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## Differentiating the Transnational from the National in a Multicultural Setting: Identity in Persepolis and Rush Hour

### Cover Page Footnote

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# Differentiating the Transnational from the National in a Multicultural Setting: Identity in Persepolis and Rush Hour

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## ABSTRACT

This essay explores the differences between transnational identities and national identities in a multicultural setting by juxtaposing the films *Persepolis* and *Rush Hour*. Furthermore, it examines the characteristics of both transnational and national identities and how they are represented in film. In an increasingly globalized world, it is important to distinguish these two types of identity and consider how these individuals interact with today's society; thus, this essay asks readers to think about the influence that the commingling of transnational and national identities has on the modern world.

**Keywords:** Persepolis, Rush Hour, Transnational, National, Identity

Understanding the elements that differentiate transnationalism from nationalism is increasingly imperative in a globalized world. As the world opens its borders "with increasing migrations, worldwide media disseminations, multinational corporations, tourism travel, and so forth, diverse peoples interact with one another more than ever" (Jensen 189). Thus, as a result of the expansive interconnectivity of nations, diverse identities begin to form. A growing number of migrants, particularly adolescents, develop a transnational identity as they take on the cultural and social norms of the nations with which they interact. These transnational identities differ from the national identities that persist throughout multicultural settings, and the films *Persepolis* and *Rush Hour* illustrate these differences.

variety of social norms belonging to multiple, divergent nations. Consequently, individuals with a transnational identity often feel displaced. Understanding this distinction helps the world acknowledge how transnational individuals function within society and how, in turn, society's institutions must adjust in order to accommodate the effects of globalization and migration. With the growing number of immigrants entering the United States, it is important for Americans to understand how transnational individuals interact with national ones and how this affects society today. Juxtaposing *Persepolis* and *Rush Hour* demonstrates the distinction between transnational identity and national identity in a multicultural setting; moreover, understanding these identities is essential in an increasingly globalized world.

National identities are defined by a specific set of political and cultural values that pertain to one nation-state, whereas transnational identities are shaped by a

## **Introducing the Films within the Context of Transnationalism and Nationalism**

### ***Transnationalism***

Transnationalism concerns itself with globalization and the interconnections across borders. As a result of the growing interconnectivity of the world, “hybridizing tendencies have become predominant” throughout cinema; similarly, transnational identities are affected and shaped by hybridization (Ezra & Rowden 2). The film *Persepolis* exemplifies this type of transnational identity and explores the exilic life of Marjane Satrapi, a girl who grows up in Iran and moves to Austria in order to escape the oppressive nature of her country. Marjane’s identity is shaped and changed as she moves across borders, causing her to feel displaced as she struggles to find herself; consequently, she develops a transnational identity that distances her from both her friends and family.

### ***Nationalism***

National identity is portrayed in *Rush Hour*: a film about two police officers, played by Jackie Chan and Chris Tucker, from dissimilar cultures who work together to find the kidnapped daughter of a Chinese diplomat. The film places an emphasis on the national identities of Chief Inspector Lee and Detective James Carter who interact with one another in the multicultural settings of Los Angeles and china town. Nationalism and national identity differ greatly from aspects of transnationalism. Nationalism is generally concerned with a feeling of strong loyalty to one nation and focuses on the principles of a single nation as the defining qualities of those within the nation-state. These principles are a particular set of social, cultural, and political values that distinguish one nation from another.

Accordingly, the film *Rush Hour* distinguishes these values by displaying characters with stereotypical qualities that are associated with their individual nationalities.

### ***Persepolis and Transnational Identity***

In order to illustrate the contrast between these two films and the two types of identity, Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis* will be examined first. *Persepolis* exemplifies aspects of transnationalism and the transnational identity, using the style of a cartoon to create a “third space” which makes the film universally relatable. Because Marjane chose to represent her story in animation rather than live-action, the locations within the film lack realism: “The city of Tehran is depicted obliquely in the film, lacking specifically cultural, geographical or historical referents; it could be any number of cities in any number of countries” (Warren 2). This lack of realistic representation is what enables the locations and events within the film to take on a universal appearance, allowing the viewer to interpret the space freely.

Furthermore, this “animation offers a means for deeply personal sometimes dangerous stories to be told without the burden of maintaining realism and negotiating authentic reconstruction” (Warren 1). The style of this film not only allows for a deeper, more focused interpretation of Marjane’s experiences, but also causes viewers to feel more connected to the characters and events. It is also told in the style of a bildungsroman, or coming of age story, which incorporates universally relatable experiences such as going through puberty and falling in love, further enabling Marjane to connect to her viewers while simultaneously illustrating how her experiences shape her identity.

### ***Identity in Iran***

While Marjane grows up in Tehran, her identity is largely non-conformist in relation to Iran's national culture. As a result of the Iranian revolution, an anti-western theocratic government, lead by Ayatollah Khomeini, is put into place, and Sharia law is implemented. Consequently, western items are banned, women are greatly oppressed, and individualism is discouraged. Despite this, Marjane chooses to indulge in western culture by listening to punk music and adorning her outfit with westernized jackets and shoes. She also goes to illegal parties where alcohol is drunk and cigarettes are smoked as an act of rebellion. By associating with Western culture and speaking out against common oppressive ideas, Marjane is anti-nationalism and distances herself from her nation's society.

### ***Identity in Austria***

In consideration of her outspoken nature, Marjane's parents fear for her safety and essentially exile her to Austria so that she can escape the oppressive nature of Iran. The theme of exile is very prominent throughout the film and is indicative of transnational characteristics. Additionally, this theme is further highlighted through the exilic story of her Uncle Anoosh, who was "an idealist and a revolutionary who fought against the shah" (Warren 3). During her own exile in Vienna, Austria, Marjane feels displaced from western culture. The film emphasizes on this displacement by contrasting the portrayals of Tehran and Vienna: "Unlike the minimal depiction of the Tehran city-scape, Vienna is animated as an exaggerated over-the-top environment" (Warren 3). Marjane also feels detached from the music scene even though she is able to find a group of friends that share her interest in punk music. Western practices

and punk music are all socially acceptable in Austria, so her love for westernized culture loses its meaning because it is no longer a sign of her rebellion. Thus, she is viewed as a conformist while she tries to find her identity in a new context.

As a consequence of her experiences in war ridden Iran, she is unable to relate to her new friends and their perspectives. This is shown when her friend Momo asserts that politics are "all bullshit" and that "life is nothingness," and Marjane responds by telling Momo that he is "the one that is full of shit" (*Persepolis*). Although she attempts to fit in and mask her ties to Iran by telling people she is French, she inevitably feels more connected to her Iranian identity within the context of her life in Austria. As a result, she alienates and secludes herself from others, becoming depressed because of her inability to fully assimilate into Austrian culture.

### ***Transnational Identity***

Marjane's unhappiness with her life in Austria causes her to return home; however, she returns to Iran to find that she no longer connects to the culture there. This is illustrated in the scene where Marjane is sitting in a chair greeting her friends. When they inquire about her sexual life, they are shocked by her promiscuity. Her friends in Iran view her as the "other" because "in her homeland, female sexuality is limited, while in the context of a host society, she has experienced a different sexual lifestyle" (Behbahani 65). Marjane says in her memoir that "[she] was a westerner in Iran, an Iranian in the west" (Satrapi 118). The dichotomy of her identities leaves her in a state of transnational hybridity. Thus, she is an amalgamation of her two separate identities, "living in a . . . 'third space;' a combination of both cultures, which

simultaneously is neither of them” (Behbahani 60). Marjane has a transnational identity which causes her to feel displaced in both her home’s and host’s culture, making it difficult for her to relate to the people in her life.

Throughout the film, this sense of displacement is further demonstrated by the images on the screen. There are many distant shots filled with empty space, representing her social marginalization and her perpetual exile to a “third space.” Most notably, the beginning of the film displays Marjane as an adult waiting at an airport in France. This moment marks the present and highlights how her character is “positioned between cultures and environments” (Warren 1). Compared to the black and white scheme used in the majority of the film, this is the only scene animated in color. Whereas the black and white scheme is used to emphasize the dichotomy of her two identities, the use of color represents the blending of her separate selves into a transnational identity. The scene exemplifies the overall transnational theme of the movie and represents the liminal space that transnational individuals are situated in.

### ***Rush Hour and National Identity***

Contrastingly, Brett Ratner’s film *Rush Hour* portrays distinct national identities by applying stereotypical qualities to the two main characters in the film. The ways in which identity is illustrated throughout this film drastically differs from the transnational identity of Marjane in *Persepolis*. National identity is characterized by explicit social behaviors, beliefs and cultural values that adhere to a specific nation. In order to accentuate national identity, national cinema “adopt[s] a range of formal and generic characteristics” (Higson 15). These “generic characteristics”

are highlighted in the opening scenes of the movie and demonstrate the national identities of Chief Inspector Lee and James Carter.

### ***Chinese Nationalism***

The film begins with a chase scene involving Chief Inspector Lee, played by Jackie Chan, and Sang, a henchman of the villain Juntao. In this scene, Lee is represented with stereotypical Asian qualities in order to put an emphasis on his national identity. While Lee is in pursuit of Sang, he must use kung-fu to take down other henchmen. His use of Kung-fu in this scene, as well as the rest of the film, is a predominant characteristic associated with Hong Kong cinema and is used to spotlight Lee’s Chinese identity. According to Desser, “Kung-fu [is] an instinctive but disciplined art linked to a cultural and national identity (143). Furthermore, this national identity is often personified by actors like Jackie Chan whose characters are displaced from their homeland (Desser 143). In the case of this film, Jackie Chan’s character is dislocated to the multicultural setting of Los Angeles. While there, he experiences American culture and must work along side his American foil: Detective James Carter.

### ***American Nationalism***

The film portrays Detective James Carter, played by Chris Tucker, with stereotypically American attributes: loudness, cockiness, pride, and independence. He is also associated with violence and explosions. In the scene immediately following Lee’s introduction, Detective Carter makes an undercover transaction with a bomb dealer. Carter is both loudly outspoken and extremely cocky as he pulls up in his American sports car. Carter’s actions exemplify the stereotype of

the loud, rich, and overly confident American. Additionally, as a result of his actions, several police officers get shot and a car explodes. Here, Carter embodies the persona of an American, one who likes violence and conflict. This stereotypical view of Americans is perpetuated throughout the *Rush Hour* franchise; in *Rush Hour 3*, the French taxi driver George vocalizes this stereotype by stating, “I will never know what it's like to be an American, never know what it feels like to kill for no reason” (Ratner). This portrayal of Carter contrasts with the restraint and non-violence that Lee showed during his chase, where he allowed the perpetrator to escape instead of shooting him.

### ***The Intermingling of National Identities***

Inspector Lee’s and Detective Carter’s divergent qualities are juxtaposed in order to place further emphasis on their individual national identities; they both serve as a foil for each other to further distinguish their differences. Although the film takes place in the multicultural settings of Los Angeles and Chinatown, the identities of the main characters still remain divergently nationalistic. Berry and Farquhar assert that “as Lee and Carter become personally closer on the job, national . . . symbols begin to merge:” Carter learns some of Lee’s Kung-fu tricks and tries Chinese food, whereas Lee learns some of Carter’s dance moves and how to act in American culture (Berry and Farquhar 152). However, despite the fact that they partake in aspects of each other’s cultures and they do not have difficulty assimilating some of these new experiences into their own identities, they still retain their distinctive national identities. Like oil and vinegar “their dynamics embody cultural emulsion;” their identities are placed side by

side but never fully blend together (Anderson 70).

### **Conclusion**

Thus, transnational identity and national identity are vastly different as illustrated in the films *Persepolis* and *Rush Hour*. In some cases, when individuals with a national identity are placed within a multicultural setting they can still retain their national identity as is seen in the case of Lee and Carter. However, as travel and communication across nations becomes more accessible and families migrate more frequently, individuals with transnational identities, like Marjane, become more common. As a result, both transnational and national individuals interact with each other within multicultural settings and “the assumption that people will live their lives in one place, according to one set of national and cultural norms . . . no longer holds” (Levitt). The presence of these diverse identities influences the social, political, and economic aspects of a host nation. According to Levitt, “together, they can transform the economy, culture, and everyday life of whole source-country regions.” Therefore, it is imperative that nations such as the United States, who experience a high influx of diverse immigrants, work to accommodate the sociological and economic effects that the commingling of national and transnational individuals brings.

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