

TOWARD A QUEER CHICANA/O FAMILY:
VISIONS OF PAST, QUEERNESS, MASCULINITY AND UTOPIA IN CONTEMPORARY
CHICANA/O POPULAR CULTURE

By

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To my family, who showed me how complicated, exciting, and ultimately inspirational Latino families can be and to Tace Hedrick whose constant support was invaluable to my work

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This work questions typical conceptions of *familia* in Chicana/o studies and culture by focusing on connections between gay men and the Chicana/o family in Chicana/o popular culture. I specifically analyze relationships of queerness, masculinity, memory and futurism in Michael Nava's novel *Rag & Bone*, Ricardo Bracho's play *Sissy*, and Richard Glatzer and Wash Westmoreland's film *Quinceañera*. In analyzing these texts, I historicize the ways in which *familia* has been used by the Chicano movement as a way to promote nationalism while at the same time cementing homophobic and sexist ideology within the movement. Furthermore, I counter queer criticism of the family as useless and always oppressive. I use José Esteban-Muñoz' idea of *disidentification* and queer potentiality to evaluate how each of the fictional texts I analyze disidentifies with the Chicana/o family in order to create new ways of understanding the role of queer masculinity in the Chicana/o family in a way that defies typical ways in which the family, specifically the Chicana/o family, has been read by scholars.

CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

“The strength of our families never came from domination. It has only endured in spite of it—
like our women”
—Cherríe Moraga, “Like a White Sheep I Follow”

“This is not school, where I am sissy and always a gender question, but home where I am brown
and boy to a mother who adores such things”
—Ricardo Bracho, “Huevos de Oro: On Passion and Privilege”

“The here and now is a prison house. We must strive, in the face of the here and now’s
totalizing rendering of reality, to think and feel *a then and there*”
—José Esteban-Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*

In his recently published book *Next of Kin: The Family in Chicano/a Cultural Politics*, queer Chicano author Richard T. Rodríguez explores the complex and dynamic exchange of social forces that characterize the connection between Chicana/o culture and the family, and the effect the exchange of those forces has on the creation and negotiation of Chicana/o sexuality and queerness. According to Rodríguez, “if there is a single issue almost always at stake in Chicano/a cultural politics since the Chicano movement of the 1960s and 1970s, it is the family in some shape, form, or fashion. Indeed, the family is a crucial symbol and organizing principle that by and large frames the history of Mexican Americans in the United States” (2). While I specifically focus on Rodríguez (due to his project’s in-depth and up-to-date study of the Chicana/o family), this claim is supported—explicitly and implicitly, consciously and unconsciously—by a number of Chicana/o scholars, novelists, filmmakers, playwrights, and poets¹. Throughout the vast and largely different work of contemporary Chicana/os, *la familia* tends to linger in the background, constantly informing, complicating, constraining, creating and

¹ Chicana/o fiction has been known to deal with this subject since the beginning of the Chicana/o movement. In contemporary works, it can be found in the writing of Cherríe Moraga, in popular Chicana/o films like *My Family*, *Selena* and *Price of Glory*, and in the plays of Luis Alfaro and Ricardo Bracho, just to give a few examples.

affecting multiple aspects of Chicana/o identity, especially gender and sexuality, which together encompass some of the most controversial topics of discussion in Chicana/o cultural studies.

In studying the connections between Chicana/o family and queer identity, it is virtually impossible not to bring up Chicana lesbian author, activist, and scholar Cherríe Moraga, one of the most central figures in the field of Chicana/o cultural studies and Chicana/o queer studies. As Tomas Almaguer notes, “more than any other lesbian writer’s, the extraordinary work of Cherríe Moraga articulates a lucid and complex analysis of the predicament that the middle-class Chicana lesbian and Chicano gay man face in this society” (265). This ability to capture the complexities behind a classed Chicana/o queer identity makes Moraga a foundational figure for questioning, exploring, and understanding the ways in which gender and sexuality interact with Chicana/o identity.

In bringing up Moraga, I am aware that the foundational work of Chicana lesbians like Gloria Anzaldúa and Moraga herself has been used by Chicano cultural critics so profusely that in doing so, they have ignored the contribution of queer Chicano men to the field². This becomes particularly clear when reading the works of heterosexual Chicano males such as Chicano scholar David T. Abalos. In his book *The Latino Male: A Radical Definition*, Abalos credits the writing of prominent Chicana lesbians in helping him understand the problems with nationalistic constructions of patriarchy in Chicana/o culture:

I have been deeply inspired by the scholarship of Chicana/Latina feminists... Their work and scholarship have demonstrated the need to see the intersection of race, class, and gender in order to better confront the interwoven forms of oppression. They have done this by using their bodies, their selves, their stories as they

² Rodríguez talks about this issue in *Next of Kin*, specifically referring to the problematic ways in which Moraga and Tomas Almaguer have criticized the Chicano gay community for not being as outspoken as their lesbian counterparts. In this section, Rodríguez specifically refers to the work of gay Chicanos like John Rechy, Floyd Salas, Oscar “Zeta” Acosta, and others whom he argues have largely contributed to scholarship on queer Chicano identity.

introduced with clarity and brilliance an autobiographical scholarship that fully revealed that the personal is political, historical, and sacred... They opened up new stories and put to rest the taboo against declaring and celebrating one's sexuality, especially gay and lesbian sexual liberation (9)

While it is hard to criticize Abalos for recognizing the great value in the struggle of Chicana/Latina feminists to create an understanding of the oppressive ways in which Chicano/Latino patriarchy interacts with gender and sexuality, the author is unable to acknowledge Chicano/Latino gay men as actual participants—if not as vocal and fully realized—in the movement against patriarchy. Thus, Abalos—perhaps unintentionally—becomes a participant in the clear lack of acknowledgment of gay Chicano scholars. Even though this is not a rarity in the field of Chicana/o cultural studies, I am not proposing that we willingly forget or make an attempt to completely ignore the contributions of Chicana lesbians as a way to highlight or privilege the work of Chicano gay men. This would cause an unnecessary and tense divide in a Chicana/o queer group that has largely survived due to its strong sense of community. And yet, at the same time, I do believe it is important to understand that the issues of gay men in the Chicana/o community are not interchangeable with those of Chicana lesbians, especially since gender and sexuality are so deeply intertwined in a way that constantly informs how a queer body is looked at, treated, studied, and politicized.

Having said that, it is worth noting that few people (man or woman, queer or straight) have been able to present a study of the Chicana/o queer experience as powerfully and thoroughly as Cherríe Moraga. In her work Moraga speaks of the complicated and often tense relationship that exists between queer Chicana/os and their families. As she shows in *Loving in the War Years* (1983) and *Waiting in the Wings* (1997), for her, *la familia* tends to represent a site where Chicana/os connect with their past but also where they can explore multiple ways to envision a different future for the community. When Moraga writes, “The strength of our families never

came from domination. It has only endured in spite of it—like our women,” she succinctly captures her complex relationship to la familia: on one hand she never fails to examine and confront the oppression embedded in the current heteronormative family dynamics that are at the basis of la familia; on the other hand, she clearly sees the family as a system rich with potential for the lives of Chicana/os. This makes for a reading of familia that far from being romanticized, opens up a realm of possibilities for what the Chicana/o family could be, especially for queer subjects. Thus, as I will discuss in more detail throughout this paper, I argue that family is the site where queer Chicana/o identity is not only oppressed (as it is usually read by queer scholars) but also created and altered, or—as Jose Esteban Munoz would put it—*disidentified*.

While she was one of the first Chicana/o authors “to shatter the silence on the homosexual experience of the Chicano population” (265), more recently, queer Chicana/o authors have started to discuss their experiences and their observations regarding the intersection of queerness and race. Following Moraga’s tradition, a number of these gay and lesbian authors have continued to explore questions regarding the Chicana/o family and its role in shaping a queer identity.

In his essay “A Place Called Home: A Queer Political Economy of Mexican Immigrant Men’s Family Experiences,” late sociologist Lionel Cantu Jr. defined the family and the home as, “a site where normalizing rules of gender and sexual conduct and performance are taught on a daily basis” (113). I argue that queer Chicana/o artists focus on this definition of family in their work while further complicating it with politics of race and ethnicity. For this study I specifically focus on representations of Chicano gay males as portrayed mostly by queer Chicano men but also—in a particular case—by a couple of queer white men; I focus on these because of both the aforementioned constant disregard for the work of Chicano gay men and because of the

oppressive role the male tends to occupy in Chicana/o family narratives. To further explain, it is this oppressive role often assigned to the male that provokes these artists to deal with the ways in which queerness divests their Chicano gay protagonists of their initial positions of power as Chicano patriarchs within the family structure.

This struggle is of course directly tied to the patriarchal system that has characterized the Chicano/Latino family structure since the 1960s, particularly since this is a culture that is heavily influenced by Mexican ideology that associates specific sexual roles and behavior to rigid man/woman gender roles. Therefore, a man who allows himself to be penetrated loses his male privilege and is perceived as “the cultural equivalent of women” (Almaguer 266). This is further complicated by the fact that, according to Cantu, more and more Chicano/Latino gay men are leaving behind labels of *pasivo* (the one who is penetrated) and *activo* (the one who penetrates) and are becoming more comfortable with a sexual versatility that breaks away from the strict and somewhat archaic *pasivo/activo* binary (236)³. Thus, it can be implied that when a Chicano/Latino gay male engages in sexual behavior he is ideologically placed outside the norm; his sexual activity deprives him of his hegemonic privilege and so then he is treated as the object of patriarchal oppression—a woman.

Because of this clearly misguided perception, gay characters in contemporary queer Chicano narratives must then confront questions about their place in the family specifically as Chicano gay men. What does it mean to be a queer Chicano in a structure with seemingly rigid definitions of masculinity and femininity? How do family, race, ethnicity, masculinity and

³ Cantu’s is an ethnographic project in which he interviewed a series of Mexican immigrants who were gay, bisexual or considered themselves straight but had been with men before.

sexuality interact to create different manifestations of Chicano queer male identity? How does the memory of family and the past work to create a queer Chicano family in the present and future?

These questions are significant in that they help tackle the relationship between *la familia*, one of the most explored themes in Chicano literature in general, and the Chicano gay male, one of the most consistently absent and silent figures in Chicano literature. In this study I focus specifically on three texts that I argue attempt to negotiate and tackle those specific questions: Michael Nava's popular detective novel *Rag & Bone*, Ricardo Bracho's one-act play *Sissy*, and Richard Glatzer and Wash Westmoreland's film *Quinceañera*. Nava's novel, which concerns a Mexican-American lawyer called Henry Rios dealing with a murder case involving his niece, presents a study of the way family, past, tradition and sexuality complicate, inform and transform one another. Bracho's play about an effeminate boy who runs away from home only to come back at the end, criticizes the oppressive heterosexist environment that is tied with *la familia* while at the same time acknowledging the essential role this structure plays in the lives of queer Chicano men and their future; Bracho also manages to incorporate the image of the sissy in his play, a figure that sadly is even more absent in Chicano/Latino scholarship and literature than other more "widely accepted" manifestations of queerness. Richard Glatzer and Wash Westmoreland provide a similar critique as *Sissy* in their film *Quinceañera*, a film about a young girl who forms a relationship with her gay cousin when she becomes pregnant at fifteen and is kicked out of her house; much like *Rag & Bone*, the film deals with issues of community and the possibility of a new queer Chicano family that could create a disidentificatory relationship with the current patriarchal family structure.

These texts not only explore different ways to deconstruct and transform the family, but they also portray a range of manifestations of queer masculinity; while *Rag & Bone* is about an upper middle class Mexican-American lawyer living in a wealthy neighborhood Los Angeles, *Sissy* is about a lower class sissy boy from Culver City, and *Quinceanera* concerns a *vato loco* (a type of macho Chicano man typically associated with gangs or lowrider culture in L.A) from Echo Park. The difference between these representations of masculinity allows for an in-depth study of the ways in which different forms of Chicano queer masculinity interact with la familia.

However, it is impossible to talk about queering the family without first exploring the way family has been ideologically read, deconstructed, and understood. By ignoring the history of the family we would risk overlooking some of the key factors that create the unbalanced power dynamics that characterize it as hegemonic force in our society. Though hardly any family is similar to any other, most of us have a typical image of what an “ideal family” looks like. Mary Bernstein and Renate Reimann are right in stating that in post-WWII America, “the privatized-nuclear family holds a sacred place in the American psyche and is embedded in most major social and legal institutions.” The authors further add that, “as an ideal type, *The Family* consists of a legally married (biologically male) husband and a (biological female) wife, approximately two children, and the obligatory dog or cat” (2). Of course in this image of the family, the father is always perceived as the breadwinner, the mother is the caretaker, and the children (and pets for that matter) are always imagined as heterosexual. I would further add that because of the underrepresentation of minorities in the media, the ideal family is often associated with images of whiteness.

Yet, this idealized image of the family is hardly an accurate portrayal of what an American family today looks like. David T. Abalos is right when he asserts that, “the idealized nuclear

family consisting of two parents, two or three children, the dog, and the house in the suburbs is already an anachronism” (xiv). A range of factors in contemporary society has significantly altered the view of the family as a static monolith, “the relationship of marriage to the family; socioeconomic influences; culture; the economy; domestic issues and pressures; divorce; remarriage; single-parent; gay and lesbian families; extended families; and governmental policy,” as well as race and ethnicity of course, all contribute to the dynamic nature of the family today (Wiseman 5). And still the rhetoric around so-called “family values” and what they entail and connote pervade American culture in a way that often disregards all those changes; despite the changes the American family has gone through, the obsession with the (heterosexist and heteronormative) idealized form of The Family still remains part of the American unconscious (Bachman 40).

In the gay community, two main camps with opposing opinions about the family structure have developed. One group, mainly identified with the “official” Gay Rights Movement as presented by the media, insists on gay marriage as the ultimate goal of the LGBT Movement. The idea is that by obtaining the same rights as our heterosexual counterparts, gay families will finally be recognized and become part of the American model of family. However, to adopt marriage as a solution that will magically end discrimination and oppression against the LGBT community is not only a naïve move, but a project that fails to erase the exclusionary socioeconomic, racial, and political practices of the heteronormative family structure. In finding this idealization of marriage guided by a hegemonic set of ideals, I side with Valerie Lehr’s argument that “the ethical framework of gay liberals who seek to gain marriage and family rights is inevitably a moral system that will exclude many who understand themselves as gay, lesbian, or queer” (46).

This exclusive and alienating nature of typical conceptions of the family has driven a number of (mainly Anglo) queer critics to call for a rejection of family altogether. Lehr herself writes her book *Queer Family Values* (1999) as a way to argue against the family as a useful way to discuss the needs of those who identify with the queer community. More famously, Michael Warner has written extensively about his disdain for the idea of family and his belief that we should reject the family altogether (xvi). It seems that in their attempt to answer Judith Butler's question of "how does one oppose the homophobia without embracing the marriage norm as the exclusive or most highly valued social arrangement for queer sexual lives?" (2), authors such as Lehr and Warner have decided (or at least attempted) to do away with the family. I say "attempted" because regardless of the shortcomings the family poses, its influence is so engrained in who we are as individuals and as a society that I do not see how it is possible or particularly useful to reject it as these theorists suggest.

Furthermore, I'm not sure that rejecting family would be the magical solution to ending the hegemonic position the family holds over us. In fact, according to José Esteban Muñoz, doing away with an oppressive structure or object altogether is a task that only works to reinscribe the structure's presence and power. Muñoz describes French linguist Michel Pecheux's theory of disidentification⁴ to describe this process, "Pecheux built on this theory by describing the three modes in which a subject is constructed by ideological practices." Muñoz goes on to describe the first mode, in which a subject fully identifies with dominant discourse. The second mode is the "Bad Subject," the subject who tries to do away with "identificatory sites" present in the first mode; for Muñoz, "the danger that Pecheux sees in such an operation would be the

⁴ Pecheux himself "extrapolates a theory of disidentification from Marxist theorist Louis Althusser's theory of subject formation and interpellation" (see Jose Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*)

counterdetermination that such a system installs, a structure that validates the dominant ideology by reinforcing its dominance through the controlled symmetry of ‘counterdetermination.’”

Finally, Muñoz describes the mode of disidentification, a way to escape the trap offered by the Good Subject/Bad Subject binary and instead opting to deconstruct and modify a system by working “on and against dominant ideology” (11).

Thus, rejecting the family would be to both validate its oppressive control while at the same time ignoring the value in modifying and ultimately queering its structure. Doing this offers the potential to transform hegemonic structures into sites that privilege nonhegemonic subjects who have been left out of typical constructions of the family (Ralph Rodríguez 43). Rather than counter-identifying with *la familia*, I propose that the three texts I study here *disidentify* with it as a way to expose its problematic nature and provide a new and queer definition of what it could be.

I previously remarked that the queer critics who continue to theorize against family are mainly Anglo authors who make up the majority of a largely white queer movement. Part of the reason middle-class queer authors are able to do this is because they occupy a privileged position that isn’t necessarily available to most queer people of color. Tomas Almaguer does a good job of explaining how “[gay] members of the privileged racial group...arguably no longer [depend] solely on their respective cultural groups and families as a line of defense against the dominant group” (263). Because they are members of the dominant racial group, white gay men and women are not forced to rely on the family as their sole system of support. Almaguer goes on to describe how, “[Chicanos] have never occupied the social space where a gay or lesbian identity can readily become a primary basis of self-identity. This is due, in part, to their structural position at the subordinate ends of both the class and racial hierarchies, and in a context where

ethnicity remains a primary basis of group identity and survival” (263). The abject position of gay and lesbian Chicana/os makes them more likely to rely on the socioeconomic benefits of being part of a family structure. Hence, a scenario in which the Chicano family is deconstructed and re-defined rather than completely destroyed, would prove more helpful for queer Chicana/os.

In siding with Ralph Rodríguez’ argument that *familia* can and should be reinvented rather than given up, I do not intend to sentimentalize *familia* or ignore its oppressive history in the Chicano culture, especially concerning its relationship with Chicano gay men, the subject of this essay. In fact, I agree with Almaguer’s critique that, “unlike the generally more egalitarian, permissive family life of white middle-class gay men and lesbians in the US, the Mexican family appears to play a far more important and restrictive role in structuring homosexual behavior among Mexican men” (260). This struggle with the restrictive role of the family is observed not only by Michael Nava and Cherríe Moraga, but it’s a theme that has haunted the work of prominent gay Chicano authors such as Luis Alfaro, John Rechy, Ricardo Bracho, and Richard Rodríguez.

It is important to note that *familia* has been used by Chicanos and by Anglos as a way to exercise control over the gay Chicano subject. Historically, the Chicano movement prominent in the 1960s and 1970s was characterized by its emphasis on *la familia* as a site of power and refuge. Richard Rodríguez explains that, “while the Chicano movement cannot be classified as a monolithic entity...the deployment of the family principle nonetheless figured prominently in various organizational practices and discursive strategies put forth by movement leaders” (21). The Chicano movement presented a significant opportunity for Chicanos to voice out their discontent with the largely white majority that refused to recognize Chicana/os as a group. The movement—led by one of its most prominent figures, Rodolfo “Corky” Gonzáles—focused on

the call for Aztlán, an imagined place that represented a Chicano nation; “Aztlán” is the Aztec word for “land to the north,” presumed to be the U.S. Southwest, which according to Aztec mythology was the land of the Aztecs before they migrated to what is now Mexico (Yolanda & Cornish 190). Aztlán represented a symbolic nation where Chicana/os were not only liberated but united as brothers and sisters.

The rhetoric involving the nation of Aztlán was one that highlighted the importance of familia and community. This is clear in “El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán,” the manifesto adopted by the Chicano movement at the first National Chicano Youth Liberation Conference which took place in Denver in 1969; the document emphasizes brotherhood, patriarchy and family as the root of power for the Chicana/o community. According to “El Plan,” “brotherhood unites us, and love for our brothers makes us a people whose time has come and who struggles [sic] against the foreigner ‘gabacho’ who exploits our riches and destroys our culture.” The focus on “brotherhood” and “brothers” invokes the family structure, and yet it decisively leaves out the Chicana women who are part of the community. This emphasis on the family is furthered observed in “El Plan” as it claims that, “our cultural values of life, family, and home will serve as a powerful weapon to defeat the gringo dollar value system and encourage the process of love and brotherhood.” Here family and home function as the way to strengthen the system of *carnalismo* or patriarchal brotherhood that characterized a major part of the movement. The symbolic power that family is given as a “base of mutual support and survival” designed to protect its members from racial oppression is at odds with its underlining theme of female subordination, mainly since in this idealized view of the family the woman becomes “the family’s unpaid cook, child-rearer, and domestic” (Alaniz & Cornish 194-195).

The connections between family and masculinity kept the Chicano movement from fully embracing all members from the community, actually creating a classed, gendered ideal of what the Chicano (not always Chicana) individual ought to be. As a matter of fact, the idea of a Chicano masculinity focused intensely on conceptions of masculinity that were built around control of nonhegemonic subjects like Chicana women and Chicano gay men; Yolanda Alaniz and Megan Cornish make this clear when they describe “Corky” Gonzáles’ definition of manhood/machismo to writer Stan Steiner “as including not only honor, dignity, courage and honesty, but also the ability [of a man] ‘to run his house [and] to control his woman’” (195). This remark made by a leader of the movement represents a desire for male dominance over the woman, but it also assumes that for a man to be a man he must have a woman to control in the first place; hence, the statement works as an affirmation and validation of sexism and homophobia within Chicano cultural nationalism.

This idealization of family values is not only characteristic of the Chicano movement of the 60s and 70s, but it can also be observed throughout Chicana/o cultural studies even in contemporary scholarship (Rodríguez 6). Even Yolanda Alaniz and Megan Cornish, who are staunch critics of the anti-feminist and homophobic tendencies of the Chicana/o movement, argue for the importance of the Chicana/o family as “a vital source of economic, cultural and psychological survival in a hostile world.” In their argument, Alaniz and Cornish claim that “the family pools its resources and labor, keeps alive customs and the Spanish language, and provides its members with the emotional support necessary to withstand the ravages of racism and denigration” (252-253). Thus, the authors ultimately subscribe to the idea of familia as the pillar of Chicano identity by adhering to its construction as an escape from the racism that Chicana/os encounter in their everyday lives.

This assumption has serious implications for Chicano gay men who are unable to reproduce, especially considering that if familia—as typically conceived by Chicano cultural nationalists—has such enormous value, “any deviation from the sacred link binding husband, wife, and child not only threatens the very existence of *la familia* but also potentially undermines the mainstay of resistance to Anglo racism and class exploitation” (266). Furthermore, while the father is usually presented as the protector of this structure, the male child then becomes the protector-in-training; in this dynamic, gayness becomes a threat to the hegemonic forces that sustain the idea of the family as a “safe haven.” Through this limited and romanticized view, only the heterosexual Chicano male can find true refuge in the family since this is the one structure where he is given full control. Regardless of *la familia*’s alleged power to provide protection for Chicana/os, a structure that protects against racism but that still relies on oppression against women and queers only serves to benefit a few and leave nonhegemonic subjects out. This is why queer Chicanos have called for a reconfiguration of Aztlán “as a borderland space inclusive of *atravesados* where the wounds inflicted by patriarchal oppression could heal, then reopen to embrace all subjects” (Aldama 22). If Aztlán can be queered then how does a queer masculinity interact with Chicana/o nationalism? And how does gayness work to complicate family as a site of tradition?

On the other hand, white Americans have also benefitted from the Chicano family ideal. This is particularly true of the world of marketing and advertising where the portrayal of Latinos and Chicanos has gained great significance in recent years due to the large increase in those groups’ population in the United States. This trend is made clear by Arlene Davila in her excellent ethnographic analysis of Spanish language advertising in the United States. Davila points out that, “Latinos are repackaged into images that render them pleasing to corporate

clients, such as in the garb of the traditional and extremely family-oriented...consumer” (4). She later goes on to add that this assumption of Hispanics and Latinos as having “good family values” has led advertisers to often portray the father as the ruling patriarch, the mother and grandmother as the protector of custom and tradition, and the children as obedient to those specific gender and (hetero)sexual positions. Davila further connects this portrayal to typical representation of Hispanics and Latinos as “motivate[d] by family and collective, not individual, needs and desires” (95). The problem with this assumption is not based on its accuracy or inaccuracy in reflecting the Chicana/Latina family; in fact, according to Rodríguez, the family did become “a constellation of forces inspiring those battles waged for political and economic justice in the name of la raza” (21). The problem is in the clear attempt to essentialize the experience and needs of specific groups like Puerto Ricans, Cubans, Mexicans and Chicana/os through the use of the family as the ultimate representation of Latinidad.

This notion of family proves as problematic as the one connected with the Chicano movement. First and foremost, as it has been previously discussed in academia, the representation of Chicanos, Cubans, Puerto Ricans, Mexicans, and other Latin American communities under the umbrella term “Latinos” or “Hispanics” fails to recognize the individuality of each particular group. Second, by assigning family roles based on gender, popular American media clearly presumes that forces such as sexuality do not alter the heterosexual pattern of Latino and Chicano families. Lastly, the portrayal of Latinos and Chicanos as having “collective needs” based on family, evidently fails to provide a site for the specific needs of Chicano gay men to be met.

This complex history Chicano gay men share with family reinforces the fact that it might be impossible to simply walk away from it. In addition, I argue that *Rag & Bone*, *Sissy* and

Quinceañera recognize this fact and so they are able to then cope with questions of how to not walk away from the family while still addressing and attacking its oppressive history. However, in looking at the ways in which family has been used to keep the dominant society from satisfying the needs of gay Chicanos, I also question the texts' inability to find a place for Chicano gay identity outside of family dynamics. Ultimately, it is this complexity that makes these texts a valuable starting point for dissecting the questions presented in this project.

CHAPTER 2
HENRY RIOS' FAMILY HISTORY: INTERACTIONS BETWEEN MEMORY AND THE
PAST IN MICHAEL NAVA'S *RAG & BONE*

In her discussion of “undoing gender,” Judith Butler explains that, “the social norms that constitute our existence carry desires that do not originate with our individual personhood. This matter is made more complex by the fact that the viability of our individual personhood is fundamentally dependent on these social norms” (2). Referring to the forces that shape our (gendered and sexualized) selfhood, Butler provides the basis for understanding how family becomes a social force that “carr[ies] desires,” and that is responsible for the “viability of our individual personhood.” The use of the word “originate” allows the reader to connect these social norms to the past and to history. While Butler is not necessarily alluding to family in this passage, I find it valuable as a way to explore *Rag & Bone* and its concern with the past, memory and history—presented through the character of Henry Rios—and their connection to *la familia*.

I argue that Nava's piece is preoccupied with ideas of the past, history, and memory because in revisiting Henry Rios' family's past (a past filled with violence, oppression, and homophobia), Nava attempts to create a future for *la familia* that is not characterized by the patriarchal oppression of the family. In his book *Cruising Utopia*, José Esteban Muñoz makes a solid case for the value in projects that see beyond the present and attempt to create a future that is queerer and better. For Muñoz, the search for a better future begins in an exploration of the past: “In Heidegger's version of historicity, historical existence in the past allowed for subjects to act with a mind toward ‘future possibilities.’ Thus, futurity becomes history's dominant principle. In a similar fashion I think of queerness as a temporal arrangement in which the past is a field of possibility in which subjects can act in the present in the service of a new futurity” (16). The past then is more than a distant and inert memory that is of no value to us; quite the contrary, the description of the past as a “field of possibility” allows us to explore and

deconstruct history, tradition and established oppressive structures as a way to create a future in which those structures are challenged and divested of their power. Therefore, *Rag & Bone's* careful study of the past can be considered part of a project that is invested in opening up opportunities for change in the future.

I am fully aware that this idea of a queer utopia, one that focuses on attempting to deconstruct the past and the present in order to create possibilities for nonhegemonic subjects, is not a popular one in the field of cultural studies or queer studies in particular. At the same time, I find José Esteban Muñoz' defense of utopianism in his book *Cruising Utopia* to be one of the most valuable ways to approach queer fiction. Early in the book, Muñoz addresses critics of his system of beliefs:

The dominant academic climate into which this book is attempting to intervene is dominated by a dismissal of political idealism. Shouting down utopia is an easy move. It is perhaps even easier than smearing psychoanalytic or deconstructive reading practices with the charge of nihilism. The antiutopian critic of today has a well-worn war chest of poststructuralism pieties at her or his disposal to shut down lines of thought that delineate the concept of critical utopianism. Social theory that invokes the concept of utopia has always been vulnerable to charges of naïveté, impracticality, or lack of rigor. (10)

The dismissal of concepts of utopia as naïve or impractical, while understandable, is ultimately misguided and not particularly useful. These critiques tend to misinterpret the search for utopia and often portray it as the belief that oppression and hegemony can be easily overthrown. To conceive utopia in such a dismissive and poorly constructed way is to completely miss the point of a process that is more preoccupied with *transformation* than it is with the destruction of the current dominant discourse. The search for utopia is not a project that pretends there is a twelve-step program toward exercising change and creating spaces for nonhegemonic subjects; rather, utopia rejects teleological ideology while attempting to recognize value in potentiality.

In this conception of utopia, the past becomes a way to open up sites of transformation, which is why *Rag & Bone*'s concern with themes of memory and history throughout the text allow for a reading of utopian philosophy within the novel (and I want to point out I'm not using "utopia" here as synonymous with perfection). This becomes present from the beginning of the text when Henry Rios suffers a heart attack and loses consciousness while in the courtroom. In his unconscious state Henry sees himself as a child, he finds himself in front an "ocean shimmering with light" and becomes tempted to step in:

When my foot touched the light, I felt a kind of ecstasy, but then someone hooked her arms beneath my armpits and dragged me away. I looked up and saw my sister, Elena, as she had been at eight or nine. Her grave dark eyes communicated love and terror. I tried to struggle out of her grip to run back into the light. 'No, *m'ijito*'... '*No es tu tiempo*.' Then a male voice shouted, "He's back," and an excruciating sensation roiled through my body that left me gasping with pain. I groaned my sister's name. (6)

When facing death Henry goes back to the past and becomes his young self, this is only one of the many reasons why this near death experience is a central moment for the exploration of family in Henry's life and in the novel. The tone Nava creates here is one of warmth and peace; references to the ocean, the sun, "shimmering light" and "evaporated" terror present this image of death as enjoyable and peaceful by going back to childhood. Yet, as the reader finds out later in the novel (and as fans of the Henry Rios series knew when first reading the beginning of the final installment), Henry often presents his childhood as a traumatic event—later in the novel he refers to the "cataclysm" of his sister's and his childhood (10)—so it is surprising that here he conceives a completely different type of past. Lionel Cantu observed a similar disparity when conducting an ethnographic study in which he interviewed a number of gay Mexican immigrants. Cantu found that most of them—even the ones who did not have a perfectly happy childhood—looked at their childhood with a certain fondness; still, he adds that they were conflicted by the "daily lessons of normative masculinity" they were forced to learn (119).

Nava quickly interrupts the soothing tone of the first part of the passage by introducing Elena, Henry's older sister, whose arms drag Henry away. In this play of the unconscious, the family (but not the mother) literally saves Henry's life; this does not occur in the present but in the past, as suggested by the fact both he and Elena are children in this brief dreamlike sequence. However, it would be rushed to assume that Nava is simply setting this up as a nostalgic view into the past of the family; the author does more than simply suggest family has the magical answer to the lives of gay Chicanos. Instead, he presents the moment where Henry and his past connect as a terrifying, tense, and painful moment. Henry sees the terror in Elena's eyes, struggles to get away, and after he is unable to, he is filled with "an excruciating sensation" that plagues all of his body. Thus, the integration of family into the image of childhood complicates it and makes this vision of childhood closer to Henry's real experience growing up. Nava then creates a complex relationship between identity, family and the past, just the way Cantu does in his study. On one hand, the inclusion of family into the conceptions gay Chicanos have of their past, memory and history inevitably causes pain and tension; on the other, revisiting the past without incorporating the family would mean to abandon an integral part of identity.

I say this is one of the central moments in the novel because, being at the beginning, it sets up Henry's continuous relationship with his past in relation to his family. Throughout the novel Henry constantly remembers and describes his father, mother and sister when he was a child. Once his niece Vicky, her son Angel and their case of abuse and violence are introduced, these memories make Henry's fear of history repeating itself emerge. When Elena is telling Henry about her desire to protect her daughter from her abusive husband because she has seen this pattern before, Henry's first instinct is to ask: "You think it's a case of history repeating itself?" Then he goes on to admit that his hostility toward Vicky "might have something to do with my

memories of my mother. Another weak woman in thrall to a violent man, with a child whom no one was protecting. Yes, I'd seen that movie before" (48). This is the moment Nava establishes Henry's connection with Angel; Henry sees himself as the abused kid and sees his own mother in Vicky. Henry's fear that he's "seen that movie before" displays his understanding of the oppressive ways of a family system that often sacrifices the agency of mother and child to protect the hegemonic power of the normative male leader. At the same time, his strong dislike for mothers who will not protect their children also becomes apparent. It is this complex relationship to Chicana motherhood and Chicano patriarchy that drives him to then search and attempt a queer version of the family that does not adhere to these rules.

Flour-Covered Hands: Motherhood in the Novel

While Ralph Rodríguez, Jeffrey S. Zamostny and David William Foster have written about Henry's relationship with his father and with the family as a whole, their writing has not fully explored the role of the mother in *Rag & Bone* and her role in the queering of family. In "Queer Sexism: Rethinking Gay Men and Masculinity," Jane Ward notes that, "the sociology of masculinity has critically examined gay men's relationship to *masculinity*, it rarely critically examines gay men's relationship to *women* in the same fashion that it examines relations between heterosexual men and women. This is a significant oversight" (153). While Ward is not specifically alluding to motherhood in her call for more scholarship on the relationship between heterosexual women and gay men, I claim it is important to begin with what is usually the first and most significant relationship a gay man forms with a presumed heterosexual woman: the mother-son relationship.

Henry's constant return to the past allows Nava to portray different aspects of the Chicano family that Henry must re-negotiate in the process of queering it. For Henry this becomes an exercise in memory; while he can easily remember his father's violence and frustration, he

mentions the difficulty of remembering his mother multiple times in the text. Interestingly enough, despite (or because of) the fact he can't remember her, Henry still compares the two main women in his family, Vicky and Elena, to his mother in different situations. They—along with cultural markers such as food and religion—become triggers of memory that give Henry the chance to recuperate the memory of his mother and understand the choices she had to make as a Chicana mother.

Unfortunately, the unnamed mother in the novel is not too different from the obedient, silent, and complicit figure found in a number of texts by Chicana/o authors. In a rather stereotypical way, Nava chooses to associate her with cultural markers that are supposed to connect Henry to his Mexican-American roots, such as food and religion. However, this only serves to further emphasize the mother's ethereal nature in the novel; she is a representation that emerges from Henry's memory, never a real person.

Henry is confronted with the memory of his mother as he is trying to come to terms with his hostile feelings toward Vicky, the niece he had yet to meet: "I could still see [my mother's] hands, covered with flour from making tortillas or clasped tightly together in prayer as she knelt beside her bed...I had come to terms, if not peace, with my father, but I had simply dismissed my mother without trying to make sense of my feelings about her. Perhaps this niece had tapped into them" (50). The memory of tradition and the memory of the mother become intertwined in Henry's reconstruction of the past. The "flour from making tortillas" and the hands "clasped in prayer" are cultural markers of Chicano identity; in his memory, however, Henry is unable to separate the two, one brings about the memory of the other. A similar moment is observed later in the novel when Henry and John DeLeon go out to lunch at a traditional Mexican restaurant, as Henry and John share some typical Mexican dishes, Henry remarks, "the food made me think of

my mother, who was a wonderful cook. She frequently cooked dishes that she knew I particularly liked. The platters of *chile rellenos* and bowls of *picadillo* were messages from her to me seeking forgiveness. I would pass them, untouched, to my father” (56). The mother uses *chile rellenos* and *picadillos* to ask for her son’s forgiveness, the act of rejecting the food and passing it onto the father becomes a way for Henry to reject both his mother and his cultural tradition, a tradition of oppression that he gives back to his father “untouched.”

While I agree with Rodríguez’ claim that, “Nava uses language and food as two of the key cultural determinants of Henry’s Chicano identity” (37), I also believe the use of language, his food, and religion in the novel are directly connected to Henry’s struggle to recover the memory of his mother, a memory he had simply “dismissed.” The two people who tap into this memory are Elena and Vicky; Elena as the sister who was not able to protect him, and Vicky as the niece whose story is eerily similar to Henry’s mother: “This woman quivered like a small, gentle animal that had barely eluded a predator. And in this, as Elena had observed, she seemed very much like our mother...[Angel] looked so much like me at that age it was like peering at a mirror into the past” (76). Vicky is an abused woman who believes in traditional Mexican-American values; in the novel she is portrayed as a good cook, an obedient wife, a deeply Catholic woman and also deeply homophobic. Angel is her kid, caught up in Vicky’s unfortunate situation; together they present an opportunity but also a challenge for the creation of a new family.

On the surface, it appears as if Vicky’s religious views and homophobia are the central factor in creating tension between her and Henry. However, Jeffrey S. Zamostny delves more deeply into this issue when he argues that, “given Vicky’s traditional Chicano identity grounded in conservative religious beliefs, she could easily interpret Henry’s movement toward more secular stances as a betrayal of his Mexican American ethnic legacy” (198). Zamostny

understands Vicky's connections to the church as the way she stays in touch with "a Spanish-speaking community that serves as an enclave for the preservation of a conservative, heterosexual Chicano identity within the more liberal Los Angeles Anglo society" (242). This question of sexual and ethnic betrayal becomes even more significant when we consider the fact Henry constantly sees his mother in Vicky. If Henry is constructing the family from the ground up, Vicky then stands for the mother and she becomes Henry's way of coming to terms with the past and creating something new for the future. Even though he finally accepts her as a Rios (170), their relationship still remains tense, "just like real family" as Henry himself points out (288). Thus, Nava refuses to allow for a neat happy resolution between the oppressive history of the mother and the present complex relationship between the mother figure—Vicky—and Henry; instead, Nava implies that the past and the present will be in constant conversation with one another, one always informing, complicating and complementing the other.

Warm and Callused Hands, Father's Hands

Different critics have pointed out the significance of the father as an influential figure for gay Chicanos. After conducting a series of interviews with Latin American, Latino and Chicano "macho" men (as described by the author) for his book *Mucho Macho: Seduction, Desire, and the Homoerotic Lives of Latin Men*, Chris Girman concludes that most of the men he interviewed about the family placed a particular emphasis on their relationship with their fathers (304). Similarly, David William Foster claims that, "conflict with the father is certainly a recurring issue in Chicano literature, whether affecting female or male children, straight or queer" (75). In *Rag & Bone* the oppressive father is central to the deconstruction of the Chicano family structure since historically the patriarch has been considered the main hegemonic force behind the heterosexism and homophobia typically attributed to *la familia*.

Throughout the novel Henry often refers to his father's brutal abuse and his role as the victimizer in his home. However, as Foster explains, "[Henry is] fully aware that [his father] was only blindly, fearfully enacting the wide-ranging discourse of homophobia. This discourse, among its many workings, obliges parents to be vigilantes of their children's sexuality and to quite literally, beat them into submissive conformity" (76). This hegemonic discourse has proved problematic to most gay Chicanos regardless of whether they see themselves as more feminine or masculine. As Cantu explains, many Chicanos feel "marginalized by heteronormative definitions of masculinity reproduced through and embodied in the traditional family... Associations of femininity with homosexuality [also] created a sense of confusion in some men who, although attracted to men, did not identify as feminine (131).

Foster and Cantu give a reading that primarily focuses on the interaction between sexuality and fatherhood in the novel, however, they do not explore Nava's way of bringing social forces together to create a more complex image of the father. This complex image is portrayed by Henry when he describes his dad as a victim himself, "with his thick accent, dark skin, and Indian features, every encounter with the outside world was an assault on my father's dignity. Unable to strike back at the Americans on whom he depended for a living, he took it out on his American son" (50). This is one of the moments where Nava is able to play with hegemonic forces that produce different family dynamics. Although Henry's father is a heterosexual Chicano, Henry is an American; their different positions of power and their different positions as oppressed individuals create an incredibly conflicted relationship that informs Henry's life even decades after his father's death. It is this relationship that he is forced to rediscover when he becomes a father figure himself.

Nava presents this rediscovering of the father figure by continuously collapsing the past and the present in Henry's life. This is aided by the fact that—unlike in the case of his mother—Henry remembers his father and his father's brutality very well; in fact, he becomes somewhat fixated on these memories as he finds more similarities between Vicky and his mother and between himself and Angel. For Foster this exercise in memory is only important in that it sheds light on Henry's constant struggles with the internalized homophobia his family—his father in particular—is responsible for; Foster stays away from delving into Henry's complex relationship with his family history and his past since according to him, "Rios's parents are dead, and his past is, as a consequence, closed in a definitive manner" (75). This analysis is engrained in a teleological ideology that places an emphasis on progress and sees the past as being "closed in a definitive matter," a series of events stuck somewhere behind us. Such a framework does not allow for a useful understanding of the ways in which the past makes our present messy and complicated. In this matter I side with Muñoz' idea that, "it is important to call on the past, to animate it, understanding that the past has a performative nature, which is to say that rather than being static and fixed, the past does things. It is in this very way that the past is performative" (28)

I also argue that Nava himself presents us with a past that is "performative"; in other words, Nava constantly recalls the past in *Rag & Bone* so that rather than being "static and fixed," the past acts upon the present. For Henry, the past is inescapable and the lines between the past and the present become blurry in his eyes as ghosts from his family become intertwined with figures of his present life. It is this interaction between memory and present experience that serves Henry as a way to explore his own masculinity and fatherhood. When John takes Henry to the baseball court and they share a romantic meal, Henry is reminded of his father and remarks

that he gets “lost in the past” (66). Then when John touches Henry’s hand before kissing him, Henry notes, “his hand was warm and callused, a workingman’s hand. My father’s hand” (69). The father emerges (through another cultural marker, the “callused, workingman’s hand” that characterize working class Mexican immigrants) just as Henry is being sensually touched by another man, an activity that, given what we know about Henry’s family, of which the father would be deeply disapproving of. Hence, the working class Chicano father becomes an image that haunts Henry and his expression of sexual desire. Perhaps Nava is pointing out the fact that Chicano gay men are never really able to leave behind the history of oppression marked by the patriarchal family. At the same time, the touch from the working class hands is queered as it no longer represents a violent, punitive touch whose purpose is to teach Chicano masculinity, but rather the touch this time is a sensual one that allows for the presence of queer love.

The fact Henry specifically refers to John’s hands as “workingman’s hands” also establishes a class difference between Henry and John. Henry comes from a working class Chicana/o family and yet he is a wealthy lawyer. The touch of John’s hands reminds him not only of his father’s past, but it specifically reminds him of his father’s status as a member of the lower class. This reminder further complicates the power relationship between Henry and his father, but it also highlights the class differences between John and Henry. However, instead of conceiving class as an obstacle between the couple, Nava presents it as a way for Henry to reconnect with family and tradition. Henry is not given the opportunity to remain in a fully privileged position where class is not an issue; instead, he has to confront both his past and his present and the significance of class in his re-envisioning of *la familia*.

This project continues as the history of oppression bound in the Chicana/o family returns in Henry’s own role as a father to Angel. When Angel misbehaves late in the novel, Henry slaps

his hand as a way to discipline him, yet he confesses, “I had a sudden, chilling thought of my father” (171). Though for a moment Henry sees himself as inhabiting the image of the violent father he is quickly able to distance himself from him; Henry not only recognizes but he also rejects the hegemonic power he has the potential to exert. He is able to do this because as a gay man he is fully aware of the trauma and pain homophobic, violent and patriarchal forms of fatherhood can cause. Therefore, his queerness functions as a way for him to deconstruct the Chicano family. And it is when he becomes aware of this ability to queer the family, an ability to not replicate the oppressive cycle, that Henry accepts the idea of having one: “I had never wanted a family, but Angel had shown me that what I wanted was irrelevant. I carried him in my veins: I couldn’t not love him” (262).

Angel del Futuro

Walter Benjamin introduced the Angel of History into our discourse as a way to understand the complexities and repercussions of the past. In *Rag & Bone* Angel becomes a way for Henry to reconcile with his past, his own Angel of History, while starting to visualize a future for his own Chicana/o family. Hence the novel aligns with Muñoz’ idea of queer utopia, a system of thought that “lets us imagine a space outside of heteronormativity. It permits us to conceptualize new worlds and realities that are not irrevocably constrained by the HIV/AIDS pandemic and institutionalized state homophobia. More important, utopia offers us a critique of the present, of what is, by casting a picture of what *can and perhaps will be*” (35). Angel, with his shared story with Henry, serves as a way to criticize the present (through his relationship with both Henry and Vicky and each of their struggles with parenthood) state of the family, and at the same time he embodies the hope for “what can and perhaps will be.” Thus, the novel promotes a reconception of *la familia* that is relatively free of the patriarchal, homophobic and racialized constraints that are tied with the concept of *familia* itself.

CHAPTER 3
“I’M ME NOT YOU”: RICARDO BRACHO AND THE DISIDENTIFICATION OF FAMILIA
ON STAGE

Ricardo Bracho’s one act play *Sissy* is a close examination of Chicano gay identity and Chicano masculinity within the structure of la familia. Bracho, a prominent queer Chicano playwright, uses the theater as a tool to force the Chicana/o family onto the stage, thus making the private public, and highlighting intersections of culture, class, gender and queerness in the process. In dissecting the family in such a public way, I propose that Bracho turns the family into a disidentificatory site; in other words, the author’s public scrutiny of oppressive family dynamics and his portrayal of the ambivalent relationship between gayness and Chicanidad allow for a possibility of queerness within conceptions of the Chicana/o family.

The play—clearly influenced by Brechtian style through its use of puppets, play with names, and stylized dialogue—concerns a young Mexican-born boy, Sissy, whose family has resided in Culver City, CA for eleven years. Sissy never refers to himself as “gay,” and while others call him derogatory names such as “joto,” “maricon,” and “faggot,” he always refers to himself as “sissy,” suggesting that while he is identified with this specific figure that encompasses a form of femininity and queerness, he is not identified with hateful images that those derogatory words invoke. Throughout the play Bracho introduces Sissy’s older sister Mana, his stuttering younger brother simply named Baby Brother, and other characters from the neighborhood. However, Sissy’s parents have no lines though Sissy often engages in one-sided conversations with them though according to the stage directions provided by Bracho, their presence must be portrayed through the use of puppets and lights. Late in the play Sissy decides to run away from home after a group of bullies from the neighborhood named the Cabrones Bros humiliate him and call him names on his birthday. While away, he spends the night at a club with a group of Latina drag queens, but he quickly decides that he is cold and hungry and that he

should go back home before his mother realizes he is gone and gets mad. The play ends with a reluctant older sister Mana wishing Sissy a “happy birthday fucker” (41) and the three siblings getting revenge on the Cabrones Bros.

In order to politicize the Chicana/o family, Bracho relies on the theater, a tool that historically has been used by Chicanos for very specific political purposes. During César Chavez’ Great Grape Strike of Delano, CA, Chicana/o, a style of theater referred to as Teatro Campesino, led by its creator Luis Valdes in the 1960s, became a prominent method of educating the farm workers and their families about the injustice of their situation (Ramirez 235). Chicana/o theater employed Brechtian theater techniques to highlight and promote the need for social change since “an ‘unrealistic’ production could produce the necessary distancing to bring about reflection in the audience, unlike the catharsis of Aristotelian theater. The thinking audience, whose consciousness had been raised regarding the nature of social, political, and economic problems facing Chicanos, could now seek to effect reform, or at least change” (236-237). Still, like other sectors of the Chicano movement, Teatro Campesino was not necessarily preoccupied with exploring themes of gender and sexuality within the Chicana/o community, so Chicana feminists who realized the political value in theater decided to become more involved participants in the production of Chicana/o theater (241). Today Cherríe Moraga herself is one of the most well-known figures in Chicana/o theater; in fact, Bracho himself was one of her theater students (Bracho 192).

Much like Chicana feminists, Ricardo Bracho is attempting to incorporate a queer vision into a preexisting, heavily political Chicana/o theater. Questions of what theater itself should be about permeate the author’s work. In his essay “Huevos de Oro: On Passion and Privilege,” Bracho firmly complains about the problematic encounters he has had with “white gay theater

folk”: “either they expect me to have the same reference points, insist on a camp sensibility and universalize their modes of (homo)sexuality, or they treat our very real and unequal differences as a fetish and seek in my work titillation and explanation” (193). He further admits that, “To date I have only been produced in feminist, gay, and Latino theaters—thoroughly and totally ghettoized am I” (194). Clearly, Bracho is not interested in adapting his theater in order to create an identificatory relationship with a privileged dominant audience whose understanding of the play will inevitably be distorted by the “unequal differences” he refers to. His awareness of exactly who his audience is—feminists, gays, and Latinos—is significant in that it reveals specifically who is the intended audience for *Sissy*.

Since Brecht’s theory of alienation was specifically concerned with raising the consciousness of the oppressed, the question becomes whether performing this play for a presumably educated audience in spaces that are targeted toward either Latina/o or queer audiences successfully employs such a theory. Here is when the cultural and sexual specificity of Bracho’s work comes into play; by exploring issues that show the intrinsic connection between queerness and Chicano identity, Bracho is able to confront *at least* one ideological issue that the audience hasn’t been confronted with. I’m specifically referring to the fact that there are really no major queer Chicano/Latino theatres in the United States, so if Bracho’s plays are produced in a gay theatre, the predominantly white queer audience would be confronted by themes of race and ethnicity the couple deals with; a similar situation occurs when *Sissy* is performed in a Latina/o theatre, although in this case the Latina/o audience is asked to deal with issues of gender and sexuality.

Bracho continues to talk about his view of theater in an interview with José Esteban Muñoz. Bracho explains that for him Latino theater is “about a certain kind of lyrical indictment

of whatever we come across: the state, our families and our dates. Theatre is for me unearthing This the violence of daily life” (70). By connecting familia, a trope usually associated with refuge and unity, to “the violence of daily life” the playwright finds a way to disidentify with the family and evaluate the ways it negotiates with a queer racialized identity. This violence is often related to Sissy and his position as a queer child.

Throughout the play Sissy experiences a relationship with family as complex and confused as Henry Rios’ in *Rag & Bone*. Early in the play, Sissy describes his passion for books because of the refuge they provide. He says, “books is the best cuz they quiet—filled with words but not loud like this house. I like to read while baby brother watches tv and everybody talks cuz then I can imagine myself all alone in the words...Books is quiet with nobody calling you joto maricon faggot sissy or yelling at you to come in off the street already” (1). The home here is conceived as a place that is loud and hectic, there is no room for Sissy to feel protected; instead, Sissy feels attacked at home and in his neighborhood. This is one of the moments where Bracho captures the complicated nature of his central character; as a queer person he has to deal with the bullies at school and on the streets who call him a number of derogatory names, and as a young kid he complains that his parents yell at him to stop playing on the streets and come inside the house (a place that is equally loud and dangerous for his queer nature). The juxtaposition of queer concerns with those of a young kid within the same body characterizes the troubled situation of Chicano gay boys growing up in a dominant setting. Here, as seen through the eyes of a Chicano queer boy, home and familia, far from being “a base of mutual support and survival” (194) are represented as synonymous with chaos.

Baseball or Chinese Checkers: Disidentification and the Father Figure

Muñoz discusses the hardships of being a nonwhite child in a white supremacist culture, and those of being a queer child who must survive in a homophobic hegemonic system. He believes that “the survival of children who are both queerly and racially identified is nothing short of staggering” (37). These two forces, queerness and race, are constantly at play in *Sissy*, constantly forcing the title character to find ways to survive the constant violence (both physical and psychological) that he encounters, especially at home. This is particularly obvious in Sissy’s tense relationship with his father, a Leftist former professor who is as interested in keeping his son from identifying with American popular culture as he is in enforcing typical codes of Chicano masculinity on him.

As it is the case in Michael Nava’s *Rag & Bone*, the father becomes a central figure to explore the role familia plays in the shaping of Chicano queer identity. While David T. Abalos contends that, “at the heart of the family is the relationship between men and women” (52), *Rag & Bone* and *Sissy* seem to suggest that this is not the only approach to understanding family relations in the Chicano family. Abalos’ heteronormative reading of the family fails to take into account the significance of the relationship between men and men that these two texts seem to point out⁵. So when Abalos adds that “only relationships enacted within a creative drama of transforming love between men and women will be able to bring forth the kind of Latino family that the times in which we live demand” (115), he is clearly ignoring the value in a project that attempts to transform the problematic, patriarchal relation that characterizes father-son relations

⁵ Of course woman-woman relationships are of equal importance in the family as well, however, since this analysis deals mainly with gay masculinity I wanted to emphasize the role men-men relationships play in family relations.

in the Chicano family. In *Sissy*, it is the father and son relation that is not only presented but also deconstructed in an attempt to transform and reevaluate it.

Further explaining the role disidentification plays in the process of transformation, Muñoz states that, “disidentification for the minority subject is a mode of *recycling* or re-forming an object that has already been invested with powerful energy” (39). It is not about simply identifying with a specific subject matter or rejecting this object altogether, but rather disidentification is about acknowledging the influence of specific dominant discourses that have been energized by social and psychic power and finding ways to transform them. So in *Sissy* the relationship between the father and the son is not simply abandoned or ignored; instead it is re-examined so moments and images that are typically associated with warm moments of childhood become disidentificatory sites that allow for a new reading of father-son dynamics.

The pressure of being the son in the Chicano family is not an easy one to handle since so much emphasis is given on the son, the future patriarch, as the future of *la raza*. In analyzing an early Chicano movement poster adapted from a charcoal portrait by Joaquin Chiñas titled *La Familia*, Richard T. Rodríguez writes,

The son? It seems as if he is unsure of where to look. Can he assume the gaze of his father? ...Integrated in the bottom right-hand corner of the portrait, the son is faced with a number of responsibilities for *la raza* and *la familia*. He must procreate. He must assume his father's role. In fact, I would argue that his resemblance to his father is hardly coincidental; in many ways, he must become his father. He must reject his mother and secure another woman to ensure the reproduction of *la familia de la raza*. But why does he not look directly at us? (34-35)

The son in this portrait becomes symbolic of the enormous pressure the male child is forced to deal with as part of the Chicano family; his pressure to embody the role of the father while rejecting his mother is not only Freudian in its nature but it's also saddled with fundamental issues of survival of the race through patriarchy and family.

On Sissy's 12th birthday, the father—usually simply referred to as “daddy”—gives Sissy a mitt to play baseball. In the American popular conscious, the moment where a father gives his son a baseball is regarded as a bonding moment of manhood in which the father trains his son on specific signs of masculinity. In *Sissy* this same moment turns into a platform for Bracho to subject the father-son relationship to critique. When Sissy gets the mitt for his birthday, he is upset, saying, “You got me a mitt. For what?/No I am not. You're high daddy/Little League? It's too late to join for this summer. Plus I don't even want to... I'm me not you. And I don't like sports” (8). Already Sissy is firmly rejecting the object that embodies a hegemonic mode of masculinity; by clarifying that “I'm me not you,” Sissy is embracing his own identity, an identity that is not modeled after his father. Given Rodríguez' earlier quote regarding the pressure of Chicano boys in la familia, Sissy's is a defiant act that searches to disrupt the identification young boys should have with their father, an identification that is inevitably constructed around lines of heteronormativity and patriarchy. However, unlike the boy Rodríguez in *La Familia*, Sissy is not “unsure of where to look”; rather, at this point in the play he knows he is a sissy and it is his position in that role that gives him the strength to reject the mitt and the ideological attachments that it signifies.

What Sissy really wanted for his birthday is a set of Chinese checkers: “So what if it's for girls. I'm good at it. Want me to show you how?/Why not?...I don't care daddy/Ok, I do. I can't make boys like me. And I can't make myself like the things they like...yes I'm a boy. But not like other boys/I'm not being a yo se todo” (9). Thus, the baseball mitt becomes a symbol that creates a platform for Sissy to attempt a discussion of the implications of his queer masculinity with his father. The boy is not afraid to ask for an object that in the father's imagination is “for girls,” unlike typical boys his age Sissy isn't concerned in adopting an identity that relies on the

boy/girl binary that the father endorses; his assertion that he is still a boy implies that there is room for Chicano masculinity in the text, just not one that is so deeply engrained in hegemony. In addition, Sissy also explains that while he is in fact a boy, he is “not like other boys,” which ultimately suggests Sissy’s admission to his father that his is a queer masculinity. He is not interested in being part of the system of carnalismo (brotherhood) that is often associated with the Chicano movement, a system that, as explained in the introduction, is protected and taught within the structure of la familia. In this way, a moment that was meant to teach Sissy the rules of masculinity is disidentified in order for Sissy to explore his queerness.

While I do believe this moment successfully functions as a critique of patriarchal traditions, I do wonder if the fact the father is not an actual corporeal figure on stage takes away from Sissy’s supposed courage. The use of puppets to represent the father is clearly meant as a way to silence the already too loud Chicano patriarchal voice, and also as a way to keep the audience from being able to identify with the father as a character. Yet, by purposefully abstaining from giving patriarchy a concrete body and physical presence on stage, Bracho misses the opportunity to make the father an actually threatening figure. This in turn diminishes the impact of Sissy’s moment of rebellion since he is not standing up to anyone but a puppet⁶. This is a moment in the play where the author’s method to silence patriarchy is clear and yet it doesn’t truly work when the audience and the audience’s perception of what they see happening on stage are brought into play.

In another attempt to train his son in Chicano masculinity, the father makes Sissy invite the Cabrones Bros, a group of guys from the neighborhood, to his birthday party. However, the

⁶ The use of puppets not only backfires with the father, but it also becomes particularly problematic with the mother since Bracho only silences the mother figure even more by having her portrayed as a puppet as well.

Cabrones Bros are not Sissy's friends, they are his bullies; still, the young boy courageously approaches them and invites them into the home: "My daddy said I had to invite you to my birthday party but don't be thinking I care if you come or not and why don't you change before you come" (13). It is rare enough to see a queer child depicted in a work of fiction, but it is even rarer to see him approach his bullies with as much bravery as Sissy's. Of course the character's actual name depicts an irony since Sissy, far from being a weak boy, is portrayed as someone who is not afraid of—yet still deeply affected by—the violence and hatred of the dominant group. Still, the Cabrones Bros call Sissy a "joto maricon faggot sissy!" to which he replies, "that's my name. Don't wear it out," and yet they leave while mocking him, "'Don't wear it out.' Just a stupid lil faggot" (13).

This encounter serves to emphasize the isolation Sissy feels on the streets as he is rejected and mocked by people from his own ethnic group. This is one of the few moments where home becomes the safest place to be. Bracho discusses this idea in his essay "Huevos de Oro": "This is not school, where I am sissy and always a gender question, but home where I am brown and boy to a mother who adores such things" (191). The public sphere is conceived here as the space where the queer boy is unprotected and must deal with outside violence, whereas home is the place that exists to escape from the public's homophobia. Of course this idea of home as a safe place is further complicated by the fact that the family establishes its own set of pressures about gender and sexuality. In Sissy's case it is the father who invites the public violence into the home and so the home loses its symbol of protection in the eyes of the queer child.

Boy Girl Boy Sissy Boy

After this event, Sissy questions his own masculinity and it seems as if he even stops considering his own (male) body, home. In an emotional moment—one of the few moments at odds with Brechtian style—Sissy tells the audience, "I should have been born a girl. Then it

would be boy girl boy girl boy in my family instead of boy girl boy sissy boy. Then when I'm mistaken for a girl at the dental clinic, on the bus, in public restrooms, by men on the streets, it would, I would no longer be a mistake" (14). This same thought is voiced out by Sissy once again at the end of the scene (21). This scene signals the switch from the Sissy who does not care whether he is like other boys to the Sissy who feels he is a mistake. This is his response to a culture that is bent on "denying, eliding, and, in too many cases, snuffing out [queer] identity practices" (37). Sissy is no longer comfortable as a queer male, he feels he must stop being a man in order to be accepted by society.

Tomas Almaguer argues that, "aggressive, active, and penetrating sexual activity, therefore, becomes the true marker of the Mexican man's tenuous masculinity. It is attained by the negation of all that is feminine within him and by sexual subjugation of women" (259). Sissy does the complete opposite, he rejects—or attempts to—Mexican masculinity and wishes to embody femininity. Yet he seems to only want what others already have decided about him, that he is a woman. Because of the violent moment the father provoked between Cabrones Bros and Sissy, the boy internalized the Chicano misconception Almaguer refers to, the idea that queerness and femininity are one and the same. This thought process lead Sissy to see himself as a "mistake" which only serves to highlight the deep and problematic emotional impact of such homophobic and sexist conceptions of Chicano queerness.

Sissy decides to leave home at least for a while, and he takes the bus to Santa Monica Boulevard where he encounters three drag queens, Herself, La Rica and La Cubanasa. These black and Latina drag queens take Sissy to a gay club where they dance and sing together. The three drag queens become Sissy's adopted familia for the few hours he is away from home. After one of them tells him to behave and not get lost, he asks "Why everybody gotta be my mom all

the time?” to which La Cubanasa replies, “Hey! I only old enough to be your older Sister” (33). The use of familial terms to describe their relationship functions as a way to establish this notion that there is a family network out in the world available for Sissy. Bracho decides to use the trope of the maternal drag queens—similar to the one found in the Hollywood film *To Wong Foo: Thanks for Everything Julie Newmar*—to represent this version of family and community outside of the home; even though this is a rather tired trope—specially as stereotypically conceived as the drag queens are here—I still believe it allows Bracho the chance to provide Sissy with a sense of hope that there are other types of family that do not operate around the forms of ideological oppression that are so engrained in his family.

In his ethnographic study Lionel Cantu describes how, “Wenston (1991) demonstrates how gays and lesbians construct ‘chosen’ families based on shared affinities and relationships of both material and emotional support. Kinship (biological) plays a central role in migration as a means through which immigrants receive support and acquire important knowledge for survival and adaption (cf Chavez 1992)” (124). Though Sissy is not an immigrant in the United States, he is a sort of immigrant at this point in the play, a young boy away from home for the first time and lost at sea. These Latina drag queens, who given the fact they are men dressed as women are able to adopt the position of both father and mother, provide Sissy with an idea of what the family could be like or look like. As they are dancing and singing, Herself screams “Viva La Sissy!” (34), evidently showing that in this family Sissy’s Chicano queer masculinity is celebrated and not mocked.

It is this opportunity that I argue allows Sissy to start the long and perhaps never-ending process of accepting one’s queerness within a Latino/Chicano cultural environment. Once he is done celebrating, he returns to the bus stop to go back home. Perhaps he has realized he is a sissy

and not a drag queen, so that particular community was not for him; perhaps the ties to home are too strong and he is not yet (and might never be) able to leave home behind. Either way, when asked if he is done with his adventures so soon, Sissy admits, “yeah, it’s cool n all out here. But it’s getting cold and I’m getting hungry and if my mom notices I’m gone, damn” (35). Though he is going back home, he now goes back with the awareness that there are networks out there available to express his queerness. In the process of creating a disidentificatory process with *la familia*, Ricardo Bracho does more than simply reject the family altogether. Instead, Sissy is pulled back to the home, unable to stay away but no longer fully tied to the self-hatred and feeling of isolation associated with his own community. As he arrives home his sister wishes him an unsentimental “happy birthday fucker” before they go—along with Baby Brother—to draw figures on the faces of the drunk and unconscious *Cabrones Bros*. Thus the author offers a resolution that neither sentimentalizes the family nor completely rejects it.

If according to José Esteban Muñoz, “queerness is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world” (1), then Bracho’s queer Chicano play firmly rejects the heteronormative nature of the present Chicano family while signaling a chance for hope and agency within the structure. While the play’s ambitions are not fully realized and certain tropes and devices fail to come together in a way that make the play work as a seamless production, it is still a valuable effort to disidentify *la familia*. Hence Bracho creates a play that not only deals with “the violence of daily life” but that offers spaces and options to counteract it.

CHAPTER 4
QUEERNESS IN THE HORIZON: SCREENING THE QUEER CHICANA/O FAMILY IN
GLATZER & WESTMORELAND'S *QUINCEAÑERA*

In the article “*La Quinceañera: Making Gender and Ethnic Identities*,” Karen Mary Davalos asserts that in Chicana/o culture, the act of the *quinceañera* is often described as, “a traditional religious ceremony that marks a rite of passage into adulthood...Adulthood is not a generic stage of the life cycle, but one that is embedded with Catholic expectations of a woman” (148). In the film *Quinceañera* (2006) written and directed by (white filmmakers) Richard Glatzer and Wash Westmoreland, Magdalena is a young high school student getting ready for her own quinceañera celebration; however, when she gets unexpectedly pregnant (she’s a virgin who gets pregnant when her boyfriend’s sperm gets in her vagina after they “fooled around”), her father kicks her out of the house; when this happens, Magdalena is forced to move in with her granduncle Tio Tomas and her gay cousin Carlos, who was also kicked out of his own house. The film seamlessly intertwines Magdalena’s and Carlos’ stories as the two of them are bound to collapse into each other, provoking a deep exploration of Chicana/o family culture and its relationship with sexuality. Throughout all this, the *quinceañera* ceremony, which represents such a significant rite of passage, looms in the background. Its role seems to signal a crucial moment in the lives of these two characters, especially in terms of the implications of the *quinceañera* for interactions between family, gender and sexuality since, as Davalos shows, the ceremony is particularly marked by traditional views of Chicana/o adulthood.

It is fitting that the directors chose to use the *quinceañera* as a narrative device since the ceremony in itself can be conceived not only as a rite of passage but also as a cultural event that “allows Chicanas to perform their cultural identity outside the realm of mainstream U.S. culture...it often becomes a subversive performance even within the strict social behavior of the cultural group, as the honoree defies strict codes of conduct” (Cantu 16). Here Norma E. Cantu is

referring to the ways in which the *quinceañera* itself allows Chicanas to work within and against the system much like Munoz description of disidentificatory processes. In the particular case of the *quinceañera*, young Chicanas are able to go against assimilatory practices by being part of such a traditional event; at the same time, according to Cantu, the girls incorporate sexuality and their own version of tradition into the *quinceañera* so they are able to create what she calls “a subversive performance.” The focus on a practice that is associated with disidentificatory tendencies by some scholars lends itself to creating a film that is able to play with conventions and ideology.

Unlike the other two texts discussed in this project, *Rag & Bone* and *Sissy, Quinceañera* is not written or directed by gay Chicano authors. Glatzer and Westmoreland are queer-identified but they are white filmmakers who in this film set out to explore Chicana/o issues⁷. The question then becomes, what constitutes Chicana/o film? And how can we talk about Chicana/os when they are portrayed through the eyes of the dominant group? I will come back to these questions at the end of the chapter.

Much has been written about the white, upper middle-class, and largely male monopoly that controls the Hollywood film industry. The images we are fed in Hollywood films are owned and regulated by multinational corporations that are aware of their enormous influence in affecting public ideology; not only are they aware of this power, but they continuously strive to exert it and maintain it (Maciel & Racho 93). This helps to account for the lack of originality that plagues American cinema, a lack of originality that suggests the industry is merely interested in replicating and cementing the dominant discourse as opposed to working toward transforming it.

⁷ Glatzer and Westmoreland also directed the MTV movie *Pedro* about late gay Cuban-American Pedro Zamora who was a devoted activist and a former participant of the reality series *The Real World*, so the directors seem to be concerned with issues in the Latino community.

It is unfortunate to see the number of franchises, re-makes, and replicas that dominate the industry, all of them generally filled with racial, ethnic, gender and sexual stereotypes that only serve to maintain a system of control that characterizes American hegemonic culture. Sadly, stereotypes are one of the few forms of visibility available for oppressed groups in Hollywood cinema since a majority of the times these groups are simply not even present in the films, their voices completely silenced (94).

Chicana/o narrative cinema then attempts to battle hegemonic constructions of ethnicity in the American film industry. Much like Chicana/o theater, Chicana/o film has been influenced by a desire to promote change. According to Richard Rodríguez, “[Chicana/os] were well aware that film and television were two of the most potent mediums for visualizing movement goals and aims...[Additionally] many Chicanos who were moved by the emergent activism of the civil rights and cultural empowerment era saw the need to work as writers, producers, and directors to shoot back at objectionable imagery” (57). Thus it is clear that the Chicana/o community was able to recognize the value in using cinema as a way to search for a voice in an industry that is more preoccupied with silencing it.

While not as prevalent as African-American cinema or even white queer cinema, Chicana/o narrative cinema still has managed to slowly but surely make its mark in Hollywood with films like *Selena*, *My Family* and *Price of Glory* which all have managed to enter the mainstream. In their essay “‘Yo Soy Chicano’: The Turbulent and Heroic Life of Chicana/os in Cinema and Television,” David R. Maciel and Susan Racho argue that Chicana/o cinema has been influenced by “the rich literary expression of recent Chicana/o writers. Family and traditions have been dominant elements in Chicano feature films” (104). It comes as no surprise that family and tradition have remained a central aspect of the work of Chicana/os in film,

especially since—as mentioned earlier—the films tend to be used to reiterate ideals engrained in the Chicana/o cultural nationalist movement.

In his detailed discussion of the family in Chicana/o film, Rodríguez claims that most of the mainstream films and TV shows that center on the family “orbit around the domineering father figure who presumably stands at the center of Chicano and Latino culture. The desire to shoot back at stereotypes in many instances results in their being supplanted in refurbished form” (75). In *Quinceañera* Glatzer and Westmoreland play with typical conventions of Chicana/o film in order to add a queer point of view; therefore, the trope of the family is once again at the center of the narrative, and yet it is not through the patriarch-driven story that the films tend to provide. At the same time, the emphasis is also on tradition since the film revolves around a traditional Chicana/o ceremony and its implications on the lives of two young characters. However, tradition in the film is often interrupted, deconstructed and ultimately queered.

The film starts with a shot of the mountains and the beach, a beautiful landscape, as the opening credits roll. This beautiful horizon brings to mind José Esteban Muñoz’ assertion that “if queerness is to have any value whatsoever, it must be viewed as being visible only in the horizon” (11). Muñoz’ idea that queerness only exists as a goal rather than a current state connects with this first image in the film, suggesting that at some level the movie is concerned with the future of queerness. This image remains on the screen until Ernesto, Magdalena’s dad, walks into the shot and it is revealed that what we have been observing during the opening is a fake cardboard picture. It is at this moment that past—in the form of tradition—and visions of the future more than just meet, collide on the screen; the patriarch literally disrupts the image of the horizon by positioning himself in front, taking over, and delivering a speech about the traditional aspect of the *quinceañera* celebration. The patriarch’s focus on tradition serves as a

way to abandon the image of the future, implying that tradition can be a force that keeps us from visualizing queer utopia.

Of course tradition is at the center of the film given its focus on the *quinceañera* ceremony. The movie starts and ends with a *quinceañera* ceremony and it helps frame the story in the particular setting of Chicana/o rites of passage. Much like Nava and Bracho do with their texts, Glatzer and Westmoreland present the *quinceañera* through a disidentificatory process that queers its status in the Chicana/o tradition. This is apparent in the opening sequence that covers Magdalena's cousin and Carlos' sister Eileen's *quinceañera*. The ceremony is shot in poor lighting and using camera movements that mimic a home video; this lack of glamour creates an intimate mood and it adds to the traditional aspect of the party, it feels like a real family event rather than an organized and calculated film moment. As Karen Mary Davalos writes, "within the public discourse, the *quinceañera* is regarded in three ways: as an extension of particular Catholic sacraments, as a rite of passage, and as a practice that has historical continuity or 'tradition'" (146). In the opening sequence (and throughout the film in general), these three aspects are heavily emphasized throughout, keeping in line with the common conceptions behind the meaning of the *quinceañera*.

As focused as the film is on tradition, it does more than portraying them for the viewer to feel identified with the moment either as an outsider or an insider of the culture; more than that, the film is introducing a familiar object in order to queer it. So instead of identifying with the typical convention of Chicana/o mainstream films that are particularly fixated on reproductions of tradition and family, the directors align with disidentification as a "performative mode of tactical recognition that various minoritarian subjects employ in an effort to resist the oppressive and normalizing discourse of dominant ideology" (97). Glatzer and Westmoreland do this by

juxtaposing the ceremony with Carlos' queer body. During Eileen's party the women are gathered in the kitchen preparing the food, Maria (Eileen's mom) tells her sister Silvia (Magdalena's mom) that she will give Eileen's *quinceañera* dress to Magdalena for her own *quinceañera*. The conversation turns to Carlos, and Eileen's mom looking uncomfortable and uninterested says that he is not coming, she ends the conversation by telling the other women, "don't talk to me about that boy" before the film cuts to Carlos for the first time. By placing the conversation in the kitchen where all the women in the family are working, the directors clearly represent the oppressive ideology that determines the women are traditionally in the kitchen. The idea of a supportive family network suggested by Silvia's wish to give Eileen's dress to Magdalena is distorted by her dismissive behavior toward her son; she is supportive about a material object that is associated with a ceremony, however she is unable to be supportive about her son's sexuality. Furthermore, the sharp contrast between the women in the kitchen and the back of Carlos' head as the camera follows him on the streets, shows the directors' desire to "resist the oppressive and dominant discourse of normalizing ideology."

Unlike the refined and upper middle class masculinity of Henry Rios and Sissy's queer, young and effeminate nature, Carlos' masculinity is more similar to typical and heteronormative images of Chicano men since he is a *vato loco*: he is buff, has a tattoo on the back of his neck and in other parts of his body, he knows gangster hand gestures, he steals and smokes pot. This image corresponds to some of the stereotypes associated with Chicano men that Maciel and Racho identify in their essay: "In numerous films and later television programs, the Chicano has been portrayed as the greaser, the convenient villain, the perpetual *bandolero*, the buffoon, the Latin lover, and the *peon*" (94). However, *Quinceañera* offers a twist on the stereotype because

far from being another patriarchal macho stereotype, Carlos is a gay man who has just been kicked out of the home.

Carlos heads to his sister's quinceañera to take flowers for her and congratulate her, putting himself in a dangerous situation by going into a celebration to which he was not invited. At the party, Eileen is dancing in a sexual way with other boys implying that heteronormative sexuality is sanctioned by the family, this is further supported by Davalos' assertion that "a girl's heterosexual and religious identity is reinforced and constructed through the *quinceañera*" (153). While Eileen is dancing, the camera moves slightly to the right to reveal Carlos dancing behind his sister, interrupting the display of (hetero)sexual behavior on the dance floor. When the father spots Carlos on the dance floor, he says to him, "get out, you disgust me" and a fight soon develops which ends with Carlos beaten up on the sidewalk after getting thrown out of the party. Glatzer and Westmoreland concentrate on the tension between (heterosexist) father and (queer) son; during the encounter, the film alternates between close ups of both characters making the tension and anger on their faces tremendously palpable. To further the sense of tension, the father and son never fully share a shot during this encounter which clearly stresses the divide between them and the isolation they both suffer as victims of rigid definitions of masculinity. As Carlos is left alone on the street, the audience becomes painfully aware that he has lost the network of support that *la familia* is supposed to provide. In his case, because of his queerness, *la familia* is the one that causes violence upon him, instead of being the protector of the underprivileged minority the family becomes the bully, only worried about punishing the queer son for entering the normative realm of *familia* and threatening it with his queer body.

Carlos' sense of isolation is not completely exclusive to his role as an abject figure in Chicana/o culture; Glatzer and Westmoreland further develop Carlos' lack of family by depicting

his relationship with white gay culture. Developing on the difficulties gay Mexican immigrants go through, Lionel Cantu argues that, “the desires for stable relationships reflect...the isolation that these men feel in the United States. The isolation that gay Mexican immigrant men feel is due in some measure to language difficulties, but racial and class issues also play into it” (130). While the issues of Mexican immigrants and Chicanos cannot always be compiled in the same category, the racial and class issues that according to Cantu create a divide between Mexican immigrants and white gay men are definitely issues that are at play in the relationship between gay Chicanos and their white counterparts.

This uneven power dynamic is clear in the relationship Carlos develops with the white gay couple who moves in to the apartment above Tio Tomas’ place. When the neighbors first see Carlos, the camera shows James—one of the neighbors—looking out his window and then we see a shot of Carlos going up the stairs from James’ point of view. This moment brings to mind Laura Mulvey’s foundational 1975 essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” in which she explains how “the determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female form which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness” (837). Though Mulvey is referring specifically to the heterosexual male gaze and its role in the objectification of women in cinema, her theory can be expanded to incorporate the gay male gaze, especially when the power dynamics between a white gay man—the observer—and the racialized queer subject—the one being observed—are unequal in the way that men/women power dynamics can be. At this point in the film, the directors seem to be alluding to the ways in which white gay culture tend to objectify and eroticize ethnic queer bodies. The irony here of course is that Glatzer and Westmoreland are

white gay men filming a racialized subject; however, by pointing to the objectification of queer men of color and criticizing it, the directors are able to disidentify rather than identify with the white gay men presented in the movie.

The gay couple invites Carlos to a housewarming party where Carlos is one of only a couple men of color present. The directors create a divide between the white gay men at the party and Carlos; the gay men at the party are portrayed as an extensive but tight network of upper middle class white men with whom Carlos is unable to have a conversation. Though there is a sense of family among these men, it is clear that Carlos' race and class create an imaginary and at the same time very real obstacle that keeps him from being welcomed into this gay family. This is further emphasized by a conversation that Carlos and the other Latino guy at the party have in which the party guest assures Carlos that James and his partner Gary "love Latin boys." The idea here is that Carlos will never be part of the circle, instead he will always be considered a "Latin boy," an outsider to be looked at and enjoyed but never at a deep, non-hegemonic level. Thus, it quickly becomes apparent that neither the traditional Chicano familia nor the white gay community are viable options for Carlos to have a sense of family.

Magdalena finds herself in a similar situation when she is kicked out of her parents' house and is made fun of by her friends because of her pregnancy. Magdalena's is a virgin pregnancy, meaning the semen went inside her vagina without actual penetration, so she becomes a sort of virgin Mary through her immaculate conception. Ironically, her deeply religious father is unable to believe in this sort of conception and so he rejects her. At this moment, the Latino family fails her too, much like it happened to Carlos; she has no network of support and so she also is forced to move with Tio Tomas. Tio Tomas is an old heterosexual Mexican man who never got married or had children; instead of being involved in Chicano ideas of patriarchy, Tio Tomas is portrayed

as a nice and caring paternal figure who takes in the sexual transgressors of the family, perhaps because he is seen as sexually deviant as well. Not only is Tio Tomas accepting of Carlos' sexuality but he is also supportive of Magdalena throughout her pregnancy. Though Carlos and Magdalena's relationship is originally tense, they begin to form a close relationship. Carlos quickly starts becoming preoccupied with Magdalena and her unborn child, and after spending enough time together he tells Magdalena that he wants to be the baby's father once he is born. Thus, a queer family is created, one where sexuality, class and race are all incorporated and accounted for.

Unfortunately, Tio Tomas passes away toward the end of the film and Magdalena and Carlos are left without his support. Still, it is his death that brings about a reunion between Magdalena and her parents, as they finally believe the truth about her pregnancy. Though the reunion could be read as simplistic, *Quinceañera* doesn't have the heteronormative agenda of a movie like Gregory Nava's *My Family*, a film that "in no way allow[s] an openly queer character to enter into the family scene as it remains closed to sexualities not premised on heterocoupling...Aiming to undo perceptions of a spectator for whom Chicano families are otherwise dysfunctional, the film conceives a family that is a procreative and progenerative culture" (Rodríguez 76). In fact *Quinceañera* ends with the traditional ceremony of Magdalena's *quinceañera*; as she steps out of the limo, we see her wearing her *quinceañera* dress but unlike the virginal princess dress that her cousin Eileen wears at the beginning of the movie, Magdalena's dress proudly displays her pregnant belly. This subversive image is further queered by the fact that it is Carlos, finally allowed to enter the family circle again, who escorts her and enters the room while holding her arm. It is at this moment where tradition and family are queered, complicated and disidentified in the film.

So can *Quinceañera* be read as part of Chicana/o cinema? It is my argument that Glatzer and Westmoreland's thorough and detailed study of the interactions between family, culture, race, class, gender, and sexuality make this movie a compelling text to explore the complexities of Chicana/o identity. The film borrows from conventions usually seen in other Chicana/o films, but more than copy those conventions in an attempt to identify with the culture, the directors choose to engage in a disidentificatory project instead. Ultimately, the movie and its themes create an in-depth portrayal of certain aspects of Chicana/o culture and identity, making it one of the most valuable pieces of mainstream Chicana/o film for Chicana/o cultural studies.

CHAPTER 5
CONCLUSION: THE SEARCH FOR A *WE*

The Chicano movement of the 1960s and 1970s focused on the search for Aztlán, an imagined Chicana/o utopia organized around race and ethnicity. Alicia Arrizon explains how, “Aztlán thus represents the spiritual power of unity among a people who see in their common pre-Hispanic heritage and indigenous past a source of cultural affirmation in the present. For Chicano nationalists, Aztlán’s spiritual reality helps combat racism and exploitation, while its physical reality justifies contemporary efforts to reclaim this lost land” (51). This description of Aztlán contributes to the idea of a Chicana/o network of support that through tradition and unity is able to battle the racial oppression Chicana/os often encounter. The “efforts to reclaim this lost land” Arrizon refers to further suggest a search for a future, a search for utopia. Hence the question is, how to search for a queer utopia within the Chicana/o nation? Is there room for queer men⁸ in the construction of Aztlán?

In her very personal but very relatable (for us queer Latinos and Chicanos who grew up with family) book *Waiting in the Wings: Portraits of a Queer Motherhood*, Cherríe Moraga describes how, “growing up, the *we* of my life was always defined by blood relations: *We* meant family. We were my mother’s children, my abuela’s grandchildren, my tios’ nieces and nephews. To this day, most of my cousins still hold onto a similar understanding of *we*” (17). Thus, Moraga succinctly evaluates the importance of *familia* for Chicanos; yet, she recognizes its shortcomings and so she goes on to say:

The search for a *we* that could embrace all the parts of myself took me far beyond the confines of heterosexual family ties. I soon found myself spinning outside the orbit of that familial embrace, separated by thousands of miles of geography and

⁸ Again while the emphasis of this project is on queer Chicano men, this question could be expanded to deal with both lesbian and heterosexual Chicana women as well as the transgendered community and other marginalized Chicana/o subjects

experience. Still, the need for familia, the knowledge of familia, the capacity to create familia remained and has always informed my relationships and my work as an artist, cultural activist, and teacher (18)

It is hard to imagine anyone else capturing the conflicted and messy relation between family, Chicano identity and queerness as beautifully and accurately as Moraga does. The distance from the “familial embrace” and its struggles with the need, knowledge and capacity for *familia* are all forces that queer Chicana/os are unable to escape. This is apparent in the three texts that I discussed in this study; Henry, Sissy, and Carlos are all characters who are forced to deal with this need for *familia* while at the same time confronting the violence that familia itself produces for queer Chicanos.

What makes these works valuable to examine the relationship between *familia* and queerness is their effort to disidentify with the present and create alternative ways to envision what is often considered traditional and by extension unchangeable. This is the case because the works seem to align with Muñoz’ idea that “the here and now is a prison house” (1). The “here and now” is embodied by tradition, hatred, patriarchy, and by the homophobia that seems to pervade the lives of Chicana/os. This environment does not lend itself to providing opportunities for queer Chicana/os to have a voice, or even to have a space that provides them with the opportunity to establish and develop an identity that is both queered and gendered but that is also deeply connected to race, a race they are deeply connected to. Muñoz refers to this present as a “totalizing rendering of reality,” one that is unable to respond to the actual reality of queer Chicanos. Therefore, the idea of a queer utopia, one that these projects are invested in, characterizes them as insistent on “potentiality or concrete possibility for another world” (1).

The texts discussed in this project all struggle with ways to find a potential in structures that have been typically associated with dominant ideology, specifically family. They are firmly aware that we are not inevitably bound to tradition, the prison of the present, and that there are

ways to think about the future. Muñoz puts it best when he states that, “utopia is not prescriptive; it renders potential blueprints of a world not quite here, a horizon of possibility, not a fixed schema. It is productive to think about utopia as flux, a temporal disorganization, as a moment when the here and the now is transcended by a *then* and a *there* that could be and indeed should be” (97). Again for Muñoz the *then* and *there* is hardly understood in terms of linear timelines; for him it is about complicating history so the past is no longer inert and so the future stops being associated with typical conceptions of progress. Instead, this is a process that is preoccupied with action in the service of transformation; it is not about getting better but about producing change. It is through the queer work of artists like Michael Nava, Ricardo Bracho, Richard Glatzer and Wash Westmoreland that the search for a *we* and a future are evident, a future that does not necessarily exist outside of the family but one that has opened up and transformed *la familia* into a space where queerness may no longer be a blueprint but a reality.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

R. Gabriel Mayora was born Ramon Gabriel Mayora in Caracas, Venezuela, in 1986, to parents Dr. Ramon B. Mayora and Maritza Alfonzo de Mayora. The youngest of three children (his older sister and brother are thirteen and eleven his senior, respectively), Gabriel—as he prefers to be called—grew up in Caracas until his family was forced to move to the United States, due to the increasingly hostile environment emerging in Venezuela at the beginning of Hugo Chavez’ regime. Gabriel’s family moved to Miami, FL, where Gabriel finished high school and completed his Associate of Arts degree through the Honors Program at Miami Dade College in one year. Soon after, Gabriel was accepted into the English Department at the University of Florida, where he concentrated in queer theory, U.S. Latino literature and drama studies. Gabriel graduated from the University of Florida with a B.A. in English in December 2007 and received his M.A. in English in December 2010.