Violent American, Violent Me: On Violence and (Masculine) Self in Edward James Olmos' American Me (1992)[1]

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Abstract:
Everything in Santana's life began with the violent riots. *American Me* (1992), Edward James Olmos' directorial debut, is a harsh reflection of the inevitably violent existence of Santana Montoya (performed by Olmos himself), an inmate from the Folsom State Prison. The movie recounts the story of a young Santana and his lifelong friends Mundo and J.D., who playfully and almost innocently create their own *clicka*, (gang), *La Primera*, and end up in juvenile hall in the same, almost accidental manner. This first step toward the de-socialization and institutionalization of the youngsters will become the catalyst of their future lives and identities, which will be marked by extreme violence. This essay aims at analyzing the several layers in which violence is constructed, assimilated, and enforced in *American Me*, paying special attention to the "supposedly inherently violent" performance of a hypermasculine self.
Keywords: American Me, Edward James Olmos, prison, masculinity, *macho*, violence.

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Şiddet Dolu Amerika, Şiddet Dolu Ben: Edward James Olmos'un American Me (1992) Filminde Şiddet ve (Eril) Benlik[2]

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Özet:
Santana'nın hayatında her şey şiddet ayaklanmalarıyla birlikte başladı. Edward James Olmos'un ilk yönetmenlik deneyimi olan *American Me* (1992), Folsom Devlet Hapishanesi'nde mahkûm olan, (Olmos'un kendisi tarafından canlandırılan) Santana Montoya'nın kaçınılmaz şiddet dolu varlığının sert bir yansımasıdır. Film, eğlencesine ve masumca sayılabilecek bir şekilde kendi çeteleri *La Primera*'yı kuran genç Santana ve yakın arkadaşları Mundo ve J. D.'nin yine tesadüfi sayılabilecek bir biçimde çocuk hapishanesinde biten hikâyelerini konu edinmektedir. Yiğit delikanlılığın kurumsallaşmasına ve toplumsaldan uzaklaşmasına giden ilk adım, aşırı şiddetle damgalanan gelecekteki yaşamlarını ve kimliklerini aktifleştirmek olacaktır. Bu yazı *American Me* filminde şiddetin inşa edildiği, asimile edildiği ve zorunlu kılındığı farklı katmanları, özellikle aşırı erkekliğin özünün "sözde doğal olarak şiddet dolu" performansına odaklanarak analiz etmeyi amaçlamaktadır.
Anahtar Kelimeler: American Me, Edward James Olmos, hapishane, erkeklik, maço, şiddet.

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Everything in Santana's life began with the violent riots. *American Me* (1992)—Chicano actor and director Edward James Olmos' directorial debut—is a harsh reflection of the inevitably violent existence of Santana Montoya (performed by Olmos himself), a Folsom State Prison inmate. The movie recounts the story of a young Santana and his lifelong friends Mundo and J.D., who playfully, and almost innocently, create their own *clicka* (gang), *La Primera*, and end up in juvenile hall in the same, almost accidental, manner. This first step toward the de-socialization and institutionalization of the youngsters becomes the catalyst for their future lives and identities, which will be marked by extreme violence. The film's narrative line begins with the young boy entering prison, and the narration then recounts Santana's life story, moving between the past and the present. A flashback introduces Santana's parents, in an episode that accounts for the Los Angeles Zoot Suit Riots[3] between *pachucos*[4] and marines in the 1940s. The narrative then turns to the moment that *La Primera* is formed in a Los Angeles barrio and the subsequent incarceration of the main protagonist. The core of the movie revolves around Santana's life in prison, and his release after several years inside. Santana organizing a powerful prison gang and the personal and group relationships that occur within the walls of Folsom State Prison form the essential narrative content. When the protagonist is eventually released from prison we are presented with the difficulties he encounters trying to adapt to "normal" life. These eventually land him back in prison, bringing about his final end within the prison system. Violence is omnipresent throughout the movie, marking Santana's life, identity, and destiny. This essay aims to analyze the several layers in which such violence is constructed, assimilated, and enforced in *American Me*, paying special attention to the supposedly inherently violent performance of a Mexican/Chicano hypermasculine self.

3 A series of conflicts that occurred in June 1943 in Los Angeles between US servicemen and Mexican-American youths, the latter of whom wore outfits called zoot suits (Coroian).

4 Pachuco and Pachuca are terms coined in the 1940s to refer to Mexican-American men and women who dressed in zoot suits or zoot suit-influenced attire (Zoot Suit Discovery Guide).

In the prison context, where the individual is institutionalized, relationships are limited, individual freedom coerced, and cross-gender relationships non-existent, the notion of gender identity—especially masculinity—is altered and requires redefinition. Men in all-male prisons cohabit in an all-male microcosm and the power relationships that develop within this enclosed system are often based on sexual subjugation and dominance. Male rape is pervasive and power is exerted by means of control over "weaker" inmates. Man and Cronan state that the prison subculture,

> which relies on an aggressive conception of masculinity, places the quest for power and dominance at the forefront. Behind prison walls, male inmates are stripped of most traditional means of asserting their masculinity and, consequently, turn to intimidation and aggression. To be sure, this mindset often is responsible for men raping women, but outside the confines of an all-male prison population it rarely results in men raping other men. In a prison society where each of its members is male, many inmates seek to reestablish their sense of dominance by using rape as a means of forcing other men to assume a submissive role that is perceived as feminine with that society. (130–1)

The film industry—and particularly Hollywood—has made frequent representations of the prison world throughout the last decades, and although the critic Paul Mason (2003) speaks of the impossibility of defining a "prison film" genre, he also states that many of the movies representing the prison world use similar constructions. Among the different resources for representing and constructing the "world within," overt description of—mostly male—prison violence is commonplace. *American Me* can be classified as belonging in this category of film, thus bringing with it a clearly identifiable discourse of violence. The construction of the prison individual Santana Montoya—as part of the construction of the prison movie narrative *per se*—is in this way inevitably and intrinsically linked to a predictably violent existence and

identity.

Butler and Kariminia (2006) argue that, according to penologists, prison violence responds to two different models of behavior. The first is "importation", or "cultural", behavior. This depends on the identities of inmates before entering the institution: the life of these prisoners-to-be are oftentimes marked by—among other things—a lack of education, unemployment, social exclusion, mental illness, and/or drug abuse. The theory is that the prisoners perform the same attitude and forms of misconduct in the restricted environment inside the prison walls as they did when free. The second model—the "deprivation" or "prisonisation" model—points at the enclosed, crowded, and restricted environment of the prison as the main factor of the inmates' patterns of violence (Butler and Kariminia 2006: 17–18). As regards the character of Santana Montoya, his personal environment outside of prison is presented as "innocently violent," with the gang game performed by the kids in the barrio being portrayed more as a "kid's game" than something that involves criminal violence. Nevertheless, even if the young Santana and his friends enter the gang world in this rather playful way, the initial scenes of the movie hint that the barrio environment, lacking proper living and educational conditions, is socially violent and personally non-fulfilling. The incarceration of the protagonist—his deprivation of freedom and thus of personal identity—gradually turns him into a seemingly irrecoverably violent individual, shaped by the restrictive and inherently violent institution that is the US prison system.

The representation of the prison world and subculture found in this kind of movie—like the violence inside the prison walls—is in many cases directly connected to the ethnic/racial segregation of the inmates. Many prison movies deal with the internal hierarchical organization and the consequent quest for power that such division entails. Gangs, and gang violence, are represented as intrinsic elements of the prison world. There is plenty of data providing evidence for the existence of gangs in prisons, and filmic representations of the prison environment tend to focus on this aspect of prison subculture, portraying violence as performed through or by such gangs.

Latinos, African-Americans, Whites, or others, pledge allegiance to their respective gangs; the members faithfully serving gang and leader. Santana's Mexican prison gang *La Eme* existed in reality and was one of the first to be organized in the California penal system. Its means of subsistence was drug trafficking—both inside and outside of prison—and this is clearly recounted in the movie (Fleischer and Decker 2001). The seemingly inherent violence of the prison world is, once again, linked to the "deprivation-model" depicted above. In the case of Santana, the fact that he comes from the gang world and soon aligns himself with prison gang culture drives him towards a violentt identity and existence that he is supposedly then unable to extricate himself from.

When analyzing the several layers of violence contained in Santana's character—which he is portrayed as inevitable linked, or doomed, to—we need to also consider his Chicano masculine identity. Chicano sociologist Alfredo Mirandé has done extensive work on the conceptualization, theorization, and stereotyping of Chicano masculinity. Mexican/Chicano masculinity has always been equated with "machismo", and this concept, in turn, with a negative understanding of male identity. Mirandé argues that descriptions of machismo fall under two models. The first is the "compensatory" model—supported by Samuel Ramos and Octavio Paz—explains the Mexican (and later on the Chicano) macho's need for domination as "ultimately motivated by feelings of powerlessness that can be traced to the Spanish conquest of Mexico (…) The powerless, colonized man thus compensates for feelings of inadequacy and impotence by assuming an overly masculine and aggressive stance relative to women and the rest of the world" (Mirandé 1986: 67). The second, "ethical", model is more positive and accounts for a male/*macho* figure that

> is not cold and insensitive but warm and emotional. Rather than being driven by feelings of inferiority or a desire to control others, his behavior is motivated by the desire to uphold his own honor and the honor and integrity of the group. The essential components of *machismo* are not violence, aggressiveness, or virility, but honor, respect,

> dignity, and bravery. **A** real *macho* is a man who has earned the respect of his family and community. Within the family, the wishes of the man as titular head of the household are more likely to be heeded because he is honored and respected than because he is feared. (Mirandé 1986: 68)

Chicanos, although their present reality differs from that of their Mexican ancestors, are defined by a rich and complex cultural heritage as a result of the amalgamation of different cultures and geopolitical and historical situations. In this regard, they are oftentimes similar to their forebears. The Chicano male/*macho* is also described as a dominating individual "because Mexican Americans often experience dissociation from predominantly white US culture, generally leading to feelings of inferiority, the power a *macho* male possesses within the family structure represents his primary outlet of self-expression (…)" (Baugh 2003: 4). The compensatory model, along with Baugh's explanation of male power and domination, accounts for this aggressive masculinity being a direct product of a social and historical context in which men exist and develop their individual and communal identity. In the case of Santana Montoya it is the prison world. Following on from the above analysis of the causes of violence within the prison world, the compensatory model is directly linked to the "cultural" model that accounts for prison violence. That is to say, the inmate brings along to the prison a predisposition for violence, and this predisposition is exacerbated by the restrictive, hierarchical prison world. According to these theories, the socioeconomic reality of Santana Montoya's barrio and ethnic cultural background provide the perfect breeding ground for the development of his violent masculine identity.

American Me—a movie about men in prison—interestingly opens with a woman's (Julie's) words: "You are like two people. One is like a kid, doesn't know how to dance, doesn't know how to make love. That's the one I care about. The other one . . . the other one I hate. The one who knows, the one who has his rap down, the one who knows how to run drugs, who kills people" (*American Me*). As the narrative goes on, these words will come to denote the core of the protagonist's internal conflict.

When they are spoken, Santana is looking at an old picture of his mother. The scene then moves, via a flashback, to the city of Los Angeles in the 1940s, and the viewer learns that Santana's parents (both *pachucos*) were unintentionally involved in the Los Angeles Zoot Suit Riots, which arose from tensions between *pachucos* and marines. His father was harshly beaten, then arrested; his mother was raped by Anglo marines. The next scene jumps forward some years to the adolescent Santana, when he and his two friends J.D. and Mundo have formed their first gang, *La Primera*. After an incident with a rival gang, the boys break into a store for protection; the owner finds them, shooting J.D. in the leg. They are taken to juvenile hall. From this point on, their story will be linked to the penitentiary system, and all of their endeavors will be aimed at gaining respect and power within this overtly violent, masculine context. Santana will become the creator and indisputable leader of the most powerful and violent prison gang, *La Eme*—the Mexican Mafia. He is released some twenty years later, if only for a short while. While out of prison, Santana's encounter with rehabilitated ex-gang member Julie—who is conscious of the fact that much of the oppression suffered in the barrios arises from the drug-dealing business of gangs such as *La Eme*—shatters his convictions about life, personal relationships, and his own identity, and splits him into the two people Julie refers to in the quote above.

This brief summary of the narrative line of the movie shows that Santana's existence revolves around his need to dwell within or between two worlds (the prison and the *barrio*); two people (his prison self and his free one), and two gender identities, or performances of gender identities (his *macho* self in prison and his male self who is together with Julie, outside of prison). In this sense, Santana is the personification and embodiment of a constant sense of in-betweenness and disassociation of the self. Santana is thus presented as fully embedded in, and limited by, a given social context and *milieu* that provokes the need for adaptation in a quest for survival. Inside, he is a tough and violent Mexican *macho* man. Outside, he needs to negotiate who he is and start anew both in the social and personal spheres. Santana is, there, a "man in progress"—a person

questioning himself and attempting to discover a new, milder, more social identity. This internal conversation that Santana is having is a step toward his probable eventual socialization and the abandonment of his aggressive, hypermasculine self. However, his fate seems unavoidable: it appears there is no choice for Santana but to be what years of confinement and violence have turned him into.

It is in this complex moment that—in a way that echoes his first, almost accidental incarceration in juvenile hall—Santana is taken back to prison for carrying someone else's very small amount of drugs with him. Thus, Santana, one of the biggest drug dealers in the L.A. area, is imprisoned for carrying an insignificant amount of drugs, which, moreover, he had snatched from an ex-convict drug addict in an attempt to help him. On his return to prison, however, he is a different person, dominated by an internal conflict that ultimately leads him to surrender and let himself be killed by his own mafia members.

The ending of the movie closes the circle with the first scene. We hear Julie's words while Santana sits in his prison cell awaiting his own death at the hands of friends. The viewer thus concludes that the protagonist's identity (in this case, his over-masculine and overtly violent identity) is defined by the setting, thus proving the idea described by the preventive model of prison violence. The experience of life outside of prison teaches him that what he thought were the essential values for survival—aggressiveness, ruthlessness, a totally rational existence, the denial of feelings, etc.—are no longer valid. On the outside, he has to reinvent himself and leave some of these values aside; a step his mates perceives as a mark of weakness. However, the dramatic end of the movie proves that the presence of the two people—the tough convict and the weak man—Julie mentions at the beginning of the movie is just an illusion, as there seems to be no choice but for Santana to live inside prison walls. There, his personal endeavors are aimed at the maintenance of his status as a man: a Mexican man, but—most of all—a violent Mexican man.

The greater part of the movie develops in Folsom State Penitentiary, and men perform almost all the scenes that occur within the prison. Folsom Penitentiary is a male prison; it is an entirely masculine world. The appearance of women is rare, here, except for a scene in which J.D.'s girlfriend smuggles some drugs for *La Eme* in her vagina. However, the spiritual and emotional presence of women is essential to the development of Santana Montoya's story, and both his mother and Julie are key characters as his life and identity evolves, both as a convicted, institutionalized individual, and as a free, socialized one.

The narration of Santana's life is relayed through a (his) masculine point of view, and, in the same way, the representation of life within the walls of Folsom is completed through a (his) masculine gaze. Olmos's strategy when creating an all-male setting, and presenting women as secondary—albeit highly relevant—characters, subverts the traditional male/female power relationship and creates a new hierarchical order based on arrangement into strong male/weak male. As a result, the viewer soon understands that the key concepts of life in Folsom are masculinity and power. One needs to be a "strong male" in order to survive, and the most "*macho macho*" man becomes leader. In such a homogenous, de-individualized, and gendered setting, the exaggerated performance of masculinity becomes essential to the hierarchical organization of the convicts. The most authoritative man becomes the leading figure in this pyramid, and the rest need to prove their manliness in order not to become inferior (feminized) and thus subjugated (raped/killed). This new authoritative order (strong/weak male) is presented to the audience through the leader's point of view, thus adding a new connotation to what Laura Mulvey calls the "male gaze," which "projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly" (1999: 837). In *American Me,* the powerful *macho*'s attitude and gaze turn the other, weaker, inmates not into sexualized, eroticized objects of pleasure, but into objects of domination—including sexual domination when necessary.

In this context, the inmates relate to one another through a strict code of behavior, which aims at proving one's strength and, hence, one's masculinity. Inside the prison, the marks of respect and honor are exactly those qualities that Alfredo Mirandé (1997) defines as the most negative aspects of traditional Mexican and Chicano masculine identity, such as exaggerated masculinity; authoritarianism; violence; aggressiveness, and self-centeredness (69–71), or those described as belonging to the "compensatory" model (Ramos, Paz). Because the prison is a homogenously gendered space, there is a strong and violent hierarchy between those in power (the most aggressive individuals) and those who lack these traits—the inferior males associated with a feminized and weak version of masculinity, and who are therefore punishable/abusable. In relation to this, Brett Levinson (1996) argues against Paz's conviction that biological determinism marks the paradigm of machismo, since gender/sexual difference is here so clearly constructed and performed: "whoever annuls the other, (…) becomes masculine/male; and whoever is "nothinged," penetrated is feminine/female. (…) It is a matter of who can and who cannot cover up the split, the essential incompleteness." (15) Santana's endeavors in prison are totally devoted to annulling/analling the others, and thus becoming complete; becoming (American, *macho)* Me.

This extreme *machismo* and its most negative attributes are maintained within the prison system through indiscriminate exertion of psychological and physical violence, both among the inmates and against the system itself. Accordingly, masculinity (or hyper masculinity) and violence (or extreme violence) are portrayed as symbiotic, interdependent factors, forming the essence of prison life. One of the most evident means by which this violent masculinity is performed is rape. Rape recurs throughout the movie and is depicted as one of the origins of many of the twists in Santana's life. Those who require mild punishment are raped, and those judged to deserve a stronger punishment are killed.

The beginning of the movie, which focuses on the Los Angeles Zoot Suit Riots and exposes the rape of Santana's mother, provides a

significant reference to the end of the film, when his father (with whom Santana has always had a difficult relationship) explains that he is the offspring of one of the Anglo marines that raped his mother. In this sense, the protagonist works as a symbol of Octavio Paz's (1950) idea of conquest exemplified by the Spanish conquerors raping the Aztecs—a historical fact that has ever since stigmatized the essence of the mestizo community in general, and that of the Mexican male in particular. Santana and his mother are the direct victims of the oppression—and personifications of the violence—of the Mexican/Chicano community in the United States. In the movie, this oppression will be turned into rage and disconformity, feelings that will lead the protagonist to a marginalized existence. Santana is thus portrayed as a victim of an inescapable situation, as well as of his historical heritage. However, his ultimate aim in life is to overcome his fate and become the executioner of power and control over others, turning his rage into what he calls respect. It is when he is raped, on his first night in juvenile hall, that he understands that his single aim must be to gain and maintain such respect. By killing his offender, Santana earns back the dignity and honor that was taken from him in the violation. Looking back, he says, "(. . .) the respect I earned made me think I'd found the answer" *(American Me).* The answer is power, control, and violence. His life thereafter will be devoted to maintaining his status of superiority and control. However, the movie shows us that recreating and enacting the violence that governs the system also traps him within the system. Up to this moment, violence is portrayed as inseparable from his life: he was conceived through an act of violence, and he first became "somebody" as the victim, and then as the perpetrator. In this sense, he embodies the assimilation of Foucault's (1977) description of the body as the a site of punishment within the prison system; as "an instrument, and intermediary: if one intervenes upon it to imprison it, to make it work, it is in order to deprive the individual of a liberty that is regarded both as a right and a property" (11). Intervening upon it physically—violating it—thus becomes the uppermost indication of domination and power. In the same way, Man and Cronan contend that,

> Whatever sense of power a prisoner once had on the outside essentially is stripped upon entry into the controlled environment of prison. Added to this sense of disempowerment is the absence of women, which prevents inmates form satisfying their sexual needs with women and eliminates the category of people that they look to in establishing their sense of power and superiority.
>
> While incarcerated, these inmates lack any option but to turn to male inmates as an object for their dominance and aggression. Prison rapists rewrite their previous conception of homosexual behavior into an acceptable masculine role, which is hugely physical and powerful, and transform their male victims into surrogate of women. The "men" in prison seek the appearance of control over themselves and exert control over others. With their former modes of expression of masculinity unavailable, inmates resort to rape to signify power. (2001:150–1)

Santana and his gang continuously utilize rape as a tool of domination, as exemplified in the rape of the son of the Italian mafia leader Don Antonio Scagnelli. The Italians do not accept that *La Eme* takes over all control of the drug business; consequently, *La Eme* convicts rape Scagnelli's son. This act, which closes with the boy's death, is the representation of the total subjugation of an individual; the suppression of personal will and honor, and thus of respect. The violation depicts the gang's usurpation of the boy's dignity as an individual (and finally, of his life), and the public verification of their own power, both inside and outside of prison. The obviously active/passive performances conveyed by the act of rape, and the active/passive roles of the performers are non-negotiable, and rape becomes a brutal act of domination *per se*. This forced sexual act is traditionally linked to the male/female relational sphere. In the case of an all-men environment such as the prison, the subjugated males are emasculated and turned into "women." In this sense,

> Taking into considerations the roles of masculine identity

> in males, incarceration is in many ways an act of stripping ones "manhood". Self-determination, privacy, freedom, independence, employment, are all taken away and withheld from the individual upon entry to a corrections facility. Standard prison protocol for the newly admitted inmate is to break him down, to humiliate and put him into a position of obedience, of subordination, symbolically a feminine role. The prison environment thus becomes a vicious arena of power struggle; an all-male jungle where the Darwinian principles of the "survival of the fittest" come into play as a brutal pecking order is established among the inmates namely based on the very masculine traits of physical size and aggression. The motivation for rape and sexual domination among prisoners is not so much for sexual gratification, but rather as a display of the individual's masculine dominance over another prisoner by making the victim "a woman" through an act of sexual violence. (Kualapi World v2.0)

Hence, rape is not only an act of overt violence and a means to prove one's power, but it also reaffirms one's manhood. Rape within the prison system is a mark of dominant masculinity. Once again, Olmos portrays violence as a direct consequence of the sociohistorical context and setting in which it is performed. However, not all the violations in the movie are male-to-male. Some occur outside the prison walls and respond to the socially assimilated version of male-to-female sexual abuse and violation.

Rape is also present in Santana's relationship with Julie outside prison (which occurs after almost thirty years inside). Santana, who feels lost in the company of a woman, has his first heterosexual sexual encounter with her, in a highly violent scene. Even though their intercourse starts in a very romantic and conventionally heterosexual fashion, Santana ultimately rapes her—an act that will tear them apart forever. He experiences his own awkwardness as an act of weakness, both in the social sphere and in his most intimate personal relationships,

and this puts his masculinity into question. As a way out, he opts for the only device he knows to gain his respect and, thus, his dignity as a man: violence, thus fulfilling the *macho* curse:

> Chicano men, as marginalized men, have been structurally blocked from resources (i.e. good education and jobs) necessary for the performance of dominant male breadwinner masculinity, and instead they have often relied on aggressive behaviors, such as the use of physical force or the exercise of control over women, in order to assert their dominance and masculinity. (Baca Zinn in Orozco Flores 2013: 477)

Following this idea, we could add that, since Santana is an inmate and thus a doubly marginalized individual with no active role in the "outside" world, Julie's rape is afforded a further layer of meaning. It shows the inevitability of his violent attitude when it comes to relating to people. Santana has learnt that he is the man in charge and that he should therefore have access to whatever he wants, which in this case is Julie. In an extremely violent scene, Santana rapes Julie anally, revealing his homosexual practices and—ultimately—desires. Interestingly enough, the most *macho* males in prison—the dominating ones—practice homosexual rape in order to perform and assert their ruling masculinity. Chicano scholar Frederick Luis Aldama (2005) suggests that this is because "same-sex desire can be represented because, there is no alternative; same-sex lovemaking (men-men, women-women) is coded as a result of the lack of "natural" heterosexual coupling within the walls" (123).

However, the code of domination Santana has internalized and performed in prison never fulfills the same function in the outside world. Julie, who will eventually reject him for what he has done to her and for what he represents, will open a whole new world for him, which leaves Santana without relational resources. He now understands the need to assimilate a totally new language and code of behavior, or else return to his "natural" space—the prison system. Inside prison, he has power and

respect. Outside, he feels alien and awkward in a spatial and social context the norms of which he does not understand. Outside, he needs to learn how to become a man, to have feelings (and follow Mirandé's ethical model of masculinity). On the inside he does not need these feelings, as there he is "the Man":

> Inside prison, masculinity resources are severely limited. Inmates have the lowest status in the wider society, are without work, have little or no money, are unable to express heterosexuality, have no distinctive clothing, little autonomy, no freedom, and are likely to be poorly educated and from a racial or ethnic minority. Thus male inmates seeking interactional confirmation of their masculine status are much less able to exploit standard cultural markers of hegemonic masculinity: socio-economic status, a reputable profession, fashionable clothing, independence, whiteness, and heterosexuality. (…) Inmates believe it is necessary to present a hypermasculine public façade that may conflict with a more nuanced private identity. (Karp 2010: 66)

Once he has his freedom, this façade loses its validity. Outside of prison, and in a different hierarchical and organizational context, Santana loses his power. Many still regard him as a powerful man, the leader of *La Eme*, but others see him as just a man. This is the case with Julie, who not only does not recognize the gang as an entity worthy of respect, but even despises it. If he wants to survive in this new context, he needs to reinvent himself in a social space in which his priorities and his way of relating to others have to change. In this sense, Julie symbolizes the only sense of hope in the movie, as she is the only character that is able to escape the violence and fate of the *barrio*, leaving gang life behind and opting for an education and a way out. Julie and Santana's relationship is mutually affirming. Julie sticks to her idea to defend the future of the barrio kids, and to her total rejection of gang life, or—in sum—of everything Santana represents. For Santana, on the contrary, his encounter with this other life outside prison puts him in dialogue with a self, an identity, that he had fought to erase, in favor of a more stoic,

defensive, *macho* and, ultimately, aggressive self. Meeting Julie makes him see his other self, the one who has feelings and does not fear showing softness and social clumsiness. As he awaits death, he shares his recognition and acceptance of this other self, reflecting on Julie's words: "I see that you are right. Until now, I would have thought it a sign of weakness to even listen to what you said to me that night. I am two people" (*American Me*). This acceptance will lead him to "showing weakness" and, consequently, to his death.

American*, (Mexican), *Me

The hierarchical ethnic division, and the constant struggle for the preservation of this power structure, within Folsom Penitentiary is made obvious from the outset of the movie. *La Eme* rules the prison, and controls the drug trade within it. Similarly, the lives and movements of *La Eme's* members, the rest of the inmates, and even the guards are in the hands of this Mexican gang. Many scenes corroborate the clear ethnic division in the prison—especially in the prison yard—showing that the different groups do not relate to each other, except through the inevitable exchanges related to the drug-dealing business or when there is some kind of violent confrontation. An example of this occurs when *La Eme* burns a black convict to death after he tries to rip off the gang. Following this assassination, The Black Guerrilla Family tries and fails to confront *La Eme*.

Within the exaggeratedly homogenizing efforts of the prison system, which attempts to erase any hints of individuality—providing numbers for identification, uniforms, etc.—ethnic and cultural characteristics become indelible traits (in addition to physical ones) facilitating the grouping of the convicts within the penitentiary space. The convicts are organized into three main ethnic collectives that reinforce their difference to others while at the same time serving to homogenize them and their origins. As Santana himself explains: "[in prison] they ain't no barrios, just blacks, whites and Mexicans."

(*American Me*) Any attempt to divide the Mexican group—as occurs with the formation and gradual acquisition of power of another Mexican gang, *Nuestra Familia*—is brutally stopped, in this instance by the killing of Nuestra Familia leader Chucko Pérez, because, "It is not just about being weak that we can't accept. It's about other people even beginning to think we are showing weakness" (*American Me*). This hierarchical relationship is, again, performed through the exertion of indiscriminate and extreme violence. Santana and the other convicts not only represent the violence they exert upon others and themselves, but they are also the products of institutional violence, portrayed as intrinsic to the prison system.

The prison is visually presented as a violently enclosed space; it is a high security prison. The first minutes of the movie provide the viewer with a deep sense of enclosure and human degradation. The noise of iron doors opening and closing and the voice of a guard giving orders to the convicts (to undress, move, bend), create a setting that is clearly defined by discipline and lack of freedom. At the same time, the images of the prison exterior and some of the aerial shots give proof of this, revealing the prison as a compact, enclosed setting surrounded by barbed wire and security posts. But there seems, at the same time, to exist a lack of institutional control over the life inside. The presence of the guards is obvious and yet secondary to the real control, which is exerted by the inmates themselves. Santana Montoya, as the head of the leading gang, stands at the top of the hierarchical structure that governs life within the walls of Folsom Penitentiary. His power controls not only the drug-dealing business inside—and eventually outside—of prison, but also the lives and destinies of his fellow inmates, whose right to live is decided by *La Eme* and Santana. In his own words, "Power became our game. Power to provide everything you find outside. Power to make every inmate pay rent. (…) The Black Guerrilla Family and the Aryan Brotherhood shared the yards, but Folsom belonged to us. *La Eme*, the oldest *clicka*, the Mexican mafia." (*American Me*)

One could assume that within a system that deprives its members of all hints of individuality, and that endeavors to homogenize

them, parameters such as class and gender would not be essential in the graded divisions of social status. However, this movie shows how there are indeed class-structures within the homogenous institution of the prison, and race and gender—or the performance of a hypermasculine, aggressive, and subjugating gender and sexuality—are essential to the exertion of dominance of some, and the subsequent submission of others. In fact, "race is used as a method of rationalizing one's violent domination, as in the case of minority-cultured inmates who feel that their oppression should become someone else's" (Inside Prison).

***American*, (Violent), *Me:* Conclusions**

American Me portrays the lives and destinies of its protagonists as marked and conditioned by an inherently violent existence. Life is violent, both inside and outside, and the characters are forced to cohabit within this aggressive environment, which forms one of the most defining traits of their identity. Santana, in particular, embodies the complete amalgamation of institutional, social, and individual violence. His life is marked and decided by physical and psychological violence from the very outset. In Huaco-Nuzum's view, Santana is:

> a composite of many histories and complex social realities, which have made him who he is: a killer and a victim of his environment and social conditioning. Santana presents a stoic façade perfectly executed by Olmos, a figure devoid of affect who, when threatened by perceived danger, is able to mobilize quickly as a panther to disarm and exterminate his adversary—whether it be a member of his own "familia" or a rival gang. (2006: 92)

Huaco-Nuzum is clear about the cause–effect bond between one's social reality and environment, and one's individual identity. In Santana's case, everything began with rape and riots. His conception sets off an existence full of hatred, rejection, and the adoption of an aggressive

stance. His life inside prison is the struggle for the control and maintenance of honor, respect, and power, which he knows how to gain only by exerting violence against others, and—ultimately—against himself. His brief acquaintance with reality outside—with life in the barrio—presents the inevitability of a violent quotidian of violent relationships, and the violent pursuit of survival in a context marked by gangs, drugs, and lack of educational and social resources.

Violence thus grows to be essential to the development of individual identity, which, in the protagonist's self, becomes representative for the development of a defensive masculine identity that embraces the most negative aspects of what has been described as the key traits of Chicano masculinity. In sum, *American Me* portrays violence and masculinity as conjoined concepts that stand in a natural and essential relationship. In the hostile, subjugating environments of the prison and the barrio, they are essential to survival, causing men to appear unable to develop an identity that may show weakness, instead portraying them as survivors who, finally, subjugate the weak in a vicious and unbreakable circle. Santana is represented as a victim of his sociohistorical environment, and his attempts to break with this fate seem impossible and void. Even if *American Me* may be regarded as reductionist and as portraying a very fixed and stereotyped vision of Chicano masculinity—and Chicano prison masculinity in particular—it undoubtedly raises question concerning the effects established by a long history of social and personal alienation and subjugation; of stereotypes and normative notions of the self; of what a punitive prison system may do to the individual in general, and to a working class minority male individual in particular.

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