

Athabasca University  Master of Arts - Integrated Studies

CINEMA FROM THE BORDER, CINEMA AS BORDER:  
CREATION, SUBVERSION, AND DECONSTRUCTION  
OF LATINO STEREOTYPES IN BORDER CROSSING FILMS

By

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## ABSTRACT

A trajectory of movies dealing with the border migrations on the U.S./Mexico frontier starting with *El Norte* in 1983, with a focus on the last decade is examined in relation to how it reinforces or subverts existing Latino stereotypes. The dialectic between cinema and North American society's treatment of Latinos is explored through the use or undermining of their images on the screen. The staging of the border crossing, border police, and Latino gender roles is examined in select movies as it is utilized to challenge expected norms. Emphasis is placed on *La misma luna* and *The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada* as both these films provide extensive subversive elements which showcase how film can be used to alter our stereotypical notions of immigrants who have been marginalized. We explore the ways in which film embraces the world that it originates from, shaping and challenging the social and cultural mosaic emerging in the U.S./Mexico border region where Latino presence is on the upswing.

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## Introduction

The end of the 20<sup>th</sup> and start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century has seen a shift in the way resources, people and ideas flow around the world (Appadurai 1996, 2012; Canclini, 1995, 2001, 2002, 2012; Pieterse, 2009, 2012). In describing the ebb and flow of culture, Arjun Appadurai underscores how the last few hundred years have contributed to completely redefining the cultural traffic that governs societal interactions, necessitating a new theoretical model of cultural dynamics. His integrated interdisciplinary approach proposes a cultural interaction model that is based on five distinct avenues of cultural exchange: ethnoscaples, mediascaples, technoscaples, financescaples, and ideoscaples (1996). These avenues all touch aspects of the film industry, thus underlining the power that film, as a popular culture and mass media product, has on contemporary cultural identity. This pervasive artistic medium must be scrutinized to understand the power of film in shaping present-day sociocultural interactions and the shaping of film by those same forces.

While there are many areas where film depicts conflict between linguistic, ethnic, religious, and cultural groups competing for supremacy and survival, we will focus on cultural depictions of the U.S./Mexico borderlands, and competing stereotypes of the people who define, maintain, cross-over and re (create) that border in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

Occupying a minor part in the national imagination for a long time, the Southern border has returned with unexpected force in recent decades as a result of seemingly unstoppable migratory movements, not so different

conceptually from those which originated the American Dream in the first place. (Deleyto et. al., 2012, Para. 1)

Today two cultures (the American and the Latin American) that have had constant interaction for centuries are redefining the region as well as themselves, and laying the groundwork for the future (Canclini, 1995, 2001; Dear & Burrige, 2005; Kraniauskas, 2000; McCaughan, 1999). The impact of this process can be seen in news and entertainment media on both sides of the border, with news media attempting to document the present and inform about the past. However, it is the artistic community (and in particular the film community) that questions fundamental stereotypes and social constructs of the border, plays a significant role in documenting historical events (while challenging canonical memories of these events). Informing us about the present, while subverting current opinion, the artistic community (and the film community in particular) presents possible alternative future configurations for the consumption of consumers living on both sides of the border, as well as globally.

Border studies are complicated. To grasp our intricate and complex world, Vartan Gregorian (2004) argues for the importance of an interdisciplinary perspective: “The complexity of the world requires us to have a better understanding of the relationships and connections between all fields that intersect and overlap.” (para. 7). Cultural studies gets us part way there by asking “why” cultures exist in their current forms. Popular culture is the rawest expression of what people are thinking, feeling and experiencing at a particular moment. It tells us more about the human condition than the canonized works that were typically representative of socioeconomic elites in past centuries (Mukerji & Schudson, 1991): “popular culture has found

legitimacy for the very reasons it was previously derided: the scale of its social impact and its attractiveness to unschooled audiences. This has made it central to any understanding of Western societies and thought.” (p. 53). Film, as a key medium of popular culture, is the lens that we will use in this inquiry into the socio-cultural creation and re (creation) of the Mexican / American border where national, racial, gender and class stereotypes and perceptions of self and others are presented via the cinematographic medium.

### **The Sociopolitical Context**

To examine how the Latino stereotype is being transformed in Hollywood and south of the border, we will take a brief look at how this borderland setting came to exist. By exploring the history that shaped this particular borderlands.

Most of the southern United States (U.S.) states bordering on modern day Mexico had four distinct historical identities: a native pre-colonial civilization followed in rapid succession by Spanish colonialism (1500), then struggles for independence from Spain by an Independent Mexico (1810 - 21) and The Mexican-American war and the secession of the region to the United States (1846). These transitions redrew lines on the map and shifted the ruling power structures. Each shift also saw a shift in demographics with an influx of colonists, settlers, and immigrants creating new cultural layers within the region.

The pre-colonial period in the region ended with Álvaro Nuñez Cabeza de Vaca exploring the regions that now comprise New Mexico and Arizona and a series of expeditions imposing the Spanish worldview by converting and evangelizing the natives. (Chang-Rodriguez, 2008, pp. 51-54) This period ended when in 1821 Mexico declared its independence from Spain after a

decade of war. With the Mexican economy in ruins Texas revolted in 1835 and fought for independence from Mexico finally achieving independence after forcing the signature of the Treaty of Velasco. (Loomis, 2010; Chang-Rodriguez, 2008) Unable to maintain its empire, Mexico began auctioning off land as its powerbase in the region declined. Border disputes with the U.S. erupted in the Mexican-American War (1846–1848) resulting in the Mexican Republic surrendering, with the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo (1848), all of California, Nevada and Utah and portions of Colorado, New Mexico and Arizona. In 1853, the United States bought the remaining area of today's Arizona and New Mexico in the Gadsden Purchase. The net result of this period is that the U.S. acquired vast tracts of land and a mostly Mexican population with hybrid Spanish/Native Indian traditions, languages and cultures.

The Desert Land Act of 1877 promised settlers in these new American states one square mile of land. This caused an influx of people into the region, relegating the native residents to minority status. As the new white elite moved in, it seized the opportunity to demonize the existing populations of Indian and Hispanic descent so as to seize control and authority while entrenching the white position of privilege in the region, an act of racial discrimination which reached a fevered pitch in the 1930s when “Mexican-American farmworkers, some of whom held American citizenship, were rounded up and shipped to Mexico to free up jobs for the whites.”(Loomis, 2010, para. 4) During and following WWII the Bracero Program, a program that allowed contract labour to enter and work temporarily in the United States, further exploited Hispanic labour, marginalizing Mexican manual labourers by denying any possibility for Mexican workers to remain behind in the U.S. as citizens. In agriculture, this temporary

labour program continued well into the 1960s. In response to border migration at the end of the century, the U.S. government enacted anti-immigration legislation to control the influx of undocumented immigrants in the lands of the Mexican cession. This was not effective in reducing the migration, but did result in the stigmatization of Latinos and the creation of strong prejudices against Latino immigrants. In this climate the Mexican American identity asserted itself as distinct from both national counterparts and saw political protests from the 1960's to the early 1980's which paralleled the development of a hybridized cultural identity and artistic expression unique to this border region. Since this time, Chicano influence appears in every sphere of the arts with galleries, festivals, and museums growing in number and popularity. The Centre for Immigration Study estimates the economic contribution of this population at 11% of the GDP of the United States. In spite of these significant contributions, defending the white status quo, targeting visible minorities as illegal immigrants and focusing efforts on detaining undocumented people (Loomis, 2010), and removing Spanish from classrooms was socially accepted.

A fundamental shift in U.S. Foreign Policy and approach to border issues came about as a result of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 creating a logical delineator for observing current issues in the region due to the deep impact this event has had on the U.S. psyche. By 2005, Hispanics and Latinos made up 29% of the national population, 30% of which is estimated as being unauthorized immigrants (Singer, 2009, pp. 2-3). Numbers that strike fear into the existing white institutions and are causing protectionist behaviour from those in power.



There are approximately 80 million<sup>1</sup> inhabitants of the border region states with approximately 50% of that population of Hispanic descent. Four or five generations ago most were Mexican, living within the borders of one country.



Today families have been divided by arbitrary lines on maps, and while products and services cross the border with little difficulty, the people do not have the same freedom. In their study *Globalization and Development* published by the World Bank, Martin and Ocampo (2003) state: “There is no theoretical justification whatsoever for liberalizing goods, services, and capital markets while continuing to apply stringent restrictions to the international mobility of labor” (Chap.5, “The Full Inclusion of Migration”, para. 1). But, this is precisely what is happening and is the cause for the majority of problems and instability in the region. Inaccurate and highly biased reports of deaths in the region estimate the yearly death toll of the border at over 300 on the U.S. side, with the Mexican side reporting a similar number.<sup>2</sup> Due to the nature of the activities and reporting, these numbers will never be accurate. However, drowning, car accidents, deaths due to exposure to the elements, criminal activities, border patrol violence, rape, vigilante activities, and more create a very somber panorama for artistic expression and sociocultural study. It is this history and reality that has been the inspiration for many contemporary borderland films. Suki Ali (2004: 267) underlines the interest in film as a medium for documentation and creation

of social issues: “There is considerable debate about whether films simply reflect or contemplate problems in society. Films themselves have been scrutinized, addressing such key social issues as gender stereotyping, violence, sexual explicitness and racism.” Absent from this perspective is how film also has the ability to subvert and challenge existing stereotypes, (re)creating social norms, which will be the focus of our analysis of borderland cinema.

### **Borders, Movies, and Stereotypes**

Film has the unique characteristic of adding a visual component to the intellectual exercise of reading and this visual power has helped create a series of Latino stereotypes including the Latin lover, bandido, drug dealer, harlot, and dark mysterious lady typically associated with the Hispanic population (Arbeláez, 2004; Berg, 2002). Likewise, movies have presented the U.S./Mexico border and the immigrant life as antagonists in their treatment of immigration issues (Arbeláez, 2004; Wood, 2004), starting with Gregory Nava's *El Norte* (1983) and reaching a feverish pace at the start of the 21 century with movies such as Steven Soderbergh's *Traffic* (2000), Gore Verbinski's *The Mexican* (2001), Joshua Marston's *Maria, llena eres de gracia* (2004), James Brooks' *Spanglish* (2004), Tommy Lee Jones' *The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada* (2005), Gregory Nava's *Bordertown* (2006), Patricia Riggins' *La misma luna* (2007), Gustavo Loza's *Al otro lado* (2008), Cary Fukunaga's *Sin Nombre* (2009), Carlos Carrera's *Backyard* (2009), Wayne Kramer's *Crossing Over* (2009), and an assortment of short and long documentary films. The recent increase in production underscores the growing importance of immigration, hybridization, and cultural integration issues on a regional and global scale as we deal with transitioning to a globally interconnected culture. This vast

cinematographic production is affecting the way that American and Mexican viewers perceive themselves and each other and ultimately how they react to each other and the national, racial, gender and class roles that are presented via the cinematographic medium.

Kramer's *Crossing Over*, released in 2009 and cast with a Hollywood A list of actors including Harrison Ford, Ray Liotta, and Ashley Judd highlights the impact of cultural and immigration issues in a contemporary world setting. In the dialectic between cinema and the real world this movie deftly hits the high and low points related to crossing over into the American dream. There are numerous narratives entwined throughout the movie that deal with entry, naturalization, and cultural assimilation, all of which demonstrate the complexity of issues related to cultural identity and assimilation, national identity and stereotyping, and the human costs associated with sociopolitical and cultural integration. This film, like many others relies on stereotypes, a shorthand that places “character quickly and economically” (Dyer, p. 278) which is associated with race and gender to quickly develop believable characters.

Charles Berg (2002) in *Latino Images in Film* explores some of the stereotypes that are (re)created via cinematic production in Hollywood. While his focus is primarily aimed at demonstrating the one sided and negative stereotyping in U.S. film, we will focus on the adherence to, and subversion of, psychosocial stereotypes. We will look at ones specifically dealing with border crossings to gain a glimpse into the complex dynamic linking together the evolving and changing mosaic where culture (social, political, economic), language, the fluctuation in dominance, marginalization, etc. are all intertwined and cannot be isolated logically from each other. Dyer, while arguing for the stereotyping of gays suggests that

“stereotypes are not just put out in books and films, but are widely agreed upon and believed to be right” (2012: 275) within determined sociocultural boundaries. His conclusions could be extended to the full spectrum of stereotyping as it is a natural neurological process to help our brains make sense of an increasingly complex world (Fiske, 2002; Harris & Fiske, 2006; Masters, 1992), all the while underscoring the psychosocial contribution to this process.

We will take an integrated approach that sees film as a medium that creates, reinforces and subverts cultural stereotypes thus integrating the various spheres of study that film touches as it engages with the evolving cultural mosaic emerging in the U.S./Mexico border region thus responding to the changes brought about by globalization. A possible explanation for the shift to a constructive outlook towards culture is supported by Martin and Ocampo’s (2003) vision to engage with globalization and not be its victim:

This view is founded upon an essential lesson of history: that efforts to simply ignore or resist processes whose roots run as deep as those of the current globalization process, as well as the negative agendas that emerge out of such efforts, are doomed to failure. Finding ways to build a qualitatively better form of globalization and to achieve the best possible position within that process are, consequently, the best option. (Chapter 5, para. 1)

The artistic community uses film and other artistic expressions to explore current situations and propose new directions for sociocultural reconfiguration. It explores how the Latino is (re)imaged, an important aspect of film studies. Given that Latinos are the fastest

growing part of the U.S. population, accepting and improving their reality is significant in achieving a better functioning sociocultural solution to the globalization processes at work in North America. Berg (2009) underscores:

The images of Latinos in American film exist not in a vacuum but as part of a larger discourse on Otherness in the United States. Beyond their existence as mental constructs or film images, stereotypes are part of a social conversation that reveals the mainstream's attitudes about Others. (Introduction, para. 10)

While “films helped to create and maintain ideas of ‘primitive’ versus ‘civilized’ people and making the notion of ‘otherness’ seem ‘natural’” (Ali, p. 267), we will focus on the opposite effect, as film also undermines the otherness and points towards the possibility of integration and a sense of sameness. As Dyer (2012) points out, simple rejection or denial of stereotypes does not resolve the problem.

Righteous dismissal does not make the stereotypes go away, and tends to prevent us from understanding just what stereotypes are, how they function, ideologically and aesthetically, and why they are so resilient in the face of our rejection of them. (p. 275)

Given film's ability to sway social opinions negatively, it is reasonable to conclude that the inverse is also true and other than just criticizing the film industry for perpetuating segregation in society, we need to also examine how this industry is contributing to overcoming existing stereotypes through the most powerful mass media vehicle at their disposal: film.

Many older movies do not challenge existing stereotypes, but utilize them because their popular and critical reception is strongly tied to pre-conceived notions of the border and individuals engaged in the crossing. However, there is a strong tendency in more recent cinema to subvert and deconstruct the existing stereotypes of the border, border police, of the Latino and the respective gender roles. We will examine some of the more significant challenges to the stereotypical views as presented on screen.

### **The Latino Experience on Screen**

Most films reinforce the initial border crossing image, portrayed in *El Norte* when transitioning between the South and the North at night or in the dark, emphasizing all the negative elements associated with this clandestine activity while associating narratives of fear, horror and desperation with border crossing. The reality of living as an illegal immigrant in the imagined utopia does not hit home until later in the narrative. Some of the more recent films are challenging this monolithic image of the crossing and placing greater emphasis on life before and after the passage itself, since the crossing has become such an engrained part of mass-consciousness. The crossing in *La misma luna* occurs during daytime and is accompanied by the official welcome to the United States via the public announcement system, as Carlitos hides inside of a van. *Sin nombre* also has the final scene crossing the river into the United States shot during daylight hours, clearly portraying the horrors of Mexican life being left behind as the gang executes the main protagonist. The failed border crossing in *Bordertown* is another daylight scene during which the coyotes abandon the vehicle with a trunk full of people

in the mid-day sun to avoid being caught by the border police, who later arrive as saviours to rescue the illegal immigrants.

*The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada* offers yet another ironic and comedic twist on the border crossing experience, by completely reversing the stereotypical image. In addition to a cadaver crossing the border to arrive at his final resting place in an illusory or imagined paradise in Mexico called Jiménez, border patrolman Norton is dying from snake venom and needs the help of a Mexican coyote to get into Mexico to see a traditional healer there. The coyote is hired to lead them across the border heading south, and attempts to charge full fees for each of the three men, including the cadaver, as if alive. While not a direct Latino stereotype subversion, the role and development of the border patrol in *The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada* provides an interesting political satire and critique of the border and those protecting the U.S. from invasion. During various scenes the rampant paranoia and advanced technology brought to bear on sealing the border is evident, but it is in the hands of incompetent buffoons who can't seem to perform their function in spite of vast resources and manpower dedicated to finding the trio crossing into Mexico on horseback. In what is perhaps the most entertaining interaction, the patrolmen ask an obviously blind man if he has "seen anyone recently". The patrolmen are basically incompetent and sloppy in all that they do, in spite of the perceived severity and importance of their role.

When examining gender roles and their associated stereotypes in film, Hollywood has a tendency to reinforce Latino sexualized stereotypes which can be seen recently in movies like *Chasing Papi* (2003) where a Latino Romeo is maintaining a harem of three sultry Latinas in

different cities who fight over him providing the humor in the movie. *Sin nombre*, exemplifies the contemporary Latino bandit stereotype in the form of a gangster. Murder, rape, robbing from the immigrants on the train, all culminate in the gangland killing of the protagonist on the riverbank at the end of the movie. The Latinas in the movie all fall for the bad boy gangster and are all weak, highly sexualized victims of the male violence and as such fall into stereotypical roles assigned to Latino women. In *Crossing Over*, both Latino characters fall into traditional stereotypes. The Latin lover who also doubles as a criminal helping others obtain false papers and the innocent yet sexy mother trying to make a new home for her child. These and many other examples demonstrate that writers and directors often resort to utilizing stereotypes as a form of cinematographic shorthand when creating their works, we will now take a look at some specific examples of characters that are presented in some of the more recent films that challenge or subvert these traditionally accepted stereotypes starting with the strong roles created for women.

It could be argued that of all the borderland movies examined, *La misma luna* is the most radical and consistent in challenging stereotypes. It exemplifies the (re)imaging of Latino women as pillars of family, society, and morality rather than fulfilling the roles of sexual objects to be desired and fantasized about. The movie consists of almost entirely positive roles for women while portraying any negative traits through male characters, which will be discussed later.

In spite of her illness and early exit from the movie, *La misma luna*, Carlito's grandmother provides a very strong moral and ethical anchor protecting the boy from his in-



laws, who want to take care of him for financial gains rather than out of love. Her death in many ways becomes the catalyst for Carlitos to grow up into Carlos Rayes, as he will introduce himself to other characters for the duration of the movie.

In a twist on the coyote, Carlitos is employed by Doña Carmen, a female coyote, who not only facilitates an avenue for him to exit the country, but also provides a dignified portrayal of a woman in a role that requires power and financial acumen, and is often associated with unethical abuse of migrants. Her role also provides a unique ability to openly criticize the American born Latinos for forgetting their roots and traditions and language as they present themselves to offer their services in transporting children across the border.

Once in the United States, Carlitos finds himself in trouble with a local drug addict, Billy, who attempts to sell him to a pimp. This transaction is interrupted by Doña Reyna, who not only stops him from being taken, but also pays for his freedom with her money. Despite her lack of resources she takes him to her house where she is providing refuge for a dozen illegal workers. Through her actions, self-sacrifice and compassion triumph over callousness and self-gratification.

However it is Carlito's mother that serves as the anchor for all the models of strong women in the film. After the boy's father crosses the border and does not support the family, she also crosses the border to provide money for her child in the form of monthly payment, sacrificing years of life with her child out of love and desire for him to have a better life. She has ample opportunity to use her sexual charms to further her enjoyment, financial position,

and gain citizenship but refuses due to her commitment to her son as a priority and marriage for love.

The other movies have strong counter-stereotype roles for women, but nowhere near the number and consistency that is present in *La misma luna*. In *The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada*, Norton is dying from a snake bite and is taken to a curandera\*, Mariana, who happens to be the woman whose nose he broke when he punched her a few weeks earlier. During that encounter she returned to protect her companion from Norton, forfeiting her freedom in the process. She saves Norton's life but gets even by pouring hot coffee on him and breaking his nose with a pot.

In *Bordertown* we are presented with two very strong women who rise to battle the male violence perpetrated on the Mexican side of the borderlands. Not only are women exploited in the maquiladoras by corporate and financial interests, but women are raped and murdered. The story rotates around Lauren Adrian, a daughter of immigrants who were killed that was adopted and raised in the U.S., and who has been fighting with her Mexican identity. She is a passionate reporter who wants to work international stories, but places her need for justice over her own ambitions. In her crusade to make public the crimes against women in northern Mexico, her character gives voice to the silenced women of Juárez, even at the cost of her own safety. Eva Jimenez, who is taken to a remote place and raped by two men, strangled, buried and left for dead manages to survive, dig herself out of the shallow grave and find her way back home. After being nursed back to health by a local curandero, she not only manages

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\* A rough equivalent of a North American Shaman. Ref: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Curandero>

to endure, but agrees to testify against her attackers, and finally beats the man who strangled her with a flaming log to save Adrian and herself.

In these examples, we can see the transformation, subversion and deconstruction of stereotyped derogatory Latina images of the harlot or female clown, and the glorified dark lady or seductress, as outlined by Berg (2002). All these women also contradict many of the previous images of Latinas in border movies as being innocent, naïve, weak, and afraid. Many of these movies also provide venues for males to be presented in counter-stereotypical ways, some positive and some negative.

In *Sin nombre*, El Casper, the main character undergoes a transformation from gangster to self-sacrificing man through love and betrayal of trust thus subverting the traditional image of the gangster. After being incapable of saving his girlfriend from the gang leader he undertakes an altruistic plan to help a young girl get across the border. This type of transformation or subversion is evident in the roles of males in many of these movies, through frequent use of inverted roles and responsibilities.

In *La misma luna*, Carlitos is, for all but the external characteristics, a capable adult. At 9 years of age, he manages to cross the border, get and perform multiple jobs, and navigate a world foreign to him. At the same time, his innocence offers the possibility of presenting a utopian vision of the borderland that contrasts with the typical adult experience that we are familiar with. As adults we are accustomed to see human tragedy on a global scale, but a vulnerable and innocent protagonist offers an avenue to reject the negative stereotypes of the illegal immigrant in the United States. Caryn Connely in her analysis of this movie states:

Carlos's strength and self-sufficiency also offer a positive image that has resonance for contemporary viewers, and it is his strength and determination that communicate the overall optimistic tone and outcome of the story. His character transmits positive messages and images that express both an immigrant-centered and immigrant-sympathetic viewpoint. (p. 105)

In stark contrast, Carlitos' father is presented as weak, subdued and cowardly. During the only scene where the character emerges, the son finds the father, invites him for food, pays for the meal, and arranges to meet with him to travel to the mother in the hope of reuniting them. The man never shows up, leaving the boy's hopes of a reunited family destroyed and relying on Enrique, a stranger, to guide him to be reunited with his mother. The character of Enrique, in *La misma luna*, serves as the personification of male transformation and as a subversion of the border canon. At the beginning of the movie he demonstrates the selfish and obsessive desire to cross the border, get a job, and look out for number one. However when it comes to Carlitos being taken away by the police, and losing the opportunity of finding family again, Enrique chooses to forfeit his freedom and everything that he has worked for so that Carlitos may have a chance at being reunited with his mother depicting the triumph of self-sacrifice and love over selfishness.

Carlitos and Enrique are the main positive male images in the movie, with a few supporting Latino roles also falling into this category, but overall the problems encountered by Carlitos on his journey are caused by Latino male stereotypes and Americans in the forms of drug addicts and pimps.

*The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada* offers an interesting perspective on male and female roles and their sexual interactions in the social milieu of the borderlands. Latinos and non-Latinos are all behaving in the same ways, showing that at fundamental levels there are no differences between us. Married women have multiple lovers, and spouses of the border patrol have affairs with migrant workers while Mexican women have affairs with migrants passing through town. All these women deny that this is going on while actively participating in it. Men are used and discarded when they are no longer satisfying. It is perhaps this attitude that explains the scene of married men masturbating while on patrol, a distraction which results in the accidental shooting of Melquiades. There are also multiple allusions to the impotence of men and bouts of erectile dysfunction which serve to underscore the powerlessness and inabilities of the males to perform throughout this movie. In sharp contrast to the majority of men, Melquiades takes on almost mythical proportions, first as a friend, worker, lover, and finally as a larger than life presence being dragged around the countryside.

After being bitten by a rattlesnake, Norton curls up in a small cave and is found by a group of migrants crossing into Texas. After a bit of discussion, these undertake to save his life and one of them guides Norton and Perkins to be saved by a curandera in Mexico. When he is better they continue their journey and meet a group of cowboys watching television who have killed a bear that was killing livestock, in a twist, the Mexicans give food and drink to the poor gringos who obviously need it more than they do. In all these cases the Latino males are portrayed as sensitive caring human beings that help and care for others, and not exemplars of the macho or gangster stereotype typically associated with the Latino male.

## **Conclusion**

We have seen that Latino stereotyping is present in film, and that it is still used as narrative short-cut by directors to create stock characters and populate films with believable characters. In many cases this over simplification and categorization of Latinos serves hegemonic agendas to segregate and devalue a population that is gaining momentum in the United States and is a threat to those in power. Berg (2002) underscores the dynamic of stereotyping and its relationship with existing society.

To return to the matter of group interactions and stereotypes, sociologists have found that stereotyping is dynamic. It fluctuates based on the social and power relationship between the in-group and the out-group. Depending on the power relationship between these groups, one of three different stereotyping scenarios can arise: cooperative, stratified, or oppositional. (Part One, "Intergroup Relations", para. 1)

As he suggests, there are movies that clearly support the propagation of roles assigned to the Latino population for political and economic gains, but it must be acknowledged that there is also a film tradition that is trying to tear down the stereotypes and rather than enforcing the feelings of otherness, it is making an effort to show the full human spectrum that Latinos possess. The artistic community, made up of an increasing proportion of Latinos, is working to balance out the image of themselves and to challenge the otherness that the Latino stereotype has been imbued with over the years. Berg cites Armando Rendon and Domingo Nick Reyes, in the statement presented to the U.S. Congress in 1971: "Chicanos no longer will

stand to be stereotyped—the days of the ‘bandido’ and the sleepy Mexican caricature are gone. We are making demands of every institution of society and every agency of government” (Part One, “Latino Critics on Stereotyping”, para. 11). Film as a medium is allowed to present what is not, to exaggerate, and to flip roles and stereotypes. This process serves to entertain, mock, and challenge the status quo therefore recreating, transforming, and redefining what is “normal” while responding to Rendon and Reyes’ manifesto. In the case of the image of Latinos in recent films, the image has been evolving to be more pro-immigrant and pro-Latino.

*La misma luna* and *The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada* deconstruct various stereotypes by offering radical twists on the typical borderland story and characters, other movies like *Bordertown*, *The Backyard*, *Al otro lado*, are more subtle in their subversion of stereotypical roles. While many movies still resort to stereotypical Latino roles throughout, these movies reduce their participation mostly to supporting and subordinate roles, mostly as antagonists and therefore constantly challenged by the subversive counter roles of the protagonists of the story. What Connely (2012) states about *La misma luna* can be said about the new positive Latino image emerging in contemporary cinema as it “affirms the strength and legitimacy of Mexican culture in the United States, and conveys a sense of community.” (p. 105)

The world we live in drives the film industry, but the industry at the same time, has the power to shape the future. The border that was seen as an alien landscape is slowly being transformed into a friendlier place through the evolution of borderland cinematographic representation (Deleyto et. al., 2012) and popular culture that is creating, subverting and deconstructing sociocultural norms. The Latino male who was once only seen as a bandido or

Don Juan is being subverted via images of more sensitive and intelligent men. The Latino female is transforming from a desired sultry sex object to a woman in her own right, strong and an anchor to contemporary society on both sides of the border. Ancient indigenous knowledge and practices are being presented as having value and merit as opposed to being devalued as primitive superstitions. While stereotyping is a neurological process that is unavoidable (Fiske, 2002; Masters, 1992), and can reach extreme levels of dehumanization (Harris & Fiske, 2006), what is within our control is how we choose to shape the image our brain associates with race, gender, class, sexuality and every other form of differentiation (Wheeler & Fiske, 2005).

This paper exploring the subversion of stereotyping in a small selection of movies about border crossing points towards the need to take a more systematic and comprehensive look at the cinematographic production examining the role that Latino stereotypes, and their subversion, play in the creation of North American culture. There is a clear distinction between stereotypes from the mid-20th century as studied by Berg, and the Latino image at the beginning of the 21st century. An interdisciplinary look at these movies points towards future research in character development differences between Hollywood and non-Hollywood films, the roles locations and actors play in reinforcing or subverting stereotypes, and the ways in which linguistic differences and hybridity are presented on screen.

The imaging of Latinos in contemporary cinematographic tradition, and how it enforces or subverts stereotypes and the disparaging views typically associated with them, should be examined as a growing expression of how Latinos are starting to represent themselves. The film industry is obviously going through a major transition as Latino producers, writers, and



actors gain a foothold in Hollywood and begin to (re)create themselves, their world, and their sociocultural milieu. At the same time, we are also starting to better understand the neurobiological underpinnings of how stereotypes work and how they can be mitigated in a globalized context. While there is still a long way to go before Latinos are able to freely speak for themselves and express who they are, as we see through the acceptance of Latin artistic expression in our globalized world, that time may come sooner rather than later.

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<sup>1</sup> California: 36,961,664, Nevada 2,643,085, Utah: 2,784,572, Arizona: 6,595,778, Nuevo México: 2,009,671, Colorado: 5,024,748, and Texas: 24,782,302 – 2009 U.S. Census

<sup>2</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Migrant\\_deaths\\_along\\_the\\_Mexico–United\\_States\\_border](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Migrant_deaths_along_the_Mexico–United_States_border)