Abjection and the Cinematic Cholo: The Chicano Gang Stereotype in Sociohistoric Context

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ABJECION AND THE CINEMATIC CHOLO
THE CHICANO GANG STEREOTYPE IN SOCIOHISTORIC CONTEXT

In this brief research note, the author uses a sociohistoric lens to examine selected films that have employed the cholo, or Chicano gang member, stereotype. He finds that the cholo is a prevalent archetype of Mexican and Mexican American youth. The author argues that the depiction of the cholo as a hypermasculine, abject personage threatening the social order converges with how actual Latino youth are constructed in sociopolitical and media discourses—as both marginalized young men and migrants unworthy of membership in U.S. society.

Keywords: CHICANOS/LATINOS, FILM STEREOTYPES, CHOLOS, ABJECION, BARRIOS

The traitor, the liar, the criminal with a good conscience, the shameless rapist, the killer who claims he is a savior . . . Any crime, because it draws attention to the fragility of the law, is abject, but premeditated crime, cunning murder, hypocritical revenge are even more so because they heighten the display of such fragility. —Julia Kristeva, Powers of Horror (1982, p. 4)

Hollywood has a long history of employing and communicating racial stereotypes (Berg, 2002; Castro, 2006; Denzin, 2005; Dryer, 2008; Fregoso, 1993). These stereotypes “are false history, but conform to . . . the history of movies and movie stereotyping” (Berg, 2002, p. 19). They become part of “the national imaginary” as films circulate in movie theatres, and on network and cable television, DVDs, and videotapes (Denzin, p. 470). The repetition of stereotypes turns them into representations of those stereotyped (Berg).

For over a century now, “the motion-picture industry . . . has functioned as the primary transmitter of racist Latino/a images” (Castro, 2006, p. 89). The cholo, or Chicano gang member, is a prevalent archetypal figure used to depict Mexican and Mexican American men and youth on the screen. The “inarticulate, violent, and
pathologically dangerous *bandidos*” of the silent film era who were depicted as cowardly, thieves, and kidnappers have morphed into the cholo (Berg, 2002, p. 69). As the cinematic descendent of the Mexican bandido, the cholo is of questionable character, with few redeeming qualities. Consequently, like his predecessor, the cholo’s “nature dooms him to come to a tragic end” (List, 1996, p. 33) and he becomes the barrio, abject persona.

The Hollywood depiction of Chicano youth as cholos must be understood with the broader sociocultural, historical and political contexts from which they have emerged as archetypal characters. In this article, I use a sociohistoric lens to explore the stereotypical cholo on film, which is a product of the abjection of Latinos, particularly Latino youth, in dominant discourse. I argue that the cholo’s depiction as an abject who threatens the social order with his ill intentions and hyper-aggressive masculinity converges with how actual Latino youth are constructed and policed in the U.S.—as both marginalized young men and migrants unworthy of being members of society. Consequently, since “[t]he film industry is a culture- and knowledge-making institution,” the stereotypical on-screen cholo serves as a cipher of how dominant discourses turn Latino boys into criminal “Others” (Liberato, Rebollo-Gil, Foster, & Moras, 2009, p. 948).

I begin with a brief historical account of the racial abjection experienced by urban youth, particularly Los Angeles Chicano and Latino youth. Then, I turn to a detailed discussion of the cholo stereotype in the selected films. I conclude with a discussion of the prospect that Latino youth will continue to be stereotyped on film.

According to Dryer (2008), on film, *stereotypes* are a subcategory of *types*, socially constructed representations of fictional characters. The stereotype, as a type, is a static character reduced to a few distinctive traits and does not develop as the film progresses; rather its embedding in narrative is quite predictable. As a result, it stands in sharp contrast to “the novelist character, defined by a multiplicity of traits that are only gradually revealed to us through the course of the narrative, a narrative which is hinged on growth or development of the character…” (Dryer, p. 247). Additionally, extending Klapp’s (1962) work on social types in society, Dryer argues that stereotypes are not so much social types as representations of social groups deemed outsiders by those in society with power. He writes: “The stereotype is taken to express a general agreement about a social group, as if that agreement arose before, and independently of, the stereotype” (p. 247).
Scholars point to U.S. history and geopolitics to shed light on the stereotyping of Latinos in film (Berg, 2002; Castro, 2006; Fregoso, 1993). Berg argues that Hollywood cinema has engaged in “Latinism”—constructions of U.S. Latinos and peoples residing south of the U.S.-Mexican border to support U.S. imperialism (p. 4). These constructions include “negative meanings,” such as the idea of a distinct dirty, criminal, and hypersexual habitus, that “circulate around those shifting points of reference marked by non-Whiteness (dark and brown skin), impenetrable accents, and the words ‘Hispanic,’ ‘spic,’ ‘Mexican,’ and ‘half-breed’” (Denzin, 2005, p. 484).

In the United States, some young men of color, especially those who are working class or poor, adopt some variant of a gendered coping mechanisms to deal with their marginalized position in society—“masculine protest” behaviors (De La Cancela, 1993, p. 34) or a “cool pose” (referring to lifestyle behaviors). In “tough” neighborhoods, some Black and Latino youth are known to put forth a tough, stoic masculine personae (Dance, 2002; De La Cancela; Ferguson, 2001; Majors & Billson, 1993; Mora, 2008), which has been aptly described as a “tough front” (Dance) or “‘cara de palo’ (wooden face)” (Thomas, 1987, quoted in De La Cancela, p. 33). Such a gendered presentation of self is typically in accordance with the hegemonic masculinity, or “leading form of masculinity on show” (Swain, 2000, p. 96), in poor and working-class neighborhoods (ghettos and barrios): a masculinity that often emphasizes toughness, male superiority, heterosexuality, physical dominance, and both the ability and willingness to use violence (Dance; Ferguson; Mora, 2008). To be clear, this hypermasculinity is but a variant of the “dominant U.S. masculinity [which] invites men to attack weakness in others and ridicule those already shamed” in order to enhance their masculine status and acquire the social power that accompanies it (Gardiner, 2000, p. 1259; see also Connell, 1995, 2000; Kimmel, ed., 1996; Messner, 1998).

Yet, as is shown in this paper, the hypermasculinity of the stereotypical cholo in films is reduced to an abject identity. The abject is s/he who embodies the unthinkable in her or his society and thus exists outside of the symbolic and social orders, lacking subjectivity (Kristeva, 1982). As castoff, the abject embodies an identity that is beyond the boundaries of the social. It serves as the not-I against which subjects construct their various identities and define their subjectivities (Butler, 1998; Kristeva). In the case of the cholo, he is turned into the abject because his existence and nature offsens the imaginary of civilized sociality. His criminality is an affront to law and order and his indiscriminate use of violence is unlike the violence of novelistic male characters, who employ it not (simply) as part of a masculine display, but to maintain social order. In the end, the cinematic cholo is an abject persona that represents “the abject specter of Chicano gangs,” which many seek to “expel” from society (De Genova, 2008, p. 127).

Abjection of Latino Youth

The equation of Mexican American youth with gang membership and deviancy has a long history with roots in Los Angeles. Two historical incidents of discrimination greatly influenced the discourse—The Sleepy Lagoon Trial and the so-called
Zoot Suit Riot. On August 2, 1942, Chicano youth José Díaz was found dead at Sleepy Lagoon, a Los Angeles area reservoir where youth congregated. The police arrested six Chicano youths and accused them of having killed Díaz in a gang fight. In the ensuing criminal trial, the prosecutors and their witnesses made statements fraught with stereotypes about Mexicans. Testifying as an expert witness, Captain Ed Durán Ayres, chief of the Sheriff’s Bureau of International Relations, presented a report in which he concluded that Mexicans, like their indigenous ancestors, are driven to kill by an inherently desire for blood (Acuña, 1996). The Ayres report helped secure murder convictions (which were later overturned) and “also served to justify a massive dragnet involving the sheriff’s deputies, the LAPD [Los Angeles Police Department] and the California Highway Patrol that netted over 600 suspected gang members in August 1943” (Acuña, p. 264).

Over the course of ten days in June of 1943, White service men, police officers, and civilians scoured the barrios of Los Angeles assaulting Mexican American youth, especially pachucos (Mexican American zoot suiters), who the LAPD and local newspapers had publicly accused of driving juvenile crime rates (Escobar, 1999). The local English-language newspapers ran sensationalized stories depicting servicemen heroically and Mexican youth as “violence-prone and uncivilized” gang members with a mob mentality (Berumen, 1995, p. 226). Though pachucos were not responsible for the melees, the press dubbed the violent episode the “Zoot Suit Riots,” thus introducing the abjection of Mexican American youth into the public imagination.

The Latina/o identity itself continues to be regularly othered by news media outlets (see Lovato, 2005; Portillos, 2006; Riofrio, 2009). Since the 9/11 attacks, news reports have suggested Latino street gangs may have ties to terrorists intent on attacking the U.S. (Bender, 2003). More recently, the Latina/o marchers waving Mexican flags during the March 25, 2006 Immigrant March in Los Angeles were referred to as unpatriotic gang members by “anti-immigrant pundits,” even though the peaceful crowd was composed mostly of families, many waving U.S. flags (Cacho, 2007, p. 43). By othering Latinas/os in this way, the media conveyed the message that Latina/o immigrants are not worthy of U.S. residence and may harbor the intent to harm U.S. citizens. What is more, U.S. media continue to perpetuate the stereotype that violent behavior is part of Latina/o cultures, if not of their distinct biological makeup (Bender). Media discourse on Latinas/os stands in sharp contrast to the depiction of Whites. As Dryer states, “White people in their whiteness … are imagined as individual and/or endlessly diverse, complex, and changing” (1997, p. 12).

Media have also put forth a “superhuman construction” of Latina/o gang members (Bender, 2003). A *Time* magazine feature in September 2001, discussing the “nightmare” of Latina/o gangs in Los Angeles, stated that Latina/o “[g]angs, it turns out, can take more beatings and lock-down time than any humane society is prepared to deal out’” (p. 63). Media (mis)representations such as these are part of the “discourse of savagery” to demonizing urban youth (Macek, 2006). This type of othering can be such that, as Cacho argues, “the social and physical deaths of young Latino men are always already justified in mainstream media” (2007, p. 182).
In the early 1990s a number of conservative writers erroneously argued that the impending increase in the youth demographic, driven in part by high birthrates among non-Whites, would result in a new generation of young criminals they dubbed “super-predators” (for instance, see DiIulio, 1995). The media and law enforcement trumpeted the notion of “super-predators” and created a panic (Pizarro, Chermak, & Gruenewald, 2007). In 1996, the U.S. Congress responded by passing the “Violent Youth Predator Act,” which legislated mandatory minimum sentences for youth convicted of violent crimes and lowered the minimum age for trying juveniles as adults to from 16 to 14 years of age. In 2000, having succumbed to the hysteria about youth crime, California voters passed Proposition 21, The Gang Violence and Juvenile Crime Prevention Initiative. Like other “tough on crime” legislation being implemented across the nation at the time, it focused solely on punishing juvenile offenders and did not include any rehabilitative or preventative intervention. The proposed initiative, which passed with 62% of votes, increased the punishment for crimes committed by youths, especially crimes deemed to be gang-related. Additionally, under this law, prosecutors were given more discretionary power to try juveniles as adults (Taylor, 2002).

While the Proposition 21 initiative may appear to be race-neutral, it is not. Pete Wilson, the Governor of California promoted the initiative by referencing the Mexican Mafia, a violent prison gang, thus, in effect, making Mexican Americans into a social problem (Rios, 2008). Rios suggests that the characterization was meant to resonate with White society:

The construction of racialized youth sub-culture (in this case gang activity) as a serious criminal threat to society reaffirmed to white society that their children would still benefit from white privilege…. In order to define the white middle class child as a good, honorable and hard-working subject that would benefit from her achievements in school, it was essential that deviants exist. (2008, p. 109)

By making Latino youth into deviant cholos, Governor Wilson constructed them as the not-I. As Kristeva (1982) tells us in the opening quote, abjects serve as reminders of the fragility of the law in the face of (perceived) violence and danger. Unlike suburban White youth, urban Black and Latina/o youth residing in neighborhoods with police-identified gangs are more likely to be stopped and accused by law enforcement officers of being gang members (Acuña, 1996). In Los Angeles, youth of color are regularly stopped, their contact information is collected, and then inputted into databases used by law enforcement to track gang members and youth affiliated or associated with gangs. Youth who are not gang members are habitually added to the database. Those who simply know or interact with (perceived) gang members run the risk of being classified as affiliates or associates, even though no such roles are recognized in street gang cultures (Boyle, 2002). Such labeling is detrimental given that “the gang label (and the police perceptions and stereotypes consistent with this label) might operate as a ‘master status’ or contingency that influences the workings of the legal process and rates of movement.
through it” (Zatz, 1985, p. 15). Furthermore, those in gang databases who are criminally charged face longer sentences as stipulated by Proposition 21.

**METHOD**

I identified and examined films that focused on and/or included Chicano gangs from East Los Angeles, as they epitomize the cholo youth stereotype in Hollywood. I documented how cholo characters were being depicted by considering their position within the overall film narratives; how they interacted amongst themselves; how they interacted with non-cholo characters; and how cholo characters approached their own cholo identities. In this paper I limit myself to *Colors* (1988), *Stand and Deliver* (1988), *American Me* (1992), *Bound by Honor* (1993), and *Havoc* (2005).

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

Cholo characters were identified in accordance with the contemporary definition of cholo as gang member. Consequently, the following two criteria were used to identify cholo characters in each of the films. Firstly, character possesses “the homeboy aesthetic,” which Richard T. Rodriguez defines as

an assemblage of key signifiers: clothing (baggy pants and undershirts are perhaps the most significant), [slicked back] hair (or, in the current moment of the aesthetic, lack of hair), bold stance, and distinct language (think caló mixed with hip-hop parlance), all combining to form a distinguishable cultural affectation hard to miss on Los Angeles city streets. (2006, p. 127)

Secondly, the character claims membership in a street gang either verbally or nonverbally (for instance, by putting up gang graffiti on a wall or using hand sign gestures to communicate gang or turf names).

**CHOLOS ON FILM**

Hollywood has a long standing fascination with outlaws. However, not all outlaws are created equal. Cholos are depicted as “one-dimensional” and “violence-prone” (Burmen, 1995, p. 169), while most White gangsters of past eras “are portrayed in a more glowing and understandable light, with their motivations made clear, despite the despicable things they may have done” (L. Rodriguez, 2006, p. 37). Consequently, the violent actions of White gangsters in films, such as *Mobsters* (1991), can be reconciled with the trope of the heroic outlaw marked by an ap-
pealingly tough masculinity. In contrast, the cholo, as stereotype, conveys the view that Latino men and youth are culturally and perhaps even biologically hyper-aggressive and depraved. In the film *Havoc* (2005), for example, the cholas are hypermasculine predators with unbridled sexual desires who find pleasure in sharing in the sexual subjugation of two upper middle class White high school girls.

Cholos are mostly portrayed as members of a corrupting peer group with little agency of their own. With their actions and words, the adolescent cholos, in effect, surrender their identities and selves to their respective gangs, which come “first,” as one of the cholo youths in *Colors* states. Since, as was alluded to above, the dominant discourse puts gang membership at odds with societal membership, the youth cholos can be read as fatalistic, anti-social, anti-authoritarian others that must be policed if social order is to prevail.

The abjected cholo stands in contrast to legitimized characters, like police officers. In the 1988 film *Colors*, the cholos are policed by Danny McGavin a young White officer in the LAPD’s gang unit, Community Resources Against Street Hooligans (C.R.A.S.H.), who the Black and Chicano youth he mistreats nickname Pac-Man. In the opening scene, when McGavin meets Bob Hodges, a veteran officer he will partner with, Hodges asks McGavin what he does for a living and McGavin replies, “I’m the guardian of masculinity, man.” It soon becomes clear that McGavin is a hot-head who has appointed himself to defend the dominant, patriarchal masculinity embodied by the hardworking “breadwinner” and vigilant “man of the house” against all corruption, particularly against the encroaching cholos, who are represented as aberrant in nature. Unlike the sensationalized violence the cholos participate in, Pac-Man’s abuse of power is depicted as the actions of a well-intentioned if over-eager public servant, unrepresentative of the LAPD’s policing practices.

Films about cholos and gang violence make little to no mention of the larger structural forces that contribute to the social marginalization that many barrio youth experience and which, in turn, spurs youth and gang violence. In other words, these films ignore that, as Jim Gilligan, a renowned violence expert, explains, “[t]he real violence is in the social and economic system, much more than it is in the behavior of the relatively few individuals who respond to that inequitable social and economic system by exploding in violence” (quoted in Harvard Educational Letter, 2002, p. 489). Also ignored by the film is the militaristic, racist, and abusive culture LAPD Chief Daryl Gates promulgated within the LAPD in the 1980s when the film takes place and was filmed (see Mora, 2003). Such an omission negates the lasting role that law enforcement has played in urban youth’s constructions of their own tough masculine identities. Research suggests, for example, that “pervasive criminal justice contact for young black and Latino men” produces in them “a hypermasculinity that obstructs desistance and social mobility” (Rios, 2009, p. 150); a hypermasculinity that reinforces the tough masculine personas put forth by many barrio youth in order to stave off potential assailants (see Dance, 2002; De la Canela, 1993; Ferguson, 2001; Majors & Billson, 1993; Mora, 2008).

On the screen, the cholos’ involvement in “la vida loca” (“the crazy life”), as cholos refer to gang life, is commonly characterized as being born out of a deviant bar-
Rio culture that feeds delinquency. Like the western frontiers of the bandido films, the barrio is depicted as a treacherous place (List, 1996). In *Colors* and *American Me*, barrios come across as urban areas where drug laws are flouted and cholos regularly kill one another in order to ward off intrusions into their turf (and drug business) from rival cholos. Cholos and barrios represent the unknown urban perils against which the dominant discourse often contrasts the archetypal serene suburbs populated by White middle-class families—a discursive binary that allows suburbanites to perceive themselves as law-abiding, peaceful individuals. As Butler states:

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

In the film *Havoc*, a group of White high school students from the Pacific Palisades, a beach front district of Los Angeles near Malibu, CA, travel approximately 25 miles to an East Los Angeles barrio in order to purchase marijuana from cholos—the message being that illicit drugs can only be obtained in barrios, as if no drug dealers reside in the Pacific Palisades or the surrounding well-to-do communities. Additionally, the defiling of one of the two White girls in the film serves as a cautionary tale for White, suburbanite parents; a cautionary tale about what happens to White girls from the good/wealthy side of town who try to befriend and party with Latino young men from the barrio, or the bad/poor part of town. The predatory, drug dealing cholos embody the deviancy from which good, responsible parents are expected to shield their children. As Denzin explains while detailing the reproduction of racial stereotypes in Hollywood cinema, the “cinematic version of the racial order situates race in … the barrio” where White viewers are confronted by “the subaltern, youthful other” (2005, p. 473).

> Films depicting cholos suggest that the majority of barrio youth readily join gangs and engage in violent behavior, which is far from the truth. Vigil (1988), a leading expert on Chicano street gangs, states that less than 10% of youth in a given barrio join a gang, and not all gang members engage in violent crimes. Given these facts, it bears asking, why then do so many films about the lives of barrio youth focus on street gangs, rather than on any of the other youth cultures in the barrio, say skateboarding, punk rock, video gaming, or Hip Hop?

> Most gang movies involve adult and youth cholos to construct a generationalized narrative of Mexican American boys destined to become cholos, implying that becoming a cholo is natural pathway to manhood. As Bender points out: “Latina/o youth are assumed to be gang members who will eventually graduate from wielding spray-paint canisters to carrying knives and guns” (2003, p. 30). In a telling scene of *Colors*, a Chicano teenager decides to get initiated into the neighborhood street gang to which his older brother belongs. The older cholos welcome their new
homeboy (fellow gang member), into the gang with handshakes, hugs, and the admonishment that gang membership is for life: “Ain’t no turning back, homes.” The scene is paraphrased by the rapper Ice-T’s lyrics to the rap song, Colors, from the film’s soundtrack: “Gangs don’t die, they multiply.” The initiation scene, like the rap verse, depicts gang members as spawning predators that must be contained.

Compare the fictional film American Me, which traces the life of Santana from his days as an adolescent cholo until he is stabbed to death in a California prison by fellow Mexican Mafia members. Santana’s murder is proceeded by the final scene of the film—a young cholo leaning out of the window of a moving car, arm outstretched, and a gun in his hand. The boy pulls the trigger and proclaims his allegiance to Santana’s neighborhood street gang, “La Primera Lives!” The film does nothing to challenge the purported generational and cultural fate of the cholo—one generation dying violently and making room for the next generation to continue the cycle of gang violence.

The young drive-by shooter does not epitomize childhood innocence. Rather, since “the barrel of the gun fired by the child in the drive-by shooting is framed in close-up from the audience’s POV,” he is reduced to an instrument of violence (Newman, 1996, p. 101). Knowing nothing about him other than that he is willing to kill, he comes across as an initiate who participated in a violent rite of passage and is likely to become a career criminal. As such, he is likely to meet an early death or end up an inmate, like Santana and Miclo, the half-White, half-Mexican cholo in Bound by Honor.

Latino directors, too, have reinforced the discourse equating Latinos with social deviancy in their depictions of cholos. Though Edward James Olmos, director and star of American Me, intended the film to show how gangs emerge in neighborhoods socially and economically marginalized by mainstream society, it falls short: “The construction of [Olmos’] critique of machismo, racism and capitalism depends on attaching racial meanings to the social issues he presents in the story. This makes race, ethnicity and culture the key factors in defining and understanding criminality, marginality and violence” (Liberato et al., 2009, p. 957). The discursive primacy of the cholo stereotype made it difficult to read the cholos in American Me as other than abjected personae.

Additionally, Menéndez’s Stand and Deliver, which tells the story of how Jaime Escalante, a Bolivian engineer who successfully teaches Advanced Placement (AP) Calculus to a class of high school aged Chicanos and Chicanas, relies on the abject specter of cholos to both introduce Escalante and lay out the narrative arc of a gang member named Angel. Early on in the film, Escalante repeatedly displays his masculine bravado with acts of one-upmanship in which he, as the novelistic character, stands up against stereotypical cholos. In one scene, he tells a group of cholos that have come into his classroom that he, too, has a street name and a gang:

I am El Cyclone, from ... Bolivia. One-man gang. This classroom is my domain. Don’t give me no gas, or I’ll jump on your face and tattoo your chromosomes.... If the only thing you know how to do is add and subtract, you will only be prepared to do one thing: Pump gas.
By referring to himself as a “one-man gang,” claiming the classroom as his turf, and indicating that he can do more than add and subtract, Escalante lets it be known that he far surpasses the cholos in both toughness and smarts. Escalante’s public display of masculinity earns him respect among his students, who are well-aware that the cholos represent hegemonic masculinity at Garfield High School.

In order for Angel to be the academic success story that he embodies by the end of the film, he has to leave la vida loca behind. The thrills of the streets that keep beckoning and his homeboys cannot support his educational pursuits. He walks out of an exam when one of his homeboys calls him out of class and spends an entire school night cruising and drinking with his homeboys. In a pivotal scene, Angel shows up at Escalante’s front door with his elderly grandmother and asks Escalante to allow him back into the Calculus class. Escalante agrees and invites Angel and his grandmother in. As the scene ends, Escalante sings to himself, “On the first day of Christmas, a cholo came to me.” That Angel, the cholo, sets aside his tough personae and pride and comes to Escalante, the educated middle class immigrant, represents Angel’s move away from the threatening abjected cholo and toward the educated and socially respectable citizen. In the end, Angel succeeds because he distances himself from his homeboys who function as the others against which the audience can gauge Angel’s remarkable accomplishments and humanity.

**DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

The cinematic depiction of the cholo converges ominously with the depictions of barrio youth within both the broader media and political discourse. For decades, media outlets and politicians have framed Latino youth as social deviants and foreigners. Thus, not surprisingly Mexican migrants in Chicago “strategically deploy that dominant (racist) ideological commonsense (about ‘Mexican’ youth gangs)” while defining their “‘Mexican’ community ... at the expense of those Mexican (‘Chicano’) youths who were perceived to have become a kind of liability” (De Genova, 2008, p. 148). Given the continued xenophobia against Latino immigrants, the popularity of gang documentaries on cable television, and the inclusion of cholo characters in videogames, the cholo stereotype on film is likely here to stay for the foreseeable future.

By approaching stereotypes as abjected visual personas, the present article provides a preliminary understanding of the interplay between the abjection of on-screen Chicano youth and the abjection of youth residing in Los Angeles barrios. Additionally, it highlights the connection between films as texts and the socio-historic and -political contexts that existed prior to, during, and after their creation. In these ways, the evidence presented above contributes to the literature on stereotypes in film that have heeded Berg’s (2002) call for more scholarly works that go beyond just counting stereotypes on the screen.

The present, cursory approach to cholo representations confirms that contemporary films stereotyping “dark skinned” people are “cultural translations, they exoticize strange and different racial worlds” (Denzin, 2005, p. 478). In the films briefly discussed above, the cholo, as a resident of the othered barrio, is made to
represent the fears and attitudes mainstream society has about Latinos, made to populate the racialized social hierarchy that turns Latino male youth into the threatening abject specter of barrio gangs (see De Genova, 2008). Stereotypes, suitably, are “very simple, striking, easily-grasped [forms] of representation but are none the less capable of condensing a great deal of complex information and a host of connotation” (Denzin, pp. 246-247). The demand for profit accumulation drives Hollywood to give audiences throughout the world characters that are recognizable as screen archetypes, which entails trading in the same clichés and dehumanizing stereotypes that the media has itself constructed over the years, including the cholo. The construction of the cholo on film as a pathological character with little to no narrative development or contextualization puts the blame for gang violence and other barrio ills squarely on barrio youth. By presenting violence as a danger posed by the abjected cholo, and not as a danger rooted in the wider society and characteristic of culturally exalted masculine identities, the films do little to engage critically with the cholo stereotype. As Dryer states: “The role of stereotypes is to make visible the invisible, so that there is no danger of it creeping up on us unawares; and to make fast, firm and separate what is in reality fluid and much closer to the norm than the dominant value system cares to admit” (2008, p. 250). The end result is an on-screen cholo illustrating how media “Latinism” continues to turn Chicano youth into hypermasculine, abjected criminals, while depicting White males as individuals with subjectivity and a wide range of masculinities available to them.

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