is unabashedly manifested in public spheres.

The city's self-assurance charts Mr. Escalante and Ana's trajectory as they build their status as Subjects through an understanding of how their Other status is not a hindrance. Mr. Escalante conveys a much more convincing portrayal of confidence than Ana in their respective schools, but they are unveiled in private interactions. As a male teacher, these layered privileges allow Mr. Escalante to build a wall while Ana struggles to maintain a mask. Yolanda does not construct a barrier until she forms a secret because she is regularly controlled by social and familial pressures to uphold her role. The ability to weave in and out of different private and public roles comes easily to Mr. Escalante while it must be routinely practiced by Ana and Yolanda.

Stand and Deliver carries the privilege of a male protagonist who can disrupt and advocate for underrepresented students. Ana and Yolanda have to advocate for themselves through public and private forms as they call upon a feminist and feminine voice, respectively. While all three films utilize stereotypes to quickly convey the situation of their experiences, ChicanX/a cinema is self-reflexive in this implementation to inscribe a

polysemy for constructing identity within and against cultural expectations. This layering of meaning within a relatively young cinema demonstrated how contradictions live at the core of Chicana/x/a/o experiences and representations.

Conclusion

Revisiting *Real Women Have Curves* and *Mosquita y Mari* equipped with an academic voice and informed by theory, has reshaped my spectatorial relationship from generic representational identification to an intentional reshaping of a past, present, and future self. Between, through, and among the crafting of identity, theory provided the tools to name hyphenated and liminal experiences, but the bodily recollection of lived experiences provided the materiality to apply that knowledge. The fusion²⁸ of theory and lived experiences is negotiated, but not in hierarchical categories. The layers of identity and the academic discourse that respond to that is constantly negotiated as a “logical inseparability”²⁹ by focusing on multiplicity over binaries. Borderlands must also be reconfigured, imagined worlds must be rebuilt, and cultural identity must oscillate between being and becoming—hyphenation, multiplicity, and liminality. The solution is not to adapt, but rather disrupt.

Decentralizing *Stand and Deliver*, not because of its masculine approach to storytelling but because its impact needs to be broadened beyond its praise, is a difficult context to highlight. The impact of this film cannot be underestimated or ignored, especially as a

²⁸ María Lugones, “Radical Multiculturalism and Women of Color Feminisms,” (*Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* vol. 12 no. 1), 73.

²⁹ Ibid, 73.

formative viewing experience. Much like my initial statements in avoiding a strong positioning that leans towards either a rejection or blind praise for these Chicano films, it is a moderation of inhabiting contradictions. My bias exists through the case studies chosen, but the analysis is a layered approach that takes a personal stance in dialogue with academic theory. *Real Women Have Curves* and *Mosquita y Mari* represent the future of ChicanX/a/o cinema because they build upon previous representations and understand that the flaws should not be erased. The differences within the ChicanX/a/o experiences are not funneled into a singular identity— they are emphasized for their differences.

As much as Chicano cinema exists as an inherently political counterstatement to hegemonic culture, it serves as a mirror for the communities depicted. Hall states:

“We have been trying to theorise identity as constituted, not outside but within representation and hence of cinema, not as a second-order mirror held up to reflect what already exists, but as that form of representation which is able to constitute us as new kinds of subjects, and thereby enable us to discover places from which to *speak*.”³⁰ (the emphasis is mine)

Organizing a hierarchy of interpretative frameworks detracts from the multiplicity of meaning that works simultaneously to connect voices in unison and in disarray. Rather than producing concrete evidence in favor of ChicanX/a/o cinema’s definition, the questions that arise in the rejection of strict categorization signals a poignant goal within fluid constructions of identity. ChicanX/a/o cinema is not concerned with the appeasement of a dominant culture’s cinematic conventions and redirects its efforts towards carving out a space to foster and maintain the politics of ambiguity. ChicanX/a/o cinema often dares to expose the abuse of power that submits others to the margins and reflects on the dominant culture in order to speak to it and speak against it. This cinema dares to probe and revel in its insubordination of the established

³⁰ Hall, 237.

pillars of meaning. Like cultural identity, this cinema is in a constant flux of meaning and appearance.

There is a direct instability when imagining the nation if there is only a face-value attempt to promote diversity that is tempered by assimilation. That which is outside of assimilation and patriotism is deemed Other. Nation-building is violent when it funnels ideologies and people through a preconceived mold of what an “American” is and looks like. My desire with this research is to assert Chicana/o films as cultural products that position the Other as a Subject for its target audience. By embedding/folding my subjectivity within these texts, it deconstructs hegemonic structures of accepted meaning and moves beyond an oppositional reading to (re)claim a psychic centrality. This work is a much-needed addition to film studies due to its fusion with larger socio-cultural fields of study to demonstrate the interconnections of cinema, culture, identity, and (anti)assimilation within the U.S. Criticism is necessary when faced against a mythical citadel that gatekeeps access to acceptance and the coveted “American” identity that renders itself as a smoke-mirror. An oppositional gaze towards identity politics expands an understanding of thought systems that are assumed as natural. It is possible to critique the systems we live in and find meaning through them because there is no singular mode of participating within cultures. Minorities have an expanded arsenal of lived experiences to participate within a national and multicultural landscape.

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