HACIENDO PATRIA: CHARRERIA AND THE FORMATION OF A TRANSNATIONAL MEXICAN COMMUNITY

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La charrería es la reserva de la nación mexicana. Nosotros somos la reserva. Es por eso que con mucho orgullo hacemos el deporte pero también estamos haciendo patria. Estamos luchando por conservar todas las tradiciones.

[The charrería is the reserve of our Mexican nation. We are the reserve. This is why we engage in this sport with so much pride, but we are also fostering nationalism. We are struggling to preserve our traditions.]
Elsa Jimenez

Introduction

Even before the North American Free Trade Agreement emerged as a "hot" topic, the implications of increased United States-Mexico integration have stirred concern over markers of differential national and cultural identity. Since its establishment over 150 years ago, the border has served as a political boundary meant to separate the United States of America from the Republic of Mexico. And yet, as real as the border is—for violating the rules instituted to control movement across this space has drastic, even deadly, consequences—it has not succeeded in delimiting national culture on either side. Today more than ever, people, goods, knowledge, drugs, fashions, and culture (among other things) continue to travel back and forth across the United States-Mexico border thereby muddying the crisp line that is meant to divide two cultures, two societies, two nation-states.

As a cultural practice that transcends national boundaries, *charrería* provides one example of the way in which Mexican culture has developed and extended across the border. Charrería encompasses an ensemble of cultural practices, values, and performances rooted in the equestrian tradition of the *charreada* or Mexican rodeo event. For centuries the charreada—with its pageantry, costumes, competitions, and gallantry—has stimulated the production of artistic expressive forms such as poetry, proverbs, novels, films, paintings, folk dances, and music. Considered a unique and vital aspect of Mexican culture, the charreada has become the

official national sport of Mexico and is currently practiced and preserved by *mejicanos* living on both sides of the border. The popularity of the charreada in areas with a large Mexican population suggests its importance as a site through which many critical issues regarding Mexican history, society, and culture and its relationship to contemporary Chicano culture may be addressed.

In this paper, I explore the charreada as one expressive means through which mejicanos create, recreate, transform, and enact their cultural identity. From this perspective, the charreada may be considered a discursive device deployed to symbolically link mejicanos on both sides of the border as "one people." In the words of the charros,[1] "*haciendo patria*" [engendering nationalism] and "*haciendo cultura*" [making cultural identity] is precisely what they accomplish through their participation in the charreada. Operating within and across two nation-states, however, the charreada must be understood in the context of those transnational processes that integrate and connect people in new space-time combinations that challenge and yet don't fully erase pre-existing conceptions of national and cultural identities.[2]

This paper is based on five seasons of ethnographic field work centered in Sunol, California but extending to other parts of the United States and Mexico. Specifically, I examine how participants construct a particular conception of Mexican cultural identity through the charreada by invoking a set of images, landscapes, historical events, symbols, and rituals which represent the shared experiences which give meaning to Mexico as a national culture.[3] I also explore some of the problems or tensions brought about as a result of the political borders and systems that cross-cut this community.

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[1] Charros is the term given to practitioners of the charreada.
[2] I follow Kearney 's distinction between transnationalism and globalization (1995:548).
[3] For a discussion of the charro and Mexican nationalism, see Nájera-Ramírez (1994).

The Formal Evolution of the Charreada

Rooted in the cattle culture of colonial Mexico, [4] the charreada evolved from the skills and techniques required in cattle ranching (Myers 1969:29; Bishko 1952).[5] Such skills included breaking wild horses, feeding and breeding cattle, controlling bulls and broncs, and protecting the cattle 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).[6] Like the harvest season for agriculture, the rodeo served as an occasion for celebration. Featuring food, entertainment, visitors, and an exhibition of riding and roping feats, such events anticipated the contemporary charreada.

By 1933, with the founding of the Federación Nacional de Charros [National Federation of Charros], the charreada became institutionalized as the national sport of Mexico with a strict set of official rules and regulations thereby "standardizing and formalizing the public performances of what originated as vaquero customs" (Stoeltje 1989:246). Modeled after the patriarchal structure of the hacienda, the Federación Nacional de Charros reinforces a rigid hierarchy based primarily on class and gender. Created and controlled by urban middle-class professionals in Mexico, the Federación Nacional de Charros remains the largest and most influential charro organization claiming membership on both sides of the border. Nonetheless, the charreada also exists outside the control of this transnational charro organization. In the United States, the Federación de Charros, United States Inc. was established in 1991 to allow United States charros more flexibility in adapting the Mexican official rules to meet local conditions. In addition, informal charreadas consisting primarily of bull and bronc riding (also called *jaripeos*) have long been a widespread practice among the popular classes and are often combined with other festivities.

[4] The colonial origins of charrería contribute to the notion that this Mexican cultural practice existed in the American Southwest long before it became part of the U.S.

[5] Much of the vocabulary, costuming, and equipment used in charrería 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).

[6] Because branding cattle was a chief goal of the rodeos, these gatherings were also called "herraderos."

In the United States charreadas typically occur on Sundays between the months of May to October, providing entertainment for the entire family. The formal charreada usually begins around noon opening with a *desfile,* or parade, featuring all participants, a salute to the United States and Mexican flags, and the playing of the *Marcha de Zacatecas* which charros consider as Mexico's second national anthem. Typically, a *banda* (a brass and percussive ensemble) or *mariachi* (a regional folk ensemble) provide musical entertainment throughout the formal event.

The competition consists of nine *suertes* or riding and roping competitive events for men. The nine suertes include: (1) *cala* or a reining competition displaying horse control; (2) *piales en el lienzo* or roping a running horse by the hind legs while on horseback; (3) *colas* or bull tailing; (4) *jinete de novillos* or bull riding; (5) *jinete de lleguas* or wild mare riding; (6) *terna* or team bull roping; (7) *manganas a pie* or roping the front legs of a horse while on foot; (8) *manganas a caballo* or roping the front legs of a horse from horseback; and (9) *paso de muerte* or jumping from a bareback running horse to a running wild mare. Sometimes referred to as the tenth suerte, an *escaramusa*, or female precision riding team, exhibits horse riding skills through the execution of choreographed patterns in the arena.

Outside the arena, the smells of Mexican delicacies such as *carnitas, barbacoa, elotes* and *menudo,* as well as the ubiquitous popcorn, soft drinks, and beer, attract people to the concession stands. Amid the constant flow of people circulating between the arena and the food stands, strolling musicians offer their services for impromptu serenades and dances. As soon as the competitive events come to an end, performing artists provide a one or two hour show, often followed by an open-air dance concert. By 8 or 9 P.M. the day's activities come to an end.

Reasons for participating in the charreada

My interviews with various participants concerning their reasons for becoming involved in the charrería revealed many motivations including a) fostering family unity, b) fostering pride in Mexican culture and tradition, c) creating a cultural space in which to engage in Mexican traditions, and d) providing a positive image of the Mexican people. For instance,

Ruben Uriarte, a first generation Chicano male, became heavily involved in organizing and promoting charrería in Northern California during his college years in the early 1970s. He states:

> We all got involved in it for various reasons. It was a good way to get together with friends, doing something different, involving the family. Our charreadas would start anywhere from around 1 P.M. and finish up by 4 or 5 P.M.. Then we would have all the entertainment. Sometimes there would be a break where we have Lucha Villa or some great mariachi group would come and perform. And there would be a dance afterwards that would last up 'til eight o'clock and there would be refreshments and food that would be sold during that time. I mean you go there and you feel like you're in México. You're like in another era, another land. I mean that's the beauty of it.[7]

In this short statement, Uriarte notes the importance of the charreada as a social event in which the family unit figures prominently. He also mentions the use of Mexican popular singers and movie stars as a special attraction as well as the importance of food and drink—elements which together add up to create the feeling that "you're in Mexico." For him and for many others, Mexican history and identity are embodied in a set of practices: music, food, entertainment, sports, costume, and behavior that constitute the charreada. The performing artists and dance bands that entertain the crowds after the charreada competition attract even those who might not be interested in the equestrian competitions going on inside the *lienzo* (arena). Thus the charreada encompasses an array of cultural entertainment and displays that give people an ample sense of their Mexican identity. Elaborating on the special significance of charreada to Mexicans living in the United States, Henry Franco, the founder and co-owner of the Lienzo Charro in Sunol, California, provides the following commentary:

> In the United States, in my opinion, it's (the charreada) far more important because you are surrounded with all kinds of other sports and the Mexicans have to find themselves in that niche, in that certain area where he belongs. The area where he can feel proud. An area where he's going to enjoy the food, the music, the folklore, the atmosphere, the language, and the feel of saying or eating or doing anything he feels like because everybody's enjoying the same thing. So it's a sense of belonging without apologizing to anyone or having to explain why you eat this or why you listen to that or trying to interpret anything because you're looking at a bunch of happy faces doing exactly the same thing. And we'd like to continue that. To make them feel that even though they're born in the

[7] Ruben Uriarte, in an interview with the author in Union City, California on April 8, 1989.

United States, they have a background to be damn proud of and become a good citizen, but don't forget your roots. That's part of the training.[8]

Here we have a more detailed explanation about how the charreada functions to create a cultural landscape in which individuals can fully engage in and indeed nurture and preserve their Mexicanness. The underlying theme, however, is that being Mexican outside this special environment presents various challenges. Foremost among these is the notion of always having to "apologize, explain, or interpret" your "otherness" to and within the mainstream dominant society. Elaborating on the politics of identity among subordinated people, Stuart Hall offers this insight:

> The ways in which black people, black experiences, were positioned and subjected in the dominant regimes of representation were the effects of a critical exercise of cultural power and normalization. Not only, in Said's 'Orientalist' sense, were we constructed as different and other within the categories of knowledge of the West by those regimes. They had the power to make us see and experience *ourselves* as "Other" (Hall 1990:225).

Elsa Lopez de Jimenez, a free-lance writer for several charro magazines in Baja California, makes a similar observation in more vernacular terms:

> *En Estados Unidos se vive más intensamente la charrería por la nostalgia de la tierra. Y yo me quito el sombrero con los charros de Estados Unidos porque están en un país diferente, están luchando con la adversidad y sin embargo están saliendo adelante y su lucha no va ser en vano.*[9]
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> [In the United States charrería is lived more intensely due to the nostalgia for the homeland. And I tip my hats off to the charros of the United States because they are in a different country, struggling against adversity but they nonetheless are coming out ahead and their struggle will not be in vain.]

The adversity Mexicans encounter in the United States in their effort to preserve their cultural identity has a long history. Educational institutions in the United States offer little opportunity to learn about Mexican heritage and language. And although some progress has been made over the past thirty years with the establishment of the United Farm workers Union, Chicano Studies departments, and bilingual education programs, the future looks grim. Indeed the "English only" campaign, the debates over multi-culturalism, current anti-immigration

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[8] Henry Franco, in an interview with the author in Livermore, Calfornia on January 27, 1990.
[9] Elsa Lopez Jimenez, in an interview with the author in Sunol, California on September, 1992.

sentiment, and the current attacks on affirmative action provide recent examples of efforts to undermine the advances made in the 1960s and 70s. These are only a few of the adverse conditions which continually threaten Mexican cultural identity in the United States.

The family unit has always figured prominently in Mexican culture, but in a hostile environment such as I have sketched above, it becomes especially important as a central site through which culture may be preserved and reproduced. From this perspective, the connections between the charreada and the family unit assume new significance. Omar Castro, an elder man from New Mexico whose family has been involved in charrería for many generations on both sides of the border, shares this view:

> *Lo que quisiera que comprendiera mucha gente que vive fuera del deporte es que dentro de ésto nos une un amor a la familia muy grande . . .Ya ve que la vida moderna come hace que la familia se desintegre, que las hijas van por acá, y eso nosotros no queremos. Queremos la unidad completamente.*[10]
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> [What I wish everyone that lives outside of our sport could understand is that within this (the charrería) we are united by a deep love for our family. You see how modern life fragments the family, that the daughters go their own way, and we don't want that. We want complete unity.]

For Omar, charrería helps to counteract the fragmentation of family resulting from modernity. Here I suggest that the concept of family serves also as a metaphor for nation. The metaphor of family for nation is particularly apt in a transnational context because national identity is not tied to space or territory.[11] Listen, for example, to Armando Ledesma, a charro judge from the state of Baja California:

> [The charreada] is a great and important means of showing our children that even though in this particular case we are in a foreign country, our roots have to prevail. And through this sport our children that live in the United States learn about out tradition, learn about our ways, learn our real values.[12]

Ledesma's allusion to the charros as members of one big family is a sentiment expressed by many charros. Henry Franco shares this anecdote to demonstrate how participating in the

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[10] Omar Castro, in an interview with the author in Las Cruces, New Mexico on October 1991.
[11] The word "nation" refers both to the modern nation state and to something more ancient and nebulous—the natio—a local community domicile, family, condition of belonging (Timothy Brennan 1990:45).
[12] Armando Ledesma, in an interview with the author in Las Cruces, New Mexico on October 1991.

charreada provides a common sense of unity even for people who haven't met one another personally:

> [But] it is a feeling of brotherhood. It is a wonderful feeling. I was robbed one time going to Mexico. I drove from California, all the way to Mazatlán without stopping. I was very tired when I arrived so I got out of the motor home, I took a walk on the beach, and when I got back all my money and everything was stolen. And I didn't have quite enough gas to go to Guadalajara, which was where I was going. When I went to go report the robbery to the police station, they gave me no hope. I could tell right away that there was no way I was going to recover anything. As I stood in the door walking out, a white pick-up arrived across the street and a charro got out of the pick-up. I felt for hope at that moment, I walked over there and I identified myself with my *credenciál* (credential) and within fifteen minutes, I had enough money to buy more gas than I could possibly need to get to Guadalajara and to eat, for which I never had to pay back. I told the man to give me his phone and address so that I could stop on the way back. He says, "If you do stop, I'd appreciate it so I can invite you to take *carne asada*, not to pay me back." And I never made it back. But I think that what I'm trying to say is that if you can go to almost any city, if you're a member of the charrería, someone helps you. All you have to do is ask who are the charros in the city, where's the lienzo? And most generally on a Sunday there's going to be something going on and someone will help you. For me, it's been one of the biggest pleasures of my life.[13]

United States -Mexico Relations:

The transnational practice of charrería, however, also contains some tensions between those charros residing in the United States and those living in Mexico. For instance, Mexicans in the United States are often perceived as having special privileges because of their status as Americans as illustrated in the following quote by Mr. Castro of New Mexico:

> *Pasó una anéctoda tan muy chistosa, graciosa, en la Ciudad de Mexico cuando ganamos ese trofeo. Después de que competimos otro día, ibamos del hotel al lienzo a ver una competencia pero ya no ibamos vestidos de charros. Y luego comentamos al taxista, "¿ya supo quien gano el trofeo Guadalupano?" Y dijo "sí esos méndigos gringos nos ganan con todo, pero que chiste hacen ellos, allá el gobierno de los Estados Unidos les da todo, les tienen todo." Y nosotros nos ibamos dentro de nosotros riendonos no?, sabiendo, que éste es un deporte honestamente mexicano, y que todavía no se desarrolla al grado que verdaderamente el gobierno nos apoyara y nos diera una ayuda. Al contrario, aveces luchamos contra de él para que nos deje hacer nuestra cultura aquí.* [14]
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> [A funny anecdote occurred in Mexico City when we won that trophy. The day after we competed we were traveling from the hotel to the arena but we weren't dressed in our charro costumes. And we asked the taxi driver, "Did you hear

[13] Henry Franco, in an interview with the author in Livermore, California on January 27, 1990.
[14] Omar Castro, in an inteveiw with the author in Las Cruces, New Mexico on October 1991.

> who won the Guadalupano trophy?" And he said, "Yes it was those stupid gringos (Americans), but that doesn't really count because the United States government gives them everything." And inside, we were laughing, you know, because he didn't realize that this is truly a Mexican sport. We wish the United States government did support us, but on the contrary, sometimes we have to struggle against it in order to foster our culture here.]

Underlying this quote lies a popular notion that Mexicans in the United States are somehow not "real" Mexicans. Note, for example, the taxi driver's use of the term "gringos" to describe the charros residing in United States. Anita Franco, co-owner of the lienzo charro in Sunol and mother of a charro family, explains how she deals with these attitudes:

> . . . it inspires you when you go to Mexico, even though sometimes they kinda look down on you because you don't speak the language that well. But I've always thought to myself it doesn't make any difference how you speak it the thing is that you're trying. *Tienes ganas de enseñarte.* [You have the desire to learn].[15]

As the following quote illustrates, charro officials from Mexico who consider themselves "guardians" of Mexican culture are only too willing to teach the charros in the United States how to become "proper" Mexicans:

> *Nosotros siempre tuvimos una magnífica amistad con todos los charros de Los Angeles. Invitados por ellos nosotros venimos con mucho gusto para empezar a competir, y así enseñar a los charros de aquí y al público que era lo más importante, porque tenemos bastante público. Pero el público no estaba educado. Para ellos este era un deporte pues de campo y pensaron ellos que se podría pues no llevar con mucho orden. Pero venimos nosotros con todo orden, practicando ya las nueve suertes o diez suertes que tiene el deporte la charrería. Vistiendo con propiedad, y comportandonos sobre todo con toda propiedad en un país como son los Estados Unidos, nosotros como mexicanos era nuestra obligación poner el ejemplo de lo que era realmente nuestro deporte no subirse a un caballo y correr y gritar y, o tomar una cerveza arriba de un caballo, eso no es charrería.*
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> [We always had a magnificent friendship with all the charros from Los Angeles. At their request we came to initiate the competitions and to teach the United States charros and the public at large because we attracted large audiences. But the public wasn't educated. They thought that the sport was a rural activity that could be run with little order. But we came with much discipline, practicing the nine or ten events of the charrería. Properly dressed and behaving properly as well in the United States, we as Mexicans had the obligation of setting the example of what our sport is really like. Not to get on a horse, galloping, screaming, or drinking a beer on horse back--that is not charrería.]

[15] Anita Franco, in an interview with the author in Sunol, California on September 1992.

Significantly, most of the federated charros in Mexico, and certainly all of the charro officials, tend to be well-educated professionals whereas in the United States, the charros are typically laborers or small entrepreneurs. Controlled by urban elite professionals, the charro federation emulates an extended patriarchal family where charro officials position themselves as the patriarchs of the charro family who have both the obligation and the authority to define the proper way of being Mexican.

This raises the issue of gender. As in all patriarchal structures, women's role in charrería is largely determined by their attachment to men. Luciana Ozuna, a young women who comes from a local charro family in San Jose, California, explains:

> I always come to the charreadas with my mother or my father, or just some times my father and it's very political. The fact that he knows a lot of the *presidentes*, a lot of the charros, that has helped me a lot. And they recognize me as his daughter. I guarantee you half of them don't even know my name. But if they see me with my father, they'll know who I am. So if I were to come here by myself, with my boyfriend and they knew he was my boyfriend, not a cousin, not a brother, they would probably not acknowledge me because I'm a young single women and I'm here with a man. It's very sad to say but that is the truth. So how they see you has to do with who you are with.[16]

While much more could be said about the issue of gender,[17] my point here is to emphasize that although mejicanos seek to present a unified vision of Mexican national culture through charrería, clearly class, language, geographical location, and gender are internal divisions operating within the charreada. Despite these internal differences, however, charros on both sides of the border recognize they share the same goal: to preserve a dignified image of Mexican culture.

But this concern with presenting a "positive" image is only one indication of the extent to which Mejicanos on both sides of the border perceive that negative images of mejicanos prevail in the United States, particularly in the media (especially in films, television, and newspapers), a

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[16] Luciano Ozuna, in an interview with the author in Las Cruces, New Mexico on October 1991.
[17] I have an article in progress on this topic.

perception that is well supported in fact.[18] For instance, Diana Ozuna, captain of the escaramusa team "Las Adelitas" of San Jose, California, complains:

> . . . you hear so many bad things about the Latinos--about how they are drug dealers and they are dropouts, and they get pregnant. There is so much good in our heritage but so many people are not aware of it.[19]

To redress the widespread negative stereotypes of Mexicanos, Diana provides free workshops on charreria at local public schools and libraries.

Given the importance of the charreada as a means of promoting a positive image of Mexican culture and identity, it is particularly ironic that the practice of charrería in the United States has itself become the focus of recent negative media attention that portrays charros as cruel, violent "rodeo renegades" who abuse animals in the name of tradition.[20] The recent attention stems from state and county initiatives in California and elsewhere proposed by various animal rights groups who claim that this sport—specifically the two *suertes* or events known as *colas* (bull tailing) and *manganas* (horse tripping)—is an act of cruelty to animals. As a result, horse-tripping has recently been banned in the states of California, Texas, New Mexico, and Maine—a fact which in effect blocks the United States charros from participating in the international charro league.

Similarly, the use and control of public and even private spaces has become another point of contention. In some communities in the United States, residents who live near the lienzos charros have mobilized to ban the charreadas altogether complaining of the excessive noise level. Curiously, these attacks on charrería simultaneously fragment and unite charros in the United States and Mexico. On the one hand, the attacks prohibit United States charros from following the official regulations of charrería as dictated by Mexico. At the same time, however, the people who practice charrería in its various forms are coming together (thereby

[18] See for instance, Limón (1973), Woll (1977), Pettit (1980) and Monsivais (1993). For exemplary studies on negative representations of Mexicans in the social science literature, see Romano (1968), Paredes (1977), and Rosaldo (1989).
[19] Diana Ozuna, in an interview with the author in San José, California on September 5, 1990.
[20] For more details on this topic, see Nájera-Ramírez (1996).

transcending social and class differences as well as national borders) to defend their right to practice charrería.

Conclusion

For Mexicans who have increasingly been displaced from their rural communities in Mexico to a variety of environments throughout Greater Mexico, the charreada has proved instrumental in promoting a sense of identity by recreating a cultural landscape in which individuals can fully engage in, nurture, and preserve their Mexicanness. Through charrería, Mexicans on both sides of the border have formed a transnational community dedicated to the promotion of Mexican culture and identity. This paper has sought to explore what charrería means to its practitioners living in the United States as well as to explore some of the internal divisions within this community.

By way of closing, let me share two final quotes. Luciana Ozuna, observes:

> I am very fortunate that I can understand both languages and both cultures. I know people that were born in México who come here and don't consider themselves Mexicanos. I mean you figure that out. Some people have a culture shock where they are born here and they don't know Spanish so they go to México and they get a shock, because the people treat them bad *y este que el otro.* And there are people that come here, like my grandparents who have been here over 45 years and they don't speak English. So I am very lucky to experience them both. I have lived here all my life, but I know what it is to live over there. I can get around without being scared, and I do consider myself a Mexicana. I'm born here, but if I had to identify myself that's what it would be, a Mexicana Charra. That's what I am.[21]

Anita Franco:

> Mexico is part of you. And no matter what it's your heritage. I mean, how can I explain it. It's something that you have inside of you that makes you proud that you are a Mexican. . . And I was born in this country and I've learned a lot by the charrería.[22]

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[21] Luciana Ozuna, in an interview with the author in Sunol, California on September 1992.
[22] Anita Franco, in an interview with the author in Sunol, California on September 1992.

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