High Noon

From **AMERICAN ENCOUNTERS: GREATER MEXICO, THE UNITED STATES, AND THE EROTICS OF CULTURE** by JOSÉ E. LIMON (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998, pp. 115-118}

In 1954, I sat in a theatre at the age of nine with my parents and watched Kramer's *High Noon* in utter fascination. As a Mexican boy, but perhaps more boy than Mexican, I, like many other Americans, was wholly taken with Gary Cooper in the role of nineteenth-century town marshall Will Kane as he awaits the return of avenging gunfighters from Texas who have sworn to kill him at high noon. Most of the film's narrative space is occupied by this impending confrontation, but now, retrospectively, one sees that the next major allotment of attention goes to the figure of Helen Ramirez (played by Katy Jurado), the town. madam and Will Kane's former lover. Initially she is seen wholly within the tradition of the eroticized Mexican woman and she is explicitly and inevitably contrasted with Amy, Kane's new bride. A proper Quaker, Amy will not abide her husband's desire to keep his heroic masculinity intact by facing the impending storm of violence, and she decides to leave him. (Later she will abruptly change her mind.) Ramirez emerges from her initially stereotyped role in a more complicated fashion. As the film develops, we see that out of her very sexual marginality she has forged a distinctive yet still subversive identity within the town's repressive moral and political economy, an economy with which Kane lives in ambivalence.

Helen Ramirez's implied professional sexual practice with the Anglo male community has led to a "primitive accumulation of capital," which she has used to convert herself into a "legitimate" and competent businesswoman, the owner of a saloon and a store. Her combined sexual and economic power allows her to hold a certain sway over the town's white males; they make ritual, obsequious visits to her queenly apartment above the bar to curry her favor even as their repressed white wives (the film is densely populated by such figures) wait at home. But her struggle is not waged against other women as much as it is with Kane himself. He becomes a heroic antagonist to the cultural economy of the town, which out of cowardice and economic expedience refuses to support him in the coming fight. And it will soon become clear that he is a flawed hero, if he is a hero at all. In a long and telling middle scene, Ramirez and Kane confront each other at the height of his crisis of conscience, and it is abundantly clear from this scene and others that Kane has fully experienced her passion and still cares deeply for her, as does she for him.

Imbedded in their dialogue is a brief but rich exchange of deeply romantic words uttered in Spanish. In their brevity and without any translation, their full subversiveness was probably lost to the predominantly Anglo viewers of this film in the 1950s (and probably is even today). In Spanish, these words uttered by Kane as well as Ramirez - are resonant with passion and longing, and speak massive cultural volumes to any native member of the Spanish-speaking world: "Un año sin verte" (A year without seeing you) she says to him as she gazes deeply into his eyes; "Si, lo se" (Yes, I know) he answers, his eyes slightly averted from her strong gaze. That he, an Anglo, answers in such an informed Spanish is doubly subversive, for this makes it clear that their relationship has involved his entire sexual-cultural being. Indeed, sabe mucho - he knows a great deal, more than he will be willing to admit. But Ramirez also knows that the impending gunfight is not the only crisis Kane faces, and that in their own *mano a mano* he has capitulated to the "other side;" for we should recall that this is also the day of Kane's wedding to the prim and proper Amy. Helen Ramirez decides to leave town, since either way - through Kane's marriage or his death in the streets of Hadleyville - their past love and passion can never be fulfilled.

They will see each other only once again. By coincidence, Helen rides to the train station in a buggy with Amy (who, we recall, is also leaving town); they pass Kane standing in the street, awaiting his assailants. Amy looks away, but Helen's eyes lock onto Kane's, and through her eyes the camera holds him for a full five seconds as he returns her steady parting gaze even as he recedes from view. So why has this passionate romance failed? Why has he left her for Amy and the life of a small shopkeeper? Perhaps he simply loves Amy more than Helen Ramirez, but there is clearly more beneath the surface. He has internalized at least some of the town's sexual and racial codes and cannot bring himself to break with them even though his passion for Ramirez is so evident. She herself comments directly on this totalizing economy as she gets ready to leave town: "I hate this town. I've always hated it, to be a Mexican woman in a town like this." Kane leaves Helen for Amy, but it is evidently the case that Ramirez is the superior figure here in every respect. (Indeed, it is she who passionately convinces the other woman to go to Kane's assistance in his final moment of crisis, as the gunfight begins.)

At the end of the film, Kane and Amy emerge as the triumphant heroes, but it is also clear that they, and especially he, have both derived great strength from the presence of the racial-sexual "other" in the person of Helen Ramirez in their lives, even as he has denied her full claim on his sexual and moral sensibility. She will, of course, lose Kane and leave town, but this is not total defeat. Indeed, for Mexicans in the United States watching this film, often in segregated theaters, this is not defeat at all but rather a tactical victory in what Antonio Gramsci calls "the war of position." In her final scene, as the camera focuses on Katy Jurado's strong, beautiful, and Mexican face looking back over the town from the train, we indeed clearly sense that Helen Ramirez has achieved some large measure of victory in this contest.

But even this most critical of films for this period of history gives way to the dominant culture, as at the end it too quickly erases Ramirez's strong Mexican presence to make narrative way for the white couple to be reunited after the climactic gunfight, triumphant heroes of the rising yet repressed bourgeois social order of the later nineteenth century. It is an erasure repeated today in critical discussions of the film.

In a recent assessment of *High Noon*, Cecilia Tichi reads Will Kane as another representative of an Emersonian vision of the heroic American self-reliant hero. But this particular hero, I submit, has a serious flaw, serious enough for us to question his heroism or at least to note its limits, and by implication those of this Emersonian tradition. In her analysis, Tichi accounts for most of the principal players in the film - Kane and the bandits, of course, as well as Amy and the townspeople - but her insight gives way to blindness to anything that would question Kane as a figure of self-reliance, which is possibly why, inexplicably, Tichi says not one word about Helen Ramirez. Kane is no hero, not when viewed from the margins of his own town of Hadleyville. While conventionally heroic as a man who will risk even his marriage for honor and manhood, as Tichi suggests, Kane fails in another direction. I submit that his defense of his honor and manhood in the face of gunfighters is not the whole of his story. Since his climactic meeting with Helen, he has also labored with his own racially motivated moral failure to respond fully to her plenitude and thereby to transcend the dominant racialized political-economic moral order. Even as he survives the gunfight and restores his commitment to Amy, it is nonetheless clear that his prim and proper new petty-bourgeois world has been forever and primally destabilized by his prior knowledge of the "other" and his concomitant failure to live up to his other obligations as a man, to be true to his desire for that other. Helen Ramirez's parting gaze is on him forever, and "un año sin verte" and other years to come may never be enough to undo her powerful incursion into Will Kane's life, an incursion which for viewers in the 1950s and today destabilizes the dominant social order as it affirms a Mexican presence and agency. (And it seems that perhaps with this film art imitated life and vice versa. In the late 1920s, the actor Gary Cooper had had an affair with a then emerging Mexican-American Hollywood actress, Lupe Velez, the famous "Mexican Spitfire." He

broke it off when his parents objected to her race.)

(Note: For another, even more political interpretation of this narrative, see Gary Cooper y el macartismo (http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2002/oct02/021006/sem-gary.html).)