

“Is there a bigger lightning rod for racism, bigotry, fear-mongering and hate than immigration?”

An interview with Rodrigo Reyes, director of *Lupe Bajo el Sol* (*Lupe Under the Sun*)

By Kevin Martinez
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Rodrigo Reyes, the young director of *Lupe Bajo el Sol* (*Lupe Under the Sun*), agreed to answer a number of questions by email. This is the exchange.

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WSWS: In most films about immigration the goal of the protagonists is to get to the US, “the land of opportunity,” but in this film we see what things are really like in California’s impoverished Central Valley and now the goal is to go back to Mexico. Was there a deeper meaning behind this story?

Rodrigo Reyes: *Lupe* is a film that comes from a story I discovered within my own family. Right before I started making the film, I discovered that my grandfather had gone missing in the United States for five years. At the time, over 40 years ago, grandpa had been coming and going from Michoacán into California, leaving before the spring and returning in the winter. But suddenly, he simply stopped showing up. It was an anxious and difficult time for my aunts and uncles, and especially for my grandmother.

When grandpa finally came home, he never offered an explanation for this absence. I made *Lupe Bajo el Sol* inspired by this story, because I wanted to look at the shadows and the pain of immigration.

The American Dream is woven into the fabric of migration and the identity of the US. We are proud of this dream because it makes us exceptional to the rest of the world. We take it for granted that folks will always fight to come here because it proves the existence and vigor of this dream, which is so important to our sense of self.

For a lot of economic immigrants, the process of

leaving their homeland is wrapped up in the chasing of this dream. This mythology is incredibly powerful. It renews itself generation after generation, in great part because there is little account of what happens when these dreams vanish on the other side. Within immigrant communities it is extremely difficult to talk openly about failure and the price they have paid to chase a mirage.

Lupe is a man caught in this tension. The American Dream never materialized for him. Instead, he spent his lifetime away from home, doing backbreaking work. He is old and tired, and his family in Mexico has rejected him. What was the point of it all? This question is devastating and it pushes Lupe into his last adventure. For once in his life he knows what he really wants—he wants to go home.

WSWS: You mentioned you are from Merced originally. Can you describe what it was like to live there?

RR: I’m actually from Mexico City, but I have lived in Merced for many years. I would describe it in terms of what the film tries to portray: a vast agricultural heartland, full of huge orchards and a slow pace of life. For migrants like Lupe, this is a place where they take root as farm workers, employing many of the skills they developed in Mexico to keep industries like peach farming alive. Dusty, hot and with endemic poverty, it is a far cry from the idealized California of Los Angeles or the Bay Area.

Many of these folks live in a bubble, a parallel world to the mainstream life of the town. Lupe, for instance, is consumed by work. His routine is overwhelming.

And on Sundays, when he does go out, he is like an alien in the world, riding his bike through the park, nice neighborhoods and restaurants. He is a ghost who cannot connect with regular life. And to my eye, Merced and the many towns of the Central Valley are full of ghosts like Lupe.

WSWS: How did you come across the actors who are in the film?

RR: Danny [Daniel Muratalla] worked with my father for many years until he retired. I approached him because he fit my idea of the character, and then I was lucky to meet his wife [Ana Maria Muratalla], who was just perfect for the part of Gloria, Lupe's lover.

I'm very grateful to have worked with him and his wife Ana María. I think they are amazing because they were willing and open to take part in the film, in spite of never having been a part of this world. They were willing to trust me—and it was this connection that allowed the movie to come to life. Imagine the courage it takes to say yes, when you are approached to work on a film and you have limited English and a hard background in your own country, with little access to education or opportunity.

Thanks to their faith and courage, I was able to make an authentic film that did not hide or polish life in the fields. Danny really looks like what he is: a hardworking man. His hands, his back, even his gait are all real. And the same goes for his wife Ana, who is an extraordinarily resilient woman.

WSWS: What do you think of the current political situation, especially in regard to immigrants?

RR: Is there a bigger lightning rod for racism, bigotry, fear-mongering and hate than immigration? Our reaction to this community, in particular in the United States, is a test of our humanity and our ability to think rationally about our relationships to other people. I really think it embodies the biggest social challenge of our times.

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