

From “Mother/Land” to “Woman/Nation”: Destabilizing Nation and Gender Structures in the Costa Rican Film *El Camino*

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Costa Rican cinematic production, just like Central American film in general, has been traditionally scarce, sporadic, of limited circulation, and of irregular quality. Referring to this cultural industry, Costa Rican film scholar María Lourdes Cortés has stated that film and video production in Central America is perhaps one of the most unknown and invisible in world cinematography, and that the region has not taken to heart the concept that a country without its own cinema “es un país invisible” (*La Pantalla Rota* 4). However, the past decade has seen a renewed drive in Central American and Costa Rican film and video production, with relatively successful films both locally and at international film festivals. Many of these films have shown an interest for exploring social and political issues such as national identity, the environment, and ethnic and gender inequalities. One of those productions, the 2007 fiction/documentary hybrid *El Camino* — a 97-minute feature-length film written and directed by Ishtar Yasin — is one of the best examples of such trend. Plot-wise, the movie chronicles the voyage of two impoverished Nicaraguan children (Saslaya and Darío) looking for their mother, who had migrated to neighboring Costa Rica seven years before in search of work and a better life. At the global narrative level, the film deals with the socioeconomic inequalities behind such migration and the discrimination faced by the more than 400,000 Nicaraguans (10-12% of the total Costa Rican population) now living in the country to the south (Sandoval García, *El Mito Roto* 25). Finally, the film (at the more personal level of its main protagonist, 12-year-old Saslaya) also tackles the abuse of women by male figures on both sides of the border.

An official selection at the prestigious Berlin Film Festival (2008), *El Camino* is one of three films about the phenomenon of Nicaraguan migration to Costa Rica that have been produced in the past 12 years in Central America— all three directed by women and all three underscoring the plight of women migrants.¹ In fact, in addition to exploring issues of nationalism, transnationalism and the struggles of poor migrants in a society that represents and treats them as undesirables, *El Camino* also delves into critical issues related to gender and sexuality — which are closely interwoven with

¹ The other two films are *Desde el Barro al Sur* (Nicaragua, 2002), directed by Martha Clarissa Hernández and María José Álvarez; and *Más Allá de las Fronteras* (Costa Rica, 1998), directed by Maureen Jiménez.

its larger migration/nationalism narrative. In this essay, I propose a hybrid reading (just like the film itself) that considers both nation and gender as structures that are problematized and ultimately destabilized. Methodologically, I employ the concept of “mother/land” that is suggested in the film, and which I believe helps articulate Yasin’s “road movie” from beginning to end, bringing together nation and gender into a single, inseparable narrative. Just like Saslaya and Darío’s actual, physical mother and the land they seek, this “mother/land” (operating both at the level of family belonging and national identity) is absent, void, unreachable, deceitful, ungraspable, always one step out of reach. However, the concept of “mother/land” is not enough to capture the transformations that are experienced by the female protagonist toward the end of the film, when she finds herself in Costa Rica, free of her grandfather’s sexual abuse but suddenly trapped in a house of prostitution. No longer the “mother/land” represented by her home country and progenitor on the other side of the border, she stands as a new metaphor, becoming the “woman/nation”: a transnational space in-between, exploited by men at both ends of “the road,” abused by societies on both sides of San Juan River that separates Nicaragua and Costa Rica, belonging to both and none of them. In other words, what I propose is that in *El Camino*, gender cannot be separated from nation. They are part of the same process of identity construction and reconstruction. In challenging one, the film inevitably challenges both.

Independently produced with the support of mostly foreign sponsors (including France’s Fonds Sud Cinéma, Dutch development agency Hivos, the Swiss and Nicaraguan embassies, the International Organization for Migration and the Spanish Cultural Center), *El Camino* can only be understood in the context of the so-called Latin American social cinema whose origins scholars trace to the beginning of the 1960s — a period of great social mobilization and fundamental political changes in the region. Julianne Burton refers to this time period in her book *Cinema and Social Change*: “Over the past quarter century [since 1960], no sector of artistic activity has been more explicit about its political dimension and goals than film. Those Latin American artists and intellectuals who, in their commitment to transform their society, have turned to film as the most promising instrument have also become deeply engaged in transforming that instrument” (ix).

While Burton wrote this in 1986, the trend of socially and politically conscious films in Latin America has not dissipated with the failure or deterioration of socialist national projects and the emergence of neoliberal forms of government and economic structures in the continent beginning in the 1980s. Choosing to produce her film independently and focusing her attention on marginalized, exploited social actors (the poor, immigrants and women), Yasin follows the tradition of cinema that Argentine filmmaker Fernando Birri calls “realist, national and popular” (Burton, *Cinema and Social Change* xi). Burton describes the work of Yasin’s predecessors in this way:

Turning their backs on local commercial efforts, which they condemned as alienated and alienating imitations of the Hollywood model, scores of young Latin American filmmakers assembled the minimum equipment necessary and undertook to produce films about and for and eventually with the disenfranchised Latin American masses. The sought to express “national reality,” which they believed to be hidden, distorted, or negated by the dominant sectors and the media they controlled. Intent on

capturing the plight of the rural and urban poor, these artists ventured beyond the confines of their own privileged urban milieu.” (Cinema and Social Change xi)

Yasin’s utilization of a hybrid documentary/fiction format also reinforces the social cinema legacy with which *El Camino* is dialoguing. Documentaries, Burton points out in the introduction to *The Social Documentary in Latin America*, were the preferred genre for politically conscious filmmakers in the region, since they provided “a mode of eliciting, preserving, and utilizing the testimony of individuals who would otherwise have no means of recording their experience” as well as “a means of consolidating cultural identifications, social cleavages, political belief systems, and ideological agendas” (7). In this regard, Yasin employs in her film the testimonies of actual immigrants making the trip across the San Juan River and street kid performers who dance and rap about “injustices” and “the faults of the government” — just like Birri incorporated slum residents in his path-breaking 1958 documentary *Tire Dié*. Even for the “fictional” parts of the film, Yasin enlisted non-professional actors who had lived similar experiences to those of the characters.² The girl who played Saslaya, for example, came from a humble background and her mother had also immigrated to Costa Rica in search of work (Cortés, *Luz en la Pantalla* 187). The documentary/fiction hybrid genre and the use of “real” people as “actors” ultimately adds to the reality of the film, making *El Camino* a follower of the tradition of Latin American *cine testimonio*, which according to Mexican filmmaker Eduardo Maldonado is “concerned to put cinema at the service of social groups which lack access to the means of mass communication, in order to make their point of view public,” while “the process of shooting becomes one of investigation and discovery” and, as a result, “the film embodies the ‘aesthetic approach to *concientización*’” (qtd. in Burton, *The Social Documentary in Latin America* 40). As a “concerned” artist, Yasin walked a road similar to those of *cine testimonio* directors, spending close to six years researching and writing the script and making the trip across the Nicaraguan-Costa Rican border as an “illegal” several times (Cortés, *Luz en la Pantalla* 186) — seeking to better understand the experiences of those people she presents and/or gives voice to in her movie. In interviews with the Costa Rican media, Yasin has also made it clear that her film has a social and political objective: “Es una obra artística y al mismo tiempo un testimonio de nuestra realidad, una realidad tantas veces oculta en el acontecer diario” (“Ishtar no detiene su camino”).

But the tradition of social cinema is not the only one that informs this film. *El Camino* is also in dialogue with more recent trends in cinematic production by and about women. Julia Lasage traces the production of films and videos about women’s concerns in Latin America since the mid-1970s, with independent productions such as Yasin’s being a key component of such filmic development (315). Just like *El Camino*, the cinema of Latinas and Latin American women in the past few decades, indicates Liz Kotz, is one that in addition to gender intersects “class, national and ethnic identities, complicated by personal experience, [reflecting] a contemporary history of Latin America in which exile, rupture, transnational migration and bicultural identity have become relatively common” (211). The reason behind such specificity of concerns driving women’s films may be explained by

² This casting strategy has been used by prominent Latin American directors such as Brazilian Hector Babenco. In *Pixote* (1981), *favela* kids portray a “fictional” story that is nonetheless frighteningly close to their real life experiences.

the fact that social cinema in Latin America and among Latinos/as in the United States, while it sought to destabilize structures and discourses of oppression largely based on socioeconomic differences and/or ethnic discrimination, also tended, as Rosa Linda Fregoso explains, “to reproduce the dominant [patriarchal] discourse on woman (“The Mother Motif” 131). While Yasin’s cinematography reveals her commitment to disadvantaged people and her desire to explore issues of inequality on the screen (she released in 2011 a documentary about the plight of Haitians in the aftermath of the January 2010 earthquake), her first film (*Florencia de los Ríos Hondos y los Tiburones Grandes*, 1999) deals with domestic violence and its impact on women. Gender preoccupations, then, are a significant theme in her artistic production and social consciousness as a Latin American woman filmmaker. Finally, Yasin’s own personal situation as a woman actress and film director with a hybrid identity (born in Russia of Iraqi, Chilean and Costa Rican ancestry), having experienced the painful events of the Pinochet dictatorship in Chile, also help shape her approach to filmmaking in *El Camino*.

Now that we understand how *El Camino* fits within the historical development of Latin American cinema, let us delve into the film’s structure and the main themes that it explores. At first glance, *El Camino* (as its title indicates) is a road movie, presented and marketed as such — the DVD’s jacket simply states, “Two children migrate from Nicaragua to Costa Rica in search of their mother.” The trailer reinforces this motif, showing snippets of the journey and its geography, and even scenes of ethnographic visual representation in the form of religious celebrations and folkloric dances. According to Fernando Aínsa, all quests for identity in narrative are manifested in a longing for “locomotion,” for “getting to know and relate separate and non-integrated areas of space” (201). In this context, the film can be interpreted as a staging of this search for an identity (embodied in the figure of the absent mother) through the discovery process of travel. However, *El Camino* subverts the notion of the cinematic journey as moving from point A to point B and achieving some sort of heroic conquest, finding of what was lost or enlightened transformation. What we end up with instead is a vicious circle: Saslaya goes from being abused by her grandfather to being abused by the “Man of the Cane.” She is marginalized in Costa Rica the same as she was in Nicaragua. There is no happy reunion with the absent mother and no resolution. In other words, the journey proves to be a trap, impossibility.³

These disruptions in the structure of the typical road movie genre help us delve deeper into the criticism contained in the movie. By engaging (and taking the viewer along) in a rather bleak transnational journey with no happy ending, the film is successful in bringing attention to an immigration experience that is little known outside the Central American isthmus. While the migration of Central American nationals to the United States via Mexico is now generating more and more scholarly work, little or no attention (at least in North America) has been paid to the other Central American migration phenomenon that does not involve Mexico, the United States or the Río Grande that divides them: the movement of hundreds of thousands of Nicaraguans across the San Juan River into neighboring Costa Rica, and the impact such phenomenon has had and

³ For a theoretical framework of the road movie, refer to the first chapter of David Laderman’s *Driving Visions: Exploring the Road Movie* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002).

continues to have on relations between the two countries and the (trans)formation of (trans)national identities in the region.

This north-south migratory pattern, unusual in the Americas, has nonetheless been the result of factors similar to those spurring south-north migration from Latin America and the Caribbean to the United States. On the one hand, Costa Rica has developed one of the most stable economies, democracies and societies in the Caribbean Basin, investing heavily on health and education, creating a strong welfare state, and avoiding the impact of political strife and instability that have plagued the region during most of the 20th century. Just across the river, Nicaragua — the Western hemisphere's second poorest country — stands in stark contrast, still reeling today from decades of dictatorships, a failed revolution, natural disasters, and bittersweet experiments with democracy and economic development. Costa Rica's favorable position in the region has made it a target for migration during the past three decades from countries such as El Salvador, Colombia and Panama. But by far, most immigrants — 400,000-500,000, or 10-12% of Costa Rica's population as mentioned above — have come from Nicaragua, finding employment in agriculture, construction, domestic service and even prostitution. As Nicaraguan writer and politician Sergio Ramírez has said, "El sur (Costa Rica) es nuestro norte" (qtd. in Cortés, *La Pantalla Rota* 147).

Such a large influx of immigrants to a country as small as Costa Rica has resulted in various forms of sociopolitical friction, including accusations that undocumented Nicaraguans are draining already challenged welfare and social security funds, calls for stricter immigration policies, and xenophobic reactions sparked by a sense that these foreigners are somehow "tainting" Costa Rican national culture (Sandoval García, *El Mito Roto* 8). Such rhetorical and political confrontations have only been stoked by a history of border disputes between the two countries and recent (November 2010, and still ongoing) claims by Costa Rica that the Nicaraguan army has invaded and deforested a small island south of the San Juan River. Meanwhile, this immigration wave has led to the formation of new transnational communities and identities, along with de-structuring impacts on families and communities left behind (Sandoval García, *El Mito Roto* 57).

El Camino takes on this complex reality by pointing to the ethnic, cultural and socioeconomic contradictions present in the Costa Rican nation, understood here as an "imagined community" following Benedict Anderson's influential studies, in which he finds that "[n]ationalism has to be understood, by aligning it not with self-consciously held political ideologies, but with large cultural systems that preceded it, out of which — as well as against which — it came into being" (19). These "cultural systems" are the ones that have helped create Costa Rica's national "metanarrative," a concept introduced by Jean Francois Lyotard to refer to those abstract ideas (such as the nation) that seek to provide a complete explanation for historical experience or knowledge (359). This national metanarrative is based on the imagined idea of a "whiter," egalitarian, peaceful and inclusive society — as opposed to its "darker"/more Indigenous, war-torn and socioeconomically deprived Central American neighbors. More recently, this grand narrative has also included the notion of a stable middle class and a solid democracy. In his book *Otros Amenazantes: Los Nicaragüenses y la Formación de Identidades Nacionales en Costa Rica*, Sandoval García claims that Costa Ricans — frustrated by the deterioration of public investment and the middle class and the fall of the welfare state in the latter part of the 20th century — have found in the Nicaraguan

immigrant an “other” against which they can accentuate their differences. In this way, Costa Ricans are reinterpreting the foundational myth of their nation even at times when such a myth appears to be shattering. In Costa Ricans’ representation of the “other,” Nicaraguans are associated with “a violent past, dark skin, poverty and non-democratic forms of government” (Sandoval García, *Otros Amenazantes* xvi)— that is, everything Costa Rica does not stand for. Even though this performance of Costa Rican national identity appears to reaffirm the country’s cultural values, Sandoval concludes that it actually problematizes the ethnic/racial and socioeconomic inequalities that have long been obscured by Costa Rica’s “official” national metanarrative.

Working against this official discourse, and with full knowledge of it and its implications, *El Camino* gives voice to Nicaraguans to bring into question the precarious fabric of Costa Rican national identity, exposing its contradictions and asking: Who belongs or doesn’t belong in the “inclusive” Costa Rican society? What happens when the “threatening other” returns the gaze, the national myth is rendered naked in front of the lens, and the “threatening one” becomes “us”? Even though Costa Rica is presented as a land of opportunities in the film by several of the people interviewed (they say they are going there “to find work,” “so that my children can have a future”), the film by far portrays migration as a painful and dangerous experience, thus contradicting the Costa Rican myth of equality and pacifism. Some of the comments by made by both “fictional” and actual migrants reveal Yasin’s intention to make this point. For example, the boy who befriends Saslaya and Darío on their way from Managua to Lake Nicaragua tells them: “One day I’m going to leave. My dad left, they’ve all left. Sometimes they forget.” This intervention underscores that the harsh reality that migration (beyond its potential economic benefits to the migrants and their families), causes much personal suffering, family disintegration, and a sense of hopelessness — something that is lost in Costa Rica’s anti-immigrant rhetoric, where Nicaraguans are seen not as “victims” but as “abusers.” Other conversations recorded in the film, this time by actual migrants, challenge the notion of a peaceful Costa Rica that stands in stark contrast to its neighbor to the north. For instance, a woman asks another boat passenger: “Is it true that they’ve killed people on that road?” in reference to the border crossing beyond the San Juan River.

In addition to these verbal interventions that allow Nicaraguans to have a voice and provide a counter-story to the “official” Costa Rican national myth, editing and other stylistic elements used in the film also reinforce such social and political critique. For example, the sound of bullets and the feeling of menace evoked by the camera as the migrants cross the border, along with the use of ominous music, help convey a sense of inhospitability and hazard associated with the Costa Rican side of the border. In one telling scene, Saslaya arrives at a fair at a Costa Rican town and watches as local children joyfully jump on a trampoline, separated from her by a safety net placed around the structure — but also segregated from the possibility of happiness and careless childhood by the way the camera uses the net to literally split in two the screen and the two conflicting realities represented, at odds with each other. Saslaya’s sexual abuse in the “promised land” south of the San Juan River also problematizes the Costa Rican national myth, pointing to the dangers facing both migrants and socioeconomically deprived citizens. The criticism reflected in this film and the deep nationalist nerve it touches may explain its relatively cold reception in Costa Rica, where it wasn’t shown until August 2008 and hasn’t attracted much attention from the public — despite the fact that it is still the most recognized Costa Rican movie ever in the international film circuit.

Costa Rica, however, is not the only “imagined community” criticized in the film. Though more subtly, Yasin also calls attention to the struggles of the Nicaraguan people in their own homeland. First, she chooses to place Saslaya, Darío and their grandfather in the grim locale of a garbage dump on the outskirts of Managua, where they along with numerous other impoverished individuals toil extracting recyclables from the mountains of refuse and live in lamentable shacks. These are exactly the people whom the Nicaraguan nation has failed. The director also contrasts the mayhem of Managua against the pristine, empty streets of the tourist city of Granada, reserved for foreign visitors. Finally, street kids are shown on camera performing songs that include lyrics complaining about the shortcomings of the government. *El Camino*’s intervention into the realm of national culture myths is, then, transnational in nature, deconstructing structural deficiencies and inequalities that link impoverished and underrepresented groups of people on both sides of the border.

Any nationalism-based analysis of *El Camino* needs to be complemented by a close look into the gender issues that are addressed in the film as well, since nation, as I indicated earlier, is intrinsically tied to gender in the many ways this visual product seeks to disrupt dominant discourses. At the narrative level, nation and gender come together through my proposed metaphor of “mother-land,” which stands both for the desire of family reunification (search for the mother) and national identity (definition of a space of belonging). This association is not gratuitous, as Fregoso notes that the mother is present in many filmic discourses as “embodiment (object) of the nation” (“Reproduction and Miscegenation” 342). In *El Camino*, however, the mother is absent and is never found, so the “mother-land” is utterly void, incomplete, and unattainable.

The “mother-land” is also a formula for deception and abuse, anchored in gendered systems that are patriarchal and enslaving in nature in the context of the movie. Not only are impoverished Nicaraguans subjected to the pitfalls of the unequal neoliberal sociopolitical structures, but women in particular suffer the double-edged impact of poverty and gender violence and discrimination. In writing about Chicana filmmaker’s Lourdes Portillo’s documentary about a Nicaraguan woman immigrant in California, Fregoso notes how this film focuses “on the impact of processes of patriarchal gender relations, migration, labor, and cultural dislocation on the identity and subjectivity of a Latina immigrant worker” (“Devils and Ghosts” 83). In *El Camino*, these same issues of gender relations, migration and subjectivity are at play as the film attempts to show the perversions of the patriarchal system and its impacts on vulnerable women. Sexual violence and the commodification of female bodies are two of such impacts represented visually (and quite subtly) in this film. Antonia Castañeda reminds us that sexual violence is “rooted in patriarchal Western society — in the ideology that devalues women in relation to men while it privatizes and reifies women as the symbolic capital (property) of men” (25). Women and their sexuality are treated as objects that can be owned and sold by men. We hear the grandfather, off-camera, calling Saslaya to his hammock “to warm him up.” Then there’s Luz, a young woman the children meet along the way and who’s part of the Man of the Cane’s itinerant puppet show and, as we see toward the end of the film, also a prostitution house. We learned that Luz was sold by her parents to this man when she was younger, and during one part of his show in Granada, the camera shows the man controlling her movements as he would a puppet.

One of the ways Yasin deals with the topic of sexual abuse in her film is through the constant use of the image and metaphor of the blue morpno butterfly, which since early on in the movie becomes closely associated with Saslaya's journey of abuse. We first see a desiccated blue butterfly tucked inside the pages of a book when she goes to "accompany" her grandfather. In Granada, Darío enters a colonial-style house to find a delirious woman and, on the background, a butterfly in a cage. This imagery is complemented by the dialogue of the puppet theater, as the Man of the Cane makes Luz dance as in a trance in a blue dress and his puppets (a butterfly and a frog) say (the man uttering all the lines): "Una mariposa crucificada. Crucificada en su nido un día. No se percató de su dignidad. No sabía. No defendió su honor. Un clavo se incrustó en su ala. Ecos de silencio resonaron. Otros clavos continuaron el camino del mal. Un día se descubrirá el crimen. La mariposa muere." As Saslaya crosses the border into Costa Rica, we see in the background a live morpno butterfly. And finally, after she goes into the dilapidated house where the Man of the Cane keeps a group of women, Luz included, Saslaya is taken to a room where the man awaits on the bed, his cane on the floor, as if it were the (phallic) instrument that would be used to pin this new butterfly. "Ya está clavada," the man says, "nailing" having both connotations of sexual violation and death. When Saslaya leaves her grandfather and her incestuous nightmare, she wears a pink Sunday dress, as if to signify that her innocence as a child is still intact. By the end of the movie, as she is given a bath by the other women and taken to the Man of the Cane's room, she is wearing a red dress, much too big for her, symbolizing perhaps lost innocence and a forced entry into adulthood. According to Cortés, the butterfly in the film "represents what's ephemeral, what is transformed and destroyed. Saslaya's infancy, which cannot be saved and goes from the grandfather's abuse to another kind, public, remunerated. Not finding the mother, losing Darío, finally results in complete alienation, a burning of the wings. A sacrifice" (*Luz en la Pantalla* 197). Just as postcolonial nationalisms are no longer "contained within geographical boundaries" but are rather "de-territorialized" (Basch, et al. 147), abuse and inequality transcend the national boundaries in the film along with the migration of women such as Saslaya and Luz, and of abusers such as the Man of the Cane.⁴ These are indeed structural problems rooted in socioeconomic inequalities and a pervasive patriarchal system, and clearly not addressed by either nation. Emma Pérez refers to the nature of this patriarchal system by comparing it to "a cycle of addiction/dependency to the patriarchy that has ruled [women] since the precise historical moment in which they became aware that women's bodies are sexually desired and/or overpowered by the penis" (65). In *El Camino*, this circle of addiction and dependency moves along and beyond national borders, without any obvious sign that it will ever be broken.

Despite the fact that there is no resolution in the film for the issue of sexual abuse and Saslaya ends up trapped in a cycle of gender oppression, there are several ways in which *El Camino* operates as what Claire Johnston calls "counter-cinema," creating new gender-conscious meanings "by disrupting the fabric of the male bourgeois cinema within the text of the film ... so that a break between ideology and text is effected" (254). First, there is a subversion of gender power relations at the level of filmic language, with the film's main characters representing starkly opposite gender

⁴ Many Nicaraguan immigrants to Costa Rica end up in the sex trade. For details, refer to Megan Rivers-Moore's "Comparative Transnational Masculinity in Sex Tourism" (in *Shattering Myths on Immigration and Emigration in Costa Rica*. Ed. Carlos Sandoval García. Trans. Kari Meyers. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2000).

discourses that are also tied to competing notions of nationhood. The grandfather is the patriarch, the aging and decaying nation that inflicts pain on his own children. Perhaps as a way of purging his sins or because he feels powerless/impotent now that his “woman” (embodiment of the nation, as discussed above) is gone, he sets his shack and himself on fire at the end of the film. Darío (named after the Nicaraguan national poet Rubén Darío) is mute, in other words, has no voice; he also has very little agency as he’s dragged along by his sister, who easily convinces him to leave the grandfather. He represents the urge to return to the *patria*, as when he speaks to Saslaya in a dream or vision on the Costa Rican side of the border, the boy lost and presumably dead: “The grandfather wants us to go back.” The night before the children leave, the grandfather also reads a Darío poem that says, as if warning against leaving and “betraying” the old nation, “Wanderer, you will never find your destination.” Both male characters, as indicated, die; disappear in the discourse of the film. This is an express criticism of the role of patriarchy and of the gendered “mother-land” formulation. The other male character, the Man of the Cane, is a foreigner (apparently European), traveling between both nations but belonging to neither; in other words, he is de-territorialized, just like the transnational structures of patriarchy and abuse that he embodies.

A second way in which Yasin destabilizes the discourse of gender inequality is by challenging the male gaze that has traditionally dominated cinema. Regarding the male gaze, Laura Mulvey posits in *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* that

[i]n a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness” ... The man controls the film phantasy and also emerges as the representative of power in a further sense: as the bearer of the look of the spectator, transferring it behind the screen to neutralize the extra-diegetic tendencies represented by woman as spectacle. This is possible through the processes set in motion by structuring the film around a main controlling figure with whom the spectator can identify. As the spectator identifies with the main male protagonist, he projects his look onto that of his like, his screen surrogate, so that the power of the male protagonist as he controls events coincides with the active power of the erotic look, both giving a satisfying sense of omnipotence. (137-138)

When a film is filtered through the patriarchal gaze, agency becomes the sole property of the male. As Fregoso explains, this male-centered perspective “marginalizes the point of the view of the [...] woman in the narrative” (“Reproduction and Miscegenation” 325). Cinema conceived under this patriarchal paradigm (regardless of the gender of the director) offers little room for female agency and voice. In order to break through such entrenched paradigm, scholars of film and gender have proposed the use of an “oppositional gaze” (originating with the woman) that would counter the operation of the male gaze and weaken its effects. One of those scholars is bell hooks, who speaks of critical spectatorship by women of color “as a site of resistance [against] the imposition of

dominant ways of knowing and looking” (210). That is what happens in *El Camino* with Saslaya. Despite being victimized and becoming another “crucified butterfly,” she is given the most agency in the film. She is strong (visually reflected through her angry, fierce countenance) and determined to escape her first abuser. We, as spectators, are also guided by her gaze throughout the film, as the camera is constantly positioned from her vintage point. This stylistic and ideological decision on the part of Yasin is brought into focus at a scene early in the film, when Saslaya is collecting recyclables from the garbage dump. She finds a broken, light pink piece of glass, which she holds up to look at the surreal landscape of the landfill: all of a sudden, the way Saslaya perceives her surroundings, her reality (and our way of gazing through her shattered but nonetheless own lens and her own position) changes, reflecting the gruesomeness of gigantic piles of society’s refuse, squalid cows roaming in the wasteland, and black smoke blocking and almost swallowing the sunlight. It is after this experience that Saslaya decides to leave her grandfather and her “mother-land,” as if her newfound vision had given a new awareness and resolution. Following Emma Pérez’s study of sexuality and power, an oppositional gaze such as Saslaya’s would render the male gaze ineffective and no longer “secure” (59).

Informed by such filmic interventions in the discourses of nationalism and gender power relations, by the end of the film, Saslaya — detached from all familial ties, male and female, and “lost” in a de-territorialized transnational space — stands as a new metaphor in the film: the “woman-nation.” As “woman-nation,” she is a space in between, abused and ignored by societies of both sides of the San Juan River, belonging to both nations and none of them, and forging a gender identity not based on nuclear, patriarchal notions of family, but on principles of female solidarity — she develops a sister-like relationship with Luz, who promises her they will figure out a way escape their master puppeteer and become, somehow, the “happy” family neither of them has ever known. They have found, perhaps, what Pérez calls “a specific moment of consciousness, when they can separate from the law of the father into their own space and language” (64). By presenting the reality of “woman” and “nation” in Nicaragua and Costa Rica as one of structural abuse and marginalization, *El Camino* successfully manages to challenge and destabilize traditional notions of nation and gender embodied in the “mother-land” metaphor. There isn’t, however, much room for triumphalism in the film. At an earlier moment in the movie we learn that Luz has a small child, whom she leaves with her parents to follow the Man of the Cane to Costa Rica. We can speculate that unless the underlying socioeconomic and political structures that perpetuate poverty and abuse are improved, in a few years this child may be taking the same road that its mother and Saslaya have taken. But at least Yasin has shown us the realities of this road and has, in a way, revealed “the crime” of the butterfly’s poem.

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