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Nationless States and Stateless Beings: The politics of identity and citizenship in Claudio Mir's *Mondongo Scam* and Cheech Marin's *Born in East L.A.*

Cover Page Footnote

Rebecca Barnes, a graduate of Penn State University, is currently a third-year PhD student in Spanish at Temple University. Her interests include ecocriticism, diasporic studies, and existentialism as they are applied to Hispanic Literature and Cinema. More specifically, this research focuses on the relationship between a literary or cinematic protagonist and their environment, to the end of discerning the philosophical underpinnings of literary affect in minor literatures. The term environment is employed flexibly, because it can refer to natural, social, and cultural surroundings, or a conjunction of any of those three, which allows for comparison between diverse artistic modes, narrative types, and fictional settings.

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“The ‘we’ of the declaration speaks ‘in the name of the people.’ But this people does not exist. They do *not* exist as an entity, it does *not* exist, *before* this declaration, not *as such*. If it gives birth to itself, as free and independent subject, as possible signer, this can hold only in the act of the signature. The signature invents the signer.” (10)
 Jacques Derrida, “Declarations of Independence”

In his essay, Jacques Derrida questions whether the signing of the U.S. Declaration of Independence simply delineated or, in fact, engendered the fundamental rights of the nascent nation's new citizens. Derrida contrasts the inherently ineffectual nature of a simple signature with the symbolic weight that it carries, concluding that Thomas Jefferson and the other founding fathers, in their subjectively *right* and revolutionary effort, did not simply declare their right to liberty, but also created it. As representatives of their respective states, the founding fathers became the creators of a New World and, thus, took the first step towards building what is now the United States of America. In other words, before this document was signed, the *estadounidense* (United States) people did not exist, and no political borders separated Great Britain from its colony. For political theorists like Ernest Renan, it is important to note that, unlike European nations, the U.S. holds no historic dynastic basis, which eliminates the possibility of having a natural homogenization of religion, culture, or language outside of its mother colony. In other words, as a former conglomerate of colonies that belonged to various European countries, there is no historical basis for cultural standardization. As a result, he characterizes the American Revolution as “an operation which one might compare with the attempt, in physiology, to restore to its original identity a body from which one had removed the brain and the heart” because the members of the colonies in the north differed greatly from their southern counterparts, as well as from those who had migrated further west (Renan 13). Thus,

the U.S.'s independence from Europe turned it into a nationless state, which has, in the years since, needed to validate itself as a unified, global power, and whose membership has a high cost.

The contrast between the U.S.'s outward image as a land of prosperity and its more nuanced status as a nationless state has appeared in theatre and film, both directly and indirectly, for decades. Two well-known examples of this are the films *El Norte* (The North) (1983) and *La misma luna* (Under the Same Moon) (2008), in which Latin American immigrants flee violence to seek a better life in the U.S. In each case, after their arduous journeys the characters are faced with insurmountable difficulties as they try to live without official documentation. These films contrast the image of the United States as a generous and prosperous country with the harsh reality of living within it. In both examples, the U.S. is portrayed as a deceitful entity, one that attracts Latin Americans with all its promise, only to exploit and, in some cases, kill them in the end. These films also portray the profoundly destabilizing effect of the nationless state on the exiled individual who has no hope of finding a niche, whether it be political or existential. This essay explores two less studied performative pieces, Claudio Mir's play *Mondongo Scam* and Cheech Marin's film *Born in East L.A.* that also depict the psychological toll that exile and illegality can have on marginal bodies. Michaela Wolf describes both the cause and the result of this issue in her article, clarifying that decolonization has had a profound effect on the "both the colonized and the colonizer: both feel fragmented, dismembered, exhausted, inferior and weak. The new situation is marked by ambivalence on both sides" (Wolf 128). This is the foundation of the unstable identities that individuals of mixed races, cultures, and nationalities have, because, while they have ties to multiple experiences, they belong to none.

This essay sheds light on the performative techniques used by both Claudio Mir in *Mondongo Scam* (2005) and Cheech Marin in *Born in East L.A.* (1987) to demonstrate what it is to be a proverbial orphan of the world. In *Mondongo Scam*, Casiano is a Dominican-born immigrant who comes to the U.S. to visit family and decides to overstay his visa. After what was presumably Hurricane David that hit the Dominican Republic in 1979, Casiano finds himself, first, a volunteer to collect the cadavers of his fellow countrymen, then a refugee stranded in the ruins of his village.¹ This part of the story, told before even revealing his full name, demonstrates that the protagonist is uprooted from his home country and a foreigner to all other nations. He seeks asylum in the U.S., goes to “the U.S. consulate in Santo Domingo to do it legally” and successfully finds himself reunited with his sister for three months, ready to work and establish a bank account in a new country (Mir 3). Upon finding himself without a job and without the right to work, however, he needs a new identity, which is when he purchases that of the defunct Ishmael Rosentahl. Upon the assumption of Ishmael's name and social security number, Casiano immediately begins to lose himself. Set in a courtroom, it is up to Casiano to defend himself against the authorities who are prosecuting him for assuming identities and social security numbers. Throughout Casiano's defense of his case, he explains not only the mitigating circumstances of his arrival in the U.S., but also demonstrates a mystical connection to the defunct people he became. In the end, he shows that he did not simply steal social security numbers, but also allowed himself to be possessed by these people.

Although Marin's film is written to be more comical, the protagonist finds himself in a similar, yet inverse situation as Casiano. Rudy, a U.S. citizen of Mexican descent, is a laid-back,

¹ On September 3rd, 1979, it was reported that Hurricane David killed over 600 people in the Dominican Republic, 400 of which were from a town 18 miles west of the capital, Villa de Ocoa (Ritchie). In Mir's play, Casiano affirms that “In 1979 I was in my country living peacefully, Tranquilo. All of a sudden the hurricane came” (2).

unambitious mechanic who, after a series of unfortunate mishaps, finds himself labelled as an illegal immigrant, rounded up and taken across the border into Mexico. Besides the evident inversion of the traditional border crossing narrative, Marin's film also reinterprets the identity struggle of a heritage Central American who, although constantly judged to be one, does not feel like a Chicano. Being a U.S. citizen born to Mexican parents, Rudy shows no real connection to his Central American roots. As the film unfolds, however, he is deported to Mexico and obligated to overcome many difficult obstacles to survive and return to Los Angeles. This story has an optimistic ending, because Rudy's experience shows how incomplete he was until he accepted his own duality. Despite the difference in their tones, however, both pieces show the psychological effects of the exaggerated nationalism that accompanies the concepts of citizenship and belonging mentioned before.

Before exploring the implications of the nationless state and its effect on citizenship, it remains to be said that, despite the potential arbitrariness of its founding, the State as establishment does serve a purpose. As Hannah Arendt points out in *The Human Condition*, man (human) is naturally a social animal, much like the rest of the animal kingdom, which denotes a need to operate within a society and work towards goals greater than those dictated by immediate need (22). Arendt points out that his socialness, coming from the Latin *societas*, has a political meaning "(indicating) an alliance between people for a specific purpose, as when men organize in order to rule others or to commit a crime" (23). This unification under a given governing control is the seed of social order and the basis of citizenship because members of any given nation, to identify as such, must share some form of legal system, ideology, culture, or values to function as one political entity and not descend into chaos. Therefore, the nation is an infrastructure that can greatly influence the developments of its members' identities by molding

their worldviews. The nation-states profound psychological power is demonstrated in Mir's play not in reference to his native Dominican Republic, but to the United States and the influence that it had in the development of Casiano's culture and worldview. After describing the hurricane that displaced him and killed his compatriots, the protagonist explains that, since his childhood, "The United States were like my mother. I noticed since I was a kid that Nueva York was everything" (2). Implicit in this assertion is the sentiment that the United States is a utopic goal in Casiano's mind, seeing as he regarded it as a place of prosperity to which he would strive to have access one day. In addition to this, the adoration of the U.S. is tied to its goods and commerce, such as toys and sneakers, when he states that "we believed that anything that came from the United States was better than anything we could buy in our country" (3). In this way, through ideological prowess and the veneration of material goods, the U.S. is a binding, ideological and political entity for Casiano, one that, at least in his perspective, drives him to wear certain clothing, eat specific foods, and, ultimately, become other people. Although this is a very negative case, his treatment of the U.S. throughout the play demonstrates how profoundly linked the State is to an individual's identity, whether they are a citizen or not.

Even for critics like Ernest Renan, who fervently question the legitimacy of such political establishments, the nation unites certain groups within it, thus increasing the importance of social acceptance in the formation of such identities. Renan identifies two key pillars of *societas*, stating that "one is the possession in common of a rich legacy of memories; the other is present-day consent, the desire to live together, the will to perpetuate the value of the heritage that one has received in an undivided form" (Renan 19). In other words, a shared history, and a mutual, consensual present, are necessary for citizens to recognize others as one of their own. These are also central themes in Cheech Marin's *Born in East L.A.* In Rudy's case, he is a U.S. citizen and

identifies as such, but continuously experiences social rejection and alienation from his compatriots throughout the film because of the way he looks. For example, this is clearly depicted when the Immigration Agent catches Rudy in the toy factory and, thinking that he is an illegal worker, says “What do we got here? Looks like a bean in a beanbag.” Suddenly, after a series of minor misunderstandings, the latent racism of his countrymen is overtly expressed to Rudy, who is resultingly silenced and exiled to Mexico. This, among other details that will be explored later in this essay, demonstrate the lack of social acceptance from fellow U.S. citizens that drives Rudy’s decisions and ways of thinking.

Although the American Revolution is revered in history books, it remains unrecognized that the U.S. is a nation born of uprising, of political auto-amputation, and that its autonomy, both on the individual and the governmental levels, is based solely on the daring actions of a few politicians. As Benedict Anderson quips, “it was only that a certain inventive legerdemain was required to permit the empire to appear attractive in national drag” or to secede in a morally righteous way (Anderson 87). Because of this historical romanticization, there is an exaggerated sense of nationalism and exclusiveness that surrounds the concept of U.S. citizenship, as if it has already been forgotten that the Declaration of Independence was signed a mere two-and-a-half centuries ago. The arbitrariness and the recency of this birth destabilizes arguments made today about U.S. citizenship, nationalism, and belonging, because when lines are drawn and walls are built, it is too easy to forget that the absolute superiority of U.S. citizenship is not only a young concept, but also one founded in the questioning of colonial and governmental establishments that were previously in place. The ontological arbitrariness of this nation-state should evoke critical thought about commonly accepted concepts, such as citizenship and illegal immigration, and make room for the possibility of a freer sociopolitical body, one enclosed by softer borders,

in which members of bigger world communities can operate and seek asylum. As Homi Bhabha asserts, the lack of a nation, or life in one that rejects the individual, only furthers the void of not belonging. As a result, this creates a nation of rogue and enraged non-citizens who will seek to subvert the State that continuously rejects them. Therefore, although the politics that define a nation may be necessary to maintain order, perhaps what creates the constant threat that fetters the Latin American consciousness in the U.S. is an inherent sense of xenophobia, taught by the government and learned by the people, against the Hispanic Other. So, if the U.S. establishment perpetuates a worldview where only white, Anglo-Saxon protestants can be accepted, where do the world citizens who do not fit this mold belong?

Studying Derrida and Arendt's theories sheds light on the ontological arbitrariness of political borders. Nevertheless, Mir's play and Marin's film each depict a protagonist torn between nations, and the existential difficulties that arise as a result of a culture that dictates their in-betweenness, their not-belonging. In both narratives, this personal struggle takes place in the aftermath of a border crossing, which not only shows divided social spaces that may not correlate to geographic divisions, but also the inevitable hybridity that results from cultures in contact. As Jorge Duany affirms "border crossing becomes an apt image not just for the act of moving to another country but also for the crossover but also for the crossover between cultures, languages, and nations in which migrants participate. An intense process of cultural hybridization usually takes place as people relocate" (Duany 228).

As Diana Taylor affirms in her introduction, it is important to analyze these performances because they are "acts of transfer, transmitting social knowledge, memory, and a sense of identity" that reveal truths about the external world and about the spectator themselves (Taylor 2). In the comparison of Mir's and Marin's works, it would be almost redundant to point out that the

profound underlying sentiments they convey are uprootedness, anger, and unfair ostracization, because both Casiano and Rudy straddle opposing identities and suffer the rejection of the United States authority, leaving them to grapple with very limited social and psychological options. In her article, Michaela Wolf asks how the postcolonial world can translate social differences between formerly colonized bodies yet continue to propagate messages about Otherness and exclusion. On a governmental level, as well as on an existential one, she asks “are not the various forms of Otherness still illusions or reflections, rather, of our own identities?” (Wolf 131). Although these works portray this struggle with very different tones, their distinct confrontations with the absolute and unrelenting establishment merits exploration. By studying their words, as well as the performative details of each piece, this analysis sheds light on the how the nationalistic absolutism that surrounds the concept of U.S. citizenship damages its subjects, creating, as the title indicates, stateless beings.

Mir’s *Mondongo Scam* exhibits the process of extreme assimilation and acculturation, at the end of which the protagonist completely loses himself. Although *Mondongo Scam* may seem like a monologue, it is what critic Camilla Stevens refers to as a *polymonologue*, a theatre piece that only shows one side of the conversation (182). Therefore, throughout Casiano’s defense of himself in court, the audience only sees and listens to his side of the story, even as he seemingly responds to questions posed by the judge. This performative detail is key to understanding the message about citizenship because it silences the judge who condemns Casiano for identity theft, thereby allowing the otherwise voiceless minority party to speak. Furthermore, as Casiano reveals the mystical downward spiral of his own identity by speaking unknown languages, dancing, and adopting other personas, the audience is consumed by the solitude of the narrative voice.

The play is written to seem spontaneous, since it has run-on and fragment sentences, curses, and words mangled by his language barrier. The protagonist's use of code-switching and a seemingly fabricated language immediately demonstrates that he is spiritually and culturally uprooted, with neither a true mother tongue nor a stable sense of himself. While the use of Spanish is distributed throughout his discourse, the language that Casiano creates and speaks with increasing frequency as he dances around the courtroom, "I can get along with anybody suiki baru tiki nolika tia nalai tia nalai, in the name of the lord I reprehend you satan, excuse me your honor I beg your pardon" further reinforces his isolation from society because, in this trance state, he is understood by nobody (Mir 14). As Karolina Majkowska refers to it, the migrant condition is marked by in-betweenness, so the use of linguistic hybridity in a performance or literary piece "highlights the characters' exclusion from certain communities, thus stressing their in-between position" (117). This is the result of Casiano's unresolved *in-betweenness*, a state he is in because he wholeheartedly transformed himself and lost sight of his original identity.

His transformation and existential struggle could be interpreted as a performance of assimilation and acculturation. As Fernando Ortiz defines the term, *acculturation* is the acquisition of a new culture, which "necessarily involves the loss or uprooting of a previous culture," or *deculturation* (102). In this case, assimilation and acculturation are deeply linked because, to assimilate oneself, it is necessary to shed the ties to former customs. To exemplify this performatively, Casiano directly characterizes his own condition in terms of clothing, stating that "we are who we are because of the things we wear" and donning the clothing that his subjects' would wear while they were alive (Mir 11). This could be interpreted as both a political and socio-economic commentary because it has to do with determinism. In a world where one's identity is determined by material wealth and, by extension, the community in which they exist,

in-betweenness, whether it be between countries or socioeconomic levels, leaves the subject with nowhere to go and no way to be. This is clearly exemplified in Casiano's case because, despite his best intentions to become someone else, he is stripped of his adopted identity and forced to be himself.

As it was mentioned before, the narrative voice highlights the solitude of the migrant experience, but it also provides a glimpse into the chaotic human brain as it recalls the past and tries to explain the present. Diana Taylor describes this performative technique as the demonstration of "a continuum between inner and outer... made evident through embodied experience" (82). For Taylor, this result of this embodiment is a sense of commonality between the protagonist and the audience. In this case, the confusing and divergent nature of the polymonologue leads the audience to distrust Casiano at first and, in the end, to question their own motives for that distrust. Casiano does not simply explain that he committed identity theft to survive, but instead obligates the audience to question their own prejudices by broadcasting his chaotic mindset.

The spectator is skeptical, judging the protagonist for having overstayed his visa in the U.S. and worked illegally under the guise of several social security numbers of deceased individuals. As his discourse continues, however, and his real name and motives are revealed starting on the eighth page of the manuscript, the play takes a dark psychological turn and leads the audience down a rabbit hole of questions about identity, nationality, and human rights. The gradual revelation of the protagonist's need, and the trauma that he suffered, succeeds in humanizing Casiano. In other words, Mir's play reveals to the audience their own prejudices and unfound conclusions about illegal aliens, as well as how complicated, yet necessary, seeking asylum in the U.S. can be. Linda Bosniak refers to these xenophobic tendencies as a

psychological *revaluing* of U.S. citizenship, which “entails a devaluation of the figure of the alien” (Bosniak 30). In other words, this is the justification of hating the Hispanic Other based on assumptions about their criminality and their insidious, parasitic motives. Mir manipulates this sentiment in his audience by showcasing Casiano’s confused, yet well intentioned pursuit of U.S. citizenship. Although Casiano is breaking the law, he genuinely wants to live an honest life as a member of this new community, to the point of effacing his own persona and adopting a new one. Mir conveys the mental switching of identities with small performative details. For example, there is a textual “(pause),” which is accompanied with a shift in tone, that indicates that the protagonist has not only adopted a new identity, but that he also has dissolved a part of his original self (3). Thus begins Casiano’s outward expression of the identity struggle, because, in becoming someone else, he becomes less of himself, and yet, his alternate identity is also taken away from him, which makes him a metaphorical orphan again, the empty shell of an individual.

Casiano’s switching and adoption of identities, all varying in age, religion, and gender, can be interpreted in two ways. In one sense, his total absorption of the Other could be seen as a form of mimetic parasitism.² Casiano becomes every bit of Rosentahl, wearing a yamaca, eating bagels with cream cheese and proclaiming “What am I? German and Russian, French and Argentinian, Italian, Spaniard, and Dominican” (4). He latches on to the host identity to blend into society and Casiano ceases to exist. For critics like Sean Corner, the parasite is a deeply political figure that reveals the underbelly of the host society. As Corner affirms, the parasite is an inherently marginal being and acts as witness to the structure of social relations, because “where hospitality is invested in creating bonds with people who are at some level strangers,

² Although parasitism usually denotes some harm caused to the host, in this case, however, it suggests the taking of a host by mimicking its behavior and way of life.

seeking to establish relations with them and avert hostility, making a potential enemy into a friend, the parasite is a fundamentally ambivalent figure, neither fully integrated nor entirely rejected, the stranger whose status is not properly resolved, but who remains an outsider within” (44). Casiano, despite his best efforts to fit in, to erase himself in the name Ishmael, suffers this marginalization. This is embodied in the reference that he makes to *mondongo*, the dish made of “intestines with tostones, fried plantains,” and a litany of herbs and spices (Mir 4). There is a grotesqueness to his description of this dish because the cow intestine, associated with feces and everything unclean, is not inherently a decadent treat, but something that was once meticulously cleaned and eaten out of need. This mirrors what Corner mentions in his article, that food is inherently a social act or a gathering, but that the parasite consumes what is left over by the host, in secret, hand-to-mouth. Within this interpretation, one presupposes that Mir’s representation of Casiano’s latching onto Ishmael is intentionally magnified not only to confront the audience with their own prejudices, but also to showcase that those who take do not necessarily do so out of malice, but out of necessity.

The second interpretation of the politically parasitic relationship between Casiano and the U.S. focuses on the use of the word *scam* in the title. Despite his seemingly random, stream-of-consciousness writing style, Claudio Mir’s title is a deliberate juxtaposition between the minority and the majority, touching on the xenophobic tendencies of the audience. *To scam* is a transitive verb that denotes two parties involved, the con man and the scammed. This is a turning of the tables because it denotes a play for power by a wily character who has agency over their opponent. Perhaps in the first few minutes of the play, when the spectator is still skeptical of Casiano, he could be construed as the fox, the cunning one who stands to gain from his own hidden agenda. As the play continues, however, his disempowerment at the hands of the

authorities, as well of fellow minority members, effectively eliminates him from this role. He is not the con man; he is the conned. As his story unfolds, the play becomes an inversion of the traditional understanding of the illegal immigrant narrative, because, instead of draining the nation's resources, Casiano finds himself exploited, consumed, and, finally, rejected by the society to which he wants to contribute. Even amongst fellow Latin Americans, he is fooled into falling for a woman who believes he has a green card and raped by a man who tells him "don't worry, I am a member of a minority too" (5). In other words, within this interpretation, society is the parasitic force. Michel Serres affirms that "we parasite each other and live amidst parasites. Which is more or less a way of saying that they constitute our environment... in more distinguished terms, we are speaking of an organic model for the members of a society" (Serres 10). For individuals who have no social network and no one to trust, life is a scam, a long-standing exploitation of innocence, identity, and nationality. As Casiano's public defender declares, "the defendant is a victim of culture, a victim of unnatural forces," he is the host killed by the parasite (Mir 12). Despite being willing to work, pay taxes, and have a credit card under his assumed identities, Casiano is not allowed to belong, only legally permitted to spend three months in the U.S., exclusively spending (not making) money to boost the economy, and then he is free to be deported back to a country to which he no longer belongs either.

Ultimately, the social critique of Mir's play subverts the traditional concepts of birthright and belonging because it demonstrates that consciously choosing a country and tolerating its governmental abuse with the hope to truly belong there, signifies a form of patriotism and of dedicated civic virtue. As Linda Bosniak points out in her article, some political theorists define true citizenship as "forms of active engagement in the life of the political community (whether engagement in the process of self-governance or in the voluntary associations of civil society)"

(30). Casiano had hoped to integrate seamlessly into the life with so much fervor that, in the end, he is physically and mentally the host of all of his U.S. identities, to the point of losing control, suffering “(brief black out)(s),” “(transforming),” dancing, and speaking in fabricated languages in the courtroom (11-14). He becomes infested with conflicting American consciousnesses, an engorgement of identity that circles back to his first claims of innocence in the beginning of his monologue. He is innocent because he was not impersonating U.S. citizens, but rather “the spirits of Virginia, Esther, Ramon Cortines Navarro, Ishmael Rosentahl, Brent Parker and Rev. George Aponte Solano possessed (his) body anytime they want” (14). By the end of the play, the audience is left with the realization that Casiano, having come from the Dominican Republic, a former colony and perhaps also a nationless state, had been raised on a diet of U.S. idealization since his formative years. Thus, the identity struggle and the will to belong there when his home was swept away in a hurricane, was a direct result of the cultural propaganda sold and consumed by nationalistic, capitalist bodies. The true scam was the lie that convinced Casiano that *Nueva York* is where everyone prospers and no one’s shoes are too small.

Cheech Marin’s film *Born in East L.A.* is a comical reformulation of the illegality narrative that highlights both the prejudices of the audience and the confusion about identity that mixed-race individuals have. As Sarah Warren confirms in her article, “identity politics in Latin America have been defined by their intersectionality,” by the tumultuous ethnic and cultural history that has resulted in a highly diverse population distributed over numerous countries, including the U.S. (833). In Rudy’s case, intersectionality is a source of confusion, seeing as he legally belongs in the U.S., but lacks, or perhaps willfully ignores, an urgent cultural knowledge about himself, seeing as his entire immediate family is very immersed in Mexican tradition and he is not. Although his story may seem insignificant, it can be interpreted in a grander sense as

the Latin American diasporic experience. Homi Bhabha points out that the problem of knowledge shows that “the people are neither the beginning nor the end of the national narrative; they represent the cutting edge between the totalizing powers of the social and the forces that signify the more specific address to contentious, unequal interests and identities within the population” (Bhabha 297). For Bhabha, it is the citizens’ right and responsibility to recall their own history and multiculturalism, lest these mental archives be whitewashed by the annals of history. In other words, maintaining one’s *latinity* in the U.S. is integral to demanding recognition and representation of the minority from the government. In this case, Marin showcases his protagonist’s knowledge problem through the representation of his *mexicanness*, and how, at first, it clashes with the cultural influences of both Europe and the U.S. As his journey unfolds, however, the comedy suggests that his *latinity* blossoms once he realizes that he belongs not on one, but on both sides of the border.

Beyond representing the Latin American diasporic experience, Rudy’s experience in Mexico could also demonstrate Ortiz’ concept of transculturation. Although Ortiz uses this term most frequently for studies about Caribbean identity, it has to do with the effects of cultures in contact. Considering the fusion of Mexican and U.S. cultures in the southwest, one can loosely apply Ortiz’ terms to the Chicano identity as well. In this case, it becomes important to specify Rudy’s consciousness of his Latin roots as a development of his Chicano identity because Marin is embodying a very specific cultural consciousness. As Rosa Fregoso puts it, “Marin renders a depiction of Chicano social reality through humor as opposed to a more serious political style” (50). An example of the humor employed to this reality is in the opening credits, where Rudy ogles a woman walking to his shop. With red hair, a green dress, and long white legs, the woman, who turns out to have a French accent, simultaneously embodies a postcolonial ideal of

beauty and is codified with the colors of the Mexican flag. Fregoso also points out that this woman resembles the statue of liberty, making the sexualization of her “a critique of the hypocrisy of dominant culture” (52). Nevertheless, she is the embodiment of transculturation.

In keeping with Ortiz’s terminology, Rudy’s hybridization would be best characterized as *neoculturation*, “the creation of new cultural phenomena,” because, as a result of his struggle, he personally flourishes once he decides to integrate his Latin American identity into every aspect of his life, both professionally and romantically (103). As Ortiz describes it, the neocultural subject is very much the offspring of both worlds that contributed to its formation, “it has something of both parents but is always different from each of them” (103). This neoculturation and hybridity is most clearly addressed in the film when Rudy is tasked with teaching others how to *act like a Mexican*. Here, Rudy encounters individuals who do not speak Spanish nor English, and he is told to teach them how to behave when they arrive in Los Angeles. Not only is this a moment in which the indigenous populations of Mexico are represented, it is also a demonstration of Rudy’s particular Chicano consciousness because, despite labelling the swagger and the jargon broadly as ‘Mexican,’ it is more specifically Chicano.

Specifying this is important because it is how Marin performs the existential struggle of Latin Americans in the U.S. who will often repress fundamental parts of their identity to fit in. As Rafael Pérez-Torres affirms, the Chicano identity in the U.S. is formulated by colonial conquests between the 1500’s and 1800’s, resulting in a personal and cultural hybridity between the Indigenous and the European that poses a constant power struggle between dominant and oppressed cultural facets (154). In modern day, Pérez-Torres confirms that “Chicanismo is measured by skin color and details of physiognomy” and it is fettered with obstacles such as deportation, persecution, and social disempowerment (ibid 155). The latter issues are represented

by the situation that Rudy finds himself in, but his physiognomy is a constant subtext of each of his experiences. Not only is Rudy repeatedly identified as a Mexican by his skin color, but he takes advantage of his ability to *act like a Mexican* when it benefits him.

By demonstrating the persecution that Rudy faces, Marin also demonstrates the willful rejection of Latin identity that comes as a result. In this case, Rudy never learned Spanish, despite being exposed to it in his family. This could be interpreted as a willful rejection of his Central American side, as well as a source of insecurity in his own Chicano-ness. As Anderson points out in his chapter “Official Nationalism and Imperialism,” language, nationality, and ethnic identity, although commonly thought to be intrinsically linked, often do not exactly correspond to one another, especially in large, sprawling empires. Anderson cites a historic example to strengthen this argument, affirming that “the Hapsburgs were not a consciously and consequently Germanizing power... there were Hapsburgs who *did not even speak German*” (84). In Rudy’s case, his rudimentary Spanish causes a tension between the archetypal characteristics of Latinos that he has internalized and his outward persona. As a result, he is sufficiently equipped to *act like a Mexican* when it is to his advantage, such as when he performs for tourists in a Mariachi band to earn money, but he does not allow himself to fully recognize his duality.

As a foil to Rudy’s basic Spanish, it is mentioned in this scene that he is fluent in German. When Dolores asks him about this, he explains that he was stationed in Germany: “In the army, being *all I could be*. Except all they’d let me be was a mechanic, so I was in the army as a mechanic for four years, then I stayed for a couple extra years and got married” (*Born in East L.A.*). Adding this exposition to the protagonist eliminates the possible interpretation that Rudy is a xenophobe, or simply completely ignorant of other cultural worldviews, because he

has shown that he was willing to uproot himself, learn a language to fluency, and legally become a citizen of another country. The subtext of his assimilation into German culture is that he felt no qualms about being European, that there was no internalized racism that ruled against embracing that culture. Moreover, his background highlights the rejection he suffered in the army, since he was only allowed to become a mechanic. This rejection of him and of his military service is a subtle discourse of propaganda, exploitation, and contempt on behalf of the U.S. government that shows how, even amongst fellow citizens, there exist racist hierarchies. This could have driven Rudy's preference for a European rather than a Latino identity.

Throughout the course of the film, Marin uses some of the same performative techniques as Claudio Mir to confront the audience with their own prejudices and profiling markers about the Latin American Other. This minority discourse is reframed, however, to represent both how the Other is seen, and how it sees itself. In other words, Marin's representation and embodiment of Rudy conveys the Chicano identity, one autonomous of any specific nation. Bhabha characterizes this as an "act of emergence in the antagonistic *in-between* of image and sign, the cumulative and the adjunct, presence and proxy. It contests genealogies of 'origin' that lead to claims for cultural supremacy and historical priority" (Bhabha 307). Therefore, using certain imagery, Marin's character evokes enough nationalistic and racist tropes to demonstrate the psychological duality of the Chicano identity. As a result, he creates a protagonist who, instead of searching for an identity that is not his, is forced to confront the underdeveloped part of his cultural psyche and recognize that, despite not having been born in Mexico and not speaking Spanish, his Latin roots are just as important as the U.S. culture in which he grew up.

Much as Mir does, Marin's imagery manipulates the audience's view of Rudy. At first, he makes him out to be a Mexican archetype and, gradually, he reveals his multifaceted

character. This transformation is displayed performatively through several small details, such as the music and his hat. One of the tracks repeatedly played throughout the film is “Mañana,” which sings of various unresolved problems, such as a broken fence and a roof riddled with the holes, that go unfixed as the singer repeats “Mañana is good enough for me.”³ The procrastination described in this tune reinforces the initial impression given of Rudy as a lazy Mexican. This is furthered by the clothing that he wears. In the beginning, Rudy wears a red baseball cap that reads “*No cerveza, No trabajo.*” There is an ambiguity to this article of clothing, because it could have two meanings, each of which denotes a connotation that is commonly associated with Mexicans in the U.S. On one hand, “if there’s no beer, I don’t work,” the hat signifies that he is lazy and stereotypically enthused by instant, superficial gratification. On the other hand, “no beer, no work” suggests that he has nothing, not sustenance, nor a job, that he lives in need, which is another common trope associated with the Latin American man living in the United States. However, during his time in Mexico, Rudy is exclusively filmed wearing a blue and white “LA” baseball cap. The colors of the hats could be interpreted in the same way as well, red and white denoting two thirds of the Mexican flag, and blue and white for two thirds of U.S. patriotism. It is deeply meaningful that, on either given side of the border, Rudy seems to represent the *other* side because it signifies his transnationality, his *self* and his *other*. The symbolism of this could be interpreted as a metaphor for hybridization.

As it was stated before, Marin uses humor to represent the Chicano reality in the U.S. Rudy’s duality is an integral part of that experience, because it represents not only his individual struggle, but also the greater social dynamic that exists at the border. In other words, Rudy lives

³ In the movie, the song is sung by a mariachi band, but the original track was released in 1947 by Peggy Lee and Dave Barbour. Although the song was interpreted as mockery of latinos, Lee went on record explaining that the song was originally about a relaxing Mexican vacation (Santiago-Mercado).

in an in-between state between the U.S. and Mexico, a blurred racial binary that is not intricately represented on a national level. Therefore, the hat is representative of Rudy's crisscrossed cultural wires and how the survival of the hybrid individual is based on transculturation. On a more symbolic level, this is also a rhetorical paradigm that proposes a new dynamic. For Adalberto Aguirre, the border is "a transcultural social space, with the potential for erasing the binary distinction of 'us and them'" (Aguirre 101). This can be seen in Rudy's transformation, because he successfully deconstructs the internalized negative tropes that he fostered about the Central American identity and, as a result, is no longer able to distinguish between his *self* and his *other*. Ideologically, this is representative of Ortiz' neoculturation, in which identity is not dictated by state lines, but by soft borders.

Both Mir's play and Marin's film demonstrate identity struggles on the individual level, but at the heart of this issue lies American politics. In the aftermath of colonialism, there have been countless instances of exploitation and intervention in Latin America on behalf of the U.S. that have continuously uprooted the social, economic, and political homeostasis that these countries have tried to establish and maintain. The result of this upheaval is the creation of nation-states that, as Duany puts it, "remain politically and economically subordinated to the United States" (231). However, when citizens of these countries find themselves unable to stay, they are not permitted to seek asylum in the country that they have been told to idealize. Moreover, even if they become U.S. citizens, they are constantly subjugated to racism and exclusion. In other words, nationless states create stateless beings. By showcasing the result of these struggles, playwrights and directors can help their audiences better understand the migrant condition and question their own prejudiced tendencies toward the Other.

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