

CHAPTER 4 *Framing Identities / The Evolving Self*

BEYOND THE ACADEMIC DIRECTOR

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I am currently in Buenos Aires, Argentina, working toward making my first fiction feature film, *3 Américas* (formerly titled *Soledad*). I have been working on this film for three years while making a career as a maker of short films. I make a living as a teacher and am considered an academic filmmaker, not because I make educational films, which is where the term originally came from, but because I am a filmmaker and I teach film production at the college level. What came first is obvious. I studied filmmaking at New York University's graduate film program and received my MFA in 2000 in film production.

When I was approached to write this essay about filming difference from the perspective of an academic filmmaker, I had to take a step back. Yes, I work in academia, and I realize I am an "academic" filmmaker because of that fact, but as I thought about this on a deeper level I had to ask myself, what exactly does that even mean? As a woman I have been identified as a female filmmaker. Obviously I can't deny my gender, but what if I didn't make films about women? In fact, some of my films aren't about women. Am I still a female filmmaker? As a Latina I have been referred to as a Latina filmmaker, but what would I be called if my work didn't have any relationship to the Latino experience? And again, some of my films don't directly relate to the Latino experience. My very first film, *Jewel and the Catch*, was a documentary about Los Angeles gay rights activist Jewel Thais-Williams.<sup>1</sup> As a gay woman I could have been referred to as a lesbian filmmaker, but *Jewel and the Catch* was the last film I made that had anything to do with being gay. So, are the labels related to my work or solely to who I am as a person? Why the labels? Why the need to categorize?

To answer these questions about my identity as a filmmaker I have to ask several basic questions. Who am I? What am I? Where do I fit in as a person? Where do I fit in as a filmmaker? What kinds of films do I make? What kinds of films are expected of me? What do I expect of

myself as a person? What do I expect of myself as a filmmaker? This essay addresses how I have come to identify my work and myself. In it I examine how identity—whether race, gender, or sexuality issues—affects and influences what I do behind the camera based on the experiences that frame my life and my evolving self.

To understand who I am today as a person and filmmaker, it's important to look back at some key life-shaping experiences. My first experience with identity and labels, at least the first one I am aware of, occurred when I was a child and attending kindergarten in Scottsdale, Arizona. I didn't fully speak English because my mother, who is Argentine, spoke to me only in Spanish. I understood English because my father spoke English at home, but I was self-conscious about speaking

it in public. One day in class the teacher called on me and, when I didn't answer, told the class I was probably "stupid." I lived in Arizona from the time I was four until I was seven. I got along well with classmates and friends. In fact, I felt and was treated like all the other "Caucasian" children—other than the time I was called stupid.

When I was seven, my family moved to Argentina so that my father could start a business. I attended second grade and began adjusting to a new

cultural and educational environment. A year later, during a military coup, my parents decided to move back to the States. For the next several years we lived in Southern California, and my experiences were generally positive. By the time we settled in the Huntington Beach community of Orange County, California, my black hair and dark, tanned skin stood out in the mostly white, suburban high school of the early 1980s.

One day at school, during my sophomore year, my best friend called me a "beaner" as a joke. At the time there were few Latinos in Huntington Beach other than the migrants who worked the strawberry fields at the sides of roads. The "undocumented worker" was perceived by many to be responsible for taking work away from Americans and was viewed as a threat to American values, an attitude fueled by the push for bilingual education. Although I was somewhat aware of these



Cinematographer Chad Davidson (left) and director Cristina Kotz Cornejo (right) on the set of *3 Américas*.

issues, I had not made any connection between my own Argentinean cultural background and others' perception that I was "Hispanic." My mother was certainly Latina in culture, but my parents considered our family to be white, and I was an all-American kid. My best friend knew my cultural background and knew I traveled to and from Argentina during the summers. After one of my trips she asked me if we (meaning Argentineans) rode around Buenos Aires in horse and buggy. I laughed at the ignorance of that question. When it came to knowledge about South America, I accepted American ignorance.

But matters were getting more serious for me. Shortly after the beaner comment, I was headed to this same friend's house on my bicycle on a slightly deserted street when I heard the sound of an approaching vehicle and turned to see a Volkswagen bug appear in the near distance behind me. The car sped up and headed straight for me. It looked like it was about to hit me. In a panic, I swerved onto the shoulder and fell to the ground. The driver stopped a few feet away and a group of guys yelled at me, "Go back to Tijuana, wetback!" They laughed and drove away. In shock, I picked myself up and rode my bike to my friend's house, where I said nothing of the incident, as I was in a state of confusion. I did, however, mention the incident to my parents. My mom innocently said, "But you're not Mexican," and reassured me that people are ignorant. My father explained that what happened was ridiculous because those guys didn't know any better. I started to think that according to my father, to know better would have meant realizing that since I was my father's daughter, I was white, even if I looked Mexican.

This incident became for me a crucial turning point in matters of race and prejudice. I was beginning to realize the complexity of the situation and that people were simply judging me for whom they thought they were seeing, a Mexican. Their assumptions were only part of the picture. Yes, I was Latina, but whether or not I was specifically Mexican did not explain why the surfers in the vw reacted to my identity, perceived or real, in such a violent manner. I was realizing firsthand that prejudice was not just a black and white issue, that it could include other marginalized groups, and for the first time I was a sign of racial prejudice.

A year later my mom and I decided it would be a good experience for me to live with her family in Buenos Aires, Argentina, where I would continue high school. I went to live in a country whose mother tongue was the very one that had led to my first experience with prejudice, a country with which I felt a deep bond. Ironically, my mathematics teacher, a stern and unfriendly woman, referred to me as a *gringa*

in front of my class and lectured about American kids, who according to her were all drug addicts. I was angry, but out of respect for her I said nothing. In Argentina at that time, students did not speak back to their teachers.

A year and a half later I returned to my high school in Huntington Beach and did not resume my previous friendships. Instead, I pursued my emerging interests in film, television, and theater. I worked at Disneyland, immersed myself in photography, took a television production course, and stage-managed school plays. I was chosen by my classmates to represent my school on the PBS/KCET interview show *Why in the World?* My interest in the behind-the-scenes work led me to ask the show's producer and director if I could make weekly visits to the station to observe the taping. They allowed me to create my internship.

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By this time I had decided that I wanted to work in either film or tv. When I graduated from high school I went to the University of Southern California (usc). I continued my internship with KCET for another year. At usc, I studied international relations. Inspired by usc alumnus Taylor Hackford (*An Officer and a Gentleman*), who before becoming a filmmaker had studied international relations, I thought that the degree would be a good foundation for documentary filmmaking. During this time I became a student activist of sorts, protesting usc's investments in South Africa. I participated in protests at the South African consulate against the apartheid system, from which they would eventually divest. I also met and became friends with African and other international students. As was also true, I suspect, for some readers of this book, it was during my undergraduate experience that I realized I wanted to make films that addressed social injustices and influenced people in a way that mainstream media had failed to. But something else happened in my personal life that would shift my already evolving identity. I met my future partner, a young African American woman, at a piano recital on campus. She and I came out shortly thereafter. It was not an easy time for either of us on what was, at the time, a conservative campus.

After graduating from usc, I decided to pursue a second bachelor's degree in film and television at another local school. I registered for the foundation courses and enrolled in an internship with a Hollywood producer. In one of my writing classes we were given an assignment to write a short fiction screenplay. I adapted one of my favorite Zora Neale Hurston short stories, "Sweat," into a twenty-minute script. My professor returned the script to me and said it was an interesting story. He also said I should get rid of the "awful black dialect" that I had made a

point of keeping in the script to maintain the integrity and authenticity of the original story. I was taken aback by his comment. Apparently the professor was unfamiliar with Zora Neale Hurston's work, and his comment could easily be perceived as racist; he certainly did not offer any other explanation. Because of his advanced years, I gave him the benefit of the doubt and continued to work on the adaptation, but after two semesters I dropped out of the program when I couldn't register for some required production courses. This was actually a blessing in disguise, as I was on a journey I could not foresee. I wanted more from a film school experience and did not see fighting to get into production courses worthwhile. I wanted to have camaraderie with classmates, and I wanted support for my creative ideas. In hindsight, a second bachelor's degree was not a part of that journey, and had I forced the issue I would not be where I am today.

I decided that if I couldn't be a filmmaker at that time, maybe I could create an organization that would support other filmmakers, particularly women filmmakers of color. In the early 1990s, my partner and I formed an organization called Women of Color Productions (woCP). We incorporated it as a 501(c)(3)<sup>2</sup> and decided we would create a forum for screenings, networking, and possibly funding. Soon after forming this organization, I began reading up on filmmakers working outside the Hollywood system. I discovered independent filmmakers such as Charles Burnett, Julie Dash, Sylvia Morales, Christine Choy, and Zeinabu irene Davis. I sought out their films at local film festivals and screenings. Upon discovering this independent film movement, I realized I didn't want to give up my own dreams of being a filmmaker. By this time I completely identified with the plight of many marginalized groups. I was more determined than ever to take my college activism and put it toward something that had power. Under the auspices of woCP, I embarked on a documentary on Jewel Thais Williams, an African American woman who was a leading AIDS/gay rights activist and owner of the popular Catch One Disco. This was my first film, titled *Jewel and the Catch*. My partner and I had come to know Jewel through frequenting her club and attending other events in the gay and lesbian community. I read every book on filmmaking I could find, bought a Beaulieu Super 8 camera, wrote a loose script, and began filming around Los Angeles, specifically at her dance club. I had finally become a filmmaker, an independent filmmaker in Hollywood at a time before it was even popular to be independent. And just as happens to any other independent filmmaker, my production was fraught with technical difficulties, many of which had to do with lighting and sound. I was shooting Super 8 sound film that was not

suitable for low lighting situations in a dark club with very loud music. I hadn't realized the problems I would face, but I was hooked on filmmaking. The more problems that arose, the more determined I was to finish the film.

After completing the documentary and screening it at a couple of gay and lesbian festivals in Los Angeles and New York, I decided that I wanted to formally continue my film production studies. I applied to a graduate film program and made it to finalist status. In my interview I spoke of my organization for women of color artists. A Mexican American professor on the interview committee promptly told me that I wasn't a woman of color because people from Argentina are of European descent. He knew nothing about me at that point or about my partly indigenous Argentine grandfather, whose jet-black hair and Huarpe<sup>3</sup> features came through in his granddaughter. I shared with him and the committee my experiences of my Latina identity, but he was unconvinced. He preferred to hold on to his own preconceived prejudices and assumptions. I suppose it's no surprise that I was not admitted to the program (although two years later I would successfully apply to and enroll at NYU Film School).

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I was once again learning that identity is something that many times comes from the outside, is imposed on you, and does not come from the inside. It didn't matter that half of me was of East European descent by way of my American father and the other half was Spanish/indigenous Argentine by way of my mother. In fact, it's that mix of ancestry that has confused a great many people in my life. I've had Algerians approach me and speak to me in Arabic. I've had Italians ask me if I'm Italian. I've had Brazilians speak to me in Portuguese. People see what you look like and see what they want to see, making their judgments on those assumptions. Unfortunately, I realized that day I was nearly run off the road that mistaken identity is not always as welcoming as someone thinking I was their fellow countrywoman. I learned that while some may embrace me because they think I am one of them, others might react with derision, violence, or indifference. People don't always take the time to get to know you for who you really are. Their preconceived ideas are based on their own frame of reference and stereotypes. We all have these prejudices and stereotypes of people. I am no different, but because of my own eye-opening experiences I am very aware of these issues of identity.

My core identity has been shaped by outside events, and these outside events have had a profound influence on the way I see the world. And the way I see the world is directly related to my work as a filmmaker. The subjects of my films, where I place the camera, and even

how I frame a shot are important clues to my worldview. They speak to my existence and to my observations as an individual living outside the mainstream.

After making the documentary on Jewel Thais Williams, I was anxious to work on another project. It was the mid-1990s, and I was working at a theater in Los Angeles founded by the Mexican American actress Carmen Zapata. The theater, the Bilingual Foundation of the Arts (BFA), was started to fill a need in the Latino community for theatrical presentations written by and featuring Hispanic and Latino people. Working as the assistant to the producer and children's theater coordinator gave me insight into the theater community in Los Angeles and an "in" when it came to knowing Latino actors. I realized this would be a good opportunity to make a fiction piece with the resources that were staring me in the face.

My partner, Angela Counts, a playwright, offered to write a short screenplay. I wanted a Latino story that focused on a strong female character that I could shoot in our apartment. What resulted was the dramatic comedy *Acrylics Don't Smell!*,<sup>4</sup> which centers on a Mexican American woman (Erica Ortega) who feels trapped by her conservative marriage to an Argentine American man and his overbearing and snobby mother. One day the main character disrupts their life by announcing her intentions to pursue her dreams of being an artist. At this time I was pretty much self-taught as a filmmaker. With the help of *The Filmmaker's Handbook*, by Steven Ascher and Edward Pincus, which I continue to use in my introductory production classes, I embarked on my first short fiction narrative video.

My partner and I hired the cinematographers, two Nuyorican (New Yorkers of Puerto Rican descent) brothers who were enrolled at AFI. We secured our locations, which included a café in Silver Lake and a USC campus building. We filmed guerilla style<sup>5</sup> in Echo Park and found a very talented cast through *Backstage West* and casting sessions in our living room. The crew was made up mostly of dedicated friends who threw themselves into the project. I took a week off from work, and we shot the thirty-seven-minute video over five days on a Hi-8 camera I purchased. It turned out to be a wonderful experience, a true collaborative effort. It is this experience that encouraged me to apply to the NYU film program.

While *Acrylics Don't Smell!* premiered at the Chicago Latino Film Festival, I found out I was admitted to NYU. My partner and I relocated to Manhattan, where I began a seriously intense education in film. It is also when I read *Reel to Real: Race, Sex, and Class at the Movies*, by bell hooks. The essays in the book put into perspective what I had been

witnessing in mainstream cinema for years, and hooks's ideas encouraged me to pursue and develop my own ideas as a filmmaker. Her writings and critiques empowered me to create stories that worked against stereotypes through multidimensional representation of situations and characters.

My first exercise in filmmaking at NYU resulted in a 16mm, black-and-white, non-sync short titled *The Man in White*,<sup>6</sup> about a homeless woman being led to her death by a Santeria<sup>7</sup> spiritual figure. I became interested in making a short about a homeless woman in a manner that I had not seen before and that would allow me to explore a style appropriate to the story. Aware of the clichés that this topic could present, I decided to incorporate the Latin American literary tradition of magic realism, a style familiar to readers of Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Jorge Luis Borges, and Laura Esquivel. In fact, Laura Esquivel's novel *Like Water for Chocolate*, which was made into a film with the same title and directed by Alfonso Arau, is a good example of a popular film using this tradition. This style of filmmaking blends dreams and magic with everyday reality through both narrative development and visual style. I applied some elements of literary magic realism: characters who accept without question the magic elements of the world, a richness of sensory details, and time that appears absent or distorted. For example, in the opening of the film the homeless woman is immediately cast into a magical world, which is defined first by exaggerated sound design and then by the introduction of the spiritual figure also known as the Man in White. The Man in White appears to move through space and time through editing. The sound design was crucial to the film. Because the film assignment called for non-sync sound filming, I decided to create an exaggerated or heightened sound design, which also aided in placing the character in a magical world and provided that sensory detail associated with magic realism. The main character, who awakens into this world, never questions it; in fact, she follows the Man in White, who leads her from Central Park into a cemetery and into the death she was unknowingly experiencing all along. I cast a New York City actor, Mary Magdalena Hernandez, as the homeless woman and Afro-Caribbean musician Wayne Eddy as the Man in White spirit.

One day it dawned on me that if I didn't achieve what I was hoping to achieve with the style of the film, then the stereotypical representations in the film could serve nothing but just that, stereotypes. I never felt that way with my two previous films because the first one was really a tribute and profile of a gay rights activist and the other was about the liberation of a repressed housewife. Neither of those themes

seemed problematic to me. This film, however, made me think further about representation of people of color, especially Afro-Caribbeans. I certainly did not want to perpetuate stereotypes for the sake of making a film; this went against my reason for becoming a filmmaker. I was beginning to feel a certain pressure and concern about how I might represent certain images. On the other hand, I did not want to feel constrained as a filmmaker. I was in film school, after all, and I wanted to feel the freedom to explore stories and ideas. bell hooks speaks precisely to this issue in the essay “Artistic Integrity: Race and Accountability”:

Most filmmakers do not have to deal with the issue of race. When white males make films with all white subjects or people of color, their “right” to do so is not questioned. . . . Ironically, more than any group white men are able to make films without being subjected to a constant demand that their work not perpetuate systems of domination based on race, class and gender. As a consequence it is this work that is usually the most unthinking and careless in its depictions of groups that are marginalized by these institutionalized structures of exploitation and oppression. . . . Marginalized groups—white women, people of color, and/or gay artists, for example—all struggle with the question of aesthetic accountability, particularly in relation to the issue of perpetuating domination. Although this struggle is most often seen solely in a negative light, it enhances artistic integrity when it serves to help the artist clarify vision and purpose.<sup>8</sup>

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I felt it was serendipitous that I would come across hooks and this book. It certainly addressed the issues and questions I was beginning to face as a student filmmaker, questions I would surely continue to face in the future. I also felt optimistic that with careful thought about what I was hoping to do, awareness of my intentions, and research on the spiritual aspects of Santeria, I could continue to pursue my ideas with the artistic integrity that hooks demands.

This issue of being accountable as a filmmaker is also a big issue I face as a teacher. As students explore their own ideas, which in most cases are influenced by popular culture, I am often faced with a resistance to understand the complexity of race and gender representation. Their exposure to and education about race and gender representation seem heavily influenced by Hollywood films and advertisements and rap lyrics, which in many cases perpetuate negative stereotypes. I address these issues in the classroom by being an example as a maker, by discussing representation in relation to student work, and finally by

showing and discussing the work of filmmakers who themselves are marginalized. I approach these matters with students in the manner in which I would approach writing a script, that is, by talking about characters in their scripts as fully realized persons or multidimensional people. In other words, I try to break down the stereotypes they understand best not by negating them but by encouraging research, understanding, empathy, and learning as much as they can about the topic they are creating a film about. Again, hooks states it well in her essay on artistic accountability:

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White male artists have not necessarily benefited from the absence of certain pressures that would compel them to address their role in creating work that perpetuates domination. Filmmakers probably have more awareness than other people about the power of moving images in an age of ever-increasing illiteracy. Movies teach so much because the language of both images and words that they use is accessible. Luckily, individual white filmmakers have begun to think critically some of the time about depictions of race, gender, or nationality.<sup>9</sup>

I would add that a film school has the responsibility to address matters of representation in the curriculum and to make student filmmakers (most of whom are white) aware of their role and power so that they develop the awareness to think critically and to be self-reflexive in their own work and in viewing the work of their peers and future colleagues. Without such curricular mandates and pressures, student filmmakers unaware of their role and power will only continue to perpetuate the domination that hooks refers to, which leads to the type of stereotyping and prejudice that many Americans like myself experience.

This self-imposed pressure during the making of my first film in film school, *The Man in White*, led to what I believe is a truthful and engaging piece in the magic realist tradition. It is thanks to my research, my work with the actors, and the aesthetic choices I made that I am left with a four-minute film I'm quite proud of and one that I continue to use in my classes as an example of a simple film done with minimal resources by someone who had never shot a 16mm black-and-white film. The title for the film came out of the spirit character's costume choice, which I decided would be white or off-white. This choice played against the contrast of the actor's dark skin and the palette of the black-and-white film stock we were required to use. Fortunately, we had an overcast day when we shot in Central Park, and the spirit character stood out against some of the dark backgrounds I placed him in. I feel the suit played an important role for the spirit character,

giving him a sense of power and importance and thus playing against Afro-Caribbean stereotypes.

*The Appointment*<sup>10</sup> was my thesis film and another work whose main character is marginalized. In this film, based on my partner's one-act play, which I co-wrote with her for the film, the main character, Carl Meeks (Godfrey L. Simmons, Jr.), an African American copy machine salesman, is faced with the prospect of losing his job if he doesn't make a sale the day before the Fourth of July weekend. This absurd, dark dramatic comedy pits the salesman against the receptionists he thinks are keeping him from making the sale he needs to save his job. My partner wrote the original play based on experiences she had working in New York and observing how the receptionists would intercept the door-to-door salesmen who were trying to sell office equipment to them. This idea led to the play, which I read and fell in love with for its rhythmic language and power play between genders. I asked my partner if she would be interested in turning it into a short film, and she eagerly agreed. The challenge for me as a student filmmaker was deciding how we could develop the theatrical components, heavy dialogue, and a single location for the screen. We ultimately decided on breaking the film out into several locations, including his apartment, a bar, several interior and exterior office locations, a pay phone, and a scene where he's practicing a sales pitch in a storefront window. The original play had two white characters, but I decided to change their ethnicities. The rationale was that making them people of color would allow me to play with the power inequities sometimes experienced by lower-level employees, who also often happen to be black and Latino. I wanted to demonstrate how people often make judgments based on preconceived prejudices, irrational fears, and desperation.

In his case, I asked myself how this man might feel facing constant rejection. Is he even happy with this line of work? Does he feel his skin color plays a role in how he's treated? What power does he think these women have over him? How does he react in this situation? Does he really see himself as powerless, or is he blaming others for his own failures? After asking myself myriad questions, many more than I have presented here, I created a character background and tried to answer these questions so when I was rehearsing and finally filming, we would see the psychological nuances and subtleties come through in the actual scenes. There is a scene in the film in the beginning that demonstrates these nuances with the most minimal dialogue. Carl enters an office and the camera in a wide hand-held shot shows his awkwardness as he confronts a receptionist, who feigns a greeting. This scene is key to who Carl is as a character and what he faces as he

tries to save his job. The unsteady camera allows us to see Carl try to be friendly with an unwilling participant. His awkwardness gives us clues to his skills as a salesman. On the other hand, the receptionist's behavior allows the audience to sympathize with what Carl faces on a daily basis. In a close-up shot we see her reluctantly call her boss, who eventually shows up, only to cut off Carl in the middle of his pitch. Embarrassed and needing to save face, Carl pulls out a brochure and tosses it on the receptionist's desk. Her reaction is to move back with fear as the brochure lands on her desk. The camera stays on him as he leaves the office and the door slams, literally and figuratively shutting him out of the sale.

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In the case of the co-protagonist in the film, Marta (Denise Casano), we see through Carl's interaction with her that she is unhappy with her job. And as I developed her psychological makeup, my questions had to do with her function as gatekeeper for her employer. This function in and of itself has some power, but is it a useful power for her? What does she think of these salesmen who need to bypass her in order to make a sale? Is she sympathetic or resentful? Does she resent being on the "front lines" of the office? What might be her reaction to an angry salesman? What about an angry black salesman? Her dealings with Carl become more complex than those of the first receptionist, who was able to get rid of him. With Marta, Carl feels it's his right to demand to see someone. He feels someone in that office made a mistake and he is not going to walk away—he can't walk away or he'll lose his job. The crux of the conflict takes place between Marta and Carl and develops through three separate interactions, the stakes getting higher each time. By the final confrontation, Carl's passive and awkward demeanor takes on a more menacing and aggressive nature. Obviously unaware of his previous sales misses, Marta, alone in her office with no one around, perceives him as a threat. A warm lighting plan heightens the tension and the heat of the moment. By this time in the film, the even shakier hand-held camera is in their faces. Close-ups and tight framing on the final confrontation create a strong sense of their psychological deterioration and place the viewer within that action.

As the director, I look at the layers that exist in the situation, the complexities of how race can and often does play a subtle role in day-to-day life situations, and the powerlessness that people experience in the work environment with regard to hierarchical structures. I enjoy discovering the power play and complex psychological interactions between the sexes in the writing process. As a director, I like exploring with the actors in the rehearsal process the background of the characters and how they might react to a given situation. A great deal of

artistic inspiration comes from seeing what each actor brings to the role based on his or her own life experiences. Each process gives life to the story and allows me as the director to create a believable story out of an imagined situation.

Though the depiction of race in *The Appointment* was challenging in ways that reminded me of my experiences directing *The Man in White*, the main challenge was to not create a character that might be subtly stereotypical. There are no overtly racial stereotypes in *The Appointment*, but I was very sensitive to how I might be portraying a black character in a powerless situation. As a result, as I developed the script for *The Appointment*, I again asked myself many questions. How will this black character be represented? Will his weakness play into stereotypes? Will his anger play into stereotypes? My way of addressing these concerns had to do with character development, and by grounding his actions in the conflicts in the story. I also worked on the back-story of the character with the actor. For example, during rehearsals, Godfrey and I spoke about Carl's background, and together we decided that he was not suited for sales. He was an introspective person with interests in the arts and creativity who if he had his preference would be working in another field, possibly as a writer. Through these conversations we came up with Carl's personality and grounded all of Carl's actions in the story in his personality and psychology. This is a process I enjoy as a director. It is a process of discovery and analysis through discussions and rehearsals.

Since *The Appointment* I have made four other short films and videos. *Ernesto*<sup>11</sup> is a film that resulted from a grant program sponsored by the Partnership for a Drug-Free America and the Palms Springs International Short Film Festival.<sup>12</sup> It is about Ernesto (Sylvestre Raskuk), a twelve-year-old Dominican boy in New York being raised by his grandfather. Ernesto is pressured by his neighborhood friends to try inhalants, ordinary household products that are inhaled or sniffed by children to get high. The film deals with the conflicts and challenges a twelve-year-old boy feels in trying to both fit in with other kids and do the right thing. By making Ernesto Dominican I was creating a broader representation of what we normally see in mainstream films. Ernesto is a Latino from a tough neighborhood who struggles with the pressures exerted on him by his peers. He eventually rejects the use of drugs and in fact saves his friend by taking a noble action his other friend discourages him from. The story was told from Ernesto's point of view. The subjective use of the camera allows the viewer to walk in Ernesto's shoes and experience his world. A particular sequence in the film shows two bullies trying to pressure him to sniff nail polish

remover under a jungle gym in their urban neighborhood. Ernesto is reluctant to follow, but, not wanting to appear weak, he decides to join them. I had the camera at the top of the jungle gym looking down on Ernesto showing his powerlessness. As the bullies jump up onto the gym, Ernesto waits a beat before jumping himself. The camera stays on him. The viewer experiences his hesitation and reluctance. As we follow them through the gym, we settle on the hidden area where their illicit behavior is to take place. The camera is now at eye level with all of them and within the circle of action, creating an increase in tension. Once the kids sniff the nail polish remover, Ernesto takes off, realizing the error of his ways, but not before taking a hit himself. In the next scene he experiences the high caused by the chemical. A frantic hand-held camera settles onto a tight, compressed shot of Ernesto dazed and disoriented. The background sounds of an aboveground train collide with the images of Ernesto trying to recover. Key to the scene was not only the visual style achieved by shots and lenses but also the location. My director of photography, Chad Davidson, and I chose the jungle gym, which is a symbol of youth and innocence. But we wanted to show that in this urban jungle gym, youth and innocence are lost long before it's time.

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After *Ernesto*, I made *Ocean Waves*,<sup>13</sup> a fifteen-minute digital video narrative adapted from a one-act play written by Angela Counts. It deals with an African American receptionist, Ocean Waves (Abigail Ramsay), working in white corporate America. She is approached flirtatiously and disrespectfully by a white male executive, Dan Winters (Jeff Riebe). During a lunch break the two become involved in an unwitting game of sexual deceit, which leads them down a road neither one is prepared for involving sexual domination and subordination. I decided to stick to the play as it was written and not to break it out of its theatrical setting. I did this because I felt the language of the piece was the driving force of the story and, although many people would say that's not what cinema is about, I decided to explore this anyway. I did make one major change to the script, and that was the age of the characters. I decided to close the wide age gap between the characters. In the play, the man is in his fifties and the woman is in her early twenties. I felt this could set the wrong tone for the audience, that it could be difficult getting beyond the "dirty old man" stereotype. I also changed the piece to a darker yet comedic tone so that there would be less danger of making her a one-dimensional, buffoonish character. The play had broader comedic strokes, but I preferred to explore the darker elements of the story. In addition, I felt there was a risk with the sexual nature of the story, which subtextually references slavery and

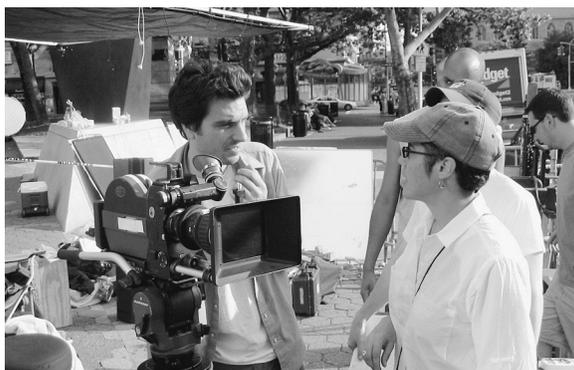
the racist notions of female black sexuality that arose from slavery. But my underlying quest for this film was to position the female and male protagonists in a seesaw game of vulnerability and power, using these tensions as the guiding force for their unconscious actions. These two characters are flawed and damaged individuals who think power in and of itself is the answer to their problems: for him, it's to exert power over women; for her, it's to exact revenge and manipulate him into submission. But the complexities of human nature emerge, and the characters' original intentions open up a new set of issues neither one is prepared to deal with.

This story was uncomfortable for some viewers, especially men (white or black). Women, on the other hand, white or black, seemed to relate to it in a way I had not anticipated, telling me they have had similar unusual and bizarre experiences related to sexual advances. I hope the film succeeds in sparking dialogue and discussion about the issues, but people seem afraid to talk about the very volatile and complex matters that involve race, sex, and power.

My most recent short film is an eight-minute Spanish-language short, *La Guerra Que No Fue* (*The War That Never Was*),<sup>14</sup> which I wrote and shot in New York City.

It is about a roasted nut vendor, an Argentine named Diego (Darío Tangelson), who is assigned to train a new Argentine girl, Susana (Romina Polnoroff), but his obsession with the Chilean competition across the street causes him to lose his job, and he winds up working for the very competition he despises.

The idea for this story came from an article I read in the *New York Times* in 2002, "Urban Tactics: Sweet Business; Bitter Feud,"<sup>15</sup> which discusses the origins of the roasted nut business in New York. In the mid-1980s, an Argentine founded the business, and when the original



Cinematographer Chad Davidson (left) and director Cristina Kotz Cornejo (right) on the set of *The War That Never Was / La Guerra Que No Fue*.



Darío Tangelson in *The War That Never Was / La Guerra Que No Fue*.

owner died in the mid-1990s, another Argentine took it over. At about the same time, a Chilean nicknamed El Conejo (the Rabbit) arrived in Manhattan in need of work. The Argentine owner of the nut business hired the Chilean and trained him. Sometime later the Chilean decided to start his own roasted nut business. Eventually, the Chilean is interviewed on a Spanish-language show in Chile claiming he started the roasted nut business in New York. As word got back to New York, a rivalry between vendors began. The implications of this rivalry go beyond the individual beliefs of nationalism. In 1978, Chile and Argentina almost went to war over the Beagle Channel and a cluster of small islands south of Tierra del Fuego at the southern tip of South America. In fact, the rivalry goes back over a hundred years to the territorial disputes between the two nations involving Patagonia and the Strait of Magellan. This story was perfect as a comedic metaphor for war and the geopolitical issues between the two nations. It was also a perfect opportunity for me to play with some of these very serious issues through comedy and also to return to my own familial roots—Argentina. I shot the film at two locations in New York: the lot where the carts are stored, and a sidewalk across from Lincoln Center. The film opens at the lot where the vendor rivals are preparing for their day. In a detail that struck me when I first read the article, the two companies store their carts only a few yards from each other. What a perfect visual moment for the film! The opening shot in the film shows the two vendors, Chilean and Argentinean, pushing their carts very aggressively as if racing to a finish line. Without a word being spoken, the tone is set and the viewer is prepared for a comedic ride. This film has now screened at more than twenty-five film festivals and cultural centers in more than ten countries. The consistent feedback I receive is that people appreciate how such a small film can elucidate larger and complex issues of territorial disputes and nationalism. This film is an example of what I hope to continue to achieve as a filmmaker: to develop work that weaves important issues and themes seamlessly into a story without being didactic.

This brings me back to where I started. As I mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, I am in Buenos Aires, where I am meeting with my line producer and actors to show them scenes from *3 Américas*, my first feature film, shot during the summer of 2006. *3 Américas* is a feature-length drama about sixteen-year-old América Hart Campos, who is sent to live with her grandmother in Buenos Aires after a tragedy hits her family in Boston. The story deals with identity issues, family violence, loss, and self-discovery, themes that are not strictly autobiographical but are greatly influenced by my own life more than

any of my previous films to date. In the story, I explore the cross-cultural issues that affect a teenager whose heritage is Argentinean and whose environment is North American, specifically New England. In dramatizing this character's challenges and opportunities, I utilize experiences from my own life to more closely inform my film work and the dramatic situations it portrays. *3 Américas* also poses for me an opportunity to explore the intergenerational conflicts that confront teens who are being raised by aging grandparents, which in América's case is further exacerbated by the fact that these two family members do not know each other before the tragedy that brings them together.

My goal for this film is to bring to bear all the elements I have learned as a filmmaker and as a human being. I seek to create a work that will actively engage the audience with the protagonist on an epic journey to claim her life and her right to live joyfully, free from the domestic violence and dysfunction into which she was born.

Production of the film went very well. We shot one week in Boston with a relatively small crew, which included professionals as well as eight students or alumni from Emerson College. The remainder of the four-week shoot took place in Buenos Aires. My lead actor, Kristen Gonzalez, who plays América as well as her guardian, three of my students (Priscila Amescua Mendez, Tatiana McCabe, Lucia Lopez), my co-producer (Angela Counts), my production designer (Toni Barton), my cinematographer (Chad Davidson), and I boarded a flight two days after we wrapped in Boston and headed to Buenos Aires. The shoot continued to go very well, considering we ran into some snags, such as scheduling problems, the loss of locations, local union issues, my having to dismiss the local wardrobe supervisor, and a confrontation with the Buenos Aires Police Department over shooting in front of a bank. Despite these problems, the American and Argentine crew worked seamlessly and as a cohesive unit. Though the film is not autobiographical, it is influenced by some of my experiences, and shooting in all the familiar places in which I grew up and my old school made this filming experience much different from that of my other films. I was connected to the storyline at a deeper emotional level, and I believe this influenced everyone who participated in the film, particularly Kristen,



Kristen Gonzalez as América in *3 Américas*.

who was very aware of the environment for herself as a person and for her character's journey within this new environment.

My personal journey informs my filmic explorations. More than any of my short subjects, *América's* story required the length of a feature film to give her time to grow into her new life in Argentina and to give me sufficient space to tell her story. It is in many ways the culmination of many years of living and making films. *3 Américas* represents my worldview, my values, and my identification with the world I live in. The journey *América* takes is a journey I have taken figuratively and whose construct is a result of everything I have lived and observed. It is why I have chosen to make a feature film. The long format affords me the time to develop the complexities of *América's* journey over time. I am able to recreate the moments in life during which we take a breather from the obstacles in our way. And I am able to solidify back-stories—the elements that give validity and believability to the story and the characters themselves—avoiding the heavy-handed imprint of the writer. I have been carefully constructing the story to allow the themes of the film to surface so that they will resonate with an audience long after the viewing of the film.

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Identity is important for each of us. We all need to know who we are. We shouldn't focus on how other people see us but on how we see ourselves. There are too many factors that can influence who we become (and are becoming). Outside perceptions limit us on our journey

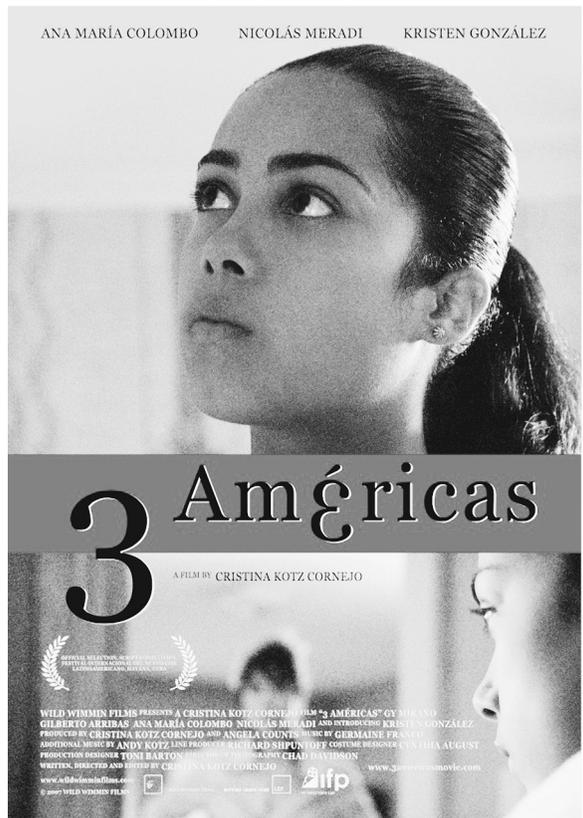


Still from *3 Américas*.

to self-realization and may not contribute to an accurate and true identity. When we are able to claim our own identity rather than having one imposed on us, our freedom to live life to the fullest can flourish.

My desire to acknowledge my evolving self every step of the way has opened up opportunities in my life and given me a voice for my work as a filmmaker. It is why I reject the labels people try to attach to me. Yes, I am Latina, a woman, American, and gay. And yes, I am even an academic filmmaker. I am all of these things at once, but as I define them. Labels conjure up different meanings to different people, depending on how they define them, so I also reserve the right to reject labels and what they may represent. What I do fully accept is that I am human and I am a filmmaker. I am an individual who is different from others yet connected to others in the human struggle. My films express the individuality of identity and its universality. The nineteenth-century existentialist philosopher Søren Kierkegaard has written that society and politics categorize individuals by group characteristics instead of individual differences. For Kierkegaard, those are the differences that make us who we are as individuals. I have to agree with Kierkegaard: “once you label me, you negate me.”<sup>16</sup>

In one way or another, all my films are about marginalized people whose lives are deeply affected by their ethnicity, race, class, gender, or other life circumstances. They are characters who either choose to guide their own destinies in spite of labels and history or are thrust into a redefinition by circumstances. Either way, the characters in my films struggle to become more fully themselves. Often they must fight to reclaim their lives as well, and to pursue a better future. Long after the film is over, we might imagine, they will continue on this path, a work in progress.



Poster for *3 Américas*.

## Notes

1. *Jewel and the Catch* is available from the UCLA Film and Television Archive's Outfest Legacy Collection.

2. Section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code is the most common section under which nonprofit organizations file for tax-exempt status. For this reason, nonprofit organizations are often referred to as 501(c)(3) organizations.

3. Huarpe is a native tribe from the Cuyo (northwest) area of Argentina known for agricultural skills.

4. *Acrylics Don't Smell!* is not available for screening.

5. Guerilla filmmaking is associated with no-budget filmmakers who bypass any formal production arrangements, such as securing locations and permits.

6. *The Man in White* is available directly from the filmmaker.

7. Santeria is a religion that combines certain traditional African religious beliefs and some Roman Catholic ceremonies.

8. bell hooks, "Artistic Integrity: Race and Accountability," in *Reel to Real: Race, Sex, and Class at the Movies* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 69.

9. *Ibid.*, 70.

10. *The Appointment* is distributed by Urban Entertainment (Los Angeles).

11. *Ernesto* is distributed by the Partnership for a Drug-Free America (New York).

12. Festival listings are available on the Web or can be found in resource books such as *The Ultimate Film Festival Survival Guide*, by Chris Gore, or *The Film Festival Guide*, by Adam Langer.

13. *Ocean Waves* is available directly from the filmmaker.

14. *La Guerra Que No Fue (The War that Never Was)* is distributed by ouAT! Media (Toronto, Canada) and voy Pictures (Los Angeles).

15. Michelle O'Donnell, "Urban Tactics: Sweet Business; Bitter Feud," *New York Times*, September 22, 2002.

16. Søren Kierkegaard was a nineteenth-century Danish philosopher.