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Language and Cultural Stereotypes
in Cheech Marin's film *Born in East L.A.*

The United States of America is a nation founded by immigrants from all over the world. Although the first Europeans who landed in the western hemisphere were from Spain, settlers from England were soon to follow, and at least in the northern areas of North America, the language and culture of England became dominant. The influence of English language and culture has had, and continues to have, a lasting effect on North American language and culture—but it is not the only influence that had an effect.

First of all, the Native Americans, or American Indians, were already here. Although subjugated by the European immigrants who attempted to suppress their language and culture, this process was not entirely successful, and there is a perceptible remnant of Native American language and culture extant in North America. Another group that contributed significantly to American language and culture is the African Americans, who were involuntarily immigrated for the purpose of slavery.

Many other immigrants from many other countries have contributed to the colonization of the U.S.A., and thus the cultural diversity that exists to this day. For example, Chicago has a thriving Polish community and San Francisco has a flourishing Chinese community. The largest community of people of non-English heritage who live in the U.S.A. are the Latin American or Hispanic population—predominantly of Mexican heritage, but also people whose heritage is that of other Spanish-speaking countries.

It is an undeniable fact that Native Americans, African Americans, Hispanic Americans, and many other groups, have historically been treated shamefully by the dominant majority who are of Western European heritage. While it is true that many of these oppressed groups had darker skin, people who immigrated from Ireland and Eastern Europe were just as “white” as the dominant group—and were also treated quite poorly—as were women and people from lower socio-economic groups. While there has been much progress in the treatment of these groups in modern times, there are still inequalities extant in our society—and perhaps there always will be.

It is also an undeniable fact that one of the ways that people from these oppressed groups have been abused is through fine arts and entertainment media. Literature, art, music, cartoons, film and other media have been used to degrade and humiliate people from these groups for many years, and there is no excuse for the emotional pain caused by such treatment. Again, much progress has been made toward the restoration of human dignity for all Americans. Those who were once emotionally abused by multimedia now have a political voice to demand that the malicious degradation of minority groups by these media be prohibited. Because of the history of ridicule under the guise of humor, members of these groups have become understandably sensitive to the potential for such abuse, and because they now have the ability to protest—they often do.

However, not all humor found in entertainment media that is based on ethnic or minority groups is necessarily intended to be malicious or degrading. Humor can be found in every corner of the human experience. Some of the things people say and do, who are members of subcultures, are honestly funny, and laughing at them is not intended to humiliate them. It is not degrading—just funny.

One of the ways that humor is found in the actions of people of specific groups is the engagement of *stereotypes*. Dictionary.com offers several definitions. The primary definition of *stereotype* is that of “a process, now often replaced by more advanced methods, for making metal printing plates by taking a mold of composed type or the like in papier-mâché or other material and then taking from this mold a cast in type metal.” One of the secondary definitions is that of “a simplified and standardized conception or image invested with special meaning and held in common by members of a group.” On the surface, these definitions may seem dissimilar—but they are not. Just as a printing press imprints multiple identical copies on paper, a social stereotype metaphorically imprints a mental image of a person who, because of his or her membership in a group, is devoid of individuality—and is only perceived by the attributes of the group.

But are stereotypes always a bad thing? If, for example, you had a mental image of a *cowboy* as being “a man who wears a cowboy hat and boots, drives a pickup truck, enjoys hunting and fishing, and listens to Country-Western music,” that image would accurately describe most men who are perceived by themselves or others as cowboys. But is that perception insulting or demeaning—even if it does not describe *all* cowboys? If, in addition to these attributes, you describe a cowboy as “a man who chews tobacco and spits it out wherever he pleases, gets drunk every night, beats his common-law wife, and never takes a bath”—and these attributes are presented as universal among all cowboys, then that perception would indeed be demeaning and insulting—it would be a *negative stereotype*.

In 1984, Bruce Springsteen’s “Born in the U.S.A.,” a song about the trials of a Vietnam war veteran, was released and steadily climbed the charts, peaking at number 9 in Billboard’s Hot 100 (“U.S.A.” *Wikipedia*). A year later, in 1985, the comedy duo Cheech and Chong (Cheech Marin and Tommy Chong) released a parody of Springsteen’s song entitled “Born in

East L.A.” (“East L.A.” *Wikipedia*). The parody song tells the story of a native-born American citizen of Mexican descent who goes to a neighborhood convenience store to buy a pack of cigarettes and is detained by immigration officials who take him into custody and deport him. After finding himself in the Mexican border town of Tijuana, unable to speak Spanish, he eventually makes it back home to East L.A.

Cheech and Chong’s parody borrows liberally from Springsteen’s original lyrics. For example, Springsteen’s song has the line “Sent me off to a foreign land” (“U.S.A.” *Springsteen*), and the parody has the line “Next thing I know, I’m in a foreign land” (“East L.A.” *Metrolyrics*), which is sung at the same place in the melody. In the Springsteen song, “foreign land” refers to Viet Nam, whereas in the parody it refers to Mexico, which is just as much of a foreign land to a Mexican American from suburban Los Angeles who does not even speak Spanish. One of Springsteen’s earlier songs, “Born to Run,” expresses sentiments of a young man’s quest for personal freedom as experienced by the biker subculture. In “Born in the U.S.A.,” we find the words “I’m ten years burning down the road / Nowhere to run ain’t got nowhere to go,” which I interpret as Springsteen’s disillusionment of his earlier dream. Likewise, Cheech and Chong’s parody has the line “Now I know what it’s like to be born to run” which is apparently another allusion to Springsteen. There is a subtle difference between Springsteen’s concept of “born to run” and that of Cheech and Chong. Springsteen’s biker/war veteran is apparently running *away from* something—bad memories of personal pain. Cheech and Chong’s inappropriately deported American citizen, however, is running *back to* something—his home—The United States of America.

Building upon the success of the parody song, Cheech Marin decided to use the song as the source material for his first solo film (“East L.A.” *Wikipedia*). The film version of *Born in East L.A.* was released in 1987—two years after the song. Marin, who wrote and directed the

film, plays the lead character, Rudy Robles (Guadalupe Rudolfo Robles), an American citizen who is mistakenly deported to Mexico. Cheech (Richard Anthony Marin) was born in California, but unlike his character, he was born in Pacoima, in the San Fernando Valley, to wealthy parents. Marin is a graduate of California State University Northridge and, unlike his character, is fully fluent in both English and Spanish (“Cheech”; “Pacoima” *Wikipedia*).

The film opens with Rudy, in a room with pale green walls covered with crucifixes and other Catholic symbols, having breakfast with his family, which consists of his mother, his sister, who is presumably a single mom, and her two children. No mention is made of Rudy’s father. The only language being spoken is English, with the single exception of Rudy’s mom addressing him as *mijo*. The radio is tuned to KRLA; the disc jockey is speaking English while introducing the song, which is Kyu Sakamoto’s “Sukiyaki”—sung in Japanese—the first of many subtle ironies regarding language.

Rudy’s mom calls his attention to a recently-purchased picture of Jesus on the cross—complete with blood flowing from the crown of thorns and eyes that open and close. This choice of artwork, which could be found next to portraits of Elvis rendered on black velvet in border town mercados, or your local flea market, could be considered by many, including myself, as “cheesy.” Not only is the Jesus picture a stereotype of Mexican culture, on either side of the border, it is also a stereotype of the Catholic subculture. The introduction of the Jesus picture is a foreshadowing of an important subplot later in the film. Likewise, a camera shot that shows us that Rudy has left his wallet on the mantle is important later in the film.

Rudy leaves the house and gets in his car—a hot pink Volkswagen Bug which has been custom-altered to be a convertible with a roll cage. Rudy then slides down in the seat until his head is barely visible and drives away. He catches sight of a tall, beautiful, redheaded woman wearing a short, tight, green skirt walking down the sidewalk, and follows her in his car—

muttering under his breath “hello... eye candy... hey you give out fries with those shakes... mama... looks like two puppies fighting under a blanket...” The girl walks past a black man dressed like a pimp standing beside a white stretch limo, and the lenses on his sunglasses crack. The girl then walks past a car that at first appears to be unoccupied until four Hispanic men slide up in unison just far enough to barely reveal their sunglasses and bandanas. The car, a late-1960s blue classic Chevrolet convertible with air shocks, bounces up and down until the front tires leave the ground by at least three feet. When the girl finally speaks, she does so with a distinctly French accent.

After work, Rudy goes to a toy factory, which is owned by an apparently Jewish man with a New York accent, to meet his cousin Javier. The factory is raided by immigration officers, and Rudy, who has left his wallet at home and is unable to prove that he is an American citizen, is forced on the bus—which then takes him and the others to the border, where they are forced to walk through the gate into Mexico.

At this point in the timeline of the film, we are shown Rudy’s life as a Mexican American from East L.A. I will not summarize the rest of the film, but suffice it to say that Rudy meets interesting people in Tijuana, including a woman with whom he falls in love, has a series of adventures, and eventually makes it back home to East L. A.

There are many stereotypes presented—particularly of Mexican Americans. But are these stereotypes insulting and degrading—or simply funny? Things that seem ordinary to people within a subculture often seem unusual or even amusing to outsiders. The way the Robles family home is depicted in *Born in East L.A.* is actually quite typical of many Mexican American homes. One example is the pale green walls. If you were to drive down the streets of the Montopolis neighborhood of Austin, Texas, you would see that many of the houses are painted pink, turquoise, lavender, chartreuse, and other pastel colors. While this may seem

strange to outsiders, within the local community, it is a cultural norm. When I see these brightly-colored houses, I find it amusing, and it makes me smile. That does not mean that I hate Mexicans, that I am a racist, or that I wish to humiliate or cause emotional harm to anyone—it simply means that, to me, the houses look funny.

The same may be said of Rudy's hot pink VW bug or the classic Chevy with the bouncing air shocks. Such cars really exist; I saw many such vehicles while growing up in Houston. When I was a teenager, the cool thing to do on a Saturday night was to cruise down Westheimer Rd. where locals showed off their cars. To this day, the sight of a bouncing car with air shocks or a pickup truck with giant tires makes me laugh.

The most important stereotypes in *Born in East L. A.* are those of the people. Rudy, the protagonist, is an honest, hard-working middle class American. Apparently, he paid for his custom VW Bug with the money he earned as a mechanic. Although he now lives with his mother in an extended family, he was previously married and divorced, and served in the U.S. Army. He is proud of his Mexican heritage, but he is, first and foremost, an American. He is comfortable with his middle-class status for the most part. When asked about of his army experience, he answered: "...in the army... being all that I could be... 'cept all they would let me be was a mechanic..." I find it significant that Rudy did not blame his vocational limitations on his ethnicity, or insinuate in any way that the U.S. Army discriminated against him because he was a Mexican. We learn that because he lived in Germany for six years while in the army, Rudy is somewhat fluent in German—although he cannot speak Spanish.

In the scene where Rudy is following the girl and making rude comments, there is no ethnic stereotype represented. If there is any stereotype at all, is that of a man fantasizing about a woman who is obviously "out of his league." The humor here is not ethnic humor—but classic Cheech.

Rudy represents one of the many groups of people who could be considered Mexican. Glenn Martinez considers language to be one of the most important factors in the taxonomy of different types of Mexicans. Martinez states that “the social reality of bilingualism affects all Mexican Americans, whether they speak only English, only Spanish, a little of one language or the other, or great deal of both” (3). Martinez further states that “multiple language ideologies may exist within a single racial or ethnic group” (14). Martinez considers *Mexican Americans* to be “Mexican-origin residents of the Southwest, both citizens and noncitizens, who have undergone significant amounts of socialization within the United States.” Conversely, Martinez considers *Mexican Immigrants* to be “Mexican-origin residents of the Southwest whose socialization occurred largely in Mexico” (x).

In the film *Born in East L.A.*, Rudy’s cousin, Javier, represents a very different kind of Mexican. Javier is played by Paul Rodriguez, a comedian, actor, director and club owner, who was born in Mexico, but grew up in East Los Angeles (“Rodriguez” *Wikipedia*). Just as Rudy speaks only English, Javier speaks only Spanish. Although not actually stated, we are given the inference that Javier is an “illegal.” Javier is wearing a woven cowboy hat, a peach-colored shirt, and a green, red and white poncho—the colors of the Mexican flag. When he finds himself alone in the Robles family home, Javier hears Rudy's voice on the answering machine, which is behind the picture of Jesus with the moving eyes, and thinks that Jesus is speaking to him. Rodriguez performs this scene with excellent comedic effect. Javier is a stereotypical working-class Mexican national who is confused about modern technology to which he has not previously been exposed. It is a reasonable assumption that an American-born Mexican American such as Rudy could have a cousin who is a Mexican national, from the other side of the border, who has had a very different life.

The only other significant Mexican character in the film is *Feo*, played by Tony Plana, who is better known as Betty Suarez's father, Ignacio Suarez, on the ABC show *Ugly Betty* (“Plana” *Wikipedia*). Feo is a Tijuana gangster, with two gold front teeth and a prominent scar on his neck, who attempts to extort money from Rudy for “protection.” I perceive no specific Mexican stereotype in this character; such a character could exist in any cultural context.

There are also ethnic stereotypes in this film of non-Mexican characters. The only African American character, a non-speaking role, is the man who is dressed like a pimp and standing in front of a white stretch limo. He is on-screen for less than one minute during the opening credits. In Tijuana, there are several characters who are hoping to immigrate to the U.S.A. who are not Mexican, known as OTMs—“other than Mexican.” The only speaking-role character is a waitress named Dolores, played by Kamala Lopez-Dawson, who is from El Salvador. Dolores is Rudy’s love interest in the film. There are also five young men, presumably Asian, who wish to cross the border.

Among the most significant character stereotypes in this film are those of the European Americans. The most important “white” character in the film is Jimmy, played by Daniel Stern, who is a sleazy street hustler and “coyote” who runs a bar and is involved in a variety of illegal activities—including smuggling illegal immigrants across the border. Jimmy, by his own admission, is a criminal who came to Mexico to escape from law enforcement in the United States. The only other European American character in the film is McCalister, played by Jan Michael Vincent, the immigration officer who deports Rudy. McCalister is a stereotypical white redneck law enforcement officer, complete with cowboy hat, metal-framed sunglasses, which he wears indoors—and a Texas accent. McCalister is presented as a bigot who takes great pleasure from catching and deporting illegal immigrants. If he were to be presented as an average generic white guy, he would not have been funny. It is the stereotype of a larger-than-life redneck

lawman that brings humor to the character. I am a European American male from Texas, and I did not find the character to be offensive—I thought he was very funny.

This paper is intended to be presented as a *Critical Discourse Analysis*, which is defined as “a highly context-sensitive democratic approach which takes an ethical stance on social issues with the aim of improving society” (Huckin 95). A CDA is typically a consideration of the text, in this case a film, using analytical methods, some of which consider the entire work, and some of which consider specific components of the whole (Huckin 98-101). One of the holistic considerations is that of *genre*, defined as “a text type that manifests a characteristic set of formal features serving a characteristic purpose” (99). The genre of *Born in East L.A.* is *comedy*. The primary purpose of the film is to be funny—to make us laugh. It fulfills that purpose, in part, by drawing upon stereotypes of various groups of people.

One of the analytical methods of CDA that examines smaller components of the whole is *framing*, which examines content based on the perspective of the writer using discrete categories or frames, which can be further subdivided (99). In this film, Cheech Marin considers a hierarchy of human beings as a whole, divided into ethnic groups, and then further subdivided into individual characters within those groups, which are shown to be quite different from one another.

Another CDA process is *foregrounding and backgrounding*, which refers to the writer's emphasis or deemphasis of certain concepts. Huckin states that “the ultimate form of backgrounding is *omission*—actually leaving certain things out of the text” (99). In the film, Marin uses *foregrounding* to project the message that Rudy is happy and contented with his life in East L.A., and that he highly values his citizenship in the United States of America. Marin uses *backgrounding* or even *omission* to deemphasize negative aspects of East L.A. that actually exist in the “real world.” In the film, there are no depictions of abject poverty, street gangs,

illegal drug use or trafficking, or drive-by shootings. Instead, we are presented with a form of Mexican American *utopia*. This presentation of Rudy's idyllic life could also be considered *presupposition*, which Huckin describes as "the use of the language in a way that appears to take certain ideas for granted, as if there were no alternative" (100).

The characters in *Born in East L.A.* speak English in a variety of different dialects, which Huckin describes as *discursive differences* (100). In the film, the identity and personality of the characters, and the way they interact with one another, is created essentially by the divergent dialects. For example, the personality of McCalister, the redneck immigration officer, is clearly defined by the way he speaks. Another example is Dolores, the girl that Rudy meets in Tijuana. The way that she speaks English projects an image of perseverance and desire to improve her life.

In conclusion, the most important premise of a *Critical Discourse Analysis* is that it "takes an ethical stance on social issues with the aim of improving society" (Huckin 95). My thesis, or ethical stance, is that some of the things people say and do, who are members of subcultures, are honestly funny, and that laughing at them is not necessarily intended to degrade or humiliate them. Considering the history of emotional abuse and humiliation of minority subcultures by multimedia, members of these groups are understandably sensitive to the potential of such abuse. However, this sensitivity can create an impression of ridicule when it is not intended by the artist. The ability to judge an artistic work expressed in multimedia objectively, and the ability to learn to laugh at ourselves, and the idiosyncrasies common to all humanity, will in my opinion—improve society.

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