Engendering Nationalism: Identity, Discourse and the Mexican Charro

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Tu orgullo es el charro
valiente y bragado
Traer mi sombrero de plata bordado
que nadie me diga que soy un rajado
correr mi caballo en pelo montado
pero más de todo ser enamorado

Your pride is the charro
courageous and dashing
To wear my silver-trimmed hat
So no one can tell me that I back down
to gallop my horse bareback
But above all, to be a lover

[Words from Yo Soy Mexicano, popularized by singer Jorge Negrete,
author's translation ]

Until recently, anthropological and folkloristic studies have focused almost exclusively on the quaint, the primitive, and the exotic. Consequently, certain forms of cultural expression have been ignored, particularly those interlinked with the mass and popular arts. Understood as modes of representation, such expressive forms raise questions of agency, authority, ideology, and process in cultural production and representation. In effect, these questions require attention to the politics of culture and therefore constitute an important terrain for anthropological inquiry.

Like other cultural groups, Mexicans have been engaged in constructing and displaying images of their culture for popular consumption for a long time. Especially visible among these constructions is the charreada or Mexican rodeo. The popular 1940s Mexican song of my epigraph proclaims the charro, the
dashing Mexican horseman, as the pride of Mexico. Not confined to popular music, the image of the charro has become representative of _io mexicano_ (literally "Mexicanness") in various domains. The charro figures prominently in a variety of discourses including, but not limited to, film, music, folkloric dance, and literature.

This paper provides a historical review of the charro as a master symbol of Mexican culture, focusing on the process by which the charro has acquired those qualities that constitute Mexicanness. A review of the historical conditions under which the charro symbol developed reveals a constant interplay between various social agencies that have struggled to control and fix meanings concerning _io mexicano_. Meaning is constantly created and recreated, negotiated, contested and, at any given moment and in any given version, available for consumption. Disclosing the process by which symbols emerge and circulate therefore contributes to a better understanding of cultural production and social processes.

The anthropological literature on Mexican national symbols dates back at least to Wolf's classic study of the Virgen de Guadalupe (1958). Subsequent studies have focused on two other legendary female figures as well: Malintzin Tenépal, or La Malinche, as she most widely came to be known, and La Llorona. In most cases, the issue of gender figures prominently as a central focus of concern. On the one hand, scholars such as Limón, Alarcón, and Del Castillo have noted the "obvious repressive ideological effects" (Limón 1984) of at least two of these symbols, La Malinche and La Virgen de Guadalupe. On the other hand, recent revisions have provided alternative understandings of La Malinche (Del Castillo 1977; Alarcón 1981) and La Llorona (Limón 1984) in part by uncovering historical and political conditions under which these legends emerged.
and subsequently developed. All of this work suggests the complex nature of Mexican symbols and inspires my own research on the charro.\textsuperscript{5}

The concern with gender as promoted through national symbols, figures centrally in this paper. Indeed, the charro must be approached as both a national symbol and a cultural construction of maleness. To ignore this latter point is to equate the male with the universal, a practice which silences women and thus promotes and legitimates male dominance (Stoeltje 1988). Therefore, by focusing on the charro as one example of the way in which lo mexicano has been historically and culturally constructed and represented, the extent to which ideas of masculinity intersect with, indeed are inscribed in, notions of lo mexicano becomes evident.\textsuperscript{6} For as De Lauretis asserts, gender (and I would add culture), both as representation and as self-representation, "is the product of various social technologies, such as cinema, and of institutionalized discourses, epistemologies and critical practices as well as practices of daily life" (De Lauretis 1987:2). Hence, this line of inquiry will uncover the various agents or interest groups who have assumed the authority to define lo mexicano through the charro and also help explain why "such a strongly patriarchal society as Mexico [which] articulates its early history in the symbols of femaleness" (Limón 1984:63) suddenly shifts to an official national male symbol.

A historical perspective helps to identify the qualities which have become associated with the charro in contemporary Mexican society and to understand the process by which that association occurred.

THE EVOLUTION OF THE CHARRO IN COLONIAL AND POSTCOLONIAL MEXICO
The arrival of the Spanish in the New World brought about numerous changes for the local populations. The most obvious included the imposition of new religious, political, economic, and social systems over existing indigenous ones. But Spanish colonization also caused equally negative but inadvertent changes that impacted the local populations in profound ways. Diseases such as smallpox, syphilis, and measles that drastically reduced indigenous populations remain unsurpassed as unintended but catastrophic introductions to the New World (Wolf 1964:195-196). The horse, which proved instrumental in the Spanish conquest, represents another introduction that transformed local culture.

In the 16th century, owning and riding a horse (caballo) was a privilege of the conquistadores and other elite males regarded as true caballeros or gentlemen. Laws prohibited Indians, mestizos, and blacks from owning or riding horses (Morner 1967:41; Alvarez del Villar 1968:17; Aguirre Beltrán 1970:24). The word peón, literally "one on foot," meant a farm laborer, or in more general terms, a member of the lower classes. Thus, from the very beginning, riding a horse became a status symbol, sanctioned by law, signaling differences in class, race, and gender.7

These restrictive laws proved difficult to enforce and the development of cattle ranching in the late sixteenth century provided lower class mestizos and Indians with the opportunity to cultivate their equestrian skills (Myers 1969; Chevalier 1972; Ballesteros 1972). As cattle ranchers had discovered back home in Andalucía, managing cattle on the open range required a team of men on horseback. The proliferation of haciendas, or large landed estates, created a steady demand for skilled vaqueros or cowhands, particularly in northern Mexico.
where the haciendas flourished over most of the land by the late eighteenth century (Myers 1969; Chevalier 1972; Brading 1978). Smaller cattle ranches, or ranchos, persisted alongside the grander haciendas. The rancho housed a single family who either owned or rented the property. Generally, haciendas operated as large independent communities that might include a church, a school for the workers, living quarters for the various employees and their families, and a grand house for the occasional use of the absentee landowner, who generally resided in the city (Myers 1969; Chevalier 1972).

One of the quintessential qualities of the charro was his equestrian skills. The skills and techniques required in cattle ranching, which were imported from the Iberian Penninsula and gradually adapted to suit the Mexican milieu, became the foundation upon which the art of charrería, or Mexican horsemanship, was developed (Myers 1969:29; Bishko 1952). Regardless of size, all cattle ranches required workers skilled in riding and roping techniques to manage the cattle over large tracts of land. Such skills included breaking wild horses, feeding and breeding cattle, controlling bulls and broncs, and protecting the cattle and themselves from the dangers of the range. Roundups, or rodeos, became necessary to sort, count and brand cattle (Bishko 1952:509; Myers 1969:26; Chevalier 1972:111). Like the harvest season for agriculture, the rodeo served as an occasion for celebration. These fiestas featured food, entertainment, visitors, and an exhibition of riding and roping feats. In addition, other games either inherited from Spain or developed from ranching activities were integrated into these festivities. Featuring various equestrian contests, trick and fancy roping, and popular entertainers, including comedians, singers, and musicians, such events anticipated the contemporary charreada.
In these early charreadas, even the most menial laborers might participate and compete in the contests of skill. Competition in the charreada tested an individual's ability to perform skillfully and successfully a series of risky, and sometimes spectacular, feats. For the wealthy sons of hacendado who had more leisure time in which to cultivate the art, the charreada provided an opportunity to prove that they possessed the necessary skills to fully and successfully run an hacienda. On the other hand, for the common vaqueros who honed their skills in the daily work, this was their chance to show they knew as much, if not more, than their "superiors." In all cases, the point was to display abilities of strength, independence and bravery. Consequently, charreadas were a means by which men of any social class might prove themselves to be worthy charros and thus greatly enhance their status as real men.

More to the point, such competitions also promoted the egalitarian ideal of the "self-made man." Implicit in this notion of the "self-made man" was the idea that individuals compete fairly in the world to obtain positions of power and prestige, an idea that ran contrary to social realities of hacienda life. For class, gender, and, to some extent, ethnic lines sharply divided colonial Mexican society (Chevalier 1972:294). The criollos, or descendants of Spanish colonizers, occupied the highest ranks of the social-economic ladder, while the indigenous people occupied the lowest rungs of the ladder (Morner 1967; Meyer and Sherman 1970:204; Gutierrez 1991:191). Colonial Mexican society, and the hacienda social structure in particular, revealed an intimate correlation between ethnicity and class.

Gender too played a significant role in determining the rights and privileges available to an individual. According to Spanish law, a father controlled
his daughters until his death or until they married, at which point the husbands took control (Lavrin and Contierier 1979:282). For many women, entering the convent presented an alternative to marriage, although that too imposed restrictions on women. Even as late as the nineteenth century, women could not hold public office or vote, could not dress as men (lest they try to pass as men to gain more privileges), and could not enter professions as lawyers, priests, or judges (Arrom 1985:58). As Arrom observes, "the rights of all women were restricted to those that did not conflict with the patriarchal social order" (Arrom 1985:78).

As Mexico approached the end of the colonial period in the late eighteenth century, "social relationship had become clearly capitalistic, and masculinized authority and class power remained intimately correlated" (Limón 1984:84). The social structure of the hacienda reproduced and localized the class, ethnic, and gender differentiation evident in colonial Mexican society at large. In an institution modeled on the patriarchal family, only men could become legitimate rulers of family and land. As patriarch the hacienda, or landowner, both ruled and protected his wife, his children, and his employees. Next, in order of descending status, power, and authority, were various foremen and managers such as the administrador, the mayordomo, and the caporal de vaquería, and at the bottom of the scale were the vaqueros or cowhands (Chevalier 1972:294-296; Ballesteros 1972:165-171). No matter where a man ranked in this social hierarchy, he ruled over the women and children within and below his rank.

Despite socio-economic and ethnic differences, then, the patriarchal hacienda system united men in their domination over women and fostered a paternalistic attitude towards those in the lower levels. Furthermore, movement
within these social ranks was extremely limited and certainly had little to do with an individual's ability. Instead, class, gender, and ethnicity largely determined a person's place in society.

Given these social distinctions, instilling loyalty towards the hacienda proved essential for the successful operation of this social institution that functioned as the *patria chica* or little nation for all its residents (Turner 1968:24, 59). Hacendados secured a steady work force through the payment of wages and such means as debt peonage. They also developed other strategies to elicit their employee's allegiance (Chevalier 1972; Israel 1975:39). In this context, the early charreadas, in which competitions simultaneously stressed individual ability and team effort, became particularly significant as a representation of life on the hacienda as one of unity and work for the common good. In the charros' performances, egalitarian principles reigned. Insofar as the successful management of haciendas required the full cooperation of all workers, this portrayal was accurate. Yet such portrayals minimized the fact that it was the hacendado who profited most directly from these group efforts. Thus, the charro figure operated as a symbol promoting unity and cooperation, while simultaneously subsuming class and gender stratification on the haciendas. Consequently, this ideal of cooperation and unity translated into additional qualities for male behavior and served well in promoting social unity.

Such ideals, together with their special skills as horsemen, made the charros a particularly effective force when fighting a common enemy. Indeed, the hacendados had a long practice of forming a private militia from their best charros to provide protection and security for the great estates, especially against bandits and marauders (Chevalier 1972:294). To reduce conflict, hacendados
frequently recruited independent vaqueros and other vagabonds, who might otherwise pose a threat to their security, into their private armies. This proved another effective way to cultivate loyalty for the patria chica. No doubt such practices resulted in a ready-made army in the early struggles for independence.

Although independence was achieved by 1821, nineteenth century Mexico was marked by political disorder and civil strife. By the turn of the century, banditry had become a widespread national phenomenon in Mexico due, in part, to the lack of legitimate means for social advancement (Vanderwood 1981:11). Operating as free agents seeking their own material gain, bandits defied political leaders and broke their rules for social order. Bandits gained the manpower to force wealthy individuals and government officials to meet their demands or face revenge. Like the hacendados, government officials often worked out a deal with the bandits in order to bring them under their control. Such arrangements blurred the boundaries between law enforcement agents, pillagers and insurgents.

Among the most celebrated of the bandits were the plateados, or silvered ones, named for the amount of silver that adorned their clothing and saddles. Dressed as charros, various bands of these "high class" thieves emerged throughout Mexico (Vanderwood 1981:9). Most were truly skilled vaqueros, but others simply dressed the part to feed off the image. Their raw power and fearless attitudes evoked admiration and dread, for such bands typically operated on their own rules to secure their own profit and hence dealt strictly with anyone who got in their way, including rival bands. More than anything else, their presence demonstrated the chaos and lack of national integration that plagued Mexico during the nineteenth century (Vanderwood 1981). But it also indicates
the extent to which patriarchal and authoritarian politics prevailed during this period of Mexican history (Cockcroft 1983).  

By the mid-nineteenth century, in an effort to establish order, President Juarez instituted the *rurales*, a mounted police force designed to enforce national laws and policies. Modeled after the private militias of the haciendas, the rurales enlisted men from both sides of the law and required them to dress as charros. Thus, the rurales enhanced their image as tough, skilled horsemen loyal to the supreme authority. No matter that not all rurales were expert horsemen; their real power rested in the image. By this time, the charro costume signaled key features which everyone understood: "its wearer could outride, outrope, outshoot, outdrink and outwomanize any cowboy from whatever land" (Vanderwood 1981:53). When the dictator, Porfirio Diaz was in power in 1876 to 1910, he took special interest in cultivating the charro image of the rurales as invincible national heroes (Vanderwood 1981:132-136). So it was that the charro image became thoroughly integrated with the ideas of manhood, nationhood, and power. Through careful manipulation of fact and imagination, the charro assumed legendary status in the nineteenth century.

If politicians contributed to the legendary status of the charro by exploiting the image, the fiction writers completed the picture by romanticizing the world in which the charro lived. As Benedict Anderson has observed, along with the newspaper, the novel "provided the technical means for 're-presenting' the kind of imagined community that is the nation" (Anderson 1983:30). Nowhere is this more evident than in the costumbrista literature of nineteenth-century Mexico which employed local characters and customs to create picturesque images of the nation. In this respect, the costumbrista style anticipated the twentieth-
century Mexican nationalist move to replace European customs with local ones.\textsuperscript{14} Luis Inclán (1816-1875), one of the earliest and most important of these writers, had actually lived on an hacienda and experienced ranch life from various perspectives (Paredes 1972:lviii-lix). Through his writings (published between 1850s-1870s), Inclán provided insights, albeit highly romanticized ones, into the life of the charro.

Drawing on firsthand experience, Inclán's descriptions of hacienda life captured the "down-to-earth" dialogues of the characters. His most popular and often reprinted novel, Astucia, portrayed the ranchero as a noble, courteous, and sincere man. The protagonist, Astucia, headed a smuggling ring made up of six charros and twelve drovers, all men who resented the government monopoly on tobacco. When they weren't defending themselves against government agents, they enjoyed themselves at fiestas and roundups, telling each other their life stories and helping the poor, weak, and defenseless. They acted as family and their motto was "one for all and all for one." As Américo Paredes notes:

Like American cowboy heroes, Inclán's charros are passing riders, who help those in distress and then gallop away. They are frank, simple men, preferring action to words but following a code of chivalry and fair play which makes them gallant to women and just even to their enemies. They use their resourcefulness, their bravery and strength and their keenness of judgment to get justice for themselves and for others, though at times they must use extralegal methods, the illegality of which all right-thinking people are only too willing to ignore (Paredes 1960:68).
Clearly, Inclán intended the novel to justify, glorify, and even promote charro ways and values. Moreover, it served to create an ambience of romanticism and nationalism around the charro figure.15

In the same costumbrista vein, Inclán's short monographs reveal a growing interest among city dwellers of the early nineteenth century in cultivating equestrian skills and participating in charro competitions and documented certain socio-historical details of the charro subculture (Inclán 1860:112). Inclán subsequently wrote a groundbreaking manual, intended explicitly for amateur enthusiasts, regarding the proper ways of tailing and roping. This book served as the precursor to what many consider the "bible" of the charros, El Libro del Charro Mexicano (The Book of the Mexican Cowboy). Almost one hundred years after Inclán's manual first appeared in print, Don Carlos Rincón Gallardo, the Marqués de Guadalupe, produced the ultimate manual of charrería (Chevalier 1972:175; Rincón Gallardo 1960). Thus, Inclán's work anticipated the development of two important areas through which the charro image would be further popularized: the charro associations and Mexican films.

COMMERCIALIZATION OF THE CHARRO IMAGE IN POST-REVOLUTIONARY MEXICO

The Mexican Revolution of 1910 marks the most significant point of transition in Mexico's history after the Spanish conquest. During the first half-century of Mexican independence, political instability plagued the nation, as over fifty separate governments ruled the nation before the accession of Porfirio Díaz (Cockcroft 1983:62). Authoritarian, if erratic, leaders such as Santa Anna (a former hacendado) dominated the scene. Stability was restored for a generation
by Diaz' "Paz Porfiriana" and then the Revolution registered a genuine attempt to dismantle the repressive autocratic system established by the dictatorship.

At first the Revolution offered some hope for social change, and indeed, peasants and workers achieved important reforms, especially in the area of land redistribution and the expansion of social services. Especially relevant to the present discussion was the gradual destruction of the hacienda system that transformed agricultural peons into communal owners and small landholders. But along with these gains, the Revolution brought about major transformations in other areas that negatively affected the same population. For instance, the commercialization of agriculture and the move toward industrialization forced thousands of Mexicans to migrate out of the countryside into larger cities and across the border into the United States.

Significant changes in rural life in general and cattle ranching in particular, brought about as a result of the Revolution, also led to the demise of charro activities and lifestyle in rural Mexico. Yet the image of the charro remained quite powerful, as evidenced by those who fought to preserve or otherwise manipulate the figure for various ends. After the Revolution of 1910, Mexico experienced a strong resurgence of nationalism and generated an explosive interest in lo mexicano among both domestic and international audiences. Film, music, and folkloric stage presentations invoked nostalgic visions of Mexican "traditional" life and it was quite common to establish "official yet spurious folklore to attract tourism but also to blur regional differences to create a more integrated society" (Monsivais 1976).16 The twentieth century also witnessed the mass-media-sponsored emergence of the cult of the macho in Greater Mexico (Paredes
1967). Significantly, the charro prevailed as the Mexican prototype in these commercial constructions of culture.

   Even before the turn of the twentieth century, charreada became an avenue for packaging and representing Mexican culture for public consumption both inside and outside Mexico. As one authority notes:

   The professional charreada initiated its activities towards the end of the last century at the time of the great Mexican charro and bullfighter Ponciano Díaz, . . . this exceptional rider and bullfighter promoted "charreada" and made a fascinating show of it. He and his friends organized the first paying spectacles (Leovigildo Islas Escárcega 1967:20).

   In 1894, the "best Charros" from Mexico made their first major expedition into the U.S. "On that tour, the Mexicans met with great success, particularly in the city of New York, where they were presented with the famous 'Buffalo Bill's Wild West' show" (Isla Escárcega 1967:21).

   New York was not the only city showcasing ranch life activities. Mexican cities were fast becoming significant centers for the preservation and dissemination of charreada. Post-revolutionary Mexico witnessed dramatic growth in its urban population as people increasingly turned away from agriculture. The new urbanites included an increasing number of displaced cattle ranchers and ranch workers who had reluctantly relocated in the cities. As this segment of urban population grew, they established national charro associations in order to continue to practice, refine, and, ultimately institutionalize, the art of charreada. By the 1920s, charreada was well on its way to becoming the first official Mexican national sport. The national charro association was formed on July 4, 1921 (the
Asociación Nacional in Mexico City); but it was not until December 16, 1933, that the Federación Nacional de Charros was established to give official status to the sport (Alvarez del Villar 1968:33). The Federación continues, to this day, to sponsor national meetings to establish and define the rules for all matters concerning participation and competition in charreadas (Alvarez del Villar 1968:42). Like their American counterparts, these associations "standardized and formalized the public performances of what originated as cowboy customs" (Stoeltje 1989:246).

Beyond allowing for the elaboration of the charro-based arts, such associations also helped specify more concretely the ideals of the charro version of lo mexicano through a code of ethics established for all members. This code stipulated, for example, that charros could not engage in disorderly conduct such as excessive drinking, participating in brawls, or using foul language, especially while wearing the charro costume. Fighting and drinking while in uniform were (and continue to be) deemed particularly dangerous because the charro costume required sporting a real gun. The code, then, was intended to encourage responsibility for the safety of one's self and of others, and sought to protect the status and reputation of the charro as a positive representative of Mexico. The charro code also forbade the use of bright colors in costuming, specifically royal blue, yellow, purple and pinks (Ballesteros 1972:114). Presumably such colors were deemed too ranchero or unsophisticated, and insufficiently masculine for the image; whereas colores serios (somber colors) appeared more elegant and manly. The color code also suggested the desire to set aesthetic standards reflective of a particular class, that is, upper-class Mexicans. In fact, the descendants of wealthy hacendados, such as the previously mentioned Don
Carlos Rincón Gallardo, played a critical role in defining the codes and policies for all members by writing manuals for charros and assuming leadership roles in the charro organizations (Alvarez del Villar 1968; Ballesteros 1972).

These newly established charro associations supported and contributed to the post-revolutionary romantic nationalist efforts to identify and promote traditional customs perceived as uniquely Mexican and to foster a sense of national unity and democratic ideals. Since the charro associations prided themselves in representing lo mexicano, they did not explicitly restrict membership to any given class. Instead, membership was determined by an individual's ability to execute at least one of nine suertes, or competitive events, just as it had been back on the hacienda. In theory, at least, charro associations discriminated against no one. However, important prerequisites such as sufficient time and money to purchase, maintain, and train a horse, and to secure appropriate riding gear severely limited membership to the wealthier sectors of society.

The charro associations were not the only avenue through which the charro image became popularized. First of all, not all skilled vaqueros opted to become members of the Federación, yet they continued to hone and display their equestrian skills in their work environment and through informal means, such as friendly competitions, jarrieos (bronn and bull riding events) and family gatherings (Alvarez del Villar 1968:146). In this way, roping and riding skills remained rooted to everyday life, especially in the rural areas. Furthermore, by the early part of the twentieth century, folkloric dance and music presentations promoted images of the charro as well. Since neither the dancers nor musicians engaged in equestrian activities on stage, riding and roping skills were not
necessary. Yet, dressed in charro costume, these performers contributed to the elaboration of the image of the charro in their presentations. In the dances, for example, the theme of "masculinity" appeared in romantic terms, with the male pursuing and ultimately capturing the woman. In such representations, the man assumed the role of aggressor, particularly with respect to male-female relationships. While the woman flirted seductively, only the male made the first overt move towards establishing a relationship.

The dancers executed these choreographed interactions between male and female to the music of the mariachi, a regional string ensemble from west-central Mexico. Traditionally, the mariachi ensembles featured male musicians dressed like peons in white muslin shirt and pants. By the turn of the century, however, following the example set by the orquesta típica (national "folkloric" orquestra) formed by Miguel Lerdo de Tejada in 1901, mariachis began wearing charro costumes on occasion. By the 1930s, the charro costume became an institutionalized part of the mariachi tradition when the government required mariachis performing for official functions to wear charro outfits. Soon afterwards, the mariachi became the official national musical ensemble of Mexico (Guías Voluntarias 1982:459).

While mariachis and folkloric dancers promoted the charro image through their performances at home and abroad, ideas surrounding the importance of Mexican traditions received further reinforcement through cinematic representations of the charro. About the time the charro associations surfaced among the middle classes, charro films emerged as another avenue through which this symbol became further linked to notions of patriotism and gained widespread popularity. While charro literature circulated among the literate in the
nineteenth century, and charro associations consisted predominately of urban businessmen in the twentieth century, commercial films proved to be the most powerful and influential channel for popularizing the charro as a national symbol across class, gender, and even political boundaries.

During the Cárdenas period (1934-1940), Mexico experienced an intense climate of "socialist" nationalism, stimulating interest in the vernacular practices and lifestyles of the common Mexican citizen. Consequently, the Cárdenas Administration encouraged "native producers to produce movies with Mexican themes consistent with the ideological program of the state" (Saragosa 1983:8). Under Cárdenas, such encouragement meant limiting the distribution of American-made films. However, under the more conservative Manuel Avila Camacho administration (1940-46), encouragement translated into institutional support in the form of tax exemptions, laws requiring theaters to feature a minimum number of Mexican films, and, in some cases, even financial backing (Martínez Assad 1986:345; Kline 1943:680).

Producing films with Mexican themes proved an easy task. Since the charro already had a history of representing lo mexicano, the charro became a major figure in these nationalistic films. In 1932, the first charro sound film appeared. However, the first major commercial success occurred in 1936, with the release of the movie entitled Alla en el Rancho Grande (directed by Fernando de Fuente) that featured the singing charro. This film became the prototype for a new film genre called the comedia ranchera (cowboy comedy). Briefly, the comedia ranchera romanticized life on the hacienda and the relationship between landowners and workers. In these films, the charro represented the "true Mexican," for not only did the charros defend their country and loved ones, they
also sang, danced *jarabes*, and participated in cockfights and festivals. Family loyalty figured prominently in these films as well. Typically, conflict occurred between families, rather than within the hacienda environment, in which the hero typically fell in love with the daughter of the rival family. Such conflicts inevitably resulted in various traditional competitions such as charreadas, cockfights, or singing duels where the hero typically won.

Charros and other folkloric elements became staples of most Mexican films produced since the 1930s, extending into other genres besides the comedia ranchera. Superficially, at least, such movies resonated with national goals of expressing Mexican themes and practically guaranteed commercial success. Yet, the ideological content of these films was another matter altogether, revealing competing political agendas among film producers. Even a cursory review of three films *Cuando Viajan Las Estrellas* (1942, directed by Alberto Gout), *Flor Silvestre* (1943, directed by Emilio Fernandez), and *El Peñón de las Animas* (1942, directed by Miguel Zacarías) will illustrate my point. Produced in the early 1940s, these films featured charros, folkloric dancing, a love story, and popular music, but the plot of each film differs significantly.²²

In the first film, Negrete stars as an unmarried and kindly hacendado. After falling in love with a foreign actress who is visiting Mexico, Negrete invites the star out to his ranch to see "the most beautiful part of Mexico." Negrete hosts a party in which guests dress in folkloric costumes, perform regional dances, and enjoy other Mexican customs such as fireworks and singing. Dressed in a charro costume, Negrete ends the fiesta by serenading the star with romantic song. A light-hearted comedy (i.e., comedia ranchera), the film comes to a happy ending as the foreign star gives up her career to marry the charro. While this film
contains intriguing elements which merit close analysis, on the whole, it clearly provided an opportunity to promote an attractive and romanticized view of the "real" Mexico.

*Flor Silvestre* (Wild Flower), a classic melodrama, features a love story situated during the Mexican Revolution as a way to comment on the social complexities of that era. The film emphasizes the hardships that people on all sides suffered in creating a "new" Mexico. In this film, the lead actor, Pedro Armendadiz, portrays the son of a rich hacendado hopelessly in love with a poor peon woman. Despite his family's view of this union as transgressive, the couple marries. At a charreada, the father shuns the bride publicly, leading to an argument between the father and son. Slowly, the man's family begin to accept the good-hearted wife, but the plot thickens when the father is killed by opportunistic bandits posing as revolutionaries, and the son seeks revenge resulting in his own tragic death. His wife, named Esperanza, literally "hope," lives on to tell the story to her son, so that he will appreciate the sacrifices made by both the revolutionaries and the landowners in forming the new state. In representing both the conservatives and revolutionaries as noble and just, the film seems to plead for justice for poor and rich alike, argue against personal revenge, and foster national unity for contemporary Mexico.

The third film, *El Peñón de las Animas*, (starring María Felix in her screen debut) offers yet another variation of a tragic love relationship. The daughter and son (played by Negrete) of two rival families fall in love, even though the daughter has agreed to marry the man her family had selected for her. Nonetheless, on her wedding day she defies her family and fiancé and runs away to her true love. Her grandfather runs after her and shoots her, while the fiancé
kills the boyfriend, and then takes his own life by jumping off a cliff with his dead bride. Here the message seems to be that disobedience leads to chaos and tragedy for all.

This third film illustrates more transparently than the others how charro movies promoted a more conservative view of society, as critics of the socialist Cárdenas administration had discovered. As the Mexican film historian, Mora, observed,

The charro is magnificently attired in an embroidered riding suit that bespeaks a hoary tradition of rural aristocracy. His environment is . . . a minutely ordered feudal society in which the hacendado presides with paternalistic yet firm authority over his socioeconomic inferiors—the hacendado's employees, tenants, and, of course, women. . . . (He) came to represent the traditional and Catholic values in defiance of the leftist, modernizing tendencies emanating from the cities (Mora 1982:47).

Conservative filmmakers sympathetic to Manuel Ávila Camacho used the charro as a vehicle to reject socialist pretensions typical of the Cárdenas administration and to "exalt the traditional patron-peon and male-female relationships" (Mora 1982:47). By the 1940s, when Ávila Camacho assumed presidency, the government supported and controlled the production of films, thus ensuring that the ideological content of Mexican movies paralleled the sentiments of the current administration. In essence, then, the film industry helped popularize the charro as the definitive Mexican but employed this symbol to popularize specific views of society as well. In the process, the charro acquired additional qualities
that ultimately distorted the noble and democratic image that the urban professional charros had so carefully cultivated.

What were the additional "masculine" traits that the charro acquired through such films? What characteristics did the charro embody in these Mexican films? A Mexican folk saying tells us that a proper man should be "fuerte, feo y formal" (strong, rugged, and upstanding)\(^{23}\), certainly qualities that a working cowboy might acquire. In these movies, however, the charro appears not only as a hardworking, noble man of honor, but also as a handsome, romantic singer represented by Jorge Negrete, Pedro Infante and, more recently, by Vicente Fernandez. For instance, in the movie *Ay Jalisco no te Rajes*, which established Negrete as the quintessential singing charro, filmmaker Alejandro Galindo describes Negrete as the Mexican ideal: "dark-complexioned, tall, proud, romantic, pistol-packing, and who sings his sorrows as readily as his joy" (Mora 1982:56). To highlight the charro's virile qualities, a short, fat, clownish side-kick invariably acted as the loyal male companion to the hero of the film. The leading female typically portrayed a beautiful but noble, self-sacrificing woman as in the film *Flor Silvestre*. Alternatively, she could play a feisty, high-spirited woman who ultimately succumbs to the charms of the dominant male.

In film, the charro sometimes exhibited aggressive and even abusive behavior, such as excessive drinking that led to barroom brawls and a general mistreatment of women. At the same time, however, the charro gained a sentimentality, expressing his innermost sentiments through music, specifically the *canción ranchera*. As a national hero, then, the charro became much more complex because, while the sentimental traits served to humanize the charro, they also offset his violent and abusive behavior. In other words, because the
charro possessed redeeming humanistic qualities, and because his ends justified the means, the charro was forgiven all his faults (especially those which occurred in a state of drunken stupor). In this way, the negative qualities became palatable, acceptable, and for some, perhaps, even valued.

But such portrayals did not go unchallenged. Jesus Barajas De León, a representative of the Federación Nacional de Charros, criticized such films as follows:

Motion picture charros, who in truth are not charros at all, but only a gross movie imitation of the bona fide charros, pay us an unwanted compliment when they pretend to portray us on the screen. In the so-called entertainment films, we see sturdy men in the guise of charros, who are not only quick at the draw but . . . (who) appear as drunken sots or in other discreditable roles, all of which are false portrayals that only serve to defame the noble character of the genuine charro. . . . It is in the matter of the screen charro's deportment, however, as called for by the script of the story where all the glaring misrepresentations of the authentic charro's moral character and tradition occur. That, of course, we cannot condone and we feel duty bound to repudiate what we term a vile caricature of a noble art (Barajas De León 1975:7).

This quote demonstrates the extent to which the urban "professional" charros considered themselves to have sole authority to define and represent Mexican culture through the "charro image." Notice also that the struggle to appropriate the symbol between the charro associations and the film producers completely
ignored the voice and position of the working vaquero whose working skills had served as the basis for the development of the sport and who continued to employ his charro skills in his everyday work.

In his critique, Barajas De León also questions the aggressive and violent attributes that the charro had acquired in these films, for indeed, these had become well-known negative stereotypes of the *mejicano*. On the one hand, the motion pictures promoted Mexican identity through the charro, but on the other hand, certain charro films also highlighted his negative traits, those which became popularly known as "machismo." In his essay on *Machismo, Mexico and the United States*, Paredes notes that the notion of "machismo" as a peculiar Mexican construct coincided with the appearance of these films in the 1940s (Paredes 1967).

But why did machismo appear around this particular time? Paredes offers insightful observations. The Mexican Revolution of 1910 was an effort to bring about social change and equality for all Mexicans. A heavy emphasis on local common customs replaced the earlier attention to European and especially French culture and standards. Consequently, after the Revolution, Mexico experienced a "growing feeling of nationalism accompanied by sentiments of distrust and inferiority toward outsiders" (Paredes 1967:36). Such sentiments heightened as a result of discriminatory practices experienced by Mexicans living in the United States. To make matters worse, the United States government forcibly repatriated many Mexicanos in the 1930s, blaming them for the depression (Barrera 1979). Once the conflict ended, such sentiments became gross and exaggerated as "this sense of manliness passed from folklore to the movies and popular literature" (Paredes 1967:37). In passing
from a lived experience to a fictionalized account, the cinema charro, like the charro of the novels, came to represent the onset of a conservative mood in Mexico which appealed to an earlier idealized, romanticized social structure where everyone knew their place, where certain privileged men ruled. Harsh and abusive behavior by men seemed acceptable and even necessary to control and lead the "ignorant" masses. By appealing to an idealized past, such films made critical comment on the social ills of their day and legitimized iron-fisted tyrannical rule.24

But these perceptions of the charro were not limited to film, which suggests yet another reason for the widespread association of "machismo" with Mexican culture in general, and with the charro in particular. In the late 1940s, when charro films reached their apex, the term "charrismo" was coined among union laborers to refer to corrupt union leaders allied with their employers (Cockcroft 1983:249). In this context, the charro specifically referred to "trade-union leader involved in corruption, violence and anti-democratic behavior."25 Underscoring the widespread association of the term "charro" with tyrannical, abusive leadership, this context reveals such qualities are grounded as much in everyday life politics as in cinematic representations. To this day, "corrupt union bosses who are imposed on the trade unions by the state" are labeled charros (Adler Hellman 1983:242).

Despite controversial political statements embedded in charro films, the glitter and glamour of the movie industry nonetheless served to further popularize the charro throughout Mexico and the United States via the growing Spanish language film distribution networks.
THE CHARRO TODAY

All representations of the charro merit consideration because they help locate specific traits and trends historically, and because all these images continue to circulate even today. In a typical charreada, all these charro images come together, for in the arena, or lienzo charro, the charro appears in various guises, that is, as mariachi, as singer, as dancer, and especially as a contestant in equestrian competitions. Since the late 1960s and early 1970s, charreadas have become increasingly popular in the United States due, in part, to the rapid growth of the Chicano/Mexicano community. This period also coincides with the rise of the Chicano Movement through which Chicanos sought to recover and promote their Mexican heritage through cultural activities identified as representative of "lo mexicano." Like the ballet folklorico, charreadas served to stimulate further interest in, or otherwise reinforce, certain Mexican traditions.26

Currently, charreadas consist of frequent (often weekly) competitions from May to October and they generally feature music, performing artists, and sometimes dances, as well as the traditional competition in the nine suertes. These regular competitions, termed charreadas amistosas or friendly competitions, prepare the charro teams to compete each year in regional, state, and national charreadas. However, any individual in Mexico or the United States who wishes to compete in one of these official charreadas (referred to as a congreso) must subscribe to the Federación for membership, and thus must submit to its codes and regulations. At each level, the judges enforce the rules and regulations with increasing precision. In order to participate in the more advanced competitions, charros must pass a strict dress code, a breath analyzer
test (that checks levels of alcoholic intake), and an equipment check. In this way, the Federación de Charros exerts tight control over its membership.

Among the Federación's most rigid and contested regulations are those concerning the participation of women in charrería. For instance, a woman may not compete in charro events or have any voting power within the association. Consistent with the patriarchal family model, her role in charrería is primarily an extension of her proscribed role as supportive wife or daughter. Hence, while the males perform and compete in events, women assume the role of "behind the scenes" organizers, hostesses and observers.

Women may only exhibit their riding skills in the charreadas through their role as escaramusas, or members of a female precision riding team. Riding side-saddle and wearing lacy full skirts, an escaramusa executes intricate designs in the arena with her team members, thus displaying her riding skills while projecting beauty in self and design. As an exhibit rather than a competitive event within charrería, the role of escaramusa tends to reinforce a view of women as objects of display, beauty, and adornment consistent with patriarchal notions promoted in the charreada itself.

While women increasingly question the limits of their participation within charrería, they typically encounter rhetorical comments about the importance of preserving tradition. In short, to question the tradition is not only "unfeminine" but un-Mexican as well. Such a view ignores the well-documented cases in which women in colonial Mexico actually employed their riding and roping skills on the ranch and on the range (Ruiz nd). Still, the Federación maintains strict control over this Mexican tradition promoting specific gender styles.
Not surprisingly, it is precisely in areas where the Federación exercises no authority that change has become most evident. The integration of women into the once all-male mariachi ensemble represents a recent change over which the Federación has no control. Like the male mariachis, the women wear a charro costume, though they sport an A-line charro skirt rather than the slacks. While a full study on female mariachis has yet to be done, their participation may be evidence of a new perspective which focuses on musical ability, rather than gender, as the criterion for becoming a mariachi musician. In any event, their participation helps break down gender barriers, for despite these and other innovations, for many people the mariachi continues to represent "traditional" Mexican culture. As Mexican ethnomusicologist Yolanda Moreno Rivas explains:

*Actualmente, el mariachi ha venido a convertirse en el símbolo de la música mexicana... La influencia del mariachi se ha extendido más allá de nuestras fronteras. Es posible encontrar mariachis (originales o en la versión local) en Guatemala, Colombia, Venezuela, Argentina, España e inclusive en Japón* (Moreno Rivas 1979:184). [Today, the mariachi has become the symbol of Mexican music... The influence of the mariachi has extended far beyond our borders. It is now possible to find mariachis (in original or local versions) in Guatemala, Columbia, Venezuela, Argentina, Spain and even in Japan. (author's translation)]

As competing images of the charro become more apparent in modern times, it is important to note that the influence of the Federación de Charros prevails in yet another domain. A review of the literature on charrería reveals
that members of the Federación assume large responsibility for documenting the origins and development of charrería. Their accounts consistently portray the charro as the true Mexican hero, always at the service of his country, fighting on horseback in every battle, every war, even when Mexicans fought against other Mexicans as in the Revolution of 1910 (Alvarez del Villar 1941; Ballesteros 1972; Valero Silva 1987; Islas Escárcega 1967). By inscribing charros into history in this manner, all conflict and opposition becomes oriented towards non-Mexicans, thereby promoting a less conflictive image of Mexican culture and society. In the process, issues of gender, class, and ethnicity remain obscured. Thus, the members of the Federación de Charros enhance the image of the charro as loyal defenders of Mexico and position themselves as the true representatives of lo mexicano. And, in so doing, ideals of patriotism (nation) and manhood (gender) become intimately fused together so that the charro continues to be a powerful symbol through which to foster a sense of Mexicanness even, perhaps especially, for those mejicanos living in the U.S.

CONCLUSION

Undeniably, the charro has served as a symbol behind which various interests have operated to meet their goals. The charro as a national symbol has been shaped and manipulated by various cultural industries: in popular historical accounts, film, sports, dance, and music as well as in contemporary charreadas.
The historical perspective allows us to understand how the charro emerged as an important national symbol expressing, among other things, ideals of manhood and Mexicanness. In general, the charro represented the Mexican male as a brave, hardworking man who stood up for his rights, defended his family and country. In this construction of Mexican society, women were required to defer to men. Subtle differences in charro characteristics and traits expanded the range of appeal and effectiveness of the symbol. However, a more controversial charro image emerged in the late 1930s through conservative, commercial nationalistic films. The movie charro exaggerated these "masculine" traits, transforming them into extreme forms of male domination over women, legitimizing the use of violence and excessive drinking—the very image of Mexican identity that many Mexicans wished to correct. But rather than dismissing the charro symbol, other agencies (most notably members of the charro associations) have worked to redefine the charros through their own enactments and their histories.

We cannot rule out any of the charro images as less meaningful despite their commercial or "artificial" roots, because once such representations enter social discourse, they become part of the symbol complex and thus one of various possible meanings. A close examination of the charro symbol demonstrates that within a complex society such as the Greater Mexican community, various agencies are involved in the representation of culture. As a figure of courage, power, and national identity, the charro continues to play an important role for mejicanos, especially those within the United States who have struggled for a position of power in the larger world. Yet, as this paper demonstrates, the issue of authority over the representation of Mexican culture
remains a hotly contested terrain involving issues of class, gender, and community that straddle political boundaries.
NOTES

Acknowledgements: This research was partially supported by faculty research funds granted by the University of California at Santa Cruz. Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the 1991 American Ethnological Society Annual Meeting held in Charleston, South Carolina and at the 1992-93 Chicano Latino Research Center Colloquium Series at the University of California at Santa Cruz. I wish to thank José Limón, Richard Griswold del Castillo, Shelly Errington, Carlos Cortez, Richard Flores, Vicki Ruiz, Patricia Zavella, David Sweet, Julianne Burton-Carvajal, and the two anonymous readers, for their comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

1 In Spain, the term charro referred to peasant farmers but in Mexico the term refers to Mexican horsemen skilled in riding and roping techniques who perform in charreadas, or competitive events in which these techniques are displayed. Charreada refers to the Mexican national sport of riding and roping.

2 The significance of the horseman as national symbol in Mexico shares important similarities with the United States cowboy and the gacho of Argentina. For details, see Paredes (1963).

3 For a detailed discussion of the concept of "lo mexicano," see Schmidt's The Roots of Lo Mexicano (College Station: Texas A & M Press, 1978). The term "mexicanidad" may be employed as the equivalent term, though "lo mexicano" is more widely used in the United States.

4 But see also Ramos' Profile of Man and Culture in Mexico (1934) and Paz's Laybrinth of Solitude (1950) for early commentaries on Mexican "types" and symbols. Roger Bartra's book, La Juana de la Melancolía (1987) provides a critique of the Mexican literature on this subject.

5 I have also been equally inspired and influenced by Beverly Stoeltje's work on gender and rodeo.


7 Exactly how these laws applied to women is unclear. Calderón de la Barca mentions that ladies horses were taught "paso" in which the horse carries weight with its hind feet for a smoother ride (1966:230). Vicki Ruiz notes some cases in which ranch women were accomplished horsewomen (1992:10).

8 Much of the vocabulary, costuming and equipment used in charreada originated in Spain and was modified over time to better suit the Mexican environment and to accommodate local preferences (Bishko 1952; Alvarez del Villar 1968).

9 I have not been able to establish when the term charreada became widely used in Mexico. Related terms for rodeo type events in Mexico include jaripeos, (bronce and bull riding competitions) fiestas charras (charro festivals), and herraderos (branding event).

10 For a discussion of this ideal in the Mexican context, see Ballesteros (1949) and Alvarez del Villar (1968). For information on similar ideals in the American Cowboy, see Stoeltje (1987).

11 Cockcroft describes this period as "an era in which local oligarchs and regional caudillos, many with their own armies, gained control over peasants, workers, and the unemployed. The control was institutionalized through a complex chain of command extending from caudillo to local cacique, priest, mayor, hacienda owner or mayordomo, factory or workshop owner or foreman, and block 'captain.' People were tied into the system through a dependence on personalized patronage, involving elaborate networks of payoffs and favors" (1983:63).

12 Under the Diaz regime, Adler Hellman describes the rurales as a brutal militia of mercenary soldiers (1983:5).
Costumbrista literature refers to the practice of utilizing local vernacular customs to create a regional flavor. Arthur Seymour (1925), Walter M. Langford (1971), and Américo Paredes (1972) provide insights on the relationship between costumbrismo and the development of nineteenth-century Mexican national identity.

In his book, *Nations and Nationalism*, Ernest Gellner makes the following observation regarding the explicit use of folkstyle in the service of nationalism, "If the nationalism prospers it eliminates the alien high culture but it does not then replace it by the old local low culture; it revives, or invents, a local high (literal, specialist-transmitted) culture of its own, though admittedly one which will have some links with the earlier local folk styles and dialects" (57:1983). For further discussion on the importance of revived or invented traditions and nationalism, see *The Invention of Tradition*, edited by Hobsbawm and Turner (1983).

Film critic Aurelio de los Reyes (1988:149) claims that this particular book became so popular that it inspired the creation of the charro movies during the second wave of nationalism experienced in the next century.

For a discussion of folklorico dance as a national symbol, see Nájera-Ramírez (1989).

Following Paredes (1976), I employ the term "Greater Mexico" to refer to all areas inhabited by people of Mexican descent both in the Republic of Mexico and the United States, recognizing that political borders do not necessarily coincide with cultural borders.

In 1884, Lendo de Tejada established the first *orquesta típica* featuring conservatory-trained musicians dressed in charro costumes playing popular dance tunes of the era (Geijerstam 1976:84).

Charro films constitute a complex subject which cannot be fully addressed here. I devote fuller consideration to this subject in another work-in-progress.

Mexican films were extremely popular among Mexicans residing in the United States in the 1930-1960s (Saragosa 1983).

The 1936 version starred Tito Guizar, but a second version of this film was produced in 1947 starring Jorge Negrete who had established himself as the quintessential charro in the 1941 film *Ay Jalisco no te rajes* (directed by Joselito Rodríguez).

I selected these films because they were directed and produced by different individuals around the same period. As such, they attest to the popularity of these cinematic ingredients as well as to the range of messages possible.

"Literally, the words translate as "strong, ugly and formal" but the translation I provide captures the notion of "feo" as a manly quality implying "ruggedness" as opposed to polished beauty (feminine quality).

In this respect, the parallels between the novel *Astúcia*, mentioned above, and the film, *Alla en el Rancho Grande*, become more evident. As Aurelio del los Reyes explains, both productions (literary and cinematic) portrayed the old social order (of the hacienda) as natural and necessary during times of social turmoil and change (1988:150).

In 1948, Jesús Díaz León, alias "El Charro," was imposed by the state to replace militant leadership of the National Railway Workers' Union. "His alias swiftly spread throughout the labor movement, spawning the term 'charrismo,' common parlance for violence, corruption, anticommunism, and antidemocracy on the part of official union leadership" (Cockcroft 1984:155). It should be noted that "charrismo" as described here is not part of the charro culture I have been discussing.

See Nájera-Ramírez (1987) for further discussion on the concept of lo mexicano and the Chicano movement.

Interestingly, Rincón de Gallardo notes one occasion in which he taught a woman to execute various charro skills and subsequently presented her publicly. For her performance, she wore a charro costume (pants, not a skirt) and did not ride sidesaddle. As a result of her fine
accomplishments, the Asociación Nacional de Charros named her an honorary member of their organization (1939:276-277).

28 The escaramusas may be fruitfully compared to the barrel racing event for women. For details on issues of gender in barrel racing events, see Stoeltje (1988).
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