

## Foreign and racial masculinities in contemporary Spanish film

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### Abstract

*This article analyses filmic representations of race and foreignness in Spanish immigration films made in the late 1990s and early 2000s. It focuses on the position of male black immigrants as sexual subjects/objects and as members of ghettoised communities whose survival depends mainly on the masculine bonding they create within their diasporic communities and the romantic interactions they establish with (mostly female) Spanish nationals. The first part of the article concentrates on films such as *Bwana* (dir. Imanol Uribe, 1996); *Taxi* (dir. Carlos Saura, 1996); *Saïd* (dir. Llorenç Soler, 1999); *Salvajes* (dir. Carlos Molinero, 2001) or *Ilegal* (dir. Ignacio Vilar, 2003), where male black immigrants are represented as (in)visible racialised bodies and perceived either in terms of their exotic/erotic appearance, their voicelessness (due to lack of mastery of the Spanish language) and their sexual interactions with the national white female; or reduced to battered or drowned bodies made into anonymous and victimised spectacles by the media. The second half of this article analyses *Poniente* (dir. Chus Gutiérrez, 2002) and *El traje* (dir. Alberto Rodríguez, 2002) as innovative and valuable contributions to the immigration genre and to interracial masculinity, insofar as they successfully problematise the alliance between marginal sectors of society and resist stereotypical representations of non-white foreign characters.*

### Keywords

immigration film  
Spanish film  
interracial masculinity  
male body  
Otherness  
racism

It has been almost two decades since European 'social cinema' began to address the subject of immigration, one of the most relevant social and political issues in contemporary Western Europe. I have argued elsewhere that, in spite of the accountable differences among the countries' cinematographic industries, filmic representations of this evolving social aspect and the effects and reactions it has wielded upon Western societies – with its unfortunate but unavoidable ramifications of racism and xenophobia – share common patterns in terms of authorship, ideology, cinematography and spectatorship (Ballesteros 2005b). Documentary techniques and *cinéma vérité* styles are to be found in most of the early representations of the migratory experience, which seek to raise spectatorial consciousness of the 'undesirable', and thus vulnerable, positions immigrants occupy in Western societies. With the progressive and global increase of immigrant populations,<sup>1</sup> and the slow but unavoidable emergence of social awareness of the implications that their presence has in the redefinition of European

1 Between ten and twelve per cent of Europe's population are immigrants. In the majority of Western European countries, the foreign-born population accounted for between seven and fifteen per cent of the total population. (Data of early 2006: <http://www.migrationinformation.org>).

identity, immigration is turning into a commercial subject as it is more and more represented through fictional formats and genres (horror film, comedy, melodrama, film noir and the western) that, without eliminating the effectiveness of more documentary formats, undoubtedly reach larger audiences.

One common pattern found in immigration films is the parallel film-makers establish between the different marginal (or undesirable) positions that constitute Otherness in their given society: foreignness, race and ethnicity go along with (working) class, age, gender and sexuality. When focusing on the migratory phenomenon of male immigration, many early immigration films link race, masculinity and class. Social class works in many instances as an equaliser providing the common ground between the male (black) immigrant and the local (white) woman, who typically plays the role of sexual as well as social mediator between omnipresent reactionary segments and institutions of the receiving society and the invisible – thus vulnerable – Others.

In the particular case of Spain, the constant arrival of immigrants since the early 1990s has contributed largely to increasing public awareness of the existence of a racial Otherness not easily relegated anymore to social and political invisibility. The racialised body of the male (as well as female) black immigrant stands out and enters the space and imaginary of Spaniards confounding the notion of national 'oneness' and (falsely) alleged 'purity'. As with those of other Western European countries, Spanish filmic representations of immigration include a panoply of reflections on the foreign and racial body's (in)visibility and on the locals' reaction to the progressive miscegenation of Spanish society. A great number of films dealing with race and foreignness in the context of immigration, made in the late 1990s and early 2000s, focus on the position of male black immigrants: as sexual subjects/objects and as members of ghettoised communities whose survival depends mainly on the masculine bonding they create within their diasporic communities and the romantic interactions they establish with (mostly female) Spanish nationals. Thus, the first part of this essay concentrates on films where male black immigrants are represented as (in)visible racialised bodies and perceived in terms of their exotic/erotic appearance, voicelessness due to lack of mastery of the Spanish language, sexual interactions with the national white female or reduced to battered or drowned bodies made into anonymous and victimized spectacles by the media. For one, the aforementioned complicity between the black male immigrant and the white female national supports the traditionally theorised connection between racism and patriarchy by which marginalised members of patriarchal societies join forces to subvert the oppression of the white male. However, this conception of an anti-racist feminism that fights for the rights of all the oppressed under patriarchy may appear in many cases unrealistic and romantic. When referring to the history of women's movements in America, from early suffragists' initiatives to organised women's movements from the late 60s on, bell hooks notes that in spite of the commonly accepted belief in feminists' support of social

equality of blacks, their struggle excluded non-white women whom they never ceased to perceive as Others (hooks 2000: 381). As hooks (2000) argues, white women have been historically socialised ‘to accept myths, stereotypes, and false assumptions that deny the shared commonness of [their] human experience’ (387) and ‘to be racist, classist, and sexist, in varying degrees’ (388). She proposes that unless white feminists ‘consciously work to rid themselves of negative socialization’ and ‘acknowledge that racism undermines the potential radicalism of feminism’ (hooks 2000: 388), facile analogies between ‘woman’ and ‘black’ should be approached with caution.<sup>2</sup>

It is important to note also that the feminist/anti-racist equation – the myriad relationships established by racial immigrants and national white women – rather than establishing a political strength, may allow (directors as well as spectators) to capitalise on stereotypes of white women being more open to racial difference but only in sexual terms (wanting ‘black dicks’), consequently encouraging in the films the sexual objectification of both the white woman and the black man. Imanol Uribe’s *Bwana* (1996) is a case in point as it exemplifies the dangers of exotising, fetichising, and silencing the black body, annulling the immigrant’s character subjectivity and exposing him to the objectifying gaze of the white woman and her family. The film centres on the encounter on a deserted beach between an African immigrant who has survived the shipwreck of his raft (and the corpse of his friend who drowned in the trip) and a lower middle-class Spanish family on a Sunday excursion. Although the film’s original intention is to critique, parody and caricature existing prejudices and stereotypes of blacks in the Spaniards’ imaginary, it ultimately reinforces the myth of the African’s sexual superiority and the combination of rejection and desire experienced by the white woman. An erotic interplay between the mother of the Spanish family and the African supports the voyeuristic exposure of their naked bodies, which leads to the victimisation and final immolation of the black subject. In *Bwana*, the black character is threatened with physical castration immediately after his body has been exposed naked and bodily interaction with the white woman has taken place at the beach.<sup>3</sup>

Complicity among disenfranchised masculine (white and non-white) sectors of society has historically proven difficult, if not impossible, to represent, and rarely seen in most Spanish immigration films, with a few valuable exceptions that I will analyse in detail in the second half of this essay. Since the times of slavery, theories of racism stress the lack of solidarity between marginalised and working class sectors of society (national and foreign), which allegedly resent the arrival of new immigrants who, according to extended yet erroneous belief, ‘take their jobs and their women’. Fear and resentment create an ‘immigration complex’ (Balibar 1991), according to which immigration is perceived as a ‘problem’ that affects, and is seen as a consequence of, whatever other social problem (unemployment, housing, social security, education, public health, morals or criminality) existing in capitalist Western societies, and provide the

- 2 Interestingly, whereas immigration films made by Spanish male directors (who don’t define themselves necessarily as ‘feminists’) consistently present the political solidarity and romantic involvement of white national women with black and non-white immigrants (one must not forget the commercial benefit of romance in film), female directors dealing with the same issue tend to include the divisive force of racism among white nationals and non-white immigrants as well or prefer to focus on the importance of solidarity among female immigrants, thus mirroring their own complicity with their immigrant female protagonists.
- 3 For a detailed analysis of the film, see Ballesteros (2005a).

- 4 Some examples are: the Northern League in Italy, the National Front in France, the Freedom Party in Austria, the People's Party in Denmark, Pym Fortuyn in the Netherlands and the Popular Party in Spain. Interestingly, in France's recent elections (May 2007) Jean Marie Le Pen, leader of the National Front, accused his opponents of copying his ideas and 'stealing his policies on immigration' while trying, at the same time, to soften his extremist edges reaching out to the marginalised immigrant sectors of France's society who caused the riots in 2004 (Arnold 2007). At the same time, Sarkozy, the winner of the election, had proposed, as part of his campaign, the creation of a 'Ministry of Immigration and National Identity'.
- 5 For a detailed exposition of the events of El Ejido, their causes and consequences, see Goytisolo and Naïr (2001: 211–226) and Téllez (2001: 235–306).
- 6 The family is also a potential space for interracial coexistence and miscegenation in *Flores de otro mundo/Flowers from Another World* (dir. Icíar Bollain, 1999).

breeding ground for the rightward political shift of working class whites. Social and economic crises create an uncertainty about their collective identity as a class that is intimately related to the weakening of labour movements and workers' organisations. As British author Caryl Philips prophetically anticipated:

It is no longer possible for a European to dismiss Fascism as the grandiose dream of a lunatic fringe: there is good evidence that right-wing extremism is on the rise again all over Europe (. . .) For the working classes, Fascism bestows a sense of worth, makes them feel part of a society that is usually unwilling to grant them anything. Not matter how poor you are, you are better than the Yid or the Spade; you are of the 'master race' (. . .) The general hopelessness and disillusionment of Western Europe is ideal soil in which to plant Fascist ideology, with its simplistic racial equations for complex socio-economic problems.

(2000: 123–124)

Indeed, right wing political parties of recent creation in Europe rely greatly upon disillusioned working-class voters by capitalising on popular hostility to ethnic minorities and by including anti-immigration policies as fundamental issues in their electoral agendas.<sup>4</sup>

Though one could argue that Spain is a good example of 'benign racism' (Ackerman 1996), sporadic outbreaks of extreme neo-fascist racism occur both on an individual and collective scale; the tragedy of El Ejido in February of 2000 is probably the most blatant example.<sup>5</sup> Following suit, Spanish immigration films alternate between benign and extreme depictions of racism and xenophobia. White supremacists and their violent physical actions against non-white male immigrants populate films such as the aforementioned *Bwana*, *Taxi* (dir. Carlos Saura, 1996), *Saïd* (dir. Llorenç Soler, 1999) and *Salvajes/Savages* (dir. Carlos Molinero, 2001). All these films problematise in various degrees the perils of reducing immigrants to bashed and unknown victimised bodies. However, it is important to note that the earliest films (*Bwana* and *Taxi*) prioritise their critique of the Spanish 'family's' reductive behaviour, but ultimately becoming accomplices with the positions they seek to convey and condemn. Given the prevalent role that the nuclear family played under the Franco dictatorship (1939–1975), independent anti-Francoist filmmakers of the 1960s and 1970s reappropriated it as metaphor of the nation through which they could tangentially and implicitly address social and political issues otherwise repressed by official censorship. Immigration films of the 1990s and 2000s reintroduce the family as an emblematic microcosm to epitomise the Nation's both aggressive and passive resistance to Otherness, as is the case in the aforementioned films as well as in Chus Gutiérrez's *Poniente/Sunset* (2002) and Ignacio Vilar's *Ilegal/Illegal* (2003).<sup>6</sup>

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Alberto Rodríguez's *El traje* (2002) is one of the most valuable contributions to the immigration genre and to interracial masculinity, insofar as it successfully problematises the alliance between marginal sectors of society and eliminates some of the romantic heterosexual constructions that abound in other immigration films. The interracial male bond in the context of underprivileged social class is the focus of the film, functioning as a potential locus of subversion and as the ground for fashioning the move toward racial integration. *El traje* also brings to the fore an aspect rarely treated in previous immigration films: the limited spaces where the black man can have popular recognition in Western societies: as a commodified sports star or model. By being successful as the former he also becomes the latter since the black sportsman's athletic body is exploited, multiplied and made ubiquitous by publicity, thus rising to the same spectacular status as the model.

The suit to which the film's title refers is introduced very early on and belongs to a black basketball star who needs help changing his brand new Mercedes's flat tyre. Another layer in the social scale is presented here as one 'undesirable black' immigrant, Patricio (Eugenio José Roca), a security guard and mechanic at a parking lot, services and plays a subservient role to a 'desirable black' immigrant, an unnamed basketball player who is made visible by the media for his sportive achievements, as his race becomes invisible (forgiven or forgotten) through the public service he renders to the sports-obsessed society. A third black immigrant, Roland (Mulie Jarju), Patricio's friend and roommate, enters the scene to admire the player's Mercedes *coupé* while soliciting him to buy one of the magazines he sells. The two 'invisible' immigrants do not resent the athlete's economic status and his service request by way of their shared foreignness, racialism and ethnicity (the three are African, albeit from different

countries since they use Spanish as their *lingua franca*). However, tension arises when the sportsman refuses to purchase a magazine from Roland and in exchange Patricio refuses to help him change the tyre. Facing the athlete's inability to do the task by himself, Patricio finally agrees to help him out, refuses to accept payment, but receives a present – the suit – as a compensation for the service. A moral lesson is already established in these early scenes, anticipating some of the themes that will evolve throughout the film: interdependence is not only unavoidable but necessary among foreign individuals in any given society, and masculine solidarity is the key to survival regardless of race, social status and recognition. As soon as Patricio starts wearing the suit later in the film, he also receives the visibility granted to the famous athlete or the model. The suit temporarily eliminates the social gap not only between white Spaniards and the black Africans but also between the two African men of different backgrounds. The disparity in the two men's physical appearance – Patricio has a decidedly un-athletic complexion – and nationality is erased in the eyes of the Spaniards by the fact that they both wear the same suit and have perfect command of Spanish. Oblivious to difference, the nationals see only the suit and consistently take Patricio for a sports star whose image is omnipresent in the city billboards.

bell hooks recognises that 'black masculinity has impacted on hegemonic masculinity, particularly in the fields of sport and entertainment' (1995: 30) but she reminds us also that 'what remains problematic is that the fields of sport and entertainment are considered to emphasise body more than mind, and therefore recast black masculinity within the traditional racialized, sexualized, infantilized and feminized framework'; 'the hypermasculine black male body is increasingly commodified and fetishized', resulting in a 'double image of black masculinities': successful and under-class (bell hooks 1995: 31). According to the filmmaker's own experience, as also noted by Santaolla 2005: 126 that disparity is an undeniable reality in our mediatic societies as well as in our daily interactions:

Day after day I kept seeing the same Nigerian man selling magazines by the same traffic lights. I pictured him all dressed up and wearing an expensive suit and, suddenly, he became a Denilson or a Jordan. I became aware that [in our society] black people are seen on the one hand as the embodiment of modernity in television ads whilst, on the other, they are the poor African [immigrants] that we see in the daily news.

(Molina 2002, my translation)

That 'double image', established, as noted, in the film's opening scenes, will remain untouched at the end. By then Rodríguez will have proven that the two sides of 'black masculinity' cannot be altered or crossed over easily. But first he plays with the idea that as long as Patricio shows sartorial signs of his improved economic status through the possession of a tailored suit, he may alter (provisionally/superficially) the invisible position

- 10 Mercer (1991: 188) uses this term when analysing Robert Mapplethorpe's photograph 'Man in a Polyester Suit' (1980).
- 11 This approach was the focus of two previous immigration films: *En la puta calle/Hitting Bottom* (dir. Enrique Gabriel 1997) and *Se buscan fulmontis/Fulmonty Required* (dir. Alex Calvo Sotelo, 1999), which, according to Santaolalla, fit the category of *buddy films*. See her analysis of the three films in the context of the *buddy film* genre (2005: 125–131).

he holds in Spanish society, or at least become a free urban *flanêur* without being constantly scrutinised due to his race and underprivileged status. Indeed, dressed in his new suit, Patricio ceases to attract suspicious gazes in the streets and gets the attention of clerks in stores, demonstrating to the character as well as to the audience that the visibility he can have in the white society is inextricably tied to his new appearance.

Homi Bahba used the term 'colonial mimicry' (1994:120) to describe the empowering process of appropriation and resistance: 'a camouflage from which to act, rather than a mask behind which to hide' (see Barrow 2003: 28). In the film, the suit (the symbol of success) represents the process of passive appropriation, a mask (in the sense Franz Fanon [1967] used it) under which Patricio hides his real marginalised social condition, a form of 'camouflage of respectability' that ultimately proves to be ineffectual since it does not grant Patricio real choices for social legitimisation.<sup>10</sup>

As the suit is proven to be an insufficient tool for Patricio to advance in Spanish society, the film explores interracial non-sexual fraternity based on shared social commonality, the sort of alliances that may develop, in spite of numerous obstacles, between black and white marginal characters who are forced to compete for – and ultimately cooperate to gain access to – the scarce resources available to them.<sup>11</sup> Robyn Wiegman (1997) traces the construction of interracial fraternity in US literature and popular culture following the model presented in a previous work on the 'American Quest Genre' by Fiedler (1960) and Boone (1986). These analyses refer primordially to United States social and discursive contexts, but they may be perfectly extrapolated to recent European fictional incursions in masculinity and race. In this context, the 'symbolic marriage' among black and white males 'who confront and overcome the tableau of differences among them', constructing a 'common' subjectivity that relies on gender sameness instead of differences of race and region, may have great subversive potential because it 'is defined by women's absence' (Wiegman 1997: 46) and, therefore, 'seemingly devoid of the hierarchical consequences of the heterosexual contract' (Wiegman 1997: 62). Following Weigman's discussion of Boone's point, the bond's defiance of the history of white supremacy through 'narratives that posit the similarities and compatibilities among black and white men, subverts the heterosexual model of social interaction by translating alienation and differentiation into mutuality and sameness' (Wiegman 1997: 63). If this model presents a provocative alternative to the usual heterosexual contracts between the black immigrant and the white national woman that one encounters in most filmic representations of male immigration, it does uphold, however, the equation of different marginal positions and decentred identities as the same, idealising the margin as 'an inherent locus of subversion' and 'metaphoric miscegenation' (Wiegman 1997: 56). This idealisation aims to transcend (or ignore) the fact that historically 'the specter of black male equality [has threatened] the racial supremacy ensconced by (. . .) patriarchal formations' (Wiegman 1997: 46), focusing rather on the antiracist struggle's necessity of forging alliances across categories of identity.

The bond between the illegal African, Patricio, and the Spanish *pícaro*, a homeless and unemployed street urchin nicknamed *Pan con queso*/Bread with cheese (Manuel Morón), brilliantly portrayed through a complex script and superb acting by Roca and Morón, becomes the central aspect of the film and the locus for a productive dismantling of gender and racial tensions. As their relationship unfolds, traditional or stereotypical social assumptions about, and filmic representations of, the black immigrant are reversed or deconstructed: namely, Patricio's victim status and moral integrity (the good savage) are complicated as he cohabits and is influenced by the national *pícaro*; sexuality is no longer used as a metaphor for cultural relations; and a positive outcome, albeit utopian, results from interracial sharing of space and discourse.

The first half of the film presents a dismal portrayal of a prejudiced, intolerant and exploitative society that makes Patricio its target and victim: his presence on the city streets and stores arouses the citizen's suspicions; his boss at the parking lot where he works treats him with condescension, denies him the right to have his friend Roland visit and expels him violently when he arrives late to work one day without even giving him the opportunity to justify his tardiness. He is robbed by *Pan con queso* at a shelter, where he had to spend the night after his apartment was sealed by the police and then is verbally abused and ripped off while trying to find his robber's whereabouts. Patricio is at first portrayed as a victim of prejudice, abuse and theft: his body and space are invaded and his community of African friends is dispersed by white society.<sup>12</sup> But, as soon as he occupies the white man's inner space (*Pan con queso* finds himself forced to host Patricio temporarily in the empty hotel he occupies as a squatter, while he finds the means to pay him back), and conquers the outer urban space by wearing the suit, a series of physical and moral inversions take place.

*Pan con queso*, who has gone from petty thief to debtor, is now the object of Patricio's surveillance. He follows *Pan con queso* around the urban space to make sure he does not disappear without returning the money he robbed him at the shelter. Patricio's sartorial distinction contradicts his homeless status and prompts his housemate and provider to jokingly note that whereas Patricio is 'dressed as a prince', he has become 'his butler'.<sup>13</sup> As the modern *pícaro* carries on with his tricks and petty thefts – and requires Patricio's complicity in them as a practical way to settle the debt faster – Patricio positions himself as a model of decency and morals. His victimisation and ethics are juxtaposed to the cunning and sometimes cruel behaviour of *Pan con queso*. However, the moral superiority that Patricio attributes to himself is subtly undermined by the audience's knowledge of pertinent information unknown to his housemate, namely the fact that he is also the perpetrator of robbery and impersonation: he takes his African friend Roland's savings from the apartment they shared after the police's raid, and does not admit it even though he witnesses Roland's distress; and he pretends to be a businessman while clad in the suit, in order to get a date with a Spanish female sales clerk. Though

12 As Perkinson states (2001), following W.E.B. Du Bois' argument, 'Black room-to-be has constantly been under the threat of invasion, a threat based not only in Black imagination of White intention, but in the historical reality of White violence. Black preoccupation with the eyes of the other is rooted in the concrete memory of having actually been invaded and made to deal with the other on the inside not only inside one's head, but inside one's body (in the form of the whip or penis or baton), inside one's house (whether in Africa or on the plantation or in the ghetto), inside one's community (in the form of the overseer or social worker or police officer), inside one's culture (in the form of religious doctrine, musical instrumentation, pedagogical instruction, artisanal tools, domestic artefacts, clothes), etc.' (184).

13 As a parodic re-enactment of the classical picaresque novel, the anti-hero *Pan con Queso* 'serves' Patricio, 'the nobleman', and lives – dragging Patricio with him – out of the 'honour' codes of his time. Like the classical *pícaro*, his outcast status makes him free to critique social institutions, and he is never granted social upward mobility. Unlike the original *pícaro*, he is an 'example' of aberrant conduct that remains unpunished. *El traje*, as a modern



*Picaresca* text is not a moralising tale to teach a lesson about the perils of amoral behaviour, which appears, on the contrary, as the logical consequence of social marginalisation and racial discrimination.

Patricio's minor misdeeds are justified by the harsh circumstances we see him endure as an illegal immigrant. *Pan con queso's* petty crimes are compensated with hospitality, respect and genuine blindness towards Patricio's race and social status. Not once is race, sexuality or nationality an issue in their daily interactions. The disadvantaged situation of both characters, whose causes and origins are deliberately avoided in the script, make them equals in the abandoned hotel they share: a space of ruin, decadence and secrecy that mirrors as well as harbours their own marginality.

A deep, progressive, interdependence that becomes a friendship between the national *pícaro* and the foreign African is emphasised beyond the ephemeral power that the wearing of the suit has momentarily granted Patricio. Destined to be homeless and jobless, he has no option but to inherit *Pan con queso's* behaviour as a survival strategy, though he at first resists helping his housemate with his petty crimes. The honesty that had characterised the 'good African' is reversed as the film progresses thus making his character more complex. Evidently, Spanish society has forced him to delinquency by not giving him the opportunity to work legally and thus socially integrate, relegating him to the ruined margins of urban space, or granting him human respect only when he follows the 'proper' dress code. As a result, the robbed African has become the thief via the indirect and direct intervention of the white national *pícaro*.

In the meantime, a manual of interracial coexistence and respect is being constructed daily within the shattered walls of the hotel where *Pan con queso* and Patricio are squatters, and a 'new society' is being slowly built though not without difficulty. The abandoned hotel should be interpreted as a microcosm of Spanish/European society where social and racial Others must learn to live and relate and in this way, resentment and distrust slowly give way to mutual understanding. Spatial boundaries are redefined, turned upside down and new rules have to be created, as both characters (black and white) realise that they can only survive through the creation of links of interdependency. The survival instinct and their position as losers within capitalist society makes the characters equal, bolsters their alliance and eliminates the subservient role of blacks in white society.

This happy outcome allows for a utopian reading of the film: in spite of its numerous obstacles, the road to tolerance can be built as long as individuals put aside their differences and are blind to colour (race is never a factor in their relationship, and Patricio's complete mastery of Spanish eliminates the incommunication that results from lack of proficiency both in society and in most immigration films); moreover, solidarity between men in distress (something commonly associated with the feminine) and, thus, between underprivileged sectors of society, is shown to be possible, in spite of evidence to the contrary. *El traje* may indeed be read as a successful parable of race relations that optimistically proposes that Otherness and difference may be shared, 'particularly as a sense of marginality, creating new bonds of identity and purpose, which cut across and undermine traditional, spatial and historical boundaries (. . .) [It] turns "inside out"

(upside down) the simplistic dichotomy implicit in those concepts (“insider”, “othernes”), and all the oppositions associated to that dichotomy’ (Rings and Morgan-Tamosunas 2003: 11).

The reading of the film as a parable of relations between blacks and whites – with the suit and the abandoned hotel as useful metaphors – is reinforced by the two stories told in the opening and ending scenes, and a stuffed lion found in a dump by Roland, Patricio’s African friend and first roommate.<sup>14</sup> In the film, Roland is associated with primitivism, simplicity, innocence and good nature, all qualities that are opposed to Patricio’s modernity, pragmatism, pride and often unfriendliness. Although Roland embodies some of the features traditionally associated with the black man (he is the storyteller, believes in magic and is fascinated by a lion), he proves to be more resourceful than Patricio, as he manages to survive by working odd jobs, and ultimately provides the film’s moral voice. The two stories and the sequences with the lion are associated with Roland’s Africanness, as opposed to Patricio’s Europeanness, symbolised by the tailored suit. Moreover, they structurally frame the film and work as implicit metaphors to both refer to and challenge stereotypical images associated with the black male: sexual prowess, savagery and primitivism.

The film opens (just before the flat tyre scene) with a conversation between Patricio and Roland in which the latter tells his friend a story that illustrates his fantasy-prone nature: he is convinced that in France ‘they are using magic to make money’. As told by Roland, a man wakes up one morning and realises he is missing his penis. Someone has used a strand of his hair to employ black magic on him and his penis has disappeared. He panics, but the person who has his penis tells him that he has to pay to get it back. The castrated man pays and recovers his penis. Incredulous, Patricio asks Roland: ‘do you believe these stories?’ and Roland replies: ‘No . . . but these things happen . . . in France’. As the first and only information we have so far regarding the film’s characters, the story provides another binary representation of African men that confronts the superstitious ‘good savage’ with the ‘civilized’ and assimilated black. Besides being an ironic commentary on Roland’s ‘primitivism’, the story refers to white society’s long-standing obsession with the penises of black men and to the white man’s anxiety about losing phallic power. Since the beginning of the African slave trade, the male member has been seen as the site of excess sexuality as well as the object of stereotyping and objectification of blacks (Africans) by the white man.<sup>15</sup> The lack of correlation between the ‘penis story’ and the asexual masculinity of the (black and white) characters in the film suggests that Rodríguez does acknowledge that one of the visible positions of power that the black man holds in white society derives from his sexuality, although he deliberately refuses to turn his black characters ‘into a penis’ (Mercer 1991: 187). On the contrary, Roland’s story speaks about the magic vanishing of the penis, in other words, about the elimination of sexuality and its normative features (hetero, size, prowess, nudity) as the only locus of masculinity, the only

14 The character of Roland is endorsed and familiar to Spanish audiences by the fact that the actor, Mulie Jarju, is one of the few black actors (an immigrant himself) who has been playing immigrant roles since the early 1990s. He played Alou in Montxo Armendáriz’s *Las cartas de Alou/Letters from Alou* (1990) for which he won the Concha de Oro for Best Actor at the San Sebastian Film Festival, and ‘the dark man’ in Ignacio del Moral’s play, *La mirada del hombre oscuro/The Look of the Dark Man* (1992) in which Uribe’s film, *Bwana*, is based, among others roles.

15 See for this matter Bordo (2001) and Schmitt (2001).

16 I cannot resist the temptation to make a visual connection between *El traje* and Robert Mapplethorpe's aforementioned photograph, 'Man in a Polyester Suit'. Susan Bordo's reading of the photograph (2001) sums up perfectly the artist's intention: 'Robert Mapplethorpe's controversial photograph "Man in a Polyester Suit" satirically illustrates this racist opposition between the White man's civilization and the Black man's primitive endowments, by showing a gigantic organ spilling out from the unzipped fly of a Black man in a tidy business suit, whose polyester material jokingly represents the tacky, K-Mart artifice of civilization' (36). Although Rodriguez's intention is also to play with the stereotyped dichotomy primitive/civilised, he eliminates sexuality from the 'primitive' category and associates it rather with Roland's 'magic story'. The reference to the organ (sexuality) is absent and irrelevant to the representation of Patricio, and the symbol of 'civilization' is an elegant and well tailored suit, definitely not a polyester one, that belonged to another Black man, the athlete, who does embody society's obsession with body and size, but disappears from the diegesis after the first ten minutes of the film.

definition of manliness and the only space where interracial relations may take place.<sup>16</sup>

In the closing scenes of the film, the three friends (Patricio, Roland and *Pan con queso*) bury Patricio's suit and the stuffed lion in the garbage dump where Roland originally found the lion. African extradiegetic music is superimposed on the two scenes with the lion, which evidently functions as a metaphor for the stereotype of the African continent in the colonial mentality. The burial of the lion and the suit signify the symbolic burial of both African wilderness and European 'civilization' with its obsession with consumerism and appearance. The lion cannot represent the African in a post-colonial and globalised world any more than the suit does not solve the economic and legal problems that Roland and Patricio suffer. Neither of them represents nor replaces the complex race relations that operate in Western societies.

After burying the lion, *Pan con queso* entertains himself throwing stones at a giant billboard bearing an image of the African athlete wearing the suit and jumping to score a basket with a television (instead of a ball). In the meantime, Roland tells Patricio the parable of 'the jackal, the goat and the lion'. The story goes as follows: The jackal had a restaurant. The goat was hungry but poor. He only had dry bread. He went to the restaurant and ate his dry bread with the smell of the kitchen. The jackal demands: 'Pay me because if it were not for the smell of my kitchen, you could not have eaten the dry bread'. The goat refused so they went to see the lion. He asked the goat for some coins, tossed them in the air and said to the jackal: 'Did you hear the coins?' The jackal said: 'Yes'. And the lion replied: 'Well, that pays for the smell of your kitchen', returning the coins to the goat. Patricio's response is as indifferent as his reaction to the previous 'penis story'. Roland has to clarify to him that the lion's role in the story is to impart justice.

Even if the real (stuffed) lion, and the symbolism it embodies, have been buried underground, the fictional lion, as the incarnation of justice, and the African parable, representative of 'primitive' popular knowledge, prevail at the end as a powerful and valid narrative counterbalance to 'civilized' compulsory consumerism. The very last scene of the film shows Patricio looking at and then turning his back on the billboard with the commodified and fetishised black male model. The promise of social advancement encoded in the suit has failed and is thus interred. The three friends walk out of the burial site into an uncertain but somehow hopeful tomorrow which is grounded on a previous experience of solidarity that may help them cope with their unsolved disadvantaged social position in society.

This ending may not open a space for real social transformation of marginal segments of society, nor for real integration of the racial Other beyond the potential that the interracial male bond may provide – which will always be circumscribed to the margin. As Robyn Wiegman cautions us, one has to call into question the idealised nature of the bond: 'the interracial male bond's vision of gender and racial transcendence, heralded as emblem of equality, does not necessarily encode broad social

transformation, no matter how evocative and seemingly innocuous the central image of men can be'. And yet, 'the antiracist struggle does necessitate forging alliances across categories of identity' (Wiegman 1997: 63) that can resist stereotypical and repetitive representations of racial and foreign masculinities. *El traje* successfully dismantles most of the patterns that permeated early representations of the non-white male immigrant, offering a complex image of the character and his interactions with the (male and female) white national.

As we have seen in the previous pages, immigration films generally reduce the non-white foreign male character to an anonymous, voiceless, victimised or drowned body. In most cases, the exclusively white national (and mostly male) directors deliberately choose to present this combination of discursive absence and reductive bodily presence as a valid and committed way to reflect and critique common situations experienced by immigrants in a society where they still lack the economic resources to script, film and produce their own perspectives. The Spanish immigration genre will not be complete until male and female immigrants are able to represent themselves and select the narrative discourses, body representations and sexual relations and interactions that better represent their experiences.

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### Suggested citation

Ballesteros, I. (2006), 'Foreign and racial masculinities in contemporary Spanish film', *Studies in Hispanic Cinemas* 3: 3, pp. 169–185, doi: 10.1386/shci.3.3.169/1

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