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Chef: A Bildungsroman for our Mixed Race Reality

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***Chef: A Bildungsroman* for our Mixed Race Reality**
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This year's NACCS theme "Chicana/o In/Civilities: Contestación y Lucha," provides an avenue to explore many challenges to hegemony and representation. The indie movie *Chef*, which debuted at *South x Southwest* in the Spring of 2014 (O'Sullivan), challenges the canonical narrative of the *Bildungsroman*, and the invisibility, tropes of representation, and stereotyping of Latinas/os in mainstream Hollywood cinema.

Chef is mixed-race food porn. Don't go hungry. The plot of *Chef* revolves around professional chef Carl Casper, played by Jon Favreau. When Casper is forced to produce standard fare by the restaurant's owner, played by Dustin Hoffman, instead of his carne asada masterpiece, Casper receives a savage review by a high-profile restaurant critic played by Oliver Platt. The owner tells Casper:

Riva: Look, if you bought Stones tickets and Jagger didn't play Satisfaction, how would you feel? Would you be happy?

Carl Casper: No.

Riva: No! You'd burn the place to the fucking ground (IMDB)

Casper's lonely 10-year-old techie son sets up a Twitter account for his tech-limited father to read this harsh review from an early supporter of his culinary genius. His father mistakes Twitter for email and the subsequent viral warfare between Casper and his critic, cleverly named Ramsey Michel (think Gordon Ramsey), brings him notoriety. To rebuild his culinary creativity and escape his flame-induced and videoed fame, Casper and his son go to Miami to buy a food truck from his ex-wife's first husband, played by Robert Downey Jr. Like Stella, Casper hopes to get his groove back.

The subsequent reclamation of an ancient food truck and journey back to Los Angeles with his son brings both of them greater wisdom in different areas. Casper and his son Percy are joined by fellow restaurant worker Martin (John Leguizamo in his best role in ages) in their drive across the continent, exploring ethnic communities, cuisine, and building their reputation. By the time they reach L.A.

Casper's reputation is rebuilt as is his relationship with his son and ex-wife, played by Sofia Vergara. In the ironic final plot twist, Casper's cyber-restaurant critic, joins him in a restaurant venture, and Casper remarries his ex-wife, reuniting the family in a clichéd happy ending (Ebert).

As a jaded veteran analyst of cinema and representations of Chicanas/os, the food-based story of a truck-owner, married to a Latin spitfire model with a famous Salsa singing father, promised a host of historical stereotypes in a familiar family narrative-based plot. I was prepared to be disappointed, but wasn't. The question was, why not? It wasn't an ethnic-marketed film. Was it, as we said in the olden days, cinema Chicanesca – a White film gone right? Or was it something else?

To be sure, there were hackneyed Hollywood tropes of representation. Sofia Vergara's character Inez, while a toned-down version of her other similar roles, is still the recognizable over-sexualized Latina, albeit more professionally and financially successful than the *cantineras* of yore. The film appears heavily based on popular consumer commodities of ethnic culture, food, and music, and the storyline was the easily recognizable *Bildungsroman*, the man-on-the-road narrative. But, the movie offered more subtle, complex consistent challenges to the hegemonic cinematic devices.

Chef provides a new, multi-racial, multi-ethnic, multi-generational *Bildungsroman*, continuing other ethnic and gender based contestations of the 18th century Germanic literary standard, in which a singular male protagonist matures through acculturation to society's broader norms because of the lessons he learned while journeying. It is a personal metaphorical journey to self-discovery through a literal physical journey. It is an interactional narrative between characters and environment. There are a number of tools – character, dialogue, storylines, mis-en-scene, music, and costuming that present a more three-dimensional nuanced version of an American experience than the usual ethnic-group specific targeted film.

Maria Karafilis and Nadia Avendaño in analyzing the Chicana *Bildungsroman*, provide a lens for examining *Chef* as more than just the latest indie film with high-profile stars. Avendaño writes that the *Bildungsroman* has been “transformed and resuscitated, not by males of the dominant culture in the United States, but by subaltern groups” (67). Through this new *Bildungsroman* there is “expanded capacity” such that acculturation through journeying does not mean assimilation to mainstream White America, nor acculturation to a stereotypical Chicano nationalism thinly portrayed in ethnic-group specific targeted films.

Karafilis goes farther in suggesting a series of questions to examine the ethnic *Bildungsroman*:

1. “How do the protagonists of the modified *Bildungsroman* negotiate the different societies into which they find themselves?”
2. “What constitutes ‘maturation’ for these protagonists?”
3. “What is the end point of their development?” and
4. “How can such a character ultimately be successful? (64)”

Karafilis uses a broad definition of *Bildungsroman* to mean a developmental process of learning a set of cultural values in a given place and time. As such, it is much broader than the traditional European

definition and in typical Chicana/o Studies *rascuachi* fashion, takes what is useful and employs it in a different manner.

Chef provides two simultaneous, intersecting *Bildungsroman*, that of Carl Casper, and that of his son Percy, immediately undermining a canonical tenant of the *Bildungsroman* – the solitary journey of male learning. Carl learns from his son about how to be a better father, but also learns about technology. His son teaches him the value of Tweeting locations for the food truck in promotions, and the use of the One-Second-Every-Day Movie App. We can sympathize with Carl’s mishap with Twitter, as most contemporarily wired-folk have hit “reply-all”, flamed someone needlessly, or mistakenly sent an embarrassing text or email to the wrong person. We see Carl’s techno-illiteracy in the following exchange:

Percy: [sets up a Twitter account for Carl] Okay. So, what do you want your username to be?

Carl Casper: Carl.

Percy: You can't just put "Carl". It's got to be "at" something.

Carl Casper: At Carl Casper.

Percy: At Carl Casper. Taken.

Carl Casper: Somebody took my name?

Percy: At Chef Carl Casper? Is that cool?

Carl Casper: Yeah, that's good.

Percy: At Chef Carl Casper.

Carl Casper: So is this for sex?

Percy: Ew. No. Is that what you're doing this for?

Carl Casper: No, I'm not doing it for that. Someone wrote something bad. I wanna see what they wrote.

Percy: Good. Oh, shit.

Carl Casper: Hey! You can't talk like that. I don't care if mommy's not around. I don't want you cursing around here.

Percy: That review went viral.

Carl Casper: What does that mean?

Percy: It means it got picked up and re-tweeted everywhere.

Carl Casper: So, all these people have read the review?

Percy: Yeah.

Carl Casper: Oh, shit (IMDB)

Late that night Carl's techno-illiteracy is magnified when he suggests on Twitter that the critic wouldn't recognize a good meal if it sat on his face. The next morning his son asks:

Percy: Dad?

Carl Casper: Yeah.

Percy: You got 1,653 followers since last night.

Carl Casper: Oh, is that good?

Percy: It's amazing.

Carl Casper: Oh, good. What does it mean?

Percy: It means that 1,653 people are reading your Twitter feed.

Carl Casper: Mmm-hmm. I thought it was like texting.

Percy: Did you post anything since last night?

Carl Casper: No.

Percy: Are you sure?

Carl Casper: Yeah, I just sent a private message to somebody.

Percy: To who?

Carl Casper: To that a-hole food critic.

Percy: You can only send private messages to people who are following you. I think you might have posted that publicly.

Carl Casper: No, he wrote something nasty about me and then I hit "reply" and it let me send a message to him.

Percy: Dad, replies are public. Everybody can read them. And it looks like he re-tweeted it to all his 123,845 followers. And he wrote back.

Carl Casper: What did he say?

Percy: I don't think I should read it.

Carl Casper: Just... can you read it to me, please? Read the... read the reply.

Percy: [sighs] "At Chef Carl Casper, I would rather have you sit on my face after a brisk walk on a warm day than suffer through that fucking lava cake again."

Carl Casper: He wrote that to me?

Percy: He wrote it to everybody (IMDB)

Simultaneously to the education of Carl Casper, Percy Casper learns about food, culture, and the values of his father. For example, Carl explains the differences between various produce and which cultures use them in what ways. He also teaches his son important life lessons such as the value of hard work when they are preparing the truck, salvaging usable materials, and showing respect for others. For example, when Percy wants to serve a poorly made sandwich to the undocumented workers who help them get a stove into the truck, because they were getting the sandwich for free, his father imparts a message about respecting everyone, especially for their work:

Carl Casper: I may not do everything great in my life, but I'm good at this. I manage to touch people's lives with what I do and I want to share this with you (IMDB).

A second way *Chef* answers Karafilis' questions about the ethnic *Bildungsroman* is through the simultaneous use of Latino specificity and mixed-race ambiguity, demonstrating that acculturation occurs to a mélange of cultures, not just one, and one that respects the differences between Mexicans, Cubans, and Puerto Ricans. The canonical *Bildungsroman* is undermined by defying a singular society or set of values to be learned.

The 1980s and the Decade of the Hispanic gave rise to the generic Latino film which balanced externally created images with marketing analyses in communication (Escalante 133). Often Latino men were generic violent characters or failures, of unspecified background, presumably designed to speak to all Latinos alike. In *Chef*, Latino groups are respected in their difference. Carl explains to Percy the differences among beans, and bananas, tostones versus plátanos maduros, there is a respect for, and explanation of, Latino variation. A similar variation is seen in the soundtrack to *Chef* which includes Willie Colon, Tito Puente, Gente de Zona, Hot 8 Brass, and Al Green. The soundtrack mixes Cuban, Puerto Rican, and West Coast urban old school Blues and Funk in the East Los Angeles context (IMDB)

Additionally, *Chef* is purposefully ambiguous about race and ethnic identity of characters. Carl Casper has the word *jefe* tattooed on his knuckles, demonstrating some Chicano cultural literacy. He understands some Spanish, but can't speak it, and relies on his friend Martin, played by John Leguizamo, to translate, a characteristic not uncommon to third-generation Chicanas/os. Favreau's character raises the often rudely pointed question to people of color: "What ARE you?" Ultimately we never know, and it is not really important, given his respect for a variety of racial communities in Miami, Austin, New Orleans, and East Los Angeles. The blend of music, food, locations, other chefs of varying ethnicities demonstrates a mixed-race literacy that transcends the need to know to which singular traditional *Bildungsroman* Carl and his son aspire. Casper's son Percy is part Cuban and part "quien sabe," and shares his father's journey to a less fixed acculturation than the canon of centuries past.

Finally, *Chef* defies the problem of what bell hooks classically called “eating the other,” in which pleasure and enjoyment is derived from a racialized “other.” The ethnic/racial “other” provides the “seasoning that can liven up the dish that is mainstream white culture.” Food is easily commodified, consumed, appropriated, and transformed. In *Chef* Carl Casper, even if he is White, has long-standing relationships with many other cooks and markets, extended family across races and cultures. He is not a culture or food vulture. There is recognition of foods’ origins and histories, from the gourmet grilled cheese to kimchi topping Mexican dishes.

In the empirical world, the film is also a partnership with Roy Choi of Kogi Korean BBQ fame. Choi is a master chef who owns many restaurants, competes on television cook shows, and is a cultural icon of the food truck movement in Los Angeles. Choi not only trains Jon Favreau how to cook, he sends him to culinary school and to work in his restaurants doing grunt-work preparation of ingredients. They build the sets in *Chef* to Choi’s specifications, and use locations Choi selects, because he was tired of movies always getting the kitchen “wrong.” They have since traveled together and done a number of shows jointly. Roy Choi develops the Cuban sandwich at the heart of the film. He co-produced the film with Favreau, not serving as solely a consultant, but rather a co-producer (Epstein).

So, unlike the food-themes in movies like *Tortilla Soup* or *Like Water for Chocolate*, food politics are carried outside into the real world economics of audiences. No one is eating the other in *Chef*. Thus *Chef* offers the opportunities to see a multi-ethnic, multi-generational, multi-racial *Bildungsroman* with *two* related men on the road successfully learning and growing – one to a more modern technological culture, and the other to a more traditional one. It clearly answers Karafilis’ four questions for the ethnic *Bildungsroman*.

Chef also demonstrates that a movie can have many actors and producers of color, and not be marketed as an ethnic film for an ethnic audience. The film had big-name stars, but low publicity as an independent film, and grossed a respectable \$45 million. In Spanish the film was called *Chef: La Receta de la Felicidad*” which provided a slightly different framing for audiences in Spanish than English. *Chef* gives me hope that progress in production, and thematics are possible, and that diverse audiences will go see these films. The fact that the 2000 Census offers a mixed-race category for the first time and 6.9 million people use it, demonstrates the need to look at films like *Chef* more carefully. As more Americans identify, with each coming Census, hopefully more ethnically thoughtful movies that aren’t marketed as such, become the mainstream of what we call independent and Hollywood feature films.

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