

The Cinematic Cholo in *Havoc*

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1) Preliminary remarks

For over a century now, ‘the motion-picture industry [...] has functioned as the primary transmitter of racist Latino/a images’ (Castro 2006: 89). The cholo, or Chicano gang member, is a prevalent archetypal figure used to depict Mexican and Mexican American men and youth on the screen.¹ The ‘inarticulate, violent, and pathologically dangerous “bandidos”’ of the silent film era have been transformed into the cholo (Berg 2002: 69). As the reel descendent of the Mexican bandido, the cholo is of questionable character, with few redeeming qualities. Like his predecessor, the cinematic cholo is an abject being (Mora 2011).

In this text, I would like to comment on the role of the cinematic cholo as an abject being within the film *Havoc* (Kopple 2005). In the film, a group of White high school students from the Pacific Palisades, a beach front district of Los Angeles cross paths with the stereotypical cholo in a barrio approximately 25 miles away. In an earlier work (Mora 2011), I identified the cholo characters in *Havoc* as stereotypes. I documented how cholo characters were being depicted by considering their position within the overall film narratives; how they interacted amongst themselves; how they interacted with non-cholo characters; and how cholo characters approached their own cholo identities. Stereotyped characters, reduced to a few distinctive traits, do not develop as the film progresses; rather they are embedded in the narrative in predictable ways. As a result, they stand in sharp contrast to ‘the novelist character, defined by a multiplicity of traits that are only gradually revealed to us through the course of the narrative, a narrative which is hinged on growth or development of the character’ (Dyer 2008: 247). As I argue below, in *Havoc*, the cholo serves as the deviant other, whose personality and character is stunted by neighborhood

¹ The meaning of cholo has changed over the years; yet, it has always referred to abjected individuals. Centuries ago, in Spanish California, it was used as a social class label for Mestizos and Indians “in transition from one culture to another and somewhat marginal to both” (Vigil 1998: 133). Over time, cholo has come to be synonymous with Mexican American and other Latino gang members, mostly in the Southwest. Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) officers have employed the term cholo as an epithet referencing Mexican and Chicano youth (Independent Commission on the Los Angeles Police Department 1991: 71-73).

pathologies, and stands in contrast to the rich, White youth for whom deviancy is an adolescent rite of passage, not a final destination.

2) First impressions

Havoc opens with the sound of seagulls and a black screen and then we see Allison, a White young woman wearing thin gold hoop earrings framed in the view find of a video camera. Swaying her head side to side and in a sarcastic, sassy tone, she speaks to the camera:

Allison: So you want to know about us? 'Bout kids from the Palisades? [Leans her face into camera shot] That's easy, right? Our parents moved to the ocean...and built walls facing the other way. They...send us to private school. They hire rent-a-cops with uniforms...and make them drive around in little Ford Escorts, see? This sends a powerful message. There's us and there's them...inside the circle and out. We live very sheltered lives.

This monologue—composed of the first words the audience hears—introduces the issue of class and racial divide. Private security forces and walls impose 'a variant of neighborhood 'passport control' on outsiders,' particularly on those profiled as deviant (Davis 1990: 246). The opening credits appear over a shot of the Los Angeles skyline. As the credits continue, we see an aerial shot that moves across Los Angeles, to the east and then to the west, showing Palisades High School, sweeping over the Santa Monica pier, and ending at a seaside parking lot. Then, we see Allison once again framed in the shot of a video camera and directing the following comments to it:

Allison: So we dress gangsta. We talk shit. So what? It's our thing. [Slides off the hood of an older model Impala] See, basically, the thing to remember...is that... well, none of it really matters. We're just teenagers, and we're bored. We are totally... [purposefully backs her buttocks into Toby's crotch as she gyrates, and he responds by gyrating along with her, thrusting his crotch into her]...fuckin'...bored.

As the film progresses, it becomes clear that contrary to Allison's assessment adopting the 'gangsta' persona does matter, as it has life altering consequences for Allison and some of her friends. The videographer, Eric, turns his lens onto Toby, Allison's boyfriend. He is wearing the trappings of the commercially-constructed gangsta look—an ENYCE jacket over a white muscle shirt, three silver (or white gold) chains, one with a dollar sign medallion. In response to a question, Toby rejects his racial and class privileges, with no recognition that the act of rejecting identity is itself a privilege or of how ironic his response is given that the dollar sign medallion around his neck is not aspirational:

Eric: 'How long have you identified with gangsta culture?'

Toby: 'I mean I hate fucking...rich-ass White culture. Shit's fucking wack (lame). You know?' [Allison is in the background drinking from a 40oz beer bottle, a signifier of urban, street culture]

Eric continues his questioning, and Sam, one of Toby's close friends who is wearing a large newspaper boy's hat, oversized button down shirt and black headphones around the neck, joins the conversation, interjects. With attitude and bravado, Sam attempts to reject the wigger label that is used, more often than not disdainfully, to describe White individuals who emulate Black people and embrace cultural practices they perceive to be representative of Black individuals:

Eric: So, are you guys just wiggers, trying to borrow from the Blacks?

Sam: Nah, the whole world jocks (imitates/steals), sonny. It's, like, all the good shit came from Black people.

Eric: Do you like anything White?

Toby: Yeah. Yeah, like my skinny White ass, player.

Sam and his friends, however, are playing with a stereotypical identity they ascribe to urban, working poor Blacks, individuals among the 'them' residing outside the walls of their families' gate communities; a stereotypical identity that reinforces the culture of poverty argument used by conservatives, which argues that poor Black men embrace a culture that promotes deviant behavior. The young men's presentation of self—their attire and use of vernacular (e.g. use of words such as wack, jocks, dawg, nigga, etc.)—borrows from Hip Hop culture, and in doing so exoticizes Black culture. As Roediger explains, 'In the case of wiggers, ...the tendency toward essentializing views of Black culture as male, hard, sexual, and violent are likely more pronounced than was the case in earlier while attraction of rhythm and blues and to soul' (1998: 363). This contemporary appropriation of Black culture is 'a performance, one that allows whites to contain their fears and animosities toward Blacks through rituals...of adoration' (Yousman 2003: 369).

Toby interrupts the interview when a White young man hanging out by another group of cars flips him off. Toby rounds up his male and female friends and they walk toward the young man and his male and female friends. The two groups of youth are framed in a panoramic camera shot walking to the center of the frame. Toby and his friends are called 'little rich bitches,' more insulting words get exchanged. A fight ensues between the two groups after Toby punches the young man that flipped him off, and who he suspects keyed his car. The camera keys in on Toby slamming the young man's head into the ground and Allison fighting a girl. The camera's focus on Toby and the following reveal that Toby's masculine performativity is the hegemonic masculinity, or 'the leading form of

masculinity on show,' which 'is able to regulate thought and action by being able to define what is the norm,' in his social world (Swain 2000: 96). Police sirens are, then, heard. Everyone involved in the melee scatters. Toby, Allison, Sam, and Sam's girlfriend, Emily, drive off in Toby's 1966 powder blue, convertible Impala, a car that is popular among Black and Latino gang members in Southern California and some rap stars. As they escape, all four of them have their hands in a celebratory fashion, signaling the bond that exists between them friends and members of their Palisades gang, 'P.L.C.', the full name of which is never revealed.

The next time we see Toby, Allison, Sam, and Emily in the Impala is in a scene when they are driving around wondering where to go and claiming that their gang, P.L.C., is 'in full effect.' After ruling out the idea of going to Hollywood Boulevard and shooting tourists with paintball guns, Toby decides: 'We're gonna hit up (go to) that ghetto. We headin' east. We holdin' it down on these streets, nigga!'² Sam responds excitedly, '¡Hola, cabrón! We coming for you!' Taken together, Toby's and Sam's comments indicate their equating ghetto with east, and east with Spanish-speaking others. Consequently, their excitement is about traveling to the barrios of eastside of Los Angeles, which is populated mostly by Latinos of Mexican descent. As they travel east, the streets look grimmer, with people doing drugs out in the open, prostitutes at a corner, and gang members idling around. They point it all out, as if on safari, while also verbally acknowledging they are in a geographic area that is alien to them. All the while, we hear The Luniz' song, 'I Got 5 on it,' which foreshadows the drug transaction that will soon take place.

Toby turns onto a dark street and pulls up next to a Black man on a pay phone and a group of cholo standing near him. The Black male never speaks, nor does he interact with the cholos or with Toby and his crew. He is a part of the barrio scenery, one that does not signify barrio. Yet, he is a signifier letting the audience know that White youth have reached 'the ghetto' they sought; that the barrio can be read as the stereotypical ghetto, making the cholo comparable to the Black gangsters films regularly equate with urban ghettos. As Denzin explains, while detailing the reproduction of racial stereotypes in Hollywood cinema, the 'cinematic version of the racial order situates race in ... the barrio,' where White viewers are confronted by 'the subaltern, youthful other' (2005: 473).

² Holding it down = in control of situation and/or location

3) Reconfirmation of the binary construct

Admittedly, the hypermasculinity Hector, the prominent cinematic cholo in *Havoc*, displays with his behavior and words is an aggressive variant of the ‘dominant U.S. masculinity [which] invites men to attack weakness in others and ridicule those already shamed’ in order to enhance their masculine status and acquire the social power that accompanies it (Gardiner 2000: 1259). However, the stereotypical cholo’s hypermasculinity embodies the unthinkable in broader society and thus lacks subjectivity and exists outside of the symbolic and social orders (Kristeva 1982). As a castoff, any abject embodies an identity that is beyond the boundaries of the social. It serves as the not-I against which subjects construct their various identities and define their subjectivities (Butler 1998; Kristeva 1982). In the case of the cholo, he is turned into the abject because his existence and nature offends the imaginary of civilized sociality. He is an abject persona that represents ‘the abject specter of Chicano gangs,’ which many want expelled from society (De Genova 2008: 127). In the end, the cinematic cholo is the not-I used to contrast the growth and civility expected of rich, White youth, and the barrio in which they reside represents the unknown urban perils against which the dominant discourse often contrasts the archetypal serene suburbs populated by White middle-class families—a discursive binary that allows suburbanites to perceive themselves as law-abiding, peaceful individuals. As Butler states:

The abject designates ... precisely those ‘unlivable’ and ‘uninhabitable’ zones of social life which are nevertheless densely populated by those who do not enjoy the status of the subject. ... This zone of uninhabitability will constitute the defining limit of the subject’s domain; it will constitute that site of dreaded identification against which—and by virtue of which—the domain of the subject will circumscribe its own claim to autonomy and to life. (1998: 368)

Allison’s highlights this binary when, after getting Allison of jail, her father demands to know why Allison would even to ‘downtown’ and hang out with ‘crack dealers.’

Similarly explicit in its dichotomy and patterns of exclusion are the final scenes when the film fades from black to a aerial shot showing McArthur Park and the skyline of Los Angeles, which serves as a reminder of the fears Palisades’ parents had about their children venturing to ‘downtown’. Allison once again speaks directly into the camera, but this time without any attitude or bravado. She is no longer playing with identity, no longer ‘buying into’ the ‘gangsta’ persona. She states:

Allison: I don’t know. Shit. I mean, I’m a... kid, basically...with good S.A.T. scores. But you can waste a lot of time buying into stuff like that...crying over some shit you think’s important...for, like, two seconds. I mean, if you give us a moment of... connection...one

true moment...and it's, like, suddenly...we know everything in the world. And that's us. That's all there is to us. So, um...is that a wrap?

Allison seems to recognize that she was foolish for believing that the 'moment of connection' she had with Hector, when he asked that she be his eyes, was genuine and not just him trying to charm her. In addition, she seems to know that she was naïve for not believing that Palisades parents were right in building walls and policing their neighborhood; right in safeguarding their children from those outside their circle, namely the cholos who wreaked havoc in her life and the lives of her rich, White friends. In fact, she has accepted the simple, less exciting life of a 'kid...with good scores' who can become a contributing member of society.

In this sense, she ultimately confirms the static representation of the cholos in *Havoc* and stresses that Hector and his homeboys are nothing more than stereotypes. By the end of the film, the brown, abject cholos have completely revealed their deviant, hypersexual, dangerous, or debaucherous nature. White Allison, on the other hand, evolves and her subjectivity is highlighted by the fact that she can and has stopped experimenting with the deviant behavior she once found enticing. The differing portrayals serve to reiterate raced and classes discourses.

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