

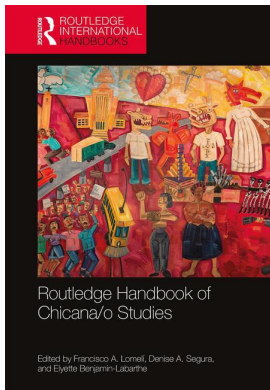
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From Don Juan to Dolores Huerta

Foundational Chicana/o films

Catherine Leen

Missing throughout the development of American cinema and later television were stories and depictions of the Mexican American and other Latinos in the United States as real people with professions, concerns and lives outside the stereotypic; in other words, missing were stories written, produced, or directed by Latinos themselves.

– Jesús Treviño (2015, p. 281)

There is only one thing in the world worse than being talked about, and that is not being talked about.

– Oscar Wilde (1987, p. 19)

As the history of Chicana/o cinema approaches its 50th anniversary, this chapter is part of a burgeoning field of scholarship that seeks to map the trajectory of the visual culture of a people. It may, however, be the first to quote Oscar Wilde. Wilde's witticism may initially seem flippant, but in fact it resonates with pioneering filmmaker Jesús Treviño's insistence on the fundamental human need to be recognized and the fear of being rendered invisible. The importance not just of being represented but of self-representation, as Treviño emphasizes, is a key notion that will inform this chapter. As an Irish scholar working on my doctoral thesis in the 1990s, I first came across the work of Treviño in the archive of the Universidad de Guadalajara, Mexico, while I was researching Mexican border cinema. I was struck by the superficial and sensationalist attitude to the borderlands and the diaspora in Mexican films – if they dealt with these issues at all – and heartened to discover the sensitive, nuanced portrayal of the same issues in Treviño's landmark film *Raíces de sangre* (USA 1977). This chapter will concentrate on Chicana/o cinema from the late 1960s to the present, providing an overview of its origins and of the theoretical frameworks advanced by scholars of Chicana/o cinema. Since it would be impossible to provide a comprehensive analysis of all the films featuring or made by Chicanas/os, I focus on two key themes that are evident from the inception of Chicana/o film – creativity and activism.

In the beginning . . . towards a Chicana/o cinema

Before Chicana/o cinema existed, there were numerous portrayals of the community in Hollywood cinema, few of them positive and all of them decidedly reductive. Much research has been done on these stereotypical portrayals, and these studies overwhelmingly point to a one-dimensional and often downright racist view of the Chicana/o as problematic other.¹ Gary Keller, in his early study *Chicano Cinema: Research, Reviews & Resources* (1985) points out that the Hollywood studio system produced formulaic genre films, such as the musical, Western, or gangster film, so that movie going became a kind of ritual wherein viewers learned to associate certain types of stories or characters with stock traits:

The two fundamental components of the Formula in the area of celluloid theatrics were that the movie should provide wish-fulfillment and that it should communicate Americanism. Often films combined both notions – hedonism and nationalism – at the deleterious expense of out-groups.

(Keller 1985, p. 25)

This view is echoed by Charles Ramírez Berg, who asserts in *Latino Images in Film* that the presentation of the heterosexual WASP male as the hero inevitably led to the stereotyping of U.S. Latinas/os and Latin Americans (2002, p. 67). Latinas have been doubly marginalized in Hollywood, both as ethnic others and because of their gender. All Latinas/os have also been subjected to a homogenization that negates the subjective, diverse experiences of Latin Americans or people of Latin American descent in North America. Early Hollywood films relegated Latinas/os to a number of stock characters, and even more positive representations, such as the swashbuckling romantic hero represented by Don Juan or Zorro, were restrictive and repetitive. Amid the wealth of scholarship on the subject, one film stands out as a compelling analysis of the fate of Latinas/os in Hollywood. *The Bronze Screen: 100 Years of the Latino Image in American Cinema* (2002), directed by Nancy de los Santos, Susan Racho and Alberto Domínguez, is an invaluable resource. The cinematic footage in this remarkable documentary begins with a clip from Francis Ford's *Licking the Greasers* (1914), an early example of the use of a racial epithet to characterize Mexicans as dangerous villains (Fregoso 2003). It concludes with interviews by Latina/o actors, directors and other cineastes on the future of Latina/os in the industry.

The Bronze Screen not only interweaves footage from hundreds of films featuring Latina/os with interviews by leading figures from Latina/o cinema, but it establishes a richly varied dialogue on the nature of the stereotypes depicted. There is general agreement, for instance, that Latina/o actors were typecast and encouraged to change their names or appearance to appear less 'ethnic' and more universally appealing. Actor Henry Silva observes that it was only when he moved to Europe that he was able to play diverse roles, while Anthony Quinn's role in Federico Fellini's *La Strada* (1954) gave him the status to return to Hollywood and star in films as diverse as David Lean's *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962) and Michael Kakogiannis' *Zorba the Greek* (1962).

Ricardo Montalbán, a renowned actor who often played romantic leads and who cofounded NOSOTROS, an organization devoted to promoting a more positive image of Latina/o culture in Hollywood films (Keller 1985, p. 47), contests the notion that all stereotypes are damaging, however. In his view, many assessments of films featuring Latina/os are too politically correct, and he looks back fondly on 1954 film *Latin Lovers* in his interview in the documentary: "There was nothing detrimental about the Latin lover, you know, fortunately [. . .] We had elegance. It was beautifully photographed and very pretty. And the story was nonsensical but fun" (Keller 1985, p. 47).

Similarly, there are diverse views on the gangster film, which has often been considered to be among the most detrimental genres to Latinas/os, as Luis Valdez argues in his interview in the documentary, “The Bronze Screen”: “A lot of the kids that are in California prisons got their first instruction off the big screen watching gangs” (cited by Urguijo-Ruiz 2012, p. 85). Conversely, actor Danny de la Paz in another interview in the documentary suggests that these films are not viewed as films but rather as the extension of a social problem. Cheech Marín, meanwhile, in another interview cited in *The Bronze Screen*, situates Chicano representations within the context of U.S. cinematic history:

Gangster films are a staple of Hollywood, whether they're Chicano, or black, or James Cagney being *Public Enemy*, or *The Godfather*. Some of the greatest films ever to exist are about the gangs or gangster mentality. That's just part of who we are as Americans.

The *Bronze Screen* concludes with similarly varied opinions from actors and cineastes on the future of Latinas/os in Hollywood. John Leguizamo, in an interview towards the end of the documentary, is optimistic, stating that the number of lead roles and varied parts for Latinas/os is increasing. Veteran actress Lupe Ontiveros was less positive, however, and suggested that Latinas/os would continue to struggle to improve their screen image, a view echoed by Valdez in his interview. While the history of Latinas/os in American film continues to be the subject of much debate, the relationship between Latina/o filmmakers and Latin America has also been a key element in the development of Chicana/o film. Despite the fact that Chicana/o cinema – and Chicana/o culture more generally – looked to Mexico as a homeland whose rich heritage that could continue to inspire pride in people living in the United States, commercial Mexican cinema was less than interested in the situation of Chicanas/os. Films that did portray issues such as migration and the diaspora were decidedly negative. David Maciel (1996) and Norma Iglesias (1991) observe that early Mexican cinema portrayed migration to the United States as a tragedy. Moreover, those who went to live in the United States were regarded as traitors, while Chicanas/os were seen as having lost their identity, language and morals. These negative portrayals of the diaspora notwithstanding, Mexican films, especially from the so-called Golden Age of the 1940s to 1950s, were extremely popular with Chicana/o cinemagoers, although as Robert McKee Irwin in *Global Mexican Cinema: Its Golden Age* points out, the extent to which one identified with these films was a marker of allegiance to one part of one's culture or the other (McKee Irwin 2013, p. 151). While Golden Age films were undoubtedly hugely popular in the United States, well into the 1970s Mexican cinema's depiction of Chicanas/os had changed little. In his *Historia documental del cine mexicano*, renowned Mexican critic Emilio García Riera despairs at the poor quality of four Chicana/o-themed films made in the 1970s. Both Rubén Galindo's *Los desarraigados* (1975) and Jaime Casillas' *Chicano* (1975) are dismissed as unconvincing melodramas. Fernando Osés' *El chicano justiciero* (1974) is condemned as an exploitative movie that uses issues such as people smuggling and scenes of bikini-clad *gringas* as a titillating backdrop to the wrestling scenes at the heart of the film. Finally, Tito Novaro's *Soy chicano y mexicano* (1974) is identified as a cautionary tale that, like the earlier films analyzed by Maciel and Iglesias, serves to warn Mexicans of the folly of migration (García Riera 1976, pp. 85–210).

If commercial Mexican cinema was slow to evolve, however, the New Mexican Cinema, part of a politically engaged, radical cinema that swept Latin America from the 1960s, proved to be a key inspiration for Chicana/o filmmakers. As early as 1980, Jason C. Johansen in his essay “Notes on Chicano Cinema” pointed out the close links between the concerns of Chicana/o and Latin American film (Johansen 1980, p. 10). Noriega has observed that the revolutionary

film manifestos of Latin American cineastes such as Octavio Getino's *Hacia un tercer cine* (Towards a Third Cinema) had a profound influence on early Chicana/o cinema, situating it "between the political weapon of New Latin American Cinema and the economic formula of Hollywood" (Noriega 1993, p. 89). He further notes that Luis Valdez was in touch with Latin American filmmakers as early as 1964, when he visited Cuba, though it was Treviño whose contact with Latin American filmmakers had the most enduring influence (Noriega 2000, p. 161). This is undoubtedly the case, not least because Treviño went to Mexico to direct the documentary *América Tropical* about Mexican muralist David Alfaro Siqueiros in 1971 and later made the uniquely important film *Raíces de sangre* (1977), which was funded by the Mexican government in an effort to educate Mexicans about Chicanas/os. Nonetheless, as we shall see, the influence of the New Latin American cinema is also keenly felt in other pioneering Chicana/o films by Valdez, Sylvia Morales and Efraín Gutiérrez.

Early Chicana/o cinema

Luis Valdez was the first Chicano to direct a widely seen and influential film that went on to have groundbreaking success in Hollywood. *Yo Soy Joaquín* (1969), a production by El Teatro Campesino, remains a key film, as does another watershed documentary, *Chicana* (1979) by Sylvia Morales. Valdez's influence on Chicana/o culture and film cannot be underestimated. As the founder of El Teatro Campesino in 1965, he raised awareness of the struggle of farmworkers for improved working and living standards and democratized culture, writing and producing plays with no financial support and encouraging others to do so. Although his work has been consistently, and often justifiably, called into question for its insistently male-centred portrayal of Chicana/o culture, his plays and films paved the way for later generations and were instrumental in inscribing Chicana/o history into American culture. Morales' work is of unique importance not only because of the lasting impact of her first film *Chicana*, but the fact that, unlike Valdez, her career as a filmmaker spans the period from the 1970s to the present, producing documentaries such as *Chicano! History of the Mexican-American Civil Rights Movement* (1996) and her most recent film, *A Crushing Love: Chicanas, Motherhood and Activism* (2009). She is also an educator who lectures in film at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles, California. Her work reflects the enduring, and indeed increasing, importance of documentary and women's cinema to Chicana/o culture.

I Am Joaquín and *Chicana* correspond to British documentarian John Grierson's famous definition of documentary film as "the creative interpretation of actuality" (Ward 2012, p. 6). Both chronicle Chicana/o history from pre-Columbian times to the contemporary period in an imaginative, inventive fashion. There are two key distinctions between them, however. Valdez's work is an adaptation, based on the poem of the same name by Rodolfo "Corky" Gonzales. But, his film, while being the first to narrate an overlooked history, focuses on the male perspective through the everyman Joaquín who links the pre-Columbian past to the present, to the point of overlooking the key role of women in the Chicano movement. Today, it seems both outdated in terms of its gender politics and yet extraordinarily current. Its powerfully emotional narration by Valdez, which at times seems to actually be the voice of God thundering from above, finds a contemporary iteration in poetry slams. It also, like many low-budget films by aspiring filmmakers today, uses a simple visual format – a slideshow that combines images ranging from Aztec god Cuauhtémoc to The Beatles, to murals by Mexican artists Diego Rivera and José Clemente Orozco. The music, played by Valdez's brother Daniel, is also very eclectic, moving from a mournful flute and drums in the establishing sequence through folk, mariachi, jazz and rock.

The initial sequence, which segues from an image of the sun to a montage of pre-Columbian faces, masks and skulls, then to photographs of contemporary people and frenetic city spaces, sets the scene for what is to follow, as the poem moves from the contemporary period to the Aztec past, through the Conquest to the independence of Mexico, and the struggle for equality in the contemporary United States. The final image, after a long montage of activism by the United Farm Workers, Brown Berets and others, returns to the Aztec past. Valdez's recitation of the final line of the poem "I will endure" (Gonzales 1972, p. 100) is accompanied by an image of an Aztec temple. Despite its acknowledgement of many key figures in Chicana/o history, the film represents a missed opportunity to acknowledge the work of one woman in particular whose contribution to Chicana/o civil rights is unparalleled. A simple, conventional device of documentary film – the provision of titles – could have been used to identify the key figure of Dolores Huerta, who is pictured but not named, unlike heroic male figures such as Miguel Hidalgo, Francisco Villa and Emiliano Zapata. Just as an image of a *soldadera* (soldier woman) in the Mexican Revolution is relegated to the secondary role of companion by accompanying the lines that speak of 'black shawled faithful women' so too Huerta's photograph does not form part of the lengthy montage of Chicana/o activism towards the end of the film. Instead, it accompanies a description of Joaquín, thus implying that she is only significant in relation to the male. These reservations aside, the film has had an enduring resonance in Chicana/o Studies. In his analysis of the film, Chon A. Noriega, in *The Ethnic Eye: Latino Media Arts* (1996), attests to its continuing significance, not least because Valdez's career became a bridge between rural activism and the presence of Chicana/os on a national and world stage (Noriega & López 1996, p. 7). It also remains a key film in the chronicling of a hitherto ignored history in an impassioned and inspiring manner.

In notable contrast to Valdez's film, the initial images of pre-Columbian society in Sylvia Morales' *Chicana* are far from heroic. Following a montage of images of a contemporary woman making tortillas which cuts to a woman working in a laundromat while looking after her children, Carmen Zapata speaks the opening words of Morales' script against images of pre-Columbian women engaged in domestic work and childcare:

The stereotype of the Chicana is the nurturing woman. As women, our role is to provide a social and economic support system. We free men to work while we prepare the future labour force. We are the preservers of the culture. And although we work, we are not paid wages for this work. If we refuse to do this. . . .

This sequence is followed by a series of shots of disapproving looks from a variety of men and women, a humorous reflection on the rigidly gendered roles women are expected to fulfil and the condemnation they receive if they do not. Rosalinda Fregoso in *MeXicana Encounters: The Making of Social Identities on the Borderlands* has noted that this ironic, more light-hearted look at Chicana history is a welcome departure from the solemnity of *I am Joaquín* (Fregoso 2003, p. 18). Although Morales also makes use of the work of Mexican muralists, she does so from a revisionist, female-centred perspective.

As a result of these and other similarities, *Chicana* has often been seen as a feminist response to *I Am Joaquín*, but it was not, in fact, intended as a counterpoint to the earlier film. Instead, it was inspired by a slideshow that Morales saw, which was organized in the 1970s by Chicana scholar Anna Nieto-Gómez with the goal of organizing working-class women. Morales received permission to use some of Nieto-Gómez's material, which she incorporated into her own script for the film. She then enrolled in a master's program at UCLA, which also gave her funding of \$5,000, so that she could use their equipment for free. As she clarifies in a 2014

interview she only realized that the film questioned Valdez's perspective after she had made her own film:

I don't think I purposely did it, it occurred to me later, because when I saw the film it film it was very exciting. Luis is a fabulous narrator. It was inspiring. However, after it was over, I thought, where are the women in this? [. . .] At that time most Chicanas and most Chicanos weren't thinking in terms of the normative. [. . .] The male came first and that was an accepted thing. Except I didn't accept that, ever. I can't remember ever being accepting of that.

(Morales 2014, personal interview)

Fregoso, in her analysis of the films, points to the importance of the 10-year gap between the production of Valdez's film and *Chicana*, for in the interim "Chicano nationalism produced its own counterdiscourse that challenged the limitations of male-centered nationalism" (Fregoso 1993, p. 28). Morales redresses the invisibility of women in Chicana/o history, providing a richly detailed account of the presence of women from pre-Columbian times that foregrounds the matriarchal aspects of the culture, with detailed explanations of the significance of the goddess Coatlicue, who symbolized the Earth and was the mother of gods and mortals, whose reign predated the height of the Aztec culture. This history emphasizes the spiritual might of the goddess, but also the work of ordinary women. Marianismo (devotion to the Virgin Mary) and machismo are presented as anachronisms that stem from colonial oppression. As the achievements of such celebrated figures as Mexican colonial poet Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (1651–1695) in the struggle for female education are recognized, an extended sequence celebrates the heroines of the Mexican Revolution, while the contribution of less well-known women such as union organizer Emma Tenayuca (1916–1999) to the improvement of working conditions for women in the 1930s is acknowledged. These pioneering activists are identified as the precursors of women who have played key roles in the Chicano movement, such as Alicia Escalante (1933–) and Dolores Huerta (1930–). If the film does not shirk from discussing the difficulties faced by women, it certainly does not portray them as victims, but rather as powerful activists, a theme that will be taken up in Morales' recent film *A Crushing Love* (2009). Moreover, cinematically, as well as ideologically, the film represents important advances that reflect Morales' subsequent formal training. Valdez's attempt to animate the still images he uses by using zoom or shaking the camera has the paradoxical effect of drawing attention to the static nature of the visuals (Yay 2012, p. 27). Although Morales' film does incorporate many stills, it also includes a wealth of filmed sequences and interviews that bring the history of Chicanas alive, not only picturing them but allowing them to speak for themselves. The film thus testifies to female activism while furthering the aesthetic and expressive possibilities of Chicana/o film.

Another early film, the first Chicana/o feature, also exemplifies the concerns of the 1970s. Efraín Gutiérrez's *Please Don't Let Them Bury Me Alive!* (1976) is, in many ways, *sui generis*. Gutiérrez wrote, directed and starred in this film, part of a trilogy set in Texas in the 1970s (Noriega 2000, p. xxix–xxx). The protagonist, Alejandro, unlike the heroic Joaquín or the women celebrated in *Chicana*, is far from an exemplary character. He rejects the possibility of employment or study to eke out a living as a criminal. Alejandro is somewhat reminiscent of James Dean's antihero Jimmy in Nicholas Ray's *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955), although Alejandro's rebellion is firmly set within the context of the Chicano movement. The film is also a powerful anti-war protest, as it opens with the military funeral of Alejandro's brother, who has been killed in Vietnam. Although the film's gender politics are decidedly problematic, with Alejandro womanizing between meetings with his 'good girl' future wife, whom he constantly lectures about racial

politics, it does contain one extraordinary scene. As the funeral comes to an end, a white officer asks Alejandro's mother to accept the Silver Star, but she angrily throws the medals at him and leaves. While the film undoubtedly suffers from technical issues and an at times incoherent script, it is this very rawness and anger that give it lasting resonance (Barrios 1985, p. 179). Besides, the frequent code-switching by the characters, the soundtrack and the inclusion of scenes of Chicana/o theatre all bear witness to a community that had never before been depicted in a feature film. This slice-of-life quality explains its popularity at the time of its release, when it outperformed *All the President's Men* in San Antonio (Del Bosque 2014, n.p.) (and its enduring significance as a countercultural statement of the alienation of young Chicanos in the 1970s).

Chicana/o cinema: creativity and activism

Much has been written on the nature of Chicana/o cinema and scholars have often commented on the tension between producing films with significant sociopolitical content and achieving box-office success. It is not my intention to distinguish between films that represent different genres or styles and to suggest that some are less or more worthwhile than others. From its inception, Chicana/o cinema has been richly varied and has engaged both with Hollywood cinema and Latin American film production while also producing experimental and independent films. I would argue that the threads that connect all of these films are activism and creativity. Patricia Cardoso's *Real Women Have Curves* (2002), the most recent Chicana/o feature to achieve notable box-office success worldwide, is both a feminist re-visioning of the Chicana/Latina body and part of a subgenre about the struggle to achieve education that includes Ramón Menéndez's *Stand and Deliver* (1988) and Edward James Olmos' *Walkout* (2006). Other features as diverse as Cheech Marín's *Born in East L.A.* (1987), a comedy about a streetwise mechanic who is accidentally deported to Mexico and forced to re-evaluate his attitude to his heritage, and Olmos' dark anti-gang film *American Me* (1992) both seek to educate audiences. Music is a central part of these diverse films. In her essay on *Born in East L.A.*, Alicia Gaspar de Alba in *Velvet Barrios: Popular Culture and Chicana/o Sexualities* (2003) highlights how Marín's deft use of the soundtrack, not least its parodic title song, establishes a "dialogue between the director and the audience through which Marín makes the viewer aware of the cultural history shared by both Chicanos and Anglo-Americans" (Gaspar de Alba 2003, p. 210). Films such as Isaac Aronstein's *Break of Dawn* (1988) have also used music to highlight the racism endured by Mexicans and Chicanas/os in the United States. In the analysis that follows, I will examine a number of activist films that provide positive alternatives to stereotypical media depictions of Chicanas/os through their emphasis on the symbiotic relationship between music, visual art and cinema.

Valdez's *La Bamba* (1987), the first Chicana/o film to be a so-called crossover hit, met with mixed reactions on its release. It has been criticized for distorting the facts of Valens' life and for suggesting that Chicanos who resist assimilation, like Ritchie's brother Bob, are problematic, in marked contrast to the overwhelmingly positive but Americanized Ritchie (Fregoso 1993, pp. 42–48). The film has also been criticized for "critically reproducing and even celebrating a destructive machismo" (Aldama 2005, p. 121). These concerns cannot be dismissed, yet the film is undoubtedly extremely successful as a celebration of Chicana/o music. Watching the film some 30 years later, what is striking is the way in which the film integrates difficult issues into an entertaining film with wide appeal. A biopic of singer Ritchie Valens, who died tragically at the age of 17 in a plane accident, the film focuses, once more, as Valdez's previous work had, on male protagonists. It does, however, give major roles to Ritchie's mother Connie (Rosanna De Soto) and his brother Bob's partner, Rosie (Elizabeth Peña). A cynical reading of the film would suggest that it does not pass the Bechdel test,² for, although it has two major female protagonists,

they do not speak to each other about anything but men. The narrative is more complex than this, nonetheless, as it uncompromisingly depicts the devastating effects of Bob's violence and alcoholism on his mother and partner and their refusal to accept his abuse. Moreover, the female characters' conversations about the male characters focus on this abuse rather than romantic trials and tribulations, and both actresses deliver outstanding performances.

In addition, the film's skilful use of music complicates the notion that Bob is more in touch with his Mexican heritage than Ritchie. In a brief scene towards the beginning of the film, Ritchie sits around a fire with his family and neighbours playing the *Canción mixteca*, a well-known traditional Mexican song. In the pivotal scene in a Tijuana brothel which inspires Ritchie to record a rock-and-roll version of *La Bamba*, he recognizes the song and plays along with the band, again suggesting that he has an extensive knowledge of Mexican music. Despite changing his name, Ritchie insists on recording the song *La Bamba*, dismissing the reservations of his manager. It is this song that he chooses to play when he gets his big break by playing on Alan Freed's televised Rock and Roll Show with luminaries such as Jackie Wilson and Eddie Cochran. While he performs the song, he wears an updated mariachi outfit, again linking him to this musical tradition, and prominently displays a necklace given to him by a shaman in Mexico, once more underlining his embracing of his heritage. Another point of note is that he learns Spanish in order to perform *La Bamba*. Finally, the fact that *La Bamba* is sung in the brothel scene by David Hidalgo of Los Lobos, who covered Valens' version of the song and made the 1958 version relevant to the 1980s audiences who flocked to see the film, is a subtle nod to Valens' successful updating of *La Bamba* and the story that surrounds it.

Lourdes Portillo's documentary *Corpus: A Home Movie for Selena* (1999) provides a welcome alternative to the male-centred visions of creativity embodied by *La Bamba* and also Gregory Nava's *Selena* (1997), a biopic about the Tex-Mex singer. Portillo has produced an extraordinary range of work over the course of her career. Her Oscar-nominated *Las madres* (1986) documents the successful resistance of the mothers of the Plaza de Mayo in Argentina to the brutal military dictatorship of the late 1970s and 1980s. *Señorita extraviada* (2001) examines the femicide in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, while her latest film *Al más allá* (2008) is a parodic pseudo-documentary about a pretentious middle-class director.

Gregory Nava's *Selena* portrays the young Tejana singer as a female Ritchie Valens for a new generation – a remarkable artist who before her death was set to achieve success in the U.S. market with the release of her first English-language album, capitalizing on her immense popularity with Spanish-speaking audiences. Unlike Valens, however, whose decisions to anglicize his name and concentrate largely on rock and roll have been considered 'inauthentic,' Selena is regarded as an artist who remained true to her Tejano roots (Storm Roberts 1999, p. 242). Nava's extremely reverential approach to portraying Selena in his biopic was to be expected, as Selena's father Abraham, played by Edward James Olmos, tightly controlled the production, to the point where Nava had to battle to be allowed to even mention Selena's murder by her fan club president Yolanda Saldívar (Boyd Jones 2000, p. 44). What ultimately disappointed many viewers most about the film was that it focused more on Abraham than on Selena. Portillo initially intended *Corpus* (1999) to counter this patriarch-centred work, but she ultimately modified her vision in order to obtain permission from Abraham to play Selena's music and show her image (Fregoso 2001, pp. 16–23).

Portillo not only deals directly with Selena's murder, but she also sheds light on the often-disturbing world of celebrity and fandom. In a series of interviews early in the film, young fans discuss why they want to be like their heroine, but one of them notes that watching her videos too much started to upset her, an uncomfortable reminder of the possibly traumatic effects of Selena's violent death on her young female fans. In another sequence, intellectuals such as

Cherrie Moraga and Sandra Cisneros discuss Selena. Moraga approvingly notes that Selena allowed Latinas to be sexual beings, but Cisneros sounds a note of caution, warning that the singer projected a sexualized image from a very young age and that she dropped out of high school. While there is no doubt that Portillo's film is less radical than she originally intended because of Abraham's constant interference, her collaboration with the family did have certain positive results. The family speak at length about Saldívar and her relationship with Selena, thus providing a context for her murder. Abraham suggests that Saldívar was obsessed with Selena, thus underlining the dangers of the close identification between fan and star. Portillo's film, unlike Nava's, concentrates less on Selena the performer and more on her legacy. Young fans are filmed emulating her singing and dancing, while scenes of an older female fan tending Selena's grave and of candlelight vigils in her memory suggest that she has achieved the status of a popular saint. Portillo comments in the introduction to her film that it was the devotion of Selena's fans that motivated her to make her film:

If there had been a Selena on the television, it probably would have made me feel like I belonged in this country. We need to see our experiences validated. Otherwise, we don't exist; we become diminished by the media. And we can't let that happen.

(Portillo 1999)

If the film also underlines the way in which the dearth of role models for Chicanas/Latinas means that Selena has become the repository of varying and at times contradictory desires (especially enhanced by the role of Jennifer López, which was done deliberately), this does not negate her significance, and the film is a powerful tribute that inscribes her story into the history of Chicana/o music.

Finally, this overview of the importance of creativity to Chicana/o cinema would not be complete without reference to the visual arts. It is difficult to think of an urban Chicana/o film that does not feature murals to create a *mise-en-scene* that is identifiably Chicana/o. *Born in East L.A.*, *Stand and Deliver* and *Real Women Have Curves* use such visuals to great effect. Notable documentaries to examine Chicana/o visual culture include Alicia Gaspar de Alba's and Alma López's *I Love Lupe* (2011), a meditation on the re-imagining of the Virgen de Guadalupe by Chicana artists; and Gronk's *No Movie* (2007), a chronicle of alternative Chicana/o art. Jesús Treviño's work has been instrumental in documenting Chicana/o visual art, as has been noted, and his most recent documentary *Visions of Aztlán* (2010) is an homage to almost half a century of Chicana/o art. Against a backdrop of footage from key events in the 1960s and 1970s such as the United Farm Workers' (UFW) strike and anti-war marches in Los Angeles, leading artists, such as Ester Hernández, Harry Gamboa Jr, José Montoya, and Santa Barraza, reflect on their work. Judy Baca, in an interview in the documentary *Visions of Aztlán* (2010), eloquently sums up the need for Chicana/o artists to counter the Eurocentric norms of the fine arts, saying that: "classical training in the arts trained your hand to racialize your figures toward Anglos. So even drawing a Chicano face was a radical act" (Treviño 2010). The documentary moves through defining genres such as mural art and describes how it moved on from the Mexican tradition to be a truly community expression that transcended the elitist spaces of the museum or gallery. The work of the San Francisco-based Mujeres Muralistas group in producing female images and stories central to the mural movement is celebrated, and the richly varied subject matter of Chicana/o art, from altars to lowriders, is vividly communicated through montages of various murals.

Finally, to return to the relationship between Mexican and Chicana/o film, it is worth examining Mexican director Diego Luna's *César Chávez* (2014), a biopic of the renowned civil rights

leader. Luna's film charts the foundation of the United Farm Workers (UFW) union and the achievements of the grape boycott. Despite its good intentions, the film has been criticized for ignoring the contribution of other groups to the securing of improved pay and working conditions for farm workers (García 2014, n.p.). It is also, particularly given its dramatic subject matter, considered somewhat dull. What is perhaps most dubious about the film, however, is the way in which the foregrounding of the work of Chávez's wife, Helen, completely overshadows the role of the union's cofounder, Dolores Huerta, who is still a renowned activist today. The filmic Huerta is relegated to the role of cheerleader and secretary, enthusiastically passing on phone messages to the men and even, at one point, packing a case for Chávez's trip to London. Helen, meanwhile, is a vocal participant in the strike action who frequently discusses strategy. The only aspect of the film that is notable for its less than traditional gender politics is the portrayal of the relationship between Chávez and his oldest son Fernando, who rejects his father for neglecting his family. The film's less-than-convincing portrayal of some of the most decisive episodes in Chicana/o history is all the more surprising when one considers that the archival footage used borrows heavily from the powerful PBS documentary *Chicano! The Struggle in the Fields* (PBS 1996), which movingly captures the bravery and endurance of the UFW's members. Besides, even the issue of the familial sacrifices that cause Chávez to have such a conflicted relationship with his son has been dealt with far more effectively in Sylvia Morales' documentary *A Crushing Love*.

The portrait of Dolores Huerta that emerges from Morales' film about the activism of five notable Chicanas is one of an iconic leader sure of her path and her mission. Huerta does not gloss over the difficulties of her family situation as the mother of 11 children and a committed activist, but she looks back at her career with pride and also humour. In one interview, for example, she recalls that she brought her young baby, whom she was nursing, to negotiations with growers. When the child cried, she was accused of pinching her to disrupt the growers' speeches. Huerta's daughter Alicia speaks movingly about the sacrifices that she and her siblings made to support their mother's work, but she unambiguously praises her as a hero. Morales' film also represents a notable departure for Chicana/o documentary through its more personal style, which interweaves her own difficulties in combining caring for her daughter Michelle with the making of the film. This approach lends a welcome touch of levity to the film. Morales' decision to make her daughter her cinematographer in a bid to keep her occupied leads to a scene that reveals much about the power struggles between mothers and their teen daughters. When Morales begs Michelle not to film her looking bedraggled after a long car ride, Michelle insists that as her daughter she has the right to film her whenever she wants. Morales' efforts to balance the demands of her artistic project with the mundane reality of motherhood bring to life the very issues that are discussed by the activists in her film with great warmth and humour.

Framing the future: some conclusions

Looking back on almost half a century of Chicana/o cinema, it is clear that a great deal has been accomplished. Dozens of features and many more documentaries and experimental films have been produced, and the participation of women filmmakers has increased exponentially. If Luna's *César Chávez* is undoubtedly flawed because of its failure to do justice to the accomplishments of the protagonists, it is nonetheless a heartening reflection of the increased interest by Mexican filmmakers in Chicana/o issues. This is evidenced also in the fact that Dan Guerrero's and Nancy de los Santos' outstanding documentary *Lalo Guerrero: The Original Chicano* (2006) opened the Primer Festival de Cine Chicano in Mexico City in 2007. Young Latina/o filmmakers continue to be recognized at prestigious film festivals such as Sundance, and pioneering

filmmakers still produce significant work. Not only have scholars such as Keller, Fregoso and Noriega produced work that provides a valuable framework for the study of Chicana/o cinema, but Noriega has been instrumental in preserving and distributing Chicana/o film through the UCLA Chicano Cinema and Media Art Series, while *Women Makes Movies* is a key distributor of Chicana films. It is important to acknowledge the very considerable progress that has been made, but we must also recognize that problematic depictions of Chicanas/os by Mexican filmmakers and Hollywood continue to be an issue. Now, more than ever, the contribution of Chicanas/os to American society needs to be understood. As almost five decades of Chicana/o cinema demonstrate, no one can tell these stories more effectively than Chicana/os themselves.

Notes

- 1 The literature on this subject is vast but the following titles are recommended. See, Hershfield J (2000), Iglesias N (1991), Keller G (1985 and 1994), List C (1996), López A (1993), Maciel D (1990 and 1996), Mendible M (2007), Nericcio W (2007), Ramírez Berg C (2002).
- 2 The Bechdel test, sometimes called the Mo Movie measure or Bechdel rule, is a simple test which includes the following criteria: (1) it has to have at least two women in it, who (2) who talk to each other, about (3) something besides a man. Consult Bechdeltest.com.

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