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TEXTE

- 1 The interview was conducted in the filmmakers' lounge of the Grauman's Chinese Theater in Los Angeles during the Los Angeles Latino International Film Festival (June 4-10) the day following the screening of the 2023 Latino Film Institute Fellowship Inclusion Program. I want to thank Shenny De Los Angeles for her time and patience in answering my questions and Xean Puccio for putting us in contact.
- 2 Since its inception in 1997, the Los Angeles Latino International Film Festival (LALIFF) has been driven by a mission to showcase films made by and about Latinos. In a similar way to its counterparts in Chicago, Austin, and several other cities around the United States, LALIFF works for better representation of Latinos in front of and behind the camera, promoting films that audiences would not necessarily have access to otherwise and foregrounding stories that counter the stereotypes that affect the Latinx community. Relying on several studies of inclusion in the film industry (such as UCLA's Hollywood Diversity Report or USC Annenberg's Inclusion Initiative reports), Latino film festivals go further than point out the gap between Latinos' share of the US population (19.1%)¹ and their representation in front of and behind the camera (which rarely goes beyond 7%)²; they offer underrepresented filmmakers visibility and networking opportunities with industry leaders via a series of events organized during the festival, and sometimes throughout the year.
- 3 Over the past few years, LALIFF has strengthened its programs to feature emerging filmmakers and build "a more inclusive and equit-

able industry”³, with a Youth Cinema Project⁴ on the one hand, and an Inclusion Fellowship Program on the other hand. Sponsored by Netflix, the LFI Inclusion Fellowship Program offers an annual 20,000-dollar grant to ten filmmakers who can identify as either Afro-Latinos or Indigenous Latinos, helping these even less visible categories of filmmakers direct a short film that premieres at the festival⁵. The project came into existence in 2021 as part of Netflix’s Equity Fund Initiative, whose goal was to invest \$100 million over five years in different organizations around the world. The Fund Initiative goes hand in hand with the festival’s mission: being an endeavor to empower emerging talents from what Keara K. Goin calls “marginal Latinidad”, it keeps “nurturing and platforming the next generation of Latino filmmakers”, as Pete Corona, Director of Drama Series at Netflix, explains⁶.

- 4 In spite of being sponsored by one of the most successful streaming platforms, the short films are not featured on Netflix: the spotlight that the grant and the festival shine on each filmmaker is meant to propel them into the film festival circuit, hoping that they will find success. A few examples have given Netflix and LALIFF reasons to believe that the grant has fulfilled its mission: Monica Suriyage, who was part of the 2021 cohort, qualified for a Best Live Action Academy Award in 2023 for her horror short film *La Ciguapa Siempre* and Justin Floyd’s *Quinceañero* was awarded the best LGBT short at Cannes’ Short Film Festival in 2021⁷. These examples are clear indicators that the role of film festivals in the film industry as platforms that add value to films and help filmmakers gain visibility and legitimization has become crucial⁸. The theme of this issue of *Sociocriticism*, which reflects on the African American author and activist bell hooks’s concept of oppositional gaze, sheds an additional light on the role of film festivals : not only do they support emerging filmmakers in their endeavors to succeed in the film industry, they also “resist the imposition of dominant ways of knowing and looking” (hooks, 1992, p.128) by giving a voice to filmmakers who do not shy away from addressing issues that affect their community, as is the case with Shenny De Los Angeles.

- 5 Shenny De Los Angeles is a 28-year-old Dominican Caribbean filmmaker who was selected by the Inclusion Fellowship Program in 2022 as part of the Afro-Latino cohort. Her short film, *sisters by water*,

premiered at LALIFF the following year, at the Grauman's Chinese Theater on Hollywood Boulevard. It is a moving and mesmerizing short film that tells the story of two friends, Ambar and Larimar, who help each other grow up. It is De Los Angeles' multifaceted gaze, fueled by her own experience as a Florida-based Black Latina whose family is from the Caribbean, that holds the film together. The understanding of the film is thus multi-layered and weaves a series of themes that are both very specific – growing up on a divided island as Black girls – and universal – women's relation to their body, friendship, sisterhood, mother-daughter relationship. She thus reminds us that the personal is political, even though her film does not advocate for a political cause. For instance, the possible reconciliation of the conflicting relationship between the Dominican Republic and Haiti is to be interpreted via the incredibly strong friendship that exists between the two girls, even though the film does not openly advocate for the reunification of the island. While they are having lunch together, Larimar just mentions that her mother thinks that the girls' "love for each other is so deep [that] it could heal the island". For her, their friendship sets an example that goes beyond political divergences. This line, and Ambar's immediate pessimistic reaction ("Girl, if that's all it took..."), only invites the audience to set the film in a particular political context. As you will read it in this interview, De Los Angeles leaves room for the interpretation of her film at multiple levels.

- 6 This said, the young filmmaker, via the non-capitalization of the title of her films, announces that she concurs with bell hooks' philosophy of resistance. *sisters by water*, by showcasing two Black Latina girls as main characters, offers the audience the opportunity to embrace the filmmaker's oppositional gaze, as she portrays them as multi-faceted characters, vulnerable yet resilient and strong. The simple act of getting into the ocean is a challenge for both, not because they are afraid of drowning but because they are scared of showing their bodies. They are helped by the most powerful character of the story, Titi Peggy – who represents the figure of the nurturing and protective aunt. Even though she does not speak a word, being a haunting presence that guides the two girls during their journey of empowerment, the audience is led to believe that her confidence helped the girls face their fears, and get into the water. Interestingly, the outcome of

the film echoes hook's analysis of Julie Dash's film *Illusions* (1982), which follows two Black women in the film industry in Hollywood in the 1940s. It is through the process of "mirrored recognition" that they understand the "structures of domination" that affect them (hooks, 1992, p. 129-130). As hook explains, "the shared gaze of the two women reinforces their solidarity" (hooks, 1992, p. 130). In the specific context of LALIFF, the process of "mirrored recognition" seems to be valid on two levels: diegetically, it helps the two girls raise their voice – both yell their anger out before getting into the water – and let go of shame together, and on an extra-diegetic level, it creates bridges between the experience of the filmmaker and that of the audience. Through De Los Angeles's eyes, the spectators are encouraged to identify to the girls, understand their struggle, and challenge the "old norms" that weigh on their shoulders (hooks, 1992, p. 130). The night of the screening, the experience was amplified by the actual "shared gaze" of the audience. The loud cheers confirmed that LALIFF had offered a space for support and solidarity between the audience and the filmmakers, but also between the filmmakers themselves, as they begin their careers. It has undoubtedly contributed to their empowerment as storytellers and filmmakers, validating their experiences as minority directors.

To start this interview, can you introduce yourself please?

My name is Shenny De Los Angeles [Spanish pronunciation]. A lot of people think that I gave myself that name, and maybe in spirit I did, but it is my birth name and my family is from the Dominican Republic. I was born in New York but not raised. I kinda was in a few different places. I was in D.R. for some time and then, when I came back to the States, I was raised in Dorchester, Massachusetts and then, I really had my adolescence shaped by Kissimmee, Florida. I'm not sure if you're familiar with the movie *The Florida Project*⁹. That's what made me. I feel the Florida Project got it right when it showed the nuance of...we're Disney's backyard but we're also so poor in resources. That is such a special town and I decided to move back almost a year ago because I am very committed to showing what Florida really is, not just what we are seeing on TV. I mean, those things

are very real as well but there are so many beautiful people there. There are so many sacred parts of Florida that are worth telling and so, a part of my purpose and a part of my work is showing that, is showing Caribbean women from the South. And I never thought I would say that, I never considered myself a Florida girl but now more than ever I feel like “I gotta rep Florida”.

How old are you?

I’m 28.

I noticed that you pronounce your name with a Spanish accent. Do you speak Spanish on a daily basis?

I don’t. Even in the film, when the mom asks her daughter “qué carajo tu tiene puesto?” - “what the hell are you wearing?”, she responds in English. That’s how I was raised. My mom spoke Spanish and I spoke in English. I think I just feel more comfortable expressing myself vulnerably in English. But of course, I can defend myself and get by in Spanish but that is not my heart language. I don’t think in Spanish. I also asked how we got to this dynamic where I only speak in English. She didn’t know. It just was when we came from D.R. to the States and I was learning English in school. She said that I would get confused and that she didn’t want to add more stress to me. So, she was learning English through me and I was learning Spanish through her by listening to each other but still responding in our dominant languages. It’s very complex but it’s my story of being first generation.

Did you go to college and study filmmaking?

I didn’t study filmmaking. I actually got my BFA in acting so I started as an actor, but even as I was doing my degree - I did my degree in New York at Pace University - I was very sad and disconnected. It did not feel in alignment to the kind of work I wanted to do while I was still in school. I did finish. I got my degree, I did the four years but where I felt my heart was alive and pumping was in Spoken Word so I would go to the Nuyorican Poetry Café. I would do the slam team. I did everything. And what I really enjoyed about that process was that, you could write your own work. You could embody yourself and present yourself in a way that was electric and alive in a different way that I couldn’t find withing the program doing very standard way of telling a story. I got to make my own and in the process, I started de-

veloping a one-woman show entitled “what happens to brown girls who never learn how to love themselves brown?”. And I played both myself and my mom in the show. It’s very powerful. It’s very profound to the point where I probably won’t do it again. But I’m very grateful that I had the experience of having an artist residency presenting in New York City and getting the feedback of how important it was to do this play. That was the start. So, how did I get into filmmaking? The summer I was gonna perform the play, Covid happened, so we had to delay it, and they were like “if you want to do something virtual you can”, and that’s when I made what ended up being a documentary about my mom and I, and our relationship to chemically relaxing our hair. It’s on the New Yorker¹⁰ and it just...it did so well and it wasn’t my intention to make a film, it was gonna be streamed on Zoom and I was gonna call it a day but that was the door that opened for me. I thought “I don’t know how sustainable live performance is in the time that we’re living in” but there was something about making the film where I was able to have a sense of detachment because I wasn’t performing and getting energy from people and also exhausting my own. It was in a limited confined space. I was like “I really enjoy this” even if it’s just for a season I need to continue to explore this, and that’s when I knew “OK, I’m gonna get into narrative filmmaking.”

Did you consider both genres, fiction and documentary?

[Hesitating] The documentary was first but even in [my first film *the ritual to beauty*], there is narrative because I am in it. There’s a sense of performance. And so it’s like, when I came out of that, I was like “yeah this is beautiful *and* I am meant to write characters”. I’m meant to take from my life. I think that’s the part I’ve never really explored before. I always played me, specifically in the Spoken Word element. I was an actor. When it was my turn to write, creating and performing, it was always my life. Making *sisters by water* was such a blessing for me because I allowed other people to be a vessel. And I got to see the magic of my writing. For women like me, it’s very hard to take space and be confident but this experience showed me that I love what I do and I’m a big fan of my own work. I can hear my words and be moved, and there’s something really special about loving your work, not from an egotistical place but deeper than my heart, like my soul really res-

onated with what I'm creating. That's how I know I'm on the right path.

Have you always felt this way?

Not always, and I think being in an institution is what harmed me. It's what made me lose my voice. All my professors were white. I had no professor of color. All of them. No disrespect but all Yale graduates so it's just like they're all coming from one sense of perspective and understanding. And I actually thought I was never going to perform after I graduated or I was never gonna be an actor after I graduated so now, it feels like I've been able to reclaim that and show how beautiful my voice is and how I don't necessarily have to make work that centers suffering but actually centers joy. And that makes me very emotional so I'm very proud to be where I'm right now.

What you are saying is interesting because over the past few years, it seems that doors have opened for other voices and at the same time, one is tempted to think that without the Inclusion Program, it would be harder for emerging filmmakers of color to show their films. What do you think about this?

I think it's a hard question to answer because I'm still learning. We're so talented and yet, so many doors close so even having the opportunity to talk to one of the Netflix executives last night, he just echoed back to me like "it's really a big deal that you're doing this. I want you to know that". There's no way I'll know the full magnitude but I feel how blessed I am in making the film, this one in particular. I could finally see the outline of the person I'm becoming. When I think about future me, it's always been blurry. I've never really known what an older version of myself looks like, what a mature version...the woman in me that has developed. I could never fully see it and in making this film it was just like a portal and suddenly, the image was so blurry but I could start to see the lights, and I think part of that was having this experience where we *are* getting the funding, we *are* getting the opportunity to try, to play, to be creative, to take an idea and make it tangible, and be able to hold it in my hand so, that's my answer to that.

How did you find out about the Inclusion Fellowship?

I think I always knew about it.

It is fairly recent though...

Yes, but I think that the Afro-Latina community is so small so when you see...for example, I was very moved by *Daughter of the Sea*, it's a film that happened last year. I really loved that director.

Was it Alexis Garcia's film?

Yes, and she is very aligned with her stories and she is so moving so I was like "wow, if I could get an opportunity like that." I think that's how I've moved, seeing women that I admire and look up to, seeing myself in, and see the trajectory of their career though it may be different. I was always like "oh she did that fellowship. Oh she did that residency. That's good to know". And then, when it came around, one of my friends who was a filmmaker was like "you need to submit". And actually, he came last night and he was like "you know what's crazy? When I was watching you speak last night, I remembered that you had called me telling me you didn't think you were gonna apply because you didn't feel your script was ready". And I forgot about that. It's just so interesting to see. All it takes is a choice and I can be very in my head and overthink, and I'm rarely proud of myself for just saying yes, just taking that risk. That is another thing I learned in this process. I've never considered the bravery that I've had to have to do this but in filmmaking in particular, I'm like "I'm very courageous. I'm very courageous." And I didn't have that before. I did not know that before. I was seeing it for the first time again like I started to see parts of myself. I think I need to put more respect for myself because I'm [hesitating] I'm exceptional. And I didn't have that kind of language before. I didn't grow up with my mom and my grandma speaking about themselves in that way so I'm trying to really work on that and call that energy in.

How long have you been able to talk about yourself with such confidence?

In making this film. So, it's only been a month. You know, I came out of this very enlightened, and my editor, who is also a woman, who is also a Caribbean woman from the Bronx, you know there would just be moments of self-doubt and she would just bring me back to myself. Even one of my actors, the actress who plays Titi Peggy, I could see that there was something in her for the first time, when we came

out of the theater, she was like “I really saw myself on a screen tonight”. And it’s not even so much about representation matters because I feel like that gets a little bit lost, I think it’s more so about - not that it doesn’t matter - but it’s the intent that you’re bringing. You can’t just put a Dominican woman in a film because you want to represent a Dominican woman. You have to really tell the sacredness of her truth and so, to see her have that connection with seeing herself, I was like “this is why I wanna talk about myself with more love because I’m calling that energy into the women I’m inviting to tell these stories”.

What would you say, so far, is the most difficult part of your job, as a Black Latina filmmaker?

One of my takeaways from this experience is that you *have* to really listen to your inner voice and really trust it because along the way, not just men, but just along the way you’ll have so many people telling you what *they* think the version of the film should be, and that was the part I think was the most challenging to overcome, even if I’m not trying to make a film that seeks the certain expectations that I think people have. I’m trying to make a film that ten-year-old me needed. So I kept having to come back to that and that is also courageous to trust what your spirit is telling you. That was my biggest challenge, just trusting myself.

When you applied to the program, did you just send a script or did you have a storyboard that gave more details about the visual aspects of your film?

I sent a script which is very visually descriptive and there was a pitch deck, along with a photo shoot published on Latina Magazine that centers the inspiration for making this film.

Yes, you said something about it last night: “if you know, you know”. Could you tell us more?

I can’t get into it. It’s very complicated and unfortunately, DR has put a lot of violence on Haiti so when you see a Dominican and Haitian hanging out, being together, it’s exactly what my friend’s mom said: “your love is so deep, it could heal the island” and I really wish it could. I wish that’s what it took but anyways, we did this photo shoot and I wrote a love letter to her through this poem, and it got pub-

lished in Latina magazine and I used those photos into my submission as well, into my page text so they could really see the vision along with the script. And then we had to do a video, explaining why we want to do this.

I think it echoes another short film that we saw last night, *Marque Dos* by Asah Chai-Chang. One line left a mark on me: “people don’t know that we, Black Latinas, exist”. On the contrary, with the Inclusion Program, people are given the opportunity to open their minds to different kinds of intersectional identifications, such as Black Latino/a or Indigenous-Latino/a. Do you think that you are going to keep on directing films that contribute to open people’s minds or that you will go where your inspiration takes you?

The thing is I’m inspired by Black Caribbean women. That is literally what moves me [passionately]. That is what propels me. That is what shakes me. That is what conjures up this thing inside me to want to create. It’s not something that I’m doing even consciously. I want to make a film about Dominican and Haitian women. It’s what I know. It’s what feels true to me. There are different kinds of writers and I definitely understand the beauty of writing about an experience you don’t understand and doing that research. For example – I’m kinda zooming out but I’m coming back in – seeing what’s happening specifically in the school systems right now in Florida. I went to go visit my high school in the process of making my short because I was curious about potentially casting someone who was my age at that time who was going to the school. It didn’t work out that way but when I went to the school, I walked away knowing what my next film was. And it requires me to really sit in classrooms, and sit and do that diligent research to understand what Black and Brown queer students are experiencing right now not being able to read the books that teach them about themselves. The fact that I learned *For Colored Girls*¹¹ by Ntozache Shange when I was 14 at that high school and now that book cannot be read there, or done there, or performed there really hurt me. So, I think for me, that’s what I’m interested in. Even when I do work, there’s still research I have to do, and at the same time, it’s still a part of me. And that’s just where I’m at in the season of my life and I have to honor that.

Would you say that it makes you an activist, and that you need to stay in Florida to be a counter-voice?

[hesitating] I am an activist. I am, I am one. Being an artist is one.

I am curious about the non-capitalization of the title of your film: is it a tribute to bell hooks?

Yes. People will naturally capitalize the “s”, “b” and the “w” and so, I’ve had to tell them so many times, the film is all lower-cased and it’s in ode to bell hooks. She’s taught me a lot in her work and I feel she’s so radical in very profound ways but even in subtle ways. Even when you see bell hooks all lower-cased, it feels decolonized, which was the point so I wanted to bring that into the film. And there are little gems like *Beloved* by Tony Morrison is in the film even if you don’t catch it. Elizabeth Acevedo, who is a Dominican writer, one of her first poetry books is in the film as well. So there’s a calling in to all these beautiful Black women who shaped me that are in the film, and bell hooks is one through the title being all lower-cased.

Do you tour schools with your films? Do you have this wish, that many filmmakers have, to be a mentor and inspire young people?

I don’t tour schools. But when I was pitching *sisters by water* at my old high school, the kids just gravitated towards me and I was like “there is something here”. This is what I’m trying to figure out. You know, I’m very young. I feel like I’m not really doing my purpose. Even Maria, one of the filmmakers from last night, told me “you and that mic! You are just meant to speak”. And I thought so too! I think that I need to own that space so usually I’m very shy but tonight, I thought, I’m gonna be courageous. I’m not gonna be little. I’m gonna be grand so I’m trying to figure out how I can honor this, even in schools, showing my films. I’m trying to work on that but, it’s funny because some of my friends who are filmmakers always tell me that when I teach, I show. And I’m very grateful.

What about your future career? Are you thinking about directing a feature film now that you have had more exposure?

I’m very joyful about last night in so many ways that I can’t even put into words. This is a proof of concept and I would love to make this into a feature. Even some of the feedback that I got last night was like

“you are touching on so many things all at once”. So I think a feature would allow me...it’s hard because even sometimes in the pre-production process, my DP [Director of Photography] was like “this is Ambar’s story”, and I’m like “It is but it is also Larimar’s”. I realized that I kinda had to sacrifice that for the short but in a feature, I’d love to show what it means to have two protagonists, to really see Larimar’s truth and story just as much as Ambar’s so I’m excited to be in development of that and have the opportunity to make that. I really *do* believe that’s my first feature but right now, I’m trying to figure how I can do what I love and be able to sustain myself financially, emotionally and mentally.

And keep your creative freedom?

You know! So, I don’t have those answers right now but this is over. This chapter has closed. This is what I’m trying to call in and this season of my life is getting more specific about what I want to do.

You are still young but would you ever consider creating your own production company to work with people who are interested in the same kind of content?

I’m not there yet. You know when you started to dream about something but you have to be at that point. I haven’t arrived. But why not? When you ask me, it feels so big and so far from me right now but I feel, when that time comes, I’ll call you to tell you that I made the production company. You never know but it’s not on my mind right now.

Going back to Netflix, aren’t you frustrated that there is not going to be a program on Netflix for the short films that were selected this year, even for a week, or a month? It is a short film, which is not going to be in theaters, so don’t you think that it could be relevant to offer it more exposure?

[hesitating] I have a lot of thoughts on that. Honestly, there’s so much, even about the writers’ strike, there’s a lot I don’t know. I would love to be a writer, that is a goal and I understand what they are going through but I only know what I’m hearing. I’m thinking, when it streams, how do *we* benefit from that? Is it just an exposure thing? Will we get paid? So, I don’t have a clear answer to that but people *did* ask me all the time: “can we see it online?”. I know there

are so many people who don't have access to going to festivals and I know the story needs to be seen by a lot of people, by very specific people that I know. Even last night, there was a mom who came to me and she was just crying and told me that she was moved by the scene with the letter. She told me she had been talking about this with her daughter last week. And she told me "I don't know why I'm punishing her the same way I was punished. I don't know why. I don't want it to be that way but it's almost like I can't help it. And just watching the letter, it just hit too close to home." It was really profound for me and these are the moments where I feel that I would love for a lot of moms to see this film.

I could identify to the film too and I come from a very different culture, to tell you how universal the themes you are dealing with are.

Of course. I'm very open to how people interpret it. It's up to you. I want folks to have their own experience.

What about the two lines in French?

That's Haitian creole. It's important that people know that. This is a Haitian creole story.

There are only two lines but it makes you think about the history of the island.

Yes.

Could you comment on the role of the ocean in your film?

This was shot in Florida and it's supposed to be in Florida but the opening of the film says "Titi Peggy once told me, not everybody is meant to get into the water but there's some people the ocean loves so much, it wouldn't be able to let them go". That was something *verbatim* that this woman, who's my spiritual mentor, whose name is Peggy, said. I don't call her Titi but I made her the character of the aunt. This spiritual mentor by the name of Peggy told me that once, because when I was 25 – and this is what I shot in *the ritual to beauty* – I got into the water and it was such a beautiful experience because that was not my first time in the ocean, but my first time not caring about how people witnessed my body. I got in for *me*. I was telling her that I felt almost ashamed that it took me so long and she just gave me such beautiful words of wisdom and gratitude. And she's a priest-

ess of Yemaya, which is an orisha¹². They call her the mother of seas. And she's very connected to the ocean, connected to water. And she said that to me, not everyone is meant to get in and that's when I knew that somehow, that's gonna come into my work. I just didn't know when and two years later, I wrote *sisters by water*. I always knew that it was important that you watch the aunt give this offering [in the opening scene]. And there's a symbolism there: it's five sunflowers and two mangoes. The number seven is important to the water, to Yemaya. But the two mangoes in particular represent Ambar and Larimar. It's interesting because one of my producers when he saw it thought that it was fascinating that young Ambar looks at herself in the mirror – so tiny so small so young – and it [the camera] goes to the shot with the two mangoes and then, we go to older her. It's like two mangoes represent breasts.

As if she was discovering her femininity...

Yes. That wasn't my intent but it's an interpretation.

What were you saying about the numbers?

I think that numbers are super important. There's something very profound of a couple, a partnership, a relationship so to bring Ambar and Larimar, these two girls together in order for Ambar to heal, she has to do it with Larimar and vice versa. In order for Larimar to let go of this relationship to sexual shame, to being a virgin, she has to do it with Ambar. Not do sex, do life. Uncover herself, with her best friend. So numbers for me are very important, and colors are very important. They're all tied to a spiritual relationship to God, spiritual relationship to rituals, spiritual relationship to culture.

Did you submit your film to other festivals?

I'm going to. I want the film to be honored. It's a story about friendship, it's a story about healing, it's a story about sisterhood, it's a story about the pains that our moms can't heal from and how that impacts us.

Have you considered Europe?

ritual to beauty did present at the British Film Institute and I went and that was really interesting.

Can you tell us about your other film, *the ritual to beauty*?

It's a short film. It's on the New Yorker. You can catch it there. It's about three generations of Dominican women – me, my mom, and my grandma – and our relationship to chemically relaxing my hair.¹³ I start the film with a very big Afro, my natural hair, and you watch the journey and you hear my mom's perspective, of not understanding why I was natural and even at one point, it's really beautiful, she is asked "Would you ever go natural?" because up to that point my mom had always been chemically relaxing her hair. She was like "it's too late for me". My mom is a light-skinned woman who is biracial, she has a Black mother and a white father. She had very thick coil hair. Since she was a baby, she's had it chemically relaxed.

Why?

It's been ingrained in the culture. There is so much violence impacted on Black Dominican folks on the island. This stems from being the first country to be colonized in the Americas. The Trujillo Dictatorship. All of the history and ethnic cleansing that is still happening on our island impacts how we see ourselves. Identifying my Blackness was very uncomfortable for my mom. But I would always remind her that a Black woman gave birth to her. And we do call my grandmother "negra" so there is that understanding that my grandmother is Black. It's so interesting for biracial Dominican women. There isn't a language for that. If you are light skin even if you have Afro-textured hair, you are white. At least, that was my mom's experience. It's a very nuanced thing so I think here in the States, I was taught the language for that kind of nuance, for being biracial, for still being able to identify in blackness as a light-skinned woman. I've had a really intentional and beautiful community of Black femmes across the diaspora to teach me along the way of becoming. So anyways, my relationship with my mom- this is the journey of the film. It's about identity but it's also about forgiving our mothers for what they didn't know, and what gets passed down to us. Both good and bad.

What if filmmaking did not exist? What would you do? How has it helped you?

I don't know how to answer that question. I could never imagine if I didn't have writing. I just can't. That's more my thing. Yes, filmmaking, yes theater and live performance. I don't know how to answer that question, but I know that the source for me is always paper and pen,

and as long as I have that, it opens up portals. Paper and pen will never go away because I can get stronger as a writer and as storyteller. Letting go of the fear. Letting go of the perfectionism and just put it out there.

If you had to choose a few adjectives to describe your films what would they be?

Sensual, intimate, vulnerable, radical but tender, haunting, in a very sweet way. As if getting justice can also be done with sweetness.

NOTES

1 <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/US/RHI725222>

2 For example, the UCLA's Hollywood Diversity Report published in 2022 shows that Latinx leads for broadcast scripted shows between 2020 and 2021 represent 5.7% of all leads, 2.8% for cable scripted shows and 3.2% for digital scripted shows. The share of roles for the same categories is 5.3%, 4.9% and 5.3%. The inclusion initiative report published by USC Annenberg in April 2023 states that in Netflix's films and series, Latinos represent 7.7% all the main cast members.

3 <https://laliff.org/fellowship/>

4 The Youth Cinema Program is a tutoring program in which filmmakers teach filmmaking to middle school students. Their films are then screened during the festival.

5 According to the festival's web page, an Indigenous Latino is precisely "any filmmaker living in the United States who self-identifies as Indigenous from a community in a Latin American territory or as Chicano/Xicanx or Mexican Native American."

6 Quincy Adams, "Submissions Are Open for the 2023 LALIFF Inclusion Fellowship Until September 16th," *Latino Film Institute*, August 16, 2022, accessed October 13, 2023, https://latinofilm.org/media/news/buzz_submissions_open/

7 Netflix, "The Los Angeles Latino International Film Festival's Inclusion Fellowship Back for a Third Year," August 16, 2022, accessed October 13, 2023, <https://about.netflix.com/en/news/the-los-angeles-latino-international-film-festivals-inclusion-fellowship>,

8 Marijke de Valck, “Fostering art, adding value, cultivating taste: Film festivals as sites of cultural legitimization,” in de Valck, Marijke, Brendan Kredell, and Skadi Loist, eds. *Film Festivals: History, Theory, Method, Practice*. New York: Routledge, 2016, p. 112.

9 *The Florida Project* is a fiction film directed by Sean Baker and released in 2017.

10 Natalie Meade, “Hair, Trauma, and Healing in ‘The Ritual to Beauty,’” *The New Yorker Documentary*, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/the-new-yorker-documentary/hair-trauma-and-healing-in-the-ritual-to-beauty>, accessed October 4, 2023.

11 The full title is *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow is Enuf*.

12 Yemaya is a deity associated to water.

13 It is a process through which women chemically burn their curls to straighten their hair.

RÉSUMÉS

Français

Cet entretien a été réalisé avec la réalisatrice Shenny De Los Angeles pendant le festival international latino de Los Angeles (LALIFF) en juin 2023. Lauréate de la bourse liée au programme d’inclusion du festival sponsorisé par Netflix, elle se confie sur sa place dans l’industrie cinématographique américaine en tant que réalisatrice afro-latina et sur sa vision de la latinité, en tant que femme noire d’origine caribéenne qui vit aux États-Unis.

English

This interview was conducted with female filmmaker Shenny De Los Angeles during the Los Angeles Latino International Film Festival (LALIFF) in June 2023. Winner of the Inclusion Fellowship of the festival sponsored by Netflix, she opens up about her position in the American film industry as a Black Latina and offers her vision of Latinidad as a Black woman of Caribbean descent who lives in the United States.

Español

Esta entrevista fue realizada con la directora Shenny de Los Angeles durante el festival internacional latino de Los Angeles (LALIFF) en junio de 2023. Ganadora de la beca de inclusión del festival patrocinada por Netflix, confía en su lugar en la industria cinematográfica estadounidense como realizado-

ra afrolatina y en su visión de la latinidad, como mujer negra de origen caribeño que vive en los Estados Unidos.

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Mots-clés

Afro-Latina, Latinidad, réalisatrices, cinéma indépendant, Etats-Unis

Keywords

Afro-Latina, Latinidad, female filmmakers, independent cinema, United States

Palabras claves

Afro-Latina, Latinidad, directoras, cine independiente, Estados Unidos

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Emilie Cheyroux est maître de conférences en civilisation américaine à l'Institut National Universitaire Champollion d'Albi et membre du CAS de l'Université Toulouse 2. Elle enseigne l'histoire et la culture des États-Unis, les relations internationales et l'analyse de l'image, en lien avec ses recherches sur les représentations. Elle se focalise sur les festivals de cinéma et s'intéresse particulièrement à l'impact social des festivals de cinéma organisés par la minorité latino aux États-Unis. L'un de ses articles récents analyse l'impact de la crise du COVID sur le festival Cine Las Americas, organisé à Austin au Texas. L'article fait partie du quatrième numéro de la revue Journal of Festive Studies qu'elle a co-dirigé. Ses recherches récentes cherchent à étudier le rôle de tremplin des festivals de cinéma dans l'industrie cinématographique ainsi que leurs stratégies d'inclusion, notamment pour les femmes réalisatrices, aux États-Unis et en France.