

Birds of a Feather: A Comparative Analysis of *Rio* (2011) and The Migrant Experience

Natalie Byers

ABSTRACT

When people migrate somewhere new, they experience a schism in their identity; there is the person they were in their homeland and the person they become in their new home. In order to make their identity whole again, migrants must decide what parts of their past selves to rediscover or reclaim, as well as what new discoveries they wish to incorporate into their new sense of self. This essay explores Carlos Saldanha's film *Rio* through the lens of migrant studies, examining how the film captures the complexity of migrant identity through the development of its characters. More specifically, this essay includes in-depth character analysis for the protagonist, Blu, a rare Macaw originally from Brazil but raised in the United States, who finds his way back to Rio de Janeiro. He must grapple with both of his conflicting identities and redefine who he is and what's important to him. Based on the film itself, *Rio* reviews, and theoretical essays on both migrant studies and the portrayal of Brazil in media, this essay reveals how migrant-oriented narratives offered in an easily comprehensible format like film provide opportunities for migrants and other audience members to understand and mend their own identities through the journey of a character on a screen.

© Byers, *The Digital Literature Review*, 12 (2), 30-42.

doi: 10.33043/q3d6a4c5. Shared with CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0 License.

Scientists, historians, psychologists, and other researchers have spent an enormous amount of time and effort trying to understand how immigration affects a person and their identity. The field of migration studies is solely focused on the journey migrants take: why they migrate, how the migration takes place, and the consequences migration might have in a broader sense, for themselves and societies involved. And one film encapsulates this journey perfectly: The 2011 film *Rio*.

Directed by Carlos Saldanha, *Rio* tells the tale of a macaw named Blu, who is believed to be the last male of his kind. Captured by smugglers when he is just a hatchling, Blu finds himself in Minnesota where he is raised and domesticated by his caretaker Linda. One day, a Brazilian ornithologist named Tùlio informs Linda and Blu that there is a female macaw like Blu in Rio de Janeiro, and asks them to go there so that they can save Blu's kind from extinction. Linda and Blu reluctantly make the journey, but just as Blu meets the female, Jewel, the two of them are captured by smugglers and chained together; they manage to escape, but now they have to figure out a way to remove their chains so that Blu can reunite with Linda and Jewel can live freely in the rainforest. They meet some other bird friends (along with a drooly bulldog) on their journey and learn to work together, slowly falling in love in the process. They have a falling out, but once Blu is forced to rescue Jewel from the smugglers again, he learns to accept his love and his identity and finally learns how to fly.

At first glance, *Rio* has no connections to migrant identity, but a closer look at the main protagonist Blu reveals that is far from the case. Blu is a rare macaw taken from his homeland Brazil before he can even fly, raised in Minnesota by a human he bases his life around. When he is suddenly forced to travel to Rio against his will to mate with another macaw he doesn't even know, he is scared, confused, and feels extremely alone. His American caretaker Linda cannot understand how his Brazilian heritage could foster in him, and his new Brazilian bird friends cannot understand how his American background

has domesticated him into a bird they can barely recognize as one of their kind. It takes the entirety of the movie for someone to accept him for who he is—his planned mate, Jewel—and when she does, he finally learns how to accept who he is: both Brazilian and American. It is only then that he is able to fly. No one has looked at *Rio* through the lens of immigration before, but *Rio* offers a perfect parallel to the struggles of immigrants through the character journey of Blu. Delving deeper into Blu's character—his strengths, his struggles, his relationships, and his development—opens a larger dialogue between the character of the immigrant and the audience.

The Creation of Rio (2011) and the Creation of “Brazil”

When Carlos Saldanha was developing what would eventually become the film *Rio*, his goal was to create a love letter to the city he grew up in, and a city that was quickly on the rise in global recognition. After a period of economic decline, Brazil had found itself in an upsurging economy and profile; in the late 2000s, Brazil had just been selected to host the 2014 FIFA World Cup and the 2016 Olympics, and they were becoming much larger players in the geopolitical scene. And Rio de Janeiro was becoming Brazil's crown jewel: all thirty-three Olympic venues were there, and the FIFA World Cup Final took place in one of its many soccer stadiums. All that was needed was the reconstruction of its international “branded identity”—an identity that depicted Brazil more positively to appeal to tourists and its own people. Saldanha did not single-handedly pioneer this restructuring, but his film did emphasize the sense of vibrance and happiness his hometown could bring to its citizens (and the prospect tourists watching the film). His purpose for creating *Rio* serves as a double-edged sword; the movie “recreates a very positive urban imaginary for Rio, with a great potential for boosting mass tourism via blockbusters, however, at the same time, it reaffirms anachronistic North-South hierarchies and recasts Brazil in the periphery of global capitalism” (Vieira, 2). From 0:12:59-0:13:34 in the film, *Rio* is presented on only the day before Carnival, arguably the largest party

in the world, and dozens of people are shown scantily dressed in shimmery one-pieces dancing through the streets. At that moment, Rio de Janeiro becomes a spectacle of an experience tourists would flock to instead of the home of a spectacular and historic celebration. Instead of exalting Brazil for its brilliant history, culture, and nature, aggrandizing Brazil for its prospective economy and tourism exalts it for its capitalist identity only. Instead of becoming an independent power of its own, Brazil also becomes a brand for other global powers to exploit.

While the branding of a country for geopolitical gain is rather commonplace and not always problematic, one must consider Brazil's goals for their brand when viewing and discussing *Rio*. Brazil wanted to portray itself as a place full of grand sports in beautiful places, somewhere with much to see and do, a tropical paradise that was also safe to visit, and Rio executes these portrayals of its setting to a tee. When Blu first sees Rio (0:12:15-0:12:58 of the film), it is a beautiful, sunny, tropical paradise with gorgeous skylines, colorful parrots flying everywhere, and hundreds of people lounging on the beach. Aside from the film's setting, what about its characters? The characters of *Rio* are pronouncedly animated, and their identities are usually simple and dichotomous; "In other words, identities are mostly constructed following a basic semiotic equation that one's identity can be defined by difference from an other" (Marsh, 74). Thus, any characters can only be understood in relation to other foil characters, as personalities, character traits, and identities are fairly cut-and-dry in the movie.

This type of stereotyping, which establishes an "us" versus "them" divide in a set of characters, is also a tactic used to create negative views on other-groups, such as migrants in a country. Otherization in populist media is a new trend in Brazil ever since the election of President Jair Bolsonaro, who promoted a nationalistic perspective at the cost of demonizing Brazil's immigrants (Gonçalves and David). When immigrants are misrepresented and marginalized, it becomes extremely difficult for them to both be

accepted by their country and by themselves, which is why stereotyping can become such a slippery slope in media. *Rio* likely utilized popular Brazilian stereotyping to create a simpler, more marketable movie, but analyzing its characters requires critics to recognize the stereotypes present in order to look past them to discover deeper meanings. Now, with this in mind, let's delve deeper into *Rio's* protagonist, Blu, and how his character includes far more than meets the eye.

The Character Blu

Almost all of *Rio's* themes revolve around the main protagonist, Blu, and his struggles with his identity through his experiences and relationships with the other characters. When the audience first meets Blu, he is a small hatchling in a nest by himself, woken up by the singing and dancing of the other colorful birds in *Rio's* rainforest as they celebrate the arrival of Carnival. He instinctually begins to dance to their samba, and when he spots other hatchlings jumping from their nests and learning to fly with the music, he braces himself to do the same, but bird smugglers interrupt their fun and Blu falls from his tree, getting trapped in a cage. This awful experience coupled with his terrifying journey from Brazil to a crate thrown off a truck into the snow (0:4:05) traumatizes Blu. The only comfort he finds is in his new caretaker, Linda, who finds him and gives him an extremely structured life that ensures his well-being. Blu never learns to fly, and Linda accommodates so that he doesn't have to. He bases his life off what Linda does, so he subsequently becomes highly introverted, book smart, and a homebody; he also makes every decision based off logical facts and his safety. When Blu is trying to teach himself to fly, he reads a bunch of books about flight, makes a checklist for himself, and even constructs a runway for himself to run down, though all of it fails dramatically (0:10:37-0:11:34). Every other bird that sees him mocks him by calling him a "pet," but Blu is happy with his life—since he doesn't know any different, how could he not be? It

is only when he and Linda are all but forced to make the trip to Rio de Janeiro to save Blu's species that Blu is first met with another culture of birds like him and begins to question his identity, specifically the reemergence of the Brazilian culture he had largely forgotten.

When Blu meets the only other blue macaw, Jewel, he is determined to woo her quickly so he can return home as quickly as possible, so he tries to impress her with his mind, not his heart, showing her how he can communicate with other animals and make daring ground escapes (0:32:31-0:33:53). Jewel, on the other hand, has no desire for a mate and only wishes to escape their enclosure to freedom in the rainforest. Right away, the macaws are set up as foils for each other: Blu, the nerdy American who acts more human than bird, and Jewel, the free-spirited Brazilian who refuses to trust humans. They are on completely opposite pages until they are kidnapped and chained together by one leg each, forcing them to work together so they can escape the chain and go their separate ways. As they learn to cooperate, the largest obstacle in the way of their freedom is Blu's inability to fly, which is depicted as his lack of freedom from humans. Jewel tells Blu that flying is freedom—it is not having to rely on anyone else (IvyPanda, "*Rio and the Issue of Freedom*")—and she asks him why he wouldn't want that, to which he replies that a life like that sounds lonely. Here, Blu's dependence on others and rejection of independence contradicts with Jewel's stubborn independence and rejection of depending on anyone but herself; as their journey progresses, they must both learn to be more independent and dependent respectively, and this is eventually how they connect with each other and fall in love. The last character of significant note to Blu is the toucan Rafael, who serves as Blu's primary mentor in successfully wooing Jewel and accepting his Brazilian identity. Like Blu, Rafael used to do things that satisfied his brain's desires, but after meeting his mate and settling down with her, everything he does now comes from his heart—and this is where Rafael tells

Blu flying comes from. He says, “Blu must connect his heart to his mind, and only then will he truly soar and discover the hero inside” (“Carlos Saldanha Rio Interview”). This juxtaposition of heart versus mind is central to Blu’s character journey as he grows to accept more of himself through his love for Jewel.

Throughout the movie, Blu’s largest conflict is his internal struggle accepting both his identities, both as an American pet and a Brazilian bird, as valid while it seems everyone around him cannot. As he unlocks more memories of his past—once through a flashback to the beginning of the movie as Blu dances with Jewel at 0:54:20—and grows to love the little tastes of freedom he gains through his wild adventures with Jewel and his friends, he still values the knowledge and carefulness from his American upbringing. Because of his upbringing, Blu is an expert at using human tools around him to solve problems in sticky situations—such as when he used a skateboard at 1:21:27 to catch up to a trapped Jewel. However, at this point in the film, Blu has not accepted both his American and Brazilian identities to make up his whole immigrant identity.

The only one that seems to like both sides of Blu equally is Jewel, which opens the door in his mind towards reclaiming his cultural heritage, but when the chain is finally removed from them and Jewel immediately flies away from him, his insecurity skyrockets. From 1:07:08-1:09:38 in the film, Blu is watching his friends and his love interest, Jewel, happily soaring above him, the music soaring with them. While the flying birds are illuminated by the moonlight, Blu is lit by streetlights on the ground with the bulldog Luiz, his face dejected. Luiz tries to comfort him by saying, “Yep, I know just how you feel. Watching them up there makes you want to chase them and grab them in their mouth and bite their heads off, huh?” and then laughs it off, but eventually he realizes he is not helping and leaves. The camera focuses on Jewel and the other birds flying in circles with Blu out of focus, until he eventually walks out of frame. It seems even the camera has decided he is not important compared to his friends flying above

him. Once Jewel realizes he is leaving and goes to ask him what's wrong, they are much more separated than they were when they were chained together, and they are never both shown in focus in the same shot. This is to signify their disconnect; now that Blu believes Jewel could never accept all of him, he tells her, "I can't spend the rest of my life following you wherever you go," and Jewel retorts that it isn't her fault he can't fly—which really means it isn't her fault he refuses to conquer his insecurities and live with her. As the music intensifies with the heat of their confrontation, Blu then completely separates himself from his Brazilian roots, claiming he doesn't belong here and also hates samba, implying nothing had changed in him and there was no possibility of a relationship with Jewel. Jewel, realizing Blu has rejected any Brazilian part of himself he'd grown to love and has thus rejected his love for her, also rejects the American part of him she'd grown to love, calls him a "pet" once more, and flies away from everyone. Blu's character has echoes of James Baldwin's essay "Stranger in the Village." Like Baldwin, an African-American staying in an isolated Swiss village, he is seen as a "living wonder" to every bird he meets in Brazil, and while they do not intentionally treat him unkindly, they do not view him as a real bird without the ability to fly (2). The people in the Swiss village only view Baldwin as otherworldly because they had never seen anyone like him before, which is similar to how the Brazilian birds react whenever they observe Blu's American mannerisms. All of Blu's friends try and use different methods to teach him how to fly, but in the end, Blu takes flight only after both his identities are accepted, first by Jewel and then by himself. Once he can see the value of his American pet resourcefulness and the value of the wonders of his freedom in Rio de Janeiro as equal, his identity is finally whole. He is American, but he is also Brazilian—he is a pet, but he is also a bird—and when Jewel accepts that too, there are no fears or insecurities that could stop him from soaring with her by his side.

Blu as the Role of the Migrant

It may seem incredulous to think the character arc of an animated macaw in a children's movie might have any parallels to the experience of immigrants, but there is much to learn about the migrant experience when viewed through the narrative of Blu's journey in *Rio*. Immigrants often struggle with trying to balance their two identities: Who they are in the culture of the country they call home, and who they are in the culture of the country they used to call home. They might feel at home in their new country but unwelcome based on what self-reflective critics of migration studies call "ethnic lensing," which conceptualizes ethnicity as separate from other sectionalities of one's identity. Peter Scholten et al. argue, "focusing only one ethnicity risks defying social complexity and the importance of intersectionalities between ethnicity and, for instance, class, citizenship, education, location, cultural, or political disposition" (18). Even though Blu was born in Brazil, he was raised in America and had no memories of his original home before he returned, and upon returning, both his identities were immediately challenged by the other's existence. As it turns out, Blu's journey is closely related to the journey many immigrants find themselves on to find self-acceptance of their multiple identities, because he is an immigrant.

On the journey to accepting his Brazilian heritage, music is the strongest way Blu is able to connect with his roots. Unlike something like language, music is a simple common ground for people from different cultures to connect to, so it is an incredibly useful tool for immigrants to use when trying to connect to their ancestral cultures. Sandra Sanchez Adorno conducted a research study that showed music allowed four second-generation immigrant children to explore the values and traditions of social groups and also served as a source for "understanding, maintaining, and expressing their ethnic, gender, and youth identities" (1). The movie *Rio* starts with birds singing and dancing to Brazilian music, and there is almost always samba playing when the cast is in Rio de Janeiro. As

a baby, Blu is shown dancing to the music, and when he and Jewel dance together at a party, the same flashback plays while Blu does a very similar dance instinctively. And it is no coincidence that when Blu rejects his Brazilian identity, he ends by saying he hates samba—a move that shocks all his friends and even brings some to tears. Carlos Saldanha’s choice to make *Rio* a diet movie musical makes sense since he was writing a love letter to his culture, and music plays such a huge part in sharing any culture with an audience. By making music a pinnacle part of Blu’s cultural rediscovery as well, he creates a portrait of discovering one’s identity that is easy for others to relate to—particularly to immigrants.

One of Blu’s toughest decisions in *Rio* is deciding what constitutes a home for him. Is a home based on where you live, where you’re from, what you’re doing, or who you’re with? He thinks Minnesota is his home because it’s where he grew up, but once he travels to Rio de Janeiro and gains new friends, love interests, and desires, he loses sense of where his home truly resides. This experience is one many immigrants go through, too. When examining the 2006 film *The Namesake*, Natalie Friedman explains that the American-raised children of Indian parents Ashoke and Ashima, who both immigrated to the United States when they got married, “do not see India as their country of origin or as a putative homeland, and they can only define home as the place where their two cultures merge” (115). For some, that home is their family’s house, with their extended family’s memories and their own memories with each other. For Blu, that home eventually becomes Rio de Janeiro, in a new blue macaw sanctuary run by his caretaker Linda, deep in the rainforest where he lives with his friends, Jewel, and his and Jewel’s three children. Although he does not still live in Minnesota, Linda, the most important part of his Minnesota life, is still with him; Blu’s home is anywhere with all his loved ones, and in true migrant fashion, both of his cultures are accounted for.

Conclusion

Narratives are how people discover new parts of themselves: their personalities, their quirks, and most importantly, their identities. It is vital to the betterment of society that a trove of diverse narratives is spread to everyone in it—that way, humans continue to foster identities that fit themselves and continue to shape the world to be a better place for all. Carlos Saldanha may have created *Rio* for the Brazilians in his homeland, but the narrative he tells speaks to more than just them. If an immigrant watches *Rio* and feels seen by the awkward, insecure, but brave Blu, they will find it easier to accept themselves for every piece of their identity that doesn't seem to quite fit together, and humanity will feel more whole as a result. And isn't that the greatest outcome society can achieve? After all, regardless of where we come from, what we love to do, what we believe in, and who we love, we are all birds of a feather.

Works Cited

Adorno, Sandra Sanchez. "Navigating Identities: The Musical Lives of Four Second-Generation Immigrant Children." *Journal of Research in Music Education*, July 2024, p. 1. EBSCOhost, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00224294241256929>.

Baldwin, James, "Stranger in the Village," Harper's Magazine, (1953).

Carlos Saldanha Rio Interview. <https://www.girl.com.au/carlos-saldanha-rio.htm>. Accessed 29 Jan. 2025.

Friedman, Natalie. "From Hybrids to Tourists: Children of Immigrants in Jhumpa Lahiri's The Namesake." *Critique*, vol. 50, no. 1, Fall 2008, pp. 111-28. EBSCOhost, <https://doi.org/10.3200/CRIT.50.1.111-128>.

Gonçalves, Isabella, and Yossi David. "A Systematic Literature Review of the Representations of Migration in Brazil and the United Kingdom." *Comunicar*, vol. 30, no. 71, Apr. 2022, pp. 47-58. EBSCOhost, <https://doi.org/10.3916/C71-2022-04>.

Marsh, Leslie L. "Another Good Neighbor?: Hollywood's (Re)Embracing of Brazil in 'Rio' (2011) and 'Fast Five' (2011)." *Revista Canadiense de Estudios Hispánicos*, vol. 37, no. 1, 2012, pp. 67-85. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24388781>. Accessed 5 Nov. 2024.

"Rio (2011) and the Issue of Freedom." *IvyPanda*, 14 Jan. 2022, ivypanda.com/essays/movie-review-rio-2011/.

Rio. Directed by Carlos Saldanha, 20th Century Fox, 2011.

Scholten, Peter, et al. *Introduction to Migration Studies: An Interactive Guide to the*

Literatures on Migration and Diversity. 1st ed, Springer International Publishing AG, 2022.

Vieira, Else R. P. “Carlos Saldanha’s Cinematic Reinvention of Rio as an Aspiring Global City.” *The International Journal of New Media, Technology and the Arts*, vol. 15, no. 2, 2020, pp. 29-50. DOI.org (Crossref), <https://doi.org/10.18848/2326-9987/CGP/v15i02/29-50>.