

**Where Have All the Men Gone? Mexican Foundational Myths and Negative Masculinities  
in *Amores perros***

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In this article, I look at how director Alejandro González Iñárritu's 2000 film *Amores perros* presents a negative portrayal of masculine identity in Mexico based on Mexican foundational myths. In the film, effectively there are no "real" men. The film even fails to present the standard Mexican "movie man," as all the main characters who are male lack the attributes of the positive and conventional hyper-masculinity established by Mexican Golden Age films in the 1940s and 50s. The men in *Amores perros* also fail to act according to Post-Revolutionary state expectations of masculinity. The model for what a man in Mexico should be can only be read in the negative space left by the male characters of the film.

I anchor my discussion of *Amores perros*' portrayal of masculinity in three Mexican foundational myths of reproduction and their depiction of masculinity. The myths are La Malinche, La Llorona and the Virgin of Guadalupe. Mexican men, both indigenous and *mestizo*, are actively barred from these myths and prevented from participating in the mythical reproduction of the nation. These myths are understood today through rearticulations given by public intellectuals of the twentieth century. These portrayals exclude Mexican men from participating in the reproduction of their nation. The effect is to create a symbology that explicitly devalues Mexican masculinity by labeling it sterile and undesirable. This symbology comes into tension with state-sponsored moral ideology that privileges the nuclear family as the basis for society. Using these articulations of Mexican masculinity, I then examine how *Amores perros* presents a consistently pessimistic set of masculine identities.

Given *Amores perros*' critical and audience acclaim in Mexico and its subsequent international success, its negative portrayal of masculinity is worthy of study. *Amores perros* is one of the most important Latin American films today. It broke box-office records in Mexico and has become one of the most successful Mexican films of all time. It was also awarded several prizes in international film festivals, such as Cannes, American Film Institute, and the Cuban Festival de Cine Iberoamericano. The film was also nominated for an Academy Award as best foreign film.

*Amores perros* has unsurprisingly generated much critical scholarship since its premiere. Aside from academic texts that analyze the film in the context of the new wave of Latin American cinema, most criticism on *Amores perros* has focused on its relationship to globalism, neoliberalism, and its portrayal of the modern city. Few analyses of the film solely focusing on the depiction gender and sexuality have been published to date. Of note is Hector Amaya's article on racialized masculinities from 2007, where he argues that *Amores perros* devaluates male characters not associated with whiteness and affluence. I concur with Amaya's reading of the film in this article, although I further trace the film's portrayal of masculinity to Mexican foundational myths and their continued importance in twentieth century popular culture.

### **Foundational Myths**

Contemporary Mexican national identity is based on three interrelated foundational myths that revolve around the notion of reproduction. First is the story of La Malinche.<sup>1</sup> Cortés's indigenous translator is remembered as an Eve figure who symbolically begins the Mexican nation through *mestizaje*. Secondly, there is the story of La Llorona. This colonial era woman regrets the killing of her children; her story concludes the myth of La Malinche by suggesting that the mother destroys the children after her Spanish partner leaves her. Finally, the most

important foundational myth in contemporary Mexico is that of the Virgin of Guadalupe. This representation of the Virgin Mary as a Mexican native woman has produced a powerful iconography that extends to all Mexican communities.

La Malinche was an actual indigenous noblewoman who worked as an advisor and translator for the Spanish invasion force led by Hernán Cortés. Few historical facts are known about this woman, especially about her life after the fall of the Aztec Empire. I base my retelling of this story on Bernal Díaz del Castillo's personal account of the conquest, *Historia de la conquista de Nueva España* (1632). As Sandra Cypress states in *La Malinche in Mexican Literature* (1991), Díaz del Castillo's account of the conquest has become the basis for most interpretations and retellings of the story of La Malinche, although it is clear that Díaz del Castillo's account was influenced by his personal agenda (Cypress 26-40). Given that this study is concerned with La Malinche's story as it is retold in Mexico, I treat Díaz del Castillo's account as a primary source in spite of its historical inaccuracies.<sup>2</sup>

Although born a noble, La Malinche had been sold into slavery by her mother and stepbrother to invalidate her claim to her deceased father's inheritance. Cortés was given a group of indigenous maidens as a gift by the Mayan rulers of Tabasco upon his arrival; among these women was La Malinche. After realizing her potential as a translator given her knowledge of several indigenous languages, La Malinche became an advisor to Cortés. She quickly learned Spanish and became invaluable in the conquest. She was instrumental in negotiations with several indigenous kingdoms in Mesoamerica and aided in the Spanish conquest of the Aztecs in 1523. La Malinche was romantically involved with Hernán Cortés. In order to preserve appearances when his legitimate wife arrived from Spain, Cortés arranged the marriage of La Malinche to one of his men, Captain Juan Jaramillo. Despite their marriages to other people, La

Malinche and Cortés maintained their romantic union during her lifetime. This union produced an illegitimate son named Martín Cortés.

The myth of La Llorona revolves around a *mestiza* woman who is left by her Spanish lover for a Spanish woman. The origins of the myth are in dispute; some attribute it to pre-Columbian stories, while others see the myth as a retelling of La Malinche.<sup>3</sup> For the purposes of this study, I create a composite based on the traditional and popular telling of this story as recorded in film, music, fiction, and oral narratives.<sup>4</sup> Although several versions circulate in Mexican and Chicano communities, I center on the most common attributes of the story, about the loss of the children and La Llorona's incessant lament over their death.

Like the Ancient Greek myth of Medea, La Llorona is unable to cope with the abandonment and decides to kill her children in order to punish the man, the children (for being born), and herself. La Llorona's act brings forth eternal damnation and forces her soul to search for her children at night, often by riversides. Her cry of “!Ay, mis hijos!” [“O, my children”] expresses her perpetual penance for her crime, as well as the point of this story, that of halted reproduction. The myth of La Llorona is of continued importance in Mexico and has been imported by Mexicans to the U.S. Mexican-American and Chicano families retell this story to young children, as a way to caution them to behave well. Because she is associated with rivers, many Chicano renditions of the story situate La Llorona along the Rio Grande between Mexico and the United States.

The story of the Virgin of Guadalupe features an indigenous man named Juan Diego who converted to Catholicism as an adult. Due to the story's links to the Catholic Church and contemporary conceptualizations of Mexican identity, there exists in Mexico the belief that there is only one true story. Several versions of this story do exist; they range the gamut from stories

tying the apparition of the Virgin to the pre-Columbian cult of the Goddess Tonantzin, to stories following strict Catholic dogma and affirming that the Virgin of Guadalupe is in fact the Virgin Mary, to versions suggesting the whole story was made up by the Catholic Church as a conversion ploy. In this study, I choose to tell the story of Juan Diego and the Virgin of Guadalupe as the Catholic Church presents it today.

In 1531, the fifty-seven year-old Juan Diego was walking in the mountain of Tepeyac. There he met a beautiful lady who identified herself as the Virgin Mary. She enlisted Juan Diego as her messenger and instructed him to notify Catholic authorities of her apparition in order to erect a temple in her honor atop Tepeyac. Juan Diego did as he was told but failed to convince the Catholic bishop of his vision. After several apparitions by the Virgin accompanied by miracles, the bishop believed Juan Diego and began the construction of the Basilica in Tepeyac. Juan Diego dedicated the remainder his days to propagating the cult of the Virgin. He died in 1548 at the age of 74. In 2002, Pope John Paul II canonized Juan Diego, officially recognizing his importance in Mexican Catholicism.

### **A Nationalism Devoid of Men**

Octavio Paz and Roger Bartra are two of the most important Mexican intellectuals of the twentieth century. In their books and essays, they construct archetypal images that rely on these foundational myths and reinterpret them for a contemporary audience. In fact, the myths of La Malinche, La Llorona and the Virgin of Guadalupe are understood today through the work of these public intellectuals. Paz and Bartra state that the children born to La Malinche and La Llorona constitute the first Mexican men through the process of *mestizaje*. Yet the myths and Paz and Bartra's interpretations of them actually erase Mexican men.

The three foundational myths are understood today through the concept of *mestizaje* and are supposed to explain the symbolic and actual origins of the Mexican people. According to twentieth-century intellectuals, the *mestizaje* between the Spanish and the native peoples of Mexico that began in the sixteenth century is what symbolically constitutes contemporary Mexico. This *mestizaje* is said to account for the creation of the Mexicans that inhabit the country. For José Vasconcelos, these Mexicans are part of a cosmic race that will inherit the world.<sup>5</sup> The *mestizos* are assumed to be biologically and socially superior because they exude the positive characteristics of their forefathers. Although Vasconcelos argued that *mestizaje* incorporated African ancestry, Mexican *mestizaje* is generally understood as stemming from the union of Spanish and indigenous peoples. Through the propagation of Vasconcelos' ideas by the state and other intellectuals, in contemporary Mexico being Mexican is equated with being a *mestizo*. This of course is not biologically true given that not all Mexicans are the product of *mestizaje*. Nevertheless, the idea that all Mexicans are the product of *mestizaje* is an important foundational myth that is symbolically tied to the story of La Malinche, La Llorona, and the Virgin of Guadalupe.

In accordance to the reinterpretations of these myths, the greatest achievement of the process of *mestizaje* is the creation of the Mexican man. Yet, the foundational myths of La Malinche, La Llorona and the Virgin of Guadalupe actually devalue the idea of *mestizaje* and in effect eliminate its tie to the production of a Mexican male subject. In the story of La Malinche, her son Martín Cortés is the first public Mexican *mestizo*.<sup>6</sup> However, Martín Cortés did not remain in Mexico. The first Mexican man abandons his mother and his country, and becomes a loyal Spanish soldier against the Moors. From the Spanish point of view, Martín Cortés is the prodigal son who returns to his mother country to serve her. He leaves behind his indigenous

mother in favor of his more elite —and racially pure, or so the story goes— paternal grandmother. From the Mexican point of view, the son's rejection of Mexico suggests that the possibilities presented by an emergent Mexican race are deficient and prevent the fulfillment of his masculinity. He chooses to become a man through Spanishness, which means dying in battle against the heathen.<sup>7</sup> The story of La Malinche has failed to produce a Mexican male subject and instead has produced a good Spanish man.

The story of La Llorona similarly suggests that the privileging of *mestizaje* as a positive social construct is faulty. This story reformulates the story of La Malinche with a new twist. La Llorona refuses to become a vehicle for *mestizaje*. The fact that she and her children are *mestizos* causes her Spanish partner to leave her. She is unable to bring these children up by herself, so instead she must destroy them. La Llorona chooses to prevent any further propagation of *mestizaje*. Instead, she leaves the man free to reproduce with a Spanish woman and produce Spanish children. On the other hand, the story of the Virgin of Guadalupe presents a fake *mestizaje*. Juan Diego is not a biological *mestizo*, he only acts like one. The Virgin looks *mestiza*, but in fact is the Virgin Mary with a *mestiza* face. Instead of propagating *mestizaje*, this story suggests that the best *mestizos* are only those who act as if they were *mestizos*.

None of these foundational myths are producing *mestizo* children. Furthermore, these stories do not feature any Mexican men in active roles. In the story of La Malinche, her only sexual partners are Spanish and her child chooses to act Spanish. The only actors in this story are La Malinche and Hernán Cortés – an indigenous woman and a Spanish man. In the story of La Llorona, she is the only actor in the story since her partner abandons her and is not seen again. Finally, in the story of La Virgin de Guadalupe, Juan Diego is portrayed as an emasculated indigenous man who follows without question the Virgin's orders.

The reproductive choices of these mother figures suggest that Mexican men are not viable partners. Both La Malinche and La Llorona favor Spanish men over indigenous or *mestizo* men. They actively reproduce with these men, even though they are unsuitable as husbands and fathers. This suggests that Mexican men must be a worse alternative. In the story of the Virgin of Guadalupe, no one is reproducing. In fact, after converting to Catholicism, Juan Diego stopped sexual relations with his wife. After her death, he moved in with his uncle Juan Bernardino and severed his ties with his children.

So, where are the Mexican men? The reinterpretations of these myths by Paz and Bartra cast Mexican men as the symbolic products of the *mestizaje* that is supposedly happening in the myths. Mexican men are reinserted as the sons of the women in these stories. Yet, because the stories do not feature these men as characters, we are to read the presence of these men through that of their mothers. In *El laberinto de la soledad*, Octavio Paz labels Mexican men as *los hijos de la Chingada*, meaning La Malinche. His use of the word *Chingada* expresses the idea that La Malinche is she who is forever tarnished by a Spanish man because, “toda mujer, aun la que se da voluntariamente, es desgarrada, chingada por el hombre” [“All women, even those that voluntarily give themselves, is torn apart, fucked by man”] (Paz 1981, 88). Mexican men are the product of this unequal relationship and are relegated to an emasculated position because of their father’s rejection of the mother and child.

Roger Bartra argues in *La jaula de la melancolía* that because Mexican foundational myths revolve around the image of the mother and the “idea de un retorno a la unidad original, la madre” [“idea of a return to the original entity, the mother”] (171), Mexican masculinity is characterized by this desire for the mother figure. This presupposes a male actor (*el mexicano*) who forms his national identity as Mexican through the contradictory notions of motherhood



offered by these foundational myths. Bartra, like Paz, pays attention to the dualistic notion of motherhood offered by these myths: the virgin/whore dichotomy that supposedly structures symbolic gender relations in Mexico. Men, according to Bartra and Paz, are caught in the contradictory desire for both their mothers (as virgins) and other women (as whores). Through these interpretations of the foundational myths, the only “character” that is desired and complex is the mother. The desire of the son for the mother does not characterize the son as an individual or active subject – it only suggests that the mother is important.

Most importantly, being a son does not constitute an active reproductive tie. So, what does it mean for Mexican men that they are not active participants in the myths of reproduction? It means that Mexican men are not the central subjects in the symbolic creation of their nation. The birth of *lo mexicano* occurs without the agency of Mexican men, and hence excludes them in the production of their own identity. The actors in these stories are women and absent Spanish men; despite their absence the Spanish men continue to wield the power. The trauma of the conquest is expressed through the unequal relationship between the indigenous women and the *conquistadores* and it supposedly creates the contemporary Mexican people. However, given that the foundational myths do not feature the presence of any of the children, the only characters for men to identify with are the parents. Mexican men, therefore, face an uncomfortable symbolic choice: to identify with the hated and absentee Spanish father or the defiled and humiliated indigenous mother.

Nationalism was developed in Mexico through the establishment of a symbology that explicitly devalues Mexican masculinity as sterile and undesirable. Mexican men were incorporated into the nation as representatives of *machismo* and hence a force that needs to be controlled or harnessed into productive activities. Class and race are implicitly integrated in this

symbology as characteristics that can alleviate the deficits posed by Mexican masculinity. The foundational myths allow Spanish men to reproduce; Mexican men with a more European appearance or identity can identify themselves in those myths as men capable of reproducing.

Furthermore, Mexican *machismo* is formulated as a (negative) culture of the popular classes. Bartra and Paz suggest that in intellectual and popular conceptions of *lo mexicano*, lower-class Mexicans are emasculated beings who overact through *machismo* to counter their impotence. The works of Paz and Bartra, and others have affected the way that Mexicans see themselves. Although these works began as observations of what these authors believed Mexican men were like, the existence and continued relevance in Mexican society of these works reinforces their conclusions by influencing contemporary interpretations. A key example of the articulations surrounding Mexican masculinity can be seen in the film *Amores perros*. With self-consciously overt portrayals of inappropriate masculine identities, the film presents a pessimistic view of the continued absence of positive Mexican masculine reproductive possibilities.

### **Negative Masculinities in *Amores perros* (2000)**

*Amores perros*, directed by Alejandro González Iñárritu and independently produced by Altavista films, has become one of the highest-grossing Mexican films of all time. The film was widely shown throughout Mexico and abroad; its urban Mexican rock soundtrack became a bestseller in Mexico City. The film is structured into three episodes about urban life from the perspectives of three different social classes: a working class family, an upper-class couple, and a hit man who lives in absolute squalor (although he secretly amasses the money from his hits and had been a professor). The three storylines come together through a violent traffic accident at the beginning of the film, the only real point of intersection and interaction between the classes.

*Amores perros* is relevant because it was popular both in Mexico and internationally. The company Altavista films is important because it is one of the first independent studios that has produced successful films without state sponsorship. It was because *Amores perros* became an overnight success in Mexico that Altavista opted to market it internationally. The film was appreciated both by audiences and by critics. This overwhelming success allowed its director Alejandro González Iñárritu and the script writer Guillermo Arriaga to “crossover” and do two more critically acclaimed collaborations in the U.S., *21 Grams* (2003) and *Babel* (2006).<sup>8</sup> Arriaga also wrote the script for Tommy Lee Jones’ *The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada* (2005).

The film also launched the career of Gael García Bernal, who is now considered one of Mexico’s most successful young actors thanks to his starring role in *Amores perros*. García Bernal’s successful portrayal of “Octavio” in *Amores perros* led to his starring role in several films that have also become national and international successes, including Alfonso Cuarón’s *Y tu mamá también* (2001), Carlos Carrera’s *El crimen del Padre Amaro* (2002), Pedro Almodóvar’s *Bad Education* (2004), Walter Salles’ *The Motorcycle Diaries* (2004), and Alejandro González Iñárritu’s third film *Babel* (2006).

In the film, the men fail to provide for their families, utilize violence to solve problems inappropriately, are ineffectual, act immaturely, and run away from their problems. In the three storylines, men from all walks of life are equally unable to act responsibly. In the first story, Octavio (played by Gael García Bernal) tries to seduce his brother Ramiro’s young wife Susana (played by Vanessa Bauche). Neither brother has a steady job that can adequately support a family. Octavio makes money by entering the family dog in the dogfights; the brother works as a cashier in a grocery store but supplements his income by robbing convenience stores with a

friend. Both brothers live with their mother, who presumably also works to support their modest Mexico City household. Susana is still in high school and is unable to help support the family financially. Octavio tries to seduce Susana by entrusting her with his profits from the dogfights and thus compete with the income the brother provides her through his crimes. The brothers' competitiveness is manifested through violence. Ramiro beats Octavio in the shower early in the film; Octavio arranges for some thugs to beat up his brother after work one day. At the same time as the beating, Octavio has sex with Susana so that he can symbolically win over his brother in two areas: physical strength and sexual prowess. Octavio's victory over his brother is transitory, however. At the end of the first part of the film, the woman chooses her husband, and takes Octavio's money as they run away.

In the second storyline, a magazine executive (Álvaro Guerrero) leaves his wife and two daughters for a Spanish model (Goya Toledo). The two characters are named Daniel and Valeria, but the audience identifies them more as the executive and the model, stock characters rather than real people. As they attempt to construct a new life together in an upscale apartment in Mexico City, she is involved in the traffic accident that unites the three storylines and is left in a wheelchair as her leg heals. This causes a crisis for the woman since she is unable to find work because of the scarring left by the accident. The relationship begins to dissolve and the executive begins to drift away from the model. From the beginning, he is portrayed as an ineffectual man who cannot appropriately solve his problems. The first time the audience sees him, he is driving with his wife and daughters. As the daughters are loudly playing and the mother is talking, he is daydreaming about the model as he sees her picture in a billboard in the street. He is not with his family mentally. Then, the executive arranges for a television show to suggest that the model is romantically involved with a television actor. This is a cowardly way for him to solve several

problems – first, this suggests that he is not involved with the model; second, it provides cover for the model; and third, it allows the television actor (who is portrayed in a way that suggests he is a gay man) to present himself as a heterosexual. The film suggests that the executive simply walks out on his family without a formal confrontation. As his relationship with the model goes sour, he begins to place crank calls to his family in order to escape his present situation by fantasizing about the past. In the story's climax, medical complications cause the model to lose her leg. The executive is left with her – a ruined model – in a ruined apartment that faces the empty billboard that formerly featured her.

The third story features “El Chivo” (played by Emilio Echevarría), a former university professor who became involved with the urban guerrilla movement in the late 1960s. His guerrilla activities lead to his imprisonment and the loss of his family – whom he abandoned when he chose to participate in the revolution. His former wife told his daughter that he had died and remarried another man, who raised the professor's daughter, Maru. After being released from prison, “El Chivo” began working as a hit man with a corrupt police officer. The officer contacts the clients, “El Chivo” assassinates the targets, and they split the money. “El Chivo” is no longer living a middle-class lifestyle. He inhabits an abandoned warehouse in total squalor along with a group of stray dogs. He roams the streets with a cart and his dogs, appearing to be a homeless peddler, while planning his hits. He also has an old pickup truck he uses for faster transportation. In the film, “El Chivo” is commissioned for a hit after learning that his former wife has died. He attends the funeral, where he sees his daughter from afar. This causes “El Chivo” to begin to regret the way he has lived his life. In the climax scene, his new dog (which is in fact Octavio's former dog) slaughters all the other dogs while “El Chivo” is out. This act of random violence causes “El Chivo” to change his life drastically. After refusing to kill his next

target, whom he leaves tied to the person who ordered the hit (who turns out to be the target's brother) in his home, "El Chivo" leaves all his money in his daughter's apartment after leaving her a phone message telling her who he is, and subsequently abandons the city with his dog. This turn of events is the only arguably positive end in the whole film. Although "El Chivo" fails to reunite with his daughter, he decides to abandon his life of crime and attempt to become a better person. This is manifested in his alteration of his physical appearance—he washes, shaves, and changes clothes. He is a new man. Moreover, he begins to wear glasses again—that is, he now literally sees things clearly. As he leaves the money for his daughter, he leaves a photo of his new self atop the photo of the girl's adopted father. "El Chivo" believes that by finally providing financially for his daughter and revealing his existence, he can become her true father. The audience does not see the daughter's reaction, but it can be assumed that this all will be quite a shock to her and her relationship to "El Chivo" will not be one of immediate trust and love. "El Chivo" conveniently leaves the city (with his escape financed by selling a stolen car to a chop shop – whether this is one last crime or an indication of his continued moral ambivalence is unclear) before he can confront his daughter.

As these three examples from *Amores perros* show, there are no male characters who can fulfill societal and state expectations of masculinity. A "real" man would behave in an opposite manner than all the male characters in the film. A "real" man would be a good father and provider, would work, would act with courage, and would not be inappropriately violent. In this film, none of the men prove to be good fathers and providers. The two brothers in the first story are trying to control the woman, but both fail to pay much attention to her child and her unborn baby. Neither one of them is an adequate provider since their income is based on tenuous situations: crime and illegal dogfights. They are not offering a secure life to the woman. With the

exception of the magazine executive (who is seldom portrayed working), no one in the film has steady and meaningful employment. None of the men are portrayed as being courageous since they hide behind real and symbolic masks from their problems – Ramiro wears a mask to rob stores; Octavio contracts hit men to batter his brother; the magazine executive runs out on his family; “El Chivo” camouflages himself as a homeless man.

All the men in *Amores perros* utilize violence inappropriately. Ramiro routinely beats his wife. The two brothers try to alleviate their problems and competition through the use of bodily harm against each other; this is echoed in the third story, where “El Chivo” is contracted to kill someone’s half brother and where the dog kills its fellow animals. The film suggests that the worst form of violence happens between brothers. The magazine executive becomes violent with his girlfriend when they fight, which is his way to deal with his ineffectualness. It can also be argued that his abandonment of his family is also a form of violence, since he leaves his wife and daughters unprotected and without a secure income. Finally, “El Chivo” represents violence in two forms. First, through his former guerrilla activities, he represents random and ineffectual political violence. Secondly, as a hit man contracted through a corrupt cop, he becomes part of a complex form of state violence. The political situation in Mexico allows “El Chivo” to murder people through the sponsorship of those who represent the state and whose job is to supposedly protect the people. “El Chivo’s” previous criminal activities opened the possibility for him to change sides and now enact violence for a price – the total opposite of his previous revolutionary ideals, yet producing the same effect of violence and disorder.

The men engage in ultra-masculine behaviors to alleviate fears about their masculinity. Octavio tries throughout the film to act like a *macho*, while in fact he is unable to control any situation. In the first story, Octavio must face two opponents, his brother and Jarocho, another

competitor at the dogfights. As noted above, Octavio does not confront his brother directly. Their only face to face interaction occurs when Ramiro beats Octavio in the shower. With Jarocho, on the other hand, first Octavio uses his brother's reputation to protect himself. Then, he utilizes the safe haven created in the dogfight arena to escape Jarocho's wrath. Eventually Jarocho arranges for a private dogfight where he shoots Octavio's dog to eliminate it from the dogfights. Octavio stabs Jarocho and quickly runs away. His only true confrontation leads to his cowardly escape and a chase that produces the traffic accident that unites all the stories. Octavio not only loses his dog (which is picked up by "El Chivo" after the accident), but he also loses his money (stolen by "El Chivo"), his best friend dies in the car, and the accident ends up hurting the model as well. Near the end, Octavio is hobbling on crutches and unsuccessfully trying to convince his brother's wife to run away with him. She refuses, even though the brother has died in a robbery and she is now destitute. She tells Octavio that she would rather be alone than be with him. In the second story, when the executive and the model fight, the executive tries to adopt a masculine attitude by becoming violent. This only causes more trouble and contributes to the medical complication that leads to the amputation of the model's leg. Like Octavio, the executive is unable to control the situation around him and is frustrated because his life fails to match his fantasies. "El Chivo" attempts to constitute himself as a hyper-masculine man, but in fact his actions have the opposite effect. By becoming an instrument of violence, "El Chivo" is trying to alleviate his failure as a husband, father, professor, and guerrilla. His hit man persona characterizes him as a disorderly, filthy, and unstable person. His clients are afraid of him – as are his victims – because of his unkempt appearance. All men in the film are attempting to hide their deficient masculinity by exaggerating their behaviors and thus presenting themselves as what they think a man should be



(ultra-*macho*, hyper-masculine). This proves to be a failure that further shows how unfit they are as men.

The masculinity constructed in *Amores perros* is unsustainable and negative. In fact, the male characters in *Amores perros* fail to behave. Their masculinity is unsustainable because it only brings forth destruction in their lives – Ramiro dies, Octavio is left alone and injured, the magazine executive is left with damaged goods, and “El Chivo” remains alone and on the run. The male characters fail to be men because of several factors. They are unable to appropriately cope with their particular realities and try to find easy answers to complex problems. Ramiro, Octavio and “El Chivo” actively participate in the criminal economy and flirt (Ramiro and “El Chivo” more directly) with murder. The men also utilize violence as a solution to all their problems. Although the strict rules that regulated violence in Golden Age cinema are no longer applicable to contemporary Mexican films, violence is still constructed as a tool of masculinity that can only be employed in certain situations.<sup>9</sup>

### **The politics of reproduction**

The foundational myths present households that lack the participation or presence of Mexican men. Although the households presented in the film do include men, the film precludes the possibility of reproduction. Mid-twentieth century Mexican state rhetoric emphasized the role of men as husbands, fathers and providers. The promotion of these ideas by state and religious institutions in Mexico suggests that in order to be a man, he must be the head of a family. Ironically, however, this state rhetoric was based on foundational myths that exclude Mexican men from familial roles. The state emphasized the necessity of men to be good providers in order to ensure that the next generations were cared for. However, according to the immortalized foundational myths, these generations were not the offspring of these men.

In *Amores perros*, the men fail to establish meaningful reproductive ties. The only character that actively reproduces in the course of the film is Ramiro. His wife is the mother of one child (a boy) and is presently pregnant with another. Ramiro, however, is not an active participant in the upbringing of his children. Susana chastises him repeatedly because his behavior is inappropriate for a father. In the second story, the magazine executive walks away from his reproductive responsibilities when he abandons his family. In a scene cut from the film because of time restrictions, the character is seen kissing his daughters goodbye before leaving his family's home to be with the Spanish model. This scene suggests that the man feels guilty about abandoning his two young daughters. Its absence in the final cut of the film further suggests that the man is a bad father who leaves his family without any remorse. In the third story, "El Chivo" similarly abandons his family years before to join a guerrilla movement. He eventually regrets his choice, but only after his ex-wife dies and he sees his daughter from afar. "El Chivo's" guilt is triggered by his witnessing of his daughter's fondness for the man that raised her. "El Chivo's" paternal feelings resurge when he realizes that his fatherhood role was taken over by someone else. None of the men in *Amores perros* care about their children nor try to establish positive ties with them. In fact, the men actively distance themselves from their children and avoid all responsibility.

The men's inappropriate actions are most visible in their interactions with women. The women in *Amores perros* enable inappropriate behaviors. Although they are often victims of violence, the women in the film also benefit from violence and wrongful actions, and try to foster this behavior in the men to their advantage. Most importantly, the women fail utterly to offer constructive possibilities for "good" masculine behavior. Susana fosters the competition between Ramiro and Octavio to her advantage in the first story. She is often beaten by her husband, but

she still chooses to be with him than with Octavio. Susana's choice is based on the fact that she perceives Ramiro to be a better partner because he is more exciting; she prefers Ramiro's short-term presents to Octavio's long-term plans. The mother of the two brothers attempts to appease the feud between them but fails to be heard. She is only able to intimidate Susana, whose place in the household is under her. The Spanish model manipulates the magazine executive to leave his family and to lose contact with them. Before he left his family, she would often place prank calls to his home to terrorize his wife. Once the executive leaves his family, she realizes that happiness does not follow automatically. He proves to be inadequate and insensitive to her needs, and she is unable to positively alter his behavior. Instead, her unhappiness and resentment after the accident gives the magazine executive an excuse for becoming violent towards her.

Women are not real characters in the third story. "El Chivo" encounters his former sister-in-law at his ex-wife's funeral and she forbids him to contact Maru. She is the only woman that "El Chivo" interacts with in the story. "El Chivo" is completely disconnected from women. His relationship with his daughter occurs only in his mind and memory. He has old photographs of her in his abandoned warehouse and occasionally spies on her. She is never a real character in the film, however. The audience never sees her interact with anyone (aside from crying at her mother's funeral). The story is crafted from the point of view of "El Chivo" –so like him, the audience is disconnected from all women. "El Chivo" is odd in that he willingly chose to avoid all contact with members of the opposite sex, including his ex-wife and child. "El Chivo" is also disconnected from other men. His only contact is with the police officer – a relationship full of mutual contempt and dislike. Unlike the other characters in the film that have friendships and relationships with men and women, "El Chivo" is all alone. His only companions are his multiple dogs. At the end of the film, he runs away with his last remaining dog.

*Amores perros* portrays men who fail to act responsibly, especially when surrounded by women. The film presents this situation as being the fault of both men and women. The male characters are more developed in the film, while the women are only peripheral. The other male characters in *Amores perros* are surrounded by women, but they are not active participants in the construction of masculinity. The women are the excuses for the men's actions, but in reality, the women exercise little direct influence on the men. They are only tangential pretexts for their actions and are treated like commodities that need to be controlled or possessed. In an early scene in the first storyline, Octavio tries to kiss Susana, who promptly refuses. He is confused by her actions since he thought that is what she wanted. In answer to her negative, he asks her, "Entonces, ¿Cómo?" She does not answer, but after this incident, Octavio decides to enter the dogfights to woo Susana with money. After he gives her all his earnings from the dogfights, she finally sleeps with him. Susana however fails to modify Octavio's behavior or to influence him to act as she wishes him to. He blames her for his actions, but she has no agency in their relationship. Octavio controls their time together and their lovemaking is always performed at his insistence. The only way Susana expresses her agency is when she leaves Octavio to run away with her husband and takes the money. Similarly Susana has no influence on her husband or his actions; she only benefits from his robberies.

The only developed woman character is the Spanish model. But from the beginning, she is demonized. She is immediately characterized as a beautiful, thin, blond, tall, Spanish woman. She is a direct opposite of Susana – who is short, dark, round, and Mexican. It is no accident that the model is Spanish. Her ethnicity and nationality are used to characterize her in direct opposition to the other women in the film. The Spanish model in *Amores perros* is a spoiled woman who derives her self-affirmation from her physicality. After the accident, she goes

through a depression because she is no longer considered beautiful by the masses. If compared to the typical woman character in Mexican film, she is an abhorrent character. She is not self-sacrificing, loving, caring, nor a mother. Her only “baby” is her lap dog, which annoys the magazine executive. The dog’s disappearance in the story further depresses the model and causes more tension in the story. The couple is isolated in this story. Most importantly, the presence of the Spanish model separates the executive from his daughters. She is portrayed as a home-wrecker, which is not a positive portrayal in Mexican film. Her role in the film is to show how the executive’s lust has hurt his family and life. The Spanish model also fails to be an active participant in the construction of masculinity of her lover. In fact, her effect is just the opposite. By choosing to be with the Spanish model, the executive distances himself from a positive construction of masculinity that includes the formation of a family and his role as provider. He ends up spending too much money on a ruined apartment and a ruined model. His investment proves to be foolish.

The rendering of the Spanish model in *Amores perros* is part of a Mexican cinematic tradition that depicts the Spanish in negative terms. Coinciding with the Golden Age of Mexican film, a vast number of exiles from the Spanish Civil War came to Mexico. Many of these were middle-class intellectuals who displaced some of the Mexico City upwardly-mobile classes. Spanish immigrants –popularly known as *gachupines*– became represented in Mexican film in static roles that placed them in complicity with the dominant classes and against the heroes of the film. For example, in the Golden Age classic Pedro Infante film *Qué te ha dado esa mujer* (1951), Luis Aguilar’s girlfriend is the descendant of Spanish immigrants, and as such, she is a miser. Her “uncle” (who may actually be her father) is a Catholic priest –who speaks with a Spanish accent– and represents a conservative church.

Furthermore, the characterization of Spanish women in Mexican film is one that suggests a revision of the myth of La Malinche. In Golden Age films, several Spanish actresses played the lead role in romantic comedies. Their characters were spoiled and proud women who needed to be tamed by the Mexican leading man in order for the film to have a happy ending. The women were humiliated into submission so that they could become good wives in Mexico. This trope continues to appear in Mexican film today, although some contemporary films complicate this imagery. For example, *Y tu mamá también* features a Spanish woman who captivates the desires of two best friends. She is an older woman who seduces both young men during a trip to the coast. Her character is not demonized, although this is achieved by the fact that she has a terminal disease and because the young men believe that they are the ones in control of the seduction. Like the Spanish model in *Amores perros*, however, the main character in *Y tu mamá también* is constructed in direct contrast to Mexican women.

The film alteration of the myth of La Malinche establishes a new symbology for Mexican *mestizaje*. The new mythic family is composed of a Spanish mother and a Mexican father. In these portrayals, Mexican men have an active role in the conquest of the Spanish. They are able to display their prowess and strength through the sexual and physical domination of Spanish women's bodies. These portrayals also suggest that Spanish men are unable to please their own women and that is what gives Mexican men the opportunity to conquer Spanish women. It is important to note that the word *conquista* is often used to label these romantic seductions. Yet these portrayals do not always present reproduction, as most of the time there is no portrayal of children born from this union on screen. The cinematic reversal of the Malinche myth is not fully articulated as an alternative for national foundation myths of reproduction. However, its very

existence in Mexican film suggests a preoccupation with the role of Mexican men in reproduction.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> La Malinche's full name is believed by some scholars to be Malintzín Tenépal. After converting to Catholicism, she was baptized as Doña Marina. Colonial documents often refer to her as such. In the twentieth-century, however, she is commonly referred to as La Malinche –a Spanish simplification of Malintzín.

<sup>2</sup> Other accounts about La Malinche differ greatly from Díaz del Castillo. For example, Francisco López de Gómara in his *Historia de la conquista de México*. (1553) portrays La Malinche as less influential in the conquest. While Díaz del Castillo casts her as a noblewoman who personally adopts Cortés' project as her own, López de Gómara writes that she came from an influential family, but was by no means of noble birth, and served Cortés in a modest role as translator. In fact, Díaz del Castillo's account was partially written in response to López de Gómara's text because, according to Díaz del Castillo, the text was biased in favor of Cortés (López de Gómara was Cortés' secretary and his text is a biography of Cortés' exploits). Recent historical and fictionalized accounts about La Malinche cast her in a new light. Adelaida Del Castillo's 1997 article in *Essays on La Mujer*, for example, rereads La Malinche through feminism and the Chicano Movement. Del Castillo's La Malinche is an active participant in the conquest who collaborates with the Spanish because of her own faith in the myth of Quetzalcoatl, and not as an act of revenge against her people.

<sup>3</sup> Bernardino de Sahagún describes in his *Historia general de las cosas de Nueva España* (1569) the cult of the Aztec Goddess Cihuacóatl, who is associated with bemoaning the loss of children. Mariano G. Somonte (1969) links Sahagún's observations with the story of La Llorona and further suggests why the myths of La Malinche and La Llorona are often joined as one in twentieth century popular culture. Nineteenth and twentieth century historical accounts of La



Llorona's myths are found in José María Marroqui's *La Llorona, cuento histórico mexicano* (1887) and Ray John De Aragón's *The Legend of La Llorona* (1980).

<sup>4</sup>La Llorona is the subject of countless popular texts. For example, several ballads whose title is "La Llorona" are part of the repertoire of folk singers Oscar Chávez, Chavela Vargas, and Vicente Fernández. These songs feature the story of La Llorona, as well as the parallel story of a love interest that also weeps like the mythical woman. La Llorona is often mentioned in Mexican films set in the countryside and in urban *vecindades* to suggest the superstitious nature of the people living there. Several 1970s B-movies featured La Llorona herself as a monster that would attack the main characters along with other supernatural beings like vampires and werewolves, of note is the popular film *El Santo vs. las mujeres vampiro* (1962). Finally, La Llorona appears in countless fictitious works both as a main character and as a cautionary tale. She is primarily important in Chicana literature; for example, Sandra Cisneros uses the story of La Llorona prominently in her "Woman Hollering Creek" (1991) short story. For more information about La Llorona, see Rafaela G. Castro's *Chicano Folklore* (2001) where she summarizes several stories about La Llorona from both Mexican and Chicano sources.

<sup>5</sup>José Vasconcelos was one of the most influential intellectuals of the twentieth century. In his roles as President of the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM) and as the founder and director of the federal Secretaría de Educación (SEP), Vasconcelos was instrumental in the creation of a national educational system in the 1920s. A patron of the arts, Vasconcelos was responsible for the hiring of muralists to decorate several public buildings in Mexico City.

<sup>6</sup>Bernal Díaz del Castillo says very little about Martín Cortés, as do other chroniclers of the conquest. Often the only mention of Martín is his birth and his status as a bastard. For more biographical information about Martín Cortés, see Mariano Somonte's text.

<sup>7</sup> It is important to note that the conquest of the Americas is often articulated in the colonial era as a continuation of the reconquest of Spain. Martín Cortés' participation in the battle for Granada suggests that he is enacting in the most important and manly Spanish enterprise – that of domination of space and culture – which is also fundamentally tied to the conquest of the New World. Like the image of the saint Santiago “Matamoros” who becomes Santiago “Mataindios” in the Americas, Martín Cortés is symbolically carrying out Spanish consolidation.

<sup>8</sup> A dispute after *Babel* was nominated for an Academy Award for best screenplay erupted between González-Iñárritu and Arriaga over authorship, however. It is not clear if the two will continue to work in the future.

<sup>9</sup> However, when *Amores perros* was to be released in the United States, the sponsoring studio, Lion's Gate, was primarily concerned with the depiction of violence against animals. The U.S. version of the film contains a message at the start of the film that states that no animals were harmed in the making of this film.

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