

MIROSLAVA CHÁVEZ-GARCÍA

## Interview with Yolanda Cruz

A filmmaker documents depopulation in Mexico

*I recently sat down with Yolanda Cruz, a filmmaker, graduate of UCLA's film school, and 2011 Sundance Screenwriters Lab Fellow, to talk about filmmaking, her indigenous origins as a Chatino (one of sixteen indigenous groups in Oaxaca, Mexico), and her views of indigenous peoples in California and, more broadly, across the globe. Cruz has produced seven films, including her latest, "2501 Migrants," which depicts the unique work of Alejandro Santiago, an indigenous artist from Oaxaca. The film examines how Santiago uses his artwork to bring attention to the migrants who have left the region and inadvertently created what has been called "a landscape of cultural and domestic abandonment." In our conversation, she mused about the power of filmmaking, organizing indigenous communities, dispelling myths about indigenous people, immigration and globalization, perseverance, and education.*

### **What inspired you to go into filmmaking?**

When I came to the US in the 1990s, I came with the intention of learning English and returning to Mexico to get a degree in law or teaching. But because I come from a very active community in Oaxaca, I was very active in Olympia, Washington, where I lived and went to college. I studied photography and creative writing. Then I took some media classes and realized that media was a very effective tool for organizing. That led me to study other forms of filmmaking around the world. I was so amazed with what film could do that I wanted to do one on the revolutions of Latin America.

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Alejandro Santiago at work in Cruz's documentary 2501 *Migrants*

I think that because the idea was pretty crazy, I got the attention of the Selection Committee at UCLA. And, to my surprise, I was accepted to film school.

I had to fight to find a place for my voice. When I got there, to UCLA, it was difficult to adapt because it was like going back to my years in Mexico. We were told what to do. I became a part of a group of Oaxacans living in LA, more so as an individual than a filmmaker. For my thesis, I chose to do a documentary about a community activist from Oaxaca, a man who was so passionate for his community that he spent five years of his personal savings to return to his village and make an offering. I submitted it to the Sundance Film Festival, not knowing how competitive it was, and it was accepted. When I learned that, I was like, oh my God. The entire experience was overwhelming too because it was my first festival and I got a lot of attention I didn't want. I realized that my film was different from what I had originally wanted to do in film school, which was to organize the Oaxacan community.

*In many ways, it is possible to argue that your films relay messages about what it means to be a global citizen living in a global society.*

I think so. But I also think that my films dispel the myth that indigenous people do not contribute to the global society. They do more than just maintain the traditions and history. I don't just go around asking them to tell me about their old stories. Indigenous people are concerned with what is happening around the world and I want to give them a chance to express their opinion.

*What do you think about the formation of Oaxacan communities—with intimate ties to Oaxaca—in places like California and the United States, more broadly?*

I think it's important to study these communities because Mexico and the United States are neighbors and they need to collaborate more on slowing the process of immigration. I think this involves improving the life of a particular community. But I think it's more difficult to slow the process [now] and we need to find new ways of working together.



*In “2501 Migrants,” you tell the story of Alejandro Santiago, an indigenous artist based in Oaxaca. What inspired you to tell his story?*

Most of my films are about organizing the Oaxacan community in Mexico and the United States. I learned of Santiago’s story a few years back. I thought his project to create hundreds of clay statutes representing the migrants who had left the region was a little crazy. But then I understood that as an artist, his dream was to populate his village because he felt emptiness. Santiago himself left Oaxaca and later returned. He and I have a lot in common. We both immigrated when we were really young and now we’re both trying to do something for our community even though the community never asked. We all want to be the voice of our communities, [have a say] about how things should be, but then we leave. Unlike the locals, we are immigrants who have the privilege of going back and forth to the United States. In the film, I started exploring this idea and I think it gives the film a very honest perspective. It is

not about how once Santiago creates a statue, everybody’s happy.

*Are you satisfied with the reception that “2501 Migrants” has received?*

I don’t know how satisfied I am, but I am overwhelmed and grateful. Initially I thought, who in their right mind is going to follow this kind of story? I thought that like my other films, it was going to have a very select group of universities and museums screening it and that’s it. But no, it’s had wider appeal. I think it is because people see art as neutral ground, not political, and it allows for a conversation to begin about the larger issues. Plus, when people hear about this eccentric guy, the statues, and the immensity of the project, they become interested.

*What do you see as the film’s message for people in Oaxaca or in Mexico in general?*

If you look at Alejandro Santiago, he didn’t have a formal education; in Oaxaca, it’s a privilege to have that. He went to

high school and trained himself to be an artist even though there is no art school in Oaxaca. For a year, he would go to the library everyday. He'd do that as a job. He'd go from eight in the morning until one in the afternoon, and he would take a lunch break, and then he would go back at two and stay until eight. There are a lot challenges indigenous artists have to endure. That's something I always say to young people—we have to motivate ourselves. If you want things to change and to improve the quality of life, you need education and self-motivation. When I started out, I did not think about the competitiveness of filmmaking. I thought, I want to do this and I'm going to push myself to do it. Migrants face a lot of obstacles; they have to take action on their own to achieve their dreams.

*Given that you're originally from Oaxaca, Mexico, a Chatino, and you speak three languages, English, Spanish, and Chatino, how do you identify yourself?*

When I moved to the city of Oaxaca, I was indigenous. Then, when I came to the US, I was Latina, a Mexican.

I did not think about the competitiveness of filmmaking. I thought, I want to do this and I'm going to push myself to do it.

And, now, when I go back to Mexico, I'm Chatino, and when I go to Europe, I'm an immigrant. I embrace all the labels. I think it's very important to recognize that people have fought really hard for their identities. But more than anything, I would consider myself an indigenous filmmaker.

*What kind of advice would you give to young Latinos or Latinas who are interested in going into film?*





Filmmaker Yolanda Cruz with sculptor Alejandro Santiago

If they have a story they're dying to tell, they should pursue it in school or with someone in the industry who can teach them. In order to succeed in this business, you have to be unique and I think we all have unique stories. We are all

special. But sometimes it can be discouraging when people don't respond well.

*Can you talk about your next project?*

It's about a boy who lives in a town [where] all the grown men have left, and the boy wants to do the same. But he's waiting to grow up a bit, since he's eleven-years-old. Then one day he finds a refrigerator and he decides to sell it, thinking it's his ticket to the United States. Yet the refrigerator keeps breaking down and giving him a lot of headaches and he can't sell it. Essentially, it's a comedy about survival. **B**