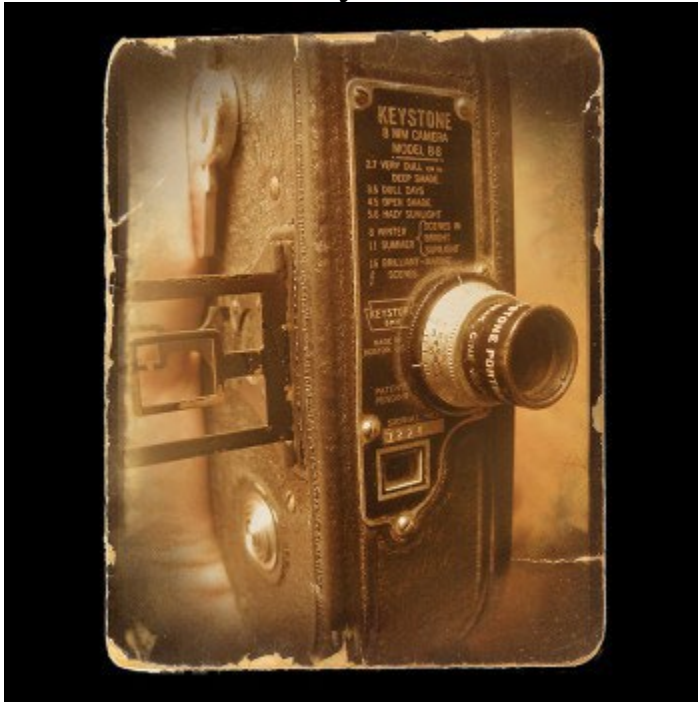


## Mexican Panda: My Short Life in Film School



*Photo by Flickr User B.S.Wise CC BY 2.0*

**by Linda Garcia Merchant**

*TITLE: Mexican Panda SCENE 1: EXTERIOR, SAN JUAN TEOTIHAUCÁN, MEXICO, PYRAMID OF THE SUN, POST NUCLEAR SPRING 2450AD, EARLY MORNING As the sun rises on a Post Nuclear Spring in 2450AD we see a wide tracking shot across the horizon of San Juan Teotihuacán Mexico with the Pyramid of the Sun in shadow. As the camera moves in on the dimly lit and foreboding pyramid we see the slight movement of Mexican grizzly bears at play. As the camera moves in we see they are not bears but Pandas. Three black and white Pandas chasing and catching a fourth black and tan Mexican Panda, beating it to death, then throwing the Panda off the Pyramid. The dead Panda lands on the ground at the feet of another black and tan Mexican Panda who has witnessed the murder. His eyes meet those of the three murdering Pandas now wiping the blood from their paws onto their fur. The three Pandas being to climb down the Pyramid towards Mexican Panda. He turns to run away from the Pyramid and into the forest.*

***Instructor:** You said this is a fantasy? **Me:** Well yes and no. It's an experimental fantasy with a moral lesson. The Pandas are a metaphor, you know symbolic of resistance to difference in the simple purity of their new world. **Instructor:** You should make them elephants. The Pandas. Make them elephants and it will work. **Me:** I can't see elephants being able to climb or chase anything on a pyramid. **Instructor:** You did say it was experimental? You want us to suspend belief for your argument? Make them elephants. **Me:** I don't understand why I need to do that. The Mexican Panda could exist if the post nuclear climate changed enough to create and support vegetation and atmosphere necessary for their survival. It is a hybridized creature born of the combination of Coati and grizzly bear, both existing in Mexico prior to the nuclear holocaust. It is probable even if it is experimental. **Instructor:** You have to consider your audience. I don't understand Pandas with moral arguments. I understand Elephants.*

While this conversation never actually happened during my time spent as a first year MFA in Film and Video at Columbia College in Chicago, many variations of it did. It was always the same, defending a script, a character, my choice of language, a setting, or even my moral arguments. I often felt like the fictional Mexican Panda character I've created above, similar to but definitely not the same as the other film school Pandas. I certainly experienced the same symbolic outcome as that of my Mexican Panda. The opportunity to get a teaching degree has been crushed and I have been hurled from the academic pyramid.

I remember getting the call about being accepted into the program; it came three days after my interview. It was 2008. I was in Austin, at Martha Cotera's office/shrine to Chicana Feminism, scanning photographs for Sylvia Morales' new film. The tone in my voice made Martha turn away from her desk to face me and, with a serious look on her face ask, "Is everything okay?" I told her the news: I had been accepted as a first year film student with a Follett Fellowship, the top prize for first year students which was full tuition for a year. That night we celebrated. When I called my momma in El Paso, she began to cry.

Two years earlier I had created Voces Primeras, a documentary film production company to capture the history of pioneering Latinas. I had made my first film about women I knew who had worked with mom in the movements, Mujeres de la Caucuz Chicana (2007). I had spoken to everyone my mother knew about what I was doing. They all introduced me to other people from community organizations and universities. I learned about MALCS, NACCS and NWSA. It was at NWSA where I was introduced to the idea of going back to school and getting a terminal degree to be able to teach. It would be a way to engage and encourage other young people to want to do this work as I could not do it alone. I applied to Columbia College in Chicago because I liked the idea that I could bring my stories to a place that could teach me how to tell those stories on film. I wanted to be a great filmmaker and I was beginning to think that was possible.

Becoming a filmmaker is like learning another language. You master a language as you begin to think in that language. As a filmmaker, you learn to react to events and circumstances by assessing the scale of drama or how the dialogue or storyline will play out. Good filmmakers are always thinking about their stories. Great filmmakers live them. I had ideas about films I wanted to do and voiced these throughout my year in film school. I knew my skills in marketing and promotion would make distributing those films possible, but I also knew I needed to learn the language and processes of production. I defended my right to make the films I wanted, challenging every suggested change to my characters and their storylines. I do not recall hearing in any of the of the introductory sessions in graduate film school that defending my art was not allowed.

I lived for the conversations with my classmates, learning so much about the structure of writing scripts and creating shot lists. Teaching them about self promotion, helping them find locations in and around the city. We encouraged each other about character development and emotional arcs. I can remember so many conversations from that year since first walking into the film school's doors at 11th and Wabash. The conversation changed completely at the end of that first year, after my Focus Film review, a requirement to continue in the program that was critical of my independence and that ended with a recommendation that I leave the program.

It has been five years since I was dismissed. My classmates have produced their thesis films and I have gone to their screenings. I frequently walk past the building that marked my period of brief promise within the academy. I do not often enter and when I do I am always expecting someone to jump out at me and yell "GET OUT." That building continues to be a reminder of my failure to connect to a community and process required for teaching. It is a scar that sometimes opens, sometimes bleeds and never quite heals.

So in February of 2014, when I went to the first screening of *The Black Sheep Roundtable*, the Black Film Society's (BFS) film about their Columbia College experience. I went to support their work. I thought, how brave to break the code of silence and speak to the challenging nature of film school. I was still afraid of that code. For five years I had not spoken publicly about that year. I was frightened, embarrassed, self-conscious, self-doubting, and thinking that these things had only happened to me.

As I watched these students sharing their pain, frustrations, and rejections I knew that if I would not reveal my own tragic journey, I would at least stand up and say how proud I was of their bravery. I shared enough to prompt the students to ask to hear my story and to include that interview in the final film. I said yes, praying on the train ride home that this was the right thing to do.

I went home and to the basement to open the plastic boxes marked "Columbia: Do Not Touch." At the very top of the neatly packed materials was my dismissal letter. I sat on the floor reading the letter, class notes, and then my final paper on the Virgen de Guadalupe as Oppressor in the film *Maria Candelaria (Xochimilco) (1944)*.

I went to the interview with BFS student filmmakers a few days later with my letter and final paper, along with newspaper articles about my work, posters from festivals and screenings, some awards and a journal article I had written. All the things I had done while in school. The interview went quickly. I got more emotional and personal than I thought I would.

It would be a few weeks before the next screening of the newly edited film that would include my interview. During that time I thought about how completely that short year of school changed my life. A month after I was dismissed, I began working with Maria Cotera on *Chicana Por Mi Raza*. It would take another two years before I felt confident enough to take on making a narrative short and even then, the validation didn't happen until in a critical scene I knew we had the money shot. I was sure then that one day I would be a great director.

I went to the screening of the final cut alone. My stomach in knots and my heart leaping from my chest, I walked into the packed theater and saw a number of faculty, the president of the college and the chairman of the department. I sat in the very last row, three seats from the exit. I was sitting next to one of the professors from the application interview. I heard nothing and felt even less. When the lights went down and the film began, my mouth began to water and I felt nauseous, but I stayed in that seat and willed myself to watch.

It got easier, each time I came on the screen, what I said was appropriate to the points being made. By the end of the film, all I could think was, what really smart choices the director made about all the contributions.

The lights came up, the students read a statement of suggestions for improvement, thanked everyone for coming and then had a Q&A. There were two screenings that night and people for the second screening were milling around the back doors waiting for the Q&A to end. The president spoke about diversity and that the bigger systemic issues needed to be addressed. The chairman said nothing. A few of the faculty offered solutions that included courses already being taught and a willingness to work with the students to make changes. I said nothing.

The faculty left, a few more came in, the professor sitting next to me said I had done a good job articulating my pain. I told him that it was hard and it still is. He patted my arm and smiled and said it was good to see me.

The second screening, also packed, included a lot more community members and students, and colleagues I had invited. During the Q&A one of those colleagues asked the BFS students how they knew of my story. Reina, the president of the BFS student group, pointed to me and asked if I would

like to share. I said that an understanding about diversity did exist at the school and it came in the face of a black man, a white man and a white woman. I said that I learned how to write scripts and direct films from these three people, who were willing to have the hard conversations about process with me. I said what I've learned is still gospel and is what has enabled me to make at least one award winning narrative short.

Lots of friends and family and colleagues that have seen the film online have said how proud they are of me for finally speaking up about this. I have also learned that the embarrassment, failure and self doubt I felt were wasted emotions, as I did nothing wrong. I was vocal about defending my stories and art to a world that insisted I make films that only spoke to a broader, mainstream audience.

I really want to believe that Columbia College will listen to the voices of its black film students. I hope the lesson learned is that all art has equal value. I hope that the stories of film students of color and the body of work produced by filmmakers of color, is given the importance and attention that other filmmakers receive. The students of color pay no less tuition to attend these schools. Based on this fact alone their demands for equal resources has merit.

In a fair and level world the academic pyramid would see the tremendous potential of every filmmaker walking through those doors. Students, eager to learn about technique and craft to then apply that foundation to their stories. Stories cultivated from history and imagination and manner just waiting for a space to become real. Even if the world is not fair and level, the administration could create a space within the college that supports the talents of all of its students. How many truly great films and performances could come from a space where we are all equal, have value and can learn from each other?

Ultimately the academic pyramid can and will have to accommodate both this Mexican and the non-Mexican Panda. We can't all be killed off or made in to elephants.

#### *SCENE 2: EXTERIOR JUNGLE THREE DAYS LATER MID AFTERNOON*

*Mexican Panda, running and hiding for three days through the wilderness, comes upon a small break in the jungle, that ends by a small pool. He sees other black and white Pandas with cubs, some of which are black and tan like him. He watches for a very long time before coming closer to the small but happy group, some swimming in the pool, others cleaning fruit. A girl Panda sees him watching from a distance and motions him to come closer. She is smiling.*

Linda Garcia Merchant is an independent filmmaker and digital media producer. She has created several short independent films both individually and in collaboration with others. A native of Chicago and life-long Midwestern Chicana, she is a 2014 Contributing Blogger on *Mujeres Talk*.

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