

Spring 2016

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Recommended Citation

Thornton, Megan, "Negotiating Nicaraguan Identity in Costa Rica: The performance of Affect in *Desde el barro al sur*" (2016). *Classical and Modern Languages and Literatures*. 4.
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Negotiating Nicaraguan Identity in Costa Rica: The Performance of Affect in *Desde el barro al sur*

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As is the case with marginalized groups in other countries, the Nicaraguan “other” is often blamed for Costa Rica’s socio-economic problems. While tensions between the two countries are not new, pressures have mounted since the early 1990s due to increased migrations, economic crises, and political problems. Costa Rican historian Patricia Alvarenga explains that the increased presence of Nicaraguans in Costa Rica, particularly undocumented ones, at the turn of the millennium has brought a fear of “invasion” that threatens “la seguridad laboral e incluso el espacio vital de los costarricenses” (“Los migrantes”). This perceived threat highlights the complex emotions that surface with the topic of global migrations and also brings to the forefront issues of belonging in Costa Rica and Central America. Recent documentaries, such as Maureen Jiménez’s *Más allá de las fronteras* (1998), María José Álvarez and Martha Clarissa Hernández’s *Desde el barro al sur* (2002), Jürgen Ureña’s *De sol a sol* (2005), Julia Fleming’s *NICA/ragüense* (2005), and Ishtar Yasin’s *La mesa feliz* (2005), address the issue of Nicaraguans living and working in Costa Rica to draw attention to social prejudices and xenophobic attitudes.¹ Yasin also

directed the feature-length film *El camino* (2007), a road movie about a brother and sister who leave home to search for their mother in Costa Rica. This flurry of filmic activity dealing with Nicaraguan migration to Costa Rica merits scholarly attention, and *Desde el barro al sur* will be analyzed here since it is the only Nicaraguan production of those mentioned.

The focus of this essay is the performance and negotiation of affect, or emotion, in *Desde el barro al sur*. It was one of the earlier films to deal with such a provocative and complex issue with (im)migrants portraying a range of emotions from fear and loneliness to disappointment and joy. The film also takes a critical look at both countries without laying blame and, since its debut in 2002, has been shown in both countries to promote cross-cultural understanding. In May 2008, filmmaker Martha Clarissa Hernández explained the film's purpose by stating, "Muy, muy, muy a propósito no queríamos hacer algo que fuera victimizante ni culpabilizante" (Personal Interview).² With this goal in mind, *Desde el barro al sur* uses music, contrasting images, and personal testimonies to explore different aspects of the immigration debate in Costa Rica. During 57 minutes, the film reveals the individual motivations and desires of each interviewee, including (im)migrant workers and employers in Costa Rica as well as families left behind in Nicaragua. By alternating between the neighboring countries, *Desde el barro al sur* represents the experiences and feelings of those who leave home, primarily women, and those who stay behind. The film thus offers a counter-image and a counter-discourse to the more stereotypical representations of Nicaraguan (im)migrants as uneducated, racialized criminals who abuse Costa Rica's resources. It also allows (im)migrants to deconstruct such misrepresentations through alternative performances of affect, thereby redirecting the Costa Rican gaze to foster mutual respect and compassion. A review of spectator responses at the end of my essay reveals the affective impact of this documentary in its ability to facilitate the imagining of more accepting communities that are transnational in nature. By stirring up certain thoughts, feelings, and emotions for both participants and viewers, *Desde el barro al sur* can therefore draw diverse actors and audiences into new ways of imagining community, citizenship, and belonging.

Since the 1970s, a cinema with social preoccupations has flourished in Central America, aligning both thematically and stylistically with the New Latin American Cinema Movement.³ Because at the turn of the millennium state resources are tight and film budgets primarily rely on private funding, feature-length films are rarely produced, so the documentary genre occupies

a privileged position within Central America and much of Latin America (Cortés, "La luz" 152). In *La pantalla rota: Cien años de cine en Centroamérica*, María Lourdes Cortés writes that the 1990s brought new social themes like migration, ecology, and the role of women to the forefront with the documentary as "el género idóneo para abordar estas temáticas de fin de siglo" (401). Filmmakers Álvarez and Hernández have emerged as two of Central America's most prominent documentarians, and much of their work, including *Desde el barro al sur*, has focused on the experiences of women and ethnic minorities.⁴ In a 2002 interview with *La Prensa*, Nicaragua's socially conservative newspaper and oppositional voice to the government, Álvarez states, "Nos llamó la atención el rol que las mujeres están jugando. Gran parte de las amas de casa de la Nicaragua desempleada, toman las riendas en Costa Rica. Pero esto sucede por la necesidad" (Ruiz Baldelomar). Therefore, by focusing on the experiences of a diverse group of Nicaraguan women and their families instead of representing the more stereotypical male (im)migrant worker, *Desde el barro al sur* offers viewers a unique perspective and an often silenced point of view within (im)migrant networks.

A documentary's audiovisual content, mode of representation, and stylized production, including the roles of the "actors," can be characterized as a performance that actively engages the public. For example, the interviewees who tell their personal stories in *Desde el barro al sur* are still reenacting their lives for the camera. They relive their experiences in order to narrate them and also reconnect with the feelings and emotions associated with their (im)migrant journeys. This act of retelling aligns with Richard Schechner's definition of performance as "restored behavior" or "twice-behaved behavior" (36). While this performance does not take away from the genuine and heartfelt emotions that interviewees express, it does speak to the reflexive and revisionary nature of the retelling. As Schechner writes, "Put in personal terms, restored behavior is 'me behaving as if I am someone else' or 'as if I am 'beside myself,' or 'not myself,' as when in trance" (37). For our purposes here, this symbolic distancing allows an interviewee, who may be seen as an actor, to recount a traumatic ordeal or to express a deep loss, experiences that many Nicaraguans may have encountered in Costa Rica. Thus, the documentary's distinctive features, showcasing oral testimonies and personal accounts, make it a particularly apt genre both for enacting and talking about feelings, leading to a performance of affect.

The notion of affect, which connotes the experience of feeling or having emotions, provides a pivotal point of entry into the (im)migrant experience. Emotions serve to negotiate one's social surroundings and interpersonal relationships, and thus are key for an experience like (im)migration, which can be gratifying and disorienting, challenging and unnerving as one constantly encounters new faces, cultures, languages, and traditions. While emotions are often described as internal processes, they are also social constructions and dynamic processes that vary with societal norms (Ehn and Löfgren 114). Such norms correspond to majoritarian scripts of accepted behavior, including the "right" look, dress, speech, and feelings, as dictated by formal institutions, dominant social groups, and cultural paradigms (115). In general, (im)migrant workers who look and speak differently than those with power tend to be cast as "illegal" outsiders and non-citizens who alter normative social matrices. Costa Rica is no exception, for the Nicaraguan "other" or "nica" is associated with dark skin, poverty, less prestigious Spanish, and political turmoil, whereas the "tico," or Costa Rican, is defined by its nation's uniqueness within Central America and therefore linked to an idyllic past, a predominantly "white" population that speaks the "purest" Spanish, an affluent middle class, and a stable democracy (Sandoval, *Threatening* xiii-xvi, 62).⁵ The most prominent characteristic of Costa Rica's "exceptional" identity is their perceived racial purity (Fouratt 150). The history of colonization emphasizes little indigenous presence in Costa Rica, and therefore their perceived direct ancestral ties to Spain make them whiter and more desirable, identifying the rest of the isthmus as "undesirably *mestizo*, or of mixed ancestry" (Sharman 47; Fouratt 150). This identity myth not only denies racial and ethnic diversity within the national image but also racializes (im)migrant outsiders like "nicas." While "nica" is a colloquial term used to identify a native Nicaraguan, it is used pejoratively in Costa Rica, connoting a sense of otherness and being on the outside. The Nicaraguan accent is another identity marker that casts "nicas" as outsiders, leading to discriminatory practices.⁶ Carlos Sandoval, Costa Rica's foremost researcher on immigration and identity, explains that Costa Ricans associate the Nicaraguan accent with ignorance, noting that it is a source of racialization in jokes (*Threatening* 122-23). Because of this perception of Nicaraguan Spanish, Sandoval reports from his ethnographic interviews that Nicaraguan (im)migrants express shame about their different accents and feel rejected by Costa Ricans who make fun of them (123). This type of language subordination can be considered

language-focused discrimination, for marking a language or accent as inferior disempowers individuals and takes away their voice.⁷ Thus, when describing "nica-tico" interactions, accents and appearances are markers of cultural difference that highlight race and power relations and also social scripts of belonging in Costa Rica and Central America.

When dealing with scripts of accepted behavior, emotions become a strategic tool. In "Feeling Brown" José Esteban Muñoz, drawing on Sartre's *Sketch for a Theory of Emotions*, defines emotions as "the active negotiations of people within their social and historical matrix" (71). He further explains that emotions are a "performed manifestation of consciousness" and that this performance enables us to cope with life's highs and lows and also mediate "different cultural logics of normativity" (71-2). Muñoz's understanding of emotion as a performance contributes to his "minoritarian theory of affect," which can facilitate an understanding of how minority subjects, like (im)migrants, affectively map their own identity and position in relation to majoritarian scripts (72). (Im)migrants can either conform to societal norms through processes like assimilation or develop performative strategies of survival, which Muñoz labels "disidentifications," that enable them to negotiate the explicit and implicit matrices of normative citizenship (*Disidentifications* 4). Although Muñoz mainly focuses on the Latino/a experience in the United States, his argument sheds light on the positions of (im)migrants in Costa Rica where normative citizenship is defined in opposition to the Nicaraguan "other."

The perceived differences between "nicas" and "ticos" have been exaggerated since the 1990s due to political, economic, and socio-cultural changes in both countries.⁸ Despite an end to the Sandinista Revolution in Nicaragua (1979-90), rising unemployment rates and poverty levels as well as the devastating effects of Hurricane Mitch (1998) have led to increased economic migrations, in contrast to the political migrations of the 1980s. Alvarenga explains that these changes have attracted working-class, primarily undocumented, Nicaraguans to the low-paying agricultural and construction sectors in Costa Rica, thereby contributing to the stereotype that "nicas" are uneducated, poor, and racialized ("Los migrantes"). This most recent migratory wave is also characterized by its urbanization, with migrants settling in San José and the central region, by its feminization, with an increase in female laborers, and by its permanency, with migrants establishing families in Costa Rica (Castro Valverde 32-37, 48). Due to the two neighbors' geographical proximity, shared language,

and cultural similarities, it is not surprising that Costa Rica has been a popular destination spot for Nicaraguans. They represent both the largest immigrant group and the highest number of undocumented migrants in the country (Fouratt 145). According to the 2000 Census, Nicaraguans accounted for 76.4% of the 300,000 foreign-born residents in the country, and of this total 50% were women who tended to work in the tourism industry or in private homes as domestic employees (Castro Valverde 26, 32). More recent statistics show that in 2011 Nicaraguans constituted 6.6% of the total population in Costa Rica, up slightly from 5.9% in 2000 (Sandoval, "To whom" 1431). While the numbers between 2000 and 2011 remained somewhat steady, the negative perception of the Nicaraguan "other" as invader has intensified over time.

When political and economic changes began to affect Costa Rica's general population in the 1990s, the country's mythic status as a peaceful, prosperous, and welcoming democratic nation began to change (Booth, Wade, and Walker 53-68). The adoption of neoliberal economic policies, for example, has contributed to a decrease in social services, compromising the government's investment in its people, which in turn has led to criticisms of the political system (62-4). Furthermore, despite Costa Rica's reputation as a friendly refuge for (im)migrants, as exemplified by the 1992 and 1994 amnesties offered to undocumented "foreigners" and the 1999 amnesty extended to Central American refugees, lawmakers responded to public anxieties about (im) migration in 2006 by redefining it as a security issue, allowing them to tighten migratory controls and give more power to the authorities (Sandoval, *Threatening* 147; Sandoval, Introducción xiv-xv). The 2006 law, General Law of Migration and Alien Affairs (No. 8487), focused on restricting legal migration and policing undocumented crossings within a framework of national security (Fouratt 145). However, outcry from human rights organizations prompted legislators to ratify an amended law in 2010. The current General Law of Migration and Alien Affairs (No. 8764) thus replaced language about national security with that of human rights and integration (Sandoval, "To whom" 1433; Fouratt 173). While this is an important change, the law still makes the legalization process difficult, costly, and burdensome, and also grants too much power to authorities to detain, deport, and investigate unauthorized migrants (Sandoval, "To whom" 1433-34). This contradictory policy reflects broader debates about national identity and underscores exclusionary scripts of belonging related to race, class, and ethnicity, thereby contributing to the demonization of (im)migrant groups, with "nicas" bearing the brunt of the criticism.

Feelings of disillusion in Costa Rica coupled with migration reforms and policy shifts have led to increased xenophobia. Since the 1990s, for example, the Costa Rican media has reinforced nationalistic discourses of belonging, representing the "nica" as an ill-tempered, dangerous criminal who is emotionally excessive while the "tico" is generally portrayed as peaceful and affectively reserved. By offering sensationalist accounts of immigrant activities and by couching their reports in criminal and racial metaphors, they have promoted feelings of anger, fear, and distrust in the public sphere. In *Threatening Others*, Sandoval writes that in the 1990s news outlets in Costa Rica began describing "nicas" as illegals or invaders coming in waves, while offering very little analysis or deconstruction of such perceptions (33-5). Furthermore, they provided scant coverage of human rights violations, thereby robbing Nicaraguans of their own representative voice (33-5). Newspaper, radio, and television reports thus outlined some possible affective scripts for dealing with "nicas" in Costa Rica. In "Feeling Brown" Muñoz recognizes the power of the media in general to stereotype marginalized groups and considers the media a "chief disseminator of 'official' national affect" (69). Therefore, according to Muñoz and Sandoval, audiovisual media, in particular, can convert disenfranchised communities into suspicious spectacles by focusing the majoritarian gaze on their "faults." Conditioning this gaze to elicit a negative affective response is part of the media's representational performance, and this is certainly true in Costa Rica.

Speaking out in *Desde el barro al sur* thus gives agency to (im)migrant actors and allows them to dismantle constructed notions of being a "nica." Their performance of affect in front of the camera provides an opportunity to make visible their own subjectivities and positionalities, meaning how their race, ethnicity, gender, class, and nationality affect their interactions with those in power, and in turn to negotiate social scripts of belonging. They can also claim cultural citizenship. Because, as previously mentioned, the difficult legalization process makes political forms of citizenship often unattainable for undocumented Nicaraguan (im)migrants, they must self-define and self-represent their right to equality.⁹ Ann Cvetkovich argues for "affective forms of citizenship" (11), which I interpret to mean alternative communities in which individuals are bound by common feelings of respect and responsibility. Redefining citizenship in terms of affect can lead to a sense of acceptance and belonging without forcing individuals to give up their native culture or conform to majoritarian norms

to be part of the community. It offers a creative alternative to understanding citizenship in terms of one's nationality or legal status, especially because formal citizenship, as Sandoval points out, does not guarantee automatic social and cultural acceptance when individuals are often judged by more visceral markers like skin color or accents ("Are We"). In my opinion, this suggests that citizenship can be viewed as a performance, rather than a legal formality, that depends on one's negotiation of hegemonic social scripts. May Joseph comes to a similar conclusion: "This ephemeral place of imagined and available rights [meaning citizenship] is a performed as well as rhetorically produced avenue of personhood, whereby peoples invent themselves in relation to, and in tension with, existing constructs of participatory politics" (19). For Joseph, "the expressive stagings of citizenship" can unite individuals who share past histories, similar loyalties, and future possibilities (11), while Sandoval advocates constructing "communities in difference" based on values of equality, solidarity, and respect ("Are We"). Based on this performative notion of citizenship, communities bound by affect can draw strength from differences in nationality, ethnicity, gender, class, and sexuality. As will be shown, *Desde el barro al sur* calls for such alternative communities that are more accepting and transnational in nature.

The title and opening scenes of *Desde el barro al sur* immediately set up the public's viewing experience by using symbolic, affectively-charged elements to contrast the Nicaraguan and Costa Rican communities. The title is a metaphor that plays with the different cultural meanings of *el barro*, mud, and *el sur*, the south. *Barro* refers to El Occidente, a poor region in northwestern Nicaragua that has been severely affected by emigration and that has traditionally worked the land through subsistence farming and also worked with *barro* to make decorative clay pots. As a mix of dirt and water, *barro* is also a biblical reference to the origins of humanity and in turn symbolizes the starting point for several of the migrant workers interviewed in the film. In contrast, *el sur* represents economic opportunities in Costa Rica, Nicaragua's southern neighbor. Nicaraguans thus travel "desde el barro al sur" in search of better opportunities.

The first scene after the opening credits intensifies the differences between the neighboring countries with a dusty and rustic shot of El Occidente. Through the dust, viewers observe an old bus, a herd of cattle, and a man on horseback, all of which communicate hard work and a difficult way of life, urging audience members to better understand the extreme conditions in which many Nicaraguans live. These conditions also contextualize the

stories of several women from El Occidente whose experiences help tie the different parts of the film together. When transported to Nicaragua, the public listens to a more rustic melody of a guitar and harmonica that nostalgically represents rural living and a simple yet difficult life. Scenes of San José, however, emphasize the plasticity and busyness of the city with a faster techno-influenced, synthesized music that plays while the camera roams the city streets focusing on tall buildings, shopping malls, street performers, and commercial billboards. One sign in particular reads, "Haga sus sueños realidad," which ironically communicates the hopes of immigrants as they travel south (*Desde*). By contrasting these images, directors Álvarez and Hernández strategically highlight the life many (im)migrants have left behind in Nicaragua and the emotional attachments and new surroundings they must continually negotiate in Costa Rica.

Much of the film focuses on the Ramírez family from El Occidente, whose members discuss the economic advantages and emotional heartbreaks of their (im)migrant experiences. Two of the daughters, Rosalba and Alma, traveled to Costa Rica illegally in search of work to help support the impoverished family. While Rosalba has returned home and is filmed in Nicaragua, Alma continues to work as a domestic employee for an upper-class family in San Rafael de Escazú, a wealthy community near San José. Rosalba enacts the impact of her crossing as she relives it for the camera with tears in her eyes: "Al recordar siento que me estoy viviendo lo que sufrí estando allá por primera vez. Me tocó sufrir mucho porque iba sola, [...], o sea pasé muchas dificultades, y [es] así como yo sé que muchas muchachas que se van sufren" (*Desde*). Rosalba is visibly shaken as she remembers her migrant experiences, and her retelling of them draws out a performance of affect for the camera through which she reenacts her experiences as an exploited worker. The audience also listens to the testimony of her mother Doña Alma, who used to make pots from *barro* and sell them to help support her family. Tough economic times, however, deeply affected their livelihood. She expresses guilt for relying on her daughters but also expresses gratitude: "Yo me pregunto cómo hará el que no tiene una persona en Costa Rica para sobrevivir" (*Desde*). Like many immigrant families, Doña Alma stayed behind to take care of the house and smaller children while her older children traveled to find work and support the family with remittances.

Spectators first observe the younger Alma Ramírez at a modern shopping mall in San José, which contrasts with the rural

and rustic conditions in which her family lives in Nicaragua. At first Alma does not show much emotion for the camera and appears to be well adapted to her new life in Costa Rica. She is twenty years old in the film but has been working for the Guzmán family for five years, cooking, cleaning, and taking care of the youngest son Manrique who has Down Syndrome. Her employers are also interviewed and they graciously express their gratitude for all that Alma does, dispelling the notion that Nicaraguans steal jobs and take advantage of Costa Ricans. Martha Clarissa Hernández commented that incorporating the Guzmán family was a strategic part of the film: "Se rompió la jerarquía de patrón y empleada porque los tres salen como personajes" (Personal interview). While this may be true, they continue to perform roles for the camera, for the Guzmán family plays the role of the gracious Costa Ricans who are appreciative and respectful of their domestic help, and Alma, who seems more stoic and quiet with her employers, enacts the role of the quiet and faithful domestic worker. What remains hidden is Alma's exploitation, the fact that she does an enormous amount of work for very little money. This segment of the documentary is a clear example of what James Scott in *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* (1990) refers to as public and private transcripts, meaning the audience is only presented with what is said in public but is not privy to what the Guzmán family thinks and feels behind the scenes.

Spectators do, however, get a glimpse of Alma's more private feelings as she shares more personal information when she is alone with the camera. She selflessly explains, for example, how her salary helps back in Nicaragua:

La verdad en Nicaragua estudiar es un lujo y un lujo que los pobres a veces no se pueden dar, y entonces en ese tiempo estábamos tan mal que yo dije bueno que aprendan a leer mis hermanitos los chiquitos. [...] Todo este tiempo les he estado pagando el colegio a ellos. Me gustaría que tengan más oportunidades. (*Desde*)

Alma speaks of her own desire to take classes and search for better opportunities in the future but her schedule only allows for free time on Sundays. *Desde el barro al sur* thus juxtaposes Alma's hopes for the future with her seemingly well-adapted nature, while shots of her doing domestic chores in the Guzmán's

beautiful home contradict her employer's expressions of gratitude. When Alma has the opportunity to watch the previously recorded video of her family in Nicaragua, it is at this moment when she enacts her homesickness, a performance of affect that represents her feelings of displacement and lack of belonging. She becomes visibly emotional and expresses her loneliness with the words, "Me hacen mucha falta" (*Desde*). Alma's different attitudes in front of the camera both alone and with the Guzmán family communicate multiple and conflicting feelings about her immigrant status. She therefore demonstrates performative strategies of survival or "disidentifications" and, consequently, the ability to cope with a situation in constant flux.

The documentary's narrative thread shifts from Alma's situation to other stories of migration to further redirect the Costa Rican gaze from one of fear to empathy. Lucila Aguilar, for example, traveled with her husband and six children from Nicaragua to Costa Rica in search of work and better opportunities. Once in the country, Lucila and her husband decided to have another child, for according to Costa Rican law undocumented women who have a baby in the country can legalize their status and obtain residency (Sandoval, Introducción xx). Pregnancy, then, may be a strategic tool for many newcomers and also a point of contention for "ticos" who view this as an abuse of the system. Hearing Lucila's story, however, humanizes the dilemma because it is clear that her life continues to be challenging. While she and her husband and their youngest child have *cédulas*, or legal documentation comparable to U.S. Social Security, her other six children are not authorized for residency in Costa Rica and must live with the fear of being deported. Her husband is the only one who can work and, as evident by the film's shots of their rustic house, providing for nine people is a challenge. On the one hand, Lucila's testimony shows the agency of a woman to create change through pregnancy, showcasing a uniquely female way to negotiate the system. But, on the other hand, it shows her heartbreak and concerns for her other children. The documentary, therefore, takes a more nuanced approach to affectively reframe a negative stereotype about (im)migrant women into a human condition with which all mothers, fathers, and siblings can identify.

Beverly Pacheco offers another example of female agency, showcasing her decision to journey south to flee an abusive husband in Nicaragua. She emigrated in 1990 to escape a situation of domestic violence, claiming "hay protección para la mujer y los niños en Costa Rica" (*Desde*). Beverly lives in La Carpio, a

neighborhood primarily inhabited by Nicaraguans on the outskirts of San José, and self-identifies herself as “negra,” for she comes from the eastern side of Nicaragua where a large Afro-Caribbean population lives. She is thus doubly marginalized for her skin color and undocumented status and, by communicating that she has been overlooked for several different jobs because of her ethnicity, she expresses disappointment and anger about racist attitudes. She speaks strongly, criticizing both governments for being corrupt, and complains about the “nicas” who get involved with gangs and the “ticos” who are racist. Beverley’s performance of affect, therefore, brings to light issues of xenophobia, racism, and violence against women as they pertain to the issue of (im)migration. Her testimony also leaves a lasting impression on audience members, for her decision to emigrate also meant leaving behind her children in Nicaragua. At the time of filming, she had not seen or spoken with them in nine years. Hernández reported that because of the emotional impact of making the documentary, Beverley clandestinely crossed into Nicaragua to look for her children and was able to travel back to Costa Rica with her daughter (Personal interview). *Desde el barro al sur* thus provided a cathartic experience for Beverley that transformed her life and reunited her with her Nicaraguan children.

The final scenes of the documentary record different reactions along the Nicaraguan-Costa Rican border from both male and female undocumented (im)migrants who were recently deported or who are waiting to cross. Overall they represent three main types of affect—joy, frustration, and disillusion—as they discuss their experiences. One man in particular is in good spirits about his pending journey and laughingly enacts his testimony. He expresses joy about working in Costa Rica and claims he would go to Vietnam or China if the pay were better: “Lo que uno necesita es espíritu de superación porque hay dos tipos de gente en la vida, hay gente pobre y pobre gente” (*Desde*). In his mind, immigrating to Costa Rica signifies taking control and not being a victim. However, another man who was recently deported tells a different story, enacting the role of the exploited (im)migrant worker. Because this man’s employer called the authorities to avoid paying for the month’s work he had done, he represents the risks and frustrations of crossing illegally. The Ramírez Centeno family from northern Nicaragua was also deported and waiting to try again the next day. After the mother explains that they have sold everything to make the difficult journey to the south, her son enacts a heartfelt description of the “nica-tica” relationship, expressing disillusion about the apparent inequalities. He states:

Parece que la ley no permite que un nica se entre mientras los ticos a Nicaragua entran cuando a ellos les parezca. Parece que no todos fuéramos centroamericanos. Todos somos centroamericanos, todos somos hispanos, todos tenemos que tener el mismo sentido de unión en el corazón. (*Desde*)

This statement is a call for cultural citizenship granted through alternative affective communities in the face of national rules and regulations that restrict individual mobility and segregate individuals who resist majoritarian scripts of belonging. It also questions the notion of Central American unity, making clear that not all its inhabitants are treated equally. The film concludes with a similar plea for working together as the following words scroll across the screen: “La migración [...] debe interpretarse no como un problema, sino, como un asunto de necesidad mutua” (*Desde*). When reading this final message, audience members can reflect upon their own feelings about the film and about the reality facing Nicaragua and Costa Rica in the twenty-first century.

To bring *Desde el barro al sur* to the masses, filmmakers Hernández and Álvarez have widely publicized and distributed the documentary in both countries. This is due in large part to distribution of the film through the *cine móvil*, or the New Latin American Cinema Movement’s mobile cinema, based on the Cuban model of disseminating films for didactic purposes. Hernández and Álvarez organized free screenings in theaters, communities, schools, universities, and cultural centers in both urban and rural areas throughout Nicaragua and Costa Rica. The film also aired on public television in Nicaragua and filled the cinemas for three weeks when it premiered in 2002, which, according to Hernández, “es una cosa extraordinaria” (Personal interview). She later commented: “Yo siento que en Nicaragua esa película puso en agenda el tema. A partir de allí, digamos, se comienza a hablar sistemáticamente del asunto” (Personal interview). *Desde el barro al sur* had a similar impact in Costa Rica. It debuted at the Centro de Cine’s 2002 Muestra de Cine y Video, which is the National Film Institute’s annual audiovisual contest, and then toured the country for about two weeks (Cortés, *Luz* 103; Hernández; Parra).

In *La pantalla rota*, Costa Rican film critic María Lourdes Cortés praises the film for its positive impact: “*Desde el barro al sur* es el tipo de trabajo que demuestra que hacer cine, [...], es

una manera de contribuir en la transformación de la sociedad en algo más justo" (452). With continued screenings and favorable reactions like these, *Desde el barro al sur* has enormous potential to connect immigrant and non-immigrant viewers by way of their affective experiences of empathy, compassion, understanding, and relatability, thereby promoting cross-cultural communities.

Thus, through the local context of Nicaraguan (im)migrants in Costa Rica, *Desde el barro al sur* offers unique viewing options for national and international audiences to promote awareness about a global trend of increasing migrations. It also represents a variety of (im)migrant experiences, those of women, men, ethnic minorities, and children, who both leave home and are left at home, a topic that translates to any society. Furthermore, the experiences and emotions expressed via the camera through personal interviews, individual storytelling, and reconnections with the past highlight different performances of affect, such as the exploited worker, the gracious visitor, the struggling survivor, and the disillusioned optimist, that reveal the reflexive and transformative process of recounting and reenacting one's feelings. Because most people can relate to wanting to feel accepted and to improving one's social and economic status, this performance of affect also fosters an understanding and acceptance of others, encouraging spectators to negotiate their own biases and feelings about immigrant tensions in Costa Rica, Nicaragua, or wherever they consider home to be. If audience members can grapple with and discuss their reactions to the film and be made aware of their own positionalities from which they view the film, be it positions of power, privilege, or prestige, then perhaps they can better understand the human complexities of migration and reach a new level of consciousness that promotes alternative communities built on affective notions of belonging.

NOTES

- ¹ I am grateful to Costa Rica's Centro de Cine and the former director Mercedes Ramirez for providing me with digital copies of the documentaries during my visit to the region in 2008.
- ² Unless otherwise indicated, all comments from Martha Clarissa Hernández come from a personal interview I conducted with the filmmaker on May 28, 2008.
- ³ The New Latin American Cinema is considered a socio-political and artistic movement that breathed new life into Latin America's film industry with a new generation of filmmakers in the 1960s who attempted to capture the particularity of the region with nationalistic appeal, new styles and discourses, and a renewed social function (Elena and Diaz López 4-7). It was primarily an alternative and anti-imperialist cinema meant to counteract Hollywood images and commercialization in order to forge a new future free of U.S. and European influences.

- ⁴ Álvarez and Hernández have been collaborating on film projects since the early 1980s when Hernández left her native country of Honduras to join the Sandinista Revolution. She then met Álvarez while working for the Nicaraguan Institute of Cinema (INCINE). In the early 1990s, the two filmmakers formed their own production company, Luna Films, and since then have produced a number of films, including *Lady Marshall* (1991), *No todos los sueños han sido soñados* (1994), *Blanco organdi* (1998), *Desde el barro al sur* (2002), and *The Black Creoles, Memories and Identities* (2011).
- ⁵ Costa Rica's "uniqueness" or "exceptionalism" has been credited to the dissolution of its army in 1949, leading to a stable and peaceful democracy, unlike its Central American neighbors with long histories of civil wars and military rule. The country is also known as the "Switzerland of Central America" because of its relatively high standard of living and implementation of social welfare programs that have provided citizens with access to education and health care. Furthermore, Costa Rica has taken great pride in protecting its natural resources, becoming a leader in environmental conservation and ecotourism.
- ⁶ One of the main differences between Nicaraguan and Costa Rican pronunciation is the reduction of the /s/ at the end of a word or before a consonant (Lipski 291). In Nicaraguan variation words like *pesca* are then pronounced *pehca*. Also, the use of the familiar pronoun *vos* is common throughout Central America, but Nicaraguans tend to use it much more freely, earning them the reputation of being "overly familiar" (292).
- ⁷ I owe this idea to Rosina Lippi-Green who writes about linguistic profiling and language-focused discrimination of different racial and ethnic groups in the United States in her study *English with an Accent*.
- ⁸ As previously mentioned, the words "nica" and "tico" are colloquial terms that identify Nicaraguans and Costa Ricans respectively. In Costa Rica "nica" is considered an insult that connotes otherness, whereas "tico" is a term of affection and endearment that derives from Costa Ricans' use of the diminutive suffix *tico* instead of *ito*.
- ⁹ While the focus of this article is Nicaraguans in Costa Rica, it should be noted that the legalization process for undocumented individuals is difficult around the globe. Debates about offering amnesty or a path to citizenship to undocumented Mexican immigrants in the United States or to illegal African persons in Spain are two examples of comparative case studies.

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