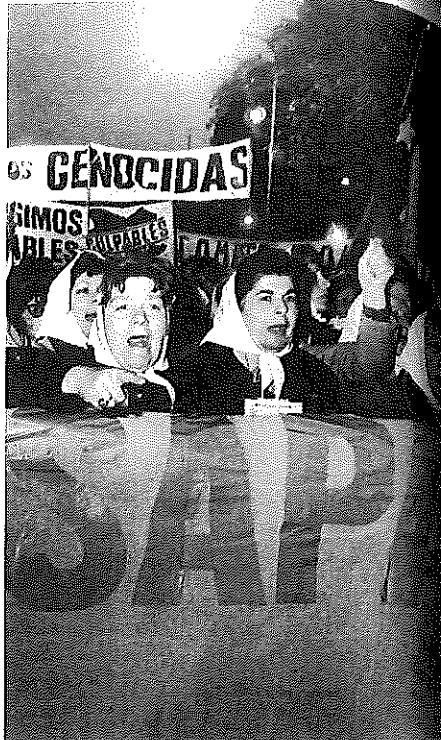




Rosa Linda Fregoso

Devils and Ghosts, Mothers and Immigrants

A CRITICAL RETROSPECTIVE OF THE WORKS OF LOURDES PORTILLO

Lourdes Portillo's films and videos are emblematic of the broad spectrum of social, cultural, and political concerns of Chicana and Latina image-makers. In writing this essay I am taking my cue from Alexandra Juhasz, who notes: "In our present climate, when women are reinventing the feminist wheel to fight yet again for our rights to health care and reproductive freedom, it is critical for feminist educators in film and other fields to see and show realist accounts of how women approached similar political work less than a generation before."¹ I was inspired by Juhasz's poignant reaffirmation of the theoretical import of realist political documentaries (and, I would add, political narrative films), by her insightful recognition of the fundamental ways that they contribute to the project of social transformation. As Juhasz indicates, our present historical context demands that feminist educators, like myself, retrace and reevaluate the theoretical legacy of feminist political works.

The films of Lourdes Portillo raise a series of pertinent issues for feminists in the late twentieth century. Residing in northern California, Portillo is an internationally acclaimed documentary filmmaker who works on the borders between two or more cultures and cinematic traditions. In the late 1970s, Portillo made her first film, *After the Earthquake/Después del terremoto*, codirected by Nina Serrano. A delicate and earnest portrait of a domestic worker who migrated from Nicaragua to California, *Después del terremoto* was awarded the Diploma of Honor at the Cracow Shorts Film Festival. A few years later, Portillo traveled to Argentina and, along with Susana Blaustein Muñoz, focused on the mothers of the disappeared (*los desaparecidos*) who defied the military regime. Portillo and Muñoz's film, *Las Madres: The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo*, played a major role in publicizing internationally the plight of the mothers and *los desaparecidos*. With the documentary *La Ofrenda: Days of the Dead* (1988), Portillo turned her focus to the realm of cultural practices, documenting the Day of the Dead celebration in Mexico and its revival and recovery by Chicanas and Chicanos in the United States. In 1992, Portillo collaborated



Scene from *Las Madres: The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo*. Courtesy of Lourdes Portillo.

One of the mothers wearing a placard of her disappeared daughter, Nidia Beatriz Sans. Courtesy of Lourdes Portillo.

with the comedy trio Culture Clash to produce the experimental video *Columbus on Trial* for the international commemoration of Columbus' voyage to the Americas. Joining indigenous groups in their protest of the quincentennial celebration and the notion of Columbus as the discoverer, Portillo's video rewrites the discovery as conquest, and humorously puts Columbus on trial in a modern-day courtroom. Later, in *The Devil Never Sleeps/El diablo nunca duerme* (1994) Portillo turned her concern to the domestic sphere. An investigation into the death of her uncle, Tío Oscar, serves as the backdrop for the filmmaker's exploration into Mexican family dynamics. More recently, Portillo has extended her interrogation of the family by focusing on the death and legacy of pop Tejana singer Selena, and in the film *Corpus: A Home Movie for Selena* (1999) weaves the story of her significance around fans, the body, and patriarchy. While her films remain grounded in Chicano/a and Latina/o concerns, Portillo embraces a broader, transnational vision that positions women at the center of her stories and documents the effects of global economic and political processes, as well as intersecting structures of domination, on the everyday lives of women.

Immigrant Racialized Labor and Latino Patriarchy

A short, black-and-white fictional film, *Después del terremoto* deals with the conflicts a Latina immigrant worker faces as she struggles to define her own autonomy and independence within Latino patriarchy. The film documents the "identity in process" of the main character, Irene—her coming into gender-consciousness. Working in a plush San Francisco residence as a live-in domestic worker, Irene anticipates, with some ambivalence, a reunion with Roberto, her boyfriend from Nicaragua who has just been released from prison, after the earthquake of 1976, for political activism against the U.S.-financed military dictatorship of Anastasio Somoza. While Roberto is a leftist revolutionary, he is also portrayed as a traditional Latino male, threatened by Irene's growing economic and social independence in the United States. Portillo's first film thus explores Latina subjectivity and identity in the interstices of immigration, racialized labor, and Latino patriarchy.

Codirected by Nina Serrano, Portillo's *Después del terremoto* is made within the general context of Third World anti-imperialist politics and the specific struggles for emancipation waged by members of the Nicaraguan diaspora and the solidarity movement during the seventies. Portillo and Serrano, however, refused to construct a single narrative of emancipation centered exclusively around a political identity which did not acknowledge multiple forms of domination within the social structure. To

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the consternation of Nicaraguan exiles living in San Francisco, Portillo and Serrano wrote a story focusing on the impact of processes of patriarchal gender relations, migration, labor, and cultural dislocation on the identity and subjectivity of a Latina immigrant worker. As Portillo explains in an interview with Kathleen Newman and B. Ruby Rich:

I was also involved in the Sandinista movement in the United States in the late seventies, in solidarity with them, Nina Serrano and I, who was also the codirector of the film. We decided to make a film that would inform the people about the struggle, and I was concerned about the struggles and the conflicts that immigrants and Nicaraguans were going through at that point. I think I didn't want to make a film that was a documentary—a straight, hard-hitting factual documentary. And I saw the richness of their life and I wanted to capture it. At the same time when I did that, it was a struggle against them [U.S. Sandinista movement] and they dis-owned us in the process. Because . . . they wanted us to do a documentary that they had been used to seeing—very factual, very political, very one-sided. Since we got an AFI grant, I figured in a certain way it was my film, so that I had control and could do what I wanted. So we broke with them and did the narrative film.²

In *Después del terremoto*, the narrative of radical oppositional and anti-imperialist politics of the Nicaraguan solidarity movement is woven in as a subplot to the main plotline, which locates a Latina immigrant in between languages and cultures and in relationship to the intersecting dominations of patriarchy, capitalism, and imperialism.

As I have written elsewhere, Portillo and Serrano choreograph the main character's desire for liberation within the tension between internal and external spaces, the domestic sphere of traditional Latino/a culture and the public sphere of production that paid domestic labor represents.³ In many ways, *Después del terremoto*'s focus on a female domestic worker who migrates from Nicaragua thematizes both the racial composition of labor in the private domestic sphere and the feminization of transnational labor migrations. By portraying the ordinary life of an immigrant domestic worker, the film anticipates the groundbreaking research of feminists of color, as is evident below.

Feminist researchers have long contended that industrial capital creates a structural division between the profit-oriented economy of capitalism and domestic home life. This division between production and consumption, commonly referred to as the public-private split, gave birth to the category of housewife and to a redefinition of women as "guardians of do-

mestic homelife." However, as feminists of color have argued, domesticity is not a universal condition for all women, but is instead rooted in the social conditions of the middle and upper classes in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. As the experiences of former slaves and other racialized and immigrant women make evident, they were wagedworkers first and housewives second. It is in this more general social arena that *Después del terremoto* captures the racialized division between unpaid domestic labor and paid domestic labor.⁴

Irene is a woman who works outside the home, a Latina who moves between cultures, languages, and the public and private spheres, possessing the ability to act on multiple levels. Like many other Latina immigrants living in the United States, Irene operates in the public sphere, working as a paid domestic laborer within an advanced capitalist economy. She is engaged in income-producing activities outside of her own home but within the private domestic sphere of another home. And while in U.S. society, at least at the ideological level, there is a separation of work and family into separate spheres, according to Mary Romero, given the nature of the work involved, Chicana domestics (and, I would add, Latina immigrants) reject the separation between work and family and see less of a distinction between the spheres of homemaking and paid domestic labor.⁵

Thus, ideologically at least, the home for domestic workers operates less as a site of homemaking than as an extension of the division of labor under capitalism. Which is precisely why Irene, in *Después del terremoto*, confronts Roberto with so much ambivalence. The film establishes Irene's financial independence at the beginning, when it shows her purchasing a television set with her own earnings. With this act, the main character enters into the sphere of consumer capitalism, for the television set also embodies the illusion of freedom through consumption. By the end of the film, viewers are well aware that a marriage with Roberto would curtail this type of freedom since, within traditional Latina/o culture, the man controls a woman's finances. Moreover, Irene's subordination through marriage would encompass other dimensions of her life as well, particularly in terms of domestic home life. Not only do Latina domestic workers experience housework as a second shift—the same as working mothers and female spouses—they are burdened by having a double shift of the same kind of work. One shift is paid, the other unpaid, but both are housework. In many respects, Irene's ambivalence toward marriage interrogates precisely the myth of domesticity and the role of women as guardians of domestic homelife.

However uncomfortable the question of gender dynamics between two a counterpoised consciousness of oppression. test women's oppression identity and the meaning. *Después del terremoto* gender, and cultural: cisive and deliberate consciousness and interre

In her essay about Liz Kotz writes: "Intertwined by personal and America (and the U.S. and bicultural identity insights of early feminism portrays these communities twentieth century, that is, the able social conditions refigure Latina subject individual and collective in *Después del terremoto* communities live that merge different ways."⁷ And conflicts and differences the filmmakers portray reference, including the migration, and bicultural phenomenon known as the number of women who

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However uncomfortable for viewers, the filmmakers thus raise the question of gender politics from a Latina immigrant's position in the dynamics between two cultural systems, visualizing the implicit discourse of a counterpoised consciousness resulting from a woman's daily lived experience of oppression. Through a realistic narrative, the filmmakers contest women's oppression, exploring the shifts in a Latina immigrant's identity and the meanings that womanhood has for a working-class Latina. *Después del terremoto* visualizes a woman who is aware of the sexual, gender, and cultural structures that formed her and who has made a decisive and deliberate break with those structures by changing her consciousness and interrogating her destiny as Roberto's wife.

In her essay about the cinema of Latinas and Latin American women, Liz Kotz writes: "Intersecting class, national and ethnic identities, complicated by personal experience, reflect a contemporary history of Latin America (and the U.S.) in which exile, rupture, transnational migration and bicultural identity have become relatively common."⁶ Paralleling the insights of early feminists of color during the seventies, this short film portrays these common features of the human condition in the late twentieth century, that is, the intersectionality of social identities and the variable social conditions which affect subject formation. The filmmakers refigure Latina subjectivity by reclaiming, reinventing, and resisting individual and collective identities through cinema. In more ways than one, *Después del terremoto* reveals "how all so-called members of so-called communities live that membership in complex, contradictory, and radically different ways."⁷ And while the film's main focus is on gender politics—conflicts and differences within the Nicaraguan immigrant community—the filmmakers portray many of the social processes to which Kotz makes reference, including the conditions of exile, rupture, transnational migration, and bicultural identity. In addition, the film renders the phenomenon known as the feminization of labor migration, or the rise in the number of women workers migrating in search of work.

According to UN reports, long distance migration movements in the past were comprised mostly of men. However, beginning in the 1970s and intensifying during the eighties as a result of the economic recession in Latin America, more women began to leave their homes and form a significant part of transnational labor flows. This rise in the migration of female workers was also due in large measure to the growing importance of gender in the new international division of labor, which, as I noted earlier, is a result of the demand for what is known as "women's work," especially domestic service but also in the garment and assembly indus-

tries.⁸ The shift in migratory patterns from Latin America into the United States has altered the demographic composition of the Mexican and Latino/a communities of the Southwest. During this period, Central Americans, like the Nicaraguans in the film, joined the ranks of Mexican immigrants working in the low-wage service sector. And this rise in Latin American immigration was due as much to economic factors as it was to political ones for, as *Después del terremoto* makes evident, many of the Central American immigrants were also political refugees and displaced persons, fleeing repressive (U.S.-financed) military regimes.

Reinventing Motherhood

As in *Después del terremoto*, Portillo's internationalism is filtered through the lenses of gender politics in *Las Madres: The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo* (codirected by Susana Blaustein Muñoz), a film about the mothers of the disappeared in Argentina. While Portillo and Muñoz started working on the film during the final years of the military dictatorship, they shot the film in the first hundred days of the country's return to democracy. In contrast to *Después del terremoto*, Portillo opted for the genre of political documentary to tell the story of women's oppositional struggles:

I was thinking first of all when you make a political film, sometimes you feel things inside you. With the story of *Las Madres* . . . there was no other way to film that story. . . . We tried to figure it out, but this was the only avenue you can take with *Las Madres*. In terms of Nicaragua, [the story] would be more contrived. The drama inherent in *Las Madres* only allowed us to do it in that way.⁹

And it was a powerful drama indeed, one depicting the toll of the military regime's "dirty war" on the nation's inhabitants: a drama showing a military junta that ruled Argentina from 1976 to 1983 and that was responsible for the disappearance of eleven thousand Argentines; a drama focusing on a group of mothers who defied a brutal military junta by staging illegal demonstrations in the "best guarded public place" in Argentina, the Plaza de Mayo, directly challenging the authority of the state.¹⁰ The film reconstructs the drama of their ordeal with cinematic intensity. Blending the realist strategy of interviews with news footage and voice-over narration, *Las Madres* tells the riveting tale of women's struggle against a violent, repressive regime and gives voice to a female mode of resistance which emerges out of the social role historically assigned to women: motherhood.

As we know, motherhood is the traditional form through which the modern state produces women as subjects of the nation, by reinscribing

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The filmmakers the disappeared, ca of resistance for u their opposition to rative emphasis on tion, has proved in thematizing how r ness and collectivit into radical action. transformed their and reinvented mo public sphere of the mothers, Adela Ant and it was the street litical strength."¹²

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Latin America into the United States. The migration of the Mexican and Central American populations during this period, Central America joined the ranks of Mexican immigrants in the economic sector. And this rise in Latin American economic factors as it was to be seen as evident, many of the Central American refugees and displaced persons found themselves in tertiary regimes.

Nationalism is filtered through the film *Las Madres*. The film about the mothers of the Plaza de Mayo started working on the dictatorship, they shot the return to democracy. It is noted for the genre of political oppositional struggles:

Like a political film, sometimes the story of *Las Madres* . . . there was a story to be tried to figure it out, but this is the story of *Las Madres*. In terms of Nicaragua, the drama inherent in that way.⁹

depicting the toll of the military dictatorship on the inhabitants: a drama showing a story from 1976 to 1983 and that was re-told by thousands of Argentineans; a drama about a brutal military junta by staged public place in Argentina, the authority of the state.¹⁰ The film deals with cinematic intensity. It is a story with news footage and voice-acting tale of women's struggle that gives voice to a female mode of political role historically assigned to

national form through which the mothers of the nation, by reinscribing

women's role in reproduction and confining them to the private, domestic sphere of child-rearing. Yet it is from their social location as mothers that the women of Argentina staged their bold defiance, acting in the public sphere at a time when most people, including the media, remained indifferent to or ignored the military's dirty war. Even though the military regime retaliated against these mostly middle-aged mothers, arresting them repeatedly and even disappearing one of their founders—Azucena De Vicente, the originator of the idea to demonstrate in the Plaza—along with two French nuns and an artist, the mothers continued their public acts of defiance and resumed their demonstrations "wearing their flat shoes and white headscarves."¹¹

The filmmakers meticulously show how women, like the mothers of the disappeared, can redefine and reappropriate motherhood as a model of resistance for unifying women across various social backgrounds in their opposition to repressive patriarchal nationalism. *Las Madres*' narrative emphasis on the process of radicalization, rather than victimization, has proved inspirational for viewers around the world, effectively thematizing how middle-aged women cultivated political consciousness and collectivity and channeled their own personal pain as mothers into radical action. By claiming the streets of Argentina, these women transformed their previously private, gendered identities as mothers and reinvented motherhood as a political identity for operating in the public sphere of the nation. As the vice president of the Plaza de Mayo mothers, Adela Antokaletz, puts it: "We decided to take to the streets, and it was the streets that taught us. . . . That was what gave us our political strength."¹²

Las Madres ends its painstaking drama of women's opposition and resistance with a collage of images of mothers who wage similar struggles on behalf of their disappeared children throughout the world. Theirs is a struggle to "make visible the unseen" or to make us see, as Avery Gordon writes in a different context, "what is usually neglected or thought by most to be dead and gone."¹³ In the case of Argentina, *Las Madres* recovers "the evidence of the things not seen," or the things Argentineans were unwilling to see and to recognize. With the end of the military dictatorship, the mothers continued their campaign for "the punishment of the people who carried out the torture and disappearance of their children."¹⁴

In the early years of the democratic transition, the new government capitulated to the former military rulers, neglecting the concerns of the mothers. To the mothers' shocked dismay and disappointment, in 1990, President Carlos Menem pardoned the members of the military junta, in-

cluding its head, General Jorge Videla. While the amnesty was couched as a gesture of national reconciliation (a "decision to pardon dictators in the interest of peace"), it was designed to appease the right-wing forces of the nation as much as to serve as a mechanism that would allow Argentines to forget, to ignore, or otherwise refuse the haunting presence of the disappeared. But ghosts have a way of coming back to haunt the living. While the Argentinean government pardoned crimes against the dead or disappeared, crimes against the children of the disappeared were not covered by the amnesty. Thus in July of 1998, retired general Jorge Videla was charged with stealing the babies of the disappeared that were born in prison and giving them to officers and friends of the military to adopt.¹⁵ It is as if the ghosts of the disappeared came back to vindicate the mothers' allegations about kidnapping—testimonies eloquently articulated in Portillo and Muñoz's stunning documentary *Las Madres: The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo*.

Global migrations and cultural continuity/discontinuity

Portillo collaborated with Argentinean-born Susana Muñoz on one other project, once again charting the complex and variable points of contact among the various communities in the Americas. Turning to Portillo's own culture, the filmmakers decided on a topic that would provide them with much-needed "healing." As Portillo recalls: "*Las Madres* made me feel so bad that I wanted to feel good. And in order for me to feel good, I wanted to think about death the way my people think of death, not the way your people think about death. That was the reaction to *Las Madres: La Ofrenda*."¹⁶

The film *La Ofrenda* traces the continuities, as well as the discontinuities, in cultural practices that cross the U.S.-Mexico border. The film begins in Mexico, recounting the history, cultural practices, and rituals associated with the Day of the Dead celebration, which takes place each year on November 1 and 2. A festivity dating to pre-Conquest Mexico, the Day of the Dead continues as a vital cultural tradition, despite centuries of effort by colonial authorities to eradicate the practice. The second half of the film takes place in San Francisco, where in the seventies the Chicana/o cultural arts movement revived the festivity, organizing exhibitions and planning an annual parade through the streets of the Mission District.

While the Day of the Dead celebration unifies the documentary's narrative, the meanings and rituals associated with the celebration differ in each context. In Oaxaca, the Day of the Dead is portrayed as linked or-

ganically to a way of from cooking the tra items on the market devout praying before cleaning of gravestones for the indigenous people as a central part of a communal practices.

In California, the nostalgia. *La Ofrenda* contextualized, located, and photographed, as museums, classrooms, the contextual contrast filmmakers offer students of cultural transformation as a dynamic form, particularly culture, to treat it as a from one generation to culture and cultural traditions. As immigrants learn with them. How not remain intact but a which in turn impact the invention of cultural tradition change, visualizing who creatively respond reenvisioning and re-

In mapping the connections that cross the Mexico-U.S. border, how these processes in matter, native racialized host countries that are in text that the revival of canas/os is a response to of the state's erasure of identities in the United an oppositional, political and multicultural difference. *La Ofrenda* has also shown

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ganically to a way of life and to a community mobilized for the festivity: from cooking the traditional foods to selling and buying the necessary items on the marketplace; from artisans making the *calaveras* (skulls) to devout praying before home altars; from visits to the grave sites to the cleaning of gravestones and dining in honor of the dead. In this manner, for the indigenous people of Oaxaca, the Day of the Dead forms an integral part of a community's traditions, its daily spiritual, cultural, and material practices.

In California, the celebration of the Day of the Dead resonates with nostalgia. *La Ofrenda* renders the cultural memory of the festivity as de-contextualized, located less in everyday life than in objects like home altars and photographs, or in displays in parades and institutional sites such as museums, classrooms, universities, and cultural centers. In visualizing the contextual contrast between Oaxaca and California, however, the filmmakers offer students of culture important insights about the process of cultural transformation. For example, the film renders culture in its dynamic form, particularly evident in the filmmakers' refusal to fetishize culture, to treat it as a static object meant to be handed down unchanged from one generation to the next or across geopolitical space. Rather, culture and cultural traditions in this film are active and dynamic, lived practices. As immigrants leave their homeland, they take their cultural traditions with them. However, the cultures of transnational immigrants do not remain intact but are affected by processes of rupture and dislocation, which in turn impact the modification, transformation, and even the reinvention of cultural traditions. The film takes us into this universe of cultural change, visualizing a Mexican-origin community of Chicanos/as who creatively respond to environmental and other social pressures by reenvisioning and re-creating cultural traditions in a new context.

In mapping the continuities and discontinuities in cultural practices that cross the Mexico-U.S. border, *La Ofrenda* additionally makes evident how these processes intensify when immigrant communities (or for that matter, native racialized groups) must adapt to different circumstances in host countries that are hostile to cultural differences. And it is in this context that the revival of the Day of the Dead in the United States by Chicanas/os is a response to needs different from those in Mexico. In the face of the state's erasure of and hostility to alternative cultural and social identities in the United States, the Day of the Dead celebration performs an oppositional, political function of affirming Latina/o cultural identity and multicultural differences.

La Ofrenda has also served the Latino gay community in its efforts to

confront the AIDS epidemic, particularly because the film opens up a space for understanding culturally specific modes of confronting death through ritual. For just as *La Ofrenda* was a healing film for Portillo, so have the film and the Day of the Dead celebration been appropriated by the Latino gay community for spiritual healing after the loss of many of its members. In fact, the film's submerged engagement with the problem of AIDS is part of a broader current in Latina/o film- and videomaking. According to Latina filmmaker Frances Negrón-Muntaner, the end of the 1980s witnessed a "sharp increase in gay and lesbian work" as a response to "transformations brought about by the AIDS epidemic." She further observed that "the AIDS crisis created a political and discursive need to address heterosexism and promote safer sex practices in Latino communities across the country (including those that did not self-identify as 'gay' or 'lesbian')." ¹⁷ It is in this context that Portillo made *Vida*. Framed by the melodramatic conventions of Latin America's telenovela (soap opera), *Vida* is a short didactic film designed to raise the Latina/o community's awareness about AIDS and to promote safer sex practices, particularly among young people.

The "realm of the imaginative"

Portillo's documentary forays across the border take a new turn in *The Devil Never Sleeps* by entering the realm of the imaginative. A film that tells the story of the filmmaker's investigation into the death of her beloved Tío Oscar, who died under mysterious circumstances in Mexico, *The Devil Never Sleeps* also sketches the permeable borders between nations, genres, and political/familial identities. Portillo crosses the border to lead a probe into the unresolved death of her uncle, Oscar Ruiz Almeida, utilizing his life to weave the strands of her inquiry. Official accounts rule his death a suicide, whereas some family members and friends suspect murder. In the process of her investigation, Portillo pierces the veneer of her family's secrets, disclosing conflicting testimony by family members and surprising contradictions in the life of her favorite uncle. In this manner, the murder-mystery-detective theme of the film serves as a ruse for a probing glimpse into the politics and secrets, not just of a typical private family (represented by Portillo's family), but also of the public national family, embodied in Mexico's ruling party, the PRI. Starring as niece-detective-documentarist, Portillo narrates the story in terms of intrigue, deception, hypocrisy, as well as the cultural values of honor, loyalty, and familism, foregrounding complex issues about *la familia* for Chicanos/as and Mexicans on both sides of the border.

As I have written, transgresses the artificial boundary reinforced by public scrutiny, veil of secrecy and prohibiting public disclosure that even Mexican cultural arena this taboo is that requires even for pertaining to their *familia* of the PRI is based in the intimate realm of Mexican patriarchy.

By transgressing the private family matters, the private and the public *familia* as both an element of the microstructures of domesticity, *la familia* father and the subject of World nationalism have their force from a religious community and, notion of community. Portillo's submerged engagement first understand the politics.

Portillo breaks the making enterprise so she deconstructs the values, "including familism (including familism), *compadrazgo* (exchange of trust and intimacy). Chicana/o nationalists oppositional politics, in *familia*—namely, the narrative of Mexican nationalism discourse sexism and abuse perpetuating the *confianza* of the

because the film opens up a modes of confronting death a healing film for Portillo, so bration been appropriated by ing after the loss of many of its gement with the problem of /o film- and videomaking. Ac- rón-Muntaner, the end of the ad lesbian work" as a response AIDS epidemic." She further olitical and discursive need to ex practices in Latino commu- hat did not self-identify as 'gay' rtillo made *Vida*. Framed by the rica's telenovela (soap opera), raise the Latina/o community's afer sex practices, particularly

border take a new turn in *The* the imaginative. A film that tells n into the death of her beloved s circumstances in Mexico, *The* eable borders between nations, . Portillo crosses the border to f her uncle, Oscar Ruíz Almeida, er inquiry. Official accounts rule ily members and friends suspect on, Portillo pierces the veneer of ng testimony by family members of her favorite uncle. In this man- me of the film serves as a ruse for ecrets, not just of a typical private y), but also of the public national arty, the PRI. Starring as niece- ates the story in terms of intrigue, ltural values of honor, loyalty, and es about *la familia* for Chicanos/as der.

As I have written in a longer essay, Portillo is a Chicana Catholic who transgresses the artificial boundary between the public and the private—a boundary reinforced by capitalism and Catholicism—by making available for public scrutiny the truths and falsities hidden behind her family's veil of secrecy and privacy.¹⁸ The filmmaker violates a cultural taboo forbidding public disclosure of family matters, a taboo so sacred and powerful that even Mexican politicians are bound by its strictures; in the political arena this taboo is known as *la mordaza* (the muzzle). It is a gag order that requires even former presidents to remain silent on political matters pertaining to their *familia*, the PRI. To the extent that the political apparatus of the PRI is based on the model of *la familia*, Portillo's foray into the intimate realm of family affairs undermines the very foundation of Mexican patriarchy.

By transgressing the sacred covenant regarding public discussions of private family matters, *The Devil Never Sleeps* blurs the distinction between the private and the public, thus linking it to feminist concerns about *la familia* as both an element in power relations and a form of domination in the microstructures of everyday life. Given its centrality in the sphere of domesticity, *la familia* plays a fundamental role in upholding the law of the father and the subjugation of women. Feminist critics of U.S. Third World nationalism have argued that male privilege and hegemony derive their force from a reluctance to contest the "idealized notion" of a monolithic community and, by extension, "the family romance upon which this notion of community relies."¹⁹ In order to weigh the significance of Portillo's submerged engagement with Chicana feminist discourse, one must first understand the centrality of family values in Chicana/o nationalist politics.

Portillo breaks the silence around family unity and the family myth-making enterprise so central to Mexican and Chicano/a nationalism and deconstructs the values associated with Chicana/o (and Mexican) families, "including familism (beliefs and behavior associated with family solidarity), *compadrazgo* (extended family via godparents), *confianza* (a system of trust and intimacy)."²⁰ Since the Chicano/a movement of the sixties, Chicana/o nationalists have conjured up *la familia* as the foundation of oppositional politics, insisting on a single, coherent representation of *la familia*—namely, the heterosexual, nuclear family. Traced to the master narrative of Mexican nationalism,²¹ *la familia* figures as the basis for a pro-nationalist discourse on community loyalty. To speak out against the sexism and abuse perpetrated by Chicano males was tantamount to violating the *confianza* of the community which, because it was invested with

all the emotional trappings of familism, meant one was also betraying *la familia*. The mechanisms for reproducing this nationalist discourse on community loyalty are located in the strict division between the private and public spheres that undergird the nationalist fantasy about *la familia* as an internal sanctuary against external threats.

Single-handedly targeting the normativity of the attributes of familism and *confianza*, *The Devil Never Sleeps* serves as an instrument for criticizing Chicana/o and Mexican nationalism, for these very principles also operate as twin pillars for endowing family mythologies, effacing their contradictions, and naturalizing male privilege. By taking her favorite uncle as subject matter, Portillo breaks the investment of Chicanas and Chicanos in the intertwined notions of family and community, in the artificial division between the public and private spheres, in *la familia* as a sacred institution. Positioned simultaneously as insider and outsider, Portillo removes from the family its shroud of secrecy, publicly unveiling its private face and exposing, not the blessed, untouchable Holy Family (derived from Catholicism), but *la familia*, a site of conflict and contestation.

Yet the importance of Portillo's intervention goes beyond the narrative or thematic aspects of film. Earlier I noted that this film enters the "realm of the imaginative" because I wanted to extend bell hooks' insights about *Daughters of the Dust* and argue that, like Julie Dash, Portillo insists "on a movement away from accuracy, reality and authenticity" for its narrative truth.²² The formal structure of *The Devil Never Sleeps* simultaneously acknowledges and critiques the conventions of documentary film, for Portillo uses realist strategies in quite self-critical and self-conscious ways.

Portillo interrogates the criteria for truth and accuracy in a documentary, as well as its reliance on visual evidence, by making truth plural and drawing attention to the partial and constructed nature of images. The filmmaker resorts to well-established techniques for communicating documentary truth—i.e., interviews, actuality footage, home movies, narrator's voice—but does not ground truth in the metadiscursive, nor does she privilege one version of Tío Oscar's death over another. Each interviewee's account, each of the narrator's digressions, each actuality footage, each clip of a home movie has as much validity as the others.

Portillo thus refuses to constitute a realistic discourse based on a singular interpretation but instead formulates a plurality of versions. The strategic overlap of multiple modes of representation derived from distinct genres makes visible this refusal to privilege the documentary as the singular mode for apprehending and interpreting reality. And while the film reconstructs its plurality from a montage of modern techniques for gathering and classifying knowledge in the documentary—the interview,

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footage from home movies, photo stills, actuality footage, narration—the documentarist complicates the status of official documentary discourse within the film by drawing from other culturally specific forms of knowledge more properly associated with the space of the popular. Specifically, Portillo pursues clues and facts from popular forms of knowledge and experience—that is to say, those disqualified or inadequate sources of knowledge passed on in the form of legends, gossip, telenovelas, canciones rancheras (folk songs), myth, proverbial wisdom; in sum, forms which for Foucault represent "a particular, local, regional knowledge, a differential knowledge incapable of unanimity."²³ These sources of knowledge are at odds with the modernist project of certainty, uniformity, absolute truth, associated with official documentary discourse, for popular forms of knowledge are often partial, contradictory, ambivalent, and in a conflictual relation with one dominant, singular interpretation of social reality. Portillo pursues the task of producing the truth concerning Tío Oscar's death by juxtaposing popular with official forms of knowledge, refusing to privilege one form over the other.

This strategy is evident in the scene in which Portillo interviews Tía Luz about Tío Oscar's conjugal relations. Pursuing a lead which implicates Ofelia (Tío Oscar's widow) in the murder/suicide, the filmmaker begins her inquiry with a question regarding the sexual affairs of the couple. The scene opens with a shot of Tía Luz expressing her visible reluctance to entertain such an intimate question. Yet with further probing she is quick to confess the truth about the intimacies of the couple, including a conversation she had with Ofelia after her honeymoon with Tío Oscar in which Ofelia reveals the proof of her virginity: bloody panties saved from her wedding night. What is striking about this scene is the manner in which Tía Luz's official testimony (the interview) is structurally reconstructed by the filmmaker as thematically suspended and visually framed within two other popular modes of representation: the telenovela and the legend. Tía Luz's off-screen voice accompanies a sequence of shots depicting a mannequin dressed in a wedding dress—shot through a bridal store's showcase while public spectators look up adoringly at the mannequin—and culminates in an over-the-shoulder pinhole shot of Tía Luz watching the Brazilian telenovela *Roque Santeiro*. From her confession about Ofelia's indiscretions, Tía Luz turns with ease to a frivolous interpretation of plot details from the telenovela, thus supplanting the narrative value of the former, since for Tía Luz one account has the same relevance as the other. As the camera zooms in to the television set, visual and narrative focus shifts away from the interview to the telenovela, affecting a slippage between two forms of discourse, the

official interview and the more properly popular discourse, the telenovela. In this instance, as well as in other places throughout the film, the strategic use of the telenovela blurs the distinction between reality and telereality. Yet closure is not anchored on the telenovela, but rather is achieved through a distinct popular discourse, the legend, thereby further complicating the status of truth in this film.

The narrative shifts once again by crosscutting to a close-up of the bridal mannequin's face. Portillo's narrator-voice interjects:

There's a legend that the owner of a Chihuahua bridal shop had a daughter she dearly loved. On the day of her wedding, the daughter died in an accident. The bereaved mother had her embalmed, dressed up as a bride and displayed in her store window. A tribute to virginal love.

Carefully crafted shots of people looking up intently at the bridal mannequin suggest that the legend of the embalmed virgin captivates these spectators, just as it secures their alignment with those of us outside the screen who have been nurtured on Mexican fantasy stories of family ghosts and spirits, on the macabre flavor in legends of enchanted statues and embalmed saints, as we too wonder about the legend's uncanny truth. The final shot of this scene depicts store attendants raising the mannequin/embalmed virgin's bridal gown, allowing us to glimpse beneath her dress as if to prove the truth of the legend and further cementing my eerie bewilderment ("this really must be the embalmed virgin; her face looks so real"). At this precise moment, the film resuscitates a distant glimmering from the past. I travel to the "marvelous real" of my childhood memories—a visit to Guadalajara's majestic cathedral, where I stand before the statue of the child-saint encased within a glass vitrine. My wide-eyed gaze rests on the delicate, statuesque feminine figure, with its long eyelashes and seemingly porous texture, as my Tía Fina whispers that we are witnessing a miracle incarnate: "This is not really a statue, it's the actual body of a young girl." I nod, fixated on those realistic features of the immobile girl who refused to decompose and as a result was bestowed the gift of everlasting embodiment and canonization. Curiously, until this cinematic moment with the legend of the embalmed virgin, my childhood encounter with the magical remained submerged in my psyche, unscrutinized by the laws of reason and rational discourse. Yet it undoubtedly structures my beliefs and relation to the "real." Thus, depending on one's belief system, the truth of the legend of the embalmed virgin seems just as plausible as the truth in Tía Luz's testimony about Ofelia's account of her virginity.

In some respects, the process of gathering truth than with the edge for making sense the legend appears in centrality of the cultural interpretation of Ofelia's framework of patriarchy to and interpellated by the embalmed virgin; in Mexico are both virgins discourse's sublimation.

In a style that quotes *Never Sleeps* "argues a subjecting as well a sense

In the late 1980s, AIDS I Portillo to make an AIDS film directed, and aimed at . Below: Lucy (Sandra Pa Elsie's (Jeanette Toro, co of Lourdes Portillo.



popular discourse, the telenovelas throughout the film, the distinction between reality and the telenovela, but rather in reverse, the legend, thereby furthering the film.

scutting to a close-up of the voice interjects:

Chihuahua bridal shop had a of her wedding, the daughter mother had her embalmed, in her store window. A tribute

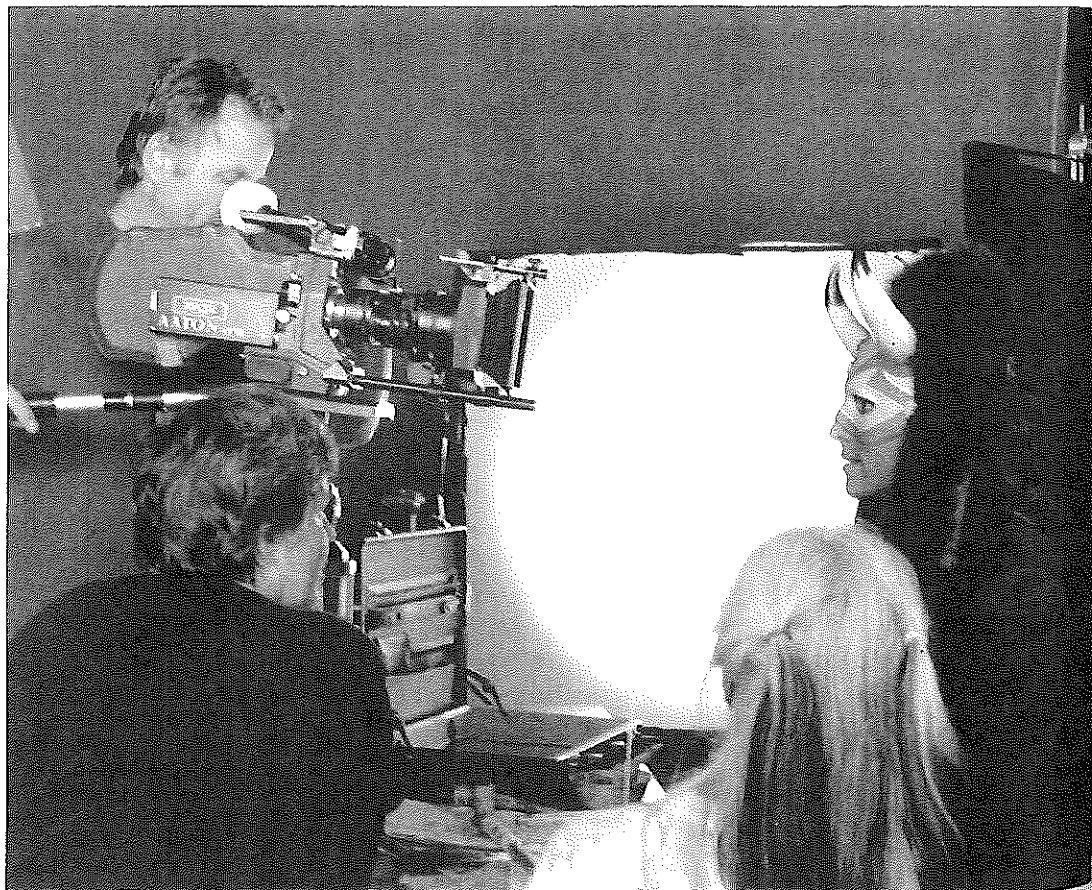
up intently at the bridal man-balmed virgin captivates these not with those of us outside the Mexican fantasy stories of family in legends of enchanted statues or about the legend's uncanny store attendants raising the man-allowing us to glimpse beneath the legend and further cementing my the embalmed virgin; her face, the film resuscitates a distant e "marvelous real" of my childhood's majestic cathedral, where I encased within a glass vitrine. My tuesque feminine figure, with its ure, as my Tía Fina whispers that This is not really a statue, it's the ted on those realistic features of pose and as a result was bestowed anonization. Curiously, until this e embalmed virgin, my childhood bmerged in my psyche, unscrutinal discourse. Yet it undoubtedly : "real." Thus, depending on one's f the embalmed virgin seems just timony about Ofelia's account of

In some respects, the legend's location in this scene has less to do with the process of gathering empirical evidence or knowledge for documentary truth than with underscoring the veracity of popular forms of knowledge for making sense of one's reality. Reading the scene against the grain, the legend appears in conflictual relation to the interview, mapping the centrality of the cult of virginity in Mexican society. Insofar as Tía Luz's interpretation of Ofelia's virginity gains significance within the ideological framework of patriarchy, the scene highlights how we are all subjected to and interpellated by familial and political apparatuses. The legend of the embalmed virgin gives meaning to this process, revealing how women in Mexico are both victims and agents, targets and vehicles of patriarchal discourse's sublimation of female sexuality in the figure of the Virgin.

In a style that quotes, parodies, and deconstructs PBS style, *The Devil Never Sleeps* "argues against the givenness of documentary reality,"²⁴ rejecting as well a sense of closure and completeness. In so doing, the film

In the late 1980s, AIDS Films, a nonprofit company founded in 1985, commissioned Portillo to make an AIDS prevention film for Latinas. *Vida* is one in a series written, directed, and aimed at Latina/o and African American audiences by AIDS Films. Below: Lucy (Sandra Paulino, right) shows Olga (Teresa Yenque, left) a picture of Elsie's (Jeanette Toro, center) new boyfriend (photo by Prashant Gupta). Courtesy of Lourdes Portillo.





Portillo collaborated with the comedy trio Culture Clash (Herbert Siguenza, Richard Montoya, and Ric Salinas) in writing the script for *Columbus on Trial*. Broadcast nationally in 1992, the video was funded by the National Endowment for the Arts. Above: Cinematographer Kyle Kibbe (upper left) filming Stormcloud (Richard Montoya, right), while Lourdes Portillo (lower left) and Emiko Omori (lower right) observe. Courtesy of Lourdes Portillo.



Ishmael Saabedra, producer (Herbert Siguenza). Courtesy of Lourdes Portillo. Rehearsing during the shoot. Mr. X (right, standing). Courtesy of Lourdes Portillo.



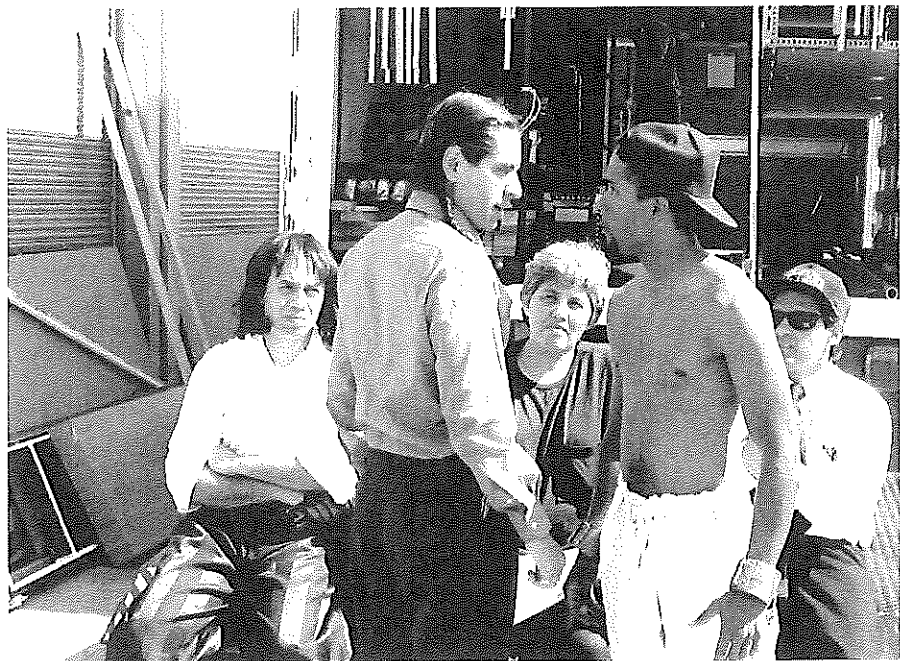


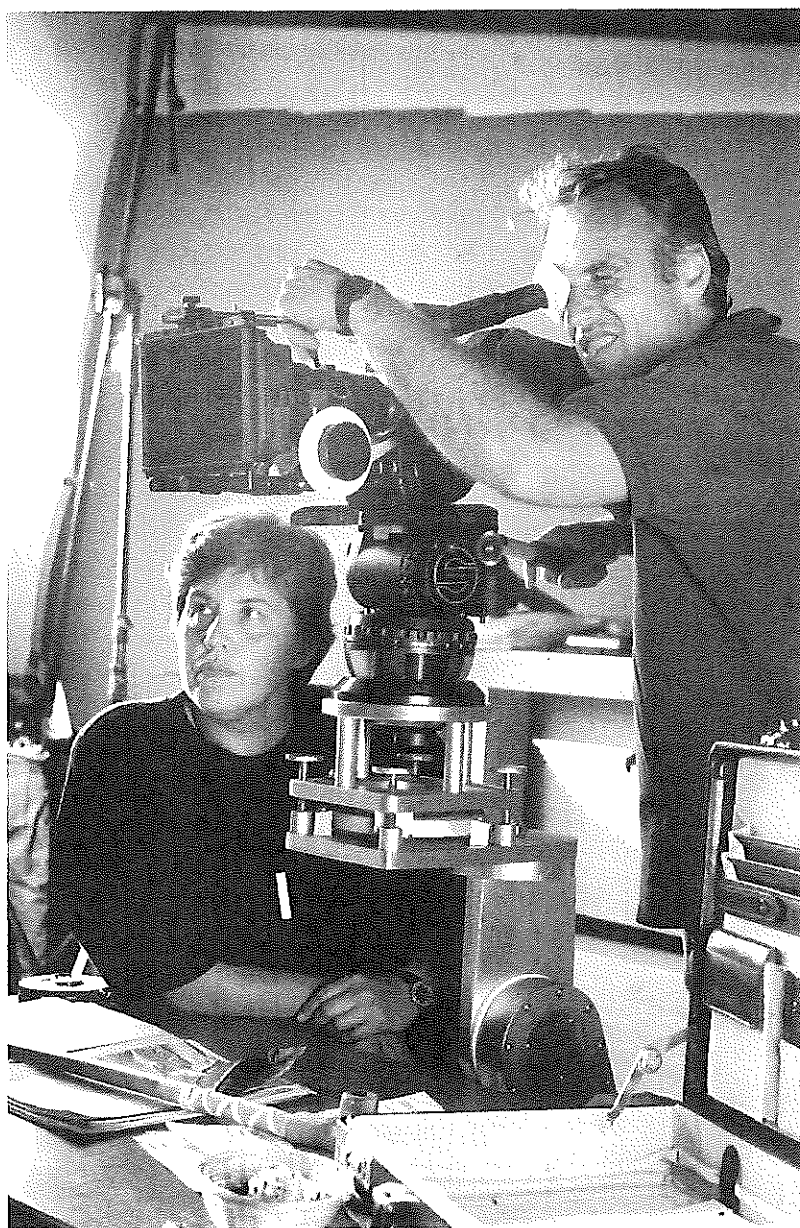
re Clash (Herbert Siguenza, Richard for *Columbus on Trial*. Broadcast na- National Endowment for the Arts. left) filming Stormcloud (Richard left) and Emiko Omori (lower right)



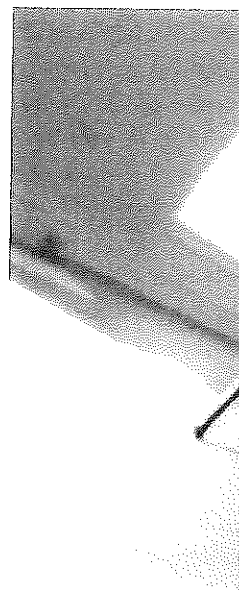
Ishmael Saabedra, production assistant, cuing the next scene with Columbus (Herbert Siguenza). Courtesy of Lourdes Portillo.

Rehearsing during the shooting of *Columbus on Trial*. Stormcloud (left, standing), Mr. X (right, standing). Siguenza, Portillo, and Ric Salinas (left to right, sitting). Courtesy of Lourdes Portillo.





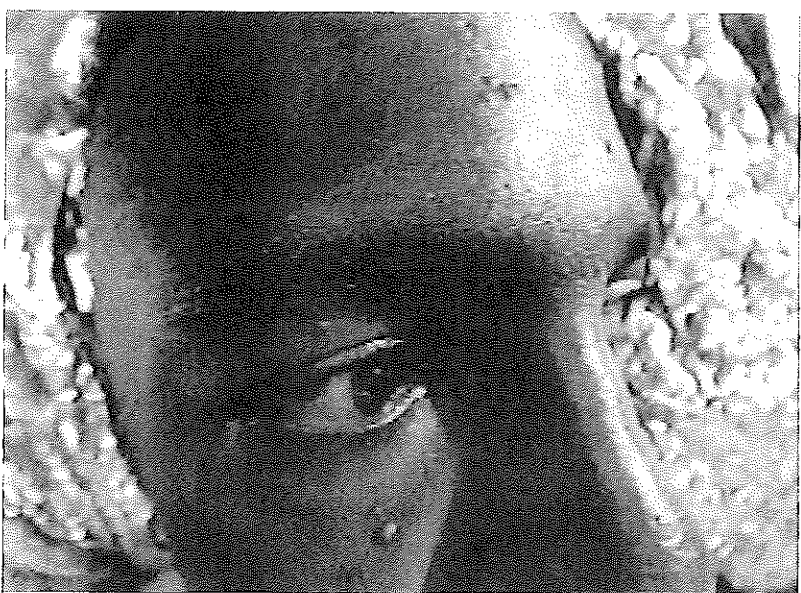
Portillo observes while Kibbe focuses on the next scene. Courtesy of Lourdes Portillo.



Portillo produced and directed *Numb*, based on the performance of Corbitt. Courtesy of Lourdes Portillo.



xt scene. Courtesy of Lourdes



Portillo produced and directed this short experimental video, *Sometimes My Feet Go Numb*, based on the performance piece by Wayne Corbitt. Above: Scene with Wayne Corbitt. Courtesy of Lourdes Portillo.

makes viewers aware of the manipulative nature of film—in particular, of realist documentary—especially when the filmmaker inserts an oversized tomato during a segment about Tío Oscar's agricultural enterprise, or provides evidence through gossip, legends, proverbs, or parables of snakes and saints, or creates reenactments with toys. With these examples, *The Devil Never Sleeps* points to or makes "audiences aware of the process of production as a limitation of the film's neutral stance, its ability to document objectively."²⁵ While the film relies in part on realist strategies, it also contributes to what Juhasz terms "a critical vocabulary which has pushed many makers and viewers of realist documentaries in the nineties towards a more noticeably self-aware theoretical/political practice."²⁶ In this manner, by pushing the boundaries of documentary realism, Portillo has contributed to the evolution of the genre.

In Closing . . .

My aim throughout this critical essay has been to assess Lourdes Portillo's contributions to feminist, oppositional visual media in this era of global capitalism. An overview of her films and videos confirms the extent to which Portillo's signature as a filmmaker is solidly anchored in the imaginative realm, in a poetic, meditative style that is contemplative rather than simply informative. As *Las Madres: The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo*, *La Ofrenda: The Days of the Dead*, and *The Devil Never Sleeps/El diablo nunca duerme* make evident, Portillo seasons realist strategies with the imaginative flavors typical of fictional narrative films. Her documentaries are narrated by a lyrical, personal, and intimate female voice rather than the distanced, authoritative "voice of God" typical in documentaries. Hers is a female voice that, as Judith Mayne observes, "destabilizes conventional symmetry whereby the register of vocal authority is presumed to be male, the realm of the visible, female."²⁷

While her work conforms to the realist aesthetics of cinema, Portillo has created a genuinely hybrid style of filmmaking insofar as she crosses the border of multiple styles and playfully blends aesthetic traditions. As in *The Devil Never Sleeps*, the tension between fiction and documentary in *Después del terremoto* is due in large part to the influence of Latin America's telenovelas, neorealism, and Cuban cinema. A seasoned filmmaker, Portillo is not averse to crafting her films with novel and experimental techniques. In *Columbus on Trial*, Portillo makes extensive use of the blue screen technique commonly employed in TV newscasts and weather reports for layering images. While the blue screen is widely used today in

independent documentary in a political,

In many respects, city of Chicana/o and segregated geography Florida, Puerto Rico each other and to of new and dynamic for And it is precisely this multicultural perspective on *Trial*, *Vida*, *La Ofrenda*, *Corpus: A Home Movie*

Despite her international independence, remain Hollywood. And it is Studio marketplace qualities in her work. ment, Portillo's definition the younger generation Her work reflects the among Chicana/o and many feminist artists, introduces different v

ture of film—in particular, the filmmaker inserts an over-the-top car's agricultural enterprise, ads, proverbs, or parables of life with toys. With these examples, she makes "audiences aware of the film's neutral stance, its ability to make a film relies in part on realist terms "a critical vocabulary of realist documentaries in the self-aware theoretical/political boundaries of documentary production of the genre.

en to assess Lourdes Portillo's role in this era of global media, her work confirms the extent to which her work is solidly anchored in the imagination that is contemplative rather than action-oriented. *Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo*, *La diablo nunca duerme*, *El diablo nunca duerme* strategies with the imagination. Her documentaries are narrative-driven, a female voice rather than the dispassionate in documentaries. Hers is a voice that "destabilizes conventional authority is presumed to be

aesthetics of cinema, Portillo is making insofar as she crosses the boundaries between aesthetic traditions. As she blends fiction and documentary in the influence of Latin America's cinema. A seasoned filmmaker, Portillo uses a novel and experimental techniques extensive use of the blue screen TV newscasts and weather report screen is widely used today in

independent documentaries, Portillo was one of the first to use this technique in a political, aesthetic context.

In many respects, Portillo's films and videos reflect the growing diversity of Chicana/o and Latino/a experiences in this country. No longer segregated geographically—i.e., Mexicans in the Southwest, Cubans in Florida, Puerto Ricans in New York—but living in close proximity to each other and to other ethnic groups, Latinas and Latinos are creating new and dynamic forms of culture, language, politics, and traditions. And it is precisely this Latina/o hybridity, its bicultural, multilingual, and multicultural perspectives, that are visibly crafted in films like *Columbus on Trial*, *Vida*, *La Ofrenda*, *Después del terremoto*, *The Devil Never Sleeps*, and *Corpus: A Home Movie for Selena*.

Despite her international recognition, Portillo passionately guards her independence, remaining on the fringes of the commercial dominion of Hollywood. And it is perhaps her freedom from the constraints of the Studio marketplace that accounts for the subversive and transgressive qualities in her work. A trailblazer in the Chicana and Chicano film movement, Portillo's defiant irreverence serves as a model of inspiration for the younger generation of aspiring, independent film- and videomakers. Her work reflects the broad range of concerns and the growing diversity among Chicana/o and Latino/a alternative imagemakers. And, like so many feminist artists, Portillo's work destabilizes cinematic regimes and introduces different ways of seeing.