

¡Mami, qué buena estás! Representations of the Immigrant Woman in "Sobreviviré" (1999) and "I Love You Baby" (2001)
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¡Mami, qué buena estás! Representations of the Immigrant Woman in *Sobreviviré* (1999) and *I Love You Baby* (2001)

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In the past decade, significant political and social reforms have transformed Spain into a "new nation," bringing about a new sense of national identity by fundamentally altering, in Benedict Anderson's terms, collective modes of imagining citizenship. Despite seemingly progressive changes in the political arena of gender and sexuality, including the legalization of same-sex marriage and laws requiring gender parity in government and industry, popular representations continue to reinforce gender oppression, especially when focused on the figure of the female immigrant. Although representations of immigrant women are diverse and multifaceted, one important tendency is the construction of identity through moral qualities, especially sexuality. In this article, I examine two recent films, *Sobreviviré* and *I Love You Baby,* directed by Alfonso Albacete and David Menkes and screen-written by Lucía Etxebarria and Alfonso Albacete. Both of these films are considered popular, lighthearted comedies. I argue, however, that in the representational arena both films allude to a threat to national identity posed by the immigration influx that is displaced onto representations of the female body.

The character of the immigrant woman has recently emerged in

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Spanish film and literature. Two different interpretations exist of the immigrant woman—that of sexualized, exotic other and that of motherly caretaker. In my analysis of the two films directed by Menkes and Albacete and written by Etxebarria and Albacete, I show that the immigrant woman character serves as first one and then the other manifestation of the female immigrant. Drawing on the work of Anne McClintock, I suggest that these two films bring attention to the plight of these women by equating sexuality with nationality, therefore questioning the inherent yet imagined definition of Spanish nationalism.

I examine the colonization of the immigrant woman's body, a space used to reinforce the patriarchal tradition through heteronormativity. I analyze the contemporary representations of immigrant women in three arenas—their work, their reproductive ability, and their sexuality—to show that, despite questioning other Spanish cultural norms, these films continue to view immigrant women in Spanish society through the lens of heteronormativity and racial stereotypes. The two immigrant women, Rosa in *Sobreviviré* and Marisol in *I Love You Baby*, represent negative stereotypes, especially in regards to sexuality.

In both of these films, the manner in which the immigrant woman is represented reinforces imperialism's hold over women's bodies. These films depict immigrant women as embodying an uncontained sexuality that exceeds normative female sexuality in its promiscuity, aggression, and predatory miscegenation. I see this portrayal as a reaction against Spain's problematic interaction with immigrants, since until recently, Spain has been a country more prone to emigration than immigration (Solé and Parella 121). Isabel Santaolalla explains that the earlier lack of attention given to ethnicity and race in Spain is understandable as, "Spain had been officially 'constructed' as an ethnically homogeneous country" during Franco's dictatorship (44). In diverse cultural and historical discourses, national identity is secured via the emphasis on a "pure" sexuality—heterosexual acts that produce purebred children to ensure the continuance of the nation. Until recently, threats to this urge toward national purity were seen most frequently in the figure of the Spanish gypsy.[1] However, in recent years, due not only to the influx of immigrants but also due to the unique sociopolitical situation of Spain, the figure of the immigrant is portrayed as a menace to privileged and normative sexuality and to national identity. The dynamics of this nationalism and sexuality configuration are particularly salient because these recent shifts in patterns of migration have brought issues of national identity to the forefront.

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Anne McClintock, in her work *Imperial Leather*, posits that women are symbolic bearers of the nation who are denied any national agency (354). McClintock states that "nations are frequently figured through the iconography of familial and domestic space," explaining the importance of the family trope in nationalistic talk (357). If nationalism is gendered, as McClintock suggests, and women are "active transmitters and producers of national culture" (355), what happens if the women who reproduce are not members of the primary racial group of the nation in which they breed? If these women are also denied agency, their children necessarily become part of a second-class citizenry. In both movies, danger comes from the biological aspect of reproduction of the immigrant woman. What does this mean for Spanish nationalism?

For Spain, the question of nationalism is problematic, with issues of autonomy for Catalunya, Euskadi Herria, and Galicia being at the center of these problems. When the language spoken in Spain is no longer Spanish but Castilian, the definition of "Spanish" becomes more complicated. Stephen Jacobson states that "Spain represents a vivid illustration of the capacities, problems and challenges that Europeans possess and have faced in balancing, manipulating and negotiating multiple allegiances and identities [. . .]," especially with issues of unification, globalization, and immigration (395). When we open up this discussion to countries colonized by Spain, Spanishness becomes even more convoluted. The "mother country" of Spain gave birth to offspring of Spanish speakers in the Americas; are these offspring not, in at least some way, Spanish? When these same products, centuries removed, return to Spain, they are immigrants, not citizens. This makes the question of Latin American immigration into Spain much more complicated.

Spain's history of immigration differs from other Western European countries in that until the 1980s, Spain was a country of emigration rather than immigration. Due to the country's strict economic policy under the Franco regime, many Spaniards chose to work outside of Spain in order to support their families. Spain began its economic climb in the 1960s when Franco opened the country to tourism and started its real economic growth during the 1990s, after becoming part of the European Union in 1986. Today, Spain's immigrants comprise 8.7 percent of the total population, with an estimated 650,000 immigrants arriving yearly in Spain (Tremlett 11).

Even with the increasing number of immigrants in Spain, in literature and mainstream popular culture, the female immigrant's voice

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has been silent until recently. In *La inmigración en la literatura española contemporánea*, the authors point to the fact that there are very rare examples of a male immigrant as literary character and even fewer of a female immigrant (Andres-Suárez, Kunz, and d'Ors 134). The movies discussed here generate three different areas of representation of immigrant women, strengthening the argument of the woman immigrant portrayed as a threat to nationality: employment, sexuality, and biological reproduction. I would like to first start with a brief description of the films in order to more fully understand the importance of the female immigrant in each movie.

In the back cover description, the film *I Love You Baby* is described as a "delightful, irreverent romantic comedy where boy meets boy who then meets girl and all become more confused than ever" (*I Love You Baby)*. The film tells the story of Marcos, played by Jorge Sanz, a young Spaniard who moves to Madrid from his small town to work at his uncle's restaurant. Marcos becomes involved with Daniel until one day, while singing karaoke, Marcos is knocked unconscious with a disco ball and "becomes" straight again. Marcos then starts a relationship with Marisol, played by Mexican actress Tiaré Scanda, a "fiery, passionate" (*I Love You Baby*) Dominican woman, whom he eventually marries. The movie deals with many stereotypes, such as gay men, country boy in the big city, and gay man's best girl friend. Here, though, I focus only on the portrayal of Marisol, the Dominican woman.

The second movie *Sobreviviré* presents the stories of Marga, a single mom and, in a subplot, of Rosa, played by Cuban actress Mirta Ibarra, an illegal Cuban immigrant to Spain. As the plot moves forward, the viewer learns that Rosa used to work as a cabaret dancer in Cuba, where she met a Spaniard who brought her to Spain. He was abusive, and although she had no legal means to stay in the country, she left him. She becomes the live-in help for Marga, who owns her own video store, and her infant son Tito, while working in a salsa bar to help pay her way.

The first area of representation is the employment status of the two characters. There are those in the Spanish government, such as proponents of the Partido Popular (PP), who claim that nationwide amnesty for immigrants is harmful to the Spanish economy, as it takes away jobs from citizens and causes rifts in Spanish society (Solé and Parella 129). However, due to Spain's low birthrate and high number of senior citizens, workers from other countries are needed in Spain, especially to fill jobs that national workers reject. This leads to an "ethno-stratifica-

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tion of the job market, whereby immigrants are employed in the lowest positions, not because of a lack of qualifications but rather [. . .] due to the discriminatory practices of employers in the state itself" (Solé and Parella 124). This same study shows that 26.4 percent of immigrants are involved in domestic service, and most of these workers are women (123). The Organic Law 7/1985, popularly known as the Ley de Extranjería, along with its three later amendments in 1991, 1996, and 2000, sets up what Solé and Parella call the "institutional framework of discrimination," condemning immigrants who enter illegally to take part in the hidden economy (127).

We see this phenomenon in both movies, as Marisol works in house cleaning and Rosa works as a nanny as well as in the bar. Gwendolyn Foster explains that there is a need to remap cinema history (she refers to American cinema) "as the center of struggle over ownership of the body," which reminds us that "cinema has been mired in the Master's discourse" (6). Foster sees the body as a site of struggle against colonial practice (6); in these movies, however, the body of the immigrant figure works as a site of heteronormativity directed at questioning the space that the immigrant occupies in Spain. There is no struggle against colonialism, nor is there a work toward integration of the colonial subject. Instead, the viewer sees the debasement of the female figure through her portrayal as a domestic worker who lacks agency in the film as well as positive representation in popular media. The question of the immigrant's access to agency becomes all the more dubious when remembering that the narrative discourse of the film is based on the Master's forming of the immigrant character to use as a trope for nationality in this postcolonial era.

Many of these immigrants are women coming to serve in the domestic industry; although Spain is "hiring," many still come to Spain illegally, looking for work that seemed to be waiting for them. Some of them also had families in their home countries, creating what is termed by Deborah Bryceson as the "transnational family" (31). These women tend other people's children in Spain while their own children live without them in their home country. This phenomenon creates a new issue for immigration policies in Spain. Whereas the African immigrants do not share language and religious similarities, the Latin American immigrants speak Spanish and are generally Catholic, creating much more of a mix between cultures. When Spain's birthrate began to drop, either related to newfound access to birth control or to the entrance of women into the workplace, the government began looking for ways to add to its working

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population. Since the former colonies share similar cultural attributes, such as language and religion, Spain began recruiting workers from the Spanish-speaking Americas, especially from Latin American countries, in order to ease the transition for the newly arrived immigrants.

Although the language and religious difference do not apply to Latina immigrants in Spain, many other negative stereotypes exist. Women immigrants tend to have a negative stereotype that Bonnie Thornton Dill defines as women with too many children who come to the host country for government handouts, who can't speak the language, and who have extreme sexual appetites. These stereotypes return frequently, both in Spain and in other countries, when talking about those who do not have access to what many consider the basic needs of a twenty-first century citizen—education, medical service, and employment. The sexuality insinuated and performed by the two immigrant women in the films comes from two different and opposing directions: unbridled sexuality and mothering.

Both Marisol and Rosa are portrayed as stereotypes of their cultures; their clothes, accents, and mannerisms bring their Caribbean background to the forefront. The women's physical portrayal marks them from the beginning as other and as sexual. Their costumes first single them out as other. Marisol, when not working as a domestic, wears red or black tight-fitting clothing with her long, wavy, black hair covering her back. Rosa wears revealing clothes, such as short, tight, black leather miniskirts and low-cut blouses. These outfits stand out all the more when shown next to their Spanish counterparts, who are dressed in nondescript, uninteresting clothing, most likely in order to make the Dominican and Cuban women more apparent and recognizable.

One scene from *Sobreviviré* that adds to the stereotype of the immigrant woman shows Rosa talking to Marga's mother, Carmen. Rosa is dressed provocatively as she prepares for a night out with Marga. As Marga's mother sits, Rosa fixes her a mojito, explaining that this typical Cuban drink is just what she needs. As Carmen talks to Rosa about the problems Marga has, Rosa speaks in clichés, such as "hay que echarle azúcar a la vida; si no puede ser bastante amarga," reassuring her with these trite sayings while also reinforcing her Cubanness. She tells Carmen that Marga needs to go out dancing, and that she, Rosa Rosario de la Cruz Figueroa Vargas y Sánchez, will make sure that Marga dances salsa all night long—all stated in the (stereo)typical Cuban accent of swallowed syllables and lilting intonations.

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Another scene, from *I Love You Baby*, takes place in a Dominican restaurant and club. While Marisol is trying to insinuate herself into Marcos's vision, she chats with the club owner, who tells her that his places gets raided nightly by the police looking for drugs and illegals. He explains that he runs a clean business, but yet the police continue to try to catch him. That a Dominican-run club receives more negative attention is indicative of a deeper overall lack of confidence in the immigrant's trustworthiness.

This scene, one of the few that really addresses problems and stereotypes of immigrants in a non-derogatory way, quickly passes, and the film transitions to scenes from the dance club below where Marisol dances with Marcos. When she talks to Marcos, he must continually ask her to repeat herself, not due to the music that surrounds them, but due to her manner of speaking. She, too, speaks in a Caribbean accent that separates her from the Spaniards. The dancing marks a separation between the Dominicans who frequent the club and the Spaniard with whom she dances. All around Marisol, people dance sinuously, while Marcos is unable to keep the beat. She tells him to hold her closer and tell her pretty things like Dominican men do. When he asks her what to say, she replies, "Como –Mami, ¡qué buena estás!" Everyone in the club sings along with the lyrics of the song ("Amor, amor") and the background fades to a tropical island while the music continues and only Marisol and Marcos are left in the scene dancing. This fade-out serves as a tool to reinforce the idea of other that surrounds Marisol. The music, the dancing, and even the food served in the restaurant mean nothing to Marcos in his Spanish life. The island scene in the background strengthens this feeling, along with creating a sense of otherness for Marisol. She is no longer just a beautiful woman; she is a dominicana, a statement that she repeats throughout the movie.

The women's sexuality denotes them as non-Spanish. Both women embrace their sexuality and do not understand the other characters' timidity when broaching sexuality. In both movies, the main female character must cope with the homosexual past of her male counterpart. Although the homosexual Spanish male characters continue to have homosexual encounters, the heterosexual Spanish female character, Marga, can only wait for her man to realize that he loves her, while the non-Spanish female characters accept the homosexual tendencies and work to keep their men. Marisol, when first dating Marcos, cannot understand why their relationship does not progress quickly. In one scene, the

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two travel overnight in a bus to see the ocean. Upon arrival, they decide to get undressed and plunge into the water. Marisol, however, expects this to be a sexual encounter, while Marcos naively plans only to swim in the ocean. When she discovers Marcos's homosexual past, she makes him choose between what she can give him (children) and what Daniel can offer (nothing).

Rosa's past drops her squarely into the role of sexual tigress, as she spent years as a dancer at a cabaret in La Habana before coming to Spain. Her discussions with Marga generally revolve around Marga's son or relationships with men. Rosa becomes involved with and eventually marries a Spanish man who works as a transvestite actor, showing her openness to nontraditional gender portrayals, whereas Marga's relationship with a gay man fails due to her inability to accept that he can be faithful to and love only her.

The female immigrant body exhibits an uncontained sexuality that exceeds the boundaries of normative heterosexuality, which in these movies is placed in opposition not only to traditional heterosexual relationships but also to homosexual ones. By equating this unbridled sexuality with the immigrant, racial or national identity shifts from being a question of geo-political interest to one of moral interest, and the dominant paradigm wins. Both immigrant women finish the movie married to Spanish men; Rosa continues to serve as nanny to a Spanish child, while the Spanish character, Marga, remains unmarried, and Marisol marries her Spanish lover and becomes a baby maker, as is stereotypically believed to happen to immigrant women.

The question of families and biological reproduction also leads to stereotypical views of female immigrants. According to recent statistics, even though immigrants are only 8.7 percent of the population, immigrant women counted for 16.5 percent of births in Spain in 2006 ("El número de hijos por mujer alcanza su cifra récord en 15 años en España"). Immigrant women are seen as both saviors and destroyers when it comes to the reproduction of children. After the death of Franco, Spain's birthrate steadily decreased. However, since 1998 the Spanish birthrate has begun to increase a small portion of a percent each year.[2] For actual population growth, this increase in the birthrate is valuable; for national identity, however, the percentage of non-Spanish mothers can lead to problematic concepts of the immigrant's position in Spain. Politically and economically, the public response to these numbers has been largely positive, as the progressive government of Spain views both the increase

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in the number of children born and the entrance of immigrant workers as good for the Spanish economy (Tremlett 11). In the sphere of popular culture, however, the response is more ambivalent, as we see in these films. The immigrant woman's body and her ability to reproduce serves as a trope of nationality, which is then articulated in terms of sexuality. McClintock's statement that women are constructed as symbolic bearers of the nation without national agency supports the argument here. The immigrant women who have children in Spain add to the nation, and yet they continue to lack representation and many times are denied basic rights as illegal non-citizens.

In 1999, the Spanish congress passed a law called "Rights and liberties of foreign-born nationals and their integration into society," which dismisses the distinction between illegal and legal immigrants in questions of education and medical care, as well as establishing a system for the legalization of immigrants who can prove residence in Spain for two years (Solé and Parella 128). All along, Spain has had a policy for family reunification, but the member of the family who lives in Spain must prove job, home, and sustainability before the family members are allowed into Spain. As in other countries, families may be reunited through marriage; therefore, if an immigrant, legal or illegal, marries a Spaniard, the new couple can bring over the immigrant's children or parents. This policy, which is like that of the US, calls into question the validity of a marriage between an immigrant and a Spaniard.[3] These two movies underline this question by emphasizing the fact that Marisol would like to be reunited with her daughter and Rosa with her mother.

The movies advertise themselves as light-hearted romantic comedies. Superficially, this is true. The main story lines deal with a boy-meets-girl premise with a few twists. In *Sobreviviré*, Rosa, the Cuban woman, is a supporting actress, not a main character, her role being to serve as sidekick to Marga. Even in this minor role, though, her nationality becomes a point of focus and a point of otherness. *I Love You Baby* has Marisol as a main character, but her persona is always shown within the confines of her Dominican background—at the dance club, talking on the phone to her daugher in the DR, with her other (black) Dominican friends. Her friends even joke with her when she tells them that she does not like Dominican men, only Spanish ones, calling her "blanquita" and "española," reminding her that she does not belong to Spain.

By continuing to focus on the otherness of the immigrant woman, these films reinforce ethnic stereotypes and promote the view of immi-

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grants as others. By then underlining aspects such as their dress, their sexuality, and their biological reproduction, the films take on a more nefarious project of marketing immigrants as dangerous to Spanish purity. In "Ethnic and Racial Configurations in Contemporary Spanish Culture," Isabel Santaolalla explains that film, TV sitcoms, and advertising can be used to follow changing patterns of ethnic and cultural identity in Spanish culture (56). Santaolalla also states that, in the past few years, Spanish popular culture has begun to produce, instead of represent, ideological and rhetorical mechanisms (56). The move from representation to production marks a significant change in the way culture affects society. When culture represents society, the outcome is that viewers recognize themselves in the portrayal of the characters on the screen. When popular media performs culture by creating and producing it, viewers do not recognize where the verisimilitude ends and the performance begins, sometimes causing non-issues to become problems. She suggests that the texts of many films carry a pseudo-liberal view of immigration by showing the discrepancy between the expectations and realities of the immigrant in Spain and by advancing the fantasy of Spain's integration into the European Union as a country that attracts immigrants (62).

In another article, "The Representation of Ethnicity and 'Race' in Contemporary Spanish Cinema," Santaolalla posits that "the cinema had an important role to play in these attempts at reimagining the Nation, rewriting its history" (44). She continues, explaining that there is a need to identify the film industry's portrayal of "enduring domestic practices, foreign influences and [...] the ideological content underpinning the contexts of production and consumption" (45). Santaolalla mentions various other movies that broach similar topics dealing with prejudice toward immigrants, which she hopes will "persuade Spaniards that Spanish-American immigration should, at the very least, invite reflection on Spain's imperialist past and on the specialness of the American colonies" (49). Gwendolyn Foster claims that "active Postcolonial spectatorship and decolonization of the specter and folds of seemingly impenetrable master narratives are not only a workable means of mediating and locating culture, but also an ongoing recovery process" (26).

In these movies, however, I see the transformation of race or national identity in terms of moral qualities, such as sexuality. These films depict immigrant women as sexual predators, drawing associations between "immigrant" and "sexual impurity." This displaces what should be a question of racial identity into moral qualities. These associations of

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female immigrant and sexual threat become naturalized—and almost unnoticed—through representational works such as *Sobreviviré* and *I Love You Baby.* Although the miscegenational, heteronormative relationship "wins" in this movie, the portrayal of the Spanish man as "hunted" and "caught" by the sexual and sinuous dominicana does nothing to improve or to question current immigration issues in Spain. Instead, it supports a fear of the other. For now, Spanish women must "win" their man from not only other men but also from immigrant women whose bodies are sites of sexualized fantasy.

Immigrant women suffer from quadruple discrimination—by being women, immigrants, ethnic minorities, and working in "invisible" sectors of the workforce—they also have to contend with the negative social construction of their bodies as sites of sexuality and childbearing ("Inmigración femenina"). In these films, the representation of immigrant women reinforces imperialism on women's bodies. The films depict immigrant women as embodying an uncontained sexuality that exceeds normative female sexuality in its promiscuity, aggression, and predatory miscegenation. I see this portrayal as a reaction against immigration in Spain and furthering the racist responses to the influx of immigrants, which have become more overt and frequent (Woodworth 73).

According to a recent article in *El País,* Spain is one of the most tolerant countries, a country that does not suffer from racism or xenophobia, citing that in a recent poll, 82 percent responded that they do not mind having an immigrant neighbor (Barbería). Although *El País*'s poll is based on a rather low standard for xenophobia (not minding having a neighbor), it signals that a certain level of tolerance is either a part of Spaniards' subjectivities or that, at least, Spaniards recognize that performing good citizenship includes publicly declaring tolerance. An article in *The Guardian* states that in 2005, Spain took in over 650,000 immigrants, reaching a record 8.7 percent of the population. Many of these immigrants come from North Africa, especially Morocco, bringing a clearly racialized and colonial flavor to the immigrant issue. Regardless of *El País*'s poll, the immigrant problem is deeply troubling to many who fear that such a huge influx of immigrants into Spain will change Spain's cultural and racial complexion, a worry that has provoked tensions. In the public arena, immigration is often constructed through the discourse of demography, evoking racial anxieties about the genetic future of Spanish self-proclaimed whiteness. When statistics on birthrate insist on the influence of non-native mothers, questions begin to form about the definition

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of Spain as a nation and national identity. In this paper, I have argued that threats to national identity posed by the immigration influx are displaced onto representations of the bodies of female immigrants. These films are only two examples of what I see as a larger and more difficult situation in dealing with immigration in Spain.

NOTES

[1] Please see Isabel Santaolalla's article for a more in-depth look at representations of gypsies in recent Spanish film.

[2] For exact numbers of increase, please see www.ine.es.

[3] For another movie that addresses the question of the validity of marriage in the US, please see *Greencard* (1990), directed by Peter Weir.

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