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## Immigrants and National Anxieties in 21st-Century Spanish Film

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## Immigrants and National Anxieties in 21st-Century Spanish Film

### Abstract

This article analyzes the ways that gender and race inform the portrayals of native-born Spaniards and immigrants in *Flores de otro mundo* (*Flowers from Another World*) (1999), *Un novio para Yasmina* 'A Fiancé for Yasmina' (2008), *Retorno a Hansala* (*Return to Hansala*) (2008), *Biutiful* (2010) and *15 años + 1 día* (*Fifteen Years and One Day*) (2013). These films position the white Spanish man at the center of their stories, even when they are not the sole protagonists. Immigrant men of color, in contrast, are most frequently portrayed as parasitical, delinquent, and criminal. White Spanish women are portrayed negatively as well, sometimes criminalized, but just as frequently portrayed as modern, liberated women who have rejected their traditional responsibilities as reproducers and caretakers of the nation. This leaves immigrant women of color, whose apparent willingness to fill the void left by white Spanish women grants them a special status as the savior of the Spanish family. Through these repeating themes and types, recent Spanish film acknowledges contemporary anxieties about immigration as well as continuing anxieties due to decreased native demographics.

### Keywords

Spain, film, immigration, twenty-first century, *Flores de otro mundo*, *Biutiful*, *Un novio para Yasmina*, *Retorno a Hansala*, *15 años + un día*, Icíar Bollain, Chus Gutiérrez, Irene Cardona, Alejandro González Iñárritu, Gracia Querejeta

## Immigrants and National Anxieties in 21st-Century Spanish Film

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In her study of contemporary films about immigration to Spain (1990-2002), cultural studies and film scholar Daniela Flesler analyses the pattern of coupling a North African immigrant man with a white Spanish woman. These inevitably failed relationships, Flesler argues, exemplify deep-held anxieties in Spain over immigration dating from the Berber invasion of 711 but refer to contemporary African migration as well. They demonstrate a culturally-based racism which posits irreconcilable differences between Muslim Morocco and, if not Christian Spain, then at least Western, democratic Spain. Ultimately, the films that Flesler studies eliminate the immigrant man through arrest, deportation, or death, suggesting a pessimistic understanding of the role immigrants play in contemporary Spain.<sup>1</sup> Immigrant women, however, are absent in these films, while Spanish men serve as the main obstacles of the immigrant protagonists' relationships with Spanish women.<sup>2</sup>

This present essay examines a more recent corpus of immigration films (1998-2013) that also use heterosexual romance between immigrants and native-born Spaniards as a metaphor for the imagined Spanish national family.<sup>3</sup> Like the films of Flesler's study, these more recent films ostensibly sympathize with their immigrant characters. In contrast to her study, however, these films flip the pattern of the male immigrant love interest coupled with a Spanish woman. Instead, immigrant women from Latin America and Africa—who do not appear in the earlier films—displace white, native-born, Spanish women characters, who previously had played “the role of sexual as well as social mediator between omnipresent reactionary segments and institutions of the receiving society and the invisible—thus vulnerable—Other” (Ballesteros 170). Immigrant women emerge as potential saviors of the Spanish family or as pleasing romantic and sexual partners to Spanish men, while white Spanish women are roundly rejected as romantic or domestic partners. Whether because of mental illness, drug or alcohol abuse, infidelity, or even access to power and autonomy, Spanish women are replaced by immigrant women, who appear more willing to sacrifice their own desires and accept traditional patriarchal familial relationships in the reimagined Spanish family. The resulting message privileges anxiety about declining birth rates and changes in gender norms over the cultural and linguistic tensions highlighted in earlier films.<sup>4</sup> The later films also betray a more overt color-based racism in which lighter-skinned immigrant women are more easily accepted as sexual partners than darker-skinned women.

Immigrant men and native-born Spanish men likewise switch roles in films at the turn of the century. Spanish male characters in Flesler's study serve "as protectors of a hegemonic sexual order in which women should not attempt to choose any other but a Spanish male as a sexual or romantic partner" (134). In later films, however, Spanish men are flawed but sympathetic characters, and the films sanction their intercultural romances and relationships with immigrant women. The immigrant men in these films, often former or current love interests or family members of the female protagonists, adopt the role that previously belonged to Spanish male characters and attempt to hinder these new romantic relationships. Because of the threat they pose to the protagonists' relationships and therefore to the imagined Spanish national family, they continue to be marginalized and criminalized, and these portrayals attempt to justify the immigrant men's disappearance from the film through deportation, incarceration, or death.

Considering the stark change in the representation of gender and immigration studied in this article, the range of dates of films analyzed here (1998-2013) is telling for several reasons. According to the Spanish National Institute of Statistics, the Spanish birth rate per woman, a subject of media scrutiny for decades, reached its nadir at 1.15 in 1998 ("España en cifras 1999" 7). The birth rate had increased unimpressively to 1.32 by 2012, but low numbers continue to be a subject of much consternation for the media. The fourteen years of this study also include the world economic crisis of 2008-2010, which affected Spain disproportionately, and which precipitated an exodus of immigrants, 2013 being the year of greatest loss ("España en cifras 2018" 9). Some press coverage argues that a lack of gender equality for Spanish women must be corrected in order to facilitate sustainable family growth (Tejedor; Cruz Villalón). These same sources downplay the role that immigrant women may play in recovering a birth rate that can sustain the population. Nevertheless, the films analyzed in this study opt to portray immigrant women as the solution to Spain's problems.

### Spanish women and the broken Spanish family

With rare exception, the films analyzed in this study portray the conventional Spanish family (understood as a pair formed by a native-born Spanish man and Spanish woman) to be in danger of extinction due to Spanish women's inability or unwillingness to conform as maternal figures and trustworthy marital partners. Chronologically the first film of my study, and the film that initiates this new paradigm, *Flores de otro mundo* (*Flowers from Another World*; Iciar Bollain 1999) demonstrates the difference between native-born Spanish and immigrant women while delineating the demographic problems and gender norms that propel these representations. The establishing shot that opens the film emphasizes the desolate Castilian landscape. Extreme long-shots recur throughout the film,

reinforcing the feeling of isolation and vastness, but also of rural beauty. Confronting rural depopulation, the townspeople of Santa Eulalia invite a busload of native-born and immigrant women for something of a ladies' weekend, in the hope that these women will establish roots and help to restore the declining town. Two women on the bus, the Dominican immigrant Patricia and the Basque citizen Marirrosi do form relationships with men in the town, the farmer Damián and town leader Alfonso, respectively. The third protagonist, Milady, is a young, dark-skinned Cuban immigrant whom the wealthy contractor Carmelo brings back from his sexual exploits abroad.

Critics frequently fail to address Marirrosi, since her story seems to differ from the immigration stories of Patricia and Milady.<sup>5</sup> As Maria Van Liew points out, however, Marirrosi serves "as an important point of contrast to the Caribbean women's situations" (267). Costuming in the film emphasizes the differences between the women. Marirrosi's muted tones of beige blend into the landscape and establish her social class, while Patricia's bright salmon dress and Milady's wild Italian lycra stand out visually. Of the three romantic relationships in the film, Marirrosi and Alfonso's comes the closest to being a partnership of equals; indeed, it is precisely this power dynamic that dooms the relationship. The failure of her relationship with Alfonso does much to explain Patricia and Damián's success.<sup>6</sup> With citizenship, a good job, a home and family, Marirrosi participates in the caravan of women because of her desire for companionship, not out of desperation for papers, like Patricia.

It soon becomes apparent, however, that Marirrosi's relationship with Alfonso is one-sided. Marirrosi always visits Santa Eulalia, and when she suggests that Alfonso visit her in Bilbao, he produces a wealth of excuses not to. Eventually Alfonso pressures Marirrosi to abandon her life in Bilbao and move to Santa Eulalia. Marirrosi ends the relationship, explaining to Alfonso: "¿Y qué? Un día te cansas de Marirrosi . . . y Marirrosi ha dejado el trabajo . . . el hijo. . . ¿Qué pasa a Marirrosi entonces?" "And what? One day you get tired of Marirrosi . . . and Marirrosi has left her job . . . her son. . . What happens to Marirrosi then?"<sup>7</sup> While the breakup is sad for both parties, Marirrosi, unlike Patricia, has the luxury of rejecting Alfonso because her survival does not depend on him.

In later films, white Spanish women are generally portrayed more negatively than Marirrosi, with the same ultimate conclusion that these women are no longer trusted to perpetuate the patriarchal Spanish family. In *Retorno a Hansala* ('Return to Hansala'; Chus Gutiérrez 2008), Martín's broken marriage to Carmen (a telling name) facilitates a possible future romantic union with Leila, a Moroccan immigrant. At the beginning of the film, Martín is separated from Carmen due to her infidelity. Though she defends herself by saying that her affairs were due to Martín's workaholicism and neglect, the viewer learns that Martín works because his funeral home is on the verge of financial ruin. The substitution of Leila for Carmen

occurs in a series of scenes when Martín prepares to travel to Morocco with Leila to repatriate the remains of a number of Moroccan men and boys, among them Leila's brother Rashid, who died while trying to pass into Spain. In the scene where Martín prepares for this trip, Carmen appears in the left foreground, while a blurry Martín packs on the couple's bed. Carmen advises Martín to take a sweater with him, but after an ensuing argument, the camera, adopting Carmen's gaze, rests on the couple's bed where Martín has left the garment. In contrast, Leila shares her coat with Martín after they are robbed in Morocco. Later, Martín appears shivering on the left side of the screen, while Leila enters from the right, providing him a sweater. When Martín returns to Spain, he observes Carmen in the kitchen window, but he soon leaves, signaling the end of the relationship. This leaves open a potential romantic relationship with Leila, to whom he proposes a business partnership. Carmen is a secondary character and, as such, is not fully-developed; like Marirrosi, however, Carmen fails to be a suitable conjugal partner because of her unwillingness to sacrifice her desires for her husband.

The character of Marambra in *Biutiful* (Alejandro González Iñárritu 2010) is the least sympathetic of the modern Spanish women portrayed in the films studied here and the only one characterized by criminal behavior through her association with the Barcelonan underground and the abuse and neglect of her children. The film attempts to explain her erratic and dangerous behavior, however, as a symptom of her bipolar disorder. She has lost custody of her two children and lives separated from them and her husband, Uxbal. Despite her protestations of sincere love for Uxbal and her children, Marambra is unreliable as a mother and wife. Like Carmen in *Retorn a Hansala*, she is unfaithful, but also abusive, neglectful, and selfish. Her first appearance in the film shows her dancing naked on top of Uxbal's brother, Tito, having obviously spent the previous night with him. Tellingly, Uxbal participates in many of the same illicit activities like drug and alcohol abuse, physical violence, and neglect for which Marambra is blamed. The one exception is extramarital sex, which due to his advanced pancreatic cancer Uxbal cannot perform.

Despite their similarities, Uxbal avoids being framed with the same moral judgement that frames his wife. For example, the scene between Marambra and Tito mentioned above immediately follows one in which Uxbal walks their children to school, demonstrating Uxbal's moral superiority. Anna Casas Aguilar argues that *Biutiful* privileges a traditional version of fatherhood and patriarchy, and the rejection of Marambra is one of the ways that the film accomplishes this end. According to Casas Aguilar, the exaltation of fatherhood "responde al deseo explícito de mostrar una crisis de los modelos tradicionales de familia en la sociedad contemporánea" (180) 'responds to the explicit desire to show a crisis in traditional family models in contemporary society.' Marambra's unreliability is a

major cause of the crisis of the traditional family, and it forces Uxbal to search for a surrogate maternal figure in the immigrants Lili and Ige.

The rejection of white Spanish women is not so clearly portrayed in *Un novio para Yasmina* ('A Fiancé for Yasmina'; Irene Cardona 2008) and *15 años + 1 día* ('Fifteen Years and a Day'; Gracia Querejeta 2013); nonetheless, these characters are depicted as flaky, incompetent, or otherwise undesirable. Lola in *Un novio para Yasmina*, though witty and funny, is also paranoid and insecure. Her loveless relationship with Jorge does nothing to recommend conventional heterosexual marriage. While Jorge is never unfaithful, he is clearly more interested in the young immigrant Yasmina than his own middle-aged wife. In *15 años + 1 día*, Margo, a wealthy widow, fancies herself an actress, to the ridicule of her wayward son Jon and her mother Caty. Suggesting that single mothers are incapable of imposing appropriate discipline and boundaries, Margo sends Jon to his Spartan ex-military grandfather, Max. Toward the end of the film, Margo also confesses her infidelity toward her deceased husband. Max, for his part, has abandoned and divorced Caty, and when Caty finally confronts him, he rebukes her: "Te abandonó un hombre hace tres años. Punto" 'Three years ago a man left you, and that's that.' While certainly nowhere near the scale of *Flores de otro mundo*, *Retorno a Hansala*, and *Biutiful*, these additional films also impugn and belittle Spanish women characters, facilitating their replacement by immigrant women.

In contrast to these Spanish women, the Spanish male protagonists of the films are portrayed as flawed but sympathetic characters. They confront some of the most important issues in contemporary Spanish society, like rural depopulation and economic depression in *Flores de otro mundo*, the financial crisis of 2008-2010 in *Retorno a Hansala* and *Biutiful*, and a world where changing gender roles leave them in a weakened position. Damián, the simple farmer of *Flores de otro mundo* is a considerate son, husband, and stepfather. When his mother Gregoria informs him that Milady is no longer welcome to visit Patricia at their house, the film sets up a traditional patriarchal scenario in which Damián will forbid Patricia to visit Milady. He deftly navigates the situation, however, and suggests instead that Patricia visit Milady's house, thereby recognizing Patricia's autonomy. Alfonso, for his part, intervenes when Carmelo physically attacks Milady, and his own inflexibility is never blamed on sexism, but rather on his deep attachment to his declining town and rural roots. Martín's willingness to place himself as the Other in *Retorno a Hansala* and his emotional reaction to his young friend's illegal immigration place him in a protagonist position. Alfredo, Yasmina's lazy and hapless husband of convenience in *Un novio para Yasmina*, is rehabilitated, taking a job as a janitor at a local school. For this, he is rewarded with a potential romantic relationship. Uxbal's situation in *Biutiful* is the most incredible of the male protagonists studied here: though he traffics in humans and causes the death of

twenty-five men, women, and children, his desperation to care for his children before his own impending death seems to absolve him of his actions.

Occasionally, men and women share protagonist roles, as in *Flores de otro mundo* and *Retorno a Hansala*, but just as often the Spanish man remains at the center of the film. In *15 años + 1 día*, two nearly identical shots at the beginning and ending of the film emphasize this point. The film opens with a close-up of the back of fifteen-year-old Jon's head, and the camera slowly rotates left 180° to reveal an extreme close-up of his sunlit face. A corresponding shot occurs at the film's end, when the camera once more frames the back of Jon's head, this time rotates 180° to the right, and again offers an extreme close-up of Jon's luminous face. The full camera rotation from beginning of the film to the end firmly establishes Jon as the continued center of the film in contrast to the marginalized or criminalized immigrant man and the maligned Spanish woman.

#### A reimagined Spanish national family

In the earlier immigration films of Daniela Flesler's study, immigrant men threaten the socio-sexual relationship between native-born Spanish men and women, and in the immigrant films of the first decade of the twenty-first century, immigrant men continue to be cast as threats to the Spanish national family. While previously this threat originates in the possibility of their miscegenation with white Spanish women, in more recent films, their presence threatens the alliance between white Spanish men and Latin American and Moroccan women. When these immigrant men are portrayed negatively, they serve as foils to the sympathetic white counterparts with whom they compete. In their few positive portrayals, their friendships with the Spanish male protagonists similarly help to establish the positive character of those protagonists. In both cases, however, the immigrant man, and frequently a dark-skinned immigrant man, must disappear in order to achieve the romantic or familial union of the white male and the immigrant woman. Most often, the films associate these immigrant men with delinquency, parasitism, and outright criminality in an attempt to justify their removal from the films.

In *Flores de otro mundo* and *Un novio para Yasmina*, Latin American and African male immigrants occupy the antagonist role. Fran, Patricia's husband in *Flores de otro mundo*, overtly threatens her newly wedded bliss to Damián by extorting money from Patricia in order to maintain the secret of their official bigamy. While he laments his inability to find a job, it seems apparent that shaking down his estranged wife for money is easier than looking for one, which suggests that at least this particular immigrant man is lazy and a drain on his family and society. Though not overtly criminal, Fran is portrayed as a shady and unlikeable character. His parasitical role contrasts with Patricia's willingness to take on the most difficult rural jobs, as in scenes showing her bringing the cow home or

working in the house. When Damián chooses to accept Patricia's past, Fran loses his power over Patricia and simply disappears from the narrative.

Similarly, in *Un novio para Yasmina*, Yasmina's brother Abdel (complete with a sinister goatee) criticizes Yasmina for her European dress and throws her out of his house because she hopes to marry the Spanish police officer, Javi. As Yasmina begins to succeed by teaching school and acquiring papers, Cardona inserts a telling scene. A moving camera follows Yasmina and Abdel walking toward the bus station, Abdel pulling luggage and Yasmina carrying a knapsack. Neither character speaks, making patent the question of which character will board the bus and why. The bus arrives and obstructs our view, and when it pulls away, Yasmina is left standing on the platform, the viewer never learning the reason for Abdel's departure. This otherwise unexplained scene playfully examines the motif of exclusion: who will be eliminated from the film, Yasmina, the immigrant woman attempting to succeed in Spain, or Abdel, the immigrant man who stands in her way? Similar to Fran in *Flores de otro mundo*, the immigrant man who has proved an obstacle to Yasmina's integration vanishes from *Un novio para Yasmina*.

This film also playfully examines the tension between the police and the immigrant community as seen in Abdel's reaction to Yasmina's relationship with Javi. Abdel's extreme mistrust reflects the prejudice of Spanish police against immigrant Muslims. This prejudice is demonstrated with comic effect when Javi accuses some immigrant boys of stealing his motorcycle helmet. The confrontation escalates into a shouting match between Javi and the community, including Abdel. The camera then switches to a scene showing what really happened to the helmet: a young girl uses it as a basket to pick wild berries. The scene successfully demonstrates the mistrust with which these two communities (Spanish police and immigrants) view each other.

In *15 años + 1 día* both Jon, the white protagonist, and Nelson, an Ecuadoran immigrant, are depicted as delinquents. At the film's start, Jon is expelled from school, and he is characterized by lying and committing dangerous and reckless acts. At his worst, he poisons the neighbor's dog, which precipitates his visit to his authoritarian grandfather. Nelson, for his part, is introduced at the police station, having been detained for public urination. He and his friends are also associated with robberies and possibly for littering the town with homophobic graffiti. In addition, Nelson bullies even his friends, and he is sexist and domineering to his girlfriend, Elsa. Though Jon will ultimately reject Nelson, the film spends a great deal of time establishing a connection between the two boys through their mutual lack of respect for social rules.

Despite their similarities, the film treats Jon and Nelson differently. In a series of close-ups interspersed with reversed angle shots of Inspector Aledo, Jon's mother characterizes him:

Es un niño especial, muy tierno, cariñoso. Pero a la vez muy independiente y muy celoso de su espacio. Odia las tonterías de la gente. Odia las injusticias. Odia la tristeza y el aburrimiento. Él está lleno de vida. Tiene mal genio a veces, y a veces se desespera conmigo, pero supongo que eso es normal. Le gustan mucho las chicas. Le gusta montar en bicicleta. No es un delincuente. Y no es un asesino.

He is a special boy, very tender and caring. But he's also independent and jealous of his space. He hates nonsense. He hates injustice. He hates sadness and boredom. He's full of life. He can have a bad temper, and sometimes he gets frustrated with me, but I guess that is normal. He likes girls. He likes to ride his bicycles. He isn't a delinquent. And he isn't a murderer.

This description justifies and excuses Jon's transgressions. In contrast, when Nelson turns up dead, no one, neither character nor spectator, mourns his demise. Rather, his death serves as the catalyst for identification between Jon and Toni. The two Spanish boys, one straight and one gay, identify over their exclusion of Nelson, the racialized and foreign other.

Even when immigrant men are portrayed more sympathetically, the results are the same: deportation and removal from the film. Ekweme in *Beautiful* emerges as a positive character, who, though charged for dealing drugs before being deported to Senegal, beseeches his wife Ige to remain in Spain to raise their son, Samuel, as a Spaniard. Despite his portrayal as a loving father, husband, and friend, Ekweme nonetheless must disappear so that Uxbal can recruit his wife Ige to raise dying Uxbal's own children. Uxbal's friendship with Ekweme demonstrates not only Ekweme's sympathetic portrayal, but by extension Uxbal's own likeability. His concern for Ekweme contrasts with his brother Tito's overt racism, as when Tito says after Uxbal confronted police over Ekweme's detention: "Así que te peleaste por un negro, ¿eh?" "So, you got in a fight over a black guy, huh?" Though he is a human trafficker, Uxbal has the proverbial heart of gold, which presumably excuses him from his own moral failings. His relationship with Ekweme serves to establish the protagonist's character.

*Retorno a Hansala* takes as its starting point the expulsion of the immigrant man, and the young men who have died trying to cross the Mediterranean and whose bodies wash up on Spanish shores serve as the plot's catalyst. One immigrant man, however, is finally accepted into Spain at the end of the film. Saïd is a teenager with an allegiance to Spain even before his migration, as demonstrated by his learning Spanish by listening to the radio and his interest in Real Madrid. He accompanies Martín and Leila as they try to identify the deceased men to their families, and he and Martín soon become friends. When Saïd immigrates illegally to Spain, Martín panics, imagining him as another casualty. As with Ekweme and

Uxbal in *Beautiful*, Saïd's character contributes to Martín's greater story, showing how Martín has changed from a man indifferent to the unjust deaths that surround him to one moved to tears at the thought of Saïd's possible demise. The film takes pains, however, to reduce the threat that Saïd could represent; to that end, Saïd is young and naive, clearly allied to Spain, and in no way Martín's competitor for Leila.<sup>8</sup> In order to be included in the new Spanish family, the immigrant male's role is reduced to that of child, not a sexual partner or father figure.

In contrast to Spanish women who cannot be trusted to propagate the Spanish family, and immigrant men who threaten relationships between Spanish men and immigrant women, immigrant women in these films appear invariably as pleasing sexual partners and/or potential saviors of the traditional patriarchal Spanish family. Patricia, the Dominican immigrant of *Flores de otro mundo*, is the most studied example of this pattern. Patricia makes it clear to Damián from the beginning that she is looking for a stable situation in which to raise her children. At Santa Eulalia's get-to-know-you party, she tells Damián: "Yo no le tengo miedo al trabajo. Yo estoy mirando por mis hijos ¿entiendes? Por tenerlos cerca" 'I'm not afraid of work. I'm looking out for my kids, understand? In order to have them near.' When later confronted by Damián about her marriage to Fran, Patricia similarly explains: "¿Tú crees que me habría casado contigo si con mi trabajo yo pudiera tener a mis hijos? ¿Y poder tenerlos en mi casa?" 'Do you think that I would have married you if with my job I could have had my children with me? And be able to keep them in my home?' Patricia nonetheless pledges her love to Damián, who accepts her. The ending scenes of the film imagine the new Spanish national family: in the photograph of Janai's first communion, Spaniards Damián and Gregoria smile along with a subtly pregnant Patricia, her children, and her Dominican aunt and friends.<sup>9</sup> This spontaneous photograph of the extended multicultural family contrasts with the earlier stiff and formal family portrait that hangs on Patricia and Damián's bedroom wall.

The other films of this study likewise suggest that immigrant women offer the best potential to form lasting romantic, sexual, and familial alliances with Spanish men. One leitmotif, however, belies the innocence of these relationships: with the possible exception of Leila in *Retorno a Hansala*, the immigrant woman's agency is lessened, reducing her economic, civil, social, and intellectual status vis-à-vis her Spanish male partner. Indeed, considering the veritable indictment of Spanish women in these films, the reduction of immigrant women's sphere of influence, coupled with the tendency to sexualize them, is what makes them such attractive partners. Of the three women protagonists of *Flores de otro mundo*, Patricia, with her light brown skin and green eyes, is portrayed as the most desirable and ultimately is the only one who succeeds in establishing a relationship with a man in the town. Marirrosi, the white woman, is both too economically autonomous and too sexually prudish; the two sex scenes between Marirrosi and Alfonso occur

off-screen after Marirrosi shyly protests Alfonso's advances. Milady's sexual prowess proves emasculating; when Carmelo tries to initiate sex with the young black woman, she jumps on top of him, both of them fully clothed, and causes him to quickly ejaculate (Arribas 62). In contrast to these women, Patricia proves both racially and sexually an attractive middle-ground. Neither sexually reluctant nor sexually dominating, Patricia enjoys several sex scenes with Damián during the film, demonstrating that marriage with the right immigrant woman can prove not only useful but pleasurable as well.<sup>10</sup> Her sexual attraction and exoticism, coupled with her desperate situation, make Patricia the most pleasing of the three women.

In *Un novio para Yasmina*, Yasmina does not start out as a perfect mate, but she transforms into one by the end of the film. Her intelligence proves the first obstacle. She studied French philology in Morocco before immigrating, and, as she explains to her boyfriend Javi's family, she hopes to continue her education in Spain. Yasmina's intelligence and education work against her, and at times she appears arrogant and curt. When Javi rejects her at his family's urging, Lola, the head of the community center, and her husband Jorge help her arrange a marriage to Alfredo, a hapless, lazy, and financially-strapped young friend of Jorge's. After the wedding, Yasmina roundly rejects all of Alfredo's attempts to be friendly. Her irritation with Alfredo and his lackadaisical lifestyle comes to a head when they meet to retrieve Yasmina's residency papers. Alfredo belittles Yasmina's goals of attending school and achieving her doctorate, telling her: "La universidad es una institución caduca" 'The university is an antiquated institution.' Yasmina retorts: "Eso dices tú porque aquí cualquiera puede estudiar, pero en Marruecos es distinto. Aquí todo el mundo va a la universidad, incluso tú" 'You say that because here anybody can study, but in Morocco it's different. Here, everyone goes to university, even you.' Alfredo's easy dismissal of an education is the product of his privilege, and Yasmina reminds him that he is no one to emulate, since he can't even afford a coffee. Though Yasmina is undoubtedly correct, her curt attitude makes her appear haughty and arrogant.

The film clips Yasmina's wings towards the end, however, in order to make her a more suitable partner for Alfredo. Yasmina fails the university entrance exams, and despite Jorge's protestations, abandons this dream. Instead, she continues to work at the community center liaising between Muslim immigrant families and the local school systems. In this capacity, she becomes reacquainted with Alfredo, who, having abandoned his unproductive lifestyle, has taken a job as a janitor. During their conversation, she insists that she enjoys her new job and apologizes for treating Alfredo unkindly. The film, having suitably tamed the shrew and having reduced the immigrant woman to an appropriate attitude and status, leaves open the possibility of a romantic relationship between Yasmina and Alfredo.

Elsa, the Ecuadoran love interest in *15 años + 1 día*, is the most reduced female immigrant character of the films studied here. Lacking all ambition, Elsa repeatedly insists that she has no intellectual ability, telling Jon:

Yo no quería estudiar. . . . Y [mi padre] me dijo que vale pero que yo tenía que ayudarle en el locutorio por las tardes y encontrar algo por la mañana. No tengo memoria. No sirvo para estudiar. Leo una frase y no se me queda. Soy como un pez.

I didn't want to study. . . . And [my father] told me okay, but that I had to help him at the Internet café in the afternoon and find something else in the morning. I don't have any memory. I'm no good at studying. I read one sentence and then I forget it. I'm like a fish.

She is so insignificant that it occurs to no one, neither Max nor Inspector Aledo, to ask her what happened the night of the fight between Nelson, Jon, and Toni. She is light-skinned and attractive, demure and hard-working, however, which makes her a potential partner for Jon. The sexist abuse that she cheerfully accepts from Nelson also sets up Jon in a savior role for her. Though it is unlikely that their relationship will endure the end of the summer and Jon's return north, the scene where Elsa washes Jon's hair serves as a stand-in sex scene that cements their alliance.

Unlike the other movies, in *Biutiful*, no romantic entanglement is ever imagined between Uxbal, who is white, and Ige, a black Senegalese immigrant. Indeed, Uxbal's advanced-staged pancreatic cancer precludes any sexual activity on his part. Nevertheless, Ige, as much as Patricia in *Flores de otro mundo*, stands as the potential savior of the Spanish family. All of her scenes pertain to domestic and maternal duties. We first see her cooking in her dark kitchen; the film shows her breastfeeding her baby and also walking Ana and Mateo to school.<sup>11</sup> As Uxbal's sickness progresses, Ige helps him administer his medicines, and Uxbal finally gives her a duffle bag with a considerable amount of money, which he has been hoarding for his children's care. He asks Ige to stay and raise Ana and Mateo. Doing so directly contradicts Ige's own desire to return to Senegal with Ekweme, and the money would allow her to reunite with her husband. Ige's inner struggle between her self-interest and Uxbal's family is demonstrated as she stands in the train station, trying to decide whether to leave or stay. The camera revolves unsteadily around Ige's head as she turns back and forth, demonstrating her inner conflict. Somewhat inexplicably and against her own self-interest, Ige returns to be both mother and father to Ana and Mateo.

Anna Casas Aguilar and Maria DiFrancesco question if Ige actually returns to the apartment or if her shadowy figure passing by the bedroom is a delusion on Uxbal's part (184; 34). In multiple viewings of the film, however, it never occurred

to me that Ige's return is Uxbal's fantasy rather than the film's reality. Normally Uxbal's otherworldly sightings pertain to the recent dead, and we have no reason to believe that Ige has died. Perhaps critics question her return because it so clearly contradicts her own self-interest. Ige's incredibly altruistic decision to stay, however, establishes her as the moral center of the film. The immigrant woman's goodness, maternalism, and willingness to sacrifice her desires for others contrast with the selfish and morally-ambiguous decisions of the other characters, particularly Marambra.

Leila in *Retorno a Hansala* also occupies the moral center of the film, though in other ways she comes the closest to equaling Martín. She has attained her residency papers, as she insists to the abusive police agent who questions her about her brother's body, which has washed up onto the Spanish shore. Nevertheless, her status as a Muslim with a low-paying, working-class job renders her still religiously and economically subaltern to Martín. At the end of the film, Martín, having left his wife, picks Leila up upon her return from Morocco. He suggests a business partnership in which the two work together in a more economical and ethical manner to repatriate the remains of people who die while attempting to immigrate to Spain. Leila coquettishly responds "Me lo pensaré" 'I'll think about it,' suggesting that the decision lies in her hands; this film, therefore mostly strongly suggests a partnership of equals. Leila's moral center contrasts sharply with Carmen's infidelity and their daughter Alba's unconcerned consumerism, making her a more appropriate partner.

Diana Flesler demonstrates that the earlier 1990-2002 corpus of films value Latin Americans over North Africans as potential romantic and sexual partners.<sup>12</sup> In these earlier films, however, the rejected sexual partner is without exception male, while Dominican Patricia in *Flores de otro mundo* offers the first potential female love interest. Later films like *Retorno a Hansala* and *Un novio para Yasmina* allow the possibility of a North African love interest, as long as the immigrant in question is a light-skinned woman. True to Flesler's original point, however, the two African-Spanish romantic relationships imagined in these films are the most oblique and incipient of the group and never represented onscreen. Leila and Martín may become a couple in *Retorno a Hansala*; unconvincingly, Leila's traditional Muslim mother encourages this intercultural relationship. As Haley Rabanal notes, this film is based on a real-life story, in which Spaniard Martín Zamora converted to Islam in order to marry his wife (152). *Retorno a Hansala*, however, merely suggests a potential future romantic relationship. By the end of *Un novio para Yasmina* relations begin to thaw between Yasmina and Alfredo. Yasmina suggests that they could delay their divorce, and they sit side-by-side in conversation. As with Martín and Leila, a possible romantic relationship between Yasmina and Alfredo is pushed into the future rather than shown on screen.

## Conclusion

From the films of Diana Flesler's study (1990-2002) to the films of my study (1998-2013), the anxieties informing films about immigrants to Spain have shifted. The cultural incompatibility which precipitated the failure of intercultural romance has given way to a more overt racism based on color, not nationality or culture. For example, language—a cultural difference—no longer forms an obstacle to intercultural relationships, as it did in some earlier films. In the later films, even the North African immigrants speak Castilian Spanish. Therefore North African and Muslim immigrants no longer appear to be less-desirable than their Latin American and Christian counterparts, especially if they are women. Gender and color, more than civil status, religion, or language ability, inform which immigrants are suitable partners and which are not. Dark-skinned women, like Milady and Ige, are rejected as possible romantic partners, though Ige is still found suitable as a surrogate mother for Uxbal's children. Lighter-skinned ones like Yasmina, Patricia, Leila, and Elsa are all considered desirable.

In addition to racial unease, demographic worries coupled with anxieties about white Spanish women's apparent rejection of patriarchal family arrangements inform all of the films studied in this essay. Immigrant women are posited as potential replacements because of their willingness to propagate patriarchal relationships as well as, particularly in the case of Patricia in *Flores de otro mundo* and Ige in *Biutiful*, to repopulate and mother the nation. Their achievement of protagonist roles, however, is a double-edged sword, because while they emerge as positive characters, their desperation to provide for their families and to attain legal status coupled with their continued exoticism, suggests their willingness to acquiesce to traditional patriarchal roles and, in Patricia's case, the potential sexual pleasure she may provide. In order to accomplish this change in sexual partners from Spanish man/Spanish woman to Spanish man/immigrant woman, immigrant men must be removed, frequently by depicting them as dubious, unreliable, parasitic, and criminal characters. The underlying gender and racial tensions of these films demonstrates the extent to which anxieties about population and race underlie representations of immigrants even in cultural productions that propose to advocate for immigrant issues.

## Notes

1. Flesler analyzes *Cartas de Alou* (*Letters from Alou*; Montxo Armendáriz 1990), *Bwana* (Imanol Uribe 1996), *Las aventuras de Saïd* ('The Adventures of Saïd'; Josep Lorman 1996), *Susana* (Antonio Chavarrías 1996), and *Tomándote* (*Tea for*

Two; Isabel Gardela 2000), with references to *Flores de otro mundo* (*Flowers from Another World*; Icíar Bollaín 1999) and *Poniente* (*Sunset*; Chus Gutiérrez 2002).

2. A number of other scholars have also noted that these earlier immigration films (dating from 1990) also portray male immigrants' experiences and their frequently unsuccessful romantic relationships with Spanish women. See Van Liew, Ballesteros, Rabanal, and Santaolalla.

3. The films included in this present study include, in chronological order, *Flores de otro mundo* (Icíar Bollaín 1999), *Retorno a Hansala* ('Return to Hansala'; Chus Gutiérrez 2008), *Un novio para Yasmina* ('A Fiancé for Yasmina'; Irene Cardona 2008), *Biutiful* (Alejandro González Iñárritu 2010) and *15 años + 1 día* (*Fifteen Years and a Day*; Gracia Querejeta 2013).

4. A curious pattern emerges when comparing the directors of Flesler's films with the directors of the films of this study. A majority of the earlier directors are male, while, noting the obvious exception of Iñárritu, all directors of the later films are women. The male directors more frequently depict Spanish men in the antagonist role, while their female counterparts invariably depict Spanish women in that role, though none to the extent of Iñárritu's *Marambra*.

5. See Arribas.

6. Van Liew further explains that "[t]his Basque resident has no intention of sacrificing her autonomy by moving to Santa Eulalia" (267).

7. All translations are my own.

8. The other male character in these films who is allowed to remain is Samuel, Ige and Ekweme's infant son in *Biutiful*. Much like Saïd, association with Spanish soccer facilitates Samuel's potential integration into Spain since the child is named after Samuel Eto'o Fils, a Cameroonian player on the Barcelona FC (DiFrancesco 32-33).

9. Thanks to Katie Doremus for first pointing out to me Patricia's pregnancy in the final scenes of *Flores*.

10. In contrast to Milady who dominates Carmelo by mounting him, when Patricia and Damián have sex, the viewer hears Damián say "Yo voy arriba, ¿vale?" 'I'm getting on top, okay?'

11. Maria DiFrancesco points out that while Ige functions as a substitute mother, she continues to be marginalized within Uxbal's family. When she walks Ana and Mateo to school, Ige hangs back and walks on the other side of the road, and when the family celebrates Ana's birthday with cake, Ige brings and serves the cake, but does not take a seat at the table (33-34).

12. Flesler argues: "These impossible romance films about Africans and 'Moors' stand in contrast to other contemporary Spanish films that present, also through romance, the gradual but successful integration of some Latin American migrants to Spain" (113).

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