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God and the Border Star in Recent Films

NEWS FEATURE, ELENA SHORE,
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Editor's Note: New movies about immigration and religion present an image of America in which the border is no longer relevant.

PARK CITY, Utah--Even as Congress considers building a wall along the U.S.-Mexico border to keep immigrants out, it is clear that cultural shifts have already made their impact on American identity. Just look at the movies from this year's Sundance Film Festival, where the major awards went to films about faith and immigration.

The Grand Jury Prize and the Audience Award for a dramatic film both went to "Quinceañera," about a Mexican American family living in Los Angeles' Echo Park. The same two awards, this time for best documentary, went to "God Grew Tired of Us," the story of the "lost boys of Sudan" who sought refuge in the United States when civil war ravaged their homeland.

Filmmakers and the general public seem to be sorting out what it means to be American five years after the attacks on the World Trade Center forced us to take a second look at who we were.

The result is a complex view of the role religious beliefs and culture play in our identity. "Forgiving the Franklins," for example, is a satire on white evangelical Christians in Middle America, while "Quinceañera" reveals the conflicting pulls of religion and family for one Latino family whose teenage daughter is pregnant and whose nephew is gay. Meanwhile, other films tell the stories of immigrants who face hardships, and even die, in pursuit of the American Dream. "La Tragedia de Macario" is based on the 2003 suffocation and death of a group of migrants in Victoria, Texas. "Journey from the Fall" dramatizes the journey of Vietnamese refugees.

The border itself has become such a powerful presence in the American psyche that it appears as a kind of character in several films. In the "Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada," the new film from the writer of "Amores Perros" and "21 Grams," a vigilante cowboy (Tommy Lee Jones) forces a Border Patrol agent (Barry Pepper) into a journey across the border into Mexico to return the dead body of a Mexican migrant the agent has shot and killed. Like Juan Rulfo's classic novel "Pedro Páramo," in which the hero takes a journey into a town where he meets a cast of characters (all of them dead), the two men bring the corpse to a place that does not exist: Jimenez, a town Melquiades Estrada, the dead migrant, invented as his imaginary home.

Everyone in the film is trying to get back to his own imaginary home and mythic past. The Border Patrol agent wants to protect a mythic America from the specter of illegal immigration in an unwinnable war to return the country to a past that never existed. His wife goes back to Cincinnati and an idyllic past on a bus that says "All Aboard America." The two men go in search of Jimenez and an imaginary Mexico. A couple on a TV soap opera discusses returning to River Valley, an imagined paradise in their own past. The journey across the U.S.-Mexico border is a journey between the myths of the two countries.

Returning to an imagined Paradise is taken quite literally in the quirky "Forgiving the Franklins." An evangelical Christian family gets in a car accident and each member has a vision of Jesus, who relieves them of their original sin. In a reversal of the exile from the Garden of Eden, when Adam and Eve suddenly became ashamed of their bodies, this once sexually repressed family starts walking around naked, among other acts. In this spoof on white evangelical Christians, conformity and the threat of The Other, it turns out returning to Paradise -- when you live in a small town in Middle America -- can be complicated.

(At the screening I attended, a teacher who had brought his class to Sundance stood up in the audience, said he identified as an evangelical Christian, and went on to apologize for all the bad things evangelical Christians have done in the name of Christianity.)

If the surrealist "Forgiving the Franklins" warns against the dangers of a society where everyone must think, look and act alike, other Sundance films take a realistic look at the way American neighborhoods are shaped by a variety of cultures.

"A Guide to Recognizing Your Saints," which won awards for Dramatic Directing and a Special Jury Prize for Best Ensemble Performance, paints a picture of Astoria, Queens, where director Dito Montiel grew up in the mid-1980s. It portrays adolescent

sexuality, violence and tensions between Italian Americans and Puerto Ricans in this tough neighborhood, and, years later, the return of Dito Montiel (Robert Downey, Jr.), the one man who got out. The "saints" in the title are all the friends he left behind, most of whom end up dead, on drugs or are in prison.

The two big winners at Sundance, "Quinceañera" and "God Grew Tired of Us," each present an America defined by the existence of many ethnic communities within its borders. Forced out of their country, Sudanese refugees must preserve their own culture in American cities, while adjusting to a starkly different life. A Mexican American family in Los Angeles keeps tradition and family alive, while grappling with pressures of gentrification and relationships that test their faith.

All of this makes the notion of building a wall along the border futile. If the Mexican town of Jimenez exists only in the Texas imagination ("The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada"), Sudan only outside the Sudan ("God Grew Tired of Us"), Mexico only in Los Angeles ("Quinceañera"), and the American Dream lives on in Mexico ("La Tragedia de Macario"), then the border is already obsolete.

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