Tanto de aquí como de allá: New Representations of the Illegal Immigrant Experience in *La misma luna* (2007) and *7 soles* (2009)

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Mexican undocumented immigration to the United States is the single most complex and difficult issue currently facing these two countries according to David Maciel and María Rosa García-Acevedo (148). Describing the situation in the late 1990s, a few short years after the passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement in 1994, they asserted that immigration was an issue of intense political debate that was receiving extensive media coverage and attention from the academic community and policy makers. A decade later, the uproar on illegal immigration from Mexico to the United States has provoked the passing of SB 1070 in Arizona and Ordinance 5165 in Fremont, Nebraska in 2010, and HB 27 in Georgia and HB 56 in Alabama in 2011, thus confirming that the politics and popular debate north of the border has changed little since.[1] Although the issue has not received the same degree of attention in politics and media outlets in Mexico, the views there also have been largely negative, with some regarding immigration as a national embarrassment and others as a threat to Mexican identity. At the same time, as immigration flows have increased, the remittances sent back to Mexico by immigrants

[1] SB 1070 is one of the strictest and far-reaching pieces of legislation regarding immigration in U.S. history. According to information provided by the National Conference of State Legislatures, the Arizona bill "includes provisions adding state penalties relating to immigration law enforcement including trespassing, harboring and transporting illegal immigrants, alien registration documents, employer sanctions, and human smuggling." (Morse). It was signed into law by the Gov. Jan Brewer on April 23, 2010 and went into effect on July 30, 2010. However, on July 28, 2010 U.S. District Judge Susan Bolton ordered an injunction to block the more controversial aspects of the law (Riccardi). Similar bills have also been introduced in other states, some quite distant from the U.S-Mexico border, including South Carolina, Pennsylvania and Minnesota (Morse) in 2010, and in Georgia and Alabama in 2011. None of this is surprising given the current economic climate in the country—the debates on illegal immigration have historically been more heated during such periods.

have contributed significantly to the national economy, and in recent years have come in second or third after petroleum and direct foreign investment (Coronado).[2]

It is in the context of these contemporary circumstances that I examine two recent Mexican feature films that focus on the topic of illegal immigration to the United States: Patricia Riggen's *La misma luna* (2007) and Pedro Ultreras's *7 soles* (2008). Both repeat themes and strategies of earlier films on this topic in Mexican cinema, but also diverge from their predecessors in important ways that reflect more recent trends in migration patterns as well as the directors' unique viewpoints as border-crossing, transnational subjects. For although Riggen and Ultreras may not be members of the working class like the people they portray in their films, they have migrated to the United States themselves, and are therefore representing the issues from a closer and more personal perspective. Their films deliberately challenge the representations of immigrants and immigration issues in both Mexican cinema and in real life.

While the films are feature-length debuts for the two filmmakers, they each attracted the participation of well-recognized figures from the Mexican entertainment industry. In the case of *La misma luna*, this included popular telenovela and film actress Kate del Castillo, as well as a host of familiar faces from the large and small screen on both sides of the border, including America Ferrera, title character of the successful ABC T.V. show *Ugly Betty*, Eugenio Derbez, a well-known comedic actor from Mexican television and film, and even one of the *grande dames* of Mexican cinema, María Rojo. Although *7 soles* features a much smaller cast, it also relied on more well-known faces in key roles, in this instance Gustavo Sánchez Parra, probably best recognized for his role as Jarocho in Alejandro González Iñárritu's *Amores perros* (2001), and Evangelina Sosa, who has acted in numerous mainstream and independent productions in Mexican television and film. The reliance on famous faces connects these films to the longer history of cinema on border and immigration themes in Mexico, in the main a popular and mainstream body of film. Yet several of these actors have appeared in less commercial and more independent films, suggesting that the directors wanted to add a more serious and intellectually respectable cast to their projects.

La misma luna and *7 soles* portray similar situations: illegal journeys northward driven by dire economic necessity and involving many perils, one showcasing an individual child traveling on his own and the other a group of illegal immigrants guided

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[2] As might be expected, the recent recession in the U.S. has had an impact on immigration rates and the flow of remittances back to Mexico. While the initial impact was negative, this trend reversed somewhat in 2010 and 2011. According to an article published in *El Universal* in June 2011, remittances rose 4.66% in April of 2011. This was the seventh consecutive month that remittances from abroad –the majority of which come into Mexico from the U.S.- maintained a positive growth rate. In 2010 remittances registered a slight increase of 0.12%, the first positive performance since 2008. The piece also confirmed Coronado's claim that remittances are the second largest source of foreign exchange after oil exports and have made Mexico the largest recipient in Latin America. ("Remesas de mexicanos suben 4.66%")

by a pair of coyotes. This follows a pattern established very early on in films on this subject: the dangerous, and frequently tragic, crossing of the border—often made more treacherous by encounters with unscrupulous and exploitative people, in addition to the natural dangers like searing deserts or rushing rivers. Interestingly enough, both titles make reference to the opposing celestial bodies of the sun and the moon. In both instances these serve as deeper symbols as well as concrete references to real situations: "the same moon" unites a mother and son and represents their bond of love ("Look out your window at night and you will see the same moon as I do," she tells him); the "7 soles" count seven days—the time it takes the group to cross the desert from Mexico to the U.S., a trek that in this case ends tragically. The titles evoke the tone and plot of the films as well: a heartwarming story of a love that transcends great distances (*La misma luna*) versus a harrowing and intense story of a deadly week in the desert (*7 soles*).

Both films focus on families separated because a parent has emigrated to the United States in search of a more secure economic situation, although different catalysts motivate the family members who are left behind in Mexico to migrate north. In Riggen's film it is the death of a young boy's grandmother and threats of unscrupulous relatives that lead him to undertake the journey to reunite with his mother in Los Angeles; in Ultreras's film, a father who has been living and working in Chicago for over six years while his wife and children live with her parents in rural Mexico pays a coyote to cross them so they can be together once more. In both instances, the journeys are fraught with difficulties. In the case of *7 soles*, this leads to multiple deaths, including those of the mother and son of the family who hopes to be reunited far north of the border.

The gut-wrenching stories of families torn apart locate the films squarely within another long-standing tradition in Mexican film: the family melodrama, a further indication that the directors utilized strategies to increase the appeal of their films to a wider audience. In this sense, one might characterize them as hybrid films that maintain certain elements of commercial genres like the family melodrama and the immigrant-border film, yet they also deviate from the historically dominant trends of these genres in notable ways. Although the stories are designed to trigger an emotional response and move their audiences, they are melodramatic without excessively distorting reality or resorting to degrading sensationalism. And in contrast to the majority of immigrant-themed films, which tend to be highly negative and one-dimensional in their portrayals of the experience and those involved in it (cruel and callous coyotes, exploitative gringo employers, long-suffering and down-trodden immigrant victims), these films express a more overtly pro-immigrant stance, convey a greater awareness of real issues, and are more nuanced in their treatment of the topic in general.

The cinema on border and immigrant themes with which these films so overtly dialogue for the most part has offered nothing but distortions, myths and stereotypes. Norma Iglesias-Prieto asserts that the majority of these films distance the spectator from the social issues that stem from Mexican immigration to the U.S. and reinforce the

belief that social problems are derived from individual behavior, or are the result of destiny or bad luck. She rightly observes that very rarely has migration been shown as the complex phenomena it really is (13). *La misma luna* and *7 soles* represent a continuation of the genre, but they also demonstrate a serious effort to present immigration in a more enlightened way. Their films offer a more immigrant-centered viewpoint and understanding of the experience, avoiding sensationalistic stories of abuse and suffering designed to instill fear or show the shame of being uprooted and relocated in a strange land. Riggen's film presents a heartfelt, feel-good tale with a happy outcome; Ultreras offers viewers a heartbreaking, harrowing and unflinching focus on the tragic aspects of illegal border-crossing. Both seek to present stories with which audiences can connect and that express solidarity with the very people whose lives they represent.

Another major difference between earlier films on this subject and these more recent ones is that in the former the return to Mexico was portrayed as the most natural outcome of events (in the Golden Age in particular, this type of ending served the didactic purposes of the film). In contrast, in *La misma luna* and *7 soles*, going north is inevitable and the return to Mexico is not presented as a likely option. This is likely due to the fact that by the early twenty-first century, immigration from Mexico to the U.S. had reached much higher proportions due both to the passage of NAFTA in 1994 and as a result of the broader phenomenon of globalization. In fact, according to data provided by the Migration Policy Institute, immigrants from Mexico ranked as the highest of the foreign-born population in the U.S. at 28.1% in 2009 (this is down from 30.1% in 2008 and 30.7% in 2006, a pattern that reflects the recent downward trend in immigration flows in light of the U.S. recession that began at the end of 2007[3]).

Both films clearly seek to represent the reality of the Mexican diaspora as it exists today, in particular as it relates to the experience of illegal immigration. *La misma luna* and *7 soles* draw on popular genres and strategies, but attempt to be more thoughtful in their representations; they reach out to a particular audience (immigrants and would be immigrants) and strive to portray the experiences of this group in a humane and compassionate way. Despite the recourse to commercial formulas that have not always treated immigration themes in the most enlightened manner, these films mark a promising turn in the treatment of this topic in Mexican cinema. Moreover, as Maricruz Castro Ricalde reminds us, "the representations and symbols

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[3] Batalova and Terrazas report that "According to Mexico's National Survey of Occupations and Employment (ENOE), the emigration rate from Mexico appears to have slowed recently from 10.8 migrants per 1,000 Mexican residents in spring 2007 to 8.4 per 1,000 Mexican residents in spring 2008 to 5.5 per 1,000 Mexican residents in spring 2009 and to 4.6 per 1,000 Mexican residents in spring 2010. The immigration rate to Mexico (i.e., the number of people who move to Mexico from abroad, who are overwhelmingly return migrants) remained relatively stable over the same period, fluctuating between 3.2 and 5.9 migrants per 1,000 Mexican residents."

proffered by popular cinema are anchored in reality. To study them then becomes a necessity for those interested in the exploring the identities of both nations" (194).

La misma luna opened simultaneously in theaters in Mexico and the United States in March 2008 after screenings at various film festivals throughout North America in 2007.[4] It broke the box-office record in the U.S. for the highest grossing opening weekend for a Spanish- language film ($2,770,000). The film received support from some important production companies in Mexico and the U.S., among them Fidecine (Fondo de Inversión y Estímulos al Cine[5]) and The Weinstein Company; major companies, including Twentieth Century Fox and Fox Searchlight, handled distribution. These details confirm that on some level the aspirations and impact of the film were commercial success and more mainstream appeal.

In contrast to *La misma luna*, *7 soles* was a much smaller scale, grassroots-level production. It involved a very small cast of characters, mainly comprised of actors from the Phoenix and Sonoran theater scenes and non-professionals, although it did enlist, as mentioned, Sánchez Parra and Sosa, two more well-known actors who have worked in art-house and independent films. The production and theatrical distribution was done with funds from Foprocine (Fondo para Producción Cinematográfica de Calidad[6]) and through small companies based in Mexico (Alphaville Cinema) and Chile (Cuadrante Films). Though released simultaneously in the U.S. and Mexico on April 17, 2009, there is very little data available regarding box office earnings, number of screens the film was shown on or earnings from DVD sales. In comparison to *La misma luna*, *7 soles* did not create the same impact, despite the many similarities in the way the two films treat the issues.

La misma luna tells the story of nine-year-old Carlitos (Adrian Alonso) and his mother, Rosario (Kate del Castillo), who works illegally in the U.S. while her mother cares for her son back in Mexico. When his grandmother dies unexpectedly, and threatened by a scheming uncle (played by Sánchez Parra, the coyote with a change of heart in *7 soles*) who wants to take care of him and, more importantly, the money sent by his mother, he embarks on a journey from small town northern Mexico via Juárez-El

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[4] *La misma luna* premiered at the 2007 Sundance Film Festival where it received a standing-ovation. It won the Special Achievement Award for Outstanding Spanish Language Motion Picture at the 2008 ALMA Awards and 2008 Young Artist Awards for Best International Feature Film and Best Performance in an International Feature Film for Adrian Alonso. It also received an Image nomination in 2009 for Outstanding Foreign Motion Picture. The film opened in Mexico on March 19, 2008 on 350 screens and in the U.S. March 20, 2008 on 266 screens. ("La misma luna" http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0796307/)

[5] Fidecine is a section of IMCINE (Instituto Mexicano de Cinematografía), the official state organ for promoting national cinema production at all levels. It supports more commercially-oriented film projects.

[6] Like Fidecine, Foprocine is an organ of IMCINE. Projects supported by Foprocine tend to be more auteurist fare.

Paso through the U.S. Southwest and on to Los Angeles where his mother works cleaning houses. His journey is the centerpiece of the film, and in this sense, the film draws on another important generic convention, strongly associated with Hollywood cinema, but not exclusive to it: the road movie. This format allows the film to show us the places where immigrants dwell and present their experience of the borderlands.

Rosario does not become aware of her son's journey until he has reached L.A. a week later; in fact, she almost returns to Mexico to look for him, but not before deciding to stay (thanks to her maternal instinct) and ultimately reunite with him, an ending that suggests that they will remain in *el norte*. This is reinforced by the suggestion that she will stay in a relationship with a legal Mexican, a security guard named Paco (Gabriel Porras—a popular telenovela actor, and yet another familiar face for the immigrant audience) who has courted her throughout the film. The focus on a loving mother-son relationship with heartbreaking overtones locates the film squarely within the traditions of the Mexican maternal melodrama, a subgenre of the family melodrama; the incorporation of melodramatic representational strategies is also a nod to the very community the film wants to address –immigrants— many of whom are very familiar with the genre through telenovelas and popular films.

The tightly constructed narrative of *La misma luna* explores the complex interplay of geographical space, personal and familial relationships, and the broader cultural, social and political dynamics that together construct the immigrant experience. While Riggen has stated that she did not intend to make a political film, nor even a film about immigration per se, but rather, tell a "love story", she acknowledges that by virtue of the fact that it takes place on the border and involves immigrants, it addresses one of the most important issues in society today (Caballero). In an obvious demonstration of solidarity with immigrants, and in particular, those who do not have legal status, the film addresses broader issues like exploitative employers, emotional and financial strains on families, and constant threats of deportation. It presents immigrants as honest, hard-working and family-oriented people trying to improve their lives and the lives of their children, *and* who make great sacrifices to do so.

La misma luna makes these subtle political statements using the vehicle of melodrama, telling a story full of emotions and deep sentiment, occasionally accented by musical accompaniments from popular artists like Los Tigres del Norte. It links these two elements (the political and the emotional) through the geography of the border region—both the movement through it, as well as the encounters with the different people and dynamics that inhabit and construct it as a material and cultural entity. The materiality of space is reinforced by the materiality of time: the week it takes for the story to unfold from approximately 10:00 a.m. on Sunday when mother and son have their weekly phone conversation to the same time and day a week later when he arrives in Los Angeles and reunites with her on a sunny street corner.

7 soles focuses on a group of immigrants who spend a week trekking through the Sonoran Desert in order to cross into the U.S. illegally. They are guided by a pair of

coyotes, at whose hands they suffer numerous abuses. The journey through the desert is risky and deadly; many in the group suffer injuries and some end up dead due to natural dangers like excessive heat, dehydration, venomous animals, or mistreatment at the hands of the coyotes, including physical abuse, rape and even murder. The film harkens back to an earlier moment of cinema on border and immigration themes in one very important way: it is a cautionary tale designed to warn would-be immigrants and their families of the great risks involved in crossing to *el otro lado*. In fact, Ultreras has stated that he made the film specifically with this audience in mind with the express purpose of dissuading people from crossing or encouraging others to cross (Flores). In the effort to deter people from making this difficult journey, and in this sense quite political in its intentions, the film offers an unrelenting focus on the many dangers one faces when crossing the border illegally.

Yet there are also some notable differences that distinguish *7 soles* from its predecessors. For one, rather than criticize immigrants for their actions, the film seeks to establish a more direct dialogue with immigrants and would-be immigrants and express solidarity with their experiences. It does this through the realistic and emotionally penetrating re-creation of real stories about real people, further enhanced by the use of documentary film techniques, for example, minimal use of tripods. While these are important deviations from the norm, perhaps most noteworthy is how the film subverts the typical representation of the coyote figure with a more nuanced portrayal of this character; El Negro (Sánchez Parra), one of the two coyotes guiding the group, gets a glimpse of the humanity of those he is crossing, which provokes a moral crisis that causes him to reevaluate what he does for a living and realize it is wrong.

The journey through the desert is framed by the story of an individual family (this is where melodrama comes in: through the tragic story of a family's separation, loss, reunion). The various members of this family, in particular Ramona (Sosa's character), the wife and mother, are central to the evolution of the reformed coyote's character. But once again, geographical space plays an important role and serves as a staging ground to convey the broader social dynamics of the individual stories. Like *La misma luna*, the film starts out in a small town in Mexico and ends in a major U.S. city, thus tracing the general geographical arc traversed by thousands every year from small villages throughout Mexico to major urban areas in the U.S., reflecting the experiences of many immigrants today, but also reinforcing the stereotypical dichotomy of a rural, poor, and primitive Mexico in sharp contrast to an urban, wealthy, and ultramodern U.S. In the manner of cautionary tales, such extremes also sharpen the message. At the same time, the endpoint of Chicago reflects the fact that Mexican migrant communities exist beyond the borderlands. Minor details shown during the brief scenes in Chicago assert the strength of the Mexican community there, including Spanish-language radio and television programming and food vendors offering typical fare in the streets.

Both films dialogue in some way with the traditions of family melodramas and films on migrants and border crossing in Mexican cinema, yet also revise them to

present something new. Riggen and Ultreras express solidarity with immigrants, and offer images and stories that are more compassionate, sympathetic and informed than what has normally been seen in both fictional and real-life accounts of the immigrant experience. In order to show how they do this, my discussion of the films concentrates on elements that are intrinsic to the genres that the films engage: the families, the journeys and the coyotes who assist the immigrants who cross.

La familia

Both films focus on families who are separated because one of the members has gone north in search of employment that will allow them to provide for their families back in Mexico. In *La misma luna*, the family consists of the mother who has immigrated to Los Angeles and left her son behind in Mexico under the care of her mother/his grandmother. *7 soles* presents a more traditional nuclear family, in which the father has immigrated north to Chicago, leaving his wife and two children living with her parents back in Mexico. The desire to reunite the family is what drives the family members left behind to get across the border at all costs.

In *La misma luna*, the mother-son bond is so strong that it transcends international borders—despite the time and distance between them, they still see the world through each other's eyes, or, as the title reminds us, sleep "under the same moon." The film establishes their deep connection from the very beginning during the opening credits, in which the editing of the scene implies that they are together. Rosario is in bed, and when the alarm goes off, she calls out, "¿Ya te levantaste?" The scene cuts to Carlitos in bed waking up, implying she was calling to him. But as the brief scene unfolds, it incorporates some important contrasts that connect them, yet also reveal they are in two quite distinct places: as she looks in the mirror on the wall in her bedroom, he sees his reflection in a well located outside on the patio as he washes his face, clothed in only his underwear; as she eats a Pop Tart –with jalapeños on it (a marker of her Mexican identity and ties to homeland)— in front of the microwave, he prepares hot chocolate standing on a chair in front of the stove, stirring it with a wooden whisk, which he then carries on a tray along with medicine for his grandmother who is still asleep in the room they share; as Rosario crosses off the day on a dry erase calendar, Carlitos marks a calendar from *La Rosarita Pollería*, complete with a vividly colored painting of a rooster. Both are crossing off Sunday, the day they talk on the phone, which also happens to be his birthday.

Part of their conversation entails the ritual of Rosario describing where she is. As Carlitos cajoles her to describe her surroundings, the camera switches to a wide shot of her on the street corner. Rosario is in foreground in the phone booth (clearly marked in English: PHONE) that is located next to the bench where she waits for one of the many buses that transport her to her cleaning jobs. To her right are some packed garbage dumpsters, indicating the urban setting, and behind her is one of the famous Mexican murals of Los Angeles painted on the wall of the building with the Mexican

party store where piñatas hang on display outside.

Carlitos asks her to confirm what seem to be well-known details—and which indicate the familiarity that both of them have with her location (Rosario: "Y la lavandería dónde ya me llaman por mi nombre…. Y una tienda donde venden cosas para las fiestas;" Carlitos: "¿Allí dónde está pintado el mural?"). This conversation evokes the sentimentally-tinged metaphor of being able to see the world through another's eyes that is implied through the title of the film. Her description momentarily becomes "real," as he envisions the scene and is transported –in his imagination— to where she is and seeing what she is describing as a direct observer. These images will return again once he has actually arrived in Los Angeles and is trying to find the phone booth from which she makes her calls.

The extremely sentimental undercurrent of the scene is carried to its logical conclusion with a teary and emotional Rosario weeping as their minutes run out. The impersonal computer voice and beeping of the phone only intensify the sentiments as they say their good-byes. Rosario expresses her love in epic terms: "Te quiero más que toda la tierra y todo el mar," at which point Carlitos chimes in to participate with her in their ritual of expressing the depths and strength of their love, and together they continue in unison: "Y todas las estrellas y todo el cielo." This brief moment underscores the strength and importance of the mother-son bond and the dedication of *and to* the mother, clearly linking the film to the tradition of maternal and family melodramas in Mexican cinema and emphasizing the importance of the mother in the Mexican cultural imaginary. At the same time, the scene conveys a strong sense of place, and not just any place, but one with a historically strong and sizable Mexican community and which currently rates as the metropolitan area with the largest Mexican-born population in the U.S.: Los Angeles, California (Batalova).

7 soles not only draws on documentary, testimonial, and the traditions of films about the border and immigration, much like *La misma luna*, it is also anchored in the genre of the family melodrama. The focus on a specific family and the extremes of emotion and experience suffered by everyone on the journey place it squarely within these parameters. The story entails the prolonged separation of a traditional nuclear family. Miguel (Benjamín Magaña) and Ramona (Evagelina Sosa) are a young couple with two children who have been apart for many years since he went to work in a food processing plant in Chicago. Miguel contracts a coyote service to bring his family to live with him in the U.S. Their story serves as the arc of the narrative, and is all too typical of the migratory patterns of the Mexican diaspora. Like *La misma luna*, the family members left behind in Mexico are struggling to reunite with the family member who has crossed before them and is now living in the U.S. This circumstance is the motivation behind the difficult journey that serves as the core of the narrative.

Ramona and her parents represent the stereotypical rural family: their home is small and humble, the parents are traditional and conservative, and the daughter is head-strong and rebellious; the way they speak, dress and act all convey tradition and

provincialism. These details contrast sharply with the slang-laden Spanish of the slick-talking coyote Gavilán (Luis Avila) who later comes to pick them up. The reactions of Ramona's parents to her decision to emigrate replicate established representations of the family in Mexican melodrama. When she tells them she is leaving, her mother invokes the Virgin Mary ("¡Virgen Santísima!" she gasps), thus calling to mind the stereotype of the pious and suffering mother, and her father is angry and hurt, evoking the image of the proud and controlling family patriarch. Later on, after they have embarked on their journey and the news of the tragedies in the desert get back to her parents, the brief scenes in the village emphasize the sorrow and loss suffered by those left behind in the *pueblo*, further asserting the melodramatic aspects of the film.

To carry the melodramatic extremes even further, Ramona is diabetic and embarks on the journey without her insulin. This not only causes her to become ill during the trip, it ultimately leads to her death. Her health crisis not only heightens the tension and emotion of the story, it is yet another detail that enhances the melodramatic tone of the film. Through this situation melodrama intersects with border-immigration cinema because it is her health problems and subsequent death that end up serving as the catalyst for coyote El Negro's change of heart.

The journeys

In *La misma luna*, Carlos's borderlands odyssey is the centerpiece of the film.[7] His journey takes the form of a series of vignettes that expose viewers to the human and geographic realities of the immigrant experience on a collective level. Through his journey, Carlos (and the audience along with him) is exposed to a range of people (coyotes, pimps, immigration authorities) and situations (immigrant safe houses, agricultural labor, INS raids) that reflect the reality of border-crossing Mexicans who do make it to the other side.

So, if the relationship of Carlos and Rosario drives the narrative (it is the "love story" that Riggen asserts is the main point of the film), it often expresses another level of meaning that reflects the immigrant reality of living in two interconnected worlds. Musical interludes featuring well-known performers of popular music communicate this interconnectedness. One of them involves the famous norteño group Los Tigres del

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[7] Official sources indicate that this would be an unlikely journey given his age. In its yearly report for 2010 (*Boletín estadístico 2010*), the Mexican *Instituto nacional de migración* reported on the number of repatriations for the year: total immigrants: 439,898; all minors: 19,296; minors under age 12: 1686; unaccompanied minors under age 12: 419. In her six part Pulitzer Prize (2003) winning series "Enrique's Journey" (published in the LA Times between September 29 and October 7, 2002, and later expanding into a bestselling book published by Random House in 2006), Sonia Nazario references INS data indicating that the majority of the unaccompanied minors detained are teenagers, although some are as young as seven or nine. However, Nazario's research, including the story of Enrique himself, does confirm that most of the children and adolescents who migrate undertake the journey in search of their mothers—much like Carlos.

Norte,[8] who end up giving Carlos and fellow illegal Enrique (Eugenio Derbez) a ride after the two have escaped an INS raid on the tomato greenhouses where they were working in Arizona. When asked where he is heading, Carlos explains his mission to get to his mother in Los Angeles, having crossed the border illegally into Texas. But, as he explains, "Cuando crucé la frontera, eso fue lo más difícil. Pero ¿qué importa? Vale la pena. Yo haría lo que fuera por mi mamá." As he says this, real-life brothers Jorge and Hernán Hernández of Los Tigres are viewed at a close distance, alternately coming into focus with looks of great sympathy and concern on their faces. This camera work highlights the intent to move the audience—the emotions further emphasized by the close-quarters of the van.

When Carlos innocently asks if they are musicians, naturally they respond that they are. They explain that they sing about people and their stories—people just like him. This serves as lead-in for their performance of "Por amor": a *corrido* about love and the risks one is willing to take to be with the one they love, but also a song about crossing the border:

> *A mí no me importa el peligro. La vida sin riesgo no es vida*
> *Si es por los seres queridos, se debe encontar la salida*
> *Yo no me voy a rendir hasta tenerte junto a mi lado*
> ("Eres tú, Carlos," interjects a band member upon this last phrase)
> **Chorus**
> *Si es por amor soy capaz de parar con el pecho una bala*
> *Si es por el amor me arriesgo a cruzar a la mala*
> *Y por amor es que voy a cruzar la frontera sin miedo*

This brief scene communicates two central themes of the film: the strong bond of Carlos and his mother *and* the dangers faced by illegals crossing the border, succinctly expressed (with a good dose of macho bravura) through a song performed by the musical group considered by many to be *the* voice of the immigrant community in the U.S. The situations of those traveling in the van further highlight the physical movement through the borderland space referenced in the song: Carlos crossed the border illegally from Mexico and is on his way to LA; the band is on its way to Tucson to play, riding in a van with California plates. In this way the song and its performance

[8] Los Tigres del Norte are true cultural icons among immigrants from Mexico and other parts of the Spanish-speaking world. One might say that their music is the soundtrack to the immigrant experience in the U.S. Their career began in the United States after they migrated as teenagers to San José, California in the late 1960. Since then they have lived in the U.S. and toured extensively there and throughout the Spanish-speaking world in Mexico, Central America and Spain. Moreover, they have a direct connection to the immigration and border film genre, having written and performed the title songs for numerous films in the 1970s and 1980s.

neatly represent the cultural and geographical spaces of the borderlands.

A central aspect of both films is the way the focus on the geographical reality of the illegal experience. However, while Carlos unrealistically moves through the desert Southwest with very few hang ups (complete with the implausible intervention from Los Tigres), in *7 soles*, the main action of the film takes place in the hot and hellish Sonoran Desert in southern Arizona were in reality hundreds of immigrants die each year attempting the treacherous journey. Many of the scenes portrayed in *7 soles* based on actual testimonies from people who survived the perilous desert crossing. Ultreras' background as a journalist and community activist explains the film's documentary feel. In his words: "I didn't have a special style in mind, other than I wanted to make it look like a documentary. I wanted the audience to feel that they were walking along with the migrants" (Goldbarg). On-location filming in the state of Sonora, Mexico and in Chicago and Phoenix in the U.S. further enhance the film's sense of authenticity. The prolonged emphasis on every possible horror of illegal desert crossing reinforces the film's dire warning. By concentrating on this specific space and experience, the film does not directly critique the policies of the U.S. or Mexican governments or issues like racism and anti-immigrant sentiment in U.S. society, but instead concentrates on the ways that some Mexicans take advantage of other Mexicans by exploiting desperate situations for their own gain.

Melodrama intersects with documentary through the numerous gut-wrenching tragedies suffered by the larger group of people who have undertaken this arduous journey. It is emotionally-harrowing to watch the horrors unfold unrelentingly one after the other, but Ultreras asserts that, "It's pretty close to reality. But reality is way, way worse than that" (Flores). The micro level of the story connects to the broader realities of illegal immigration to the extent that the various members of the group constitute a demographically representative range of the people who seek to cross: there are Ramona and her two children, a mother with a small baby, an older man, two young men, a married couple, and among this group, people from different parts of Mexico and beyond—as far south as the state of Oaxaca and even Honduras. The different horrors they experience are also representative of the range of tragedies encountered in real life. As Ultreras explains, "Not that I wanted to kill so many people, but there were real cases where near eighteen people died in the same trip. In the Arizona desert the largest number I remember was fourteen at once. So, it's not like I was exaggerating" (Goldbarg).

The primary focus is on the characters played by Sánchez Parra and Sosa, but the stories of all the members of the group are significant and serve to show the different tragedies that can befall those who cross. There are injuries that lead to people being abandoned in the desert, which is what happens to the older man in the group. His death leads to another when one of the young men he is traveling with becomes confrontational with El Negro who wants to leave the injured old man behind. Demonstrating his more cruel and heartless side (and more in conformance with the

stereotypes of coyotes), El Negro's response is to stab him in the stomach. The larger group carries on and the young man suffers a slow and painful death alongside the old man. The mother who is traveling with an infant who is constantly crying of hunger and thirst runs out of food and the baby also dies, but not before El Negro drags the mother away at gunpoint, presumably to rape her. The husband of the couple who is traveling, weakened by dehydration and unable to carry on, is shot by Gavilán to be put out of his misery, and when his hysterical wife loses control in response, he kills her too. Finally, Ramona also ends up dead towards the end of the film due to complications from her diabetes after she and her children are abandoned by the coyotes who continue on with those who are still able to walk. Her two children plod on without her, but the tragedy does not stop there. Her son is bitten by a scorpion and dies as his sister keeps vigil over him in the hot shade of a cactus. In this sense the film covers a vast range of awful possibilities facing those who cross illegally, all played with high drama and for maximum emotional impact.

Los que pasan a los inmigrantes

If the main focus of *La misma luna* is the story of Rosario and Carlos, the various people they interact with are also significant to the story and the overall message of the film. Doña Carmen (Carmen Salinas) and Reina (María Rojo) are two characters who not only function as mother figures for Carlos, thereby reinforcing the central role that women play in the film and the film's dialogue with the tradition of the maternal melodrama, they also represent the different people involved in the complex system of human smuggling between Mexico and the United States as it exists today. Whereas in the past most aspects of the crossing of immigrants were the purview of the coyotes (predominantly men) who make the trek with the immigrants, now the system is a vast and complex business operation involving many players, including "brokers" like Doña Carmen who obtain false documents and arrange for transportation from within Mexico and people like Reina who harbor illegals in "safe houses" on the other side. Similar to *7 soles*, but with a completely distinct tone, the film seeks to humanize the people involved at this level of the immigration process, or at the very least demonstrate that there are gray areas. Their sympathetic portrayal also reinforces the family-oriented and feel-good nature of the film.

Doña Carmen conducts business in the backroom of her dress shop. Again demonstrating the connection of the individual story to broader dynamics, Carlos works for her after school, and in fact, it is through her that he comes into contact with the Chicano siblings who transport him across the border. In her role as a *coyota*, Doña Carmen conforms to the stereotypes. For instance, her treatment of a trio of men who have come seeking her services is rather harsh, and when one of them expresses doubts about the mode of transport she has arranged, she coldly responds, eyes squinted, "Mira, mi rey, aquí no hay más de dos sopas: o se trepan en la troca o se pasa nadando—a ver si llegan, mi güey." Of course, this contrasts markedly with her

treatment of Carlitos, with whom she is nurturing and protective. Reina hosts men who are on their way to jobs throughout the southwest at a house in El Paso. Carlos meets her when she rescues him as he is being handed over to a pimp in her neighborhood by a junkie he had met in the bathroom at the bus station in El Paso (he had turned to this young man for help buying a bus ticket to Los Angeles). Not only does she rescue him from danger, she takes him back to her house, feeds him, and also assists his travel to Arizona. She is clearly represented as a mother figure for the men who stay with her, including Carlos. She offers her guests home cooking, comfort and camaraderie, but also –like any mother– imposes house rules, such as no alcohol.

The film's treatment of stock characters like coyotes and Chicanos demonstrates continuities with earlier representations of the border-crossing and illegal immigrant experience, as well as some important deviations. Marta (America Ferrera) and David (Jesse Garcia), a brother and sister who come to Carmen offering to cross babies, represent both categories, and they simultaneously confirm and refute the established stereotypes. As coyotes, they are anything but typical. For one, they are not connected to a larger network of human smugglers. In fact, their motive for wanting to cross people is highly personal and short-term, and at its core, a noble one: to get money to pay David's college tuition. Clearly this is not the right way to go about achieving this goal, but it does comment on the lack of opportunities for both Chicanos and Mexicans, and the lengths some will go to –including criminal activity– in order to improve their lives; in this sense they have something in common with the illegals coming north.

However, if their representation as coyotes is atypical for the conventions of immigration films, the representation of these characters as Chicanos is anything but, and is consistent with many long-standing stereotypes, particularly those that emphasize their disconnection from Mexican culture. In line with the nastier aspects of her persona, it is doña Carmen who condescendingly points out their ignorance as they stand there unable to understand her insulting them in Spanish ("Estos chicanos que ni siquiera saben hablar su propio idioma. Se creen mejor que nosotros porque nacieron al otro lado."). She later remarks snidely on their inexperience: "Estos mangos están muy verdes, m'ijo. De volada les cae la migra." Her comments and their delivery highlight the contrasts between the different groups of Mexicans present in the room: from the more savvy and lighter-skinned *norteños* doña Carmen and Carlos, to the poorer and darker men from further south who are seeking help to cross illegally, to the nervous, non-Spanish speaking, and highly Americanized Chicanos. While the interaction on the whole successfully communicates real cultural and class differences between people of Mexican origin, it also reinforces stereotypes previously presented in border and immigrant films regarding both Chicanos and darker-skinned Mexicans.

La misma luna offers a somewhat superficial and unrealistic portrayal (like the journey of Carlos itself) of the middlemen (and women) involved, whereas *7 soles* attempts to be much more realistic. In *7 soles* the heart of the film is the journey

through the desert and most of the story takes place there. However, some important details are revealed prior to this point, one of them being that one of the coyotes, El Negro, is secretly planning to get out of human trafficking business, and has decided that this will be his last run. We learn of this decision through a phone conversation he has in the opening sequence of the film with his girlfriend Mariana, who also lives in Chicago. Of course, such activities are run by larger criminal organizations that prize loyalty to the organization, and his plan is not so easy to carry out. The bosses suspect what he is up to and pair him with the young and ambitious Gavilán to keep tabs on him. As a result, the difficulties the group faces in the vast and searing desert are compounded by the conflict between the coyotes, further exacerbated by the fact that the group must take a more roundabout route to avoid any number of threats from the Mexican National Guard, U.S. Border Patrol, and the Minute Men militia, thereby extending their time in the desert.

One unique aspect of the film is that it offers a much more nuanced view of the middlemen in the operation: the coyotes who take the risk of traveling on foot with their human cargo across the inhospitable Sonoran Desert. Gavilán represents the stereotype of the cocky, slick and exploitative coyote who has no sympathy whatsoever for the poor and desperate people he is guiding, and in this sense his character replicates previous representations. Throughout the journey he is seen lagging behind to call the boss and provide updates on his partner, and stuffing his face with food and water while the others suffer for lack of the same. Despite the fact that El Negro commits his fair share of abuses against the people he is crossing, his compassion for Ramona and her family pushes him all that closer to getting out of the human smuggling business. His potential for change is marked early on in the journey when she is not feeling well and asks to rest. He is sympathetic and makes the whole group stop. While everyone rests, the two share their stories and reveal to one other how they are both trying to get to Chicago to be with their partners. El Negro confides in her about his moral dilemmas regarding his work, and is moved by her arguments encouraging him to get out of the business.

Following this interaction, El Negro becomes increasingly protective towards Ramona and her children, an attitude that leads to conflict –at times violent– with Gavilán. In fact, as the trek through the desert is coming to an end, the conflict between the two has boiled over to such a point that El Negro is essentially a hostage of Gavilán. In the end his compassion prompts him to go back to the desert to look for Ramona's daughter, get her to Chicago to be with her father, *and* give them the money he was paid for smuggling the people and drugs that he had hidden in a teddy bear he entrusted to the little girl. All of this follows another pro-immigrant action on his part, which was to escape from the halfway house in Phoenix where he and Gavilán had arrived with the group, and to call the INS to raid the home. Unfortunately, Gavilán gets away, while the immigrants they brought there are faced with deportation—two realistic outcomes, to be sure.

Conclusions

One of the salient features of these two films is their expression of open solidarity with immigrants. Both films directly address the illegal immigrant community living in the U.S. and seek to represent, in an extremely compassionate manner, their experiences and concerns. Although there are certainly cautionary aspects to the films, quite drastic ones in the case of *7 soles*, they also assert that immigrants continue to come north and that Mexican immigrant communities are already well-established all throughout the borderlands—and in *7 soles* beyond it as far north as Chicago.

Departing from established representations of the immigrant experience, *La misma luna* deliberately portrays the experiences and viewpoints of immigrants in a more sympathetic *and* positive manner. Riggen has stated: "Estamos acostumbrados a ver cintas de migración que son muy oscuras y deprimentes, que son crueles; esta película es muy luminosa, positiva y llena de esperanza" (Caballero). She recounts the story of a screening in the U.S. after which the Anglo members of the audience commented to her how the film broke with their expectations of what Mexicans are like: "Siempre es el mugroso, el ladrón o el cruel y no es así, estamos llenos de sentido del humor y de ganas de vivir. Esa es la cara que estamos mostrando y esperamos que por eso sea influyente políticamente" (*Correo de Guanajuato*). Although she may not have had explicit political intentions in making the film, her attempts to present immigrants in a more positive light, to show a more human side to the experience, to open people's hearts and eyes to the immigrant experience all have potential political ramifications—as Riggen herself realizes.

The mother-son "love story", the idealization of mother figure, and the overall appeal to emotions all indicate that the film relies heavily on melodramatic strategies of narration and representation. But even the use of melodrama can be seen as part of the pro-immigrant message of the film. Melodrama is a genre that speaks to the audience, and in this sense, its employment *is* a political act: the resolution of the emotionally-charged tale gives the immigration story a happy ending. The film thus not only breaks with cinematic tradition to portray immigrant experiences more positively, it sends the message that the challenges of distance and economic hardship can and will be overcome by the strong values and good intentions of the overwhelming majority of the immigrant community—even its more jaded and marginalized figures. These details indicate that *La misma luna* is much more than an escapist, feel-good melodrama.

7 soles emphasizes the more perilous and tragic aspects of illegal immigration in an attempt to discourage people from crossing, while also recognizing the reality that people keep trying and, with varying degrees of success, and in some cases at high costs, make it to the other side. It avoids the bias and sensationalism of more mainstream films on the topic of immigration by relying heavily on accounts provided by real people involved at all levels of the process. Like *La misma luna, 7 soles* communicates a pro-immigrant emphasis on family values: in the end father and daughter are united in

Chicago thanks to the assistance of a reformed coyote. And, of course, the coyote's change of heart itself is yet another way that the film deviates from the traditional representations of the immigrant experience on film.

Reflecting different facets of illegal immigration from Mexico to the U.S., *La misma* and *7 soles* contrast with the history of films on border and immigration in which blame for the perils of the experience has traditionally been laid on the migrants themselves, not the political and economic system that determines their plight. Whether or not it is due to their more direct knowledge of the circumstances of illegal immigrants and the social and political climate in the U.S. with respect to the issues, these directors' films are more realistic, sympathetic and engaged with the very people they represent. Their incorporation of elements from films on border and immigration themes, as well as family and maternal melodramas, acknowledges the appeal of these genres for those they seek to represent *and* with whom they strive to communicate, and although some stereotypes are replicated, others are challenged. The recent ratcheting up of anti-immigrant discourse in the U.S. has led to a wave of legislation that is highly unfavorable to illegal immigrants. These circumstances only heighten the importance of films that offer more informed representations that demonstrate a deeper understanding of the immigrant experience.

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