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Reframing Identity and Building a Nomadic Home through Mestiza Consciousness in *Brincando el charco. Portrait of a Puerto Rican*

RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT

Reading through one another insights raised by feminist thinkers Gloria Anzaldúa, Chela Sandoval, Rosi Braidotti and Karen Barad, this work analyses the 1994 autofictional film *Brincando el charco. Portrait of a Puerto Rican* by New York-based filmmaker and scholar Frances Negrón-Muntaner. This film is approached as a prime example of ways in which feminist autofictional practices in cinema have the potential to reframe the notions of identity and home, beyond dominant—sexist, racist, and homophobic—narratives. Barad's diffractive methodology allows for bringing together Anzaldúa's mestiza consciousness, Sandoval's differential consciousness and Braidotti's nomadic consciousness, as a conceptual apparatus to unpack how Negrón-Muntaner combines fiction, autobiography and documentary footage in order to problematise androcentric narratives, come to terms with her multi-layered identity as a queer member of the Puerto Rican diaspora, and ultimately manage to build an alternative, always-in-the-making, home for herself.

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Creative autobiographical practices by members of oppressed groups have a long genealogy and a strong foundation, being at the core of what Chicana writer and feminist activist Cherríe Moraga calls "theory in the flesh", that is, "one where the physical realities of our lives – our skin color, the land or concrete we grew up on, our sexual longings – all fuse to create a politic born out of necessity" (Anzaldúa and Moraga 23). In 1981, Moraga and Anzaldúa edited the groundbreaking anthology, *This Bridge Called my Back*. *Writings by Radical Women of Colour*. This pioneering book brought together insights by African American, Native American, Asian American and Latina women in the United States, whose writing processes started from their own embodied experiences. It became one of the most important texts for intersectional feminism, despite preceding the coinage of such conceptual term by eight years.

The idea of "intersectionality" was developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989 to explain the specific struggle of black women against overlapping levels of discrimination in the US, which was experienced as an articulation rather than as a mere sum of parts. In other words, the convergence of gender, race, social class, sexuality and other identity axes at various levels of social inequalities cannot be captured in its entirety through a simple juxtaposition of categories. A law scholar and civil rights advocate, Crenshaw identified that policies which would seek to rectify gender-based discriminations without tending to race, or vice versa, would always leave black women out, therefore the urge to take an intersectional approach.

In *This Bridge Called my Back*, both Moraga and Anzaldúa share their own autobiographical essays ("La güera" and "La prieta," respectively), in which we see Moraga's "theory in the flesh" (Moraga and Anzaldúa 23) in action. What these Chicana scholars do in their texts can be described as intersectional in as much as they reflect how "structurally constructed sociocultural categorizations such as gender, ethnicity, race, class, sexuality, age/generation, dis/ability, nationality, mother tongue and so on, interact, and in so doing produce different kinds of societal inequalities and unjust social relations" (Lykke 50). Anzaldúa's and Moraga's autobiographical essays also have an important underlying statement: starting from oneself plays a key role for intersectional feminism because it is from a deep understanding of one's oppressions that alliances with other subjugated groups can be built.

For those women located within the Latin-American, or any other diaspora, autobiographical writing can be a political praxis, a healing process, a self-worth restoration and an act of reaffirmation, as described by Anzaldúa:

> I write to record what others erase when I speak, to rewrite the stories others have miswritten about me, about you. To become more intimate with myself and you. To discover myself, to preserve myself, to make myself, to achieve self-autonomy. (Anzaldúa and Moraga 169)

Anzaldúa thus conceives autobiographical creation as an act with the capacity to constitute one's identity in shifting ways and on one's own terms, from the perspective of a different—split, complex, multiple, oppositional—kind of consciousness. One that she called "mestiza" and which, as argued in this study, can be read along with Chela Sandoval's "differential consciousness" and Braidotti's "nomadic consciousness". Moreover, Anzaldúa insisted on the importance of not only writing about personal experiences in a narrowly solipsistic way but on linking them with the social reality (Anzaldúa and Moraga 170). Talking about her nomad's identity, Braidotti asserts in a similar vein: "Were I to write an autobiography, it would be the self-portrait of a collectivity" (14). However, while the Chicana writers speak from their embodied experiences as migrants, within which alliances for survival are not exactly metaphorical but rather a matter of survival, Braidotti refers to the autobiographical practice in a more elitist way and the "self-portrait of a collectivity" (14) she describes seems to be less engaged with social conflicts, and more focused on the multiplicity within oneself. Such tensions can be illuminated by reading these ideas through one another, as further explained below.

Several Latino scholars have also conceived of self-narratives as privileged sites for "stories of emergent racial, ethnic and gender consciousness" (Saldívar 154), as well as acts of "imaginative re-discovery," which allow for reinvention, recovery and revision of a "lost" history for oppressed groups (Fregoso 1). The imaginative aspect of this kind of life-writing finds a powerful expression in the genre of "autofiction". A concept coined in 1977 by Serge Dubrovsky, autofiction combines autobiographical elements and fiction. Dubrovsky argued that the pact of fiction is compatible with the convergence of author, narrator and character (Casas 9).

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In autofictional cinema, this implies that instead of the external focalization of an anonymous narrator, there's an internal focalization in which director, narrator and character onscreen coincide, thus "executing explicitly, intradiegetically and visually a narration that is compatible with the pact of fiction" (de la Torre Espinosa 567). The director-narrator embodies the fictional story of a character with whom s/he shares only some autobiographical characteristics. An autofictional documentary presents audiovisual material that evokes a documentary aesthetic, but their discursive organization introduces that fictional angle which demands an ambiguous and hybrid pact from the audience, a pact "between the fictional and the autobiographical, between different film genres" (de la Torre Espinosa 574). In autofictional documentary films, any so-called "truth" of the events thus yields to the emotional and creative forms in which such events are presented. A clear line between fact and fiction utterly blurs.

In this article, the 1994 autofictional film *Brincando el charco*.[1] *Portrait of a Puerto Rican* by New York-based filmmaker and scholar, Frances Negrón-Muntaner, is taken as a case study to analyse how creative and feminist autobiographical practices in cinema can have the potential to reframe the notions of identity and home beyond dominant—sexist, racist, and homophobic—narratives. The hypothesis guiding the analysis is that *Brincando el charco* is a prime example of the ways in which Anzaldúa's "mestiza consciousness", Sandoval's "differential consciousness", and Braidotti's "nomadic consciousness" operate along the fictional, autobiographical and documentary tools that the filmmaker employs to problematise androcentric narratives, expose racism and homophobia, come to terms with her multi-layered identity, and ultimately manage to build an alternative home for herself.

Due to its pioneer complexity in portraying the experience of a queer woman from the Puerto Rican diaspora, *Brincando el charco* has been previously analysed in articles and academic papers.[2] It has also been discussed with/by the filmmaker herself.[3] These works highlight the ways in which Negrón-Muntaner exposes the intricacies of the Puerto-Rican identity and its relation with the U.S. by means of formal experimentation that blurs the distinction between fiction and non-fiction, combining archival footage, interviews, soap opera drama and still images. What this study focuses on are the insights from mestiza, differential and nomadic kinds of consciousness regarding questions of home and identity, once such conceptual apparatus is put in dialogue with the film, as well as with the filmmaker's intentions as expressed by herself. The methodology to bring together these diverse strands of thought is Karen Barad's "diffractive methodology", a tool for "reading important insights and approaches through one another" (Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway* 30).

The article is divided into three sections. The first theoretical-methodological section summarises the three tools previously mentioned: "mestiza consciousness", "differential consciousness" and "nomadic consciousness". Next, it points out the key aspects of Barad's diffractive methodology employed in this study to analyse the film in the light of the conceptual apparatus and a series of interviews with the filmmaker, one carried out specifically as part of this research, and the other ones taken from secondary sources. The second section presents the analysis of *Brincando el charco*. The discussion focuses on how this autofictional film approaches the notions of identity and home from the perspective of the Puerto Rican diaspora in the U.S. as embodied by the protagonist. The article finishes with some concluding remarks regarding whether and how the results from the analysis of the film illustrate the possibility of overcoming exclusionary identity boundaries in the process of building a cinematic, nomadic home.

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1 The expression "brincando el charco," which can be translated as "jumping the puddle," is a colloquial way of referring to the act of crossing the ocean towards another country.

2 For example: Blasini, Gilberto. "Hybridizing Puerto Ricanness. Review of Brincando el charco: Portrait of a Puerto Rican." *Caribbean Studies*, vol. 36, no. 1, 2008, pp. 196–200. / Compos-Brito, Rosa. "Múltiples intervenciones (des)'del otro lado': Frances Negrón-Muntaner, la trans-nación puertorriqueña y el género del documental." *Chicana/Latina Studies*, vol. 6, no. 1, 2006, pp. 16–48. / Machuca, Ricardo. "Brincando el Charco Portrait of a Puerto Rican (1995)". *Visual Anthropology Review*, no. 13, 1997, pp. 91–93. https://doi.org/10.1525/var.1997.13.2.91 / Torres Camacho, Lourdes. "Boricua lesbians: sexuality, nationality, and the politics of passing." *Centro Journal*, vol. 19, no. 1, 2007, pp. 231–249.

3 For instance: Rodríguez, Dinah. "Un cine sospechoso: Conversación con Frances Negrón-Muntaner." *Revista de Crítica Literaria Latinoamericana*, vol. 23, no. 45, 1997, pp. 411–419. https://doi.org/10.2307/4530919. / Negrón-Muntaner, Frances. "When I Was a Puerto Rican Lesbian: Meditations on *Brincando el charco/Portrait of a Puerto Rican*." *Gay and Lesbian Quarterly*, vol. 5, no. 4, 1999, pp. 511–526.

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1. DIFFRACTING IDENTITIES THROUGH MESTIZA, DIFFERENTIAL AND NOMADIC CONSCIOUSNESS

In her 1987 partially autobiographical book *Borderlands/La Frontera. The New Mestiza*, Gloria Anzaldúa elaborates on what she calls "mestiza consciousness." She acknowledges her situated vision from the margins, a position which, she argues, triggers a different kind of identity, a multiple one. She explains that she had to learn to dwell in the "alien" area of the borderlands not just due to her being Chicana, but also a lesbian, thus reinterpreting homophobia as "fear of going home" and then being rejected by the family and the culture (20). Her urge to come to terms with her need to feel at home, while also embracing the contradictory aspects of her shifting self, led her to come up with an alternative: "if going home is denied me then I will have to stand and claim my space, making a new culture—una cultura mestiza—with my own lumber, my own bricks and mortar and my own feminist architecture" (22). This self-created space is that in which the "mestiza consciousness" emerges.

Describing "mestiza consciousness" as a site for Latina feminist agency and critical thinking, Anzaldúa points out a series of onto-epistemological implications relevant for approaching the idea of identity. Firstly, since the "mestiza consciousness" is the product of various cultures at the same time, it cannot keep concepts within rigid boundaries: "Only by remaining flexible is she able to stretch the psyche horizontally and vertically" (79). Secondly, the "new mestiza" develops "a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity" (79), and this is directly linked to a third effect: "A massive uprooting of dualistic thinking in the individual and collective consciousness" (80). Anzaldúa specifically mentions the breaking down of the subject-object duality, which is a fundamental Western paradigm. Finally, the same tolerance for ambiguity leads to a process of constant (de)construction in which new meanings are created, as the idea of a unified Self surrenders to a state of permanent becoming. The new mestiza "learns to transform the small 'I' into the total Self" (82–83). This is also why she finds it so natural to create alliances with other oppressed subjects.

Next to the framework offered by Anzaldúa's "mestiza consciousness" we find what Chicana feminist theorist Chela Sandoval has called "differential consciousness," the second tool that, according to this study, can be useful in the analysis of autofictional practices in filmmaking by women from the diaspora. In her 1991 essay, "U.S. Third World Feminism: The Theory and Method of Oppositional Consciousness in the Postmodern World," Sandoval first identifies four feminist political strategies (equal rights, revolutionary, supremacist, and separatist),[4] which she describes as the "hegemonic" modes of oppositional consciousness. They are hegemonic because they all have tended to present themselves as absolute. She then argues that the practices of U.S. third world feminism have given rise to a new kind of oppositional consciousness, a differential one that, just like Anzaldúa's "mestiza consciousness", is capable of moving "between and among" the other modes so as to transform them (Sandoval, "U.S. Third World Feminism" 14).

Differential consciousness, Sandoval explains, was developed as a survival skill by women of colour who had to learn how to read power relations in each situation and how to adopt the ideological tool best suited to confront them. It proposes a shift of paradigm since it does not conceive the other four modes of oppositional consciousness as mutually exclusive; rather, they are viewed as strategic weapons at specific moments. Sandoval keeps on developing these ideas in her 1999 essay, "New Sciences: Cyborg Feminism and the Methodology of the Oppressed," in which she openly draws an equivalence between her "differential consciousness," Anzaldúa's "mestiza consciousness" and Donna Haraway's "cyborg consciousness". In this essay, she explains that the "differential consciousness" is materialised in the concrete world through what she calls the "methodology of the oppressed" (Sandoval 249).

The differential form of oppositional consciousness is that which "enables movement 'between and among' ideological positionings" (Sandoval, *Methodology of the Oppressed* 57) so that no ideology claims itself to be the final answer (61). The "methodology of the oppressed" consists

4 According to Sandoval (*Methodology of the Oppressed* 50), the "equal rights" mode of oppositional consciousness is behind liberal feminism ("women are the same as men"); the "revolutionary" mode is that of socialist or Marxist feminisms ("women are different from men"); the "supremacist" mode lies under radical or cultural feminisms ("women are superior"); and the "separatist" mode is closer to different expressions of utopian feminism.

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of five technologies: semiotics (sign-reading); deconstruction (challenging dominant signs by separating form from its dominant meaning); meta-ideologizing (appropriating dominant forms to transform their meanings into new, revolutionary concepts); democratics (using the former three technologies to create egalitarian social relations); and differential movement, which allows for the other four technologies to operate in harmony. Together these technologies are capable of constituting "love" as an apparatus for social transformation (Sandoval, "New Sciences" 249).

Like "mestiza consciousness," "differential consciousness" activates a new space: the "alien" area of the borderlands and "a cyberspace, where the transcultural, transgendered, transsexual, transnational leaps necessary to the play of effective stratagems of oppositional praxis can begin" (Sandoval, *Methodology of the Oppressed* 62). This is the space located beyond binary oppositions that the differential subject inhabits. Sandoval also asserts that "differential consciousness" cannot be expressed through logocentrism and rational thinking but rather by means of "poetic modes of expression: gestures, music, images, sounds, words that plummet or rise through signification to find some void—some no-place—to claim their due" (139). In this regard, an innovative autofictional film like *Brincando el charco*, which challenges boundaries and resists classifications, can be an evoking example of a poetic mode of expression signalling toward that ungraspable "differential consciousness". This is discussed in the next section.

The third tool employed in the analysis of the case study is Rosi Braidotti's "nomadic consciousness," developed in her 1994 book *Nomadic Subjects. Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory*. Braidotti's nomadic project bears many similarities with the aforementioned "mestiza" and "differential" types of consciousness, even though she speaks from within the European context. She builds on Haraway's "figurations," which stand for alternative subjectivities outside dominant ways of representing the self. The nomadic subjects and their "nomadic consciousness" are the figurations Braidotti proposes for "political resistance to hegemonic and exclusionary views of subjectivity" (23).

Like Anzaldúa and Sandoval, though from a more elitist perspective, Braidotti imagines an epistemological position that rejects fixed borders and permanent, unitary identities. One of her examples, totally relatable to the experience of the women whose voices appear in *This Bridge Called my Back*, is the polyglot as a linguistic nomad; she says: "A person who is in transit between the languages, neither here nor there, is capable of some healthy scepticism about steady identities and mother tongues" (Braidotti 12). Braidotti also reflects on the relation between the nomad and home: "nomadism consists not so much in being homeless, as in being capable of recreating your home everywhere. The nomad carries her/his essential belongings with her/him wherever s/he goes and can recreate a home base anywhere" (16). More than by constant displacement, the nomad is characterised by having "relinquished all idea, desire, or nostalgia for fixity" (22). It is important to point out, though, that Braidotti's figuration is mainly a voluntary nomad, while many of the experiences described by the Chicana scholars are traversed by forced migration and the harsh conditions that come with it.

As an epistemological project, the "nomadic consciousness" has analogous effects to the mestiza and differential ones, such as the critique of dualistic ways of thinking (including the Western notion that "different from" implies "less than"), the recognition of differences as a condition for creating new types of bonding, the need for transdisciplinarity and the deliberate mixture of voices, of which *Borderlands* is a paradigmatic example. But while Anzaldúa's "mestiza consciousness" emerges from inhabiting the borders, the "nomadic consciousness" develops "an acute awareness of the nonfixity of boundaries" (Braidotti 36). However, we could argue that, contrary to what Braidotti seems to suggest, certain boundaries are actually extremely fixed in very practical terms depending, for instance, on one's passport. Thus the need for a permanent intersectional approach. Braidotti places the roots of nomadism in the body, understood "as neither a biological nor a sociological category but rather as a point of overlapping between the physical, the symbolic and the sociological" (Braidotti 4). She conceives the body as a threshold, the point of intersection between the socio-political sphere and the subjective dimension, that is, between wilful social transformation and unconscious desire.

Another important contribution from Braidotti is the working scheme through which she renders operational what she calls "sexual difference as a project" (149). In looking for ways to redefine female subjectivity from the perspective of the self as a process and of "identity as

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a site of differences" (157), she comes up with three layers depicting "different structures of subjectivity but also different moments in the process of becoming-subject" (158): woman as different from man; women as different from "The Woman"; and differences within women. The first layer stands for the rejection of so-called male values as the right and only parameter, the second layer refers to the deconstruction of the culturally available positions with which the enormous variety of women have been forced to identify with under a patriarchal organisation, and the third layer demands acknowledging that each female subject is a multiplicity in herself.

Braidotti points out that the three layers coexist in everyday experiences and that it is precisely a "nomadic consciousness", which allows for consciously transiting from one level to another. The goal, like that of Sandoval's "differential consciousness", is to become able to operate at various levels, from one's own identity up to the creation of political alliances in recognising differences among women, shifting tactics according to the oppressive situation being faced. The three kinds of consciousness, mestiza, differential and nomadic, thus converge in the shared goal of strengthening coalitions between non-hegemonic subjects upon the acknowledgment of their differences.

To bring together these different insights in the analysis of *Brincando el charco*, this study proposes the employment of Karen Barad's "diffractive methodology" (*Meeting the Universe Halfway* 30). Combining her background in quantum physics with the "thick legacy of feminist theorizing about difference," Barad develops an onto-epistemology based on a "diffractive consciousness" ("Diffracting Diffraction" 168). As a quantum phenomenon, proving that particles can sometimes behave like waves, diffraction questioned the foundations of Newtonian physics in which everything has to be one thing or the other: "The key is understanding that identity is not essence, fixity or givenness, but a contingent iterative" (173). She points out the similarities between how Anzaldúa's "mestiza consciousness" strives for transcending duality, and the ways in which quantum physics "queers the binary type of difference at every layer of the onion" (174):

> Living between worlds, crossing (out) taxonomic differences, tunnelling through boundaries (which is not a bloodless but a necessary revolutionary political action), Anzaldúa understood the material multiplicity of self, the way it is diffracted across spaces, times, realities, imaginaries (....) Difference isn't given. It isn't fixed. (Barad, "Diffracting Diffraction" 175)

Barad's diffractive reading methodology is characterised by reading insights through one another rather than in opposition (*Meeting the Universe Halfway* 30). Birgit M. Kaiser defines diffractive reading as "radically performative" (281) because it is by reading texts together that certain and new patterns emerge. Barad describes diffracting as re-turning, not "as in reflecting on or going back to a past that was, but re-turning as in turning it over and over again (...) an iterative (re)configuring of patterns of differentiating-entangling" ("Diffracting Diffraction" 168).

Following these ideas, diffraction is the methodological umbrella for building bridges between the diverse insights that have been pointed out in this section and the analysis of *Brincando el charco* in the next section. Negrón-Muntaner's film is understood as a "diffraction apparatus" (Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway* 73), that is, as technologies that make certain boundaries and cuts within phenomena so as to make part of the world intelligible to another part of the world in specific ways. *Brincando el charco* is therefore analysed as a record of autofictional practices that have effects, starting from the fact that, instead of a unified subject, what emerges from the film is an identity constructed by and through the very act of narrating oneself, as always already entangled with a collective.

2. *BRINCANDO EL CHARCO. PORTRAIT OF A PUERTO RICAN*: A QUEER FILM AS HOME FOR THE MESTIZA NOMAD

Brincando el charco. Portrait of a Puerto Rican is the first feature-length film directed by Frances Negrón-Muntaner, awarded Puerto Rican filmmaker and Full Professor at Columbia University specialised in Latino and Hemispheric American studies. This 1994 autofictional film, which was also Negrón-Muntaner's Master thesis at Film School, tells the story of Claudia Marín, a middle-class, light-skinned, lesbian photographer and video-maker from Puerto Rico living in

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the U.S. Claudia is a fictional character played by Negrón-Muntaner herself in this multi-layered exploration of the Puerto Rican diaspora in the U.S., an exploration that combines fictional and non-fictional elements, ranging from archival footage and interviews to soap opera drama. *Brincando el charco* opens with a sequence combining documentary images of people from the Puerto Rican diaspora in the U.S., as we listen to Claudia's voice over saying:

> (…) I have known of Puerto Ricans asking themselves to the point of despair: Who are we? What is our common destiny? Trusting that a clear answer will undo centuries of conflict and turmoil, turning us into the owners of history. I am an echo of these questions even if I contest them. I am seduced into seeing us. That is why I must point my lens elsewhere, to look for what escapes the us in nosotros. (00:01:19)

Such preface states what becomes the structuring axis of the film, which is precisely the personal-political search of Claudia for understanding what a so-called Puerto-Rican identity entails in-between experience of migration, subversive sexualities and racial discrimination. This opening sequence also establishes that pact of fiction characteristic of autofictional documentary cinema: director, narrator and character all coincide, and documentary aesthetics at the visual level are accompanied by an essayistic—and partially autobiographical—voice over.

The quest for unpacking the complexities of Puerto-Rican identity is portrayed through the eyes of the protagonist and the dilemma she faces when confronted with an intimate decision, i.e. whether to go back to the island in order to attend her father's funeral or stay in New York. Nevertheless, Claudia's personal conflict is constantly in dialogue with the issues faced by the community as a whole. Still, like Anzaldúa and Moraga in *This Bridge Called my Back*, and also in line with Braidotti's nomadic approach, Claudia/Frances embraces the idea of building her identity in her own terms, despite nationalist discourses: "I picked another way of narrating myself. No longer do I want a plate at the table on La Gran Familia Puertorriqueña" (00:24:23).

Anzaldúa acquires her "mestiza consciousness" as a result of having to live in the borderlands; for Claudia/Frances, the possibility of a different perspective is provided by her experience of "seven years of voluntary exile" (00:04:41), which helps her overcome a dualistic image of Puerto Rico and the U.S. Instead, she acquires what can be described as a diffractive, non-monistic consciousness, in which both countries are understood as "always already open to, or rather entangled with" (Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway* 393), each other.

In *Brincando el charco*, the relationship between the two countries is problematised. On the one hand, the inherent hierarchies and exploitation of colonialism are denounced, while on the other hand, the growing presence of immigrants in the U.S. is highlighted: "America, what a formidable fiction. We are no longer your backyard, the rest of the world, we are in your living room making it anew" (00:45:28). Officially, the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico is not a colony but a Free Associated State, an unincorporated U.S. territory with Commonwealth status. In terms of mobility, this means that—as American citizens—Puerto Ricans can move freely between the island and the U.S. Importantly, Claudia speaks of "exile" because, even though there is no official restriction to her coming back to the island, we soon discover that she had avoided going back since her father kicked her out of the house due to her sexual preference.

In an interview conducted in April 2020, Negrón-Muntaner pointed out what she considers to be the main contribution of her 1994 film in the context of Puerto Rican cinema. Apart from introducing the first lesbian lead and from clearly identifying the Puerto Rican experience as a transnational one, *Brincando el charco* brought attention to "a perspective that we would now call intersectional but at that time we didn't use that word, we'd rather say multiplicity, hybridity (…) it brings up issues of gender, race and sexuality, in a way that had not been seen before" (Negrón-Muntaner, interview).[5]

Alberto Sandoval-Sánchez sustains that, in giving visibility for the first time to the LGBT community in Puerto Rico and the U.S., this film "inaugurated a new discursive space and a new mode of queer representation" (161), allowing queer Puerto Rican spectators to "gain

5 The interview was conducted by the author in Spanish, via Zoom and the interviewee has given explicit consent to being quoted in the article. Original fragment: "…la primera protagonista lesbiana y claro, traía otros asuntos, era también una perspectiva lo que llamaríamos ahora interseccional, que en aquella época no se usaba esa palabra, se usaba multiplicidad, hibridez (…) el texto es importante y trae asuntos de género, de raza y de sexualidad, de una manera que no se había visto antes."

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agency for the articulation and examination of their own relationships with the father, the family, the home, the nation" (160). He also points out that the film's radical political project can be summarised as that of showing what a Latino/a queer citizenship would entail: one which acknowledges "that the issues of class, racism, and colonialism for minorities go hand in hand with the challenging of heterosexism and homophobia" (160). The similarities of this claim with the call of Anzaldúa's "mestiza consciousness" for alliances between oppressed groups are evident, as "it takes a lesbian (Claudia/Negrón) to propose from the in-between location of a minority (ethnic) within a minority (sexual) a new way of defining Puerto Rican identity and nationhood" (Sandoval-Sánchez 157).

Brincando el charco can also be considered an example of what Chela Sandoval calls the poetic expression of a "differential consciousness" (*Methodology of the Oppressed* 139). Rather than a conventional epistemophilic approach to documentary, Negrón-Muntaner combines a reflexive voice over with a creative stream of audiovisual metaphors, among which the sequences of the nightmare (00:46:05) and the sexual fantasy (00:35:48) are particularly evocative. The combination of moving and still images, the introduction of video-within-video sequences, and the seamless cut from a fictional sequence to a standard talking-head interview are all formal strategies that speak of the ungraspability of any fixed identity that Claudia/Frances experiments.

Even if Negrón-Muntaner never uses the term "differential," Sandoval's concept describes the filmmaker's position. In an interview conducted in 2001, Negrón-Muntaner explained that her academic and artistic strategies rely upon shifting locations as a result of her own queer and diasporic experiences:

> The identity that I may claim for myself—which depends on the audience, what the piece is about, and what concern of mine is on the table—doesn't mean that I would not take on a feminist, lesbian, national, or ethnic identity if that's what it takes at a particular juncture. To me, it's not about unchanging and absolute identities but ways to contest power and open up options. (qtd. in Juhasz 287)

This position is also in line with Braidotti's "nomadic consciousness," which rejects hegemonic and exclusionary perspectives and allows mobility within the three stages of "sexual difference," as well as with Barad's "diffractive methodology," for which attention has to be on practices and processes that have effects. In the same interview, Negrón-Muntaner actually describes her practices employing very similar terms:

> When I am showing a film in a context that is hostile to discussing issues affecting women or giving women a voice, I have no problem deploying feminist discourse and strategies, regardless if it is labeled "feminist" or not. **The bottom line here is practices and effects, not "identities".** (qtd. in Juhasz 285. My emphasis)

Claudia/Frances experience with language, "my empowerment speaks a creole tongue" (00:43:01), can also be put in dialogue with Braidotti's "polyglot as a linguistic nomad" (8). Nevertheless, the protagonist's "creole tongue" is not a voluntary choice to transit between languages, but rather the result of colonialism, which imposes a language—English, in this case—upon another one, Spanish. The paradox comes with that empowerment potential in the encounter, which is illustrated in the film through the exchange between the U.S. and Puerto Rico's LGBT liberation movements. Once again, Claudia/Frances manages to overcome dualisms by adopting a mestiza, differential and diffracting consciousness. The transit between languages is also reflected in the subversion of a conventional cinematic language in the film, which blurs boundaries between fiction and non-fiction. For Sandoval-Sánchez, this is a key element that makes *Brincando el charco* an epitome of queer cinema in terms of both form and content:

> That "queer edge" I understand as the film's possibility to call into question normalizing categories, regulatory regimes, and cultural norms, as the possibility to blur boundaries and benefit from the porosity of borders, to interrogate and disrupt hegemonic (imperial and colonial) ways of seeing, to trouble, or undo, and to unsettle dominant master narratives. (156)

From the same queer perspective, Sandoval-Sánchez reflects on the film's problematisation of the concept of home. He starts from what he calls "the primal scene," which concentrates "the horror of carrying in our flesh a father's curse and the trauma of the expulsion of nuestros

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cuerpos and s/exile from a place called home once upon a time" (161). He refers to a specific scene from the film, shot like a soap opera drama, in which Claudia's father kicks her out of the house upon finding out that she is a lesbian. The death of the father triggers Claudia's feeling of uneasiness towards the impossibility of going back and/or belonging to a place she could call home: "there must be a way I can regain this unspeakable part of myself. Even when there's no return. Even when I will remain a partial stranger anywhere and everywhere" (00:51:48).

Both Anzaldúa and Braidotti subvert the traditional idea of home. The first one, confronted with homophobia, which she understands as "fear of going home" (Anzaldúa 20) due to her queerness, claims a habitable space built by herself with her "own feminist architecture" (22). For the second one, any idea "or nostalgia for fixity" is relinquished and replaced by the nomad's capability of recreating "a home base anywhere" (Braidotti 16). Negrón-Muntaner acknowledges that finding a home is something always present in her work, with a stronger emphasis in her latest documentary, still in progress, *Paraíso*. One of the reasons she identifies behind this obsession is actually her being Puerto-Rican:

> From the very beginning, they tell you that not even your country is yours, that is, legally, in the language of the Supreme Court, Puerto Rico is defined as a territory that belongs to the United States. "Belongs to," is not "part of" but "belongs to." It is a piece of land that is owned by some gentlemen in the United States (…) If you think that Puerto Rico was a very poor country until the middle of the 20th century, which is not so many years ago… Well, it has become a very poor country again, but I am thinking before these decades of catastrophes, because even then the issue of housing itself, having a roof, these are problems that are historically there. (Negrón-Muntaner, interview)[6]

Like Anzaldúa, Claudia/Frances faces a second loss of home due to homophobia. What the protagonist of *Brincando el charco* identifies as her home at that moment is the disco, but this does not happen without contradictions: "It was the space where I felt safest, the only place I could openly love whom I wanted, although this too, as the ethnic ghettos, were sometimes an escape, others a prison" (00:33:47). After the experience of migration, the disco ceased to be home until she found voguing, a style of dance performed mainly by members of the African-American and Latino LGBT community in Harlem. Claudia found an unexpected alliance in those male voguers who became part of the bricks of her own architecture.

As for her body, more than seeing it as home, she conceives it, in Braidotti's terms, as that threshold in which the socio-political and the subjective dimensions converge: "I am a surface where mestizo diasporas display one of their many faces" (00:24:40), she says while taking a shower. Her body is also where desire is felt and expressed.

Ultimately, it can be argued that the act of making this film operates as a way of building a portable home, close to what Braidotti envisions for her "nomadic subject." In Negrón-Muntaner's words: "Given my continuous transit between diverse geographic, sexual, and creative localities, the cinematic space can enact a re-signification of home" ("Beyond the Cinema of the Other", 150). Sandoval-Sánchez indeed defines *Brincando el charco* as "an attempt to shake the foundation of the patriarchal house of power" (152). This is reflected in the filmmaker's constant questioning of the existence of a nationalist home in the island because such a hostile "home" excludes at least four communities: "Afro-Puerto Ricans, homosexuals, lesbians, and U.S.-Puerto Ricans" (152).

Brincando el charco can thus be defined as a queer film that becomes a cinematic home for the diasporic *mestiza*. It is also possible to describe the film following the stages of Sandoval's methodology of the oppressed: first, the dominant sign of the patriarchal home is read (semiotics) and then deconstructed due to its exclusion of several groups. It is then appropriated and transformed into a new concept (meta-ideologizing), which is used in the

6 Original fragment: "desde muy temprano te comunican que ni tu país es tuyo, o sea, legalmente, en el lenguaje de la corte suprema, Puerto Rico se define como un territorio que pertenece a los Estados Unidos. 'Belongs to,' is not 'part of,' 'belongs to.' Es un pedazo de tierra que es propiedad de unos señores en Estados Unidos. Entonces pues, eso es un nivel del asunto. Si piensas que Puerto Rico fue un país muy, muy pobre hasta mediados del siglo XX, que no es hace tantos años, y bueno, ha vuelto a ser un país muy pobre. Pero estoy pensando antes de estas décadas de las catástrofes, pues la vivienda en sí misma, tener un techo, son problemáticas que están históricamente ahí."

search for different practices of equality and justice (democratics). And that space allows for the process of turning fixed identities like that of a feminist, a lesbian and/or a migrant into a queer Self always in process, and in permanent dialogue with other Selves to build alliances against precarity.

3. CONCLUDING REMARKS

This article has analysed the film *Brincando el charco. Portrait of a Puerto Rican* through the lenses of Anzaldúa's "mestiza consciousness," Sandoval's "differential consciousness", Braidotti's "nomadic consciousness" and the filmmaker's own insights. This has allowed us to identify how the form and content of Negrón-Muntaner's debut film reframe the concepts of identity and home from an intersectional perspective that subverts androcentric connotations. It is from this angle that *Brincando el charco* can be regarded as a prime example of the potential of autofictional practices in the audiovisual for subverting dominant—sexist, racist and homophobic—narratives, while at the same time proposing alternatives for being, seeing and inhabiting spaces.

Claudia/Frances' "mestiza consciousness" provided by their experience of voluntary exile allows them to overcome dualistic thinking, reductive nationalist discourses and exclusionary identity boundaries. This leads to an intersectional claim even before the concept had been popularised, and to a "queer edge" rejecting "hegemonic (imperial and colonial) ways of seeing" (Sandoval-Sánchez 156). In this sense, the subversion of fixed borders is also expressed in the formal strategies of the film, since Negrón-Muntaner skilfully transits between fictional and non-fictional elements to tell the story of identity as a process.

Brincando el charco. *Portrait of a Puerto Rican* also outlines a different understanding of home from a nomadic, mestiza, queer and differential perspective. First confronted with a colonial reality that denies Puerto-Ricans a land of their own, and then rejected from the traditional androcentric home due to her queerness, Claudia/Frances must invent a "feminist architecture" (Anzaldúa 22) in her own terms, so as to build a habitable space for herself. Ultimately, the film becomes a kind of cinematic home that carries memories of struggles as well as inspiration for possible alliances between precarious subjects aiming at creating a home despite, against and beyond oppressive structures. Subjects that include queer activists, feminist sexologists, male voguers and anti-racist Latinxs who appear as diffracting mirrors for Claudia/Frances in her search for a Puerto-Rican identity. In the end, rather than a fixed answer, what she manages to put together is a mosaic of resistances and coalitions within the always-in-the-making practice of building spaces for safely inhabiting vulnerabilities.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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