



## **AMERICAN (VISA) DREAMS**

by Debra A. Castillo

Wanderers, migrants, and other traveling characters are common in film, as are cross-cultural encounters. Yet U.S. characters in U.S. movies tend to cross borders invisibly, or with panache (unless there is an evil Nazi roadblock to slow them down); but in any case, they cross borders without having to apply for visas. Jason Bourne never had such performative challenges as the characters in the movies I will be discussing here, nor, for that matter, did Gidget on her jaunts to Paris or Rome. Because borders offer such a rich vein of study for introspection on national identities, it is, then, largely up to other national cinemas, the third world cinemas, to interrogate the unstable analytic category of the protective nation-state, and to ask us to reconsider identities that are refined down to national stereotypes in the scripted dialogue of the visa questionnaire.

Cantinflas's 1967 parody of superpower manipulations, *Su excelencia*, opens with a scene at the República de los Cocos (i.e., Mexican) Embassy in Pepislavia (i.e., USSR), a scene that is openly and suggestively derived from the experience of the frustrated citizens of the world when encountering the bureaucracy of the U.S. visa application system.<sup>11</sup> Elderly Milos Popovich is first in line at the embassy that day. His visa has been in-process for 35 years, and accordingly, he knows very well that he needs to arrive early, with all his papers in hand, given that the hours for visa petitions are limited to Monday through Friday from 10:30 to 10:45 am. Cantinflas, playing the consular official, sympathizes with the complexity of Popovich's task in providing the proper paperwork, agreeing with him that during these years the laws have been continually

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1

changing, so that the applicant can never be sure that he is bringing all the necessary documents, and that there is no way to know in advance if additional certifications are needed. Cantinflas then asks for a series of documents: passport, health certificates (for vaccinations including yellow fever, white vomit, jaundice, rabies, heartburn, typhus, smallpox), military service record, marriage license (Popovich never married), and, finally, his “certificado de defunción” (death certificate). Since Popovich is still alive, Cantinflas denies his application one more time, telling him that he needs to return with a notarized letter swearing he will not die during his visit to Los Cocos, as Los Cocos will not be responsible for funeral or repatriation expenses. Once he has this final certification, and, of course, Cantinflas assures him, barring any further changes in the regulations, Mr. Popovich will be granted his tourist visa.

The visa application vignette is a small, humorous set piece in *Su excelencia*, though as the opening scene, it establishes the tone for the movie. More significantly, *Su excelencia* is an early example of what has become a well-established and formulaic subgenre in international and U.S. narrative and film, involving encounters with the complicated officialdom of the U.S. visa and immigration system. Besides the movies cited in this paper, there are many other Spanish American films, including hundreds of straight-to-video productions, which have a significant plot point focused on U.S. visa and immigration issues. This topic is particularly familiar in a wide range of Mexican and Mexican American films, as well as Cuban and Cuban-American films. A sampling of feature films from other parts of the world would include *Purab Aur Pachhim* (India 1970), *West is West* (India/USA 1978), *Merika* (Phillipines 1984), *Gringo Wedding* (Colombia 2006), *Línea del cielo* (Spain, 1984), *Fei faat yi man* (Hong Kong 1985), *Green Card* (Australia 1999), *Little Senegal* (Algeria/France 2001), *Kehtaa Hai Dil Baar Baar* (India 2002), *Green Card Fever* (India/USA 2003), *A Fronteira* (USA/Brazil 2003), *Spanglish* (USA 2004), *American Visa* (Nigeria 2004), *Love for Rent* (USA 2005), *Apartment 202* (USA 2005), *Every Dog's Day* (USA/India 2005), and *Thirteen Months of Sunshine* (USA/Ethiopia 2007). It is also a topic that appears as a pivotal plot point in border narratives and immigration stories too numerous to mention. In the context of this paper, I note only one of them—Juan de Recacoechea's prizewinning novel, on which the film *American Visa* is based.

These films and narratives respond to the now century-long history in many parts of the world of seeing the United States as a desirable locus for immigration, and also offer local counterpoints to respond filmically to the hegemony of Hollywood films on screens in many parts of the world. In this sense, following Adrián Pérez Melgosa, I would argue that in these films from the global south provide the other half of the dialogue referenced by that scholar, in which “film has conformed an imaginary contact-zone where both Latin American and Anglo American audiences have witnessed the struggles of each kind of Latinamericanism to naturalize its view of Latin America” (2). Thus, while Pérez Melgosa studies mostly classic Hollywood films that focus on inter-American cinematic couples, the wide variety of non-United States films alluded to above stage their own versions of this encounter between the global North and South, including what we might call a struggle of world citizens (including Latin Americans) to naturalize their views of the United States. In both these studies, filmic rehearsals of dislocation, north and south, provoke viewers to interrogate the bases for presumptions about national identity, cultural values, and inter-cultural (mis)communications.

For purposes of this paper, I will focus on a small sample of these films from former Spanish colonies now under the U.S. sphere of influence, including movies from Mexico (*Espaldas mojas*, 1955), Bolivia (*American Visa*, 2005), Colombia (*Visa U.S.A.*, 1986), Dominican Republic (*Nueva Yol*, 1995), and Philippines (*La visa loca*, 2005).<sup>2</sup> In each of the films I will be referencing in this study, the difficulty of obtaining a U.S. visa serves as an important device for setting the plot in motion. At the same time, the encounter with U.S. officialdom also creates the first noteworthy meeting of the protagonist with U.S. people and culture, and while the exchange between the two individuals is always formulaic, it also nontrivial, as it highlights significant performances of identity on both parts. The U.S.A. is defined by these consular procedures; indeed, the exterior shot of the embassy building, the consular officials, and the flag are the first, and often the only representations of the U.S.A. in many of these films. Likewise, the exchanges between individuals and the form the conversation/questioning takes, indicate the film’s presumed understanding of how the U.S. imagines the natives of other countries, at the same time as it gives the applicants clues as to how the U.S. imagines itself, or wants others to imagine the country and its

inhabitants. The applicant for his part plays a stereotyped role that he has been assured will present him favorably in the U.S. official's eyes; this role as the "good foreigner" is carefully rehearsed but usually badly performed due to nervousness or bad coaching. The U.S. official's role is no less stereotyped, but in these films, his character tends to be flat (does not extend beyond the stereotype) while the applicant's role is nuanced for humor or dramatic effect.

In all of the films I will be discussing here (and many others in this genre as well), there is a standard set of elements that almost always recur, irrespective of national origin or historical moment of production, almost as if following a set schema. First, a heterosexual man dreams of coming to U.S.A.; the visa question immediately crops up. Secondly, in preparation for the critical encounter, he engages in a rehearsal of his self-presentation intended to plead his case with U.S. officials, based on advice from a range of questionable informants. He then encounters radical otherness in the form of a threatening/corrupt U.S. consular official, and realizes that there is no straightforward and legal way to get his visa. At that point, a coyote/friend/intermediary generally gives him bad advice, and the man gets a fake/fraudulent visa (or in some versions, he arrives in the U.S.A. undocumented). If the film extends to life in the U.S.A. there are then two possible outcomes. In a first set of movies (more typical of movies made outside the U.S.A.), he will fall in love with a woman from his home country and realize that home is better than the U.S.A., giving up his unrealistic American Dream.<sup>3</sup> In a second set of movies (more typical of the movies made in the U.S.A. that I will not be addressing in this paper), he will get to the United States, fall in love with a U.S. woman, and assimilate to the American Dream, as represented by achieving a green card, along with a stable job and a happy family.

For my purposes in this study, I want to focus on the two iconic moments: first, the problem (difficulty of getting a visa and what it augers about the U.S.A. as well as how it plays up certain anxieties about properly dominant heterosexual masculinity); second, and to a lesser extent, resolution through heterosexual pairing.<sup>4</sup>

The United States has traditionally seen its strength as being a country of immigrants, an asylum for the world's hardworking and freedom-loving masses. This myth, as

Behdad notes, is further grounded on the argument that “land in the New World was unclaimed before the arrival of Europeans whose ‘labor’ gave them the right to claim it” (55). The American Dream includes this conceptual erasure of native populations, and along with that primary erasure arises the myth of the rightful appropriation of empty landscapes through hard work, of achieving success through the model of personal accomplishments—the Horatio Alger story, the “self-made man who pulled himself up by his bootstraps.” At the same time, this country prides itself on its hospitality and inclusiveness based less on labor power than on aspirations to more spiritual qualities, as in the often-quoted Emma Lazarus poem, “The New Colossus,” graven on the pedestal of the Statue of Liberty: “Give me your tired, your poor, / Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, / The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.” This dual myth of hospitality for all oppressed peoples and appreciation for ambitious immigrants whose pride would never allow them to accept assistance, comes into frank conflict with the hostility displayed in the embassy, where suspicion replaces welcome, and the rejection of determined, hard-working poor folks is the norm.

Writing in another context, Ofelia Schutte’s comment is apposite. She recognizes the complex standards by which the alien ceases to be other only through the process of defining her distinctive otherness, the foreign qualities that can only be recognized once they are reduced to identifiable stereotypes and adequately performed:

Once I am able to perform the feat of representing my culture in some distinctive way in the context of dominant Anglo-American culture, I am no longer considered only a culturally marked “other”. . . . But in order to do this, I need to be knowledgeable in the language and epistemic maneuvers of the dominant culture, the same culture that in everyday practice marks me as culturally “other” than itself. (53-4)

Moreover, the audience for this cultural performance characterizes itself precisely by absence; the dominant culture by definition is the unmarked category in these exchanges. Schutte acutely marks the stresses for the immigrant, who is formally required to abject cultural qualities that s/he is nonetheless never allowed to forget or abandon, for an audience that, forgetting its own recent immigrant past, differentiates

itself as baldly “American” (and whose placeholder in these films tends to be a white male bureaucrat).

As we move between immigration history and filmic representations of it, Schutte’s insight could be explored, perhaps (with apologies Quetzil Castañeda for retooling his term) through what he calls an ethics of the doughnut hole. As Castañeda notes, “This uncanny pastry is a presence defined as an absence and an absence materialized as a presence” (26). The comparison of this project with a paradoxically-named fatty, yeasty confection is borne out in the history of traditional discursive encrustings that project onto Latin America an imaginary presence: from the U.S. side, an illusory reality as a three-dimensional concretization of a Hollywood dream that nevertheless serves as the site of cultural contamination that must be contained; from the Latin American side, an imperialist project that refuses to recognize its political and cultural inroads. In other words, the immigrant, or potential immigrant, is scandalous from two cultural points of view because he points to an absence (a no-culture culture) and embodies an overdetermined presence (a too two-cultured culture, in which the dominance of one culture over the other is precisely calibrated from the opposite space: Latin America for the U.S.; the U.S. for Latin Americans).

How, these movies seem to ask, can the United States be the beacon of freedom and simultaneously the force that oppresses well meaning and hard working individuals? How can it be at the same time the standard to which other nations aspire, and yet so xenophobic, so protective of its peoples’ accomplishments? How can the U.S.A. claim exclusive rights to “American-ness”, yet be so devoid of a distinguishing/distinguished culture? I, in turn, would like to ask of these films: Why are encounters with the United States framed as a particular performance of and challenge to heterosexual masculinity? Why is the resolution so relentlessly the happy ending of (stereotypically feminized) romance?

## **Location, Location, Location**

Enforcement starts at the embassy or consulate, and includes a performance that involves a double play of real and imagined/expected identities from the applicant. On the other side of the counter, as Peter Andreas reminds us, is another performance that is at least double from the U.S. perspective: “having to assure some of the audience that the border is being opened (to legal flows) while reassuring the rest of the audience that the border is being sufficiently closed (to illegal flows)” (10). Thus, even beyond and before the manipulations of cinema, the physical space of the embassy is already a staged environment, replete with surveillance mechanisms and checkpoints combining technological safeguards and reminders of adherence to implicit moral standards, calculated to present a performance of control and impress the applicant with a convincing display. The applicant’s goal, then, is to successfully pass through these many hurdles, to define an acceptably legal, moral persona, to interpellate himself into a presumed American identity.

The embassy/consulate in the films encompasses this sublime, restricted space. Often the end point of a considerable journey, it is almost as unreachable as the American Dream itself: this is the case in *American Visa* and *Visa U.S.A.*, where the long bus rides from Oruro to La Paz in the former, or from Sevilla to Cali, and then to Bogotá in the latter film remind us of the investments of resources, the significant amounts of time and the displacement across long distances involved in making an application for those people who do not live in the capital cities. To finally make his way inside the doors, however, only presents our heroes with a second set of challenges. The embassy or consulate is, first of all, a puzzle. As the long shot or the pan gives way to the almost claustrophobic tight shot of the embassy interior, the viewer appreciates the immense contrast between the expansiveness of landscape or busy urban bustle in the surrounding environment and the cool, restrained embassy, and knows there is a relation between being able to read the cues of the location and understanding the world represented. Invariably, for the main character, the embassy is a place of rigid control, yet alien and unreadable from his cultural background. This is not surprising, since the embassy is intended to be estranging and difficult to parse. Our protagonists generally do not have the cultural resources, and are further disadvantaged by having the wrong

sort of body, the wrong name, the wrong profession to safely navigate its complexities. They are made aware that the mechanisms of control exist to exclude them, presenting an unsurpassable challenge that nevertheless must be overcome. And because in all these films there are informal ways around this inflexible and impermeable control structure, the place of control reveals itself as a performative shell; underneath, the process is chaotic, out of control.

Like *Su excelencia, La visa loca* opens with a humorous take on the scene in the U.S. embassy, where long lines of hopeful Filipinos one after another present their cases for a visa to a skeptical white man behind a glassed-in counter. The applicants all have crosses on their foreheads and prayerful faces, making the embassy look like the site of an Ash Wednesday religious ceremony—the goal of a wrenching spiritual pilgrimage. Snippets of individual dialogues offer a range of reasons for wanting a tourist visa: to visit Disneyland, to see snow, to reconnect with family. Our likeable hero, Jess, has a series of problems with his application from the outset; his last name is Huson (which the official pronounces “Hussein” and views as un-Philippine: “It’s not Arabic, is it?” he asks); he has an underclass job as a limousine driver (“Stretch limos?” asks the official. “Yes, yes, stretch, only short,” Jess responds); he comes from a fishing village named “Sexmoan” (“What is that, like a red light district?” Jess clarifies that it is named after a kind of dried fish). The scene is comic, but also points to the process by which the U.S. power structure constructs intelligibility in foreign climes.<sup>5</sup> Clearly pigeonholed as an undesirable in the official’s mind (a Muslim pimp with a shady job), Jess glumly departs through the crowds, while another unsuccessful applicant in the background struggles against armed guards, yelling, “Long live Saddam Hussein!” The “Pasyon chorus”<sup>6</sup> makes the first of its appearances in the film following upon this scene at the embassy, and in song comments on how often people sacrifice their pride for the chance of coming to the United States and earning dollars.

In contrast with the brightly-colored ensemble parading through the embassy of *La visa loca*, the color palette of the embassy interior in the Bolivian film *American Visa* is limited to muted shades: grey, green, and black, establishing an atmosphere of high seriousness. Low camera angles and backlighting emphasize the monumental form of the American consul, strategically placed between busts of Washington and Lincoln.

At the same time, the introduction to the embassy veers quickly from the hyper-realistic to the absurd. First, Mario Álvarez sets off the alarm on the metal detector upon crossing the threshold. The film then gives us a terse and formulaic dialogue as a way of establishing the parameters of the two national identities. After reviewing and verifying his materials, the woman who does the first level of screening reads from a sheet of questions familiar to visa applicants around the world: “¿Ha cometido alguna vez un crimen? ¿Ha participado en alguna actividad terrorista? ¿Alguna vez ha vendido o distribuido ilícitamente sustancias controladas o se ha prostituido o ha sido proxeneta? ¿Piensa Ud. asesinar al presidente de los Estados Unidos?” (“Have you ever committed a crime? Have you participated in any terrorist activities? Have you ever illegally sold or distributed controlled substances, or have you been a prostitute or a pimp? Do you plan to assassinate the president of the United States?”).<sup>7</sup> These questions are less intended to produce any accurate information about the applicant than to add to a general atmosphere of intimidation. Nevertheless, they do, however tangentially, provide information on the United States’ understanding of itself (no criminals, drug dealers, prostitutes or terrorists reside in this country) versus how it sees the perilous outsider (likely to inhabit at least one of these undesirable categories) and hence inadmissible to the purer and more refined realms of the U.S.A. One of the movie’s more interesting suggestions is that the honest man (well, more or less honest!), who only wants to work hard and achieve the American Dream promised in so much U.S. propaganda, is stymied in his efforts and forced to turn to precisely the kinds of criminal activities in order to obtain a visa that would have disqualified him in the first instance.

*American Visa* states explicitly the presumed official perspective on all these applications to take vacations or go shopping in the U.S.A. When his turn comes with the second (male) evaluator, Mario explains that as an English teacher, his dream has always been to see the country he has loved so much and taught about for so long. He presents (fraudulent) paperwork to prove he has property and resources tying him to Bolivia. Nevertheless, doubts arise about his motivations. In Mario Álvarez’s specific case, it is suspicious that a mere teacher would have sufficient resources to support a vacation in the U.S.A., but in general, as the consul tells him: “la ley nos obliga a asumir que toda persona que solicite visa quiere quedar. Ud. no ha demostrado lo contrario”

(‘the law forces us to assume that anyone who solicits a visa wants to stay. You have not proven the contrary’), that is, in legalistic terms, the applicant is assumed guilty of the intention to overstay his visa in the U.S. until he can prove otherwise. Since Mario’s intent is precisely to immigrate to the U.S. and work at the job his son has found him in the House of Pancakes in Florida, objectively speaking, the suspicion is not unfounded. The complication in this movie comes from learning that the consul is himself corrupt, and routinely denies all visa requests except for those individuals willing to pay his very hefty bribe.

Mario’s reaction on first being refused the visa, and then gaining it, albeit through illicit means, is nicely captured in a pair of stills from the movie. In the first, a medium shot from a low angle camera, Mario looks back at the American flag, a blue sky with fluffy clouds in the background, his “fuck-you” finger exactly paralleling the flagpole. In the second, later scene, a long shot frames Mario in front of the airport just before boarding the plane to the U.S.A., his fist upraised in celebration. *American Visa* is especially good at depicting, in iconic gestures like these, the Latin American’s deep ambivalence about the U.S.A.<sup>8</sup> It is only because the situation is so bleak in Bolivia that Mario is tempted at all by the potential of the American Dream, and at the same time, he knows that his path to that dream will involve the continual need to endure demeaning and emasculating encounters like the one with the consul. Nevertheless, the film ends with a shot of the plane taking off, carrying Mario and his new girlfriend, the ex-prostitute Blanca, off into the open horizons of their happy new lives together (presumably as undocumented dishwashers in the House of Pancakes?). Thus, finally, despite the implicit arrival of our intrepid hero on the other end of his airplane flight in the final shot of the film, the United States in this film is entirely limited to the dreams of the protagonist, the sound of U.S. rock music, and the sobering interiors of the La Paz embassy and its cold, corrupt inhabitants. And yet, of course, the idea of the U.S.A., as well as its sonic environment and visual iconography, pervade the movie and shape the character’s actions.

In contrast with the humorous versions of the application scene in *Su excelencia* and *La visa loca*, and the tense exchange in *American Visa*, the Colombian film *Visa U.S.A.* provides an unusually nuanced and sympathetic view of an honest U.S. consular official,

though his point of departure is also to assume a plan to use a tourist visa as a way to illegally immigrate. This unusual integrity is only fully available for a bilingual audience, since the establishing comment is in English. The hero of the story, Adolfo, travels from Sevilla to Cali to the American consulate there, and just before he is granted his interview with the consul, we see inside the consular office and hear the end of a phone conversation. The consul says, “Look, I can’t review this girl’s visa again. She’s engaged in criminal activities here in Colombia.” He adds that he knows she’s a friend of the senator’s daughter, but suggests energy would be better spent investigating why the senator’s daughter is such close friends with a known drug dealer. Adolfo’s own interview follows.

As in *American Visa*, knowing too much English is a red flag. Mario is an English teacher, a respectable white-collar profession that instantly makes him suspect. Likewise, Adolfo’s knowledge of English has stood him in good stead at home, where he has been tutoring a pair of attractive women and flirting with them under the mother’s eagle eye. The message seems to be that English in the home country increases the man’s attractiveness, while at the same time serving a fantasy of emigration that begins long before the official process starts. At the same time, in the official context, the applicant’s ability in English leaches away his hard-won masculinity. The official asks Adolfo why he needs such good English for a two week vacation, and then reminds him that the U.S. government has records on his brother, Alberto, who went to the U.S.A. on a tourist visa five years earlier and overstayed his permit. The consul’s conclusion is politely phrased: “me da mucha pena pero si no fuera por los antecedentes familiares yo no tendría ningún inconveniente en aprobarle la visa” (‘I am very sorry but if it weren’t for your family background I would have no difficulty in approving your visa’).

This theme of U.S. suspicion of foreigners is repeated over and over again in these films. It is, of course, an essential plot point that the protagonists be denied their visas, since it creates narrative tension and logical reasons for them to engage in the rest of the activities portrayed in the film. More interesting than this rather banal explanation, though, is the underlying exploration of these interactions themselves. The visa process is confusing; the negative outcome after long effort strikes them as incomprehensible and unjust since the investment of labor and sincere motivation should (in the world of

cinema, at least) lend themselves to a more favorable result. Besides, everyone knows that the mythic United States welcomes immigrants, and only the evil consular official stands in the way, blocking access to the American Dream.

In this way, even though there is a perfect match up between the heroes' schemes to stay in the U.S.A. illegally and the officials' suspicions of just this intent on their parts, in the context of these films the U.S. official policy is seen as unreasonable, capricious, or illegitimate. The unequal power relationship also lends itself to tamping down the would-be migrant's voice in favor of the repetitive and univocal voice of authority, the consular "no" that narrows the range of expression to a limited script. Yet, as these movies reveal, the strategies used in response to this assertion of absolute power give rise to endlessly creative narratives: moving, funny, dramatic, absurd, tragic. As Schutte suggests in the quote cited earlier, the applicants engage in consistent, albeit futile, efforts to speak at the level of culture, to engage the other despite the pressures of a culturally and politically asymmetrical power relation, to explain what it means to be culturally different and why that difference is not threatening, to represent oneself in complex, multilayered, often contradictory ways, to engage in self-censure and self invention, to define an American self in the mirror held up to the U.S.A.'s own sphere of influence.

The embassy, like other checkpoints, in Luibhéid's words, "often regulated the terms by which the formation of identity occurs" (79). In this set of movies, the consular officials define U.S. power in relation to the ideal of control, including self-control. U.S. bodies are rigid in costume, carriage, speech, and environment; in this submission to control, it is implied, lies the key to power. The only form of communication they will accept with the applicant (the supplicant) falls within a narrow range of accepted and acceptable language and behaviors. At the same time the potential immigrant is asked to abject his culture, to censure himself, to performatively embody a new identity, this alien and more restrained American identity. The applicant's body visually betrays its failure to achieve this ideal: in its exuberance, its display of emotion, its tropical or exotic trappings. The physical discomfort parallels a spiritual lack of fit. The psychic cost to the individual is already evident in the long lines, the intimidating environment, the humiliating petition process. This process is just the beginning, however. While the

protagonists in these three films never reach the U.S.A., the viewer intuits that, at best, the projected successful applicant has made a dubious compromise with himself. In the U.S.A. he will no longer be a respected member of the dominant culture, but will instead become more fully the introjected identity circumscribed in embassy protocols: yet another suspect, minoritized, subaltern subject. This failure to embody the American Dream is always already built into the system, into the asymmetrical power relation that tells the candidates for a visa that they will never achieve the ideal identity they strive to project.

Unsurprisingly, given the complexities and the high stakes, these films frequently deploy a series of cultural brokers who negotiate cross-cultural exchanges between the dominant and the subaltern cultures. Unlike either the applicant (our point of view character) or the U.S. official, each of whom is deeply embedded in their respective dominant culture, the intermediary knows two cultures and has the skills to pass between them and interpret exchanges. Yet, given the pressures already adduced, the individual who is able to move between cultures, or inhabits the shadow underworld of brokered identities, can never be favorably portrayed. This character is, at best, a trickster figure with unreliable morals. In most cases, though, he is completely untrustworthy, dishonest, or criminal; nevertheless, for the desperate hero, he provides the only access to necessary information and documents. Thus, a pool hall conversation in *Visa U.S.A.* leads our intrepid hero to two men in Bogotá who promise a forged visa in a new name for a \$1500 fee; in *American Visa*, a woman outside the embassy in La Paz hands out cards for a sinister travel agent in the pay of the corrupt U.S. consul; in *Nueva Yol*, a Puerto Rican “friend” convinces Balbuena that his discounted rate of \$5,000 for a visa is nothing, taking into account the ease of making money in New York City; in *La visa loca* Jesse hears of a fixer who can arrange his visa for \$10,000.

Later in the film, Jesse learns an important lesson indirectly from another cultural intermediary. He coincidentally accepts as a fare in a hotel a returned Filipina and her American husband, and her whining about the defects of the Philippines strikes very deeply, especially so since Jesse recognizes her (the recognition is not mutual) as his own disappeared mother who abandoned the family for the U.S.A. many years ago. A somewhat similar situation obtains in *Espaldas mojadas*, where the movie casts a

compassionate and condescending eye on vagabond Louie Royalville/Luis Villarreal whose adept maneuvering in both the U.S. and Mexico shows only a sad deracination. The negative characterization of this intermediary figure reinforces the films' message that culture is best understood as singular and local/national; transnationals and other bicultural people lack a strong moral compass since by definition they have been promiscuous with their loyalties. In cases where backstories are developed (e.g., *Espaldas mojadas*, *Nueva Yol*, *La visa loca*), the intermediary characters are to be pitied as much as condemned since they have lost the most valuable connection of all—the strong ties of the Latino heterosexual family that give stability and meaning to life.

In two of the movies, the protagonists do not meet the representatives of U.S. officialdom in consular offices, and the filmmakers ask the viewers to identify and define the normative U.S. citizen outside the accouterments of guarded doors and U.S. flags. In these films, the gendered quality of authoritarianism is, if anything, even more starkly evident, and the affront to masculine integrity is more intense than in the films in which the embassy surroundings themselves take up some of this work. In *Espaldas mojadas*, the voiceover narrator warns sternly that legal workers will carry passports and visas, and will cross into El Paso over the bridge for legitimate work with reputable contractors, while desperate men without papers will be open to exploitation.<sup>9</sup> The movie offers brief shots of other Mexicans gaining Bracero Program papers from U.S. officials; our hero, Rafael Améndola Campuzano, is on the run and has none of the requisite documents. Thus he, like other unfortunate men in similar circumstances, is forced to make an arrangement to come to the U.S.A. with a shady labor contractor in the backroom of a Ciudad Juárez bar. Mr. Sterling is both aggressive and condescending, rewriting the role of the abusive “patrón” in a transnational context. In *Nueva Yol*, Balbuena's friend Fellito brings him to a mansion where they meet with someone introduced only as “the consul,” an obnoxiously portrayed, overacting, effeminate gay man who accepts a large bribe in order to produce a U.S. tourist visa. When the consul, feminine tropical drink in hand, gaily offers: “en esta casa se hace lo que Uds. quieran. Bueno, tú sabes que es así, Fellito” (‘in this house you can do whatever you want. Well, you know it is true, Fellito’), Balbuena nervously turns down the offer,

protecting his threatened masculinity, and the appalled viewer knows that Fellito is not just culturally, but also sexually suspect.

These two movies also represent for the purposes of this paper the subset of films in this genre where the bulk of the movie is set in the U.S.A., making them, as Claire Fox comments, “meditations about Mexican [or, in *Nueba Yol*, Dominican] identity staged abroad rather than domestically” (115). The illegitimacy and moral turpitude of the first encounter with a representative of the U.S.A. serves as a foreshadowing of the hero’s experience after arrival. For both Balbuena and Rafael, coming to the U.S.A. results in immense disillusionment—not just the homesickness that any proper heterosexual macho would be expected to bear with a stiff upper lip, but the constant challenge of friction with dishonest, immoral, and criminal elements that define their highly unpleasant stay in the country. The original displacement, then, serves them, and the viewers of these films, as an opportunity for self reflection, for reinforcing lessons in national pride, teaching the viewer that the U.S.A. offers only imaginary benefits to people gullible enough to believe in empty promises.

Although the portrayal is not unique, *Nueba Yol* expresses the cost of the immigrant process, not just to pride, but to the immigrant’s masculinity itself, more overtly than in any of the other films discussed here. Thus, the anxieties over displacement and cultural subordination trade upon other anxieties about perversity and sexual predation. The proud breadwinner becomes a supplicant, an implicitly emasculating position. He shrinks into himself, evidences fear, is forced into an inappropriate feminine role. Balbuena’s body is tightly pulled in on itself, with hands and legs both restrained. In contrast, the consul’s girly crossed legs reveal his sexual orientation, and only Fellito, with spread knees and open arms, shows any sense of masculine comfort as expressed in his expansive use of space. Made strange and out of place in the consul’s house, there is no furniture that adequately/properly supports Balbuena’s body, and the only person he has to look to for assistance is the unreliable Fellito who brought him to this dangerous surrounding. The consul offers a poisoned hospitality—whatever Balbuena wants—that echoes the equivocal hospitality/hostility he will encounter at every turn in the U.S.A. The white man is weak and repulsive, his effeminacy tied to his overrefinement, his wealth, his sense of superiority; yet, of course, this person undeserving of respect holds

real power, power that will constrain the proper masculine man and force him to make undesirable and soul killing decisions masked as lifestyle choices. Balbuena, then, learns his first lesson: the U.S.A. has a different orientation (in all senses) from the Dominican Republic, a different relation to what is wanted, how one knows to grasp things, and what one finds within his reach. His second lesson follows logically from the first; in the U.S.A. he will occupy a different space, and he will occupy space differently.

## **Restoration**

In each of these movies, in different ways and to different extents, the protagonists must face up to a crisis of masculinity. This impossible heterosexual crisis needs to be urgently resolved, but only rarely can the resolution occur through direct action against the perpetrators. One form of this exceptional rebalancing of values occurs in *Espaldas mojadas*. Mexicans fed up with his evil ways force Mr. Sterling into the risks of a river crossing at the end of the film, where justice is served and he gets his rightful comeuppance when he is shot and killed by U.S. border guards by mistake. In another version of this recovery of masculine pride, the hero of *American Visa* responds to the intense humiliation suffered at the hands of the consul by talking back, speaking truth to power in blunt form: “And you call this country corrupt. Son peores que nosotros y después vienen y nos joden” (“You are worse than us, and then you come and fuck us over”). These scenes seem nicely calculated to provide the local audiences with opportunities to stand up and cheer.

Despite these examples, in the general run of these stories, a straightforward confrontation with the U.S. tormentor rarely occurs. Instead, the man’s loss of control over his circumstances in the first instance hints at the potential for a more devastatingly complete loss of control and authority in every sphere, including intimate relationships. Irrespective of whatever other narrative tension may evolve, this is the crisis that most urgently calls for a response. Universally in these movies, the ending is on the arm of an adoring woman, who shores up the hero’s wounded hetero-masculinity and returns the man to his properly dominant role in an ordered and moral society. This ending is so typical of the genre, and yet so stereotypically “chick flick”-like in its

content, that it must give pause.<sup>10</sup> Thus, the structure of the film, up to this point so unrelentingly masculine in focus, nonetheless in this plot twist dislocates itself and echoes an entirely different genre of film, the romantic comedy, where more typically the focus is on female characters achieving the ultimate goal of marriage with an attractive man.

By this point in the films, the representatives of the U.S.A. have stripped our heroes of pride and have downgraded their cultures, so that the men fall into an existential crisis. Their past may have involved meeting numerous manly challenges—political instability, financial uncertainties, social tensions—but their response to life's difficulties (even if occasionally wrongheaded) is leavened by a knowledge of their absolute cultural superiority expressed through deep family and friendship ties, a cultural advantage that can only fully define itself in the fully realized heterosexual man. The United States, on the other hand, whether figured in consular agents or encounters on the streets of El Paso or New York City, is fundamentally castrating. Honorable adult men are forced into demeaningly dependent roles, with disastrous results to their sense of honor and pride. Authority figures disrespect them, bicultural intermediaries have lost their moral compass and provide no real guidance, the heroes' insufficient control of linguistic and cultural codes cripples them. The story inevitably reaches a crisis, and at this axial point the wounded male turns toward that which will recreate a whole and viable heteromascularity: a woman who is even more lost, or more needy than himself. The bad/independent America and its American(ized) women are taught a lesson or rejected with disgust; a reconstructed nation-family with a nurturing and submissive good woman resolves the plot.

The protagonists of *Nueba Yol* and *Espaldas mojudas* rescue women of their home culture lost in the immoral setting of the U.S.A., and bring them back to heterosexual family happiness in their mutual country of origin. Here is an easily recognizable trope that contextualizes the reshaping of expectations and the redefinition, if not of political citizenship, then of what it means to "assimilate" to the U.S.A., and what are the costs of "belonging" to U.S. culture. Woman is, or in this filmic universe should be, the culture bearer, and as such she stands in for the idealized concept of nation itself. Our modern hero must, in order to restore balance to the universe, at least temporarily occupy this

space of the culture bearer, bringing the woman back into alignment with the nation, in her proper space and at his side.

In *Espaldas mojadas*, Rafael saves Chicana waitress Mary from the spiritual death of a life in the U.S.A. (Claire Fox also makes this point, see 107), and instills in her a love for Mexico. She crosses the river to join him in Ciudad Juárez, where—after recovering her deepest identity along with her original name, the portentous-sounding María del Consuelo—she utters the deathless words that emotionally close the film: “Para una mujer no hay más mundo que el hombre que uno quiere” (‘For a woman there is no other world than the man she loves’), inspiring not only her lover Rafael, but also drifter Luis to reconsider his own lost and homeless life: “Espérenme, iyo también me quedo en México!” (‘Wait for me, I too am staying in Mexico!’). Claire Fox comments: “María finds her place, then, under the sign of the three M’s: man, Mexico, and monolingualism. Taking Rafael, the world, and Mexico as synonymous in her last line is entirely plausible from the 1950s Mexican perspective” (112-13). María offers Rafael the consolation that allows him to reintegrate himself into his rightful community, and the strength of this commitment is so powerful that it even drags into its orbit the wandering/lost intermediary, who, like the Chicana, opts for Mexico, monolingualism, and strong family and spiritual values.

Astonishingly enough, the clichéd values that may have seemed reasonable in the 1950s U.S. and Mexican film understandings of the universe reassert themselves entirely unchanged in more recent films.<sup>11</sup> One of Balbuena’s most difficult trials in New York City involves his daily humiliation at the hands of his cousin’s wife and daughters, when he is forced to share their apartment. Despite possession of what seems like ample space and luxurious accouterments by Dominican standards, these women are out of control; they have become greedy, hardened, Americanized, causing his cousin intense shame and embarrassment at their unwomanly, inhospitable behavior, their arrogant jabs at Balbuena’s overtures. Eventually, this dysfunctional Dominican New York family is cured of its Americanized selfishness by Balbuena’s Caribbean virtues. The women become more generous and helpful, more respectful of the men who honor and protect them. The context of the film makes it clear, though, that the battle is uphill and the victory merely local: New York remains an inherently noxious environment.

The repair of his cousin's family prepares Balbuena for the next step—the decision to return to the Dominican Republic. And, as with Rafael, he does not do it alone. Like María del Consuelo, Balbuena's girlfriend Nancy is a fundamentally good woman who has lost her bearings and is unable to realize her human potential in a soulless and alien land. A Dominican woman whom Balbuena met during his New York misadventures, she has shared the heartbreak of trying to make it in the harsh, cold north and fully understands and shares his rededication to his homeland. She too suffers disillusionment with the American Dream; his love cements her decision to go back to the Dominican Republic, and her arrival there precedes his own.<sup>12</sup> In the final scene of this film, Balbuena marries his sweetheart in a fancy church ceremony and makes a poignant farewell at the gravesite of his tragically lost first wife, Natalia, before rededicating himself to manly Dominican pursuits with his new bride. "Fellito tenía razón," he tells Natalia's headstone. "Llegar a Nueva Yol es como llegar a la Gloria. Allí todo el mundo es rico. En Nueva Yol los cuartos están rodando por la calle. Pero ese era el Nueva Yol de mi fantasía. Porque *New York* es otro" ('Fellito was right. Arriving in Nueva Yol is like arriving in Heaven. There everyone is rich. Money is rolling in the street. But that was the Nueva Yol of my dreams. Because *New York* is something different'). In both these movies, then, love brings men home and heals them. They are wiser for their experiences, and know that the United States is a poisoned dream, with only illusory benefits. Even the people who successfully manage to incorporate themselves into the U.S. culture, like Balbuena's cousin, do so at an unreasonable cost to manhood and morality. In the crisis of the Dominican or the Chicano drifter, the viewer learns how the fundamental fabric of national identity suffers tragic tears and losses. Identity, these films tell us, like other manly affiliations, needs to be heterosexual, monogamous, state-sanctioned, and anchored in a properly respectful woman.

In *La visa loca* and in *Visa U.S.A.*, love keeps men home, but more critically, committing to a local woman reminds them of the core values that make life meaningful. It tells the viewer that their heroes have made the right decision, the patriotic decision. In *Visa U.S.A.* Adolfo and Patricia plan to go to the U.S.A. together, but when his illegitimate visa is discovered at the airport, she also stays behind. The final image

shows them walking arm and arm down a Bogotá street as the soundtrack brings up a bolero singer crooning, “te quedarás porque te doy cariño” (‘you will stay because I give you tenderness’), and credits roll. In *La visa loca*, Jess’s original impetus to go to the U.S.A. is to join his immigrant, hence evil, girlfriend, Annette. After his encounter with his unnatural, unpatriotic mother, Jess learns firsthand that the United States deforms family relationships. In fact, he realizes, the very desire to immigrate has already begun the process of infection, as one of Jess’s decisions had involved putting his father in a retirement home in the Philippines prior to accepting a work visa for (ironically) a geriatric care company in Florida. Fortunately, Jess comes to his senses. He happily decides to stay in Philippines with his father, and with Mara, the mother of his son, Jason. At the end of the film, Jason’s proud description of his happy family confirms the rightness of Jess’s choice to turn down the lure of the seemingly easy dollar.

The film version of *American Visa* ends differently from the novel, in which Mario and Blanca decide to marry and stay in Bolivia. The film’s ending, with Blanca accompanying Mario onto the plane for the U.S.A., is logically incoherent and narratively unaccounted for, but responds equally well as the novel’s alternative ending to this persistent imperative to shore up a threatened masculinity through a satisfactory heterosexual pairing. In the film, Mario calls his son just before boarding the plane: “he conocido a alguien. Estamos viajando a tu pueblo” (‘I’ve met someone. We’re traveling to your town’). Against all odds, this is a hopeful image, as we viewers know that—despite the various activities U.S. officials might frown upon (assault, theft, murder)—Mario is a decent person, as is his beloved (the prostitute with the heart of gold). They have come through the fires, and unlike the drug dealers that the U.S. officials imagine they see at every turn, Mario and Blanco will smuggle only their values into the United States of America.

“What does it mean,” asks Schutte, “to be culturally different and to speak, at the level of culture, in a different voice?” (52). The characters in these movies need to become transnationalized long before leaving their countries, as the U.S. visa procedure demands that the applicants present themselves as able manipulators of cultural codes. In *American Visa*, as in so many movies of this genre, the dream of getting to the United States is in itself the most potent and controversial form of the American Dream,

superseding its common variations in U.S. films and complementing the U.S. version where the immigrant's past is erased in favor of an acculturated future. The overall message of these films can be easily parsed in clichés: while the grass looks greener on the other side of the fence, there is no place like home, and ignorance is bliss. And yet, as I have been at pains to demonstrate, this genre's most typical format tends to channel itself in a confrontation precisely at the level of cultural dislocation, as a form of speaking culture in a different voice, albeit in a relentlessly masculinist challenge that the hero cannot win. If the mechanism common in these films decides for the facile solution, and orients cultural understanding along gender lines, more interesting is the potential in the failed negotiation, the story of the self that recurs again and again, striving to speak to the other about otherness. Incommensurability hints at a kind of communication, a transnational understanding, as the films travel across borders, even as their protagonists stay (or return) home.

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## Filmography

*American Visa*. Dir. Juan Carlos Valdivia. Bolivia/Mexico: Instituto mexicano de cinematografía, 2005.

*Espaldas mojadas*. Dir. Alejandro Galindo. Mexico: Atlas Films, 1955.

*Nueva Yol*. Dir. Ángel Muñiz. Dominican Republic: Cigua Films, 1995.

*Su excelencia*. Dir. Miguel Delgado. Mexico: Posa Films, 1967.

*La visa loca*. Dir. Mark Meily. Phillipines: Unitel Pictures, 2005.

*Visa U.S.A.* Dir. Lisandro Duque Naranjo. Colombia: FOCINE, 1986.

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<sup>1</sup> “Por supuesto que no existen. . . . Pero advertimos que es muy posible que a esas naciones que no hay, ustedes las confundan con otras que sí hay . . . o que esos dos pueblos imaginarios se parezcan a los que ustedes van a imaginarse. Lo correcto sería advertir que es mera coincidencia pero conste que lo hicimos deliberadamente a propósito, para que luego no empecemos con dificultades” (‘Of course they do not exist. . . . But we advise that it is very possible that you might confuse these nations that do not exist with others that do exist . . . or that those two imaginary peoples may resemble some that you imagine. The proper thing to do would be to advise that this is a mere coincidence, but we assure you that we did it deliberately on purpose, so that later we don’t have any problems’).

<sup>2</sup> The fifty-year spread in these movies points to the persistence of this subgenre, and also its diversity. The earlier films (*Espaldas mojadas* and *Visa U.S.A.* are serious dramas; all three of the more recent films are comedies. I would, nevertheless, hesitate to draw any definitive conclusions or adduce a trend—each film would have to be more carefully embedded in its own national framework, including political context and filmic traditions, a subject far beyond the more modest aims of an article-length study.

<sup>3</sup> Daniel Reichman has also pointed out that several of these movies seem to be made in the context of recent authoritarian governments, suggesting a displacement of anxieties about the regime. I thank him for this perceptive comment, which surely opens up rich opportunities for analysis that I am unable to pursue here.

<sup>4</sup> I have been asked, where are the films with women protagonists in this subgenre? I wish I knew the answer to this question, and would welcome input from readers. The only border-crossing films featuring women that I am familiar with (e.g. Alberto Isaac’s 1995 *Mujeres insumisas*) do not include encounters with officialdom on their way to the U.S.A.

<sup>5</sup> It also implicitly offers an opportunity for Filipinos to experience a sense of linguistic superiority, since the monolingual U.S. agent has a limited imagination analogous to his limited language skills, in contrast with the polyglot, multilingual richness of the Filipinos, who speak Tagalog as well as English, and whose ordinary speech includes a pidgin that mixes in Spanish and English words on a Tagalog base—a residue of their history of a double colonial past embedded in speech patterns.

<sup>6</sup> The chorus’s role is crucial, and its very name reminds us of how language mediates identities and selves. The original title of the film is *Pasyon U.S.A.*, and the theme of passion/pasión is carried through into the enactment of the “Passion of Christ” towards the end of the film. *La visa loca* was chosen as its title for international distribution, highlighting the pan-Hispanic colonial heritage that includes the Philippines as well as the Americas, while also echoing the title of Puerto Rican singer Ricky Martin’s hugely successful “Livin’ la vida loca” (1999, written by Desmond Child). The movie’s script is based on Meily’s prize-winning play, *Good Friday Archipelago*.

<sup>7</sup> As Behdad notes in his book, “section 212(a) of the Immigration and Nationality Act lists thirty-three classes of excludable aliens, twenty-two dealing with the ‘personally undesirable’ and six with the ‘physically or mentally deficient’ . . . . The idea is not to identify a prostitute, an insane person, or a drug addict, but to transform all these types into sites where the law can extract the ‘truth’ of prostitution, insanity, and addiction, and thus impose on the average immigrant a sense of visibility and vulnerability” (154).

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<sup>8</sup> Appadurai's *Fear of Small Numbers* has an exceptionally clear analysis of this phenomenon, which he summarizes as: "hatred for America is intimately tied up with the desire to be part of it" (125).

<sup>9</sup> The movie was filmed at the height of the Bracero program (officially, 1942-1963), and, like the much later, and highly polemical publication, *Guía del migrante*, could be read as having a controversial pedagogical function, in that they teach people how to perform in these alienating circumstances while at the same time overtly emphasizing the message that they ought to stay home.

<sup>10</sup> As noted earlier, I will not here be talking about the U.S.-oriented versions of this trope in a parallel set of films where the immigrant man finds love and the American dream (along with a green card) by marrying a U.S. woman and establishing a happy and morally superior household in the U.S.A.

<sup>11</sup> Reviewers of an earlier version of this article pointed to the lack of historical context for the films; here is one aspect in which they do indeed "float in an eternal present" as the reviewers noted. Given the small sample, I would hesitate to make any stronger historical generalizations about them.

<sup>12</sup> The movie's sequel, *Nueva Yol, Part Three: Bajo la Nueva Ley* (1998) opens with the revelation that Balbuena's triumphant return to the Dominican Republic and reunion with Nancy was just that—a dream that sustained him when he was left for dead after a brutal assault in the penultimate scene of the first film. Instead of his Dominican happy ending with Nancy, in the second film Balbuena takes part in a green card marriage in order to secure legal immigrant status and social security benefits in the United States: a stark and dystopic contrast with the idyllic conclusion of the first movie.

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