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Proxemics,¹ Homogenization, and Diversity in Mexico's Road Movies: *Por la libre* (2000), *Sin dejar huella* (2000), and *Y tu mamá también* (2001)

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Me gusta la carretera por moderna y por bonita
pero más me gusta a mí tu vereda y tu curvita.²

The Genre

A recent article published in *The Economist* about interstate highways in the United States starts with the famous quotation by Norman Bates in *Psycho*: “Oh, we have 12 vacancies: twelve cabins, twelve vacancies. They, uh, they moved away the highway” (Roads). This is a perfect example of how roads or the lack of them shape modern life. Present day Mexico has more than two hundred thousand kilometers of unpaved roads, more than one hundred thousand of paved roads, seven thousand kilometers of expressways and four thousand more kilometers of four lane roads. As of 2005 Mexico is the fourteenth largest economy in the world, having reached the trillion dollar mark, and has a per capita income over 10,000 USD. According to projections by *The Economist* by 2020 Mexico will reach the two trillion mark and will be the twelfth largest economy in the world surpassing Spain and Canada. The meaning of these numbers is that Mexico is a developing country. Between the third-world rhetoric of the *zapatistas* and the neocon jargon of *salinismo* stands the object of our study, movies that tell about metaphorical and genuine middle-of-the-road lives.

This essay is about how roads have transformed Mexico, the view Mexico has of herself, and the impact of these roads on urbanization. This is about the changes that have happened in the country and how they are represented and perceived. To accomplish this task I have chosen three road movies produced in the year 2000: *Y tu mamá también* (2001) by Alfonso

Cuarón, *Sin dejar huella* (2000) by María Novaro and *Por la libre* (2000) by Juan Carlos de Llaca. A country with roads can have road movies.

Laderman has analyzed the development of the genre in the United States and most of his investigation applies to the movies that are the object of our study. In road movies the car is a key protagonist because automobiles recontextualize the journey literature in industrial terms. The protagonism of the car in the road movie nationalizes the Industrial Revolution. In this new century (Mexican) cars are in charge of taking the people to the four corners of the country. In some of these movies like *Y tu mamá también* the car has a name: Betsabé. The reality is that without this machine the country cannot be experienced, in the same vein that the Revolution was possible because of trains. Because these movies are about driving it is very important who does it. In *Sin dejar huella* we see two marginalized women trying to regain their freedom through the agency of driving. In the other two movies, the act of driving by the four young male protagonists represent their attempt to impose their will on the other and find their own identities after the rite of passage from youth to adulthood that happens during the road movie. The relationship and the bond between the owner and the car are also relevant and subject to negotiation. Aurelia's car is the only thing her husband left behind besides her older son. Betsabé has two owners and the Mercedes of *Libre* is the object of dispute between son and father, and it represents the authority of the grandfather, the patriarch of the family. The grandsons declare themselves true heirs to the democratic grandfather, bypassing the neoliberal mediocrity of their parents. When Julio makes love to Luisa inside Betsabé, Tenoch has to stay outside and he is unhappy about it. Aurelia lets Marilú in her car because she could help with the driving. We soon learn that Marilú is a terrible driver. What becomes clear in these movies is that the technology of the automobile is liberating and worthy of pursuit. In this new era the cathartic impulses of Romanticism come sitting at the driver's seat. The third protagonist after the car and the drivers is the highway system, from the modern expressways to the unpaved rural roads. They crisscross the country and are the arteries of the nation, as defined by the Eisenhower administration with a metaphor that has become a cliché.

There are "sundry detours, motels, diners, and gas stations" (Laderman 15) or their Mexican equivalent. Scene 73 in *Y tu mamá también* is in a "lonchería de pueblo" (132), a modest restaurant. When the camera abandons the three protagonists and enters the kitchen of the modest house, we see a boy who is doing his homework, a shaggy dog, an old man sleeping in front of the television and a woman fixing the First Communion dress of a girl who is standing on a chair. This detour is not to present an exotic Mexico, but to tell the young protagonists and the spectators that they are missing the reality of their country. Aurelia and Marilú meet at the restaurant of a truck stop.

The journey is usually “aimless and fragmented” (Laderman 15) and the protagonists, humans and cars, suffer breakdowns and aggressions. The three cars in the three films end up in the shop and the four young men fight with their partners and *federales* and *narcos* are trying to kill Marilú and Aurelia. “Road movies may not possess a clear-cut beginning, middle, or end” (Laderman 17) and tend to the episodic structure. There is also a certain dose of pastoralism in road movies. We see the beaches of Oaxaca (*Y tu mamá*), Guerrero (*Libre*), and Quintana Roo (*Huella*) and the diversity of the Mexican landscape from the desert to the jungle. *Huella* takes us to a stunning cenote.³ Drugs and alcohol are also present in these movies and get all the protagonists in trouble or drive them to having wild sex as in *Y tu mamá*. Aurelia incessantly drinks *cervezas Sol* to produce milk for El Billy.

The two main subgenres of the road movie are the quest and the outlaw. Both are in our three road movies, quest in the three of them and outlaw in Novaro's. In the other two we have teenagers who go on a trip without their parents' permission. It is a light version of the outlaw. Laderman notes a “conservative subtext” (20), especially regarding race and gender. In the Mexican case we have to add class. Luisa's main function in *Y tu mamá* is to be the catalyst of the sexual relationship between Julio and Tenoch. The three stories represent the confrontation between working-class, middle and upper-class and between progressive and conservative politics. We will study below the political aspect of the movies in more detail. Robin Wood has noticed the “surreptitious gay subtext” (227–30) in road movies i.e., the repressed desire between Julio and Tenoch. The race element is extremely complex in Mexico and is linked to class, but there is a certain idealization of Mayas in *Huella*. One of the key characteristics of the genre according to Laderman is “American expansionism and imperialism” (22). In these Mexican movies we find a rediscovery of Mexico to avoid emigration to the United States and redefine nationalism. *Huella* starts with one of the protagonists, Marilú, crossing the border ironically and illegally from the United States to Mexico while the other protagonist, Aurelia, a woman from Juárez, a border person, moving⁴ south from Juárez to Cancún instead of emigrating to the United States as dictated by the stereotype. The other two movies represent *chilangos*⁵ who go out and return to the metropolis transformed after their trip of discovery to the other Mexico. The United States is absent as a utopia in these three Mexican road movies, although they are heirs to Hollywood and Churubusco⁶ movies: Indio Fernández (or John Ford) landscapes but the *indios* of the Golden Age have become *indígenas*; the “realism” of the Acapulco movies of Luis Alcoriza: *Paraíso* (1969) and *Semana Santa in Acapulco* (1981); the films of American directors who made extraordinary movies in Mexico like Orson Welles, John Huston, and Sam Peckinpah, some of them road movies like *Bring Me the Head of Alfredo García* and *The Night of the Iguana*. More recent is *The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada* by Tommy Lee Jones. *Sin dejar huella*

is strongly influenced by Ridley Scott's feminist *Thelma and Louise* (1991); *Por la libre*'s main topic is the return to the real family, which evokes Wim Wender's *Paris, Texas* (1984); the adventures of two young men of different social class with a gay subtext is related to *My Own Private Idaho* (1992) by Gus Van Sant.

At a technical level, features that belong to the road movie genre are also present: the rearview mirror shot, especially when the protagonists are being chased, like the red car in *Huella*. Eye-level traveling shots give the point of view of the driver, and at times even the point of view of the car. Traveling shots parallel to the car are also common to frame the three protagonists, the couple, and the vehicle. High-angle shots and long panning shots show the immensity of the landscape or how small the protagonists are when compared to nature, as in the case of the Sonora desert. Campfire scenes and low-key light are typical of the genre to show the moment in which the protagonists are outside of their society because they have (momentarily) been expelled from it, for instance Aurelia breastfeeding Billy in the middle of nowhere and Marilú eating Aurelia's potato chips for dinner.

Laderman observes how the precedent of the road movie is the Western, especially the John Ford classics: *Stagecoach* (1939), *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon* (1949), and *The Searchers* (1956), in which "the journey is a form of social criticism, revelation, and redemption" (23). These three characteristics are present in the three movies that are the object of our study.

A New Era

The development of roads has two consequences in the process of urbanization: homogenization and diversity. This phenomenon had an antecedent during the expansion of railroads during the Porfiriato and the protagonism that trains had throughout the Revolution. At the beginning of the twentieth century the nation-state Mexico became an imagined community as defined by Benedict Anderson. The victors of the Revolution "invented," as defined by Habermas, their own nationalism, the *nacionalismo revolucionario*. This peculiar nationalism was a one-party regime, the PRI, a party that articulated the representation of the different social actors of the nation and processed the demands of these actors, and determined who got what.

After 1968 the party tried to resolve the leftist demands of students, unions, farmers, migrants, and *guerrilleros* with fiscal expansion. Instead of reforming the country and its institutions, the role of the state grew, more goods were distributed to the people and the state invested heavily in industrialization. The governments of Luis Echeverría (1970–76) and José

López Portillo (1976–82) borrowed billions of dollars to pay for new expenses that tried to contain the loss of legitimacy of the regime. This model entered in deep crisis during the administration of Miguel de la Madrid (1982–88), who inherited a mounting debt, high inflation, a nationalized bank industry, and the loss of 2% of the GDP during the 1985 earthquake. This model died in 1997 during the presidency of Ernesto Zedillo (1994–2000) when the PRI lost control of Congress for the first time and the debate about Fobaproa⁷ also tested for the first time the new three party regime of modern Mexico. The defeat of the PRI in the last two presidential elections represents the definitive end of *nacionalismo revolucionario*. This is why the key date for our research is 2000, not because of an end of millennium fatalism but rather because 2000 is the beginning of a new century with a non-PRI president and with an administration that, like Zedillo's, does not control Congress. The three movies in this work react to the same crisis: the end of an era. I am not using the term crisis in a negative way but as:

A vitally important or decisive stage in the progress of anything; a turning-point; also, a state of affairs in which a decisive change for better or worse is imminent; now applied *esp.* to times of difficulty, insecurity, and suspense in politics or commerce. (*Oxford English Dictionary*)

A first viewing (reading) of the movies confirms some trends. In this Mexico women are more relevant. They are the protagonists of one of the movies (Novaro's), have a key role in the second (Cuarón's), and project a more traditional role in the third (Llaca's). This Mexico is multilingual. Spanish has to share its protagonism with Mayan and Catalán and Anglicisms that pepper speeches in the films. Mexico City is not the only center: the metropolis is absent in one of the movies and is secondary to Acapulco in the other. New cities share the protagonism: Ciudad Juárez, Torreón, Acapulco, and Cancún. Rural areas reappear in Mexican cinema, but without the essentialism of the *nacionalismo revolucionario* of the movies of the Golden Age. These rural areas have convenience stores, guerrillas, *narcos*, are on the verge of being converted into resorts for tourists, and the oil exploitations of Pemex are getting ready to be privatized. In the new Mexico globalization is not a promise but a reality. The *mestizo* model of the PRI period gives way to an integral but diverse vision of Mexico: *güeros*, *mestizos*, some foreigners, and *indígenas* are all Mexican. Social classes are represented using the parameters of realism, although there are remnants of the idealization of the poor and the *indígenas*. If the *nacionalismo revolucionario* was anti-Spain, these new movies present a critical but positive attitude towards Spain. Spain brings bilingualism in Novaro's and Llaca's film, the democracy of the II Republic in Llaca's, and is the object

of desire in Cuarón's. A reductionist approach to Mexico always stresses the impact of NAFTA and the Americanization of Mexican society, but it forgets that Mexico since 2000 has had a treaty (TLCMUE) with the European Union and the presence of European products give a distinct cosmopolitanism to Mexican society. This is also present in the movies that are the object of this study, although NAFTA is the dominant force in economic and cultural terms and the United States is one of the main conflicting blueprints that converge to map out Mexico. European culture has always been used in Mexico to balance the influence of the United States.⁸

I am going to take these three trips; I invite the reader to come along and share the driving as the exploration will be more important than the arrival.

Y tu mamá también

The reading of the script makes clear something that was already obvious in the movie. You are where you live. At the beginning of the published version of the script we find a map of Mexico City with key spots marked. In the *Delegación*⁹ Álvaro Obregón we come across Tenoch's house in San Jerónimo and the exclusive Club Deportivo. To the south in the *Delegación* Tlalpan we find the *lienzo charro* (Mexican rodeo) where the wedding happens. To the north of Tlalpan and east of Álvaro Obregón we have Coyoacán. Here we visit the Hipermercado Gigante and Saba's apartment. Julio and his girlfriend Cecilia live in the Benito Juárez *Delegación*, but their geographical proximity stresses even more the class difference between them. Julio lives in an apartment at the Multifamiliar Juárez¹⁰ and Cecilia at a house in the Colonia del Valle. Downtown in the Cuauhtémoc *Delegación* we find the house of Tenoch's girlfriend at the yuppyish Colonia Condesa, the neighborhood of restaurants, open cafes, and artists. Luisa's apartment is in the Colonia Roma.¹¹ It is difficult to know where Condesa ends and Roma begins, because the border with Condesa shares the glamour, but Luisa lives in a more modest part of the *Colonia*. The political demonstration in which Julio negotiates with his sister the use of Betsabé is in Reforma and Bucarelli. At this same place we find the cafeteria Wings in which Julio and Tenoch meet for the last time at the end of the movie. The historical and financial centers are presented as neutral and symbolic sites good for negotiation, while the residential *Colonias* mark the social class of the character. Cuauhtémoc, Condesa, and Roma were developed during the Porfiriato perpendicularly to Reforma.¹² They represented the end of the orthogonality of the Mexica that had been respected during Colonial times. During Mexica times urban spaces were open and dominated by the pyramids and structured by the roads (calzadas); colonial streets were a compromise, they broke the panoramic vision of the horizon but respected

the linear structure of the roads (Chanfón Olmos 2.1: 185; 2.3: 422). The construction of these new colonias was also the end of the cohabitation of social classes and the entrance into modernity and the separation of social classes in different neighborhoods.

This mapping of the characters comes from Realism. This map of Mexico City follows the model of Galdós and other realists in which characters are closely linked to their dwellings and are very meticulous indicating where exactly the characters live: neighborhood, street, house or apartment and characteristics of the surroundings. The message from the Cuarón brothers is that this is crucial to understand the characters. There is one more detail on the map; in the *Delegación* Victoriano Carranza we have the viaduct Miguel Alemán where a construction worker dies in a car accident while trying to cross the expressway. He did not want to walk the very long distance to the next pedestrian bridge, and is killed by underdeveloped urbanism.

This map of the city puts the upper class in Obregón: Tenoch's house and the Country Club. The supermarket and Sabas's department are in Coyoacán as an upper-middle-class neighborhood. Juárez is more disputed with working-middle-class zones like the Multifamiliar Juárez where Julio lives and Cecilia's upper-middle-class house at the trendy Colonia del Valle. As we near the historical center we also find more hybrid *delegaciones* like Cuauhtémoc with Ana's yuppyish Colonia Condesa, Luisa's petit bourgeoisie apartment at the Colonia Roma and Reforma as a symbolic arena for political and labor demonstrations, and the café where the pact between social classes (and the homoerotic opening) concludes for good. This data is relevant because it shows the producer's idea of making a social comment on the whole of society from a progressive middle-class point of view. This is why the map of the city includes the immigrant who gets killed on the viaduct.

At Ana's house in the Colonia Condesa we are only allowed into her bedroom. It is small and has a big French poster of the film *Harold and Maude* (Ana's mother is French). The room has a window to an interior patio. It is full of books and has a stereo. It is more intellectual than Cecilia's, an upper-middle-class house with a large living room with a huge window overlooking a garden, a chimney, and an adjacent dining room. Her room is bigger than Ana's. It does not have books, but it has a computer, a stereo, telephone, and well-stacked folders. She may be a good student, but she lacks intellectual curiosity. The room has a large window out on to the street. The fact that Cecilia and Ana, without their parent's permission (Cecilia) or with it (Ana), let their boyfriends make love to them in their rooms is associated with the space that they inhabit. They have appropriated these rooms and have made them their own. This is where they rest, read, listen to music, chat, talk, study, and have sex. These are modern female teenagers who live in a modern country.

Tenoch's house is shown twice because it is so impressive that it cannot be revealed in its entirety in just one scene. It is a Colonial style with ashlar masonry in the exterior and the interior. The house has a tower that overlooks a large garden. There are Colonial ornaments inside and out. There is pre-Hispanic art, either authentic or very high-quality reproductions. On the walls we admire a wonderful *cuzqueño*¹³ angel. The house has an ample kitchen in white with black and white chess tiles. The formal dining room seats eight. It has carved Colonial furniture and *neo-Mudéjar* ceiling.¹⁴ It follows the Spanish aristocratic style of the Renaissance in imitating the Roman house. It has an interior patio with natural light, a fountain, an arcade, and an atrium. We do not see Tenoch's bedroom because he is always at the "entertainment center" (in English in the original), the place where he watches TV, eats, and talks to his friends. Cuarón shows us the house with the camera following Leodegaria—Leo—the servant, from the kitchen to the entertainment center. She has to cross the atrium, climb the long stairs, and walk to the sofa where Tenoch is "rascándose las pelotas" (104), scratching his balls, literally and metaphorically. Leo is bringing a *platillo volador* to Tenoch, his favorite sandwich (made of chopped ham, cheddar cheese, pickled chiles, and Bimbo bread toasted in a pan). The phone is ringing, but Tenoch does not answer it because he expects Leo to do it for him. She performs these tasks with pride and love. The person calling is Luisa, who is asking if the invitation to go to Puerto Escondido beach is still on. Because the scene cuts between the two protagonists the camera takes advantage of this situation to contrast Luisa's apartment with Tenoch's house. After this conversation is over, Tenoch calls Julio who is at home in his underwear, and the camera technique is the same, comparing both dwellings.

Luisa and her husband, Jano, Tenoch's cousin, have just arrived from Spain. He is looking for a job in the federal administration and at the present time he is working at the university on a modest scholarship. Luisa's bedroom is very different than those of the girlfriends. Instead of making love to Jano, Luisa receives a call from him. He is drunk, and he tells her that he has been with another woman and Luisa cries and hangs up on him. The walls are naked with just a couple of small pictures. From the window we can see the people in another apartment. The furniture in the rest of the apartment is modest, a futon, hundreds of books piled on the floor, a Sanyo boom box, a cheap plain table, a framed poster leaning on the wall waiting to be hung, a halogen lamp, and unframed pictures on the wall. The camera follows Luisa outside through the window to show us a wide avenue, with trees and kids playing soccer on the sidewalk. Luisa has not had time to nest and make the apartment her own.

Julio is seen wearing cheap, white briefs. We understand that he is at ease in his own habitat. He is also scratching his balls, with the only difference that he is standing because he needs to pee; he is hungry after

spending the night watching videos. Julio's apartment has a kitchen with a washing machine and a gas heater, a crowded dining room with a computer, a mass-produced, ordinary and old table and chairs, a sewing machine on the table, many pictures on the wall, and a big window with clothes hanging outside. Mexico City's smog can be seen through the window.

The rest of the city is formed by the *lienzo charro* (the bullring for the Mexican rodeo, the jaripeo), the country club, the hypermarket,¹⁵ the viaduct, the cafeteria, and the political march. The upper class can afford to have a nationalist place and an international one exclusive for them. But the rest of the citizens have to share homogenizing spaces. The commonplace is to talk about an Americanization of the Mexican society, but the hypermarket is a French innovation and the American cafeteria was adopted soon by other countries that adapted them to their own idiosyncrasies. There is no imperialism in the adoption of these forms of business, just the fact that they are convenient and customers prefer them to traditional forms. Hygiene, price, and class are important factors in the embracing of these types of commerce. The British anthropologist Daniel Miller discovered in his field studies in London that "the elderly, poor, disabled, and ethnic minorities" (99) enjoy modern shopping areas as public spaces where they are welcome and find high-quality products at good prices instead of the "disheveled food" of the old stores. This explains the abyss separating the progressive discourse of the left in the United States regarding Wal-Mart and the experience of the real people who shop there on a regular basis and have a gratifying experience.¹⁶

Once the movie clearly establishes the social status of the three protagonists, social warfare can start during the excursion. They take the "Oaxaca libre," the freeway instead of the toll road, and drive through the high plains on their way to Roca Blanca beach, close to Puerto Escondido, Oaxaca (Cuarón 233). The car will visit a shop at Teposcolula, Oaxaca (Cuarón 157).

Acevedo-Muñoz has done a fine job studying sex and class in this movie. Following the history of Mexican cinema and history, he establishes how the movie works: "in Mexican cinema the woman's body (through motherhood or prostitution/sex and violence) constitutes the site where 'the nation' is articulated" (40). Another important point is the function of the narrator, which is to "poke holes into any assumption of a 'straight' or hegemonic national history" (41). With these premises the film can address "the 'classless' fantasy of the Mexican Revolution" (43).

Sin dejar huella

María Novaro, the director of this extraordinary film, makes abundantly clear from the very first scene that this movie is going to tell a story different from conventional wisdom. The opening sees Marilú, a professional woman in her thirties, crossing illegally and ironically the border between the United States and Mexico. Instead of entering criminally into the neighbor of the North, she is returning to Mexico. Two signs reading “Arizona desert, USA” and “Sonora desert, Mexico” reaffirm the irony of the scene. There is a fence with barbed-wire on top and a convenient hole through which Marilú may pass. The second stereotype that is demystified is that the person entering Mexico is coming to a lawless country. Marilú has barely had time to start walking when a car with the federal agent Mendizábal and his lawyer “Chaparro” (Shorty) reach her. The third shock for the spectator is that Marilú is a Mexican with a Spanish accent. The fact that she has three passports, uses five different names, and speaks English and Mayan make it very difficult to stereotype the character.

The second protagonist of the movie is Aurelia, a young *maquiladora*¹⁷ worker in Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, who is still nursing her second son, El Billy. In a few days she will have to return to work because her maternity permit will expire. Her boyfriend is Saúl, a drug pusher, who uses Aurelia’s house to hide cocaine.

Aurelia is at a crossroads in her life. She is scared because she knows young workers from the maquila have been murdered, and she does not want to be one more name in the macabre statistics: more than four hundred women and girls have been murdered in Juárez since 1993.¹⁸ Aurelia was abandoned by her husband and is now linked sentimentally to this very young trafficker who is not El Billy’s father. Her situation is precarious, and she feels vulnerable. She decides to sell Saúl’s cocaine, take her old van and ride to Cancún, Quintana Roo, and start a new life with her two sons.

We first met Marilú at the border, and in a parallel scene we see Aurelia breastfeeding her son by the Río Bravo while a wetback in underwear is crossing it and a *corrido* in off is telling a story about illegal immigration. We see a panoramic view of the city, and two signs indicate that the foreground is Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, and the background is El Paso, Texas. The border is somewhere, invisible, lost in the maze of buildings. Following the structure of the road movie the two women will meet by chance at a truck stop at Tulancingo (Hidalgo).

The first stop in our research is the Ciudad Juárez shown in the movie. Besides the panoramic view we are only invited to one house in a working class *Colonia*. Aurelia’s is a one story house made of bricks and concrete and painted in blue. In front of the main door there is room for one car protected by a roof. The fence is unfinished and does not offer the house much protection because it is open on one side. The house has two bedrooms. El Billy’s bedroom has a crib, two posters of Los Tigres del Norte, family pictures and two lithographs of blonde kids. Juan’s bedroom

(Juan is the older son), has a TV, a mattress on the floor, and more posters: an alien, the Chicago Bulls, and Japanese cartoons. In the kitchen we find a small table for four and an old refrigerator. The living room is decorated with figurines of dubious taste: two swans, five elephants, a teapot, an ashtray, and a box of Legos. These decorations are important because the ceramics and the posters show the degree of acculturation of the Mexican working class. The figurines belong to an international taste from nowhere and are poor imitations of upper-class bibelots of the Victorian period (the Porfiriato). The posters are the typical juxtaposition of diverse cultural items of late capitalism without any hierarchy: articles from the United States like the drawings of Anglo children, an NBA team and a neon alien from Roswell, New Mexico; Japanese anime; and the most famous icon of Northern Mexico, Los Tigres del Norte, the group that has sublimated the drug trafficking culture and has made of the *narcocorrido* an international phenomenon. The street where they live is a long unpaved, stretch of one-story houses made of concrete with graffiti and just one small and dusty tree.

Aurelia leaves her son Juan in Torreón, Coahuila, with her sister Lolis, who is an elementary school teacher. The decoration of Lolis's house is similar to Aurelia's but with better taste and more items, including a life-size oriental statue. The chalet-style house is beautiful with a fine-looking fence. It is painted white, the plants are well groomed, and the entrance to the house is tiled. The street is paved, and the trees are full grown. The message is clear and loud, a college degree leads to a good life and the lack of education to the mess that is Aurelia's life. She will later tell Marilú that she never finished *la prepa*, secondary school.

Juan will fly later to Cancún to meet his mother and brother. At his aunt's he has a map of Mexico and traces his mother and brother's trip: Torreón, San Luis Potosí, Veracruz, Tabasco, Campeche, Yucatán, and Quintana Roo. This little, smart kid can find his way on a map, but "Tiroloco," an alcoholic federal cop, spills his drink on his map and cannot find his way around.¹⁹

Marilú's final destination is Acanceh, Yucatán, where her boyfriend Heraclio Chuc lives. This village is 30 kilometers from Mérida. The name of its *zócalo*, the main plaza, is "The Square of Cultures," it includes pre-Hispanic, colonial, and modern constructions. While we follow Heraclio who is going to take a tricycle taxi, the spectators are given a tour of the plaza²⁰: The Temple of Nuestra Señora de la Natividad, built in the sixteenth century, a superb example of the Franciscan style. The archeological zone of Acanceh is composed of two buildings: The Pyramid with three terraces and the Palace of the Stuccos. This building has a frieze in red. The cornice is decorated with astronomical symbols and zoomorphic figures, mammals and birds in mayan blue. The Acanceh architecture belongs to the initial classical period (200–600 AC.) in very big blocks.²¹ Novaro continues constructing Mexico's imagined community, providing pieces of the puzzle. In Ciudad

Juárez we saw the modern, urban city built in *Colonias* to separate the social classes and constrained by the border. History in the North is made of concrete, the border, maquiladoras, and narcos, while Mérida represents Mesoamerica, the colony and the independence of Mexico. Acanceh is as beautiful as Juárez is ugly. In Acanceh we have the Mesoamerican perspective, the open space that leads to the church and the pyramid and the presence of all classes and ethnicities in the communal area of the plaza, while in Juárez the inhabitants of different social classes do not share the same space. Middle or upper-class people will never visit Aurelia's *Colonia*. Novaro is not making a touristy movie about exotic Mexico. She is juxtaposing places and presenting the diversity of the country, representing it without the forced homogenization of the revolutionary nationalism of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI). This is what anthropologists call vernacularization.²²

Mexico City is no longer the center of the country: new technologies, new roads, new bridges link the country without the need for a center to hold the nation. As important as the presence of Mexico City in the other two movies is its absence in this one. When Marilú leaves the border town she makes the federal police believe that she is taking the bus to Mexico City, and Aurelia's first intention is to go from Juárez to Cancún via Mexico City. They do not take that route, but instead travel together following the coast. They bypass Mexico City because they do not need it.

This movie has a fetish for bridges. We do not see any of the bridges of the Rio Bravo that link the United States and Mexico, but we see extraordinary bridges in Veracruz and Yucatán that link the different Mexicos and show off the wealth of the first-world parts of this developing country.

Aurelia is chased by narcos and Marilú by the federal police. The women retreat to the former Hacienda Tabi in Yucatán to gather strength and better understand their situation. They realize that they are fighting the same enemy. The two main enemies of ordinary Mexican people are narcos and their staggering violence, and a corrupt police force that worsens the narco problem instead of solving it. The hacienda, managed by indigenous people of the region, is a haven for the women where they can defend themselves when they are attacked by the police. They put their car behind a cenote to make the car that is chasing them stop at a safe distance and be able to negotiate their situation. The federales from the North do not know what a cenote is and they fall inside it and kill themselves. When the federales from the North are out of their habitat, they do not know how to read the cultural parameters of other parts of Mexico. Because of this vulnerability they will die. The hacienda that had been the backbone of Mexico's economy since the seventeenth century is at this time undergoing a process of reconversion as a tourist attraction for the travelers (national and foreign) who are looking for a more "authentic" Mexico. The irony is that

everything is authentic: the cocaine, the convenience store, the art reproductions, the highways, and the dirt roads, along with the controls of the army looking for weapons. The hacienda, ruled now by its legitimate owners, is a place that can provide peace and justice for the two women.

The meeting point where all the survivors gather is Ticul, Yucatán, and it is here where they will solve all the conflicts of the plot. The two policemen, Chaparro and Mendizábal, decide to meet at the Hidalgo Plaza. Following the tradition of the Porfiriato²³ of having thousands of monuments of the heroes of the Independence and the Reforma,²⁴ Ticul has a Plaza Hidalgo. The problem is that there are two plazas with monuments and neither one is Hidalgo. The little kid who is shining Mendizábal's norteño boots thinks that it is very funny that the guy in the statue is not el cura Hidalgo. We do not see the whole statue, the askew fragment that is shown seems to be Juárez. At last they meet at a Plaza Hidalgo where instead of Hidalgo we find a naïf, big head of Felipe Carrillo who was a famous Governor of Yucatán (1922–24) assassinated for being a land reformer. The joke makes fun of the homogenization of the liberal state. In Ticul, narcos and federales are not in their natural habitat, and they feel lost. In one wonderful scene Mendizábal stomps into a room and harasses an old indigenous lady who starts complaining in Mayan. He turns around and tells Chaparro: "A mí ningún pinche indio me va a ver la cara de pendejo" (No fucking Indian will me look stupid!). This is the house where Heraclio Chuc used to have his studio. Instead of the perfect and beautiful reproductions that Heraclio makes and that are sold to the museums as authentic, he has left behind the same ugly bibelots that we already found at Aurelia's and Loli's. It is interesting that for an outstanding artist like Heraclio to get good money for his art he has to sell it as old—i.e., "authentic"—because new it has no value since the work and art of the "Indian" has no value. Let us notice that this is a movie about commerce in late capitalism: drugs and bootleg Mayan art and the role of the state to impede the sale of these commodities. It is Mexico's bad luck that there is a high demand for these products in the United States, although they are illegal. As an alternative, the legal commodity that pleases the authorities of both countries is tourism.

All the postmodern parties—corrupt federal police, narcos, the international dealer of illegal art, and the maquiladora worker—meet at the beautiful premodern hotel of Ticul. When the women enter the city the car passes by a stunning Franciscan church and the modern statue of a Maya warrior, thereby asserting once more a historical Mexico as opposed to the contemporary Mexico of the border with its narcos and maquilas. The hotel does not accept credit cards in spite of a sign that says the opposite. Registration is done in a very old fashioned notebook with cursive handwriting, there are no computers, and the calendar on the wall is outdated. Most of the problems will be solved in this nostalgic, timeless place. The building is Colonial with a main patio in the center fulfilling the

functions of a cloister. It may be the cloister of a religious building disentailed during the Reforma.²⁵ It is here that Saúl, the young narco, kills Mendizábal by chance. He flees with the body in Aurelia's car and she does not see Saúl or the car again. She stays in the hotel room cleaning the spilt blood with Billy's diapers. At this moment Aurelia does not know that Marilú has left with the money. *Narcos* and *federales* stop chasing the women and now they can meet in Cancún. Without money, Aurelia's life is not much better than in Juárez. She works in a postmodern establishment, Tequila Sunrise Mayan Party, neo-Mesoamerican, in which they sell exotic drinks with "Mexican" names like Aztec fantasy and Chac-Mool. The apartment buildings for the working class are as desolate as the house Aurelia had in Juárez.

Marilú shows up with the money at the airport when Aurelia goes to pick up Juan and the two women decide to start a new life, buying a modest hotel by the beach. They launder the money and start a legal, postmodern, global business, developing one more beach for the ecotourists of the future. Let us not forget that the isolated beach of *Y tu mamá también* is developed as soon as the friends return to Mexico City. In *Por la libre* we see an Acapulco that is already urbanized, without a single square inch of beach left to erect a new hotel or any other tourist attraction. This is the ironic happy ending of the story.

There are three epilogues during the credits. In the first one we see Chaparro who has been elected governor of Chihuahua, with Saúl as one of his *guaruras* (bodyguards). In the second epilogue we see Heraclio as mayor or leader of the community with a tricolor band in his chest. The third part of the ending is that Pémex has been at last purchased by Exxon and Shell. The four happy endings mean that they all have entered legality and the global economy and the bad cops and narcos are dead or have been recycled to the new world order. The market economy and democracy have no alternatives.

Por la libre

This movie is a relevant cultural text, although it lacks the complexity of the previous films. In the opening Rocco Carnicero and his friend Roña stroll the streets of San Angel in Mexico City with its cobblestones, beautiful houses with Spanish windows, chalets, lavish vegetation in the parks and gardens, blonde girls, a cute boy with a headless nanny²⁶ and expensive cars. The Carnicero family is gathered together to celebrate the birthday of the patriarch. Dr. Rodrigo Carnicero is a member of the Spanish exile community who speaks Spanish with his family and Catalán with Felipe, his best friend in the exile community. Carnicero's extraordinary house is neo-Colonial. In the entrance you have direct access to the patio. There are plants

everywhere, including the walls. There is a niche with a religious figure. When the uniformed maid sets the table for the celebration, it sits eleven.

Carnicero's office is in the attic and is full of books, pictures, paintings, and memorabilia. He owns the whole collection of Austral,²⁷ which in its time was the epitome of high culture in the Hispanic world. The living room is presided over by a chimney in ashlar masonry as seen in Tenoch's house and with an impressive castellano dark wood ceiling. They all meet to eat paella, which in Spanish movies is a nationalist symbol used to present a conflict or solve it.²⁸

Por la libre is a tale of two cities, Mexico City and Acapulco, Guerrero. Carnicero has not told his sons, but he is moving to Acapulco. Mexico City is represented by his two sons, Rodrigo Jr. and Luis, who are egotistical and value only money and status. The old Carnicero does not have any faith in them but loves deeply his grandsons and thinks they can represent a future different from that of his direct heirs, an upper class lacking any solidarity and sense of community. The artistic analysis of the movie coincides with that of the economic experts who claim that Mexico needs an extensive tax reform to become a first world country (Survey 10).

During lunch Carnicero has a heated discussion with his sons and dies from a heart attack, while the paella falls on the floor. When the patriarch's will is read they learn his last wish was to be cremated, his ashes dispersed in the bay of Acapulco with no religious service. His sons are only interested in taking possession of the booty (Rocco's words): sell the house in San Angel and get hold of the bank accounts. When the grandson Rocco realizes his father and uncle are not going to fulfill the last will of his grandfather, he steals the grandfather's Mercedes to drive the ashes to Acapulco. Like Betsabé or Aurelia's old van, this car has a strong personality. It is a character of the movie. They all perceive the spirit of the grandfather in it. When Rodrigo realizes his grandfather deceived him he attacks the car as if it were the old man. The deception was that Carnicero had a *casa chica* secretly kept in Acapulco with a mestizo woman Perla, owner of a small hotel by the beach, and they had a daughter, María. The main message of the movie is that the second family is more authentic than the legitimate one. The conflict is presented in racial terms, the criollo family, the all-Spaniard sons born and raised in Mexico, are egotistical, and represent crony capitalism. On the contrary, Perla is a mestizo woman of indigenous and Spanish origin, and has a very nice hotel, the clients look happy, the food is excellent because she uses Spanish ingredients in her Mexican dishes, and she treats her employee with dignity and care.

The grandson Rodrigo inherited the car and is now the legitimate owner. The two cousins start the road trip reluctantly because they cannot stand each other. Rocco is cool, a virgin, wants to be a writer, smokes marijuana, and has a hippyish attitude towards life. His cousin Rodrigo is preppy, despises Rocco's pot smoking and is yuppyish. He has a beautiful blond

girlfriend, Irina, and they cannot stop making out. The only things the two young men have in common are their last name, their love for the grandfather and the veneration they had for him.

The second part of the movie is the autopista de Acapulco, the toll road between the two cities. The title of the movie *Por la libre* is ironic because the two cousins do not take the free road, but rather the paying one. Ricardo, who is driving, makes the decision in spite of Rocco's objection. As is typical of the road movie, agency is given to the driver. The highway is presented in its magnificence and is a monument to Mexico's capitalism. There is a moment in which the two cousins stop to pee and the camera pans them until they are framed against a viaduct. It continues the fetish for bridges and extraordinary architecture and engineering of Novaro's movie. Helicopter shots show the beauty of the road crossing the sierra and at the end the camera leaves the road to show behind the last curve of the hill and the splendid skyline of the bay of Acapulco.

The payment of the toll is a metaphor for the emotional cost for the two cousins during their trip. In spite of Rocco's wishes, in modern Mexico there are no free roads. The old one is inefficient and slow like the revolutionary nationalism the country is leaving behind. In *María de mi corazón* (1979) by Jaime Humberto Hermosillo the two protagonists split, Héctor takes the tollroad and María the freeway, María has an accident and is sent to an asylum.

In order to reinvent itself Mexico has to return to the origin, which in Llada's movie is once again Spain. We already had Luisa, the object of desire and the female body in which to present the social conflict and the class warfare between Tenoch and Julio, and we also had Marilú, the trilingual professional who could help mestizo Mexico to communicate with its indigenous compatriots and with the Americans of the United States.

Carnicero represents the old ideal of democracy that was destroyed by fascism in Spain and the paternalistic totalitarianism of the PRI in Mexico. Carnicero is also bilingual and a professional. Bilingualism means biculturalism and the possibility to vertebrate²⁹ cultures. Carnicero's marriage to a Spaniard produced two *criollo* sons that behaved exactly like those of Colonial times. But Carnicero's illegitimate union with the mestiza Perla produced the beautiful María and Carnicero's true heir. Once in Acapulco the two cousins will meet the other half of the family and realize the authenticity of this family compared to the egotism of their fathers.

The first view of Acapulco was the helicopter shot of the skyline. It is a propaganda image that any Mexican has seen many times on television. After that we see the two cousins walking the beach and strolling the paseo marítimo, the promenade with its convenience stores, restaurants, and hotels. It looks like Waikiki or Marbella, and is in an international style that tourists recognize all over the world. The cousins decide to take the grandfather to a disco to spend his last night before they scatter the ashes. The disco also

belongs to an international style. It could be argued that this is more Mexican than the establishment where Aurelia works in Cancún in which they sell “Mexican” drinks in a neo-Mayan decor. This place does not try to sell what it is not. It is just a cool place, with good music and facilities and young people who can afford it go there to have a good time. Perla’s hotel matches the same ideal of Marilú and Aurelia. Tourism is perceived in the three movies as an integral part of the Mexican economy and way of life. In *Y tu mamá* the voice in off always states the truth of the reality that the protagonists cannot see. The voice gives information about the new development that is going to happen on the beach, which the friends visit. There is no irony, only a statement of fact: a reality that the country cannot escape and should not escape is the development of its resources. These movies cannot joke about an industry that raises the standard of life of thousands of Mexican citizens and produces almost two million direct jobs (Rangel). This is why tourism is an integral part of the happy endings of the three movies.

The other ending is incest. Rocco and his aunt María make love and fall in love. The criollo grandson has to connect to the mestizo daughter, not the imposed mestizo ideal of revolutionary nationalism that denied the ethnic and cultural diversity of the country, but the true mestizo condition that is to respect all ethnicities and cultures, including that of tourism. The movie also approves of the relationship between Ricardo and the blonde Irina. What is important is not the color of their skin, hair, or eyes, but how they relate to the other Mexicans.

Conclusions

1. These movies represent the reality of Modern Mexico in which social classes live in separated dwellings. The only exception is the open space of the Mesoamerican plaza where indigenous and poorer people have resisted the separation.
2. Roads vertebrate the nation and celebrate its diversity.
3. There is no irony regarding tourism. Tourism is such an important industry that Mexican filmic texts see it as an integral part of the nation and its future.
4. Spain is the object of desire and part of the solution.
5. Mexico City is still the center of the nation, but other cities, especially those by the border or on the coast, challenge the supremacy of the Federal District.
6. Mexico is a developing country and is continuously negotiating the excesses of modernity. Democracy and capitalism have no alternatives.

Notes

1. “Proxemics is the study of people’s use of space as an aspect of culture” (Low and Lawrence-Zúñiga 4).
2. These lines come from the soundtrack of *Sin dejar huella*. The credits explain that it is a “son” from the beginning of the twentieth century; this new version is performed by the Grupo Chocumbé. A son is a slow Cuban dance and song. It can be translated as “I like the highway—it is modern and nice. But even more, I like your path and its curves” (my translation).
3. “A natural underground reservoir of water, such as occurs in the limestone of Yucatan” (*Oxford English Dictionary*).
4. Between 1995 and 2000 four million people moved inside Mexico (Urrutia).
5. Chilango is the person from Mexico City as seen from other regions of Mexico. It denotes parochialism but present day chilangos use the term with pride.
6. According to Wikipedia, the Estudios Churubusco are located in the Churubusco neighborhood of Mexico City. They started in 1945 by RKO and Emilio Azcárraga, the owner of Televisa. The most important Mexican movies have been filmed there.
7. Fobaproa was the acronym in Spanish of the Mexican Bank Deposit Protection Fund. Since 1975, it started redeeming nonperforming loans at 75% of its value. By 1998 it already had \$65 billion in liabilities (Kessler 123–140). For a cultural analysis see Monsiváis.
8. The historical data is a brief summary of ideas contained in Kessler and Smith.
9. Mexican cities are divided administratively in *Delegaciones*. *Delegaciones* are subdivided in *Colonias*.
10. The Multifamiliar Juárez was designed by Mario Pani, who had done the Multifamiliar Alemán following the rationalist functionalism of the postwar period. The tallest buildings of the Multifamiliar Juárez were destroyed during the 1985 earthquake (Gutiérrez 586).
11. The Chanfón Olmos team explains that during the Porfiriato running water was taken to lands in the Southwest of the city to be developed by people of high income. These lots became later the *Colonias* Roma and Condesa (Chanfón Olmos 3.2 125). The land in the West and Southwest was better because it was at a higher altitude and less prone to floods and had better trade winds according to the standards of the Victorian period that associated aeration and hygiene. These *Colonias* ended the orthogonal orientation of Mesoamerica and respected by the colony and were parallel (or perpendicular) to the Paseo de la Reforma. They followed the model of ‘villas campestres,’ modern chalets, with gardens between the houses and made the locals affirm that Mexico City was one of the healthiest and most beautiful cities of the Americas (135). The Porfiriato created the city of the rich and the city of the poor (186). The houses of Juárez, Condesa, Cuauhtémoc and Roma had two or three levels, lots that went from 400 to 2500 square meters. They did not have an interior patio because most of the rooms had windows to the outside. The gardens surrounding the house gave them four facades. Everything in the house is covered and the open parts are outside. They have been labeled villas and chalets and follow European models from France, Switzerland, and England (371).
12. The Paseo de la Reforma is the magnificent avenue that links the Chapultepec Park to the Zócalo. It was built during Emperor Maximilian’s kingdom. Porfirio Díaz made it the model for modern nationalism erecting monuments to the fathers of the nation. The most important is the monument to Independence, popularly known as

- El Ángel. Nowadays it is the center of capitalism in Mexico City and the most popular place for political demonstrations. Traffic jams are endemic in the Paseo de la Reforma.
13. At the end of the seventeenth century local artists of the Cuzco area in Perú became independent from the Spanish guild of painters and started painting *mestizo* religious images. *Cuzqueño* art is one of the epitomes of colonial art.
 14. The Chanfón Olmos team explains that the two most important treaties on neo-Mudéjar ceilings were published simultaneously by Diego López de Arenas in Spain in 1633 and by Fray Andrés de San Miguel in New Spain (c. 1634). It seems both to share a common source and antecede French books about wood ceilings. This team argues that it was in Spain and Mexico where they had the best technique to build these ceilings. The Tenoch and Carnicero families in two of the movies we study use these ceilings because they can be read in nationalist terms and because they provide status because they are associated to the first Spaniards and *criollos* in Mexico (2.2, 151–52).
 15. In spite of the little success Carrefour had in Mexico, the European model of the hypermarket has been more successful than the American supermarket. The Super Wal-Mart is the model Wal-Mart found when it started selling food and reinvented the hypermarket.
 16. Wal-Mart is the number one retailer in Mexico with more than one thousand stores and sales of 200 billion pesos a year (Aguilar Juárez, Olvera, and “Wal-Mart”).
 17. “The value of Mexico's *maquiladora* industry exports is seen to reach \$120 bln (95.05 bln euro) in 2006, Ruben Aguilar, spokesperson of Mexico's President Vicente Fox, said on October 19, 2006. The amount is higher than the \$100 bln (79.2 bln euro) in exports expected by the industry and is also higher than the registered in 2005, which totalled \$96.6 bln (76.5 bln euro). The *maquiladora* industry imports duty free supplies and exports assembled products mainly to the USA. The *maquiladora* sector depends on the economic situation in the USA. The value of Mexico's *maquiladora* exports totalled \$60 bln (47.5 bln euro) for the first seven months of 2006, Aguilar added. The exports of the *maquiladora* industry account for almost half of Mexico's total exports. The sector employs directly some 1.3 million people. Around 2,800 *maquiladora* plants operate in Mexico. Employment in Mexico's *maquiladora* industry rose by 4.8 percent year-on-year to 1,223,532 in July 2006, the Mexican National Statistics Institute INEGI said on September 28, 2006.” (*Latin American News Digest*, October 20, 2006).
 18. <http://www.amnestyusa.org/spanish/mujeres/juarez/>
 19. In *Y tu mamá* when Tenoch y Julio go to Saba's apartment to ask for directions about how to go to the beach, Saba is so high on marijuana he cannot read the map. At the beginning of *Huella* the walls of Mendizábal's office are full of official maps, among them the satellite picture of a city.
 20. The Chanfón Olmos team explains the democratic character of the origin of the plazas of New Spain. They are heirs to the ceremonial centers and Mesoamerican roads. During the colony and in spite of the racial policy of the Spanish government the people kept using them and enjoying these public spaces (2.3: 68).
 21. <http://www.mayanroutes.com/acanceh.html>.
 22. Setha Low explains this phenomenon as follows: “Globalization of labor and capital has recast out urban landscape, but along with globalization comes a counter social force called *vernacularization*: the process by which the global is made local through the attribution of meaning. These local spatial/cultural spaces provide the emotional and symbolic basis for maintaining cultural identity. When interviewed in the streets and parks of these neighborhoods, people will tell you how good and

- happy they feel to be here—to eat the food, smell the local smells, hear the sounds of their indigenous music, buy culture-specific products not found in other parts of the city, or simply to speak their native language. These neighborhoods provide the symbolic as well as the economic and practical sustenance for everyday life. The vernacularization of urban space, then, is a powerful and important corrective to globalization processes that contributes well-being and meaning to local lives” (244).
23. The Porfirismo made the Paseo de la Reforma the model to be followed in the rest of the country with monuments to honor the heroes of the nation. By 1910 there were already 428 monuments to Juárez all over the Republic (Chanfón Olmos 3.2, 482).
 24. The Reforma starts with The War of Reform (1857–1861) and is the liberal period associated to the presidency of Benito Juárez (1858–71).
 25. The Disentailment (*Desamortización* in Spanish) is the process by which liberal governments in Spain and Mexico during the nineteenth century seized property from the Catholic Church and put it in the market. Mostly monasteries became schools, hospitals or were torn down to build houses. At the present time some have become luxurious hotels like the Monastery of the Clarisas in Puebla.
 26. The camera enjoys the vision of the boy playing and the arm of the nanny pulling the kid. In an exercise of deconstruction, we do not see the face or the head of the nanny. The shot is from the neck down telling that in San Angel what is important is the rich kid and the nanny is irrelevant.
 27. The Colección Austral belongs to Espasa-Calpe publishing house. It has more than five hundred titles of Western culture: Spanish classics, Latin American and Spanish contemporary literature, translations of German philosophy, classics of British and American literature and Latin and Greek classics. They are inexpensive and well edited and are very popular in the Hispanic world.
 28. See *El virgo de Visanteta* by Vicente Escribá (1977), *La corte de faraón* (1985) by José Luis García Sánchez, *Belle Epoque* (1992) by Fernando Trueba, *Jamón, jamón* by Bigas Luna (1993), *La ardilla roja* (1993) by Julio Médem, *Así en el cielo como en la tierra* (1994) by José Luis Cuerda, *La flor de mi secreto* by Pedro Almodóvar (1995), *Manolito Gafotas* (1999) by Miguel Albadalejo, *Lucía y el sexo* (2001) by Julio Médem, and *En la ciudad* by Cesc Gay (2003).
 29. Vertebration is a concept developed by José Ortega y Gasset in *Invertebrate Spain* (1921). Ortega referred mainly to the need in modern Europe after World War I and the Russian Revolution to integrate the needs of the masses and the minorities. In contemporary Mexico the vertebration will be to find a common link between the north and the south, the social classes, the ethnic groups, Spanish speaking and non-Spanish speaking communities, and the Mexicans inside and outside of Mexico.

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