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Language, Space and the Evolving Chicano Family in Nava's *My Family*

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Abstract:

This article focuses on *My Family* as an outstanding example of Chicano cinema that was successful in reaching both minority and so called mainstream audiences. In particular, the study explores the film's use of language (specifically, code-switching), its representation of space (the film is set almost exclusively in East L.A.) and its representation of the family (the film depicts three generations of a Chicano family). These categories are examined in turn to determine the extent to which *My Family* enacts a dialectic between accessibility (openness to the dominant culture) and inaccessibility (the assertion of difference), concluding that the film rejects separatism and assimilation in favour of integration.

Keywords: chicano family, language, space



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1) Preliminary remarks

My Family (1995) is a film directed by Chicano director Gregory Nava. It was written by Nava and his wife, Anna Thomas, and produced by Thomas¹ The film depicts three generations of a Chicano family living in East Los Angeles and is set in three separate time periods – the 1920s/ 1930s, the late 1950s and the 1980s. The main characters are played by Latino actors from a variety of backgrounds and, given the temporal shifts in the film, most of the family members are played by several actors. According to Rosa Linda Fregoso, Chicano cinema “concerns the emergence of a film culture *by, about, and for* Chicanas and Chicanos” (original emphasis, 1993, xiv).² Although few Chicano films will be all of these things at once, *My Family* arguable fulfils all three criteria – ‘by’, ‘about’ and ‘for’ – even if there is some disagreement concerning the extent to which it is ‘for’ Chicanas/os. The film is part of a larger body of films, increasingly made by Latino filmmakers, that have addressed Latino relations in the United States and ethnic and regional relations along the United States-Mexican border as well as attempted the difficult task of reaching both minority and dominant audiences (Marambio and Tew 2006: 476).

Clearly, unless Chicano cinema is intended as an assertion of difference aimed exclusively at Chicanas/os, it needs to address a dual audience (minority and dominant). This leads to complex, competing impulses that reflect the wider issue of

whether (or how far) the politics of Chicano identity entail a bid for Mexican American inclusion in ‘the American dream,’ or conversely, a radical rejection of its premises (Jankowski quoted in Belgrad 2004: 249).

Belgrad believes that, in cultural terms, the inclusionary impulse translates into a celebration of cultural hybridity that rejects older assimilationist models as well as left-leaning discourse that emphasizes the historical asymmetries and social inequalities that give meaning to cultural difference in favour of a border-zone where identities mix and enrich one another. Nonetheless, as Shohat and Stam point out (1994: 43), a celebration of synthesis and hybridity

¹ Anna Thomas was born in Germany to a Polish family and moved to the United States as a small child (Anna Thomas Tribute Blogspot 2009). Various producers came on board to help complete the project, including Francis Ford Coppola.

² Essentially, this is the position outlined in one of the first articles to argue for a Chicano counter-cinema and the possibility of Chicano self-representation, Jason C. Johansen's 1979 ‘Notes on Chicano Cinema’ (1992 [1979]).

per se risks endorsing the *fait accompli* of colonial violence: in other words historically hybridity is power-laden and asymmetrical. Precisely because of the unequal power relations involved, assimilation can frequently be viewed as treason and accessibility as capitulation provoking members of minority groups to insist on their ‘otherness’. Consequently, much contemporary Chicano cultural production can be seen as cultural negotiation with conflicting impulses towards ‘inclusion’ and ‘otherness’ simultaneously present (Ybarra-Frausto 1991: 147- 48). Through an analysis of its use of language, its representation of space and its representation of family, this article examines how *My Family* negotiates these tensions between accessibility and inaccessibility.

2) Code-switching in *My Family*

As Shohat and Stam note (1994: 191), languages are potent symbols of collective identity and as such frequently mark the boundaries of national and cultural differences. In the abstract, languages do not exist in hierarchies of value but in lived experience languages, in fact, operate within hierarchies of power (Shohat/Stam 1994: 191). Code-switching, which can be defined as “the alternate use of two languages or linguistic varieties within the same utterance or during the same conversation” (Hoffmann 1991: 110), is one response to such hierarchies since it involves retaining use of the vernacular and the associated affirmation of identity, alongside gaining command of the dominant language as a survival strategy. As both the narrator’s voice-over and the dialogue of *My Family* employ linguistic code-switching, it is worth examining how and to what effect this strategy is used in the film.

The film as a whole is a visual representation of a written memoir by the eldest brother of the Sánchez family, Paco. Based on the sheet of paper seen in his typewriter, we can take it that Paco’s ‘book’ is written primarily in English, consistent with the use of English as the dominant code by most Latina/o writers (Torres 207: 77). This leaves open the question of whether or not his parents, José and María can be understood to have spoken mainly in English – for instance, to help their children learn English – only switching to Spanish from time to time, or whether they in fact would have spoken mainly Spanish and the use of English interspersed with Spanish words and phrases is Paco’s strategy to convey to his ‘readers’ the linguistic world in which his parents lived. In the case of the second and third generations of the family, the use of English and Spanish can be seen as a reflection of the linguistic reality of bilingual code-switching by many Chicanos and Latinos. The forms code-switching takes are both intersentential (different sentences within the same conversation

spoken in different languages) and intrasentential (switching between languages within a single sentence). Both intersentential and intrasentential code-switching are used in this film albeit they have somewhat different functions. Intersentential switching is relatively redundant (i.e. it is usually used to ‘repeat’ the Spanish meaning in the English dialogue and *vice versa*), while intrasentential switching relates mainly to expressive functions and includes terms of affection (*carnal/a, hermano/a, hijo, mijo, vato*, etc.), friendly exhortations (*ándale, apúrate*, etc.), insults (*puto, cabrón, pendejo*) and, to a lesser extent, words and phrases used to refer to law enforcement institutions and agencies (*la pinta, la Migra, la placa*) and to Anglo culture (*pinche*). One example is the confrontation between José and Chucho with José saying that “I didn’t raise my children to be *sinvergüenzas*...” and Chucho shouting back “Fuck *la dignidad*. Fuck your struggle...”, when intrasentential code switching signals their extreme anger.

Overall, the use of code-switching draws attention to those segments of the population living between cultures and languages and stresses the fact that the Spanish language is an intrinsic part of Latina/o life and, therefore, of the multilingual reality of the U.S. Although using Spanish can be considered a political act (for example during the proliferation of English-only laws in the U.S.; Torres 2007: 92), in any analysis of accessibility versus inaccessibility it is also useful to examine *how* Spanish is incorporated into the dialogue. A number of the points raised by Lourdes Torres in her discussion of Latino literature are relevant to language use in *My Family*, since she contends that most of the Spanish used in Latina/o fiction is easily understood by a monolingual speaker of English and is in fact included with this monolingual reader in mind (2007: 79). In Chicano literature, code-switching is achieved by using Spanish words whose meaning is obvious from the context (e.g. foods and place names) and words familiar due to their circulation in popular culture (e.g. the Spanish words for members of the family) without any translation, as well as the use of Spanish words in the text followed by an English translation. The film really only uses the first two strategies and rarely provides direct explanations for words (one of the few examples of an English-language explanation involves the Aztec word *Cihuateteo*). In the main, *My Family* employs strategies of redundancy (e.g. by using Spanish words whose meaning is obvious from the context or, as mentioned earlier, repetition of content) and explication (see the subtitling of the scene when José first arrives in L.A. and of the scenes set in Mexico). As in the case of the Chicano literature discussed by Torres, such strategies allow monolingual speakers of English easy access to the film. Despite the potentially positive aspects of this approach – reaching a wider audience – an alternative analysis is that these strategies permit

“the reader [viewer] to sense that s/he is entering the linguistic world of the bilingual Latino/as without having to make any effort” (Torres 2007: 81). Nonetheless, in spite of the use of subtitles and redundancy, the scenes set in Mexico are not subtitled in full (some phrases are omitted) and there are various instances when Spanish-language dialogue is not ‘repeated’ in English. Consequently, while overall the linguistic strategies employed facilitate access to English speakers to accommodate all potential audiences, the use of Spanish also signals the linguistic reality of the central characters and insists on some degree of inaccessibility to non-Spanish speakers.

3) Representations of Space

As a consequence of unequal power relations between the Chicano community and the dominant community, Belgrad argues that Chicano art is “never just about the transgression of boundaries, but also about an awareness of those boundaries” (2004: 251) and so, not surprisingly, the representation of space in the film functions to reference both political and socio-economic boundaries. At the macro level, the film raises the issue of the U.S. border and the increasing focus on policing it, with the implied background of ongoing migration into the U.S. from Mexico and other Latin American countries.³ At the beginning of the film, *El Californio* belongs to a generation who lived in L.A. before it became part of the United States and when José travels from Mexico to join him in the 1920s, the border is not an obstacle. Subsequently, however, it was to be policed with greater intensity and this is reflected in the film when, in the 1930s, María (a U.S. citizen) is illegally deported to Mexico. This deportation is later paralleled by Isabel’s threatened deportation (Isabel is not a U.S. citizen, but her life is in danger if she returns to El Salvador). At the micro level (the city of L.A.), the key image structuring the divisions and boundaries within L.A. and relating them to the city’s dependence on Chicano labour is the image of the bridge between East and West Los Angeles that opens the film.⁴ The voice-over accompanying the second appearance of the bridge (which follows José’s journey from Mexico and his arrival in L.A.) specifies that “no one crosses from the west to go into the barrio.” Subsequently, the bulk of the film is set in East LA. The few scenes set elsewhere relate to characters working in West L.A., to Jimmy in

³ As Nava says in interview, the U.S. is a nation of immigrants but although U.S. society is based on its diversity, the central mainstream is Anglo with resultant potential for culture clash (West 1995).

⁴ It is worth mentioning that the film was released shortly after the 1994 bid to reinforce borders via California Proposition 187 prohibiting undocumented immigrants from receiving health care, public education or other state services. In 1997 Proposition 187 was declared unconstitutional and State of California appeals against this ruling were later withdrawn (see Note 7, Marambio/ Tew 2006: 491).

prison as well as when he collects and marries Isabel, while there are also some more extended scenes set in Mexico (José's and, later, María's journeys). One interpretation of this representation of space is that it denotes the *barrio* as a kind of prison, moreover, one that is subject to official neglect – e.g. the unpaved road, the inferior facilities in the hospital where Isabel dies and the urban decay visible in the scenes portraying Paco living and working in the old family home. In this reading, the dearth of images of access to the wider city, in other words, access to upward mobility challenges the belief that all U.S. citizens have equal access to the American Dream. However, it can also be argued that the decision to focus on the *barrio* operates in more positive ways, re-coding the spatial distinctions in L.A. In the first instance, it brings mainstream viewers, who we have been informed never go there, across the bridge into East L.A. Once 'there', the representation of East L.A. differs markedly both from its usual representation in cinema as a criminalized ghetto and its close association with gang culture in the wider popular perception,⁵ because the chief focus is on the domestic and on the co-existence of different cultural codes. The Sánchez house and garden together represent the family's resourcefulness, adaptability and willingness to embrace a mixing of cultural codes or *mestizaje* (Baugh 2003: 15), evidenced in the manner in which the house and the space around it contain signifiers of both Mexican and U.S. cultures. Indoors, such signifiers include the numerous religious images that adorn the house and the scenes when members of the family watch *I Love Lucy*, with a specific reference in the dialogue to Desi Arnaz (pointedly, the family are watching this assimilated Cuban when Chucho is shot i.e. permanently excluded). Outdoors, the family home acquires a picket fence but corn and beans are grown in the garden, local children play baseball and the second eldest son of the Sánchez family, Chucho, polishes his low-rider and dances the Mambo. Despite this overall emphasis on everyday, domestic life crime is not totally absent. Chucho becomes involved first in selling drugs, and then in a knifing after he is attacked by another *pachuco* on the dance floor.⁶ This dance hall scene is another instance of the mixing of cultural codes within the *barrio* because it combines Mexican visuals (the murals on the wall) with 1950s U.S. pop music on the soundtrack. Prison, too, is portrayed as a reality in the *barrio* since Jimmy does

⁵ In relation to their representation on screen, despite some changes since the 1980s, stereotypical images of Chicanos reach a mass audience much more frequently than do non-stereotypical images (Christine List cited in Baugh 2003: 12). In relation to popular perceptions, Carlos E Cortés describes an incident on a popular television game show to demonstrate how the dominant culture views the Chicano community as synonymous with gangs (1992: pages 94 and 95).

⁶ Though glossed as meaning a gang member by the policemen hunting Chucho, the term *pachuco* refers to at least as much to the subculture (which included clothing styles, tastes in music and modes of speech) developed by young Chicano males in the south western United States. The phenomenon emerged during the 1930s and 1940s and declined in the 1960s.

two stints in jail. However, the narrative specifically links criminal activity and imprisonment to “all the hate, all the rage and all the injustice”, and Jimmy’s initial involvement in crime is specifically linked to having witnessed Chucho’s murder when he was a boy.⁷ His second brush with the law follows Isabel’s death as a result of what he believes is negligence due to her background (“It’s just one spic more or less”). Also, Paco’s voice-over claims quite convincingly that if Jimmy had had more money and less attitude a good lawyer could have got him out of his first custodial sentence. Ultimately, the only real crime the audience witnesses taking place in East L.A. is when the police shoot Chucho without making any effort to arrest, question or charge him, a killing that takes place beneath the bridge between East and West L.A. (making it a signifier of division in this instance). In a further blending of cultural codes, both Chucho’s death and later that of Isabel are overtly linked to mythic Aztec beliefs. Despite being a staunch Catholic, María believes that Chucho, originally saved by a ‘magic’ ritual, is finally claimed by the river spirit and that Isabel becomes one of the *Cihuateteo*, the spirits of women who die in childbirth.⁸

Towards the end of the film, the most assimilated Sánchez son, Guillermo/Memo (who has attended U.C.L.A., lives in West L.A. and now insists on being called William/Bill) brings his Anglo-American fiancée and her parents to visit his family in a symbolic reversal of the usual direction of travel across the bridge. This episode works on two main levels. For one thing, it portrays Memo’s prospective in-laws (and by extension many Anglo-Americans) as ignorant about Memo’s (and Chicanos’) background. It also portrays Memo as having rejected his origins and acts as an indirect reaffirmation of the family’s right to their history and customs. At the same time, an unfavourable comparison between Memo’s future in-laws and another Anglo-American character, Isabel’s employer, Gloria emerges. Whereas Gloria (who can be interpreted as a surrogate for an open-minded audience) is not necessarily knowledgeable about Isabel’s background, she is concerned, willing to learn about El Salvador and to help Isabel stay in the U.S., and she has no hesitation in contradicting her friend’s prejudiced views about Isabel. In contrast, Memo’s future father-in-law focuses on cultural boundaries: “So you folks are all from Mexico, huh?” As viewers will be aware, and as his prospective in-laws ought to know, all the Sánchez children except Chucho were born in L.A. and have never

⁷ The term *cholo* emerged in the 1980s to refer to Chicano youths who adopted a countercultural identity similar to that of the *pachuchos* of an earlier generation. The fact that Jimmy is referred to as a *cholo* emphasizes the lasting impact Chucho’s death had on him.

⁸ In interview, Nava stresses this syncretic relationship between the pre-Columbian and the Catholic in the film and also that the film has an underlying pre-Columbian mythic structure (West 1995).

been to Mexico.⁹ Meanwhile, Memo's attempts to reinterpret the family's stories (including Jimmy's prison sentence and the fact that *El Californio* is buried in the garden) to versions he considers more palatable to his future in-laws, jar because they suggest he is ashamed and expects his family to alter their account of their history. In short, this rather negative portrayal of Memo, his fiancée and her parents serves to promote integration rather than assimilation, and links back to the ambiguous meaning of the bridges which stress the socio-economic division in their *mise-en-scène* of one-way traffic but also invite viewers to overcome the traditional boundaries.

4) The Representation of Family

Three factors are of particular importance in the analysis of the film's representation of family. Firstly, the concept of family is one that has potential to make the film more accessible to a mainstream audience by stressing common ground with the dominant culture. However, it also has potential to be used to assert difference because the Chicano family is a concept that has consistently been claimed by Chicano nationalists as a site of resistance (Fregoso 2003: 74). A third, related, factor is persistent mainstream social science interpretations of the Chicano family that emphasize the negative aspects of machismo as its defining principle and characterize it as pathological.¹⁰ The stereotype of male violence and criminality described in social science literature is linked, moreover, to the more general issue of stereotyping of Latino characters in U.S. cinema, so widespread that a large body of work by Chicano and Latino scholars on film representations of Latinos focuses on negative stereotypes.¹¹ This concern with stereotypes is directly related to issues of power (the extent to which the group represented controls its own representation), and to the burden of representation or the situation whereby:

every subaltern performer/ role is seen as synecdochically summing up a vast but putatively homogenous community. Representations of dominant groups, on the other hand, are seen not as allegorical but as "naturally" diverse (Shohat and Stam 1994: 183).

⁹ At this point, Chucho has been dead for many years but having left Mexico as a baby he would not have remembered ever having been there.

¹⁰ For an overview of social science 'myths' about the Chicano family see Baugh 2003 (especially pages 4-9). Fregoso too discusses how the culture of poverty model was hijacked by U.S. social scientists to stigmatize the lower classes in general and Chicanos and Latinos in particular (2003: 80-84).

¹¹ The first book to be entirely dedicated to Chicano cinema and to the depiction of Chicanos and other Latinos in U.S. and Mexican cinemas, *Chicano Cinema: Research, Reviews, and Resources*, was edited by Gary Keller and included a chapter by him on the image of the Chicano in film (1985). See, also the essays in Part One of the collection edited by Noriega (1992), the chapters in the first two sections of Berg 2002 or Darfen Davis' overview of Hollywood representations of Latinos (2007).

Consequently, stereotypes are not an error of perception but rather a form of social control (Shohat and Stam 1994: 198) which implies that diverse representations of Chicano characters can be interpreted as disruptive of established mechanisms of social control. Despite claims to the contrary in Fregoso's analysis (Chapter 4, 2003), the film's representation of family is diverse and inclusive as opposed to monolithic and exclusive, and it is not predicated on male dominance and female submission.

The family established by José and María conforms to both the Mexican and Anglo-American cultural norms, promoting identification in both main target audiences. However, despite the fact that at different points in the narrative they each articulate traditional views about marriage and family, the portrayal of their marriage clearly transcends the stereotypical representation of the Chicano family. José and María work together to bring up their children and this is reflected in the way they refer to them as *jefe/ jefito* and *jefita* (masculine and feminine versions of 'the boss'). This equality challenges Fregoso's assertion that although *My Family* places María Sánchez at the centre of the narrative, her lack of narrative agency reinforces gender inequality (2003: 77). María is totally committed to her family and, far from being passive and accepting her fate, shows great spirit in returning to them after she is illegally deported to Mexico. José's portrayal, too, diverges from the stereotypical macho Chicano. He works hard to provide for his wife and children, is affectionate towards them and regrets his one authoritarian act (throwing Chucho out for drug dealing). Indeed, the couple's portrayal is quite close to the egalitarian relationship between mother and father that, as early as 1975, Baca Zinn argued underlies the surface of patriarchal rule in Chicano families (1975: 26).¹² Although María and José attempt to pass on traditional Mexican values to their offspring, as they grow to adulthood most of their children adopt values that are at variance with both traditional Mexican values and those of dominant Anglo culture. According to Fregoso the "definiton of familia as central to the cultural identity of Chicana/os as a people is based on excluding many from its fold" (2003: 86). However, in the main, their parents' reactions to their children's non-traditional values reveal an acceptance of difference and a willingness to find a place for everyone within the family. That this is so is illustrated by the fact that, of the six Sánchez children, Irene is the first and ultimately the only one to enter a traditional marriage and establish a traditional family since Isabel's death prevents Jimmy from doing so. By contrast, Paco does not marry and raise a family and there is no indication that he ever has any type of sexual relationship. He also joins the Navy (a homosocial

¹² Baca Zinn's states early in the article that "the passive, submissive, Mexican woman is a creation of social scientists and journalists" (1975: 19)

environment), and when he leaves it opts to risk becoming a writer supplementing his income by working in Irene's restaurant. It is certainly possible to interpret this character as homosexual, in which case it is worth stressing that he is always included in family events and made to feel welcome, because this could be seen as another indication of the family's openness to alternative life styles. Memo, whose career as a lawyer is a source of pride to his parents, rises above the working-class status of his family and this is reflected in his choice of bride. Whatever their feelings about him 'marrying out' because he has assimilated rather than integrated, the family are willing to facilitate him staying in contact and to welcome Memo's fiancée and her parents into their home and even to alter their family stories for his sake.

The characterization of the remaining siblings is more complex and they present their parents with greater challenges. Contrary to Fregoso's contention that "the film downplays the significance of female voices within la familia, depriving women of significant agency" (2003: 75) there are strong female characters in the second generation also and they have an important effect on a male character (for whom it is not a sign of weakness to listen to a woman). Indeed, according to Baugh (2003: 17) these characters initiate/ prefigure an important shift that is more fully realized in *Mi vida loca* (1994) and *Selena* (1997). The first of these characters is Toni, the second eldest sister of the family, who initially rejects the institution of marriage altogether to become a nun. This is because 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 (Nava in West 1995). Subsequently, while working as a missionary and political activist in Central America she leaves her order and marries an Anglo-American ex-priest, David. María faints from the shock of this revelation. Despite this, both parents immediately accept the marriage, with María saying not to worry about her and José saying that if it is all right with God, it is all right with them. Like her mother before her, Toni is a strong character and demonstrates this by going against the Church and her parents' values (leaving her order; marrying but not having children) and the U.S. establishment (the immigrants' rights centre; persuading Jimmy to marry Isabel for the good of the cause). She also exercises a beneficial female influence on Jimmy and in so doing initiates the process of his transformation from *cholo* to, eventually, a husband and father. Although he marries Isabel to "use the system to fuck the system" (Toni's words), Jimmy soon finds that she is another feisty female and one who is not willing to play with the institution of marriage (according to the voice-over, Isabel is perhaps the first person not to allow Toni to "boss" her). No matter how Jimmy protests, Isabel continues to return to his apartment and insinuate

herself into his life. Ultimately, in the scene where she prevails on him to dance with her Isabel seduces him and, in a moving love scene, they learn they have both experienced traumatic loss. When Isabel becomes pregnant Jimmy starts to behave more like his own father, José, by getting a job in West L.A. However, Isabel's death precipitates a return to his old lifestyle. Through this character and that of Chucho, the film attempts to redress the systematic depiction of Latinos as drug pushers, gang members, criminals and *pintos* (Baugh 2003: 11). Baugh's study analyses *American Me* (1992) as well as *My Family* on the basis that both films interrogate notions of Chicano masculinity, Chicana femininity and types of family albeit in contrasting ways. He argues that unlike *My Family*, *American Me* equates gang culture in the *barrios* with the dysfunction of the Chicano family in manner that exemplifies contemporary mainstream film (2003).¹³ By contrast, through the characters of Jimmy and Chucho, *My Family* challenges such stereotypes while not eliding the issues of crime and doing time in prison. After Isabel dies, Jimmy intentionally gets sent back to prison, abdicating his responsibilities and abandoning his new-born son to the care of his parents (despite this rejection, his parents remain concerned about him). Meanwhile, the narrative portrays Carlitos as always in trouble. When Jimmy is released from prison José stresses that Carlitos needs his father, not the money Jimmy offers. Belatedly, Jimmy decides he wants to be involved in his son's life, but Carlitos rejects him forcing Jimmy to negotiate his role as father. Fregoso, following Huaco-Nuzum, contends that the film reworks the classic oedipal crisis by emphasizing oedipal conflicts between fathers and sons (José and Chucho; Jimmy and Carlitos) ultimately reinstating patriarchal authority (2003: 75). However, José and Chucho are shown to regret their estrangement, and the manner in which Jimmy addresses his conflict with Carlitos implies that this character negates the traditional pattern of machismo passed from father to son, and that he learns an alternative type of familial leadership from both his father José and his son Carlitos (Baugh 2003: 18). We infer that, in so doing, he has finally broken free of the effects of Chucho's death.

Chucho is the family member who most closely conforms to the stereotypes of macho violence and criminality associated with Chicano males and he is involved in drug dealing and macho stand-offs with rival gangs. Chucho rejects his parents' values (from their tastes in music to their work ethic) and decides that money is all that matters in the U.S., no matter how you get it. Yet despite his being a macho *pachuco*, Chucho's characterization is nuanced and he is shown to have a caring side: his willingness to allow Butch Mejía insult him for his

¹³ Baugh also identifies *Blood in, Blood out: Bound by Honor* (1993) and *Mi vida loca* (1994) as films that offer some negative and stereotypical Chicano representations (2003: 3).

sister's sake on the day of Irene's wedding; the scenes where he teaches a group of children to dance the Mambo; or his final conversation with Jimmy, when he asks after first his mother and then his father, repeating "Tell him ..." but then changes the subject. We never know what he was going to say, but it seems likely he wanted to say that he was sorry or that he loved his father just as, in the very next scene, José says he wishes he could hold Chucho again and forgive him. Moreover, his life is given a positive value by portraying him as having a "special" mythic dimension. When María tells José she is pregnant he replies that it will be a special child because he saw an "angel" in the clouds on the day the baby was conceived. Later, on the journey back from Mexico, Chucho is nearly drowned – an event associated in María's mind with the evil river spirit (the owl/ *buho* she sees is associated in Aztec mythology with death and destruction). Although her baby is saved, María believes his life has been on borrowed time until the river spirit finally claimed him (and, indeed, Chucho hears and sees an owl shortly before he is shot). Near the end of the film, José picks up a photograph of Chucho and becomes pensive. Immediately afterwards José looks at the sky and sees the same "angel" cloud formation he saw when Chucho was conceived. This comforts him and assures the audience that Chucho was special by inscribing him in an alternative reality, that of Mexican spirituality. Consequently, as Baugh argues, "*My Family* not only reveals Chucho as a compassionate member of the Chicano family and community, but also reconfigures the pachuco stereotype" and actually subverts "the stereotypes of the macho male and Chicano family" (2003: 16).

5) Concluding Remarks

Overall, the use of the family as a character in the film provides a point of reference for most potential audiences but, at the same time, the diversity of the characters and the narrative evaluation of their life choices value integration over assimilation, while the allusions to Mexican spirituality insist on some degree of inaccessibility to non-Chicano audiences. Hence the representation of the family replicates the patterns already identified with respect to language use and the representation of space.

On balance, what emerges from this three-fold analysis of *My Family* is that although the film incorporates both elements that emphasize accessibility and inaccessibility it avoids defining the characters by their race and inherited culture at the expense of their individuality, aspirations and talents. Instead, it celebrates what is shared across cultures to promote

integration in preference to either 'nationalist' separatism or complete assimilation into U.S. society.

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