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In the Spirit of Solo: Neo-Neorealism and American Identity in Independent  
Cinema after September 11

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## **Introduction**

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 played out like a Hollywood movie coming to life. As E. Ann Kaplan notes, “this event seemed to feed trauma by being so highly visible in its happenings” (Kaplan 98). Images of the World Trade Center, a symbol of American culture, and of the public’s reaction to the event flooded media markets. The magnitude of this singular event led to the realization of American vulnerability in the post-Cold War era. At this moment, the American Creed - the defining social ethos of the United States, and the American dream - the belief that democratic principles are a promise for success for the American people, came into question. Moreover, in the nine years since the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon there has been an emergence of a culture of fear in the United States intensified by the Bush administration’s post 9/11 policies, wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, and the 2008 global economic crisis. “The first ten years of this century,” writes Andy Serwer in *Time Magazine*, “will very likely go down as the most dispiriting and disillusioning decade Americans have lived through in the post-World War II era” (Serwer 31). Serwer labels the 2000s “the decade from hell” noting that at the turn of the century the American dream “was about to dim” (Serwer 31).

According to political theorist Dominique Moïsi, a culture of fear has existed in the United States since the founding of the nation in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The violent conquest of the Native Americans and

the violent treatment of enslaved Africans defined American history until the late nineteenth century. Similarly, the Red Scare of 1919-1920 and the McCarthy hearings of the 1950s generated a fear about the nation's social and political stability in the twentieth century (Moïsi 110-11). However, September 11 and its aftermath have given the culture of fear in the United States a new depth. The American people have rediscovered their political and economic vulnerability in the post-Cold War era. "Americans had known since the beginning of the Cold War that their geographic location no longer protected them," writes Moïsi in *The Geopolitics of Emotion*. "But 9/11 changed an abstract knowledge into a tragic, visceral reality" (Moïsi 111). In this post-September 11 United States, the emerging "culture of fear" and "decade from hell" mentalities can be seen in American cinema.

There was a concern among Hollywood executives that the trauma of September 11 would affect box office returns (Prince 2). Therefore, in the immediate months following September 11, a shift in the modes of production, perception, and audience reception for Hollywood films occurred. Films featuring violent spectacles or sequences featuring the World Trade Center were shelved and temporarily recut while family films were rushed into production to offer audiences an escape. These changes lasted briefly. Soon, Hollywood released a series of blockbuster war and action films such as *Black Hawk Down* (Ridley Scott, 2001), *Collateral Damage* (Andrew Davis, 2002), and *We Were Soldiers* (Mel Gibson, 2002) that renewed audience

appetite for conflict narratives and centered on a desire to replicate the notion of “just” war promoted by the American government.

These war films did not necessarily inspire patriotic sentiments among audiences. The 1950s Cold War in fact seemed to better capture the mentality of the nation. “The media, entertainment, and advertising declared the post-9/11 age an era of neofifties nuclear family ‘togetherness,’ redomesticated femininity, and reconstructed Cold Warrior manhood” (Faludi 3-4). This was seen through a renewal of the 1950s Western. For instance, the Turner Broadcasting System rebroadcast John Wayne films in December 2001. At this same moment, the entertainment industry, in collaboration with the Bush administration, produced *The Spirit of America* (Chuck Workman, 2001). This three-minute montage of iconic American screen images premiered on more than ten thousand movie screens on Christmas Day in 2001 (Lyman E1). The clips overwhelmingly featured a reluctant American hero from films ranging from *Birth of a Nation* (D.W. Griffith, 1915) to *The Patriot* (Dean Semler, 2000). The film is bookended by the opening and closing shot of *The Searchers* (John Ford, 1956) in which John Wayne’s character is framed by the 1870s homestead. “This was the Duke we were so desperate to ‘welcome back’ in the aftermath of the 9/11, a stone-cold killer and Indian hater who would stand guard over our virginal girls” (Faludi 7). A film such as *The Spirit of America* works to re-imagine American identity in the face of an enemy. Yet it was not a widely seen film. Therefore, this film contrasts with

fiction and documentary films that reacted to September 11 and overwhelmed the film market.

Both Hollywood studios and independent filmmakers made films that were cinematic responses to September 11. These films included Oliver Stone's *World Trade Center* (2005) and Paul Greengrass' *United 93* (2006). Steven Spielberg directed a trilogy of sorts—*The Terminal* (2004), *War of the Worlds* (2005), and *Munich* (2005)—that acts as a reflection on 9/11 and terrorism. Smaller and less-seen films included *The Guys* (Jim Simpson, 2002) and *WTC View* (Brian Sloan, 2005). While these film fictionalized the events of September 11, political documentaries such as *Fahrenheit 9/11* (Michael Moore, 2004), *Control Room* (Jehane Noujaim, 2004), and *Uncovered: The War on Iraq* (Robert Greenwald, 2004) saw a resurgence in American cinema during the 2000s. These films captured the growing political tensions and public fear in the aftermath of September 11. More recent documentaries such as *Iraq in Fragments* (James Longley, 2006) and *No End In Sight* (Charles Ferguson, 2007) reflected a growing public dissatisfaction with the American government's post-9/11 policies.

In “Something Lost—Film after 9/11”, Wheeler Winston Dixon raises several questions about American cinema following September 11. Writing in 2002, he asked, “How do we now review the films of our shared cinematic past in light of these recent events? What effect will the events of 9/11 have on filmic genres? ...What other questions arise as we consider the films of the past, and the present, in the view of this violent and tragic introduction to the

twenty first century?” (Dixon 2). Blockbuster films, the resurgence of the Western films, and political documentaries are indicative of just some of the initial cinematic responses to September 11. As film scholar E. Ann Kaplan states in *Trauma Culture*, “If the wound of trauma remains open, its pain may be worked through in the process of its being ‘translated’ via art” (Kaplan 19). The trauma of September 11 and its aftermath are currently being addressed through films directed by American independent filmmakers. These films, identified as Neo-Neorealist films, present overt and subtle commentaries on post-9/11 America through a realistic aesthetic.

A.O. Scott, film critic for the *New York Times*, noted in a March 2009 article that there is an emerging trend in American independent cinema he calls “Neo-Neo Realism”. Films such as *Man Push Cart* (Ramin Bahrani, 2006), *Wendy and Lucy* (Kelly Reichardt, 2008), *Sugar* (Ryan Fleck and Anna Boden, 2008), *Treeless Mountain* (So Yong Kim, 2008) and *Ballast* (Lance Hammer, 2008) have a style reminiscent of Italian Neorealism. These films feature fictional characters often not depicted onscreen, the characters are played by non-professional actors from similar backgrounds, are filmed with bleak naturalistic aesthetics, and reflect a heavy subtext connected to current political and economic strains on the American people. Noting that this cinematic style is not revolutionary, Scott writes, “To counter the tyranny of fantasy entrenched on Wall Street and in Washington...it seems possible that engagement with the world as it is might reassert itself as an aesthetic strategy. Perhaps it would be worth considering that what we need from

movies in the face of a dismaying and confusing real world is realism” (Scott 40). In the face of the trauma and aftermath of September 11, this returning cinematic style connects to the belief in a culture of fear, an argument that is tied to the fading American dream, and the changing American national identity that Dominique Moïsi claims exists in post-9/11 America.

Fear is what Moïsi calls the dominant emotion of the West and it is “a reaction to the events and feeling taking place elsewhere” (Moïsi 90). Because the West is no longer setting the tone in global politics, the perception of vulnerability and the loss of centrality are at the center of a growing Western identity crisis. Moïsi distinguishes between European fear, which centers on the question “Who are we?”, and American fear, “What have we done to ourselves?” (Moïsi 109). Post-9/11 political and economic anxieties related to the growing American culture of fear have changed the perception of American identity. Samuel Huntington in *Who Are We: The Challenges to America’s National Identity* presents a comprehensive study of American identity, its defining factors, and the myths associated with American identity. Moreover, Huntington examines how, after September 11, American identity is changing and in crisis.

Modernization, economic development, urbanization, and globalization have caused people to redefine their identities. By the end of the twentieth century, “America’s common culture and the principles of equality and individualism central to the American Creed were under attack by many individuals and groups in American society [...] We Americans were not what

we were, and uncertain who we were becoming" (Huntington 11). Huntington asserts that subnational, cultural, and regional identities are taking precedence over a homogenous national identity. This change in identities has caused a rise of multiculturalism and racial, ethnic, and gender consciousness among the American people (Huntington 13). Central to the crisis of American identity has been an increase of new immigrants entering the United States. Between 1965 and 2000, 23 million new immigrants entered the United States, many from less-developed countries than the immigrants of the early twentieth century. Their presence raises concern regarding how these immigrants will assimilate into American society (Huntington 178).<sup>1</sup> For instance, in current media outlets and the rhetoric of certain politicians and special interest groups, there is an overwhelming assertion that Hispanic immigrants will not learn the English language and not assimilate into mainstream American culture.

The American film industry has been a key agent in immigrant assimilation in the United States. According to Sumiko Higashi, social change influenced the construction of the feature film in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Higashi 2). Motion pictures were a popular attraction for lower class workers and immigrants; by 1910, 25 percent of filmgoers were lower-middle-class workers (30). Middle class cultural practices became the basis for redefining cinema at this time. The films of Cecil B. DeMille, for instance, used cinema as a method to Americanize and to assimilate the lower,

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<sup>1</sup> Samuel Huntington's work is seen as an example of nativism, when the interests of the dominant (established) group of a nation are preserved over those of the newcomer or immigrant group. Nativist beliefs are widely considered to be anti-immigrant beliefs.

immigrant classes whose ability to understand visual languages often exceeded their command of the English language.

If, on one hand, the motion picture industry helped integrate lower immigrant classes in American society at the turn of the century, then it is through the cinema that the immigrant identity is visually constructed. In *Immigration and American Popular Culture*, Rachel Rubin and Jeffrey Melnick note that in immigrant narratives, certain images, frameworks, and stories are invoked so that they are recognizable to audiences. However, these frameworks are reworked to reflect the needs of the current immigration culture. Rubin and Melnick also assert that immigrants and popular culture cannot be separated; rather, they have created each other. Cultural institutions, such as the American film industry, have incorporated immigrants both cinematically, through character, plot, and imagery, and institutionally, as directors and producers. Furthermore, through these cultural institutions “Americanness” and “otherness” are negotiated (Rubin and Melnick 1-16).

The immigrant narratives featured in American cinema of the 2000s are a reflection of both American and immigrant culture in post-9/11 America. Several films of the American Neo-Neorealist variety, as assessed by Scott, address the growing culture of fear that connects to the changing perceptions of American identity. Courtney Hunt’s *Frozen River* (2008), So Yong Kim’s *In Between Days* (2006), and Ramin Bahrani’s *Goodbye Solo* (2008), feature immigrant characters who challenge the notion of American identity by

representing characters and narratives not commonly depicted on screen.<sup>2</sup>

These three films feature an immigrant plotline or character: an illegal immigrant smuggling operation in upstate New York (*Frozen River*), a Korean teenager assimilating to life in an unnamed North American city (*In Between Days*), and a Senegalese taxi driver who strikes up an unusual friendship (*Goodbye Solo*). How immigration is addressed in these films through their narratives and characters challenges the notion of American identity and shows how American identity is changing in post-9/11 America. Moreover, these films and their representation of American identity in a post-September 11 society echo a statement by Swedish sociologist Gunnar Myrdal, who first coined the phrase the “American Creed”. In 1945 Myrdal wrote, “Americans are continually struggling for their soul” (4). These films question what it means to be an American and an immigrant in the United States as a culture of fear grows following the events of September 11.

### **What is Imagined: Nations, National Identity, and the Cinema**

Nations and national identity are the product of a tumultuous period in European history from the fourteenth to nineteenth centuries. The Renaissance, the Reformation, the Enlightenment, and Romanticism provided the historical and intellectual groundwork for modern nationalism. The French

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<sup>2</sup> Scott does not identify *Frozen River* as a Neo-Neorealist American film; I, however, see it as a necessary film to examine when looking at representations of American identity in post-9/11 American cinema. Moreover, director Courtney Hunt utilizes certain Neorealist techniques and narrative devices that link *Frozen River* to *In Between Days* and *Goodbye Solo*.

Revolution (1789-1802) is considered the pivotal event in the rise of nationalism due to the revolution's determination to replace monarchial politics with principles of liberty, equality, and fraternity. Until this defining historical event, people did not consider themselves members of states. What resulted was a romanticized and driven movement for self-determination in opposition to dynastic reigns. The breakdown of the Austro-Hungarian, Ottoman, and Russian empires because of the First World War further spurred nationalist movements. Reconstructed in 1919 through a series of treaties, the Balkans region today remains a frequent location for nationalist movements. Likewise, anti-colonial movements in the twentieth century encapsulated nationalism in the 20th century. The end of the twentieth and beginning of the twenty-first centuries saw nationalism as a result of the collapse of the Soviet Union and as a reaction to the rise of globalization (Hearn 13-18). As we can see, nations are and continue to be created and reconstructed throughout history.

Benedict Anderson calls the nation an “imagined political community.” “It is imagined,” writes Anderson, “because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (6). Quoting political theorist Ernest Gellner, Anderson also asserts that nationalism “invents nations where they do not exist.” According to Anderson, the nation is imagined as limited, sovereign and a community. The nation as imagined emerged from the origins of national consciousness,

which, according to Anderson, are connected to the decline of a universal God, the end of the dynastic realm, and the relationship between capitalism and print journalism. Of the processes that created national consciousness, the relationship between print and capitalism is especially pertinent to cinema.

Print-capitalism gave rise to the concept of national consciousness in the nineteenth century. It created unified fields of exchange and communication, gave stability to language by removing the “image of antiquity so central to the subjective idea of the nation,” and created languages-of-power that were different from the older languages (Anderson 44-45). Print-capitalism broke the divisions between languages in nineteenth and early twentieth century communities no longer defined by religion. Anderson writes, “the convergence of capitalism and print technology on the fatal diversity of human language created the possibility of a new form of imagined community, which in its basic morphology set the stage for the modern nation” (Anderson 46). As a twentieth century technological descendent of print-capitalism, the cinema “imagines” the modern nation. The cinema vividly conveys the power, pathos, and epic grandeur of the nation in a way that the other arts and mass communications cannot. The cinema does this through character development, historical reconstruction, and ethnoscapes (Smith 50-51).<sup>3</sup> This idea is evident in Sumiko Higashi’s understanding of early twentieth century American cinema and its role in shaping American

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<sup>3</sup> Ethnoscapes, according to Anthony Smith, are “the poetic landscapes of distinctive ethnic communities.” The cinema specializes in the reconstruction of ethnoscapes. Smith cites Sergei Eisenstein’s work, including *Battleship Potemkin* (1927), *Alexander Nevsky* (1938), and *Ivan the Terrible* (1948) as examples of ethnoscapes (Smith 51).

social classes at that time. Moreover, we can see it in current independent cinema's representation and questioning of American identity through immigrant characters.

### **The Components of American Identity**

After September 11, we entered into an age of identity where stories of those sacrificing their well-being for the sake of their beliefs, communities, and ways of life saturated the media. This is the by-product of democratization, globalization, and advanced communications between people (Erickson and Hoover 1). Given this articulation of identity in the twenty-first century, how do we understand the concept of identity? First, individuals find and redefine their identities in groups. The need for identity leads individuals to seek identity in an arbitrarily constructed group. Second, identities are highly constructed. As Benedict Anderson asserted, nations are “imagined communities” and identities are imagined selves; people define themselves as they choose. Third, individuals have multiple identities that may be cultural, political, national, and social (to name a few). Fourth, identities emerge because of interactions between the self and others as well as governments and the self. Fifth, the salience of alternative identities for any individual is situational. To define themselves, an individual needs an “other,” that is someone to whom they can define themselves in opposition. (Huntington 22-24). From this understanding of identity, American national identity takes root.

Race, ethnicity, culture, and religion define the United States. These four components derive from the values, institutions, and culture of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Anglo-Protestant British settlers. They have continually changed during the nineteenth- and twentieth-centuries. For example, World War II led to the assimilation of southern and eastern European immigrants, essentially eliminating ethnicity as a defining component of American identity (Huntington 38). In fact, of these four defining components, only Anglo-Protestant culture remained virtually unchanged until the latter part of the twentieth century.

The United States was founded as a Protestant nation and it remained as such until the arrival of German and Irish immigrants in the late 1800s. Protestantism “shaped American attitudes toward private and public morality, economic activity, government, and public policy” (Huntington 62). Also deriving from Protestant values are individualism, the work ethic, moralism, and the reform ethic. Most significantly, Anglo-Protestant culture is the primary source of the American Creed, the social ethos that is said to define America.

Swedish sociologist Gunnar Myrdal in *The American Dilemma* first coined the term “American Creed”. Myrdal writes:

The general plane which we shall call the “American Creed” where the American thinks, talks, and acts under the influence of high national and Christian precepts, and the valuations on specific planes of individual group living, where personal and local interests, economic, social, and sexual jealousies; considerations of community prestige and conformity; group prejudice against particular persons or types of people; and all

sorts of miscellaneous wants, impulses, and habit dominate his outlook (xlvii).

Myrdal's interpretation of the American Creed comes at a specific moment in 1944 when the United States was on the verge of becoming a hegemonic superpower in the post-World War II era. Broadly, the American people are said to be defined by and united by their commitment to the political principles of liberty, equality, democracy, individualism, human rights, the rule of law, and private property embodied by the American Creed. Myrdal later calls the American Creed "the cement in the structure of this great and disparate nation" (Mydral 3).

Further connected to the American Creed is the American dream and the place of the immigrant in American society. The workplace and the job are understood as a core value of the American dream. It is through hard work that the American achieves the benefits of the American Creed. Upon entering the nation, immigrants also seek to join the workforce and their presence, especially in a time high of economic anxiety, is seen as a threat to hard-working, white America (Orchowski 75-80).

### **Immigration: A Challenge to American Identity**

The United States is often described as a "nation of immigrants." Yet Samuel Huntington states that this claim does "not tell us anything about the society that attracted the immigrants or the culture that produced the Creed" (Huntington 37). Huntington distinguishes between the colonial settlers, who left Britain and established a new community, and the immigrants, who

entered the established society because they wanted to “become part of the society the settlers had created” (Huntington 40). Interestingly, the term immigrant did not enter the English language until the 1780s, in order to distinguish the new immigrants from the founding settlers. In the nineteenth century, this model of settlers and immigrants was replicated as westward expansion took place. At this moment in U.S. history, communities of settlers from the eastern states moved west and founded new societies. The American frontier was the product of both these settlers and the European and Asian migrant workers who worked to establish new communities.

Throughout the nation’s history, most Americans did not maintain positive views of immigrants and did not celebrate the country’s history as a nation of immigrants (Huntington 38). Various government policies have attempted to control immigration to the United States. The first attempt occurred during the First United States Congress of 1790 when the Naturalization Act limited naturalization to persons of “good character” (“Century” 103). Following the Naturalization Act of 1790, other governmental policies such as the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, the Barred Zone Act of 1917, the Jones Act of 1917, the Johnson-Reed Act of 1924, and the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952 continued to limit and control the number of persons entering the United States.

The Johnson-Reed Immigration Act of 1924 placed for the first time numerical limits on immigration and a racial and national hierarchy favored some immigrants over others. For instance, the act excluded Chinese,

Japanese, and other Asians from immigration on grounds that they were racially ineligible for naturalized citizenship (Ngai 3-7). This act also led to the concept of the “good” immigrant and the “bad” immigrant, which is connected to one’s racial identity. When immigrants enter the United States, they enter a nation constructed on a black and white divide. It is the “founding traumas” of race in the American history, the colonization of Native Americans, slavery, and racism, which underscore the representation of immigrants in popular culture (LaCapra 23; Melnick and Rubin 5). For instance, the good immigrant is a deserving white, European immigrant who journeys to the U.S. to pursue the American dream.

This idea of the good white immigrant lasted until the 1960s and 1970s, when subnational, racial, ethnic, and cultural groups were promoted along with the American Anglo-Protestant national culture. From 1965 to 2000, 23 million new immigrants entered the United States. Arriving mostly from Latin America and Asia, these immigrants represented unprecedented numbers leaving less-developed countries in favor of wealthy developed nations. Interestingly enough, these movements of people, both legal and illegal, coincided with the drop in fertility rates in Western countries, excluding the United States. This combination of immigrant pressure and a probable population decline establishes not only incentives for immigrants to meet labor needs but also generates concern among citizens. The immigrants entering the United States come from societies with significantly different

cultures than the defining Anglo-Protestant culture (Huntington 178-180). The presence of these new immigrants raises questions:

To what extent will these immigrants, their successors and descendants follow the path of earlier immigrants and be successfully assimilated into American society and culture, become committed Americans forswearing other national identities, and adhere through belief and action to the principles of the American Creed? (Huntington 178).

In the post-9/11 era, immigration and an immigrant's inability or refusal to assimilate is viewed as a threat to American ideals and culture. Moreover, immigration after September 11 is more widely seen as a threat to national security. For instance, a result of September 11 was the reorganization of the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) into two new immigration service and enforcement agencies within the new Department of Homeland Security. As Mark Krikorian notes in *The Case Against New Immigration*, "The changes that define modern America—in our society, economy, government, and technology, for example—are so fundamental that our past success in dealing with immigration is simply no longer relevant" (1).

### **What is National Cinema?**

In the twentieth century, a new set of technologies and modes of communication gave rise to a newfound understanding of the nation. Where print-capitalism created and defined the nineteenth century the cinema became the art form that visually and ideologically created the twentieth century concept of the nation. The artist, the writer, and the filmmaker "have been at

the heart of this project of popular national representation and renewal, clothing the ideal of the nation and its historical myths, memories and symbols in palpable dynamic forms which are easily accessible to the mass of national membership” (Smith 48).

The cinema is seen as a reflection of the dominant beliefs and values in a given culture. Graeme Turner in *Film as Social Practice* asserts that the concept of the nation operates at the most basic levels of meaning and discourse. The nation, writes Turner, “becomes an overriding set of priorities which define what is acceptable and what is not, what is normal and what is not, all through defining what is Australian or British or American or what is not” (Turner 184). Identification with the nation is one of the most durable social constructs and it creates a sense of political power. Most countries have a network of institutions and government policies that create, limit, and control the national representations. National film industries, in particular, act as representatives and representations of a national culture. Although the United States does not have a government subsidized film industry, how American life is understood primarily comes from the exportation of the images produced by American cinema. What links textual and contextual approaches to film is that the processes of production and of reception must be in some way related to cultural ideologies (Turner 180).

Siegfried Kracauer’s *From Caligari to Hitler* is an illustration of the relationship between film and national ideology. Writing in 1944, Kracauer analyzes the evolution of German cinema from the post-World War I era until

the advent of the sound film in the late 1920s. “In general,” Kracauer writes, “it will be seen that the technique, the story content, and the evolution of the film of a nation are fully understandable only in relation to the actual psychoanalysis pattern of this [German] nation” (Kracuer 3). He asserts that the films of a nation reflect its mentality in a more direct way than any other artistic medium because the cinema is not the product of an individual, and popular films satisfy existing mass desires. Moreover, Kracauer writes on German cinema at a particular moment in German history. German cinema at the onset of World War I represents the mentality of the German nation at this time.

Kracauer’s writing, although influential, did not inspire the study of national cinemas. Rather, national cinemas were largely associated with a single *auteur*; for instance, John Ford or Howard Hawks in the United States. It was not until the 1970s and 1980s, when semiotics, Lacanian psychoanalysis, structuralism, feminism, and cultural studies influenced film theory and criticism that the concept of national cinema changed. At this time, questions of styles and conventions of national cinemas, and the influence of national context on genre and production modes, came under study. Questions of how, and to what extent, do cinematic works imagine the nation-state in national cinemas are seen today (Hjort and MacKenzie 1-4). Currently there are debates about whether or not the limits of the nation-state are the most appropriate method to frame cultural and cinematic diversity. As Andrew Higson points out, “the contingent communities that cinema imagines are

much more likely to be either local or transnational than national" (Higson 73). How does this understanding of national cinema affect a reading of American film, both studio and independent productions?

### **The American Film Industry: Hollywood vs. Independent Cinema**

The ways in which film audiences have come to understand American society and ideals comes predominantly from Hollywood cinema. The American film industry is the most prominent film market internationally. Hollywood films engage millions of viewers worldwide and create a "lingua franca" for both reading the cinema and understanding America (Bordwell 1).

The American dominance of the international film market began when the productivity of European markets diminished following the First World War. As American dominance grew throughout the 1920s, production companies such as Fox, Paramount, Loew's, and Goldwyn recognized that control over the industry could be achieved if they produced, distributed, and screened their own films. From this realization, the studio system emerged as a method to manage industry professionals; the star system, a studio's identification with a certain genre, and control over directors determined what films audiences would see. During the 1930s and 1940s, although a period of classic filmmaking, movie attendance decreased due to the Depression and World War II. However, following the war, the United States regained its footing in the international market by distributing and producing films in countries such as Latin America and Germany (Turner 20-24). The advent of

television in the 1950s led to a decline in audience attendance. The studios responded by both creating films specifically for television as well as bizarre innovations such as Cinerama, Cinescope, 3D, Aromarama, and Smel-O-Vision. These innovations were attempts to attract audiences and coincided with the end of studio system.

In considering American films since 1960, David Bordwell writes, “American films have changed enormously. They have become sexier, more profane, and more violent...The industry has metamorphosed into a corporate behemoth, while new technologies have transformed production and exhibition (1). Moreover, the studios recognized that blockbuster films or “megapictures” could be exploited for financial gain. Through soundtracks, cable broadcasts, videocassettes, and now DVDs, the blockbuster film can sustain a lasting presence among film audiences. This “blockbuster model” became a business strategy for production companies that ultimately saved the industry (Bordwell 2-4). The presence of the blockbuster also influenced auteur filmmaking. At this same moment, a group of young filmmakers including Martin Scorsese, Francis Ford Coppola, and Steven Spielberg emerged. These filmmakers were influenced by European art cinema and established Hollywood genres. Although their films redefined Hollywood filmmaking practices, these filmmakers still worked within the confines of Hollywood. As film historian Thomas Schatz suggests, American films became “increasingly plot driven, increasingly reliant on special effects, increasingly ‘fantastic,’ and increasingly targeted at younger audiences”

(Schatz 23). In response to the new Hollywood cinema and the blockbuster business model, an alternative brand of American cinema emerged in the late 1970s. American independent cinema gained a sustained and institutionalized base by the 1980s and 1990s.

American independent cinema is a multi-faceted and dynamic branch of American cinema. The term “independent” has had different connotations at different periods in American cinema history. Geoff King explains:

In the 1930s, it signified something less than trash. In the 1950s and early 1960s it might have suggested both the innovations of the ‘American New Wave’ and the low-budget exploitation science fiction and horror made by Roger Corman for AIP [...] From the mid 1980s, however, the more arty/quirky, sometime politically inflected, brand of independent cinema began to gain a higher profile and a more sustained and institutionalized base in the broadly off-Hollywood arena (9).

“Independence” is clearly not a unified entity and represents various industries, narratives, forms, and genres. For instance, the American avant-garde sector of the 1950s and 1960s, although not commercially influential, exemplifies how a subset of independent cinema sustains its own infrastructure.

American independent cinema is often recognized for its emphasis on marginalized groups not depicted in Hollywood cinema. These films often present alternative visions of America. Charles Burnett’s *Killer of Sheep* (1977) offers an interesting comparison to the work of the current American independent filmmakers. In this film, Burnett adapts the Italian Neorealist aesthetic to showcase inner city life in Los Angeles. He uses his neighborhood

for the setting, and his friends and neighbors as actors. “*Killer of Sheep*” writes Scott MacDonald, “is Burnett’s response to the frustrations of his world, and in particular to the limitations he is confronted with as an African-American filmmaker interested in depicting and interpreting what he has experienced... It is both an index of the societal limitations that Burnett has faced, an explicit and implicit critique of these limitations, and a transcendence of them” (MacDonald 106-107). Notably, *Killer of Sheep* is a film largely seen in classrooms and museums, although the release of the film on DVD has generated additional interest. A.O. Scott calls *Killer of Sheep* an American Neorealist film; its mode of production, cultural significance and audience reception is analogous to current American films, such as *Frozen River*, *In Between Days*, and *Goodbye Solo*.<sup>4</sup> What a film like *Killer of Sheep* articulates is a director’s serious concerns with the social, political, and economic status of American culture. This idea is articulated in current American independent cinema by filmmakers who find issue with the representation of gender, immigrants, and American ideals by Hollywood in the wake of September 11.

### ***Frozen River, In Between Days, and Goodbye Solo: Three Neo-Neorealist Films***

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<sup>4</sup> *Killer of Sheep* is also compared to *Ballast* (Lance Hammer, 2008), a film labeled as Neo-Neorealist which I will discuss in my conclusion.

Film critic A.O. Scott argues that some American independent filmmakers have returned to the Neorealist techniques first used by Italian filmmakers after World War II.

Since Scott's initial article on Neo-Neorealism, film critics and scholars have debated the value and definition of American Neo-Neorealism. Richard Brody, Roger Ebert, and David Bordwell have all questioned the movement. Brody, a critic for *The New Yorker*, presents eight notable counterarguments to Neo-Neorealism: “[Scott’s] ambitious article ranges widely over the history of cinema; I think it rests on questionable premises and reaches dubious conclusions” (Brody “About Neo-Neo Realism”). Brody largely argues that there are countless other examples of Neorealism in American cinema, both in Hollywood and independent films. Theorist David Bordwell further comments, “Neorealism isn’t a cinematic essence floating from place to place and settling in when times demand it. The term, like the films it labels, emerged under particular circumstances, and it’s hard to transfer the label to other conditions” (Bordwell “Getting Real”). He goes on to question, “Why not just call [Neo-Neorealism] an Italian variant of that broad tradition of naturalism or *verismo* or ‘working-class realism’ that we find in many national cinemas?” (Bordwell “Getting Real”). Brody and Bordwell are correct to assert their understandings of Neo-Neorealism. Yet as Scott notes in his response to Brody’s eight points, “I took pains to use the term neo-realism loosely and somewhat expansively, to capture not a style or a school or a movement, but rather a cinematic ethic that has surfaced in different forms in

different nations at different moments and that now seems to be flowering in some precincts of American independent cinema” (Scott “A.O. Scott”).

I first focus on Courtney Hunt’s *Frozen River* (2008), a film that provides the framework for an analysis of post-9/11 discussions on national identity. *Frozen River* follows two impoverished single mothers, one white, the other Native American, who smuggle illegal immigrants across the U.S.-Canadian border. The narrative maintains a crisis structure: the women smuggle immigrants out of a necessity to provide for their children after their husbands and communities have abandoned them. Unlike *In Between Days* and *Goodbye Solo*, it is not widely identified as a Neorealist work. Yet this film is imperative to the representation of American identity in cinema because of the film’s narrative and structural representations of illegal immigration and identity politics. By first analyzing *Frozen River*, we can see how the post-9/11 culture of fear is articulated in American cinema.

Second, I focus on So Yong Kim’s 2006 film *In Between Days*, a nuanced and personal examination of identity and the loss of identity in the wake of immigration. It follows Aimee, a new immigrant who lives with her mother in the Koreatown of an unnamed North American city. As Aimee works towards assimilation, she develops unrequited feelings for her best friend Tran. Over the course of the film, Aimee’s status as a new immigrant and a naïve teenager contributes to her isolation from her community. She reads a letter she has written to her absent father; the letter voices Aimie’s isolation and confusion about her identity. *In Between Days* is based on Kim’s

experience growing up in a Los Angeles Koreatown. This film is a deeply intimate portrait of the assimilation process that indicates the personalized nature of immigration. It is through *In Between Days* that we see the significance of a director's personal story on the representation of American identity.

Third, I focus on Ramin Bahrani's *Goodbye Solo*, a film framed as the story of one man's journey for the American dream. *Goodbye Solo* encompasses the themes seen in *Frozen River* and the aesthetic techniques used in *In Between Days* to rework American history. In the film, Solo, a Sengalese taxi driver befriends William, an elderly white Southerner determined to commit suicide. Over the course of the film, the men develop an odd couple friendship, which tests Solo's familial relationships and his perceptions of his identity. Yet by the film's conclusion, the men reach an understanding about each other's decisions and ultimately their fates. Bahrani's work, which includes *Man Push Cart* (2005) and *Chop Shop* (2007), are widely recognized as Neorealist films that question American identity after September 11. Throughout *Goodbye Solo*, the use of Neorealist techniques, focus on the family structures, and representation of the American dream, Bahrani explores the changing landscape of the United States and American identity. But the character Solo, who is loosely based on St. Francis in Roberto Rossellini's *The Flowers of St Francis* (1950), is symbolic of positive changes to American identity. Bahrani directed *Goodbye Solo* in response to numerous fiction and documentary films about the Iraq War.

Thus, Bahrani illustrates how in the face political and economic frustrations faced by a nation, a character with “the spirit of Solo” can inspire audiences and affect one’s conception of the nation.

I have found that films such as *Frozen River*, *In Between Days*, and *Goodbye Solo* are representative of a Neo-Neorealist trend in current independent cinema. As my textual analysis of these films shows, in spite of the strikingly different narratives the three films are linked by thematic codes, aesthetic similarities, and the representation of reality. Each film contextualizes immigration through plot (*Frozen River*) and character (*In Between Days* and *Goodbye Solo*). Moreover, each film addresses the fragility of the family structure and subsequently the role of the family in defining one’s identity. In a post-9/11 context, these three films reflect a heavy subtext connected to current political and economic strains on the American people. The political references are overt, evidenced by character discussions on border security in *Frozen River*, and subtle, seen through the nuanced audio and shot composition and character development in *In Between Days* and *Goodbye Solo*. Moreover, I argue that these films reflect changing perceptions of American identity in the twenty-first century, which is seen through a questioning of national identity (*Frozen River*), an isolated teenage immigrant assimilating to American culture that is itself in transition (*In Between Days*), and an immigrant striving for the American Dream (*Goodbye Solo*).

## ***Frozen River***

### **Introduction**

Set in upstate New York near the United States-Canadian border, *Frozen River* takes an unexpected approach to representing American identity through its narrative structure and cinematic techniques. Director Courtney Hunt uses long takes, tight close-ups, and a keen focus on actual spaces and events to depict accurately the illegal immigrant smuggling situation and ramifications. The film follows two working class, single mothers, Ray (Melissa Leo) and Lila (Misty Upham), who, after a tense first encounter, join forces and begin smuggling illegal immigrants from the United States into Canada across the frozen St. Lawrence River. Both women are in dire economic and social situations. Ray's husband has abandoned the family and taken their savings needed to buy a doublewide trailer. Lila is a Mohawk woman whose husband died on a smuggling run across the St. Lawrence and her mother-in-law is now raising her one-year-old son. When Ray and Lila meet, both women have been effectively excluded from their communities. These factors combine to push the women to conduct illegal actions that could implicate the security of the United States. *Frozen River* follows the reluctant bond that develops between Ray and Lila, and Ray's ultimate maternal sacrifice.<sup>5</sup> The film indicates that motherhood and community have an essential role in defining the American character. Therefore, what results from the illegal immigrant smuggling operation is an unorthodox family structure,

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<sup>5</sup> This theory is discussed by Linda Williams in “Something Else Besides a Mother.”

where two women become mutually dependent on one another and achieve a new version of the American dream.

*Frozen River* provides the framework of a culture of fear as it exists in post-9/11 America. Unlike *In Between Days* and *Goodbye Solo*, *Frozen River* overtly addresses post-9/11 anxieties such as the fear of illegal immigration, ethnic tensions between white Americans and minority Americans, and the dire economic constraints of the working class. Moreover, the film is set in a region where border security is far less in the public discourse, as compared to border relations between the United States and Mexico. *Frozen River* utilizes the complex issue of illegal immigration as a method to question national identity, to question what constitutes a nation, and to present a new yet complicated answer to these issues.

### ***Frozen River: A Production History***

Director Courtney Hunt was raised by a single mother in Memphis, Tennessee. She attended Sarah Lawrence College and Northeastern University for law school. Although she completed her law degree, Hunt realized that she did not want to practice two months into her studies. Hunt then received a M.F.A in film from Columbia University in 1994. Her thesis film, *Althea Faught*, is a 20-minute short film about women surviving the 1863 Siege of Vicksburg during the Civil War. From this early work, we see that Hunt has maintained a focus on the status and role of women in American society throughout her filmmaking career. In 1996, PBS purchased the film and aired

it on American Playhouse. Following her graduation from Columbia, Hunt began work on *Frozen River*. She spent ten years researching the Mohawks of upstate New York, eventually befriending a medicine woman and gaining the trust of the Mohawk community. Hunt explains in an interview with *New York Magazine*, “it took me a long time to feel like I understood enough about that life to make a credible character” (Schoemer). That credible character would develop into Lila Littlewolf, portrayed by Misty Upham.

Hunt’s experience as the daughter of a single mother and her desire to create a different women’s film also influenced the production of *Frozen River*. Hunt frequently describes her frustrations with the notion that women’s films lack adventure and were talky. She explains: “I grew up with a single mom, who was working and struggling through school, and frankly, paying the rent was an adventure” (indieWIRE “Oscar ‘09”). She explains in an interview with *Filmmaker Magazine* that she wanted to write a story where women “were really active, where they were doing stuff. Not relationship stuff, just stuff in the world” (Macaulay). Rather than draw influence from a film like *Fried Green Tomatoes* (Jon Avnet 1991), Hunt was influenced by Arthur Penn’s *Bonnie and Clyde* (1969) and Martin Scorsese’s *Alice Doesn’t Live Here Anymore* (1973). Hunt also found inspiration from John Ford’s *The Searchers* (1956). She explains: “*Frozen River* is set in a sort of border area, and I thought of it as a frontier as, a little bit, the Wild West” (Macaulay). The influences of *Bonnie and Clyde*, *The Searchers*, and *Alice Doesn’t Live Here Anymore* have a particular resonance when considering *Frozen River*’s

narrative. *Bonnie and Clyde* and *The Searchers* both feature characters who are outlaws with a selective engagement with authority, while *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore* follows the cross-country journey of a single mother working to provide for her son. In *Frozen River*, Ray and Lila, two single mothers, become outlaws because of their illegal activities.

Hunt's initial screenplays of *Frozen River* featured female characters who smuggled cigarettes across the border. Although this was a real occurrence on upstate New York Indian reservations, producers and executives were not interested. After September 11, Hunt learned that the Mohawk women had begun smuggling illegal immigrants and she began to work this development into a new version of *Frozen River*. The character Ray, who Hunt had tried to kill off in earlier versions of the script, became the film's main protagonist. This screenplay was adapted into a short film version of *Frozen River*, which premiered at the 2004 New York Film Festival. The short starred Melissa Leo and Misty Upham as Ray and Lila, who reprised these roles in the feature film. While the short generated some interest from producers, they intended to replace Leo and Upham with actors with a greater star appeal for the feature. However, Hunt refused to replace the actors, a decision that would affect the budget for *Frozen River* because it drew less interest from producers. This action, along with the widely accepted notion that smuggling only occurs at the U.S.-Mexico border, proved to be the greatest challenge for attracting producers. After Hunt's husband, Donald Harwood, wrote a prospectus and raised less than \$1 million to produce the

feature film. All of these factors combine to make it a definitively independent film.

Hunt describes the filming of *Frozen River* as gritty, which describes the film's overwhelmingly realistic mise-en-scene. "We went to a place that wasn't at all film savvy and the locals were into it. It was a story about their region and everybody knew this kind of stuff [smuggling] goes on, so everyone had a story to tell" (Macaulay). The locals also portray secondary characters throughout the film. Specifically, non-professional Native American actors from the reservation play the Native American characters with significant supporting roles in the film. In an interview with PBS talk show host Tavis Smiley, actress Melissa Leo also comments on the rough shooting and a film set that was not characteristic of a Hollywood production. For instance, when Smiley questions Leo about her character's haggard and unflattering appearance, Leo informs him that she did her own make-up and hair and that Ray's appearance is a product of knowing the character (Leo). Leo understands that Ray is a woman who could not afford high quality beauty products and this characteristic defines the character as a woman affected by her economic status on both inside and out.

*Frozen River* premiered at the 2008 Sundance Film Festival and won the Grand Jury Prize for Dramatic feature. Director Quentin Tarantino, a juror for the festival, said: "[*Frozen River*] put my heart in a vise and proceeded to twist that vise until the last frame" (Schoemer). Stephen Holden writes in his review of *Frozen River* that the film "evokes a perfect storm of present-day

woes: illegal immigration, ethnic tension, depressed real estate, high gas prices and dire poverty" (Holden E8). He adds that Melissa Leo's "magnificent portrayal of a woman of indomitable grit and not an iota of self-pity makes *Frozen River* a compelling study of individual courage" (Holden E8). *Chicago Sun Times* critic Roger Ebert writes that *Frozen River* is the story of two lives in economic emergency, and two women who are brave and resourceful and ready to do what's necessary" (Ebert "Frozen River"). David Bordwell comments that *Frozen River* is "resolutely unHollywood in its setting, theme, and characters—deglamorized women, especially—*Frozen River* still adheres to classical script structure" (Bordwell "Getting Real"). In spite of this, "The film is a sturdy example of how classic principles of construction can be applied to subject matter that is worlds away from our prototype of Hollywood filmmaking" (Bordwell). These three critics note that *Frozen River* is not simply about illegal immigration or smuggling, but rather the economic situation that drives the women to smuggle. This is a correct observation, but a closer textual analysis of *Frozen River* shows the post-9/11 atmosphere depicted in the film intersect with the women's familial and economic struggles and these collective issues become the driving force of the women's actions.

*Frozen River* received eleven national awards and nominations for fourteen other awards, including two Academy Award nominations: Best Original Screenplay (Courtney Hunt) and Best Actress (Melissa Leo). Some journalists, who believe that nominating a small, largely unseen, independent

film would alienate Oscar viewers (Surowiecki), criticized these nominations. Although the film was not widely distributed or seen in theaters, *Frozen River*'s recognition by the larger Hollywood film community solidifies this film's significance. Moreover, Academy recognition will ensure that audiences see the film over time.

### **Illegal Immigrant Trafficking on the U.S.-Canadian Border**

The events seen in *Frozen River* are based on actual occurrences of illegal immigrant smuggling and trafficking along the U.S.-Canadian border. At 5,500 miles in length, the U.S.-Canadian border is sometimes called “the longest unguarded border in the world” (Adelman 21). In comparison to the U.S.-Mexican border, which has been at the center of the immigration debate for some time, there has not been a similar emphasis on U.S.-Canadian border security. *The 9/11 Commission Report* notes that border security prior to September 11 was not seen as a national security concern and that the immigration system was widely viewed as increasingly dysfunctional and badly in need of reform.<sup>6</sup> Following September 11, significant changes were made to U.S. border security and immigration laws. The 9/11 Commission, established in November 2002, made specific recommendations designed to prevent further terrorist attacks, ranging from integrating the U.S. border security system into a larger network of screening points and creating a

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<sup>6</sup> There was some interest in the Canadian border security after the 1993 World Trade Center attack when it was learned that the terrorists forged Canadian immigration papers to gain access to the U.S. But the U.S. concern seemed to deal more with the Canadian government's leniency regarding organized crime than actual border security (Adelman 20).

biometric entry-exit screening segment. *The 9/11 Commission Report*, published in 2004, states that approximately 500 million people annually enter the U.S. at legal entry points but another 500,000 people enter the United States illegally. It states that “the challenge for national security in the age of terrorism is to prevent the very few people who may pose overwhelming risks from entering or remaining in the United States undetected” (383). This understanding of U.S. border security provides a socio-political context for *Frozen River*, the narrative of centers on an illegal immigration and smuggling across the U.S.-Canadian border.

Drug and immigrant smuggling is not unique along the U.S.-Canadian border or on Indian reservations. The issue of jurisdiction on Indian reservations frequently places the United States and Canadian governments and Native American leaders at odds.<sup>7</sup> For instance, the Canadian government raised concerns regarding illegal cigarette smuggling operations in the 1990s. In February 1994, Canada cut cigarette taxes in an attempt to thwart smuggling. At the time, Indian leaders expressed concerns that the increased surveillance of the reservation would increase tensions between the natives and the police. Despite these concerns, what resulted from the tax cut was an increase in smuggling of other goods such as drugs and illegal immigrants.

A 2006 *New York Times* article describes the smuggling trades on reservations in New York, Washington, Wyoming, Minnesota, Montana,

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<sup>7</sup> Since the 1960s, American Indian reservations have had the right to self-determination, guaranteed by the 1968 Indian Civil Rights Act and the 1975 Indian Self Determination Act. The relationship between reservations and the state is predominantly a trust relationship, where the Indian reservations are domestic dependent nations and are thus quasi-sovereign (O’Brien 258).

North Dakota, Arizona, and Wisconsin. It states that Indian reservations have become a critical link to the drug underworld by creating “mafia-like enterprises” (Kershaw 1.1). Among these reservations is the St. Regis Indian Reservation, a 14,000-acre reservation in upstate New York that straddles the U.S.-Canadian border. This reservation belongs to the Mohawk Nation of Akwesasne. The Mohawk’s tribal government allows them special protection from the American judicial system. This tribal sovereignty therefore makes the jurisdiction of this area difficult for border patrols. On the reservation, the smuggling of cigarettes, marijuana, ecstasy, and illegal immigrants supports the economy. In particular, the illegal drug trade is a \$1 billion operation. Border smuggling increases during the winter when Mohawks use ice bridges that form on the St. Lawrence River to transport goods. The ice bridges are largely unguarded by Customs officials and police, and can only be patrolled by helicopter. *Frozen River* depicts this illegal smuggling operation on the St. Regis.

### ***Frozen River* as a Neo-Neorealist Film**

*Frozen River* might be called a Neo-Neorealist film that borrows cinematic techniques reminiscent of those in Italian Neorealist films of the 1940s and early 1950s. Like some Italian Neorealist films, which represented the domestic struggles of Italians after World War II, the Neorealist techniques used in *Frozen River* capture an American society after September 11. Illegal activities and economic despair define this border region. Through

the presence of non-professional actors, who portray most of the secondary Native American characters, and the representation of the ordinary and everyday life, the film captures the socio-economic realities of the region.<sup>8</sup> The daily lives of the characters, such as Ray's struggles as a single mother, and community interaction on the Mohawk reservation, further capture the socio-economic realities of the region. Melissa Leo later commented that the film offered a "vast and good portrait of the Native situation" (Leo). Interestingly enough, Ray Eddy in *Frozen River* strikingly resembles Antonio Ricci in Vittorio De Sica's *Bicycle Thieves* (1948), a film that is considered a pinnacle of Italian Neorealist film. In *Bicycle Thieves*, Antonio Ricci is a working-class Italian struggling to support his family after World War II. He receives a job on the condition that he owns a bicycle. When the bicycle is stolen, Antonio and his son embark on a desperate search and he ultimately faces a decision to steal a bicycle or to continue living a life of poverty. Like Antonio, Ray is living in a dire economic situation intensified when she unexpectedly becomes the sole provider for her family. She struggles to pay bills and to save money so that she can afford a new home for her family, represents her achievement of the American dream. In the absence of the paternal figure, she eventually resorts to the illegal action of becoming a smuggler to care for her children and to buy their new home. In the face of economic and domestic despair, these two characters come to represent the struggles of working class postwar Italians and single mothers in the twenty-first century in a manner that is raw

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<sup>8</sup> These are the broad terms A.O. Scott uses to define Neo-Neorealism.

and harshly realistic. These characters come also to signify the affect current political and economic situations have on the domestic space.

### **Themes and Motifs in *Frozen River***

Cinematic techniques such as long takes, handheld camera work, and harsh close-ups capture and intensify the post-9/11 tensions that underlie the film's focus on family and community life. *Frozen River* opens with a montage sequence that establishes themes such as the questioning of national identity and the definition of a nation, motifs such as frozen tundra, cars, and borders, and the social-realist aesthetics of the film. Moreover, this opening sequence introduces the audience to the social and political characteristics that define the upstate New York region as well as introduces the film's two protagonists, Ray and Lila.

As the film's opening credits begin, ambient sounds of the weather, predominantly wind, are heard. This use of ambient sound establishes the significance of the frozen winter tundra, which acts as a motif and has a narrative function throughout the film. The credits transition to a shot of the frozen ground which pans up to a shot of the frozen St. Lawrence River and an ice bridge. This is the illegal link between the United States and Canada, which smugglers use to transport illegal goods and immigrants across the border. This shot is followed by a shot of the Seaway International Bridge; it is the legal border crossing between the U.S. and Canada. Courtney Hunt calls this shot one of the most critical in the film. The bridge, first seen from a distance and through a barbed wire fence, signifies the complexity of the

political tensions related to U.S.-Canadian border security. The bridge is then seen from the U.S. side of the border with the customs and border protection sign in the forefront when a commercial truck passes the sign to cross the border. From the Canadian side of the border, cars are seen crossing the border and a sign welcoming people to the United States is in the distance. Although seen in the shot, less emphasis is placed on the customs and border patrol signs. This international border crossing is also known as the Three Nations Crossing, renamed to honor the Akwesasne Mohawks in 2000. By beginning the film with a shot of these two border crossings before introducing the film's main protagonists, an emphasis is placed on the role that both illegal and legal borders will have in the film. Moreover, the shots of the Three Nations Crossing indicate the thematic role that national identity has in the film by informing the audience that multiple nationalities live in this region and of the ethnic and legal complexities of the area.

From the shots of the bridge, the film transitions to introducing the regional setting of the film. A single car is seen driving on an isolated, one-lane highway and entering Massena, an upstate New York border town. Scott Macaulay in *Filmmaker Magazine* calls *Frozen River* an example of regional independent cinema; it is a film that highlights the economic and political conditions of upstate New York border towns. The film introduces the main characters, Ray and Lila, and the film's main domestic space. Shots of a run-down property, a broken-down carousel, and the singlewide trailer where Ray and her two sons live establish this character's domestic space. With these

shots, the film transitions from having a predominantly political focus to incorporating a more socio-economic and familial focus. These two themes are interwoven throughout the film, often balancing each other out in the film's most critical narrative sequences: the smuggling runs.

Ray is first seen sitting in her car in front of the trailer. The shot begins on Ray's foot, slowly panning up her body and moving into a close-up of Ray's haggard and aged face as she smokes a cigarette. The camera remains in a tight close-up of Ray's face as she cries and smokes. A cut to an empty glove compartment in the car shows that the family's savings for a double-wide trailer are missing. It is later revealed that Ray's husband, a gambler, took the money and abandoned the family. This long sequence shows the desperate situation Ray finds herself in as she unexpectedly becomes the sole breadwinner in an already fractured family. Lila Littlewolf, Ray's eventual smuggling partner, is similarly introduced. Like Ray, Lila is a woman isolated by her community. She is first seen walking along a busy highway on her way to work. In a medium shot, Lila is presented as completely alone in the world as she slowly walks and as the cars speed past her.

Beginning with this opening sequence, we see the development of frozen tundra, cars, and Ray's physical body as dominant motifs throughout the film. Shots of the frozen tundra establish the harsh and isolated locale of the upstate New York region. In this sense, shots of the frozen river acts like the shots of the city and skyline in *In Between Days* and the shots of the highway in *Goodbye Solo*. They orient the audience with a place in the United

States they most likely have not seen on screen. These shots are of the link between the United States and Canada, serving as a visual reminder of the border and border relations throughout the film. Lastly, the shots of frozen tundra often depict a time lapse; in a shot before the final smuggling run, the frozen ice is clearly melting, foreshadowing the dangers of the upcoming smuggling run.

Cars are present throughout the entirety of the film. Beginning with the opening shots set at the border bridge, cars represent the constant movement of people from the U.S. to Canada and vice versa in this region. For Ray and Lila, the car supports their livelihood. Ray and Lila first interact after Lila steals Ray's car, a perfect vehicle to conduct a smuggling run. Her community prevents Lila, a known smuggler, from owning a car; this act keeps Lila from securing a job necessary to provide for her child. The car for Lila is symbol for her possible prosperity; Lila is seen in one tracking shot walking past a line of cars for sale. This shot links the cars to Lila's quest for the American dream and to one-day care for her child. Moreover, the car is the place where they conduct business and ultimately develop a bond. When used in this capacity, Ray's car has a similar function to Solo's taxi in *Goodbye Solo*. In the film's final shot, we see the significance of the car readdressed, when a car is seen transporting the family's new home to them.

Lastly, Ray's body is symbolic of her broken life. She is often filmed dressing, undressing, or applying make-up. As she is dressing, the camera pans over Ray's body and her multiple tattoos, indicating this character's life

experience. Harsh close-ups of Ray's face reflected in a mirror reveal her haggard and tired appearance. Often these sequences featuring Ray's body are long and they occur before a major event transpires. Notably, Ray is seen dressing prior to the final smuggling run, as she contemplates the need to go on this final and risky run.

### **The Fragility of the Family in *Frozen River***

Ray and Lila's broken familial structures largely define *Frozen River*; both families have an absent paternal figure. The absent paternal figure is also seen in *In Between Days*. A sequence set on Christmas morning captures the broken domestic space that exists in Ray's house. Because of the economic struggles and an absent paternal figure, the familial tensions between Ray and her teenage son, and the illegal activity with which Ray has become involved, the family structure is more at risk than before. A shot of the sun rising over the frozen St. Lawrence River precedes the sequence, indicating a time lapse and serving as a reminder that the frozen river serves an important socio-political function. This shot also continues the motif of frozen tundra being present through the film. A scene set inside the domestic space then follows this shot. Here Ray's sons are briefly unaware of their economic situation and broken family; they play with their Christmas presents and Ray cooks breakfast. A police officer knocks on the door; Ray's youngest son runs to the door and calls out, "Daddy," a reminder that their father is absent. In a series of shot-reverse-shots and close-ups, Ray and the police officer discuss Lila

and how she is a known smuggler. He warns Ray that she should no longer associate herself with Lila. This conversation is the one instance in the film where a member of Ray's community attempts to intervene and help her. Moreover, throughout their conversation, they are framed by the outside of the trailer, the domestic space. While their conversation is a reminder of the possible ramifications of Ray's smuggling, this framing serves as a reminder of Ray's status as a mother and of her domestic role. Once the police officer leaves, Ray realizes that the trailer had been set on fire, leading to a confrontation between Ray and her son, TJ. In the absence of his father, TJ becomes the paternal figure for his brother and he attempts to act as the man of the house. In an attempt to defrost the pipes, TJ accidentally sets the trailer on fire. The trailer is deeply symbolic. Not only is it her family's home but it is also emblematic of Ray's quest for the American dream, which is her desire to purchase a new and bigger house for her family. Having a destroyed home makes her quest for money and thus desire to smuggle more desperate. The confrontation between Ray and her son is deeply emotional and realistic. The sequence begins with Ray and TJ standing in front of the trailer, framing the burned corner. As Ray yells at her son for his irresponsibility, rather than moving into an expected shot-reverse-shot sequence as the characters converse, the camera holds the figures in a mid-long shot. By keeping the focus on the scope of the damage and not the just character's face, the sequence emphasizes the importance of this domestic space. The mother and son's argument becomes less about their damaged home and more about the

absent father. The shots become close-ups of Ray and TJ and the cuts quicken. In a moment reminiscent of when Ray held Lila at gunpoint, TJ points a blowtorch towards his mother, as if he is holding her at gunpoint and threatening her life. The two argue about his father, ultimately coming to an understanding that their family may be better off without him. As the argument becomes less frantic, the pacing of the shots lessens and TJ puts down the blowtorch. The camera then remains on a close-up of Ray's face as she embraces her son after their argument. This extensive sequence is followed by a shot of Ray getting dressed, and once again, her broken body has become a metaphor for her broken life.

### **The Four Smuggling Runs**

Ray and Lila's first three smuggling runs fragment the social-realist aspects of the film, such as the opening sequence and Ray and TJ's confrontation. These runs emphasize the film's central themes: post-9/11 anxieties, the fragility of the family, and the role of the community. Underlying all four runs is the audience's preconceived knowledge of immigrant smuggling, in particular its dangers and legal consequences in a post-September 11 United States. The first two smuggling runs establish the political and legal risks of smuggling illegal immigrants as well as the tensions that exist between Ray and Lila because of their cultural differences. The third run uses Ray's discrimination against a Pakistani couple to not only

reiterate post-9/11 fears of Muslim immigrants but also to showcase the role of the family and the power of a mother's bond with her child.

*Frozen River* addresses the political issue of illegal immigration and of border security through the cultural differences and ethnic tensions that define Ray and Lila's relationship during their first two smuggling runs. The women maintain two differing views about illegal immigration, both of which relate to their survival and the welfare of their families. For instance, Ray knows the dangers of smuggling illegal immigrants. But because Ray realizes that smuggling is a quick way for her to provide a new home for her children and she sees it as a short term occupation, she is willing to risk her safety, the stability of her family, and the safety of the country by smuggling illegal aliens. For Lila, smuggling is her only source of income because her community has effectively shunned her. Although Lila's smuggling continues to separate her from her community and her son, she continues to do so in hopes of one day providing for her child. These two views of illegal immigration contribute to a larger national debate about illegal immigration. Courtney Hunt explains that the United States is unclear about immigration as a nation. "The discussion is going on, it's developing and this is part of the discussion. Is it dangerous to have people streaming over the border? Yes it is. On the other hand, the large majority of those people coming in are coming with a good intent. So it's very much your typical American debate" (Macaulay). These characters, in many ways, voice what the audience may believe about illegal immigration in the United States. On one hand, it is

dangerous. Yet, as *Frozen River* indicates, illegal immigration can be a viable and lucrative source of income for those struggling under current economic conditions. Moreover, the immigrants smuggled by Ray and Lila can never be viewed as a threat to national security. Specifically, the Muslim immigrants they bring into the country are entering as a family; family values and reunification are the core principles of current American immigration policy.

While Ray and Lila have differing views on smuggling and its benefits, the women also have different understandings of the nation and national boundaries. This disagreement is prevalently seen through their dialogues during their first smuggling run. Lila convinces Ray that she can sell the car and the two women drive to Lila's associate, who is also a smuggler. Ray drives cautiously and holds Lila at gunpoint as Lila directs Ray to an ice bridge-border crossing. Ray recognizes the difference between the U.S. territory and Canadian territory, and she refuses to cross the border; Lila tells her that it is Mohawk land and that there is "no border." Long shots emphasize the frozen tundra, the magnitude of the river, and the dangers of crossing the ice bridge. In one shot, the car almost disappears into the horizon and the wintery landscape. It is soon revealed that Lila has tricked Ray into being the driver on a smuggling operation. When Ray refuses to take illegal immigrants across the border because it is a crime, Lila informs her that the smuggling operation is "free trade between nations." "This isn't a nation," Ray responds before Lila forces her to drive the car and two illegal immigrants to a hotel. This brief but important conversation shows the

women's different understandings of nationhood and of national borders.

Their conflicting understandings of nationhood and different experiences with national identity influence their actions for the remainder of the film.

In comparison to the first run, the second smuggling run is brief. This sequence builds on the post-9/11 anxieties presented in the first run, but also incorporates the theme of motherhood and the immigrant experience. Here Ray has accepted smuggling as a necessary way to provide for her children. Moreover, Ray and Lila find common ground through their experience as mothers, although Lila still maintains her disdain for "whites." This sequence introduced the threat of police authority. The shots of Ray and Lila in the car are still close-ups but the pacing is slower. A scene set in the domestic space is interspersed with this smuggling sequence. TJ is seen scamming elderly Mohawk women in order to pay the family's television bill. He is acting as the father figure in two ways. He is attempting to fill the void of his father's absence by fixing the family's financial problems. Yet, in order to do, he is acting as a con artist, which is how his gambling-addicted father often acted. The insertion of this brief sequence serves as incorporation of the domestic space within the political sphere. It also serves as a reminder of how these two worlds are related throughout this film.

It is during the third run and the film's climactic sequence that *Frozen River* emphasizes post-9/11 anxieties, the immigrant experience, and the importance of motherhood as a way to highlight and question the American identity. The sequence is set on Christmas Eve when Ray and Lila go on an

evening smuggling run. Before crossing the river, the women stop at a local diner and gas station for supplies. It is here that Lila encounters her infant son and mother-in-law. Lila stands in the entryway of the diner, watching her son. Although clearly separated, the family is in the same room. Ray watches this scene through a window. This sequence is reminiscent of an earlier scene in which Lila watches her son through a window. This scene connects Lila and Ray as mothers who, until this scene, had been separated by the cultural differences.

Ray and Lila proceed across the St. Lawrence and to the associate's house where they pick up a Pakistani couple. The couple carries a bag that Ray assumes could be a bomb. On their drive back across the river, Ray tosses the bag out the window. It is also during this drive that Ray calls her children, reminding her youngest son that Santa Claus will not come unless he is asleep. This brief conversation reminds the audience that Ray is a self-sacrificing mother before she is a smuggler, as she is trafficking illegal immigrants on Christmas Eve to purchase her children Christmas presents and their new home. When Ray and Lila drop the immigrant couple at the motel, they learn that the couple's infant child was in the bag. At this moment, a third mother is introduced into the narrative.

Ray and Lila return across the river desperately searching for the baby. In a way, they have become like the protagonists in *The Searchers*, who spend the majority of the film desperately searching for a kidnapped child. A long shot depicts the car disappearing into the dark night as the women begin their

search. The car is filmed from behind so that only the tail lights are seen as darkness envelopes the car, emphasizing the car's small size in comparison to frozen river tundra and the dark. The women stop the car and guided only by the car's headlights they search for the baby in the snow. There is an absence of a musical score; instead, the sound of wind and the car driving on snow is heard. The women discover the baby but fear it is dead and they frantically attempt to revive the baby. Ray quickly reverts from her tough smuggling persona and becomes a mother, instructing Lila to treat the baby in the same manner as the doctors did when her son was born not breathing. As the women drive back to the motel, a police officer stops them. The introduction of the police officer to the narrative is a reminder that Ray and Lila have committed a crime. Ray and Lila fear that the police officer will search the car and discover the child. In her conversation with the police officer, Ray tells him that Lila takes care of her children as an alibi for why they are driving late at night. Although a lie, this conversation foreshadows the film's conclusion. The police officer's presence also prolongs the baby's reunification with its mother and increases the possibility that it will die.

Miraculously, the infant is returned to its mother alive. There are two scenes of mothers interacting with the baby. The first occurs in the car when Ray and Lila, both mothers who took on the caretaker role for the child, realize that the baby is alive. Lila, in particular, feared the baby, called the infant "it" and did not want to revive it, becomes comforting towards the child. The second scene of reunification occurs between the infant and its

biological mother. This scene of reunification celebrates motherhood and the mother-child relationship. Shot from above, the weeping Pakistani woman cradles her child. The shot evokes the image of the Madonna and child and the biblical story of the birth of Christ on Christmas Eve.

### **Maternal Sacrifice in *Frozen River***

Ultimately, *Frozen River* can be classified as a maternal drama seen through the events that transpire during Ray and Lila's fourth and final smuggling run. In comparison to the first three runs, the fourth and final smuggling run further capitalizes on the preconceived political tensions. However, it also addresses a mother's need to provide for her child, and the role of the Mohawk community shown by the Mohawks significant presence in this smuggling sequence. The events of the third run rattle Lila, so much that she quits smuggling and is determined to have an honest career so that she can provide for her child and be readmitted into her community. Lila is seen wearing glasses as a sign of her development as a character. Earlier in the film, she refused to wear glasses, although they would afford her a better paying and legal job. This subtle change shows a recommitment to her child and her community. Ray, however, convinces her to go on one last run so that they can make enough money so that Ray can afford a new trailer and Lila can raise her son.

Unlike the previous runs, this smuggling run is more dangerous; the women travel off the grid to French-Canada to collect two female illegal

Chinese immigrants. The sequence begins at a seedy strip club, further linking the illegal immigration operation to other seemingly illegal activities. During the scene of money exchange, the camerawork becomes more frantic, quickly cutting between close-ups of Ray, Lila, and the French-Canadian snakehead.<sup>9</sup>

When the man refuses to pay the women and endangers the illegal immigrants, Ray and Lila frenetically agree to transport them. Ray then surprisingly pulls a gun on the snakehead; the sequence is reminiscent of when Ray and Lila first met, and Ray, without thinking, pulls a gun on Lila's trailer. Ray is shot in a low angle close-up and the camera pans to a tight close-up of her face, emphasizing both her desperation and her power in this sequence. As she drives away with the money and illegal aliens, Ray is shot. As opposed to the previous smuggling runs, the pacing is quickened and frantic, and becomes even more so when the police begin chasing the car. The low speed car chase goes through the reservation; shots of the cars show them driving through snow while shots inside the car feature unsteady camera movements and cuts between Ray and Lila. In a final moment of desperation, Ray drives the car onto black ice. The car is shot emerging from the dark forest, with only the headlights illuminating the ice-covered river in front of them. A rare shot shows Ray and Lila sitting side by side in the car, their faces barely lit by the headlights before driving onto the ice. The pacing and lighting of the shots show the dangers of the situation. Shots inside the car are unsteady, often bouncing while close-ups of Ray and Lila's faces are quick,

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<sup>9</sup> A snakehead is an agent who pays for the illegal immigrants to enter the U.S. The snakehead character in *Frozen River* is implied to be a Quebecois, adding another contested national identity into the film's framework.

until the car goes into the ice. They frantically vacate the car and the chase transitions onto foot until the group is picked up by another smuggling agent and brought to an older Mohawk woman's house.

At this moment, the focus of this now-unsuccessful smuggling run is on the Mohawk community and Ray's maternal sacrifice. The Mohawk tribal council is seen deciding what punishments Lila will receive, while the older Mohawk woman is seen aiding Lila, Ray, and the illegal immigrant women. The council votes to expel Lila from the reservation, which she agrees to, although she will not see her son for five years. Lila's action prevents Ray's arrest and ensures that Ray can continue to care for her children. Ray, instead, turns herself into the police. She is arrested and sentenced to four months in jail while Lila becomes the primary caretaker for her family.

Ray is an example of the self-sacrificing mother, which film theorist Linda Williams describes in the essay, "Something Else Besides a Mother." Williams focuses her article on the Hollywood maternal melodrama *Stella Dallas* (1937) and she highlights the two typical characterizations of the maternal melodrama: the portrayal of the mother as a bad woman and the mother's ultimate sacrifice. A classical Hollywood maternal melodrama often depicts the mother as an immoral woman who does not conform to the domestic space and patriarchal system. Because she is a bad woman, the mother must therefore forfeit her relationship with her child.<sup>10</sup> Stella's

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<sup>10</sup> In *Stella Dallas*, for example, Stella is a working-class floozy who marries an upper-class man. But Stella does not exhibit the proper behavior of an upper-class wife; she drinks, plays music and plays practical jokes. Because she is an improper wife, her only admirable characteristics are associated with her role as a mother. Although the audience is reassured

sacrifice preserves the integrity of the domestic and patriarchal spaces by removing the presence of the working class mother from the family structure. As Williams explains: “The device of devaluing and debasing the actual figure of the mother while sanctifying the institution of motherhood is typical of the woman’s film and the subgenre of the maternal melodrama” (Williams 137). Although *Frozen River* is not an example of a classic melodrama, the film functions as a maternal drama when Ray sacrifices herself not only for the benefit of her children, but also to protect Lila and her son. Ray’s sacrifice allows Lila to live independently from the Mohawk community, for Lila and her son to be reunited, and for her own children to live in a new, used trailer. In the end an unorthodox family structure results from the actions of women saving themselves without resorting to the act of marriage. The repaired carousel symbolizes this new family. In the film’s opening sequence, the carousel is seen outside the run-down trailer. Throughout the film, TJ argues with his mother about whether or not he should fix the carousel and sell it in order to pay the bills. By the film’s conclusion, TJ has fixed the carousel. *Frozen River*’s final shot is of TJ, his brother, and Lila’s son using the carousel as Lila, the family’s new caretaker in the absence of Ray, watches the new siblings interact. Like the once broken carousel, these once broken families have been repaired.

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that Stella is a dedicated mother, she seen as a negative woman from the perspective of the upper-class community. Therefore, in order to benefit something greater than herself, Stella “sacrifices her only connection to her daughter in order to propel her into an upper-class world of surrogate family unity” (Williams 137).

### **Conclusion: A Version of the American Dream**

Allan Carlson asserts in *The American Way* that “family and religiously-grounded community...served in the twentieth century as the dominant imagery for American self-understanding” (Carlson x). In twenty-first century America, Carlson states that one aspect that defines a present day American family is “the affirmation of the family as the natural and irreplaceable human community.” The American family is defined as a man and woman living in a socially sanctioned bond called marriage for the purpose of propagating and rearing children, sharing intimacy and resources, and conserving lineage, property, and tradition” (Carlson 169). Yet in *Frozen River*, we are presented with a twenty-first century vision of the American family that stands in opposition to this definition and therefore questions American national identity. Ray and Lila are two characters with different understandings of the American experience as result of their national identities. Their differences initially prevent them from achieving success. However, at the film’s conclusion, their single parent households are merged into one and the women become mutually dependent on one another to ensure the survival of their families. In the absence of paternal figures, the women share a property, resources, and ultimately child rearing responsibilities to create a new American family.

As will be clear by the end of this essay, a comparison can be made between Ray and Lila, and between Solo and William in *Goodbye Solo*. In both films, unlikely relationships develop between characters of different

ethnic backgrounds. By each film's conclusion, the friendships benefit the characters and push the characters towards achieving a better life. In *Goodbye Solo*, Solo's relationship with William ultimately pushes Solo to try harder for the American dream. In *Frozen River*, the women save each other and form a unique family structure, thus achieving an unlikely version of the American dream. Actress Melissa Leo explains the significance of the relationship between Ray and Lila. She says, "That perhaps as Ray does we find ourselves living besides someone that we don't even care to look at, to know, to name... that person could save our lives one day" (Leo). Yet it remains unclear at the film's conclusion how the women will benefit from this new situation. They are now explicitly dependent on each other's friendship for survival and once released from prison, Ray will still struggle, arguably more than before, to find permanent employment. It is also unclear if Ray has learned a lesson about the dangers and legal consequences following her arrest. Lila returned to smuggling once before, and in the face of a difficult future after Ray's release from prison, the women very likely could return to smuggling. What is clear at the film's conclusion is that the characters in *Frozen River* achieve a version of the American dream, although it is atypical and not guaranteed to thrive.

## *In Between Days*

### Introduction

Director So Yong Kim's debut feature film *In Between Days* is a personal reflection on the assimilation process. In the 1980s, Kim immigrated to the United States from Korea at age twelve and lived for a time in an isolated Korean neighborhood. Although set in an unnamed city, *In Between Days*, teenage protagonist, Aimie, is a version of Kim during that time in her life. With this intimate narrative, Kim portrays a nuanced articulation of what constitutes one's identity.

Aimie (played by non-professional actor Jiseon Kim) has recently arrived in the U.S. and she settles an unnamed North American city with her mother. They live in the city's Koreatown and Aimie begins the assimilation process by taking an English-language immersion course at a local high school. Aimie remains socially and culturally isolated from her classmates and her community; her only constant interaction is with her friend, Tran (Taegu Andy Kang). Like Aimie, Tran is Korean, although it is unclear if he is a recent immigrant. Tran is slightly more accustomed to American life than Aimie. The film follows their friendship as Aimie develops unrequited feelings for Tran and as Aimie becomes ever more disconnected from her community. A letter that Aimie has written to her father, who is separated from her mother and remains in South Korea, narrates the film. The letter voices the isolation that Aimie experience as a teenager and a new immigrant, as well as Aimie's misconceptions about the society to which she is adapting.

*In Between Days* captures the every day occurrences that influence one girl's search for her place and identity in a new culture. *In Between Days* offers a subtle socio-cultural commentary on the isolating nature of the immigration experience. This can be read as intrinsically linked to the Korean immigrant experience. While this film does not overtly address American anxieties after September 11 as in *Frozen River*, *In Between Days* places immigration into a present day context and questions the nature of American identity in the twenty-first century.

### **Korean Immigration in the United States**

Since the late nineteenth century, there have been three waves of Korean immigration to the United States. The first Korean immigrants were male laborers who arrived in Hawaii in the 1900s. Sugar plantation owners needed these immigrant workers to replace Chinese workers banned by the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882.<sup>11</sup> Because these laborers immigrated for purely economic reasons, they typically remained loyal to their homeland and did not intend to assimilate to American life. Moreover, these immigrants were unmarried men who did not establish families in the United States, further preventing these immigrants from permanently settling in the U.S. Korean immigration to Hawaii and the mainland United States effectively

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<sup>11</sup> The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 barred practically all Chinese migrants from entering the United States for ten years. It was the first federal law passed banning a group of immigrants solely on the basis of their nationality. See: Gyory, pp. 242-259.

ended with the passage of the Immigration Act of 1924.<sup>12</sup> A second wave of Korean immigration occurred from 1951 to 1965. These immigrants consisted of the wives of American servicemen, orphans, and students. Their entry into the United States was made possible by the McCarran-Walter Act of 1952, which removed all racial and ethnic bars to immigration and naturalization and provided for family unification, and the Korean War (1950-1953), which established close ties between the U.S. and South Korea and generated sympathy among Americans (Jo 6-7). The federal government offered aid to South Korea for restoration following the war and enabled Koreans to emigrate to the U.S. Yet the number of Korean immigrants entering the United States remained small until the passage of the Immigration Act of 1965 which initiated a third wave of Korean immigration. This act led to a change in both the number of immigrants and the demographic characteristics of the immigrants entering the U.S. From 1969 to 1973, the percentage of Koreans in the U.S. rose from 0.7 percent to 3.8 percent. In four years, the United States admitted more than 70,000 Koreans (Jo 14). Moreover, instead of single male laborers, these immigrants were multi-generational families: grandparents, parents, and children.

Despite the increase of Koreans, living in the United States there has been a slow assimilation process for the Korean immigrant community. First, intergenerational differences within families related to identity, language, facility, and adjustment are more pronounced than before (Jo xii). These

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<sup>12</sup> The Immigration Act of 1924, or the Johnson-Reed Act, excluded Chinese, Japanese, Koreans, and other Asians on the grounds that were racially ineligible for naturalized citizenship, a condition that was declared by the Supreme Court in the early 1920s (Ngai 7).

intergenerational differences can prevent parental figures from grasping and adjusting to American culture in the same capacity as children or young adults. Second, Moon H. Jo explains that Korean ethnocentrism, the language barrier, self-employment in ethnic enclaves, and both subtle and overt racism by the white majority has not facilitated the complete participation of Koreans into American life (Jo 16). Korean immigrants are more handicapped when entering the U.S. for a number of reasons. First, unlike Asian immigrants from the Philippines or Hong Kong, Koreans have not had experience with Anglo-colonial settlers; their exposure and knowledge of the English language is thus limited. Second, many Korean immigrants entered the U.S. during the 1970s and 1980s, a time when the country was experiencing slow or gradual economic growth, and at a time when knowledge based jobs were replacing unskilled jobs. At the same time, public attitude towards newly arrived immigrants from Southeast Asia deteriorated; immigrants faced discrimination and, sometimes, violence. A notorious incident of violence directed towards the Korean American community is the Los Angeles riot of 1992. During the riot, national television broadcasted images of a Korean shop owner killing a black teenager and black men targeting Korean stores.<sup>13</sup> The images have had a lasting impact on the perception of the Korean American community in the United States.

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<sup>13</sup> Today the news footage of the murder of Latasha Harlins by Korean shopowner Soon Ja Du, as well as the Rodney King beating, and their aftermath can be watched on YouTube.com. Web sites such as YouTube ensure that the images can be easily accessed and have a lasting presence in American society.

The Los Angeles riot of 1992 is an extreme example of discrimination against the Korean American community. While institutional discrimination against Korean Americans has largely subsided, “Asians are still targets of subtle and sometimes overt hostility from certain segments of the white majority” (Jo 148). In response to this hostility, Asians living in America adjust to or accommodate the white minority by becoming passive. They make a living by operating small businesses, which minimizes social interaction with the public. Asians are therefore labeled “quiet” or the “model” Americans. Isolation and separation from American life is thus a method for Asian immigrants to assimilate to American life (Jo 148).

This understanding of the experience of Korean immigrants living in the United States influences an analysis of *In Between Days*. The film addresses the Korean immigrant experience from a social-domestic level. The generational differences that exist between Aimie and her mother are glaringly apparent to the audience. Aimee lives in a single parent household. Aimee’s mother works full-time and they have a tenuous relationship. In comparison to Aimee, her mother has had a different experience adjusting to American life. The Korean immigrant women living in the U.S. generally work outside of the home whereas, in Korea, women are expected to fulfill a traditional homemaker role. Nevertheless, there has not been a radical transformation in gender roles in the home. Korean immigrant wives “believe that the authority of men as family heads should remain unchallenged for the family order” (Pak 38). Yet in Aimee’s household, the absence of the father figure challenges

traditional Korean family dynamics, presenting an atypical Korean immigrant narrative.

Aimee and her mother are residents of a Koreatown in an urban setting; they live on the outskirts of the city and are often isolated from the non-Korean community. They speak only Korean in the home and Aimee struggles to learn English, hindering her assimilation process. In a post-9/11 context, *In Between Days* is both director So Yong Kim's personal reflection on her own immigration experience as well as a subtle socio-cultural narrative about Korean immigration. The film highlights the struggles of new immigrants living in the United States. Aimie's status as an immigrant teen is not a theme, but a fact. She drifts through adolescence on her journey towards assimilation. The Neorealist aesthetic used throughout the film counteracts the dismaying and confusing real world to which Aimie struggles to adapt. In the face of alternative modes of cinema, Neorealism depicts the routine of a young immigrant out of the necessity to tell the story and to ask the question: what is an American? This question, like Aimie's future at the film's conclusion, is left unanswered.

### **So Yong Kim: Biography and Influences**

So Yong Kim was born in Prusan, Korea, and immigrated to the United States at age twelve. Her family settled in a Koreatown in Los Angeles and later moved to Covina, California. She received an M.F.A from the Art Institute in Chicago, where she met her husband, director Bradley Rust Gray.

Kim first worked as an installation artist and experimental filmmaker in Chicago and New York, before transitioning to working in independent narrative cinema. Kim has stated that she did not see herself working in narrative cinema until she wanted to write about her personal experience as an immigrant in the United States (Kim and Gray). She believed that narrative cinema afforded her the best opportunity to present a story such as the one seen in *In Between Days*.

Kim and Gray often collaborate on their filmmaking projects; their production company is soandbrad.inc. For instance, Gray is a producer and co-writer of *In Between Days*. They have also collaborated on *Treeless Mountain* and Gray's two feature films, *Salt* (2003) and *The Exploding Girl* (2009). Ben Howe, a producer on *Treeless Mountain* (2008) and *The Exploding Girl* said: “It’s almost as if [Kim and Gray] think together. It’s definitely one or the other’s film, but every decision is made with the other one close in mind” (Lim AR16). Their spousal and artistic partnership has had both a significant influence on the production of their films as well as their film’s aesthetic characteristics. Kim and Gray are described as “miniaturists who specialize in narrowing the frame...given their fondness for tight close-ups, and in how they seem to filter the world through the consciousness of their protagonists” (Lim AR16). Moreover, their films are described as “poetic and realistic in equal measure, and they have a knack for zeroing in on seemingly small moments and making them feel anything but small” (Lim AR16). This comparison is best seen in Gray’s first feature *Salt* and in Kim’s *In Between*

*Days*. Kim cites *Salt*, a road movie and love story set in Iceland, as a major influence on *In Between Days*. Like *In Between Days*, *Salt* focuses on the formative experiences of teenage characters.

In addition to Gray's work, Kim cites *Rosetta* (Jean Pierre and Luc Dardenne, 1999), *Unknown Pleasures* (Zhang Ke Jia, 2002), and *Rebels of the Neon God* (Tsai Ming-liang, 1992) as having the greatest influence on *In Between Days*. While all three films feature disaffected teenage protagonists, it is *Rosetta* that had the most significant influence on *In Between Days'* narrative and aesthetics. Described as a “terminally bleak, stoically drab portrait of a 17-year-old Belgium girl,” *Rosetta* utilizes handheld camerawork and a minimal screenplay to capture the day-to-day routine of the title character (Holden B13). Social circumstances define Rosetta; she lives in the outskirts of Seraing in a trailer with her alcoholic mother, desperately searches for steady employment, and has a wary friendship with Riquet whose job she covets. Although she is the protagonist, Rosetta remains a detached character whom the audience never gets to know. “The closest the movie comes to examining the inner life of a character,” one reviewer wrote in 1999, “whose entire existence revolves around finding a job is when we overhear her muttering bedtime prayers” (Holden B13). These prayers become a method for Rosetta to find her identity and remind herself of her goals, “addressing herself first as “you,” then attaching the same words to “I” as though retrieving a precarious sense of self that had been abandoned in the daily grind” (Holden B13). Much of the plot and aesthetic techniques, such as

handheld camerawork and a minimal screenplay, seen in *Rosetta* are emulated in *In Between Days*. Most significantly, similar to the way Rosetta recites a prayer, Aimie reads a letter to her absent father as a way for Aimie to navigate her new American identity.

### **Production History**

To finance the production of *In Between Days*, Gray and Kim sold *Salt* to the Sundance Channel and used their personal savings. The main actors, Jiseon Kim and Taegu Andy Kang, are non-professional actors. Kim and Gray cast Jiseon Kim after meeting her in a Korean café in Fort Lee, New Jersey, a town with a high Korean immigrant population. Like the character Aimie, Jiseon Kim immigrated to the United States at age fifteen and lived primarily in a Korean neighborhood. *In Between Days* was produced when Jiseon was twenty years old and she had primarily lived in an isolated Korean community in New Jersey. In this sense, Jiseon Kim's immigration experience was similar to director So Yong Kim's and in turn, similar to the character Aimie's immigration experience. So Yong Kim met Taegu Andy Kang in a Toronto nightclub and persuaded him to play Tran. The initial script of *In Between Days* chronicled three decades of Aimie's life but eventually edited down to fit Jiseon Kim's timid personality and the film's limited budget.

*In Between Days* was filmed over a two-week period in Toronto. The original story was set in Los Angeles but So Yong Kim wanted to distance the film from her personal background. New York City was briefly considered

because of its large Korean population, but this setting seemed “too urban” to convey the theme of isolation that is aesthetically depicted by shots of open, uncongested city space (Gray and Kim). Toronto was eventually decided on because a location scout found an apartment that could easily be used as the main set. This location shooting decision challenges the idea that an American film has to be filmed in the United States. So Yong Kim, Bradley Gray, cinematographer Sarah Levy, and Jiseon Kim lived together in the apartment used as Aimie’s house. The act of living together immersed the actors into the characters they were portraying. Often the actors improvised their conversations, giving the film a more realistic atmosphere. Kim compares this aspect of the film to her work as an installation artist and experimental filmmaker. “You create an atmosphere or environment and you put people in these installations, and you allow them to experience that environment around them” (Kim and Gray). It was important for the film’s overall realistic style and form that Jiseon and Taegu be immersed into the story and the characters they were portraying.

Ultimately, So Yong Kim has stated that although *In Between Days* is a story that had to be told in narrative form, she made this film without an audience in mind. She explains: “When I made the film, I wanted to focus on specific emotions I had while I was growing up, that I could not articulate in words. I didn’t think of reaching an audience or think about the end result (indieWIRE)”. *In Between Days* premiered at the 2006 Sundance Film Festival where the film won a special jury prize for independent vision. The

film screened at the Berlin Film Festival's International Forum of New Cinema in 2006, where it won the FIPRESCI Prize<sup>14</sup>.

Critical reception of *In Between Days*, although limited, notes the relationship between Kim's personal story and Aimie's characterization. Lisa Schwarzbaum of *Entertainment Weekly* calls *In Between Days* "A quiet specimen of personal storytelling at its most exciting...Aimie makes her way precariously through teen-girl romantic confusion heightened by cultural dislocation and the loneliness such distance from the familiar brings" (Schwarzbaum "Review"). Dennis Lim writing in *The Village Voice* notes that the film is "painful, funny, unsentimental, perfectly measured in its ambiguities" (Lim "Friends without Money"). He also comments on the film's status as an independent film and how this affects its mise-en-scene. "It is exemplary low-budget filmmaking, the rare DV movie with an assured visual style and a strong sense of place, moving between the claustrophobic sanctuary of a teenager's pink bedroom and evocative in-between spaces like bus shelters and highway overpasses" (Lim "Friends without Money"). Most notably, Lim compares *In Between Days* to Ramin Bahrani's 2006 feature *Man Push Cart*. He writes that like *Man Push Cart*, Kim's film addresses the daily tribulations of assimilation and "it derives much of its power from daring to leave a lot unsaid."<sup>15</sup> Here Lim connects *In Between Days* to another

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<sup>14</sup> The FIPRESCI Prize is presented by the International Federation of Film Critics, a society of film critics and journalists who award prizes during international film festivals.

<sup>15</sup> Lim also compares *In Between Days* to Kelly Reichardt's 2006 film *Old Joy*. A.O. Scott identifies Reichardt's 2008 film *Wendy and Lucy* as a Neo-Neorealist film.

notable Neo-Neorealist work, linking this film to the film movement immediately after its 2006 release.

### ***In Between Days* as a Neo-Neorealist Film**

*In Between Days* is a representation of the every day experience of existing in time and space. Realist elements such as an absence of a score, limited dialogue, long takes, natural light, and handheld close-ups capture the banality of daily life while ultimately depicting the emotional assimilation process for a new, teenaged immigrant. As film critic A.O. Scott writes in his review of *In Between Days*, director Kim “uses rough, naturalistic cinematography and sound design to bring us into a state of remarkably intimate sympathy with her confused, inarticulate heroine” (Scott “Immigrant” E5). Beginning with the film’s opening shot a close-up of Aimie with her hooded-head looking down as she crunches through snow, the film captures what Scott calls, “the ordinary dimensions of experience.” In this shot, Aimie is walking towards the camera but seemingly going nowhere. A dark sky as the sun rises, telephone wires, and apartment buildings frames her figure. This initial close-up introduces Aimie in a way that is similar to the introduction of Ray Eddy in *Frozen River*. A tight close-up reflects the isolated and desperate state of these characters. Furthermore, similar shots of Aimie walking repeat throughout the film, often reflecting Aimie’s isolated mental state. In other shots, Aimie walks with Tran, capturing the playful nature of their friendship, as they exist in their environment. For instance, a long take shows Aimie and Tran walking at sunset. As they walk towards the

camera, their bodies darken out and the sky illuminates a background of telephone wires. There is no spoken dialogue and the only sounds are made by their feet as they walk.

Aimie is foremost seen in her daily routine. She attends an English immersion class, spends time Tran, and tends to her family's apartment while her mother works. Notably, Aimie is frequently separated from groups or completely alone. In an initial sequence of Aimie eating lunch in a school cafeteria, students and noise surround her. However, the tight close-up of Aimie as she eats and does not interact with others shows the isolation she is experiencing. A quick cut to other students in the cafeteria reveals that unlike her peers, Aimie has chosen not to interact.<sup>16</sup> In the following shot of Aimie in school, she engages with the course material, although she doodles and does not participate in class. Aimie's interactions and conversations with Tran, including playing video games at an arcade, drinking coffee at a café, and watching television, are a part of her everyday routine. Yet she remains disconnected from the community. They only speak in Korean and when they interact with their classmates, Tran usually speaks in English for Aimie. The repeated sequences of her day-to-day activities show the audience the mundane nature of Aimie's life. We learn from these sequences that these isolated and isolating actions define her life.

A critical aspect of Aimie's daily routine is her use of public transportation. Aimie is frequently traveling on buses or trains between the

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<sup>16</sup> In the school scenes, Aimie's peers are multi-ethnic yet when Aimie and Tran interact with students outside of school they tend to be Asian. It is never clearly indicated if these students are Korean.

Korean community where she lives and the city's center. Often her image is reflected in windowpanes or Aimie is looking out windows. These scenes of transportation become moments where Aimie reflects on her experiences as they capture the mundane facets of her daily life. These scenes also further show how Aimie is isolated from the community, including her isolation from Tran. For instance, in one scene Aimie and Tran are standing at a bus stop. Aimie is in foreground, on the left side of the frame, while Tran is in the background on the right. The glass walls of the bus stop separate them. Despite their friendship, these two characters frequently misread their feelings towards each other or become separated by circumstance.

### **The Americanization of Aimie**

In comparison to Solo, the immigrant protagonist in *Goodbye Solo*, Aimie is in the beginning stages of her assimilation process. Government institutions such as the school system integrate Aimie into Western society by teaching her the English language and other social customs. However, she rarely speaks English outside of her home. Aimie's refusal to speak English therefore poses an issue for her and her mother's integration into American society. As Allan Carlson notes, the household is a powerful vehicle for the assimilation of new immigrants into national life (Carlson x). Aimie could potentially teach her mother English but because she does not, Aimie remains connected to her Korean identity, hinders the shaping of her American identity, and continually isolates herself. In fact, Aimie only speaks English

on two occasions throughout the film, when she asks to drop her English-immersion class and when she interacts with Michelle, a more Americanized Korean whose company Tran prefers.<sup>17</sup> When she does, her voice is quiet, she is inarticulate, and she is shot in a tight close-up that shows her uncomfortable nature. Aimie's decision not to learn English in a school setting only hinders her integration into American life and causes issues as Aimie begins to associate "Americanness" with consumerism and sexual activity.

Americanization in this film is correlated with consumerism.<sup>18</sup> The more products Aimie uses, from clothing to technology to cigarettes, the more American she believes she will appear to her peers. We see Aimie use the refund from her incomplete English-immersion course to buy a piece of jewelry. In another scene, she enters a lingerie store to improve her physical appearance and to attract Tran's attention. Before Aimie and Tran attend a party, Aimie is seen applying make-up and hair product to seem more like her Westernized peers. Yet at this party, Tran abandons Aimie for a group of more Westernized teenagers. Although filled with people and noise, Aimie is separated in the room from the crowd, similar to the scenes set at her school. The result of this isolation pushes Aimie to use sex as a mode of locating and cementing her new identity.

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<sup>17</sup> Aimie is physically contrasted with Michelle. In comparison to Aimie, Michelle is outgoing and fully assimilated to American culture.

<sup>18</sup> This association with consumerism and American culture is also seen in *Goodbye Solo*, where Solo is fascinated by a cell phone camera and his stepdaughter's ability to send him pictures with her cell phone. In *Frozen River*, consumerism is linked to working class identity. The climactic sequence is set on Christmas Eve when Ray struggles to buy her young son the perfect Christmas present.

Aimie's Americanization occurs because of her sexual objectification. In one scene, Aimie and Tran are lying on a bed together as Aimie naps. In a point-of-view shot that pans from Aimie's breasts to her head, Tran sees Aimie as a sexual object. When Tran grabs Aimie's breast, she slaps him. Although Tran later apologizes for this action, his sudden sexual interest in her spurs Aimie to reconsider her appearance, leading her to buy new clothes. Consumerism in *In Between Days* is thus linked to Aimie's status as a sexual object. This becomes glaringly apparent in the film's concluding scene, in which Aimie and the character Steve have just engaged in an implied sexual activity. Throughout the film, Aimie is shown to be naïve and sexually inexperienced, leading to her complicated assimilation process because she does not engage in typical American sexual behavior. Consumerism and therefore sex becomes the easiest way that Aimie can easily assimilate to the American culture presented to her by her peers.

### **Familial Relationships in *In Between Days***

In addition to Tran, Aimie's central relationships are with her parents. Her mother is her primary caretaker while her father remains in South Korea. Later in the film that Aimie's parents are revealed as either separated or divorced, and her father abandoned the family. This fact connects Aimie's family to the families in *Frozen River*; the paternal figures have abandoned the female characters leading to financial issues, isolation, and family disputes.

Because of her father's abandonment, Aimie and her mother are distant from one another. Aimie's mother, who works long hours to provide for Aimie, is often absent as Aimie goes about her daily routines. Aimie is seen eating, cleaning the apartment, and living alone while her mother is at work and disengaged from her life. In one sequence, Aimie asks her mother for money. Although they are engaged in a conversation, Aimie's mother never makes eye contact with her daughter and instead tells her to go study. This separation between mother and daughter is seen throughout the film. Their scenes are quick conversations and rarely shot in the same frame. The turning point in their relationship occurs when Aimie's mother asks her how she would feel about having a new father. This is the only instance when Aimie's father is discussed within the narrative and shot in a tight close-up together. Aimie's mother is in the foreground; her head is slightly cut out of the frame and blurry while Aimie is in the background. In her final interaction with her mother, Aimie remains distant. Aimie hears her mother crying in a separate room and approaches her, but remains behind a door as she watches her mother cry. The doorframe slightly obscures the shots of her mother. Although these characters are shown having an improved relationship at the film's relationship and understanding of one another, they remain detached and isolated from one another.

Aimie longs for an intimate parental bond as we see during her frequent attempts to connect to her absent father through a letter. Her father never physically appears in the film and we never learn if Aimie sends the

letter.<sup>19</sup> Aimie's relationship with her father is just as isolated and detached as her relationship with her mother. The lingering presence of this absent paternal figure influences the film, much like the absent paternal figures in *Frozen River*. Yet while the absent father figure drives the plot in *Frozen River*, for Aimie her absent father represents her life before she lived in the United States and her attempt to make sense of her new identity. These two facts are voiced as Aimie reads to the letter to her father.

Voiceovers of Aimie reading the letter she has written to her father break the narrative, giving the film an episodic structure. There are nine voiceovers in total and their frequency increases as Aimie becomes more disconnected from Tran, her mother, and her community. Aimie's low and melancholic voice reading the letter is matched with shots of open and expansive spaces, which contain apartment buildings, telephone wires, sky and clouds at different times in the day, and parking lots. These repeated shots emphasize the removed area where Aimie lives. The letter initially fictionalizes Aimie's new life when Aimie describes her diverse group of friends. Yet, we never see Aimie closely interact with anyone except Tran. The letter describes Aimie's relationship to her new surroundings and to the winter environment. "It was really cold today," she says. "Felt like my skin was being ripped apart." This voiceover is the one instance where the shot is not of an expansive space. Rather, the shot is of a windowpane covered in snowflakes. Most significantly, the letter voices the separation Aimie feels

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<sup>19</sup> In *Goodbye Solo* and *Frozen River*, the absent families are seen in photographs. Aimie does not have a photograph of her father.

from her father. She tells her father to send her regards to her grandmother and her aunt, who presumably also remain in South Korea. She expresses to her father her disappointment that he is not visiting and her voice conveys a longing for her father to be present in her life. “I wish you could come here soon because there is so much here that I want to show you.” This letter is contrasted with the letters Aimie steals from a car. Aimie and Tran are seen stealing car radios. While in one car, Aimie discovers a pack of letters. After she carefully examines the family photos (there are none in her own home), she steals the letters and photographs. Over the course of the film, Aimie becomes more isolated and she often returns to these photographs. Before she returns the letters and photographs, there is a voiceover and a shot of the sun rising over Aimie’s apartment building and telephone wires. Aimie says, “I miss you so much but don’t you miss me? Just wondering.” The implications of this voiceover are that Aimie’s letter is not going to be sent or that her father will not respond. The stolen letters represent the family she does not have but desires. By returning the letters and photographs, she is returning the essence of this stranger’s family, a relationship that is missing in Aimie’s life. Due to the absence of a family, Aimie has lost her sense of identity.

In Aimie’s letter, she identifies an overpass as a significant place for her in her new environment. She says, “Dad I want to show you this place. Whenever I go there, I feel much better, like I have wings and can fly.” Her description of the bridge in her letter implies that some of the shots that narrate the letter are from the bridge. For instance, the shot that accompanies

her description of the bridge is a long shot of telephone wires and trees at sunset. The overpass is where Aimie experiences the world and contemplates her identity. She is often shot walking across the bridge or watching the trains arrive on the platform. She and Tran are seen joking around on the platform. In one sequence, Aimie is seen crying on the bridge. Most importantly, the overpass is a link to the train station that connects the Koreatown to the city's urban center. The bridge therefore serves as a literal bridge between Aimie's immigrant identity and Aimie's burgeoning American identity.

## Conclusions

*In Between Days* ends ambiguously. Aimie and Tran's friendship has fallen apart and they are not speaking. Both end up at a party held at the same apartment as the first party. Yet their roles have reversed. Tran sits isolated from the group in a red chair while Aimie has a questionable sexual experience with a character named Steve. Aimie and Steve lie in bed as they casually talk in English and eventually sit in silence. As Steve exits the room, Tran is seen standing outside the doorway. The door shuts before Tran can enter the room, further separating him from Aimie. The scene cuts to a final close-up of Aimie; her face is lost and confused. This open-ended conclusion leaves several unanswered questions about what just occurred between these characters, about the future of Aimie and Tran's friendship, and the future of Aimie's assimilation.

In its nuanced contemplation of identity, *In Between Days* captures both the experience of being a new immigrant and a teenager. It is director So Yong Kim's personal reflection on her own experience as a Korean immigrant living in the United States. Through motifs such as shots of open spaces, public transportation, the overpass, and letters, the film shows not only the mundane nature of daily life but also how a character navigates their understanding of identity. It is through Aimie's relationships her with best friend and her distant parents that the film depicts Aimie's search for an identity. She tries to use American products, such as clothes and technology, and practices, such as sexual relationships, as a way to assimilate into American culture. The open-ended closing shot indicates that Aimie has not assimilated and remains shut off from society. *In Between Days* is thus a film about the loss of identity and, in the face of this loss, what comes to define identity.

## *Goodbye Solo*

### **Introduction**

Iranian-American director Ramin Bahrani's third feature film *Goodbye Solo* is the story of one man's journey for the American dream. In comparison to *Frozen River*, a heightened struggle for the American dream defined by its post-9/11 anxieties, and *In Between Days*, the story of a teenage immigrant struggling to assimilate to American culture, *Goodbye Solo* features an almost fully assimilated immigrant character whose story reworks American history and shares a new ideology for audiences.

Solo (Souleymane Sy Savane) is a Senegalese cab driver who has settled in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, with his Mexican wife and stepdaughter, Alex. Solo and his wife are expecting their first child, whose birth symbolically cements Solo's American identity. Moreover, Solo dreams of becoming a flight attendant in order to provide a better future for his growing family. When William (Red West), an elderly southerner, hires Solo to drive him to Blowing Rock<sup>20</sup> and Solo presumes that William does not wish to return, Solo forges a unique friendship with the older man. During his attempt to aid William, Solo encounters marital problems and the two men are often at a crossroads. The film concludes with a long drive to Blowing Rock where the men ultimately reach an understanding about each other's decisions and, more subtly, a story about an American experience fulfilled.

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<sup>20</sup> The Blowing Rock is a rock formation in the Blue Ridge Mountains where light objects blow upside down.

Throughout this film, the use of Neorealist techniques, focus on family structures and visualization of the American dream, Bahrani explores the changing landscape of America and American identity. However, the character Solo, loosely based on St. Francis in Roberto Rossellini's *The Flowers of St Francis*, is symbolic of positive changes to American identity. Bahrani directed *Goodbye Solo* in response to numerous fiction and documentary films about the Iraq War and he shows how in the face political and economic frustrations, a character with "the spirit of Solo" can inspire audiences in the face of post-9/11 anxieties about the economy and government policies.

### **African Immigration to the United States**

It must first be noted that, as a film set in the American south, *Goodbye Solo* reworks American history. The film focuses on a relationship between a black African and a white American. Yet Solo, a recent West African immigrant, has no ties to the history of slavery or racism that define this region of the United States and are, as Dominick LaCapra asserts, the founding traumas of the United States (LaCapra 25). Bahrani in this sense is reworking American history by phasing out possible discussions of slavery. Therefore, Solo can be read as emblematic of a new American identity.

The 1965 Immigration Act, the 1980 changes in laws related to refugees, the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act, and the 1990 Immigration Act have facilitated the immigration of Africans to the United

States. After 1965, African immigrants entered the United States for four main reasons: to obtain postsecondary education, to reunite with family, for economic gains, and to escape political persecution. However, the immigration of Africans from Francophone Africa to the United States is a recent phenomenon. French-speaking Africans were more likely to immigrate to France, Belgium, and Canada where they maintain strong cultural and linguistic ties with these countries (Arthur 131). In *Invisible Sojourners: African Immigrant Diaspora in the United States*, John Arthur provides a sociological understanding of the making of African immigrant communities and the assimilation roles played by these immigrants. Arthur explains that to avoid marginality, African immigrants rely on strong kinship bonds. They also engage with American culture selectively and remain spiritually connected to Africa (Arthur 141-146). This characterization broadly defines West African immigrants. In *Goodbye Solo*, we see a West African immigrant who strives for the American dream and unabashedly embraces American culture.

Winston-Salem, North Carolina, has a small, burgeoning West African immigrant population in which many men work as taxi drivers. Although it is unclear why or when Solo entered the United States, he embodies those African immigrants who have voluntarily entered the United States. Moreover, while Arthur describes African immigrants who maintain ties with Africa and the hope of returning one day, Solo is firmly embedded in American culture. This is seen through his family; his wife is Mexican and he

acts as the father figure for her daughter. Following the birth of his son, Solo's family becomes an American family and he is solidified as an American.

### **Ramin Bahrani: Biography and First Films**

The son of Iranian immigrants, Ramin Bahrani was born and raised in Winston-Salem. Bahrani's family was one of the few of Persian decent in the city. "I always felt like an outsider in Winston-Salem," Bahrani explains. "Increasingly I see how my parents are outsiders, how they really don't seem to belong there" (Ebert "New Great"). This perception of his life in Winston-Salem has influenced how immigrant characters and their sense of belonging are represented in his feature films. After graduating with a degree in film theory from Columbia University, he lived in Iran for three years.

After returning to the United States in 2001, Bahrani found inspiration from New York City street vendors, who inspired the characters in his first feature, *Man Push Cart*. Bahrani was also motivated in part to capture the anxiety and self-consciousness of being a Muslim-American in the age of the Patriot Act (Lim 2.17). He directed *Man Push Cart* in three weeks in 2005, less than four years after September 11. A.O Scott cites *Man Push Cart* as the first and arguably definitive work of American Neo-Neorealist cinema. In *Man Push Cart*, the protagonist Ahmad (played by non-professional actor Ahmad Razvi), is a Pakistani immigrant who sells coffee and doughnuts from a push cart in Manhattan. Loosely based on Albert Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Ahmad begins and ends each day by pulling his push cart through

the crowded streets of Manhattan. Little is revealed about his life except that he was once a pop star in Pakistan and accident a year earlier killed his wife. Ahmad is unable to provide for his son and the child lives with his in-laws. Scenes show that the child has forgotten his father. Ahmad is briefly given the opportunity to return to his music career but passes it up to continue working in his push cart. The film ends, devastatingly so, when Ahmad's push cart is stolen. Calling *Man Push Cart*, "an exemplary work of independent filmmaking," Stephen Holden in the New York Times compares the conclusion to Vittorio de Sica's *Bicycle Thieves*. "[*Man Push Cart*] allows a single, devastating blow, reminiscent of the end of De Sica's *Bicycle Thief*, to dash Ahmad's expectations of salvation, leaving him no other choice but to keep rolling that rock uphill" (Holden E1:12).<sup>21</sup> The character's personal despairs are coupled with the alienation Ahmad experiences as a Muslim immigrant living in post-9/11 New York City.

Because *Man Push Cart* explores the theme of immigrant isolation, features a broken familial relationship, and uses Neorealist techniques, it is often compared to So Yong Kim's 2006 film, *In Between Days*. Bahrani later perfects certain Neorealist techniques in *Goodbye Solo*. Long takes of Ahmad dragging his cart through the busy Manhattan streets characterize Ahmad's isolation. There is an overwhelming sense of danger in these seemingly understated shots as Ahmad's cart competes with the oncoming traffic. We then see Ahmad's daily routine in the push cart; tight close-ups of Ahmad's

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<sup>21</sup> As described earlier, a comparison between *Bicycle Thieves* and all Neo-Neorealist films is made by A.O. Scott in his March 2009 article on Neo-Neorealism.

hands and face as he works capture the confined space of the push cart. These close-ups function in the same manner as close-ups of Aimie in *In Between Days* and similar shots of Ray Eddy in *Frozen River*; they embody the isolation and desperation experienced by these characters. While close-ups of Ahmad are imperative for the scenes set in the push cart, when Ahmad is walking in the city or interacting with other people, he is often shot from a distance. People walk past him, typically blocking our view of Ahmad, and he blends into the background scenery. Like Solo's taxicab, the tight, confined space of Ahmad's push cart becomes a character within the film and it defines Ahmad. The push cart is Ahmad's place of comfort, where he experiences the world, and, most significantly, his livelihood. We associate Ahmad with his push cart and when his cart is stolen, it is crushingly apparent that Ahmad's quest for the American dream is indefinitely shattered. Without his cart, Ahmad cannot care for his son and repair his broken family. He continues to drag his cart through the city with no promising future in sight. This open-ended conclusion works in several ways. It is decisively a non-Hollywood ending, where narratives do not neatly end and characters are not types. Rather, the ending allows the audience to question the future of these characters. In the same vein, the open-ended conclusion allows for the themes and techniques that Bahrani initially presents in *Man Push Cart* to be further explored, modified, and perfected in his later films.

Like *Man Push Cart*, Bahrani's second feature *Chop Shop* (2007) examines a fraction of New York City unseen in film. Set in the Willets Points

section of Queens, *Chop Shop* centers on the relationship between siblings Ale (Alejandro Polanco) and Isamar (Isamar Gonzales) whose parents are absent and they do not attend school. They live in a makeshift bedroom above the auto body shop where Ale works and scrambles for cash. Isamar sells sex to truck drivers while Ale dreams of owning a vending cart. Presumably, Ale's dream is a part of his scheme to protect and save his older sister. Like *Man Push Cart*, *Chop Shop* is not necessarily an uplifting film. There are no explanations for the character's state of orphanhood and at times, the plot seems non-existent. Instead, *Chop Shop* conveys the day-to-day realities of characters struggling to survive, often by clinging to an unlikely dream. In *Chop Shop*, Ale dreams of owning a push cart, a modification of Ahmad's push cart dreams in *Man Push Cart*. The reality is that Ale will not own this push cart and that his sister will continue to prostitute herself. Unlike *Man Push Cart* and *Goodbye Solo*, *Chop Shop* focuses less on the immigrant experience in the United States and more on the every day routine of the characters. It is in this film that Bahrani's Neorealist practices are perfectly crafted to bring a sense of unadulterated authenticity into his work.

Stylistically, *Chop Shop* is similar to *Man Push Cart*. Long takes, the absence of a musical score, and long shots of the characters simply existing in the frame characterize the film's documentary and Neorealist feel. Moreover, there is a broken family structure, a theme that is prevalent throughout Bahrani's work, *Frozen River*, and *In Between Days*. Like *Frozen River*, in the absence of a traditional family structure, Ale and Isamar form their own

unique family where they are mutually dependent on one another to survive. The influence of Iranian filmmakers such as Abbas Kiarostami and Jafar Panahi is seen in *Chop Shop* through “the oblique, naturalistic storytelling, the interest in children, and the mingling of documentary and fictional techniques” (Scott E5). In his review of *Chop Shop*, critic A.O. Scott further connects Bahrani’s work to Italian Neorealism, focusing on Bahrani’s “encounter with local reality that is both poetic and clear-sighted” (Scott E5). The film’s final shot of pigeons flying into the sky can be compared to the closing shot of *Goodbye Solo*, when Solo stands on Blowing Rock and throws a stick into the air. These shots speak to the use of open spaces, to the Neorealist techniques, and to the open-ended narratives that define Bahrani’s work.

### ***Goodbye Solo: Production History***

Pre-production on *Goodbye Solo* began in 2005, at the height of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Bahrani spent six months with a Senegalese taxi driver in Winston-Salem, riding in his cab on the night shift, and learning about the driver’s life (Bahrani). This is similar to the way in which Courtney Hunt spent ten years researching an upstate New York Mohawk community before writing *Frozen River* and how So Yong Kim’s personal experiences influenced *In Between Days*. After working with the taxi driver, Bahrani began envisioning the narrative that would become *Goodbye Solo*.

Bahrani cites Rossellini's *The Flowers of St. Francis* (1950) as having a significant impact on *Goodbye Solo* and in particular on Solo's character development. Rossellini directed *The Flowers of St. Francis* after he had directed his postwar trilogy: *Roma Open City* (1945), *Paisan* (1946), and *Germania Anno Zero* (1948). Unlike these three films, which are considered exemplary of the Neorealist aesthetic, *The Flowers of St Francis* is not a conventional Neorealist postwar film. Through its episodic story structure, the film presents the life of a Catholic monk who advocates goodness and peace in thought, even at our own expense. Bahrani explains, “[Rossellini] felt that the world at that time needed not a war film but needed somebody with the spirit of Francis and of that kind of love” (Bahrani, *Charlie Rose*). While developing *Goodbye Solo* at the height of Iraq War, Bahrani saw an overwhelming number of fiction and documentary films about the war and terrorism in production or being released. He believed that what the American people needed was a character like St. Francis or someone with the “spirit of Solo”, that is openness, love, and the desire to help a stranger.

Moreover, Bahrani cites Iranian filmmaker Abbas Kiarostami's 1997 film *Taste of Cherry* as an influence on *Goodbye Solo*. Similar to *Solo*, this film follows a middle-aged man, Mr. Badii, who drives through Teheran looking for someone who will bury his body after he commits suicide. Mr. Badii never reveals why he intends to commit suicide. Structurally *Taste of Cherry* features long takes, minimalist editing, and frequent close-ups of Mr. Badii. The opening and closing sequences intentionally displace the audience

in order to stimulate a reflection on fate. These stylistic features are somewhat replicated in *Goodbye Solo*.

Using long takes, minimal editing, and a limited musical score, the Neorealist influences on *Goodbye Solo* are recognizable throughout the film. Yet it must be noted that *Goodbye Solo* is the first feature film in which Bahrani worked with professional actors. Souleymane Sy Savane, an immigrant from the Ivory Coast, plays Solo. Red West is a character actor who starred in sixteen Elvis movies and worked with such directors as Robert Altman and Oliver Stone. This casting decision adds to the sense of realism in *Goodbye Solo*; although Savane and West are not playing themselves, they are playing characters who they could be. Using these definitively Neorealist techniques such as long takes and minimal editing that emphasize the significance of the setting, the film further examines the meaning of being an American. Like *Frozen River* and *In Between Days*, *Goodbye Solo* focuses on familial relationships and their role in the quest for the American dream.

### **Analysis: Goodbye Solo**

*Goodbye Solo* begins abruptly; there are minimal opening credits and no establishing shots. We first see a two-shot of Solo and William in the taxicab. It is unknown who they are and where they are going. However, what is apparent is that a deal is being made between the two men, creating an air of mystery surrounding them and their personal stories. Throughout the film, we will learn little background information about these characters, implying that what we see on the screen is the most important information we can learn.

In this nearly two-minute sequence, there are no cuts; in fact, it is the only continuous two-shot through the front windshield seen in the film. This opening shot thus serves two essential purposes. First, it develops the odd couple relationship that characterizes the film's narrative. Second, it establishes the significance of Solo's taxi.

Solo and William initially have a tense and terse relationship. Solo, the driver, is open and friendly while William, the backseat passenger, is cantankerous and disgruntled. Their placement within the taxi is significant; West and Bahrani planned when William would and would not look at Solo (Bahrani, INDIEWIRE). His skeptical glances timed with pauses in the dialogue foreshadow the film's central plot line – the mystery of what William wants to do and Solo's attempt to help him. Moreover, over the course of the film, William moves from the backseat of the taxi to the front seat, symbolizing the progression of the men's friendship. William is initially suspicious of Solo's over enthusiastic and welcoming behavior. Their initial scenes of interaction are the result of William's suspicions, with him questioning at one instance why Solo is always his driver. In a subsequent scene, William accompanies Solo and his acquaintance on a drive and implied illegal activity. The acquaintance and Solo exit the taxi leaving William, who does not wish to be with them, alone in the backseat. William watches Solo from within the taxi, analyzing his actions. The radio rings with the dispatcher calling for Solo breaking the silent close-up of William smoking and observing Solo from a distance. This is the first instance when Solo and William are captured

watching and observing the other man, either through windows, through reflections in mirrors, from balconies, or from across rooms. These long takes show these two disparate characters attempting to understand one another. For instance, William watches Solo practice for a flight attendant exam through a kitchen window as he cooks breakfast. This scene occurs during William's first visit and interaction with Solo's family. It also introduces Solo's desire to become a flight attendant and William's slowly changing appreciation of Solo's friendship. While these shots show how certain characters act, these long takes rarely answer the questions concerning the character's behavior.

Solo's taxi is his livelihood; it is an extension of his identity, and it serves as a metaphor for his transition as a West African immigrant to an American citizen. Furthermore, Solo's taxi defines his personal relationships and his place in society. The taxi is an extension of Solo's identity. It is foremost his source of income and a source of pride for Solo. He takes pleasure in satisfying his customers. He is frequently shot in close-ups, driving passengers throughout the city. In certain shots, Solo is shot from behind so that his head blends with the lights of the city in front of him. In this sense, Solo, his taxi, and the city are intrinsically linked. Solo's taxi functions similarly like the push cart in *Man Push Cart* and *Chop Shop*, the cars and trailer home in *Frozen River*, and the overpass in *In Between Days*. These places and vehicles are the places where the characters experience the world, where their career and very survival is made or broken, or symbolic of their journey for the American dream.

Solo's taxicab also becomes symbolic of the significance of location shooting in *Goodbye Solo*. Similar to long shots of the rural, winter landscape in *Frozen River* and the city in *In Between Days*, shots of expansive highways and of Winston-Salem capture the fundamental role of the location shooting. This is also characteristic in Bahrani's films, *Man Push Cart* and *Chop Shop*, where long shots of New York City distinguish the film. These shots link Solo's relationship with the city to his role as a cab driver. Often his taxi is the only car seen on the highway in a visual layering of streetlights and concrete roadways. These shots act as a meditation on time and space, and on Solo's relationship to the world.

### **The American Dream in *Goodbye Solo***

*Goodbye Solo* is framed as the story of one man's desire to achieve the American dream. In comparison to William, Solo is a character representative of a changing American identity. Yet Solo maintains strong ties to his African heritage. He talks of returning to Senegal one day where his family will take care of him in his old age. Immersed in the immigrant community, Solo is seen playing soccer with fellow immigrants and helping others buy phone cards to communicate with their families abroad. The idea that Solo is willing to maintain ties with his African roots although he lives in the United States is what drives, for some, the fear of new immigrants living in United States. If Solo is unwilling to leave his African heritage and connection behind and to adapt to American culture, how can he become a productive member of

American society? Yet we also see that Solo is immersed in American culture and is on the road to assimilation. He listens to American rap music, plays pool, and has a fascination with new technologies. In *In Between Days*, constant consumerism connects to the idea that one is assimilating to American culture. Moreover, because he works towards a career as a flight attendant and establishes familial roots in the United States, Solo is in fact assimilating to American life and leaving some of his African heritage behind.

Solo's desire to become a flight attendant marks his quest for the American dream. We briefly see shots of airplanes taking off and landing, and shots of Solo watching these airplanes from his taxi. This is where Solo longs to be instead of in his taxi. The comparison between the taxi and the airplane is significant. In a post-9/11 atmosphere, Solo choice to become a flight attendant can be read a precarious decision. Yet because Solo's desire to be a flight attendant serves as a metaphor for Solo's character development, it overshadows possible audience concerns related to terrorism. Solo is literally a character who is in flight and who wants what is best for himself and his family. The airplane represents Solo's literal transition from an immigrant taxi driver to an American flight attendant. Solo often talks of changing jobs to become a flight attendant and actively pursues this aspiration, in spite of his wife's objections. Furthermore, his dream becomes a way for William and Solo to bond when William helps Solo study for the exam. During his examination, Solo is standing in front of the exam proxies. Behind him, we see airplanes landing and taking off through a window - his dream is literally

behind him. Yet Solo does not pass his exam and his quest for the dream seems effectively deterred. This is when Solo finally agrees to drive William to Blowing Rock. Like William, he has been defeated by life and almost gives up on his American dream. However, the experience of traveling to Blowing Rock, his relationship with William, and the realization that William supports his aspiration forces Solo to reconsider. At the film's conclusion, he is studying to retake the exam in his taxi. Although it is unknown if he will pass the examination Solo's version of the American dream, that is his determination to achieve a better life for himself and his family, is realized.

### **Familial Relationships in *Goodbye Solo***

In its representation of the American dream, *Goodbye Solo* focuses on familial relationships. It is apparent that the family is a priority to Solo. In one scene, he and William stand in front of Solo's family portraits that adorn a wall in Solo's home.

While the broken family, in particular the absence of the father figure, defines the families in *Frozen River* and *In Between Days*, Solo's status as a father characterizes the family in *Goodbye Solo*. The female protagonists in *Frozen River* and *In Between Days* have been abandoned by men. They create non-traditional family structures in order to survive. Solo, in comparison, acts

as the caring stepfather to his wife's daughter, Alex. They often bond over common interests and Solo is seen teaching her French.

Yet Solo's relationship with his family is complicated. He often talks of supporting his relatives in Dakar, implying that he maintains familial ties in Africa. In one conversation, he makes a comparison between American families and Senegalese families, claiming that families never stay together in America. Solo's statement turns ironic when Solo briefly leaves his pregnant wife midway through the film. With this act, he is just like the father figures in *Frozen River* and *In Between Days*, where the purpose of the mother and the family is to benefit the father. Solo returns to his family because of the birth of his son. The birth of the son reunites the broken family. Like the family in *Frozen River*, the family in *Goodbye Solo* can only function when a male infant enters the family structure. Most importantly, the child's birth establishes Solo's status as an American. Until his son's birth, Solo is an immigrant who is unsuccessfully striving for the American dream. The child's birth allows for Solo to achieve one aspect of the American dream and for his family to become representative of a multicultural American family.

Solo's blended and multicultural family is contrasted to William's broken and absent family. In the absence of William's family his American dream and his desire to live has ended. William spends considerable time at a local movie theater where his grandson works. He never reveals to the grandson his identity and they are always physically separated by the ticket booth. William, however, is seen appreciating the few moments he spends

with his grandson. In Solo's attempt to help William, he first tries to incorporate William into his family life. Although William bonds with Alex, Solo's family cannot replace his biological family. Solo then tries to repair the bond between William and his grandson. His meddling causes William to lash out and to end his communication with Solo.

### **The Drive to Blowing Rock**

Solo and William's relationship is temperamental and defined by their differences. Despite these differences – their conflicting outlooks on life, their sense of belonging, and their desire for individuality – the men forge a bond unlike any other. By the film's conclusion, it is apparent that these men have developed a fondness for one another. It is seen when William allows Alex to come to Blowing Rock so that Solo does not have to deal with the reality of William's death alone. Cinematically it is seen by William's transition from the backseat to the front seat of Solo's taxi. Instead of remaining the backseat passenger who is dependent on Solo's services, William is his equal and his friend. In one sequence, they are riding through the streets while listening to music. They are two men from different cultures, evidenced by their clashing tastes in music. Rather than cut between Solo and William as they discuss country music, they are in the same shot, sitting side by side.

The drive to Blowing Rock stands in contrast to the drives in the city. Here the long takes are of the expansive Blue Ridge Mountains during the early morning as opposed to a congested city at night. The sequence begins

with Solo and William shot from behind in the front seats of the taxi; they ominously discuss the event that may take place at Blowing Rock. This is a rare shot where the characters are shot from behind in the taxi as opposed to tight close ups on their faces. The sequence then transitions to the two-hour drive to Blowing Rock. The sequence is silent; William and Solo are silent while Alex is asleep in the backseat. It is a rainy and foggy morning. The camera remains stationary as the taxi drives through the fall scenery of changing foliage. This sequence draws attention to the expansive natural landscape and isolation that is surrounding the characters at the moment. The cab moves through the thick fog, only noticeable because of its headlights. The road and trees are barely distinguishable in these long shots of the highway. The taxi is the only car on the road, further highlighting the character's isolation as they travel to Blowing Rock. In one shot, the car appears suddenly through the thick fog, moving into the frame, only to disappear in the thick fog again. The audience is aware that William is planning to commit suicide. This drive, the longest driving sequence, can thus be read as a reflection on the events leading to William's death.

The characters begin their ascent to Blowing Rock and Alex is blissfully unaware of William's decision. Solo and Alex leave William standing on the trail. There is a long pause as William and Solo stare back and forth at each other. Their stares take the place of a conversation and the men have said goodbye each other. Solo eventually turns, leaving William standing on the trail. In the final shot of William, he watches Solo leave and disappear

into the fog. This shot replicates the countless other shots in the film where Solo and William observe one another. Yet here, there is no physical barrier between them. The final shot leaves an open-ended conclusion to William's story. He wanders into the woods and we never learn if he commits suicide. William is also representative of an aging American generation; the allusion to his death is synonymous with the passing of this generation.

Blowing Rock is a place of legend where, according to characters in the film, it is the only place the snow blows up. It is thus fitting that the film's penultimate sequence occurs at this point. Solo climbs to the top of Blowing Rock and his figure blends with the expansive mountain ridge in front of him. In a close-up shot from behind, mountains, fog, and clouds surround Solo's head. Here he simply exists with the world. Solo grabs a stick and tosses it into the air to see if the legend of Blowing Rock is true. The film then abruptly transitions to a shot of trees filmed through the taxi window as Alex and Solo return to Winston-Salem. Like William's death, we never learn if the legend of Blowing Rock is true. The film ends with Alex quizzing Solo in the car for his flight attendant examination. It is indicated that he will continue to strive for his version of the American dream. In the concluding shot, the taxi drives through fall foliage and disappears into the distance. Fog slowly seeps into the frame. This final shot of *Goodbye Solo* leaves the audience with a mixture of emotions. Similar to the opening shot, which abruptly introduced the characters, this closing shot leaves their futures open for interpretation.

## Conclusion

In March 2009, film critic Roger Ebert declared director Ramin Bahrani “the new great American director” after viewing *Goodbye Solo*. Ebert writes, “After three films, each a master work, he has established himself as a gifted, confident filmmaker with ideas that involve who and where we are at this time. His films pay great attention to ordinary lives that are not so ordinary at all” (Ebert “New Great”). Because Ebert’s statement addresses a second-generation American, it adds another layer to the film’s representation of American identity. Bahrani uses his work to work through his personal understanding of his American identity after September 11. The frequent use of immigrant characters in his work reflects Bahrani’s perceptions of his own identity. Yet he does not call these characters immigrants. Rather, as Bahrani explains, the lives of characters like Solo, are asking, “How should I be as a person, how should I be behaving, why is the world this way?” (Ebert). This comprehension of life and fate comes to fruition in *Goodbye Solo*, particularly in the film’s closing sequence when Solo tosses a stick into the air and the legend of Blowing Rock remains a mystery.

With *Goodbye Solo*, we see a progression in the understanding and representations of the United States after September 11. Solo is a character who is striving for the American dream and it is implied at the film’s conclusion that he will achieve it. Bahrani intends for Solo to be a character that will inspire audiences to think differently about themselves and how they perceive others. *Goodbye Solo* therefore depicts a version of the United States

that is not as bleak as the version understood by the conclusions of *Frozen River* or *In Between Days*. Through the character of Solo, we see that American identity is not necessarily in crisis and that the culture of fear is not as definitive of American character as one might perceive.

## Conclusion

I was led to Courtney Hunt's *Frozen River*, So Yong Kim's *In Between Days*, and Ramin Bahrani's *Goodbye Solo* initially because these films were identified in a series of point-counterpoint articles written by A.O Scott of *The New York Times* and Richard Brody of *The New Yorker* in March of 2009. These film critics debated the definition and validity of Neo-Neorealism in current American independent films. Neo-Neorealist cinema, argued Scott, seems to exist in response to post-9/11 Hollywood filmmaking and in reaction to the American public's post-9/11 anxieties, including a fear of terrorism, government policies that limit civil liberties, and economic collapse. Brody, however, did not see Neo-Neorealism as an emerging trend and points to a range of films that indicate the presence of realism throughout the course of American cinema. Yet Brody in his arguments seems to want to exactly define Neo-Neorealism. This is something that A.O Scott is not interested in doing: "I took plains to use the term neo-realism loosely and somewhat expansively to capture...a cinematic ethic that has surfaced in different nations at different moments and that now seems to be flowering in some precincts of American independent cinema" (Scott, "A.O. Scott"). This debate between Scott and Brody illustrates the various methods of how we can interpret cinema at a specific moment in history. What I have found in my textual analysis of *Frozen River*, *In Between Days*, and *Goodbye Solo* is that these films encompass a range of plots, characters, aesthetics, and camera techniques to bring the director's unique understanding of American identity

to the screen. Moreover, I have found in my analysis of *Frozen River*, *In Between Days*, and *Goodbye Solo* that Neo-Neorealism as cinematic ethic is present in these films.

Furthermore, I have found that Neo-Neorealist films seem to address changes in the perception of American identity that have developed over the course of the twentieth century. These changes became alarmingly apparent to the public after September 11. Most notably, political theorist Samuel Huntington, in his 2004 book *Who Are We? Challenges to American National Identity* argued that the dominant Anglo-Protestant American identity was changing due to an influx of new immigrants arriving to the United States from Latin America and Asia. The question of whether or not these new immigrants will successfully assimilate to American culture and adhere to the principles of the American Creed has generated concern among the Anglo-Protestant Americans (Huntington 178). Dominique Moïsi broadly echoes this idea when he argues in *The Geopolitics of Emotion* that fear is the dominant emotion in the West. In the American context, fear is associated with the vulnerability of American dominance after September 11. There is a culture of fear that defines current public perceptions of American national identity.

In my project, I tried to find the links between these political theories and current cinema. I examined theories of national cinema, the history of American filmmaking, the development of independent cinema in reaction to Hollywood filmmaking, and the relationship between American cinema and immigration. Beginning with American silent films, the cinema was used as a

method of assimilation. In particular, the films of Cecil B. DeMille, as Sumiko Higashi argued, introduced the codes and understandings of American culture to immigrant working classes. As certain frameworks, stories, and symbols have been reworked to suit the needs of the latest immigration culture, recent American films use immigration as a way to present and challenge conventional notions of American identity (Mesnick and Rubin 2).

I focused on *Frozen River*, *In Between Days*, and *Goodbye Solo* because an immigrant character or narrative links these three films. In comparison to other films identified as Neo-Neorealist, specifically *Wendy and Lucy* (Kelly Reichardt, 2008) and *Ballast* (Lance Hammer, 2008), the theme of immigration is unique to these films.<sup>22</sup> Nevertheless, that does not discredit the significance of Reichardt's and Hammer's work. As I will show, what Neo-Neorealist cinema and three additional independent films collectively articulate are the conditions pertinent to the United States during this current historical moment. American filmmakers are questioning and challenging the conventional notions of American identity. Moreover, through a unique brand of national cinema, these filmmakers are articulating and imagining new visions of the United States.

*Frozen River* is essential in my study because it depicts public fears of illegal immigration, economic despair, and questions the status of American identity. The immigrant narrative is seen in two instances: first through the illegal immigrants smuggled across the U.S.-Canadian border, and second,

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<sup>22</sup> As I will show, these films all illuminate conditions pertinent to the United States at this moment. Along with other independent films that are not necessarily Neorealist, they present issues of national identity and...

through the presence of white and Native American protagonists acting as the smugglers. Moreover, Ray Eddy is on a journey toward the American dream, a theme present in *Goodbye Solo*, and the film establishes the fragility of the family, a theme present in all three films. *In Between Days*, based on So Yong Kim's memories of immigrating to the United States and growing up in a Los Angeles Koreatown, offers a more personalized and intimate look at the immigrant experience. The protagonist, Aimie, is working towards assimilation, yet she is unsure of what culture into which she is assimilating. Through her character development, we see the nuanced articulation of what constitutes a person's identity in the face of the challenges wrought by immigration. In *Goodbye Solo*, the immigrant protagonist, Solo, fully assimilates to American life, develops a unique friendship with an elderly white man, and actively pursues the American dream. From these three films, we can see a progression from the heightened and intense drama of *Frozen River*, to the personalized and intimate storytelling of *In Between Days*, to the ultimately uplifting, although open-ended, narrative of *Goodbye Solo* of not only the range of narrative and formal techniques used by the filmmakers, but also of the post-9/11 American experience. Lastly, the cinema and in particular a Neo-Neorealist work such as *Goodbye Solo* imagines a new vision of the United States by taking the public's fears after September 11 and utilizing an immigrant character to rework American history and change audience perceptions about American identity.

### **Other Films to Consider**

During my research, I found that *Frozen River*, *In Between Days*, and *Goodbye Solo* are representative of a larger group of independent films released between 2005 and 2009. Like the work of Hunt, Kim, and Bahrani, these films question the current state of American identity, post-9/11 anxieties, and the existence of American national cinema.

*Sugar* (Ryan Fleck and Anna Boden, 2008), *Ballast*, and *Wendy and Lucy* have been classified as Neo-Neorealist films. *Sugar* centers on a Dominican baseball player attempting to break into major league baseball. The title character, played by Algenis Perez Soto, is a nonprofessional actor who had once been a minor league baseball player. *Sugar*'s dream of playing professional baseball is a metaphor for the American dream; he, like Aimie, struggles to learn English and becomes isolated from his team. The film ends with *Sugar* leaving his baseball career and settling in New York City in search of a different American dream.

In comparison, *Ballast* and *Wendy and Lucy* do not feature an immigrant character or narrative. Set in a sparsely populated and impoverished Mississippi delta town, *Ballast* follows a family reacting to a relative's suicide. Non-professional actors portray the man's twin brother, his son, and former wife. This film's aesthetic and thematic roots are seen in the work of the Dardenne Brothers, Italian Neorealism, and Charles Burnett's 1977 film *Killer of Sheep*. The film's representation of experience through its handheld camerawork and heavy ambiguity, presents a faction of American

life beyond looking at immigrant experience. Like the characters in *Goodbye Solo* and *Frozen River*, Wendy is in search of the American dream. Wendy believes that finding work in Alaska will improve her life but her journey comes to a halt when she loses her dog and her finances in the Pacific Northwest. Wendy is portrayed by actress Michelle Williams, an actress whose presence in the film can distract audiences from the Neorealist aesthetics seen in *Wendy and Lucy*. Yet like *Ballast*, this film explores the hard facts of American life without sentimentality. These two films can be best compared to *In Between Days*. Like So Yong Kim's film, they offer a nuanced articulation of what creates one's identity in the face of adversity. The characters in *Ballast* and *Wendy and Lucy* are challenged to reconsider their status and identity as Americans.

*Cavite* (Neill Dela Llana and Ian Gamazon, 2005), *The Visitor* (Todd McCarthy, 2008) and *Amreeka* (2009) examine similar themes such as the journey for the American dream and the fragility of the family that are seen in *Frozen River*, *In Between Days*, and *Goodbye Solo*. They also capitalize on post-9/11 fears in their narratives to question and offer different notions of American national cinema and American national identity that exist at this moment.

Like Ramin Bahrani's *Man Push Cart* and So Yong Kim's *In Between Days*, *Cavite* was cited by Dennis Lim as an example of the globalization of American independent cinema. *Cavite* follows Adam (played by director Gamazon) an American expatriate who becomes involved with a terrorist

cell in Manila. Both Gamazon and Dela Llana were born in the Philippines and the film captures Gamazon's own culture shock upon returning to the country for the first time since he was nine years old. By incorporating a terrorism subplot, the film becomes a fast-paced and gritty exploration of an American audience's worst fears after September 11. Much like *In Between Days* and *Man Push Cart*, *Cavite* was filmed under tight and limited constraints. This fact greatly contributes to the film's Neorealist aesthetics, although the Hollywood-style thriller can disorient one from seeing this underlying concern. Dennis Lim calls this film an example of the globalization of American independent cinema. Because *Cavite* is in both Tagalog and English, and set in the Philippines, the film questions the basic assumptions of what constitutes an American film.

*The Visitor* is thematically comparable to *Goodbye Solo*. When Walter Vale (played by Richard Jenkins) discovers an illegal immigrant couple living in his New York City apartment, he allows them to continue living there. Like *Goodbye Solo*, an unorthodox relationship that develops between Walter, a white American and Tarek, a Palestinian-Syrian djembe player. Imperative in *The Visitor* is the question of who is "the visitor". Both Walter and Tarek are alienated characters; Walter is an unhappy widower and Tarek is Muslim immigrant living in post-9/11 New York. They act as the film's immigrant character, seen metaphorically when Walter is taught how to play the djembe by Tarek, and literally when Tarek is arrested and held in an immigrant detention center. A film such as *The Visitor* shows how the themes of national

identity, broken families, and the immigrant experience that are presented in the *Goodbye Solo*, *In Between Days*, and *Frozen River* can be presented in more traditional modes of filmmaking.

In *Amreeka*, a Palestinian woman and her teenage son immigrate to a Chicago suburb from the West Bank. The film addresses post-9/11 American anxieties, as the family must deal with negative attitudes towards Muslim immigrants. Like *In Between Days*, this film features characters who struggle to assimilate to American life and like *Frozen River* and *Goodbye Solo*, these characters are on a journey for the American dream. Moreover, the title of this film, like *The Visitor* questions what it means to be living in America; it indicates that America is “Amreeka,” a hybrid vision of the United States after September 11.

### **Questioning American National Cinema**

Andrew Higson in “The Limiting Imagination of National Cinema,” questions whether or not the idea of the nation presented by Benedict Anderson in *Imagined Communities* – that is the nation imagined as a limited, finite, and sovereign community – provides an appropriate framework for understanding national cinema. Cinema tends to be local and transnational, not necessarily national, argues Higson. Moreover, debates about national cinema need to take into consideration the distribution and reception of films; the meanings an audience reads into a film are heavily dependent on the cultural context in which they watch it.

Ramin Bahrani echoes this idea. In a 2006 interview with the *New York Times*, he said, “The idea of national cinema doesn’t make sense the way it used to. I find it frustrating when people expect a certain country to produce a certain kind of cinema. There’s economic and cultural globalization, but also physical mobility.” The range of themes and narratives presented by the films I examined for this project, question what constitutes an American film. *Cavite*, for instance, shows that an American film does not necessarily have to be set in the United States while *In Between Days* shows that an American film does not necessarily have to be in English. The cinema itself is not a pure product. From the production histories of *Frozen River*, *In Between Days*, and *Goodbye Solo* we can see a range of cinematic inspirations, economic factors, and personal experiences related to gender and ethnicity that influenced these filmmakers.

Yet while these arguments all question what the current status of national cinema is in the age of globalization, I consider the films I have researched for this project to be indicative of American national cinema. As Susan Hayward writes, her understanding of national cinemas “is one which perceives cinema as a practice that should not conceal structures of power and knowledge but which should function as a mise-en-scene of scattered and dissembling identities as well as fractured subjectivities and fragmented hegemonies” (Hayward 101). The films I have examined, with a few exceptions, are localized independent films and go to great lengths to present narratives – through naturalistic mise-en-scene and nonprofessional actors

portraying versions of themselves – that relay distinct understandings of American experience and identity.

### **A Culture of Fear or a Culture of Hope?**

Lastly, when I began this project I first analyzed recent political theory and recent newspaper articles that questioned American identity. While it is true that these ideas are prevalent in the work of Courtney Hunt, So Yong Kim, and Ramin Bahrani, it is necessary to reexamine and question the validity of Samuel Huntington's arguments in *Who Are We?* Based on my understanding of the films I examined for this project, I have since found Huntington's arguments, although grounded in some merit, to be alarmist.

Philosopher Bernard-Henri Levy, writing on American identity comments that “rarely has a country questioned itself so anxiously about its vertigo; few are the nations prey to such vertigo of identity” (Levy 238). Levy, writing in 2006 in direct response to Samuel Huntington's arguments in *Who Are We?*, follows in the footsteps of French political theorist Alexis de Tocqueville and journeyed across the United States to better understand American national identity. He concludes, “America never was, and never will be, founded either on the continuity of a ‘race’ or on a solidity of a soil...or even on a thoroughly shared history...It will surely be abstract” (Levy 251). Dominique Moïsi in *The Geopolitics of Emotion* identified fear as the dominant emotion in the West, but he also discusses the culture of hope. Moïsi identifies hope in a Western context describing its trust in one's identity and one's ability to

interact positively with the world. “Hope” he writes, “is the opposite of resignation, a form of trust that pushes us to move toward others, to accept without fear how they differ from us” (Moïsi 30-31).

The films I have examined can also be seen as promoting a culture of hope rather than solely a culture of fear. In particular, this is seen in *Goodbye Solo*. Because Ramin Bahrani intends for “the spirit of Solo” to inspire audiences, *Goodbye Solo* presents an alternative and more uplifting perspective on American culture. As A.O Scott noted in his March 2009 article on Neo-Neorealism, what these films do is “expand the range of aesthetic possibilities and experiences available to cinema by pressing to bring it into rough, thoughtful, and lyrical contact with reality.” In this sense, these films expand an understanding of American identity that distances it from the claims made by Samuel Huntington. When compared to the desperation and post-9/11 anxieties that define *Frozen River* and to the lack of understanding of American identity in *In Between Days* and *Goodbye Solo* show us that the future of the United States and American identity is not necessarily in crisis; rather, it is evolving and there is nothing to fear.

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