



PONIENTE AND THE QUESTIONING OF SPANISH NATIONAL IDENTITY

By

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The opening frames of *Poniente* by Chus Gutiérrez greet the viewer with a brightly colored beach scene complete with a palm tree, an expanse of white sand, a radiant blue sky, and a tranquil sea. One can instantly recognize this scene as one of the popular images of Spain disseminated by the tourist industry. However, once the theme of an idyllic paradise is established, the camera pulls back to reveal a small model, a school project no doubt, being pulled along a busy city street in a child's wagon. This cinematic slight-of-hand brings to mind the conclusion of Rimbaud's *Bateau ivre*, which discloses that a simple toy boat had inspired the poet's visionary journey. It also introduces an implicit critique of what Dorothy Kelly has called the "selling of Spanish otherness" (28), best illustrated by the *España es diferente* advertising campaign during the Franco years that promoted tourism in Spain in the hope that foreign visitors would overlook the reality of an oppressive regime and flock to its idealized landscapes and cultural treasures. The commercial exploitation of Spanish otherness can be understood as a process of self-exoticization (Martin Martínez 8-9) whereby Spain sees itself reflected in the mirror afforded by the gaze of the rest of Europe and, in conformity with this reflected image, represents itself as an exotic destination. The structure of this opening scene, thus, allows Gutiérrez to direct the viewer's attention to the ambivalence that underlies the construction of Spanish identity.

Poniente is the fourth of six feature films directed by Gutiérrez. Although each film is quite different in theme and style, they are in general characterized by a fascination with the marginal regions of Spanish society where a variety of questions of difference and identity play out. Her work is decisively engaged in the intense renegotiation of identities which has been taking place in Spain since 1975 when the country emerged from a political



regime that had silenced all forms of difference in the name of a monolithic nation (Richards 1-6). During its initial phase this renegotiation concerned primarily regional and gender identities, but as Spain went from being a country that many left in search of a better life to become the recipient of a significant flow of immigrants from Africa, the Americas, Eastern Europe, and Asia, the question of ethnic identity has been raised with greater frequency and urgency. *Poniente* participates in the development of new Spanish identities by examining the contemporary Spanish response to immigration in light of the ways in which Spain's Islamic past and its relation to the rest of Europe have shaped the historical construction of its national identity. More specifically, I will suggest that this film questions a prevalent view that posits a pure Spanish essence anchored in the foundational moments of the Visigoth monarchy and the Reconquest, an essence which is thought to have remained stable and true to itself over the centuries (Flesler 17-29, Subirats 39). As a corollary, proponents of this view minimize the significance the multicultural legacy of medieval Spain in the construction of Spanish identity. The ambivalence alluded to above results at least in part from a tendency to downplay the impact of what was unquestionably an important period in Spanish history. This is not to suggest that such a view has been adopted by all Spaniards since 1492. As Martin Márquez has documented extensively in *Disorientations* (2008), numerous scholars and writers from José Antonio Conde to Américo Castro have taken exception to it or have elaborated more nuanced versions. However, while recognizing that over the centuries the issue has been subject to debate and disagreement, I agree with Martin Marquez's assessment that this view is not only "hegemonic" but central to the construction of Spanish identity (28).

Poniente is loosely inspired by the attacks that in February 2000 were directed against immigrant workers in the town of El Ejido (Almería). Due to the revenue generated by intensive agriculture in plastic covered greenhouses, El Ejido has one of the highest per capita incomes in all of Europe. Moreover, the type of economic development adopted in this region has been held up as a successful model to be emulated by other regions in Spain (Nair 69). This prosperity, however, is the product of a carefully shrouded human misery. At particular moments of the growing cycle, it



relies heavily on a large number of undocumented workers who can be easily taken off the payroll when no longer needed (Nair 70). Since these workers are not protected by Spanish labor law, their working and living conditions are cruel and exploitative. Paradoxically, they are at once needed and unwelcome, a sentiment expressed by the mayor of El Ejido, Juan Enciso, who declared “A las ocho de la mañana todos los inmigrantes son pocos. A las ocho de la tarde, sobran todos.” (qtd. in Nair 70) Thus, rather than attempting to assimilate these workers into the community, the prevailing tendency is to exclude them and to keep them at a distance. In 2000 the situation took a dramatic turn. On January 22 in the locality of Santa María del Aguila, two Spaniards were killed by an immigrant worker from Morocco. Then on February 2 Encarnación López was fatally stabbed by another Moroccan worker. Although the authors of these crimes were arrested, some of the residents were not content to let justice run its course but instead unleashed three days of mob violence that targeted North African immigrants, their dwellings, their places of worship, their businesses as well as the offices of ONGs that provided support for immigrants. Racist slogans “¡Muerte al moro!” “¡Fuera moros!” were visible on the walls of the town each morning, thereby erasing any doubt about the motivation for the attacks. Unlike the immigrant workers who were responsible for the death of the three *Spaniards*, the authors of these xenophobic attacks were never arrested, which suggests a degree of complicity on the part of local authorities. As we attempt to understand how and why these events took place, we need to acknowledge that the causes and responsibilities for the El Ejido events were numerous and complex. One could cite Spanish immigration policy, the economic forces of the global market, bilateral relations between Spain and Morocco, and the lack of urban planning in the region (Checa 13), just to mention a few of the more prominent ones. If I have chosen to focus on the ethnic dimension, it is not that I deem the other factors any less important, but because it is the area that I believe was most cogently explored in this film.



The filmmaker set her cinematic version of the El Ejido events in a fictional town named La Isla. The film's title situates the narrative geographically because it evokes the westerly Mediterranean wind as well as the region (*comarca del Poniente Almeriense*) where El Ejido is located. While the film does shed some light on the living conditions and concerns of immigrant workers, it is mainly concerned with the Spanish reaction to the recent waves of immigration. Gutiérrez centers her narrative on two Spaniards, Lucía and Curro, who are both viewed as outsiders by the townspeople, a commonality that explains at least in part their subsequent romance. Upon learning of her father's death, Lucía takes a leave of absence from her teaching job in Madrid to return to the town where she grew up and which she left in grief over the drowning death of her daughter. Instead of selling her father's greenhouse as everyone expects, Lucía remains in La Isla to run it, a task for which she has little practical preparation. Lucía transgresses the social order of the town by challenging the way things have been done in the male-dominated world of the greenhouses. This is illustrated by her conflicts with Paquito, the foreman who insists on reminding her of how her father ran the business. The other main character, Curro, was raised in Switzerland, where his father worked as an immigrant worker, and later settled in Spain as an adult. Both Curro and Lucía experience a sense of displacement but, whereas Lucía is returning to a place where she lived and felt compelled to leave, Curro is living in a place that he hardly knows. Within the narrative structure of the film, these two characters occupy a liminal space between the spaces occupied respectively by the Spanish residents of La Isla and the immigrant workers. The primary function of Lucía and especially Curro is to undermine the binary opposition between these two groups and to illustrate the principle that identity is not a question of essence but rather one of shifting positionality. A third important character is Adbembi, a worker from Morocco, who is Curro's best friend. Together they plan to purchase a *chiringuito* on the beach, a project that illustrates the possibility of collaboration across cultural boundaries. Adbembi is also actively involved in organizing the other immigrants of La Isla and, in this capacity, he both demonstrates his knowledge of the rights of



workers under Spanish law and offers the viewer insight into the challenges of the immigrant experience in Spain. Finally, in a crucial sequence of the film, *Adbembi* reminds us of Spain's Islamic and African heritage.

Gutiérrez takes a very important liberty with the actual events of El Ejido: in *Poniente*, the wave of xenophobic violence is triggered not by a homicide but rather by a pair of economic developments. The workers of La Isla organize a strike demanding contracts that would ensure them steady work and the possibility of regularizing their immigration status. Despite their general prosperity, the greenhouse growers struggle to compete in the global market and the irony is that they simply can't match the low prices of products from Morocco, where labor costs are one third of what they are in La Isla. The strike thus threatens their livelihood. Running parallel to this is a property dispute between Lucía and her cousin Miguel, who claims that part of the land owned by Lucía's family rightly belongs to him. Initially, Miguel attempts to recover the land by legal means, but once the case is decided against him, he tries to drive Lucía away by hiring thugs to torch her farm. When news of the conflagration reaches the greenhouse owners, Miguel blames the immigrants. Given the general fear of the *other* reigning in La Isla and the threat to the grower's livelihood posed by the strike, they are only too willing to accept Miguel's account and set in motion a wave of violence against the workers. Thus, in addition to exploring the ethnic substrate of the conflict, the film also alludes to the economic factors that played a role. Although there was no worker's strike in the buildup to the events of February 2000, the greenhouse owners in El Ejido were and continue to be subject to the very same competitive pressures depicted in *Poniente*. In recognizing some of the economic factors that were involved, Gutiérrez seeks not to excuse or justify the violence, but rather to acknowledge the circumstances that condition it.

We can now take a closer look at the relations between Spaniards and immigrants in La Isla. The character who best expresses the attitude of the local residents is Paquito, the foreman of Lucía's greenhouse, who advises her to keep the immigrants at a distance. When Lucía introduces herself to some of the workers at the greenhouse, Paquito sneers "Con esa gente cuanto menos trato uno tiene, mejor". In this exchange, Paquito attributes to Lucía a



shared ethnic and national identity and his use of the expression “esa gente”¹ establishes a clear opposition between the immigrants, who are relegated to a category of “them” or “others”, and the category of “us” consisting of the Spanish residents. Underlying this opposition is the belief that the latter possess some sort of essence, which in the absence of a better term we can call “Spanishness”, that the immigrants lack. The opposition between the two groups is starkly marked by the spatial organization of La Isla. For the most part, the locals refuse to rent immigrant workers apartments in the town itself, and, consequently, the latter are relegated to old, dilapidated farmhouses on the outskirts of town, far from stores and other amenities. Furthermore, the workers are not welcome in the local establishments where Spaniards congregate. La Isla is thus organized into two segregated communities separated by a boundary that prevents the immigrants from taking part in the social life of the town. The intent is to limit the contact between different cultures, contact that is irrationally perceived as a threat to the community’s identity. Paraphrasing the statement of the mayor of El Ejido quoted earlier, Adbembi puts it succinctly: “No soportáis vernos cerca vuestro. En realidad os gustaría que fuéramos invisibles.” Underlying this spatial structure of exclusion is an essentialist conception of identity. The immigrants are thought to be, by their very nature, absolutely and irreducibly different from Spaniards and thus the separation of the two groups into bounded communities purports to be based on natural fact rather than on arbitrary differentiation. Although there is some movement across the boundary separating the two communities, often such attempts serve only to confirm the existence of the divide. For example, in one episode, a young Spaniard offers to rent an immigrant worker an apartment in town. This gesture suggests the possibility of a more amicable relationship between Spaniards and immigrants, but unfortunately this hope is dissipated when the Spaniard’s father refuses to rent the apartment. At this point I would like to make it clear that the above remarks apply to the fictional town created by Gutiérrez and to acknowledge that in Poniente almeriense there exists a greater degree of interaction between Spaniards and immigrants than what *Poniente* would suggest. Although the filmmaker has no doubt simplified the situation in the region, perhaps for dramatic effect, studies of the ethnic situation in El Ejido by social scientists (Navas Luque, and Isabel Cuadrado 171-198,



Aznar Sánchez, and Sánchez Picón 69-98, Pumares, Fernández, Rojas, and Asensio 99-126) do confirm in its broad outlines the exclusionary system that Gutiérrez depicts.

This pattern of exclusion can be found with certain local variations in any number of nations that host an immigrant population of recent origin. In La Isla, however, the relations between immigrants and Spaniards are conditioned in particular ways by Spanish history and by the construction of Spanish national identity. Contemporary cultural theorists have taught us that identity is relational: we construct our sense of who we are in opposition to other groups. At two crucial moments of the master narrative of Spanish identity, the Reconquest and the expulsion of the *Moriscos*, “Spanishness” was defined in stark opposition to the peoples living across the Strait of Gibraltar. Attacks over the centuries by Berber pirates, the infamous *moros de la costa*, Spain’s troubled colonial adventure in North Africa and the participation of Moroccan soldiers in Franco’s army during the Spanish Civil War have all reinforced this view. In *Return of the Moor*, Daniela Flesler contends that the continued prevalence of this manner of imagining Spanish identity has resulted in a tendency to equate the current generation of Magrebi immigrants with the Arab and Berbers who ruled much of Spain from 711 to 1492.

This tendency is clearly visible in *Poniente*. Although the general exclusionary structure of the town discussed above applies more or less uniformly to the entire immigrant community irrespective of their place of origin or their ethnicity, one particular group is singled out. When Lucía asks Paquito whether all their workers are Moroccans, he responds “¿Has visto marroquíes por aquí? Sólo trabajamos con subsaharianos. A tu padre no le gustaban los moros. Los marroquíes son los peores.” Thus within the broader group of immigrants working in La Isla, Moroccans are considered a troubling and undesirable subgroup. Moreover, the reference to *moro* confirms Flesler’s insight that this group of immigrants is being viewed through the prism of Spanish history, a conclusion that is corroborated when one of the greenhouse owners refers to the presence of immigrants in the community as an “invasión.”ⁱⁱⁱ In her analysis of the “leyenda de la pérdida de España”, the legendary account of the conquest of Spain, Flesler (70-79) argues that the obsessive



retelling over centuries of the sexual transgression of King Rodrigo and the betrayal of Don Julián, who opened the gates of Spain to the Moors, betrays a deep and unresolved anxiety at the heart of Spanish identity. The construction of this identity has been founded on a myth of cultural and racial purity, which has minimized the role of hybridity in the development of Spanish culture. This myth, however, has always been undermined by the undeniable miscegenation that took place in Spain during the Middle Ages, and by the gaze of the rest of Europe that was alternately repulsed or delighted by Spain's difference. Within this context, contemporary North African immigrants would seem to constitute a reminder of Spain's multiethnic past and thus reveal the fissures and contradictions that intersect the imagined purity of Spanish identity. It is quite fitting that in *Poniente* the term "moro" returns insistently at the very moment when the anger of greenhouse owners reaches its peak, thereby validating the view that the immigrants are considered an affront to the hegemonic view of Spanish identity, as if Spain were again threatened and a "heroic" action were required. The mere evocation of an ancient enemy would appear to justify the lawless behavior that is about to ensue.

In addition to establishing the connection between the xenophobic violence of El Ejido and the hegemonic view of Spanish identity, Gutiérrez challenges this view in a number of ways. First, *Poniente* provides a much-needed counterpoint to the conception of Spanish history adopted by the residents of La Isla. In one conversation between Curro and Adbembi, the latter recounts the long history of his people, the Berbers. When Curro exclaims "¡Qué suerte tener raíces!" Adbembi retorts "Mis raíces son tus raíces. España fue un país bereber durante muchos siglos." By anchoring this sense of a shared identity in a common past, Adbembi's version of Spanish history, like that of the townspeople of La Isla, is essentialist. Nonetheless, what is important for the present discussion is that it dispels the myth of Spanish cultural purity by suggesting to the viewer that the Islamic period constitutes not a tragic interruption in Spain's preordained destiny but rather a vital contributor to the fundamental hybridity of Spanish culture. At same time the reference to the Berber people, who inhabited North Africa prior to the Arab expansion and who continue to retain their cultural specificity, is a reminder of both the historical and the



current ethnic complexity of North Africa, which is silenced by the term *moro*.

Another sequence of the film undermines a particularly virulent stereotype of North Africans. Flesler (77) makes the point that the Moorish invasion has often been viewed in sexual terms as a violation of Spain and its women and, as a result, the Moors are associated in the Spanish imaginary with sexual violence and lasciviousness, traits, which we should note, are also prominent Orientalist and/or Muslim stereotypes (Goytisolo, *Crónicas* 37, Martín Márquez 180-83). The aforementioned raids by the *moros de la costa* and the actions of Moroccan soldiers during the Spanish Civil War have also contributed to these stereotypes. As a vivid reminder of their persistent power, SOS Racismo reports that some townspeople from El Ejido have alleged that the violence of February 2000 was justified because a number of Spanish women had been raped by immigrants, even though no such complaints were actually submitted to authorities (qtd. in Goytisolo, *España y sus Ejidos* 46). In *Poniente* Gutiérrez stages these stereotypes in a scene where Lucía who, despite her position as an outsider and her general sympathy towards the workers, demonstrates that she is not immune to the fear of the *other*. While driving home one day, she loses her way in the maze of greenhouses and ends up in the immigrant encampment where her car gets stuck in the dirt road. When she leaves her car to inspect the problem, several workers walk towards her. The camera captures a look of fear in her eyes and she quickly turns to retreat to the safety of her car. This situation, a woman, alone, stranded, surrounded by immigrant men, plays on the identification of Spanish and Western viewers with Lucía and is cleverly designed to trigger the viewer's own xenophobic reflexes.ⁱⁱⁱ Our fears and those of Lucía prove to be unfounded when one of the immigrants steps forward, smiles, and asks her if she needs help. He then assembles a small work crew and together they proceed to free her car. This scene brings the stereotype of sexual violence out into the open thus demonstrating its existence, only to undermine its foundations.

Poniente also makes the case that the construction of Spanish identity has not been simply a matter of its relationship to Africa. As was suggested in the opening lines of this essay, Spain has also elaborated its sense of identity through a simultaneous gaze at its



image in the mirror held up by the rest of Europe. This complex web of relations, which Flesler has called the triangulation Spain/Europe/Africa (21), has been expressed succinctly by sociologist María Rosa de Madariaga:

El español se reconoce demasiado en el otro —moro— y esto lo irrita, le causa desasosiego, lo lleva, en un esfuerzo por distinguirse, por afirmarse a reaccionar violentamente contra él. Hay que demostrar a los demás europeos que el español es superior, que África no empieza en los Pirineos (585, qtd. in Santaolalla 144).

Spain's relationship to these two geographical and cultural entities has been, for centuries, subject to a rigorous dynamic: any conception of Spanish culture that emphasizes a close relationship to Europe implies a movement away from Africa. As a result, even the peripheral nationalities of Spain have often been conceptualized in terms of a proximity to Europe and a distancing from Africa (Martin Márquez 43-46). The corollary of this general principle is that any acknowledgement of the African legacy of Spain would seem to jeopardize its belonging to Europe, since the traces left by the African and Islamic presence in Spain constitute the basis on which the rest of Europe has traditionally viewed Spain as different.

The film engages these issues by evoking Spain's recent past as a country of emigration, when Spanish immigrants were viewed as the *other* by the residents of their host countries.^{iv} In one sequence, Pepe, a friend of Curro's father from their days in Switzerland, speaks of that period of his life in the following terms: "Aquí no había nada de comer y la mitad de la gente tuvo que irse. Salimos de una miseria para meternos en otra miseria peor." While Pepe is burning a pile of rubbish, Curro spots a projector and several reels of film. Asked why he is discarding them, Pepe responds: "Eso ya no le interesa a nadie." Later when Pepe and Curro view these films, we learn that they depict the exodus of Spaniards from their homeland and their difficult existence in exile. Gutiérrez follows Pepe's films with a panning shot of a sprawling plain of plastic-roofed greenhouses to establish the connection between the privations suffered by Spaniards just a few decades ago and the current misery of those who have migrated to Spain fleeing one desperate situation to find themselves in "otra miseria peor". As evidenced by Pepe's statement "Eso ya no le interesa a nadie", what Gutiérrez finds troubling is that current attitudes toward immigration in Spain reveal a nation that has forgotten or chosen to forget that



not long ago many emigrated to escape hunger and poverty. On this subject, she has stated “lo que sucede en La Isla ... puede ocurrir en cualquier ciudad, pueblo o barrio de una metrópoli europea. El conflicto se origina en el miedo a la diferencia e, insisto, en la pérdida de memoria: quienes fueron emigrantes lo han olvidado” (*En el tema de la inmigración*). On one level, Pepe’s initial desire to burn the reels of film, a document that serves as a mirror of his own experiences, implies a desire to erase painful memories. On a second level, however, the erasure stands for the collective desire of the nation to see itself in a different mirror. Recalling the hardships endured by many of its citizens in the not so distant past would interfere with efforts to construct an image of Spain as a prosperous nation and a full-fledged member of the European Union, thus, the need for oblivion. Nonetheless, the perturbing and lingering spectral presence of all those Spaniards who left offers an additional explanation of why current generations find it necessary to define themselves in opposition to the immigrants who have come to Spain in recent years.

Gutiérrez is not content to challenge particular provisions of the received view of Spanish identity. Instead she questions in a direct fashion the very concept of identity on which this view is predicated. In the film’s narrative, Curro has the precise function of transgressing the boundary separating the two bounded communities that make up La Isla. In that he grew up in Switzerland and later settled in Spain as an adult, Curro exemplifies the sort of identity that is often the result of displacement. His identity is at once hybrid and fractured, a circumstance that is quite apparent when he declares “Yo crecí en Suiza y siempre me sentí diferente allí. Lo malo es que aquí también me siento diferente. Nunca he conseguido saber de dónde soy.” This special sense of belonging, but of not quite belonging, enables Curro to occupy a unique position within the social and ethnic structure of the town: he is the only Spaniard who freely crosses the divide separating the local residents and the immigrant workers. His friendship and business partnership with Adbembi places him in the middle of the conflict that opposes the greenhouse owners and the immigrants. He also finds himself drawn into the property dispute between Lucía and her cousin, Miguel, since he works as an accountant for both of them. Curro’s role in the narrative undermines two important pillars in the essentialist view of Spanish identity. First, his position in the community, or more accurately, his ability to



assume different positions, suggests that rather than being based on a fixed, immutable essence, identity is the sum of the different positions which individuals, with varying degrees of deliberate choice, adopt. Moreover, his ability and willingness to transgress the boundary separating the two communities undermines the notion that this boundary is a natural one and instead demonstrates that it is based on an arbitrary distribution of identity. However, in the polarized world of La Isla, the boundary between the two communities, though arbitrary, is nonetheless substantial and, ultimately, there is no middle ground. At this point it is instructive to consider Adbembi and Curro's plan to purchase a *chiringuito*. Although this project could certainly strike the viewer as a rather insignificant and prosaic subplot in the film, the fact that the name they choose for their business is precisely *Poniente* both highlights the significance of the project and sheds a new light on the title of the film. Indeed, one could read the *chiringuito* as a metaphor for the possibility of overcoming difference and creating a new and idyllic gathering place that would embrace the diversity that is, and has always been, Spain. The film, however, reveals the tragically utopian nature of their dream, since it does not survive the outbreak of racial violence that closes the film. The *chiringuito*, thus, comes to symbolize the seemingly insurmountable difficulty of building bridges across the bipolar ethnic divide of La Isla.

The view of Spanish identity that emerges from *Poniente* is clearly relational and contingent upon historical developments. It is a view that does not rely on an essence of Spanishness frozen in time but rather acknowledges that Spanish identity has been constructed over the centuries in response to changing circumstances. In particular, this film reminds us that the construction of Spanish identity has involved a continual renegotiation of Spain's cultural connections to Africa and Europe. This view of identity reflects and is conditioned by important changes that have taken place in Spain the past few decades. The country's transformation from a nation with a high rate of emigration to an attractive destination for immigrants is testimony that identity is both a matter of being and becoming. In contemporary Spain, we can observe a growing acceptance that there are different ways of being and becoming Spanish (Sánchez-Conejero 4-7) and that Spanish identity needs to be conceptualized as a complex nexus of identities to which each individual



may subscribe, a nexus which includes regional, gender, class and ethnic differences. Moreover, one can also detect a significant tendency to celebrate the *convivencia* of Medieval Spain and to hold it up as a model to be emulated in the present (Martin Márquez 300-307). For her part, Gutiérrez strikes a similar note when she speaks of *Poniente* as a “canto a la tolerancia” (*El siglo XXI*). However, despite some hints at a new *convivencia*⁹, her film is more pessimistic than this statement might lead one to believe. *Poniente* seems to suggest that changes in the collective consciousness, like economic development, often proceed at an uneven pace. While many Spaniards have embraced new identities, others, in the face of change, have clung to the hegemonic view. In *Poniente* Curro’s ability to transgress the boundary separating the two communities in La Isla, does not, however, cause this boundary to simply disappear. His position between immigrants and local residents is a precarious one and in the closing scenes of the film he becomes the first victim of the wave of ethnic violence for being “el gran defensor de los moros”, an outcome that offers a clear parallel with the February 2000 violence which targeted both the immigrants workers and the NGOs that had provided them assistance (Nair 71). In the final analysis, the events in El Ejido and their retelling by Gutiérrez offer a cautionary tale about the hegemonic view of Spanish identity, demonstrating both its resilience and its capacity to shape the contemporary Spanish reception of immigrants from across the Strait of Gibraltar.

In closing, I would like to say a few words about a subject that is somewhat tangential to the primary focus of this essay, but one that is nonetheless quite important: the representation of the immigrant experience. By constructing her film around two displaced Spaniards, Gutiérrez chose to provide Spanish viewers with characters they could easily identify with in order to encourage them to examine the question of immigration under a new light. This strategy, although legitimate, results in a relative silencing of the voices of the immigrants who were the victims of this episode of xenophobic violence. Whereas several of these secondary Spanish characters are given names (Pepe, Perla, Miguel, and Paquito) and an incipient degree of individuality, the immigrant community is represented as a largely anonymous, undifferentiated mass. We neither know their names nor their stories nor do we hear them speak at significant length of their lived experiences



in Spain. By including their strike activities in the film, Gutiérrez does attribute to the workers a sort of collective agency; however, they are never truly constituted as autonomous subjects. Finally, the film presents immigrant characters whose broadly construed geographic origin, i.e., North Africa, Sub-Saharan Africa, Eastern Europe and South America, can be inferred by the viewer from their physical appearance, dress or language, yet it never details the ethnic origin of individuals. The only exception to this general tendency is Adbembi, but, despite his importance in the film, his character is less developed than those of either Curro or Lucía. For instance, we never learn anything of his life prior to his arrival in Spain, i.e., why he left Morocco or what his family situation was. We know so little about him that we don't have a clear sense of what qualifies him to be Curro's business partner or to be a leader of the workers' strike.

We certainly can not expect a single film to address a complex issue from all relevant points of view so these comments are not intended to question the validity of *Poniente*. Instead it is my contention that the film is quite successful at achieving what it set out. Yet, it would seem that Gutiérrez was keenly aware that *Poniente* had not adequately represented the Moroccan perspective and that her most recent film *Retorno a Hansala* attempts to remedy this lacuna. It centers on Leila, a young Moroccan woman working in Spain. When her brother drowns while attempting to cross the Strait of Gibraltar in a *patera*, she hires Martín, a Spanish funeral director, to take her brother's body back to Morocco. The film documents their journey to Hansala, her family's village. Its primary concerns are the conditions that drive people to risk their lives in the perilous crossing of the Strait and the differences that separate the two cultures. Initially, the relationship between Leila and Martín is distant with a certain degree of mistrust, but as the film progresses the barriers gradually fall away and when they return to Spain, Martín asks her to marry him. In a sense, *Retorno a Hansala* extends and brings to the foreground of the film the sort of dialogue between cultures that was initiated by Curro's friendship with Adbembi in *Poniente*. It would thus seem to compliment the earlier film. We should, however, keep in mind that the representation of other cultures is never a simple matter. In her study of a series of works based on the testimonies of immigrants, Flesler (163-180) raises the nexus of questions articulated by Gayatri Spivak in the seminal essay "Can the



Subaltern Speak?” In her formulation of this problematic, Flesler argues that such projects rest on a basic inequality between their Spanish authors, who have access to representation, and their immigrant sources that, for the most part, lack such access, an inequality that is often overlooked. Moreover, despite the claims of their authors, these texts do not offer direct, unfettered access to “authentic” immigrant voices; by editing, organizing and rewriting the narratives of their informants, the authors have added several layers of mediation between their sources and the reader or viewer. Although a thorough discussion of the film is not possible here, it is clear that Flesler’s concerns do apply at least in general terms to *Retorno a Hansala* since Gutiérrez does indeed mediate the viewer’s access to Moroccan culture in a variety of ways, most notably by adopting the perspective of Martín, who doesn’t understand Arabic and who struggles to understand the customs and practices he encounters. In fairness to Gutiérrez, we need to acknowledge that whenever one attempts to represent another culture, this sort of mediation is unavoidable, though it can be attenuated. Ultimately, the questions raised by Flesler will be relevant until immigrants in Spain have gained much greater access to the media (Santaolalla 260) and have greater opportunity to represent their experience in their own terms. In the meantime, it is important for creative artists as well as readers and viewers to consider the consequences of both the unequal power relationship inherent in these projects and the ways that their own interventions and our own readings might appropriate or misinterpret immigrant voices. It is no less important, however, for artists such as Gutiérrez to continue to explore the question of immigration in Spain and to bear witness to the experiences of immigrants in Spain.



NOTES

ⁱ Paquito uses this expression a second time in the film. When Lucia learns that Paquito is paid for his overtime hours while the immigrant workers are not, she confronts him. He responds "no vas a compararme a esa gente." Lucía smiles broadly and says "Claro que no. No te les pareces en nada." Her intended meaning is clearly that Paquito lacks the human qualities that she has encountered in her interactions with the workers, but the implied irony is lost on Paquito.

ⁱⁱ In *La Inmigración inesperada*, Antonio Izquierdo has analyzed the *ideología de la invasión* prevalent in discussions on immigration in the Spanish media which has created a climate of fear and mistrust.

ⁱⁱⁱ On this subject, Gutiérrez (*En el tema de la inmigración*) has stated:

Pero para mí lo más importante de *Poniente* es que nos identifiquemos con sus personajes, con la parte humana y salvaje que todos llevamos dentro. Parece que las cosas siempre les pasen a los de al lado, y nadie nos reconocemos como racistas ni intolerantes. Pero es importante saber que todos tenemos dos caras y que llevamos un monstruo dentro.

^{iv} We noted earlier that immigrants are not welcome in many gathering places in La Isla. In an interesting parallel, former Spanish President, Felipe González has related that when he was a student in Belgium during the 1960s, it was common to see signs in bars that read "No entry for Spaniards, Africans and North Africans" (quoted in Carr 93).



Curro and Adbembi's friendship and their plan to go into business together are the primary suggestions in the film that a collaborative partnership is possible. There is one other notable example. One afternoon, Curro takes Lucía and her daughter to the immigrant encampment for a dinner. The gathering features a *paella* as well as music and dance from Africa and gives the viewer a glimpse of what is possible when cultural differences are embraced rather than being used to divide. This sequence, however, stands in sharp contrast with everything else that happens in La Isla and constitutes but a momentary respite from the rising tensions.

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