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Latinidad and masculinidad in Hollywood scripts

Ana S. Q. Liberato, Guillermo Rebollo-Gil, John D. Foster and Amanda Moras

Abstract
We examined representations of Latinidad and masculinidad in a set of crime and independent films. Findings show that crime films emphasized marginality and suggested Latinos’ inadequate cultural stock. They focused on violence and created notions of Latino inferiority based on class-specific presumptions of power, masculinity and success. The narratives suggest that Latinos lack the assertiveness and brilliance of the tough white gangster of the 1930s and 1940s. The deviant Latino is rather emotional and succumbs to his own vulnerabilities. He possesses an unfit masculinity which is linked to the presumed backwardness of his own ethnic community. The independent films reproduced some elements of these stereotypes, but one, Girlfight, situated Latinos in the context of racism, assimilation and multiculturalism. They offered a different narrative and a new Latino subject, one that somewhat destabilizes the coherence of racist and patriarchal messages found in the crime movies examined in this paper.

Keywords: Latinidad; masculinidad; racialization; stereotypes; Latinos; whiteness.

Introduction
The film industry is a culture- and knowledge-making institution. As such, cultural representations communicated in cinematic narratives convey meanings about a society’s problems, anxieties and contradictions and reflect that society’s view of itself and what is considered valued or undesirable (Denzin 1989). The work of cinema is thus highly sensitive to ideological scrutiny by professional critics who have the responsibility to ‘politicize mass culture’, paying attention to the ideological aspects around the production of film and interrogating the biases of filmmakers (McGee 1999).
With this in mind, this paper examines the set of generalizations and stereotypes about Latinidad and Latino masculinity portrayed in a selected number of Hollywood films. We examine the ideological frames and cultural assumptions that structure the narratives about Latino men and analyse the extent to which the narratives reproduce white racism. We also explore the extent to which these stereotypical representations help to promote a racialized view of Latinos in the United States, perpetuating the idea that Latinos/as do not want to and/or are not fit to be part of the fabric of American society.

**Whiteness and Hollywood scripts**

Hollywood filmmakers invoke ethnic difference as a means of constructing the Latino male’s identity (Murji and Solomos 2005). They conceive and represent the Latino male as the Other in terms of their culture and ‘moral, mental, and physical inheritance’ (Roediger 2006). They render the Latino male as inferior to the white male in a codified narrative that subtly upholds WASPism.

A careful examination of the Othering of Latino men in Hollywood films demands an interrogation of whiteness. By definition, whiteness is involved with issues of power differences among whites and non-whites in the colonial and postcolonial context (Alcoff 1995; Kincheloe 1999; Barnett 2000). Whiteness is synonymous not with ‘white people’ but rather with a well-established epistemology in which the politics, culture, history, personality and phenotype of white Europeans are framed as if they would represent the natural and ideal way to be in the world (Kincheloe 1999; Barnett 2000). Whiteness acts as the common sense of people and represents sophistication, ‘orderliness, rationality, and self-control’ (Kincheloe 1999, p. 3). The ubiquity and pervasiveness of whiteness is possible due to its malleability and presumed ‘social invisibility’ (Frankenberg 1993; Keating 1995; Mahogany 1995; Dernersesian 1997). Racial divisions in the United States have been constructed on this dichotomous model – whites vs. non-whites – ‘with the white self seeing racial others as monolithic’ (Vera and Gordon 2001, p. 265).

An important consequence is the stigmatization of people of colour at all levels – from the institutional and governmental levels to microworlds such as that of cinematic storytelling. Another consequence is the reinforcement of emotional segregation, or European Americans’ inability to see people of colour ‘as emotional equals or as capable of sharing the same human emotions and experiences’ (Beeman 2007, p. 687). The sense of worth, as well as the cultural and political citizenship, of people of colour is systematically diminished both in society and on screen.
Othering and stereotyping are precisely the lenses through which Anglo-American filmmakers have depicted Latinos in film (e.g. the caballero, the ‘lazy greaser’, the Mexican bandido, the harlot, the male buffoon, the female clown, the Latin lover and the dark lady) (Noriega 1992; Ramírez-Berg 2002; Rodriguez 2002). In particular, Chicano men started to be associated with urban violence in the late 1970s and early 1980s (Limón 1992; Noriega 1992; Ramírez-Berg 1998, 2002; Fregoso 1993a, 1993b; List 1996). This trend continued in the 1990s and early 2000s with Latino characters other than Mexicans. White Men Can’t Jump (1992), Collateral Damage (2001), Cocaine Cowboys (2006) and Illegal Tender (2007) offer only a snapshot of the myriad Hollywood vehicles of vicious Latina/o stereotyping (Fuentes 1992; Ramírez-Berg 2002).

These cultural representations are such because they emphasize race and ethnicity following narrative recipes mediated by an ideology based on whiteness. They come to be a symptomatic manifestation of the existing ‘structural relations of marginalization’ and inequality that exist in our society, an indicator of ‘the mental state of the dominant’ (Murji and Solomos 2005). We look at stereotypes as a means to uncover this mental state. Our analysis is based on seven Hollywood films. The films included are: Scarface (1983), American Me (1992), Carlito’s Way (1993) and Blood In, Blood Out (1993). We also include three recent independent films that offer audiences an alternative vision of Latina/o life, but in the end reinforce Hollywood race scripts based on whiteness. The three independent films are: Girlfight (2000), Piñero (2001) and Empire (2002). These films are under-studied and have generational representativeness. We included Girlfight because this film provides interesting insights into how filmmakers use race and gender in the construction of characters’ personality. We talk about Cheech Marin’s Born in East L.A. (1987) in several parts of this article as this movie features themes that are relevant to our discussion.

Methodological approach

We utilize the phenomenological-interpretative approach. We identify categories of meanings and discourses, ‘ways of looking at and seeing things’ emphasized in the narratives of Hollywood filmmakers. Carefully analysing the texts involved and repeatedly watching the movies, we began discovering themes and sub-themes, finally deciding which themes were more salient and establishing theoretical links between these themes and the literature. The recurrent themes found in the text were generalizations and stereotypes about deviant behaviour, marginality, diminished citizenship and machismo. These themes appeared pervasively in the narratives of the older films and persisted in the
more recent films that, according to their producers, intended to portray Latinos/as in a more progressive, non-stereotypical way.

**Latino masculinity in *Scarface* and *Carlito’s Way***

Brian DePalma directed one of the most popular movies involving Latino themes in the 1980s, *Scarface* (1983), a remake of a 1932 mobster movie played mostly by Italian American actors. Unlike the original movie, the DePalma version incorporated Latino characters and themes (Rodriguez 1997). Al Pacino played Tony Montana, a Cuban refugee, who is the main character in the film. Brian DePalma and Al Pacino reunited again in *Carlito’s Way* (1993); this time Pacino played Carlito Brigante, a Puerto Rican ex-convict who is in search of a second chance in life after his release from prison.

Tony is flamboyant, alluring, sexy and nasty. Carlito is sad, susceptible and broken. In time, it was Tony Montana, the most violent, deviant and flawed of the two characters, who became a cultural icon. It is the image of Tony Montana that appears on the bedroom walls of many young Latino men who admire him and see him even today as the epitome of Latino manhood and social rebelliousness; clear evidence of internalized sexism and racism among Latino men (see Sandoval Sánchez (2003) for a discussion of Latino audiences and criminal Salvador Agron in the theatrical production of Paul Simon’s *The Capeman*).

Carlito ‘Charlie’ Brigante is a Puerto Rican from Spanish Harlem and Tony Montana is a recently arrived Cuban refugee living in Miami. Early in the films Tony and Carlito show awareness of the American ideals of progress and success. Tony and Carlito possess qualities that are highly regarded in the mainstream: intelligence, attractiveness, defiance, bravery and ambition. In the narratives, Tony and Carlito are not stripped of some of the qualities that marked Hollywood masculinity in the Reagan era: success, achievement, toughness and strength (Jeffords 1994). In particular, Carlito shows a strong sense of personal responsibility as he tries to take control and better his life after being in prison for several years on drug-trafficking charges.

These qualities make Tony and Carlito intriguing and thrilling characters, but at the same time their life stories are presented in problematic ways. For instance, Tony and Carlito play Latino men who live in a world of crime, sex, violence and drugs and who are obsessed with money and power. The narratives suggest that Tony and Carlito possess very dysfunctional personalities and shaky moral values. They grew up without fathers (like most Latino men in crime movies) and had turbulent relations with their families. Tony and Carlito chose criminality and terror as opposed to embracing the ideal
notion of ‘good old Americanness’, which prescribes consistency between reaching success and respecting the rule of law (Jeffords 1994, p. 15). Even so, these characters expose a double standard in Hollywood and white hegemonic culture: that Anglo men who exhibit these characteristics are respected, even revered, while Latino men possessing the same qualities are detested; that is, a white (heterosexual) man acting macho is viewed positively (i.e. his ability to attract and seduce women and be in control) while a Latino (heterosexual) man exhibiting sexist traits is seen negatively (i.e. his propensity to dominate and terrorize women (see Mirande 1997)). The criminal and corrupt behaviour of Tony and Carlito defines them as essentially not ‘good old Americans’. They are only more dangerous since they are conceivably non-native and non-white.

Thus, characters like Tony and Carlito are effectively Othered in this process, symbolically defined in relation to the appropriateness, wholesomeness and righteousness of the dominant white male. Tony and Carlito are two maladjusted Latino males who cannot adjust to the otherwise sophisticated and rightful American way of life, and instead turn to crime and violence to earn money and respect. The narratives suggest that their inability to adjust resides in their maintaining a cultural identity that contradicts American values. One particular scene in Scarface illustrates this. In the scene, Tony Montana says to his best friend, right before joining a drug-trafficking organization, ‘I didn’t come to the United States to break my fucking back’, indicating that he wanted money, power and success but he wanted them quickly and without having to play by the rules. The overall attitude system of Tony and Carlito, positioned as they are in the films as ethnic Others lacking an American identity, is subtly explained in relation to their cultural stock. Therefore, in both films, their characters are telling a story about a presumably identifiable and definable form of cultural identity and masculinity, a story about the nature of Latino men and Latino culture.

Tony killed and sold drugs to gain power per se; in a way he enjoyed being a criminal. This fact makes his character infamous. Carlito resented his past and showed some concerns for his future and some preoccupation over the effects of his behaviour on his family and community, but his defective character and his past are presented as such a burden that in the end he is unable to reshape his life. Alienated by criminality and trapped by passionate attitudes, both Carlito and Tony fail to create a healthy future for themselves and their kin. These two Latino characters, conceived within the ideological frameworks of whiteness, are represented as fragmented individuals, dangerous and tough, sexy and cruel, whose subjectivity can only be material for violent crime movies such as Scarface and Carlito’s Way. With this background, Carlito and Tony become the prototype of the ethnic
criminal, joining on screen the earlier Italian gangster in the urban criminal scene, the dangerous Chicano and the black gangster from the projects (Noriega 1992).

The masculinity of Tony Montana is highlighted through images of fearlessness and bravado. He is not afraid of the harshness of the American criminal justice system and has no regard for scruples. It is precisely his excessive bravado and aggressiveness that leads to the destruction of his self and his criminal enterprise. In the end, Tony builds a powerful and profitable criminal enterprise, but is defeated by his own desires and pathological personality. Passion over reason and pleasure over duty defines Tony’s attitude systems in the Hollywood narrative.

Tony and Carlito experience life as if they are on the verge of an existential breakdown. Being emotional and highly subjective is not antithetical to masculinity in these two men. Carlito and Tony are never in control, even at the peak of their power. Their unpredictable, explosive and even childish behaviours are presented as the cause of such an emotional state and part of the cause behind their deviant lives. At times, Carlito and Tony show compassion and vulnerability in the films. There is a scene in Scarface in which Tony restrains himself from killing when he realizes his target is accompanied by his wife and child. On the other hand, Carlito struggles with his past, letting the audience know how much his emotional life has been affected by his criminal past. But the characters are too flawed and therefore their sensibility is actually dangerous. The subtle message is that Carlito and Tony possess a defective, even queer, masculinity (Negron-Muntaner 2000) and become victims of it. Furthermore, their actions throughout the film rationalize their brutal killings in the end (Rodrı´guez 1997, p. 181), while they justify Anglos acting violently against them (Ramı´rez-Berg 2002, p. 27).

Further, the controlling leadership style of Tony and Carlito reinforces stereotypes that Hollywood films have traditionally attributed to Latino men. They embody the ‘machismo’ that castrates, manipulates and controls other people’s individuality and identity and that conceives interactions with other people through the lenses of clearly delineated hierarchies, where somebody always has a recognized power over others. These frames of representation of the Latino male resonate with the views of many western intellectuals that attribute certain backwardness to people of Latino descent. Arguments about backwardness have been frequently based on negative assumptions about the ‘Catholic religion’ and culture vis-à-vis ‘Protestantism’ (Harrison 1985).

Ideas about the inferiority of lifestyles, attitudes and culture of Latino men are conveyed through the criminalization of their place of residence and/or area of operation. Spanish Harlem and Miami are the
settings of these films. They are negatively represented and depicted as being as dangerous as Tony and Carlito themselves. Miami and Spanish Harlem are sites of crises, lost territories disconnected from the quiet ‘realities’ of the rest of society. Only ‘lesser whites’ can risk coming close to these environments. A subtle connection is made in the narrative between failed masculinity and failed communities and between ethnicity and backwardness.

Defective in character and guided by non-US values, these men are depicted by these films as corrupt, irrational, contradictory, unsophisticated and therefore ‘underdeveloped’. With their defective character, they built the barriers between them and American society. They resist the process of cultural assimilation, have a ‘natural’ tendency to failure and live in broken environments within broken families. Viewing dignity as a function of toughness and material exhibitionism, Tony and Carlito are portrayed as both glamorous and retrogressive. They are ‘hotblooded and have an easy virtue’ (Castro 1998). This male personality is essentially a threat to the constitution of stable and solid communities and to the society as a whole. With a fatalistic and authoritarian vision of life, they profess an overall attitude that contradicts those of US society. They are lacking not only the emotional resources and professional skills but also the discipline and talent needed to become, in a legitimate way, ‘successful’ Americans.

The masculinity of these two characters in many ways resembles hegemonic views of masculinity circulating in the society. The violence and aggression, the toughness, the readiness for emotional disconnection, the thrust for power and control are all there in rather excessive amounts. Their masculinity is not constructed in relation to women or to other men (Cohan and Hark 1993), but in connection to deviant behaviour. This deviance acts as a marker of masculinity and a stage for celebrating spectacular and racialized violence. But, while hyper-masculine in their behaviour, Tony and Carlito are paradoxically feminized by their somewhat ‘emotionalized’ existence. In this way, DePalma produced the binary ‘vs.’, providing no plot about how these two male characters negotiate their male identities and roles vis-à-vis their experiences with urban life, sexuality, friendship, community, violence and drugs (Cohan and Hark 1993). In the end, DePalma created a coherent narrative of Latino life based on a monolithic and gendered concept of Latinidad.

The omnipresence of marginality in narratives of Latinidad and masculinity: Blood In, Blood Out and American Me

Marginality is an important theme in narratives of Latinidad and Latino masculinity. Just as in Scarface and Carlito’s Way, an
identifiable pattern of imagery helps construct notions of the marginal Latino man in *Blood In, Blood Out* and *American Me*. In both of these films, the camera takes us to dirty and isolated neighbourhoods or jails and exposes the audience to the problems of poverty, drug use, gang life and dysfunctional families. The neighbourhoods are ugly; there are clothes hanging on the walls, a lot of noise and a lot of Spanish signs on building walls. People walk down the neighbourhood streets and hang out, suggesting chronic idleness. Inside this world, the young inner-city population struggles to survive in the midst of drug violence, drug addiction and economic insecurity. Shootings, burglaries and gang confrontations form part of their everyday life.

In *Blood In, Blood Out* and *American Me*, Latino men are depicted as marginal men and marginal citizens. Marginality is presented as the common denominator of their life experiences in the United States. The marginality of Latino men is constructed on notions of gang membership, lower occupational status and income, and difference based on language and nationality. The narratives of marginality focus exclusively on accentuating a strong and exclusive relationship between ethnicity and deviant behaviour.

The constitution of the marginal Latino in these two films includes images of the unassimilated immigrant who cannot speak English fluently or hold a decent job. These images contrast noticeably with the dominant imagery of America as a wealthy middle-class nation. Neither physically nor behaviourally do these neighbourhoods represent American prosperity. Hence, these films represent Latino communities as peripheral, distanced culturally, technologically and economically from the mainstream and yet geographically close to the centre of it.

In these two films Hollywood filmmakers attach conditions of poverty, marginality and deviance to the Latino male experience. The constant focus on the street life of inner-city youths and delinquents make this attachment salient and exclusive and leaves out important aspects of Latino immigration and adaptation to US society. This is important since very few cinematic narratives actually tell stories about their lived experiences and status in US society and the particular historical, political, and economic circumstances in which they arrived (Flores 1993).

In essence, the narratives of these movies promote the sense that the poor and economically marginalized represent a threat to urban life and to society at large. They live broken lives in broken environments, and as a consequence have no future. Within this depiction, Latinos should not be ‘rescued’ or ‘vindicated’, since neither their families nor their communities are deemed able to cope with their problems or improve their situation. They live marginal lives and possess a marginal citizenship.
Chin Marin illustrated the consequences of marginalized experience and citizenship in his film *Born in East L.A*. Main character Rudy Robles’ deportation to Mexico in this film reflects how marginal citizenship can be constructed through meanings of appearance and language capabilities in specific settings in the United States. Marin also shows how ethnic background, skin colour, class appearance and residency can fragment the status of people as citizens in American society. This film exposes how Chicano ‘subjectivity resides in the space between and among cultural systems/orders’ (Fregoso 1993b, p. 68). In the case of Rudy Robles in *Born in East L.A.*, his American citizenship was denied on the basis of his non-whiteness. Rudy is a third-generation Mexican-American who, despite speaking perfect English, could not prove his citizenship during an Immigration and Naturalization Services [INS] raid. Rudy was not carrying personal documents with him at the time of the raid and was captured and ‘deported’ to Mexico. Located in a poor immigrant setting, looking poor and being a person of colour, Rudy could not neutralize the strength of the images that associate those characteristics with illegal immigrant status in California. In the end, he had to put up with the mistreatment of INS officers. The persistent insinuation of questionable legal residency status sometimes took Rudy out of the category ‘American all together’ (Fregoso 1993b).

But marginal citizenship can be enacted on screen using other devices. For instance, portraying Latinas/os as culturally backward and unwilling to participate in the development of the country yields notions of second-class citizenship. Being consistently located in the margins of society in Hollywood narratives reinforces negative perceptions of the integrity of their communities and lowers their status as American citizens. When we see gangs killing each other in *Blood In, Blood Out* and *American Me* (and see the lives that Tony Montana and Carlito Brigante live), we witness the damage inflicted on urban life in America by mostly Latino delinquents. The actions and activities they are involved in legitimize ideas of exclusion and discrimination. These criminals are by no means represented as the protagonists of complex social problems and dramatic lives but rather themselves constitute the problems. They threaten the health of American life and institutions with their difference, deviance and marginality. Within the frameworks of whiteness, such individuals of colour should have fewer responsibilities to society and also many fewer rights. In essence, the marginal Latino does not and should not belong in America.

The marginal Latino is pitched against the notion of traditional US citizenship. In modern times, the concept of becoming or being an American has been linked to ideas of belonging to a society ruled by law, ethically inspired by the principles of freedom, democracy and
material success (Gusteren 1998). Encapsulating Latinos within frameworks of marginality and criminality thus curtails the formation of positive perceptions regarding their participation in American society. This portrayal of Latinas/os as socially, culturally and personally unfit to form part of American society produces knowledge that recreates and perpetuates notions of their lower citizenship reinforcing the primacy of white citizenship and the lower citizenship of most recently arrived Latino immigrants (Rosaldo and Flores 1997).

It is the supremacy of these narratives that made success difficult for Edward James Olmos in his attempt to create an illuminating protest barrio film in American Me (Denzin 2002). Although the film is powerful, realistic and threatening in its indictment of Chicano male culture and capitalist values (Denzin 2002), Olmos employs the ultimate racialization narrative in it. The construction of his critique of machismo, racism and capitalism depends on attaching racial meanings to the social issues he presents in the story. This makes race, ethnicity and culture the key factors in defining and understanding criminality, marginality and violence. In the end, the film reifies the concept of race and ethnicity and invokes the biological, social and cultural unity of ‘an arbitrarily Racialized group, that of Americans of Latino descent’ (Murji and Solomos 2005).

Independent films as on-screen remedy

Latino actors from as far back as the 1930s have resisted negative scripts of Latinidad (Ramirez-Berg 2002). Today, when the trend in Hollywood is towards Latinization (Dávila 2001), Latinos are increasingly portrayed as visible outsiders. In this context, Latino actors and producers have put efforts into challenging uncomplicated narratives of Latinidad. Three recent independent films that offer audiences an alternate vision of Latino/a life and peoples are Girlfight (2000), Piñero (2001) and Empire (2002). Interestingly enough, all three films are set in New York City and give a glimpse into the life of predominantly Puerto Rican communities. Both Girlfight and Empire are fictional stories about boxing and the drug trade, respectively, while Piñero is the biopic of the famous Nuyorican poet, playwright and actor Miguel Piñero. Two of the productions, Girlfight and Piñero, received critical acclaim and certain accolades, with Girlfight being the more decorated of the two. Empire, though heavily criticized in several media outlets, is an important film to examine, considering the fact that it is the first feature production of the Latina/o-centred movie studio, Arenas. We analyse these films to ascertain exactly what are the different and genuinely progressive elements in their portrayal of Latinos/as on screen and what, if any, ideological concessions these films had to make in order to achieve box-office success.
Empire: the sensitive man's Scarface

*Empire* is the story of Victor Rosa, a respected Puerto Rican drug dealer in the Bronx who gets into business with a white American Wall Street con-artist who meticulously lures him into investing in several cutting-edge dot.com companies and then takes off with the money. The rest of the story unfolds in a predictable fashion as Victor, in his desire to move up out of the Bronx and leave the drug business behind, ends up cutting his interpersonal ties, upsetting his drug supplier and hitting rock bottom only then to seek out and kill the con-artist, getting his money back. In this sense, *Empire* does not break any new ground: drugs, shoot-outs, murders, cops and revenge invade the screen. *Empire*'s story however is twofold. Developing at the same pace as the traditional underworld storyline, there is the story of the clash between the white and non-white world in New York City. *Empire*'s contextual values lie in its conception and depiction of a clear class/colour demarcation between the world Victor Rosa inhabits and the world the con-artist offers him an entry to. The traditional and even clichéd gangster tale the movie tells is meant to serve simply as an attractive mechanism by which to present the more crucial issue of white/non-white relations. The problem is that the mechanism employed in the film ends up overtaking the principal message of the movie. Consequently, somewhere between the various scuffles and shoot-outs between opposing drug dealers and the cold and vicious murders of several of the film’s primary characters, including the leading man, the issue of race is lost.

What remains is a sparse glimmer of hope that shines through every so often during the film. There is the loving relationship that Victor has with his girlfriend and his touching desires to be a father. There is the construction of Victor’s posse as at once a frightening and deadly association of criminals and a loving and complex group of friends that go through an entire series of diverse emotions as their group is shaken by outside forces and almost torn apart. There is most importantly, for the purposes of the film, the equation of white legitimate business operations with the non-white drug world. Victor and the con-artist, Jack, are brought together by the kind of money they make and by the way they make it. They are both hustlers. However, since the audience views the action through Victor’s eyes, and because the film does try, and in fact succeeds to a point, in depicting a more humanized version of the Puerto Rican drug dealer, Victor is the character one roots for. He is the character the people like. More importantly, his character, because he is given a girlfriend, a future child, a group of friends and a community, is the complex, three-dimensional person that the white American character is not and that makes all the difference.
This, in our estimation, is *Empire’s* most meaningful accomplishment. It manages to give a more complete view of a traditionally one-dimensional character. It does so, however, in the same fashion that Hollywood productions construct their white American heroes: it utilizes an image of the racial other as a mere foil (Vera and Gordon 2003). This is problematic for, in order to break out of the traditional Latino/a villain role, the film dehumanizes the white American character. Liberation here depends on an inversion or recreation of typical white vs. brown representations. The progressive character of the representation is thus compromised.

**Piñero: straight up, no chaser**

The film *Piñero* is compromised in a similar way. Based on the life and work of a founder of the 1970s Nuyorican poetry movement, this film is set up as a series of flashbacks that provide audiences with a dizzying look into the life of the deceased writer. The problem, however, is not with the cinematic style of the film, for one is able to get a good sense of what the man went through. The problem lies in the depiction of the man himself and the community he represented. Miguel Piñero, the writer, is taken completely out of context in this film. While it is true that the movie goes to great length and succeeds in giving Piñero’s work, especially his poetry, centre-stage on screen, the work is not placed adequately within the specific social circumstances under which it emerged. The migration of working-class Puerto Ricans to the US that took place following the Second World War and their settlement in some of New York City’s poorest areas is only briefly acknowledged in the film by way of a facile nostalgia for better times on the island. This is problematic because Piñero’s work, along with that of his fellow Nuyorican writers, was the direct product of that migration process and it arose out of an utter necessity to protest against the dire conditions in which they were forced to live in New York (Flores 1993). Further, their work served as the premier vehicle for the expression of socially conscious and politically motivated ideas among the Puerto Rican community (Flores 1993). Consequently, to strip the work from this context is to misconstrue both the nature and purpose of the work, as well as the life of the man who wrote it. Miguel Piñero is thus portrayed in this film as more of a junkie outlaw than a socially conscious poet. He comes off as a wayward and non-political petty thief with a unique and seemingly inexplicable gift for writing gut-wrenching plays and aggressive yet lyrical poetry.

Furthermore, the film’s treatment of Piñero’s sexuality leaves a lot to be desired. In the few instances in which Piñero’s bisexuality comes to light in the film it is depicted as somehow deviant, immoral, or as a
tragic consequence of the sexual abuse he suffered at the hands of his father when he was a child. His supposed truancy is further developed in the many scenes in the film where Piñero appears either drunk, high or getting drunk or high. Now, while it is true that Piñero’s drug addiction and alcoholism did lead to an early death, and while it is also true that as his condition worsened he got more and more desperate and thus, more and more decadent, the film seems more concerned with this theme than with the relationship between the poet and his father, lover or best friend. The fact is that all these relationships, even though they do appear in the movie and even though they are at the base of some of the film’s most touching moments, are overshadowed by the graphic and brutal drug scenes in which Piñero slowly but surely deadens himself with each hit.

A cloak of criminality thus seems to come over this character for even his most tender looks and heartfelt actions are somehow taken over by the moral and/or social defect he is presumed to have. Such is the span of this criminal persona that it eclipses the Puerto Rican community the writer represented. The film refuses to portray the people that made up Piñero’s Puerto Rican New York. Consequently, it seems that the writer lived in some type of larger communal vacuum. It seems that he wrote for himself, that he believed in nothing and was read by no one.

**Girlfight: punching out racial/racist conventions**

Of the three independent films, *Girlfight* (2000) is the most successful in portraying multidimensional Latino/a characters. In the movie, Michelle Rodriguez plays the role of Diana Guzmán, a tough and stubborn yet sensitive Puerto Rican teenager from the Red Hook section of Brooklyn, New York. Diana lives with her obnoxious and domineering father and her little brother. The overall mood in their home is one of tension and anxiety. The two siblings get along and take care of each other, but their relationship with their father Sandro appears strained. He and Diana constantly clash. Diana’s conflict with her dad stems from her mother’s suicide which in Diana’s mind was provoked by years of physical and emotional abuse from Sandro. The mother’s presence in the movie is thus strikingly evident. Throughout the film, the audience witnesses the girl’s trials and tribulations as she attempts to find a niche for herself. The movie, then, has much less to do with boxing than with this teen’s urgent need to carve out, establish and assert an identity of her own.

*Girlfight* thus avoids all the trappings that could have made the film a female *Rocky*-type tale by having the boxing serve not as the centrepiece of the movie but rather as the metaphor for the much more interesting and important internal and interpersonal conflicts of the
film’s leading character. There is no glory, no fame and no money for Diana to make in this film. There is no visible change in her situation. On paper, she is no better or worse at the end of the movie than she was at the beginning. What *Girlfight* manages to do is to present the coming of age of a disenfranchised and doubly marginal character (she is in the margins of both mainstream white American society and the male-dominated Latina/o boxing community) in a difficult and dangerous social environment without having to resort to typical Hollywood depictions of ‘people of colour’ struggling to get by. Consequently, the violence prevalent in Diana’s community, though acknowledged and somehow ever present, does not visibly appear in the film. By the same token, the abuse to which Diana’s mother was submitted does not appear in visual recollections in the film even though it drives Diana’s every move towards her father. What is played out for the camera is her attack on him. Physical violence is used here in a more positive manner: not as a reflection of the moral depravity of this community, but as the crowning symbol of self-assertion of one of this community’s most subjugated members.

Furthermore, the ethnic character of the story is not developed within a context of criminality or overall illegality. On the contrary, the movie introduces the audience to a rich though economically humble and troubled community. There are loving relationships all through this movie. The movie is in fact built on the complex relationships of the different Latino/a characters. There is thus an overwhelming air of humanity that rises up in seemingly every scene and which gives the Latino/a characters in the film a tenderness rarely if ever seen in Hollywood productions. This tenderness, however, does not come at the expense of social consciousness or critique. On the contrary, the film harbours a very strong message against patriarchal thinking and male violence within the Latino/a community.

The character of Diana Guzman represents what Mary Beltrán refers to as the ‘new Latina action hero’. The example of *Girlfight* is one of many, yet stands out as the most progressive. Beltrán writes:

*Girlfight* challenges gender typing with respect to the physical and mental training and qualities we associate with heroism... in this regard, *Girlfight* comments on the qualities associated with masculinity in US culture, and the tradition of resistance to women demonstrating such so-called “masculine” traits. (Beltrán 2004, p. 194)

Whereas the representation of Diana challenges hegemonic notions of masculinity and heroism, Beltrán also points out that much of the construction of the Latina action hero relies on the emphasis on Latina bodies: because they are ‘sexy’ their aggression is more...
palatable, as is the case for instance in the myriad action roles Jennifer Lopez has played (Anaconda, Enough, Angel Eyes, Out of Sight). In contrast, Girlfight provides a welcome relief from these over-sexualized portrayals, the ‘new macha heroine for a new era’ (Beltrán 2004, p. 193).

Diana’s character is a remarkably crafted and beautifully staged affront against traditional notions of manhood and femininity. Her character’s ferocity represents the social and moral weight of the critique. The film then succeeds because it does justice to and humanizes Latinas/os on screen without having to shy away from the more troubling aspects of Latina/o culture and without compromising its commitment to female empowerment and overall social change.

Conclusions

Hollywood filmmakers construct ideological messages that safeguard whiteness through the systematic racialization of Latino men in film. Race and ethnicity are invoked to create a limited understanding of marginality and criminality, producing inferiorization of Latinidad and Latino masculinity. Accounts of gendered violence, cultural otherness and deficient cultural stock and class-specific presumptions of success, progress and normality help uphold white identity in the film narratives.

Although crime and marginality have been recurring themes, there are marked differences between these tales of crime and the frameworks used to tell crime stories involving white characters. It is obvious that the toughness of Latino criminals like Tony Montana and Carlito Brigante lacks the assertive manhood of the tough white gangster of the 1930s and 1940s (Neibaur 1989). The criminal Latino is defective in character and personality as it is his culture (Fregoso 1993a). In the case of Latinos, toughness and virility are revealed as counterproductive and extremely dangerous. Unlike the skilful and rational white villain, the marginal Latino is distracted by the confusion and contradiction of his emotions and succumbs to his own vulnerabilities.

Overall, the set of films analysed, except for Girlfight, fail to present and situate Latinidad and masculinidad in the context of racism, multiculturalism and assimilation. Even Edward James Olmos, who consciously tried to break the Hollywood mould, failed in this effort and reproduced Hollywood’s narratives of Latino masculinity in his film American Me. These racialized images teach people about what it means to be a Latino male in the US (and what it means to be white), provide a reference for conceptualizing their citizenship and social
worth, and help to jeopardize society’s chances of increasing social closeness among groups (Feagin and Vera 1995; Honneth 1996).

Early twenty-first century films such as Piñero, Empire and Girlfight evidence the effort of challenging certain stereotypes of Latinas/os in Hollywood films as the number of Latinos/as increase in Hollywood and US society at large. They illustrate an attempt to define Latina/o ethnicity, community and identity from the standpoint of Latinas/os themselves as opposed to utilizing Hollywood’s most traditional racial definitions (Molina Guzmán 2006). Latino/a actors have understood that the image of the dangerous Latino male is used to convey messages about the alleged dysfunctional character of families of colour. With an essential patriarchal premise, these messages link the goodness of a community to the goodness and fitness of their men. Movies like Piñero and Empire offer a different narrative and a new Latino subject, one that destabilizes the coherence of racist and patriarchal messages such as this.

As we write this conclusion, the number of Latina/o actors, producers, directors and singers continues to increase and become more visible in American movies and television. At the same time, the debate over the future shape of the American bi-racial order continues as the numbers of people of colour among the US population continue to increase. Bonilla Silva (2004) envisions a tri-racial system of stratification composed by whites (on top), honorary whites and collective blacks (at the very bottom). According to Bonilla Silva, the benefits of whiteness will be (unequally) shared by new white immigrants and lighter skin multi-racials while blacks, black immigrants and dark-skinned Asians will share the bottom of the hierarchy. George Yancey (2003) foresees a dichotomous system of stratification composed by whites and all minorities, on the one hand, and African Americans alone, on the other hand. Yancey’s argument suggests changes in the definition of whiteness in a way that allows the integration of all non-black minorities.

As race and racial ideology are functional systems in our society (Haney Lopez 2006), we should expect these changes to reflect the dynamics brought about by the increased numbers of inter-marriage and multi-racial individuals and increased numbers of people of colour. We should expect films to reflect these tensions and new social, political and cultural realities (Noriega 1992). The challenge for professional critics is to expose the ideological underpinnings by which the stereotype of the dangerous, marginal, criminal Latino is maintained in the present and near future in the light of substantial transformations in the lives of Latinos and challenges to white supremacy by multiculturalism, new identity politics, progressive social policies and anti-racist social movements (Twine and Gallagher 2008).
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