
Thea Pitman
(University of Leeds, UK)

Will I ever become a ‘real’ Chicano? Will I ever ‘arrive’? Will ‘they’ – the border guards of identity – ever let me? (Guillermo Gómez-Peña 2000: 12)

1) Introduction: Transnationalism, National Identity, and Chicano Cinema

In their compelling introduction to Transnationalism from Below, Michael Peter Smith and Luis Eduardo Guarnizo argue that some of the experiences of subaltern transnational actors examined in the chapters of their anthology ‘question the hopeful expectations of those who argue that transnational practices and identities constitute “counter-narratives of the nation” that subvert essentialist nationalist identities’ – their critical characterisation of Homi K. Bhabha and others’ take on the issue (Smith and Guarnizo, 1998: 22). They then go on to observe that, ‘If anything, these cases suggest the reinscription of group identities by transnational actors “from below” as efforts to recapture a lost sense of belonging by recreating imagined communities [that are] often no less essentialized than the hegemonic projects of nation states. Identities forged “from below” are not inherently subversive or counter-hegemonic’ (Smith and Guarnizo, 1998: 22-23).

In this analysis of the identitarian tendencies of subaltern transnational groups Smith and Guarnizo underscore a real problem concerning the formulation, and subsequently the analysis, of transnational identities that can also be discerned in the discourse on identity produced by much of the Chicano community in the USA. The Chicano situation is arguably more complex than that of other, more obviously homogeneous, transnational groups of subaltern subjects in the USA – many Chicanas/os claim at least varying degrees of indigeneity to the South-West of the United States and there is sometimes tension between such sub-groups and those comprised of.

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1 An earlier version of this article was published as ‘Policing the Borders of Chicano Cinema: The Critical Reception of Allison Anders’ Mi vida loca / My Crazy Life (1994) by the Chicano Community’ in New Cinemas, 8:2 (2010), 71-86. My thanks go to the editors of New Cinemas for their kind permission to reproduce and to the anonymous readers of both versions of the article for their insightful comments.

2 Nb. the quotation within the quotation is from Homi K. Bhabha, ‘DissemiNation: Time, Narrative and the Margins of the Modern Nation’, in Nation and Narration, ed. by Homi K. Bhabha (New York: Routledge, 1990), 291-322, 300. Néstor García Canclini also ‘contends that transnational migration and communication have led us to abandon “obessions with the immaculate conception of authentic national...cultures”’ (García Canclini, Culturas híbridas [1992], quoted in Stock 2006: 158).
more recent immigrants from Mexico; furthermore, contemporary Chicano identity discourse is often premised on its representing a ‘third way’, countering both assimilation to the Euro-American mainstream as well as nostalgic recreation of ‘old Mexican’ lifeways. Nevertheless, the cultural production and associated critical discourse of the Chicano community broadly conceived (i.e. comprising all those of Mexican ancestry resident in the United States, no matter how recent and exclusive that ancestry nor how temporary their residential status), both in terms of that production’s most explicit messages and the way in which cultural products themselves are put together, has often provided at least as much evidence of a drive for the (re-)creation of essentialised, ‘cultural nationalist’ imagined communities that instate their own kinds of norms and hegemonies (Aztlán, la raza de bronce, and associated attributes), as of a desire to revel in the carnivalesque non-essentialising transcultural possibilities of a more accommodating form of transnational culture hailed by Bhabha.³

In this article I consider the Chicano community as a whole (film critics, audiences, gang members) as an example of a subaltern transnational community with respect to the United States mainstream and I attempt to explore the degree to which Smith and Guarnizo’s caveats regarding the nature of transnational identities hold true in one, most revealing, example. Where appropriate, I also unpack some of the homogenising over-generalisations about ‘whole communities’ made in the above statement of position.

To be sure, the theorisation of Chicano identity is a complex matter. While the evidence of essentialist arguments has perhaps become more nuanced, less strident as the years since the 1960s Chicano Civil Rights Movement have passed, it has not disappeared altogether. Many self-aware Chicana/o academics have warned against the neo-essentialising dynamic to be found in so many expressions of Chicano cultural identity, past and present. Nevertheless, some also recognise an on-going need for at least a certain amount of Spivakian ‘strategic essentialism’ to counter the ‘upsurge of conservative ideology’ in contemporary US society (Fregoso and Chabram 1990: 203-212, 210),⁴ while others are explicit about how difficult it has been, and

³ It might also be noted that when Bhabha subsequently wants to reference a Chicano source for such a form of transnational subaltern subjectivity as seen in cultural production, he almost always picks the work of Guillermo Gómez-Peña (Bhabha 1996: 9-10), a Mexican-born performance artist who depicts himself as most often at odds with the wider Chicano community over such issues (see epigraph).

⁴ Their caveat comes in a special issue of Cultural Studies (4:3 [1990]) dedicated to examining the ways in which Chicano/a intellectuals choose to describe and/or attempt to ‘speak for’ the Chicano community, particularly the more subaltern social strata of that community: ‘Chicana/o Cultural Representations: Reframing Alternative Critical Discourses’.
continues to be, to find a stable locus from which to articulate a Chicano critical discourse, and recognise the inevitable role that essentialism will play in such positionings:

Chicano scholars [...] must situate their critique in the uncharted spaces between cultural affirmation and the decentred subject of poststructuralist and postmodern theories. The result has often been a complex, strategic sense of place and identity in which the Chicano critical and artistic text shifts between cultural nationalism, postnationalism, and postmodernism. (Noriega 1992: xiii)

Yet despite their engagement with the complexities of the theorisation of Chicano identity, these same critics still struggle, on occasion, to disentangle themselves from having recourse to essentialist arguments – strategic or perhaps sometimes rather more gratuitous – in their own work.

The case that I propose to examine here constitutes a prime example of this problem within Chicano critical discourse. It concerns the debates, in Chicano intellectual circles, over definitions of ‘Chicano cinema’, focalised via an examination of a film that has provoked a quite particular polemic in this respect: non-Chicana director Allison Anders’s *Mi vida loca / My Crazy Life* (1994). My discussion of Anders’s film will centre on its reception with a range of professional film critics, mostly Chicana/os, as well as reports on the reaction of a sample group of the film’s subjects – Chicana gang members – to their representation on screen. It will examine the factors at play in the way it has been received, and expose evidence of recursive essentialism in such arguments where apparent. It should be underscored here that the purpose of this article is simply to reveal and warn against, but not condemn, the permanence of such recursive ‘folds’ within the discourse on Chicano identity, representation and inclusion.

2) What is ‘Chicano Cinema’?

The existence of something that might be denominated ‘Chicano cinema’ as a self-sufficient category is highly contested. Arguably the bottom line is that it exists since several filmmakers have written ‘manifestos’ heralding it, and several film critics have subsequently written books or chapters in books that go under this and related titles – see, for example, Gary D. Keller’s edited volume, *Chicano Cinema: Research, Reviews and Resources* (1985); Chon A. Noriega’s edited volume, *Chicanos and Film: Representation and Resistance* (1992) which includes notable manifestos and interventions on the subject by Jason C. Johansen, Francisco X. Camplis and Noriega himself; Rosa Linda Fregoso’s more subtle *The Bronze Screen: Chicana and Chicano*

But what do these critics mean by ‘Chicano cinema’ and do they all take the term to mean the same thing? According to Fregoso in her most cogent introduction to the subject, her project ‘concerns the emergence of a film culture by, about, and for Chicanas and Chicanos’, closely allied to the goals of the Chicano civil rights movement, though she then goes on to question and refine this definition (Fregoso 1993: xiv; author’s italics). Since film is a medium that is not produced by a lone creator but rather by a whole team of people and since Chicano cultural production goes on within the borders of the USA, right under the nose of Hollywood – its studios, production values, conventions and messages –, it is very difficult indeed to achieve a filmic product that is exclusively ‘by, about and for Chicanas and Chicanos’ and that is totally independent of Hollywood and oppositional in nature. Indeed, if we were to stick to this definition rigorously, we would end up with almost nothing feature-length to place in the ‘Chicano cinema’ category – just a few shorts and documentaries. Nevertheless, this three-pronged definition was the one adhered to by those involved in making and critically constructing the first ‘generation’ of Chicano cinema in the late 1960s and 1970s (Fregoso 1993: xvi).

But if, in the long run, we cannot find a feature-length filmic product that is all these things at once (and this is something that even many Chicana/o filmmakers and critics have now conceded), which is more important? The ‘by’, the ‘about’ or the ‘for’, and what exactly should we take these prepositions to mean? Let us take just one example of this kind of conundrum to help problematise these terms: Anglo-American director, Robert Young’s The Ballad of Gregorio Cortez (1984) has been classified by Charles Tatum as ‘Chicano cinema’ in comparison with the same critic’s classification of Chicano director, Luis Valdez’s Zoot Suit (1981) as a ‘Hollywood Hispanic Film’ because of its ‘production values and distribution’ (Tatum 2001: 50-58). Both films are frequently identified as at least very close to the core of what constitutes Chicano feature-film production and many would hesitate to distance the work of key Chicano activist Luis Valdez, regardless of the involvement of Universal Pictures, in favour of a movie such as The Ballad of Gregorio Cortez which, despite its strong Chicano credentials in many respects –

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5 Different emphasis has been placed on these three terms over the several decades during which ‘Chicano cinema’ can be said to have existed. For reasons of space, this synopsis cannot entirely do justice to this facet, though it does not disregard it entirely – a more temporally-aware account is to be found in Fregoso’s introduction to The Bronze Screen (1993: xiii-xxiii).
indeed, apart from its Anglo-American director, the rest of the ‘by’ (producer, scriptwriter, actors etc.) were all Chicanas/os –, has been criticised for its proclivity to translate Chicano/Mexican culture for ‘a white colonial gaze’ (Fregoso 1993: 82). Thus, while the ‘about’ appears essential, and relatively straightforward, in both cases, the exact nature/role of the ‘by’ and subsequently the ‘for’ are contested and can be manipulated to justify exclusion of a film as necessary to support the critic’s argument.

It is evident from the criticism available on ‘Chicano cinema’ that all films properly identifiable as such have to be substantially and realistically ‘about’ (as well as politically committed to) Chicanas/os – Robert Rodríguez’s films such as the Spy Kids trilogy (2001, 2002, 2003) or Sin City (2005) really do not count, despite lead roles in Spy Kids being given to Chicana/o characters, and Rodríguez’s earlier feature, El mariachi (1992), is qualified by Ramírez Berg as ‘a significant break with two decades of Chicano cinema’ and only recuperable as part of a ‘New Wave’ that is ‘more mainstream than earlier Chicano filmmaking and far less overtly political’; one that risks eliminating ethnicity, potentially – but only potentially – compensating for its lack of Chicano politics through subversive practices in film narrative and aesthetics (Ramírez Berg 1996: 107). Such exceptions and caveats substantially problematise Jesús Salvador Treviño’s assertion in 1991 that Chicano films ‘no longer have to be about Chicanos’ (Fregoso 1993: xvi) and thus no longer about their struggle for civil rights and so on. Arguably the need for (realistic and preferably oppositional vis-à-vis Hollywood/mainstream Euro-American) portrayals of Chicano lives (i.e. the political dimension to Chicano cinema) is still deemed ideal by many even if it is perceived as a politically-correct straitjacket by others.

Treviño has also argued that Chicano films no longer have to be ‘for’ Chicanos Fregoso 1993: xvi), and, even as far back as the early 1980s, the producer of The Ballad of Gregorio Cortez, Moctezuma Esparza, would have agreed with this, arguing that he was interested in targeting a ‘broad, multiethnic, multi-language audience’ and creating a film such as The Ballad ‘as a project...
of the Chicano community, not for it’ (Esparza quoted in Rosen 1992: 247; original italics). Yet while the desire to show positive images of Chicanas/os to a wider community is to be applauded, as is the desire to move beyond an oppositional ‘for’ that cannot cope with any negativity or indeed realism and that can only sanction positive but nonetheless Manichean images of Chicanas/os, many still feel the need for a form of cinema that speaks ‘to’ as well as ‘on behalf of’ this particular community (Fregoso 1993: xix).

Furthermore, if we were to concede that the ‘about’ and the ‘for’ are now irrelevant, that would only leave the almost inevitably essentialist ‘by’ category with which to judge the nature of a film. To his credit, Noriega, in his introduction to Chicanos and Film argues against Manichaean classifications of film products based on the ethnic origin of their director – a tendency influenced by the ‘presence of the color line’ in United States society – and offers examples that illustrate that “‘identity’ cannot be equated with the text or its producers, but rather occupies provisional, multiple, and contradictory spaces within discourse’ (1992: xxi). Nevertheless, when forced to define what he means by a “‘Chicano” film’ for the purposes of assembling his anthology, he chooses to resort to accepting ‘the definition offered by the filmmakers: a film (or video) by and about Chicanos [where] the word “by” is taken to mean that the writer, producer, or director is Chicano’ (Noriega 1992: xix). He then goes on to confess the limitations of his choice:

Such a move is admitted more “strategic” than definitive, especially since it implies certain essential markers of biology, culture, and politics, and may therefore serve to silence some even as it seeks a voice for others. Nonetheless, a need remains to consider the domain of discourse for Chicano filmmakers and video artists. (Noriega 1992: xix)

Offering a theoretical advance on Noriega’s stance with regard to the ‘by’ category, Rosa Linda Fregoso, in her introduction to The Bronze Screen, starts by noting that ‘the racial “authenticity” membership-test continues unabated in the current “second wave” of Chicano nationalism, often reaching absurd proportions’ (Fregoso 1993: xviii). She then goes on to offer her own preferred alternative to this ‘racial “authenticity” membership-test’ by arguing that ‘the problem is resolved by de-emphasizing the biological claims to authenticity, yet accentuating its productive quality. In this respect, Chicano refers to a space where subjectivity is produced’ (Fregoso 1993: xix). While such a solution has potential, even a critic as theoretically astute as Fregoso has, on occasion, had difficulty in adhering to such a principle.
Thus, while there are theoretical arguments that manage to de-essentialise the ‘by’ category, they are hard to apply systematically. Furthermore, the ‘by’ requirement still keeps being invoked as the ultimate defining category, even though the ‘about’ and the ‘for’ categories have, in reality, not yet been entirely discarded. It is the case that, even though for many a film can still be classed as Chicano with an Anglo-American director such as Robert Young just so long as significant input in the creation of the film in terms of producer, scriptwriter, actors, camermen/women are ‘Raza’, the fact of a non-Chicana/o director alone will attract some criticism since Chicana/o film critics will argue that the film is subsequently not really ‘for’ or properly ‘about’ Chicanas/os – not sufficiently destined for their gaze and not sufficiently pro- (both ‘about’ and ‘for’) their cause.

Ultimately, however, if the ‘for’ (as it overlaps with the ‘about’) can be the right kind of ‘for’ – not a condescending ‘Euro-American’ ‘for’ which actually serves to send a message which keeps Chicanas/os and/or Latinas/os in their place (as I would contend was the case with El Norte [1983], despite the input of Chicano director Gregory Nava), but a more positive, empowering, oppositional, mobile sort of ‘for’ – the ethnic background of the director might be ignored. (This is exactly where William Anthony Nericcio locates the ‘borders’ of what he calls ‘proto-Chicana/o cinema’ in his study of Orson Wells’s A Touch of Evil (1958) – the lovingly-explored question is essentially the extent to which Wells is ‘for’ the Chicano community and the answer is highly complex [Nericcio 2007: 39-80].) But will this ever happen? Can an Anglo/Euro-American/even British director ever be admitted as the creator of the right kind of ‘for’ by the Chicano community itself or will essentialist definitions of ‘Raza’ and Chicano identity forever preclude such a thing?

The emergence of the phenomenon loosely referred to as ‘Chicano cinema’ came about in the 1970s as a result of the Chicano Civil Rights Movement and the desire to right the wrongs of negative, stereotypical images of Chicanas/os that had until then proliferated in Hollywood, alongside the extremely low participation rates of Chicanas/os within the industry.9 It is thus hardly surprising that Euro-American directorship (no matter how independent and responsible/supportive, and no matter how mitigated by other Chicana/o ‘members of the team’)

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should be deemed suspect by the Chicano community. Nevertheless, one most notorious Euro-American production actually stands as one of the earliest forerunners of Chicano cinema as understood by Chicanas/os: *Salt of the Earth* (1954) made by the blacklisted ‘communist’ directors/ producers/ scriptwriters, Herbert Biberman (director, Russian Jewish descent), Paul Jarrico (producer, Russian Jewish) and Michael Wilson (scriptwriter, Anglo-Californian). The film concerns a successful strike at a zinc mine in Bayard, New Mexico, and the confrontation between Anglo-American bosses and predominantly (but not exclusively) Mexican-American workers. It is based on real events and includes non-professional actors/members of the community in its redramatisation of said events. (It also has a female narrator and includes an emancipatory message regarding gender politics in the Chicano community.) In McCarthy-era USA its production was impeded in so far as was possible and its exhibition was banned. (The same cannot be said for any other US movie!)

So what does this film do that means that it is acceptable to the Chicano community? In the first place, one should note that the message is radically oppositional. However, the key is that, despite the non-Chicana/o filmmakers, the Chicano community of Bayard were consulted with extensively in open meetings during the production of the film and their responses were worked back into the screenplay thus ensuring that it represents their point of view as they would wish it to be seen. (Allegedly the script was read/heard and responded to by over 400 community members [Lorence 1999: 60].) Many of them also were given the chance to re-enact their own struggle for the camera once the script was confirmed. In so doing it does not purport to ‘speak for’ the community, but to allow that community a vehicle through which to ‘speak for itself’. It is akin to the process of creation of good ‘testimonial’ writing or the role that Third World feminists have defined for themselves. While the film has received some criticism from the Chicano community (for romanticising events, for stereotyping characters, and for having an incomplete grasp of Chicano history, in so far as it presents the strike as a ‘one-off’ rather than simply part of Chicanas/os’ on-going struggle against discrimination [Lorence 1999: 60]), the local community endorsed the movie as their own (both ‘about’ and ‘for’ them) and, according to Biberman, he was also asked to help promote the film in Los Angeles by members of the Chicano community there (Lorence 1999: 197-98).  

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10 Lorence does sound a note of caution here, since we only have Biberman’s account to go by. However, Gary D. Keller signals the film as an important part of Chicano film history (Keller 1985: 34-35), and Rosa Linda Fregoso
Skipping ahead a few decades, from the mid-1990s onwards there have been a number of feature films that are by Anglo/Euro-American (and also British) directors and most notably ones who usually work outside of Hollywood and are renowned for their responsible, oppositional and/or social realist filmmaking credentials. These films include: *Mi vida loca / My Crazy Life* (Allison Anders, 1994), *Bread and Roses* (Ken Loach, 2000) and *Quinceañera* (Richard Glatzer and Wash Westmoreland, 2006) (marketed in the UK as *Echo Park LA*). Many of these films, despite their British and/or Anglo-American directors, involved non-professional actors/members of the Chicano community and consultation with said community as a way of overcoming the ‘non-Chicano’ ‘by’ in terms of direction and filmmaking team as a whole. But how do these directors and their films fare with Chicana/o film critics and/or the wider Chicano film-going public? Can they be discussed with respect to the extent to which they are ‘about’ and/or ‘for’ Chicanas/os without resorting to below-the-belt essentialist critiques of the director based on their non-Chicano ethnicities? In order to try to answer some of these questions, I intend to concentrate on the film for which the greatest amount of material on its reception by the Chicano community is currently most readily available – Anders’s *Mi vida loca*.

3) *Mi vida loca / My Crazy Life*

Anders is an Anglo-American filmmaker from Kentucky and her subjects are usually related to women’s issues. Prior to *Mi vida loca* (1994) she made *Gas, Food Lodging* (1992), concerning the lives of white ‘trailer trash’ girls in Texas – there is a hint in this film of her interest in Mexican/Chicano culture as one of the girls escapes her humdrum life by watching invented Golden Age Mexican melodramas. Anders lived in LA’s Echo Park neighbourhood in the 1970s and 1980s (for a period of c.10 years) and made quite some effort to get to know the local homegirls – some of the main actresses in *Mi vida loca* are real homegirls whom she befriended. Anders also consulted extensively with other members of the Echo Park gang community, inviting them to comment on matters such as dialogue, *mise-en-scène*, behaviour, music and style.

In *Mi vida loca* Anders is aiming to represent a realistic portrait of Chicana homegirls’ lives, hence the attention to detail, although the various plotlines are more clearly and deliberately

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calls it ‘the best feature film to date about Chicanas and Chicanos’ (Fregoso 1995: 36); some praise indeed from this most critical of Chicana/o film critics.

11 Anders even ended up becoming a surrogate parent to one of the homegirls’ children after the death of his mother.
The film ‘is structured as a series of interconnected vignettes, each one narrated in voice-over by a different person’ (López McAlister 1994). Key plotlines include the relationship of two of the girls (Sad Girl and Mousie) who end up having babies fathered by the same gang member, Ernesto; as well as the story of Ernesto’s lowrider truck and the conflict it supposedly generated not only because of his devotion of time and resources to it rather than his children, but also because it was coveted by a rival gang leader, El Durán. There are also two more minor narrative threads. The first concerns ex-felon Giggles, her attempts to forge a better life for herself and her daughter, as well as her attempts to raise consciousness among the younger girl gang members. The second concerns the ‘travesty’, in gang terms, of Sad Girl’s sister – La Blue Eyes – and her romantic involvement with rival gang leader El Durán while the latter is in prison. The message of the film is clearly feminist, with its main focus being directed towards the gender relations between Chicana homegirls and their position vis-à-vis the male gang members.

In general Mi vida loca has met with a favourable critical reception from a feminist point of view but a negative one from a Chicana/o point of view, and an enduringly ambivalent reaction from those who write as both Chicana and feminist. Thus feminist critics such as Linda López McAlister have praised the film substantially for avoiding trite and unrealistic narrative closure – ‘one of the wholly admirable things about Anders’s screenplay is how she resists tying things up in neat little packages’ –, for being ‘informative, honest, and, as far as I can tell, quite a realistic dramatization of the lives of young women such as these in the LA barrios’, and for treating the theme of the girls’ lives with ‘respect’. López McAlister’s only substantive criticism is ‘the absence of the older women in the community; we see fathers but no mothers’ (López McAlister 1994).

On the other hand, strongly Chicana/o-identified critics tend to reject Mi vida loca for a variety of reasons relating to its representation of Chicano culture. Teresa L. Jillson and José J.

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12 This combination of docudrama and melodrama is, in my view, one of key areas where the film comes unstuck, not because melodrama is a fast-track to failure (indeed, the resonance with Latin American preferences in storytelling – especially telenovelas – could make it particularly pertinent as a mode for framing a Chicana girl-gang story; furthermore, exaggerated style is what Luis Valdez’s Pachuco singled out as the ‘essence’ of Chicano identity in Zoot Suit), but because the melodrama and docudrama modes counteract each other – you cannot simultaneously narrate something as true to the last detail even if it appears ‘larger than life’ and as stylised in the mode of melodrama.

13 The film has also received criticism, often quite negative, from mainstream Euro-American critics, particularly for its portrayal of hopelessness among Chicano youth. Such criticisms are generally cited and then efficiently dispatched by the Chicana/o critics that I will be discussing in what follows as part of their strategy to focus explicitly on what they find problematic from a Chicana/o perspective in Anders’s work.
Barrera offer some praise of the film for normalising the lifeways of Chicana homegirls as it presents them to a mainstream audience, but criticise it for simultaneously erasing the specificity of Chicano barrio life: ‘[The film] walks the line between portrayal of a universalizing – read erasure of difference – “normalcy”, which brings in the mainstream audience, and that of more specific cultural attitudes, history and social structures tied to the Chicano community’ (Jillson and Barrera 1998: 198). Domino Renée Pérez, has also criticised the film for its failure to show positive representations of Chicanas: ‘The majority of female characters featured in Anders’s film are negative stereotypes, painting a grim picture of Chicanas’ (Pérez 2003: 238).

The maximum example of the enduringly ambivalent reaction from a Chicana feminist critic is to be found in the series of articles/parts of chapters dealing with Mi vida loca that have been published by Rosa Linda Fregoso (Fregoso 1995, 1999, and 2003). To take but one example of these responses in detail, in her first brief article on the subject, Fregoso praises the film, as López McAlister did, for its attention to detail and for its gender politics, qualifying it as ‘the best mainstream film on Chicano gangs’ and observing that ‘its gender politics are great’ (Fregoso 1995: 36). Fregoso also notes the lengths Anders went to obtain almost ethnographic accuracy through consultation with the community concerned (in precisely the same way that the directors of Salt of the Earth went about the matter – and Fregoso notes that Salt of the Earth is apparently one of Anders’s favourite films [Fregoso 1995: 36-37]). However, Fregoso also criticises Anders for attending so carefully to (superficial) detail while simultaneously not taking on board the same homegirls’ comments regarding the plot – the plot is ‘unverisimilar’ even if the dialogue and other features are very close to reality.

Fregoso’s most substantial criticisms, which coincide with those of a group of Oakland homegirls who watched the film at its première and whose reactions she cites, boil down to this:

1. Homegirls don’t get pregnant from the same guy, they have more respect than that; 2. A homeboy does not obsess over a lowrider truck at the expense of his kids; 3. Rival gangs fight over turf, never over a car. (Fregoso 1995: 37)

While some of these criticisms may be due to relatively minor omissions in Anders’s contextualisation of the actions of her characters (such that some plotlines appear rather petty in terms of motivation), the available sociological literature on Chicana/o gang culture quickly

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14 De la Garza defines this kind of approach as the ‘complementary’ mode of contemporary (Anglo-–) American filmmaking on Mexican/Chicano topics which tends to take the antagonism out of such relations, observing the phenomenon at work in films such as Loach’s Bread and Roses (De la Garza, 2006: 100-16).
reveals how fragile the statements cited above really are.\textsuperscript{15} To suggest, as Fregoso does, that these plotlines in themselves provide evidence of Anders’s imposition of her own Anglo-American values on the characters and a lack of understanding of what ‘respect’ means for the Locas reads as overly defensive at the very least.

The point of challenging the criticisms levelled by Fregoso and others at the film is not a defence of Anders’s film at all costs, nor is it motivated by an archly conservative desire to see Chicana/o gang members represented as petty-minded and unprincipled ‘lowlife’. Rather, the question is: Why and how are these criticisms being made? What discourses do they rely on and what do they aim to achieve? Fregoso explicitly clarifies that she is not hankering after positive (even idealistic) representations of Chicana homegirls, as per the criticisms of the film made by some Euro-American mainstream film critics, or even by Domino Renée Pérez cited earlier. And while she alleges that her argument rests on the fact that Anders captures the ‘form’ but not the ‘substance’ of Chicana homegirls’ lives (Fregoso 1999: 37), I would argue that the key to analysing her argument also lies in the ‘form’ in which she expresses herself, rather than the ‘substance’ of her criticisms.

My issue here is that these criticisms of Anders’s film – that it is too heavily imbued with Anders’s personal life and values and thus misunderstands the Chicanas who are its subject – are specifically framed as ‘because she’s not Chicana she doesn’t understand what motivates us’, or as Fregoso puts it in the prominent first sentence of her Cineaste review, ‘What happens when you wrap a white girl’s story in brown girl’s drapes?’ (Fregoso 1995: 36). And while Fregoso might claim that the biological essentialism of the ‘racial “authenticity” membership-test’ can be dodged by focusing on ‘the space where subjectivity is produced’ (Fregoso 1993: xix), when she chooses so prominently to express herself in terms of ‘white’ and ‘brown’ (rather than Anglo/Euro-American and Chicana/o), the inference has to be that she is ostracising Anders on the basis of her ethnic otherness, drawing ‘the color line’, even when she claims that, ‘In principle, I don’t have a problem with whites making films about Chicanas’ (Fregoso 1995: 36). Indeed, the choice of the term ‘white’ to describe Anders – and ‘brown’ to denote Chicana/o –

\textsuperscript{15} Although too vast a body of literature to analyse in any detail in the context of this article, my sources for information on Chicana/o gang behaviour and attitudes include sociological studies such as John C. Quicker’s Homegirls: Characterizing Chicana Gangs (1983), Mary G. Harris’s Cholas: Latino Girls and Gangs (1988), Joan W. Moore’s Going Down to the Barrio: Homeboys and Homegirls in Change (1991), Marie “Keta” Miranda’s Homegirls in the Public Sphere (2003) and Norma Mendoza-Denton’s Homegirls: Language and Cultural Practice among Latina Youth Gangs (2008), as well as Reynaldo Berrios and Mi Vida Loca Magazine’s more eclectic volume, Cholo Style: Homies, Homegirls and La Raza (2006). For low riding see Denise Michelle Sandoval’s ‘Cruising Through Low Rider Culture: Chicana/o Identity in the Marketing of Low Rider Magazine’ (2003).
means that, no matter how long Anders might cohabit in Echo Park with homegirls, and no matter what past experiences she might have of being a welfare mother herself (experiences/spaces which might produce the right kind of subjectivity she needs to perform Chicana homegirl identity), she can never be allowed in by the ‘border guards of (Chicano) identity’, for that identity is still seen to reside, at least in part, in biological claims to a certain ethnicity.

To return briefly to the other examples of the rejection of the film from a specifically Chicano perspective cited earlier, once again closer examination reveals that the bottom-line in the construction of these critics’ arguments for why Anders fails to represent Chicano specificity properly is the good-old ‘racial “authenticity” membership-test’. Pérez sums up her argument by stating that, ‘While this Anglo filmmaker does make a feminist statement in reference to female agency, she neglects the opportunity to capitalize on Chicanas in positive positions of self-empowerment’ (Pérez 2003: 238; my italics), furthermore polarising the identity politics at stake by identifying herself as part of the Chicana ‘us’, and the gang members as Anders’s ‘one-time Echo Park neighbors’ (236). Jillson and Barrera’s critique is more tempered and/or ambivalent, depending on one’s point of view, but it still ends up drawing similar conclusions to those cited above based on the film’s non-Chicano background. While it starts off by claiming that, given the high level of Chicana/o involvement in the making of the film, ‘this film is Chicano from its inception’ (Jillson and Barrera 1998: 197) and while it stoically omits any reference to Anders’s ethnicity itself, it concludes by identifying the film as a ‘production by and for HBO’ (Jillson and Barrera 1998: 199; my italics), and leaves the reader to impute that the criticisms that have been made of the film regarding its representation of Chicanas/os have their origins in the ethnic otherness of the film’s production and target audience.

Although only one of the analyses of the film cited above focuses in a slightly round-about on the rightful categorisation of Mi vida loca as ‘Chicano cinema’ or not, given the debates regarding Anders’s right and ability to represent Chicana girl gang members, such Chicana/o film critics as Fregoso, Pérez and Jillson and Barrera would clearly never concede that the film be included in a ‘Chicano film’ category. Furthermore, as we have seen, their rejection of the film from a Chicano perspective cannot be entirely disassociated from an essentialist conceptualisation of the director’s ethnicity and cultural background.
4) Ongoing ‘Discursive Turf Wars’

Fregoso has now published several different versions of her initial review of *Mi vida loca* analysed above – an ironic testament, if ever there was one, to how central the film has been to her work on the representation of Chicana subjectivity over the ten years following the film’s release. In general, in the more recent and more developed articles concerning Anders’s film, Fregoso has been much more positive in her criticism of the film, praising it particularly for showing *cholas* making the streets their own. Nevertheless, she still includes comments concerning the fact that the film is too imbued with Anders’s personal life, while simultaneously underscoring the fact that Anders is a ‘white’ director, even though these asides are entirely tangential to the main focus of her argument (Fregoso 2003: 97, 100). Thus the temptation to criticise Anders on the basis of her ethnicity and related cultural values, to apply the ‘racial “authenticity” membership-test’ continues, even in the work of a scholar who is in all other respects just about the most astute and influential film critic working in the field.

Two other recent critical readings of / references to *Mi vida loca* serve as a pertinent epilogue to the ongoing ‘discursive turf wars’ that are waged over this film, its director and her right to represent Chicano culture. The first ostensibly offers a way out of the traps of essentialist critiques, but ultimately also succumbs to the need to criticise, albeit defensively, on the basis of the ethnicity of the director. The second reveals, most interestingly, the only critique of the film so far that does not fall into this trap.

The film’s most positive treatment to date appears in Susan Dever’s study of melodrama in Mexican and US cinema made in large part by female directors (*Celluloid Nationalism and Other Melodramas: From Post-Revolutionary Mexico to fin de siglo Mexamérica* [2003]). Here Dever skilfully overcomes or simply ignores all of the standard criticisms of the film as detailed above (its use of melodrama is recouped; its inclusion of the wider Chicano community and family structures is emphasised [Dever 2003: 125-65]). Furthermore, she explicitly defends the film against any hint of racial essentialism deployed in the work of Chicana/o film critics, as well as in

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16 I borrow the term ‘discursive turf wars’ from Susan Dever’s study of *Mi vida loca* in her *Celluloid Nationalism and Other Melodramas* (2003: 128).

17 Fregoso 1999 and Fregoso 2003. Since the 2003 chapter is simply a more thoroughly referenced version of the 1999 article, all subsequent analysis will be based on this document. Apparently, Fregoso initially reviewed the film in a very positive light for National Public Radio’s ‘Latino USA’ programme in summer 1994 (Fregoso 2003: 189, n. 19), before publishing her rather more damning *Cineaste* article the following year after taking stock of the initial wave of critical responses to the film, both positive and negative, and by both Chicana/o and mainstream Euro-American critics.
that of mainstream Euro-American critics such as Los Angeles Times staff writer Kevin Thomas who also think that only ‘ethnic and minority filmmakers’ can make films about ‘their own people’ (Dever 2003: 164). Instead Dever argues for Anders’s espousing a kind of ‘cultural citizenship’ based on shared spaces and experiences rather than laying a claim to an impossible essentialist ‘cultural authenticity’ (Dever 2003: 165).

Nevertheless, despite Dever’s cogent dismissal of those who would have recourse to ethnic essentialism in their criticisms of Anders’s work, she still does not manage to move entirely beyond the terms of such discourse. Although presented in a very self-aware manner, in the book’s introduction Dever still feels a need to identify both herself and Anders as white, working-class feminists and to explicitly work through what this means for their ability to represent the lives of non-white subjects, focusing in particular on how their intimacy and common experiences with the community in question helps to give them the right to comment as insider/outsiders (Dever 2003: 35-41). While this tactic makes a clear case for a non-essentialist understanding of ‘cultural citizenship’, and while honest examination of the privilege accorded the Euro-American gaze is much to be appreciated, the terms ‘white’ and ‘brown’, and the requirement to identify as one or the other, are still too prominent in the debate for ethnically essentialist arguments to be completely forgotten (Dever 2003: 38).

Finally, Marie “Keta” Miranda’s study of the same Oakland homegirls cited by Fregoso above\(^\text{18}\) reiterates the criticisms of the film that Fregoso attributes to the girls, specifically with respect to the reasons why homegirls fight each other. As reported by Miranda, the girls were generally very pleased to see themselves represented on the big screen, and their criticisms were occasioned more by a desire to see the complexity of their motives represented accurately – instead they found themselves too harnessed to a plot that wanted to explore the divisiveness of patriarchal culture, and see them purely in relation to male gang members, rather than examine their experience of group solidarity or the sheer diversity of their reasons for getting involved in fights. Most interestingly, however, when discussing the post-première question-and-answer session with Anders at which the girls were present, Miranda observes that ‘When other members of the audience were critical of Anders – as an outsider, a Euro-American, representing Latina

\(^{18}\) Miranda was a research student at University of California-Santa Cruz and the Oakland homegirls were more properly the subject of her thesis. Fregoso met them and heard reports of their reactions to Anders’s film during the course of Miranda’s research (Fregoso 2003: 189, n. 21; and Miranda 2003: 115-16).
youth – the Latina teenagers didn’t seem to side with [questions that] tended to emphasize Anders’ outsider position in the Latino community’ (Miranda 2003: 2).

It would be an overstatement to try to use this response to the film as a way of subdividing the subalternity of the Chicano community and contesting Smith and Guarnizo’s arguments regarding ‘transnationalism from below’ as outlined in the introduction to this article. That is to say, the Oakland homegirls’ response to Mi vida loca could not be seen as ultimate proof that the more subaltern sectors of a subaltern transnational community are less prone to articulating ethnic essentialist exclusions than the, by now, educated, middle-class sector that makes up the ranks of Chicana/o academics and journalists. Nevertheless, the girls’ disinterest in criticising Anders on the basis of her ethnicity does offer a sobering and valuable alternative to so much of the academic discourse devoted to the subject. And perhaps some hope that Smith and Guarnizo’s rather downbeat assessment of the discourse on identity produced by subaltern transnational groups might not be the whole story.

5) Conclusion – From Imagined Borders to Policed Borders

In his reflective piece on the development of ‘Chicano cinema’, ‘Imagined Borders: Locating Chicano Cinema in America/América’, Chon A. Noriega observes how the generally accepted ‘first Chicano film’ I Am Joaquin (dir. Luis Valdez, 1969, based on the poem by Rodolfo ‘Corky’ Gonzales) ‘contributed to the idea of a “Chicano cinema” that operated within clearly marked borders (for community, for identity) that were defined by the exigencies of the Chicano civil rights movement’ (Noriega 1996: 17), and laments the way that other contemporary Chicano-directed ‘experimental films with their interracial, cross-cultural, and transcendental concerns’ were exempted from inclusion within the ‘Chicano Cinema’ rubric. Writing this retrospective article in the mid-1990s, he also comments that ‘Still “Chicano cinema” persists as a quasi-national category within international film festivals in Latin American and Europe’ (Noriega 1996: 17) – attendant essentialisms in the definition go without saying.

It is no figment of the imagination, then, that ‘Chicano cinema’ continues to be a category that, in order to exist, is found to be in need of a border patrol that seems to fly in the face of so much of what is, with the exception of Smith and Guarnizo’s work, traditionally argued for and advocated within the fields of border and transnational studies. Yet this tendency to erect and maintain borders around (cultural) national categories of cinema is perhaps too much of a
straitjacket in the contemporary filmmaking climate. As Ann Marie Stock has commented of similar tendencies in the field of Latin American film criticism, ‘A critical activity intent on policing the borders of Latin American Cinema is destined to dwell in the past and to marginalize current film-making practices. […] To continue to define Latin American Cinema narrowly, insisting upon the criterion of authenticity, may very well bring about the demise of the critical object’ (Stock 2006: 163).

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