

BRIDGING SOCIAL GAPS IN GREGORY NAVA'S *MY FAMILY* (1995)

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ABSTRACT

The development and transmutation of Chicana/o identity in the American Southwest is a central theme in Gregory Nava's film narrative *My Family* (1995). The parents of the titular family represent the traditional, immigrant identity, which entails a hesitation to embrace the American lifestyle while showing a close adherence to their Mexican roots. The children, however, born and/or bred in the ethno-racial 'battlefield' of the borderlands in the US, challenge the socio-cultural norms they have inherited from their parents, but also those of white America. This article examines the children's cultural deviations as endeavors to confront socio-cultural conflicts in the borderlands and to carve a path towards a better individual and, symbolically, collective future for *la raza*.

KEYWORDS: Chicana/o Identity, Borderlands, Cultural Conflict, *Machismo*, Gender Roles.

REDUCIENDO LAS BRECHAS SOCIALES EN *MY FAMILY* (1995) DE GREGORY NAVA

RESUMEN

El desarrollo y la transmutación de la identidad chicana en el Suroeste de Estados Unidos es un tema central en la narrativa de la película *My Family* (1995) de Gregory Nava. Los padres de la familia a la que se refiere el título de la película representan la identidad tradicional de los inmigrantes, que implica una cierta resistencia a adoptar el estilo de vida americano y, al mismo tiempo, un profundo apego a sus raíces mexicanas. Sin embargo, los hijos nacidos y/o criados en "el campo de batalla" étnico-racial de las zonas fronterizas de los EE. UU., desafían las normas socio-culturales que han heredado de sus padres, así como también las normas de la América blanca. Este artículo investiga las desviaciones culturales de los hijos como intentos de enfrentar los conflictos socio-culturales en las zonas fronterizas y de forjar un camino hacia un futuro mejor para *la raza*, tanto a nivel individual como a nivel colectivo, simbólicamente.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Identidad chicana, zonas fronterizas, conflicto cultural, machismo, roles de género.

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Gregory Nava's *My Family* (1995) explores the life stories of a Mexican American family during the first part of the twentieth century, emphasizing the generational gap between the parents and the children. Following the trend in contemporary ethnic storytelling, *My Family* shows that "ethnicity is something reinvented and reinterpreted in each generation by each individual" rather than "something passed on from generation to generation" (Fischer 195). Overall, while the parents represent a more traditional Chicana/o identity with closer ties to the Mexican culture, the children assess and challenge the ways of both Mexican and American cultures. Specifically, this article examines the socio-cultural deviations of the children as attempts to negotiate their position within both the American society and the Chicana/o community by overcoming the oppressive social and cultural structures of the borderlands.

According to Francisco A. Lomelí, "[a]lthough much of American culture still manifests itself through opposites, there seems to be a tendency toward bridging the gap and concentrating more on common points of contact" (166). A similar, yet ambivalent, tendency is central in *My Family* and is communicated through the symbolic function of the bridges connecting the prestigious West Los Angeles with the East Los Angeles *barrio*. The bridges stand as a symbol of the cultural interaction of the borderlands, but also, and quite ironically too, of the segregation and exclusion of Chicanas/os from the American society. Although the bridges create contact points and possibilities between white American and Chicana/o cultures, an unequal relationship develops. The West side of Los Angeles is depicted as prestigious and industrialized, while the East side is a suburban slum, secluded and distanced from the mainstream United States. This implies the existence of two distinct "worlds" within the American borderlands; a "civilized" world of advanced technology and infrastructure and an impoverished, underdeveloped world with all the accompanying connotations for each area's residents. Additionally, it becomes apparent that, while for Chicana/o workers, crossing the bridges on a daily basis is a matter of survival, white Americans rarely cross over to East Los Angeles. This alludes to the fact that white Americans almost invariably expect Chicanas/os to bridge the cultural gap, usually by integrating or assimilating, while they show little interest of exposure to Chicana/o culture. However, *My Family* challenges this unilateral relationship. As Bruce Williams observes, "[o]n a meta-filmic level, the bridges suggest the reality of Chicano film practice as it negotiates its way between community and the broader Hollywood mainstream" (54). Indeed, *My Family* is written for both white and Chicana/o audiences and attempts to bridge cultural and cinematic gaps between the United States and the Chicana/o community.

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My Family offers an overview of the major incidents in the lives of a Chicana/o family residing in East Los Angeles. Paco, the eldest son, narrates and simultaneously writes these incidents into a book meant for publication. As a result, the film is structured as a *testimonio*. According to George Yúdice, a *testimonio* is “a personal testimony” recounted to a wider public as “an act of identity-formation which is simultaneously personal and collective” (15). In other words, it relates individual experiences, which are also identifiable at a communal level. Furthermore, “testimonial writing may be defined as an authentic narrative” which is “told by a witness who is moved to narrate by the urgency of a situation” (17). The impetus for Paco’s testimonial writing is the act of watching the Los Angeles bridges and considering their symbolic significance. However, Paco chronicles a considerable number of events, which he has not witnessed. Arguably, he has been informed of these events by the other members of his family. In this sense, *My Family* is a collective *testimonio*; it is mediated through Paco, but practically narrated by the entire family. For all these reasons, the film also serves as a historical overview of the Chicana/o community for the most part of the twentieth-century United States. It is as much the story of a specific Chicana/o family as of the Chicana/o community as a whole.

My Family also tackles the issue of how mainstream representations can arbitrarily assign meaning to minority groups. While writing his *testimonio* into a novel, Paco realizes that he will not be able to sustain himself by pursuing a career as an author (Nava 1:09:22-1:09:26). This is due to white America’s long history of excluding Chicana/o perspectives in favor of its own racist narratives. Nevertheless, Paco chooses to present an authentic account of his family’s lives rather than accommodate his writing to the dominant narratives. In this context, *My Family* emerges as a counter-narrative, one which disputes hegemonic representations and works towards reinstating the historical and cultural presence of *la raza*. According to Stuart Hall:

[I]dentities are about questions of using the resources of history, language and culture in the process of becoming rather than being: not ‘who we are’ or ‘where we came from’, so much as what we might become, how we have been represented and how that bears on how we might represent ourselves. Identities are therefore constituted within, not outside representation. (4)

While *My Family* does not outright deny the existence of various stereotypical Chicana/o archetypes, such as that of the pachuco involved in criminal activities, it deconstructs and re-semanticizes these stereotypes by bringing attention to the sociopolitical circumstances that engender them. Thus, by providing an insider’s narrative of the Chicana/o life experiences in the American Southwest, Paco’s *testimonio* challenges the politically-driven misrepresentation of the Chicana/o community. Furthermore, by being autobiographical in nature, the *testimonio* “has a commitment to the actual,” a commitment which cements Paco’s narrative as a reliable representation (Fischer 198). As a filmic representation itself, *My Family* establishes a valid depiction of Chicana/o life by providing the Chicana/o viewpoint of the borderlands and popularizing it through the cinema screen. Furthermore, by



promoting a positive account of Chicana/o life, *My Family* seeks to minimize the gap between the Chicana/o and the broader American communities.

Having established itself as an authentic narrative, one which ventures to falsify dominant white American narratives, *My Family* explores the children's reinvention of the Chicana/o identity in the 1950s and onwards. This reinvention is developed in comparison with the previous generation, which is represented by the parents, José and María. José and María's lifestyle is distinctly traditional due to their close ties to the Mexican homeland. For them, family is of the utmost importance. A major indication of this is that they effectively devote their entire lives to the upbringing of their children; indeed, they appear to have no personal desires other than their children's welfare. This is aptly communicated in the film, when Paco explains that, as a display of the magnitude of the father's affection towards his eldest daughter, the expense of Irene's wedding brought the family at the edge of bankruptcy (0:28:09-0:28:14). The wedding is followed by a big and distinctly Mexican celebration with a sizable number of guests and traditional food and music. Furthermore, José and María are deeply religious. María, in particular, has strong spiritual connections to the Mexican tradition through her devout belief in Mexican Catholicism and the myths of the Aztec cosmology. Prominent examples include her belief that the owl, which appears as she and her newborn son, Chucho, battle the currents of the river, is an incarnation of the "the spirit of the river" (1:00:05) as well as her conviction that the women who die in childbirth become "*cihuateteo*" [divine women], beings who "helped the sun to set" (1:34:37-1:34:52). This mixture of Christian and Aztec beliefs reveals María's development of a *mestizalo* spirituality, which is also highlighted by her frequent evocation of La Virgen de Guadalupe, the *mestiza* goddess of Mexican Catholicism.

The second generation, however, largely denounce their parents' worldview by espousing varying lifestyles of resistance to the oppressive structures of both American and Mexican cultures. For instance, Chucho's foremost act of resistance towards the American status quo is his subscription to the pachuco culture. The concept of *machismo* has been an emblematic feature of pachucos and is central in their portrayal in *My Family*. Its primal aspect in *My Family* is male-to-male competition, suggested by the recurring confrontations between Chucho and his rival, Butch. Paco explains that Chucho and Butch have no scores to settle and the main motivation for their actions is their excessive amounts of "hate and anger," which cannot be directed back to their source (0:31:49-0:32:04). Gloria E. Anzaldúa explains *machismo* as "an adaptation to oppression and poverty," resulting from the fact that in the United States "the Chicano suffers from excessive humility and self-effacement, shame of self and self-deprecation" (83). As these properties run contrary to the concept of *machismo*, men over-perform their masculinity in order to bring it to the spotlight and downplay the imposed non-macho qualities. As Harvey Mansfield explains, "[m]anliness is steadfast; it is taking a stand, not surrendering, not allowing oneself to be determined by one's context" (48). In this sense, *machismo* constitutes a reaction against the pressure of external forces in one's environment. *My Family* seems to zoom on Chucho and Butch as representatives of two separate strands of *machismo*. While Chucho's *machismo* is portrayed as a controlled and assertive act of protest,



Butch, who functions as Chucho's foil, is a macho caricature, short-tempered and disrespectful, excessively competitive and gratuitously violent.

Chucho is faced with a society that prohibits his way up the social ladder. Anzaldúa notes that "Chicanos and other people of color suffer economically for not acculturating" (63). In the film, as well as in the grim reality of the major part of the twentieth century that the film recreates, Chicanas/os who do not assimilate are limited to jobs characterized by low-paid manual labor. In essence, Chicanas/os are given two less than desirable options; to assimilate or to join the working class. If they assimilate, they betray their cultural roots; if they choose to stay loyal to their culture, they become confined to the working classes and their labor can only "support and maintain the standard of living of a socio-economic, political and cultural system that [relegates] them to a subservient class" (Lomelí 162). Ultimately, this limited social mobility entails a "reproduction of class inequalities," which "is inextricably linked to the maintenance of white supremacy" (Omi and Winant 107). Therefore, Chicanas/os who do not assimilate are stuck in a vicious cycle of exploitation and in the lower strata of the American society.

Chucho's father seems content with working class labor, as he perceives a certain "dignity" in toiling to provide for one's household (0:43:07-0:43:14). His *machismo* adheres to the traditional ideal of the father as a provider and protector of the family. He further attests to this when he proclaims during Irene's wedding that the family is one's single most valuable possession (0:30:12-0:30:18). Nevertheless, Chucho is not content with either of his options in the borderlands. As indicated by his adoption of the pachuco lifestyle, he refuses to assimilate to American culture and, at the same time, he does not wish to find a working-class job and become part of the vicious cycle of economic subservience to white Americans. The fact that Chicanas/os work in the West side of Los Angeles for the profit of white people further emphasizes the social and financial gap between West and East Los Angeles, white America and the Chicana/o community in general. Thus, since he regards both options as undesirable, Chucho resorts to a third option, that of crime. In doing so, he rejects both assimilation to American culture and participation in the economic exploitation of *la raza*. In this way, *My Family* dismantles racist explanations of Chicana/o criminality by pointing to the sociopolitical context that makes crime an appealing choice in the first place. Interestingly, Chucho's breaking of the law as a response to the injustice of the system echoes the Thoreauvian maxim: "I do not lend myself to the wrong which I condemn" (Thoreau 8). Chucho defends his choice by highlighting the importance of money as a status symbol in America and by claiming that moral concerns are outdated and irrelevant in a society preoccupied with obtaining money by any means necessary (0:41:34-0:41:49). In this way, he condemns American materialism and the rigid economic hierarchy, which confines Chicanas/os at the bottom ranks of the social ladder. His father eventually throws Chucho out of the family household, an act which completes the rupture between Chucho and the traditional Chicana/o *familismo*.

Chucho's resistance to the status quo eventually reaches a tragic conclusion. While in self-defense during a confrontation with Butch, Chucho accidentally delivers a fatal stab to his rival. He later runs away, perhaps out of awareness that, as



a “*master category*,” the color of his skin will deprive him of any possibility of proper justice (Omi and Winant 106). This fear proves true when a group of policemen arrives at the *barrio* to arrest him. A police officer delivers to his colleagues a racist speech, which paints a stereotypical picture of Chucho as a “known criminal,” who is an “armed and extremely dangerous” serial killer (0:52:38-0:52:45). The police officer also endorses state-sanctioned violence by encouraging his colleagues to open fire on Chucho for the sake of their personal safety (0:52:45-0:52:50). A few scenes later, a policeman casually shoots Chucho in the head and subsequently celebrates his death. By asking questions such as “Who counts as human? Whose lives count as lives? And, finally, What *makes for a grievable life*?” Judith Butler’s *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* contends that the way lives are mourned by society is indicative of their position within it (20). Thus, the celebration of Chucho’s death by the police, a governmental agency, confirms the status of Chicanas/os as unwanted and dispensable in white American society. Ultimately, Chucho’s death aims to expose America’s institutional racism.

Having eye-witnessed Chucho’s death at a very young age, his brother Jimmy grows into adulthood filled with anger. His anger seems to stem from losing someone he loves in an unjust way before his very eyes. However, it would be insufficient to argue that Jimmy’s traumatic experience is the sole cause of his seething anger. In his deliberation of anger, Alison Bailey argues that “some angers are inherited along with the historical traumas of colonized and oppressed peoples” and thus “the memories of past injustices remain alive in these communities today, because these injustices continue under different names” (107). Jimmy grows up in the marginalized Chicana/o community and, having had a first-hand experience of discrimination as a child, he is better equipped to discern the injustices that surround him. He cannot be free of his anger as long as he is oppressed due to the color of his skin. Interestingly, he follows Chucho’s footsteps into minor criminal activities and is eventually taken into custody. Although the film skips the details of Jimmy’s first incarceration, audiences receive a taste of the American prison system during his second time in prison, when a guard comments that Jimmy’s return was expected because his “kind always comes back” (1:36:17-1:36:25). The prison guard not only makes the essentialist claim that Chicanos are criminals, but also excludes them from the category of human by referring to Jimmy’s “kind” as if they belong to different species. Thus, the prison recycles the narratives of the mainstream United States and further exposes its ingrained institutional racism. Jimmy’s unquenchable anger is not solely an instinctive reaction to the unjust loss of his brother, but also a response to his life-long oppression as a Chicano.

Jimmy’s anger evolves into a driving force, which orchestrates his defiance of the status quo. Jimmy’s initial act of resistance against the oppressive system of the United States begins with his first incarceration. Paco notes Jimmy’s “bad attitude” when he was arrested, which is more than likely to have continued in prison (1:01:09-1:01:11). Arguably, then, Jimmy’s time in prison is not spent in compliance with the values and rules imposed on him by the American jurisprudence, but in active resistance to these values and rules. The tattoo he acquires on his right forearm during his imprisonment is a symbol of this resistance. According to B.V. Olguín,



getting a tattoo in prison is an unlawful and, thus, subversive act, which constitutes “a victory” (125) over the prison authorities, because the tattoo “will permanently record the prison’s ‘failure’ and persist as a prominent and permanent mark of defiance” (128). Therefore, in spite of his exclusion from American society, an exclusion further underlined by his imprisonment, Jimmy manages to defy its oppressive structures.

Arguably, Jimmy’s foremost act of opposition to the racial discrimination in the United States is his marriage to Isabel. Isabel is a Salvadoran political refugee on the verge of being deported back to her country. Her father was murdered because he was a “union organizer” and it is highly likely that Isabel will suffer the same fate if she returns to El Salvador (1:10:50-1:10:52). In order to prevent this, Jimmy’s sister, Toni, proposes that Isabel marry an American citizen to legalize her presence in the United States. Although Jimmy is initially reluctant to help, he is quickly persuaded when Toni explains that by marrying Isabel Jimmy could take his revenge on all instruments of governmental oppression (1:15:14-1:15:27). Jimmy is eventually seduced by Isabel leading up to a scene of sexual and psychological bonding, where Jimmy realizes that they share the trauma of witnessing a loved one’s death at a very young age (1:29:14-1:29:41). The story of Isabel and Jimmy is a call for Latina/o solidarity against their common oppressor.

As a result of this bonding, Jimmy undergoes a radical transformation. When he learns that Isabel is pregnant, he abandons Chucho’s footsteps and becomes more like his father, as he makes the decision to start working in West Los Angeles to provide for his new family. However, Isabel’s death during childbirth reignites his anger, since he believes that the doctor purposefully let Isabel die because she was a “spic” (1:35:37-1:35:40). Thus, Jimmy relives the experience of losing someone he loves and links it back to Chucho’s death by assuming that Isabel’s death was due to her phenotype. As a result, her death cancels out Jimmy’s prior efforts towards a happy life and plunges him back to grief and anger. Jimmy concludes this cyclical movement when he intentionally gets arrested in a manner identical to his previous arrest. As a result, he leaves his son, Carlitos, parentless for the first years of his life. Jimmy’s return to prison is an instance of escapism, an attempt to run away from overwhelming feelings and problems he feels powerless to fix. This is also suggested by the fact that after his release he wants to leave his family and the *barrio* and start a new life in hopes of erasing his past traumas (1:41:38-1:41:46). However, after meeting Carlitos, Jimmy changes plans and makes considerable efforts to gain the love of his son. As their relationship heals, Jimmy teaches Carlitos how to plant corn in a scene meant to call to mind a previous scene when Jimmy was taught how to plant corn by his father. As Jimmy is the only second-generation character who has children of his own, this scene symbolizes the continuation of the family by passing on the knowledge and traditions of previous generations. Redeemed by his efforts to win the love of Carlitos, Jimmy espouses his father’s *familismo* and receives an opportunity to live a fulfilling life with his son.

Memo differs from his brothers in that he takes the path of assimilation and financial prosperity. Due to his meticulous studying, Memo is admitted to law school at West Los Angeles. As a professional, he anglicizes his name to “WILLIAM



SANCHEZ" (1:39:05) and calls himself "Bill" while in white company (1:48:24-148:25). Furthermore, he uses exclusively English and his Mexican accent is imperceptible. Therefore, Memo is portrayed as a *malinchista*, "a person who adopts foreign values, assimilates to foreign culture, or serves foreign interests" (Pratt 860). His betrayal of Chicana/o culture is made prominent when he brings to the *barrio* his fiancée, a white woman from a prestigious family in West Los Angeles. He systematically attempts to downplay the cultural gap between the two families by dismissing potentially embarrassing family stories as fabrications. He also assures his prospective in-laws that he has spent his entire life in the United States and, thus, further distances himself from his Mexican heritage (1:49:43-1:49:49). As Jaume Martí-Olivella phrases it, "Memo is ready to deny the family's historical roots" to secure a positive impression on his familial background (22). However, in the end, José and María assist Memo in bridging the gap between the two families and thus confirm that the welfare of family members is their principal concern.

The younger daughter, Toni, is what Paco calls a "bossy" kind of woman (0:24:32-0:24:34). In her first scene in *My Family*, she is depicted undermining the traditional male authority of the Mexican household by vigorously arguing with her brother, Chuchó. Her forceful character is also manifest in her persistent endeavors to persuade Jimmy to marry Isabel, since she does not yield to his multiple demands to be left alone. During Irene's wedding, she realizes that her attractiveness makes her an ideal sexual partner for virtually all the young men in the *barrio* and feels threatened by the prospect of becoming a wife like her sister (0:30:51-0:31:03). As a result, she frustrates all expectations and decides to become a nun. However, her choice is not due to religious sentiment. As Anzaldúa explains, for a Chicana "there used to be only three directions she could turn: to the Church as a nun, to the streets as a prostitute, or to the home as a mother" (17). Thus, to become a nun is not an ideal life decision for Toni, but merely the lesser of the three evils. Anzaldúa goes on to say that, in contemporary times, a number of Chicanas "have a fourth choice: entering the world by way of education and career and becoming self-autonomous persons" (17). Toni may not have had this option, although as director Gregory Nava explains in a 1995 interview, "in the 1950s joining a religious order was the only way she could get an education, expand her horizons and avoid assuming the roles of wife and mother" (qtd. in Carty 81). Therefore, Toni's choice constitutes her first step towards escaping from the patriarchal oppression of her community and living her life independently.

Toni violates cultural and religious norms to attain this independence. Much to the dismay of her parents, she falls in love and marries a white priest, after both leave their order. Notably, her marriage is rather untraditional, as she chooses to marry without the presence of her parents and kin and only announces her marriage after the union is sanctioned. Toni appears to have no regrets regarding her choices, while her parents consider her actions shamefully sacrilegious. In her parents' eyes, Toni experiences a fall from grace. A scene in which Toni and the priest are seen having extramarital intercourse, illustrates this fall from grace, as from being a nun she becomes *la Chingada* [the fucked one]. This scene also accentuates her sexual liberation, a victory over the religious and cultural norms, which seek to control



her sexuality. Toni continues to challenge and transcend gender roles by becoming involved in political activism by means of providing aid to the downtrodden. Due to her strong will and character, she is never daunted by the fact that the men of the family frequently refer to her efforts as “political bullshit” (1:09:56-1:09:59; 1:13:43-1:13:45). Her preference for humanitarian over religious principles is further argued by the fact that she does not hesitate to use the “sacred” union of marriage as a means to save Isabel’s life (1:20:25-1:20:28). In brief, Toni manages to escape prescribed gender roles stemming from Mexican culture and becomes actively involved in endeavors to bring about the change she wants to see in society.

Although her deviations are important, Irene is the child who breaks away the least from a traditional life course. She is the only one to marry a Chicano, while the rest of the children—apart from Jimmy, who technically did not choose who to marry, and Paco and Chuco, who did not marry at all—have chosen white partners. She also shares some of her parents’ religious reverence, as she is appalled at the idea of Toni marrying a member of the clergy (1:09:40-1:09:49). However, unlike her parents and after many years of marriage, she does not have children. The reason for this is unspecified in the film and, thus, it is impossible to know to what extent it may have been her choice. It is telling, however, that throughout the film she never expresses the wish to have children. A possible reason, which also constitutes Irene’s major departure from the Mexican cultural tradition, is her refusal to be confined in the domestic sphere. Unlike her mother, who has stopped working ever since she has had her children, Irene becomes a successful restaurant owner with an active role in her business. Therefore, she also undermines the traditional gender roles by becoming a businesswoman and attaining a certain degree of economic independence.

In their own ways and to varying extents, the children in *My Family* break away from the traditional Chicana/o identity their parents represent. Their actions reveal a wish to overturn the oppressive sociopolitical structures they have inherited from the previous generations. Interestingly, the identity negotiations that each child undertakes differ depending on their gender. On the one hand, the men’s frictions with both cultures are attempts to escape the socioeconomic injustices imposed on them due to the color of their skin. On the other hand, the women’s resistance tactics chiefly seek to diminish patriarchal mandates in their lives. Toni, in particular, takes this a step further by also combating the hegemonic oppression of white American society through her activism. In short, their reconstruction of the Chicana/o identity is a result of the interaction between Mexican and American culture and is unanimously a process of fighting for a better position in one’s society. The children do not simply venture to bridge the gap between Mexican and American cultures; they predominantly seek to bridge the gap between the various levels of social stratification. In contemporary times, when the Trump administration stresses the importance of artificial barriers and other symbols and practices of division, the insistence of *My Family* on bridging gaps becomes all the more relevant.

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