



## *The genesis of “Into the snowstorm” by Debra A. Castillo & Melissa Castillo-Planas*

by Melissa Castillo-Planas

The short film, “Into the snowstorm” was one of several products of a year-long international, interdisciplinary collaboration. The project began as a conversation among Jorge García (Mexico; then professor at Ithaca College), Alejandra Zambrano (Ecuador, Artistic Director, La Poderosa Media Project), and Debra Castillo (USA, Cornell University). We proposed a year-long collaboration entitled “Bridging Stories,” that would include students in Cornell University’s theatre troupe, Teatrotaller<sup>1</sup>, members of the local Ithaca community, and members of La Poderosa Media Project<sup>2</sup> located in Bahía de Caráquez, Ecuador, and Santiago, Chile. The participants in the project would learn how to write short film scripts, exchange them with their collaborators in the other country, and cross-produce short films. During 2013-14, participants in the group met regularly with Jorge García to brainstorm ideas and write scripts; these scripts were then sent to a group of student collaborators in Santiago, Chile. These young people chose “La larga espera,” written by community member Juliette Ramírez Corazón, for production, and suggested then 17-year-old Diego Vidal as director. During Winter 2014, the group assembled in Ithaca, including Chilean acting coach Gabriela Espinosa, director of photography Nicolás Schvarzberg (Argentina), along with Vidal and a mixed cast of students and local Ithaca community members who acted in the film, to produce a professionally edited short film, “La larga espera,” for the festival circuit.

However, “La larga espera” was never meant to be the only product of this collaboration. Working with the core team, Espinosa, Castillo, and Zambrano planned to develop a parallel project working from image to text, rather than (as in “La larga espera”) from text to video. After brainstorming on potential suggestive images that made use of the local resources, the group generated a series of short video images for

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<sup>1</sup> <https://courses.cit.cornell.edu/spanl301/>. Accessed 1 May 2019.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.lapoderosa.org/en/>. Accessed 1 May 2019.



participants in Ithaca, and potentially, in Chile as well, to use as raw material to recombine into a series of short films (three films were eventually created from the same image files). Because it was winter, and the international participants were exposed to large amounts of snow for the first time in their lives, we decided on an outdoor setting that would take advantage of Ithaca's somewhat forbidding, snowy March landscape. The footage was shot by Ecuadorian director Alejandra Zambrano over a period of three days and features Chilean actor Gabriela Espinosa, eventually consisting of a set of approximately 50 video clips, ranging in length from 10 seconds to two minutes long, mostly featuring a young woman in a red dress, incongruously outside in the snow with indoor slippers, engaging in various mysterious actions.

The short film, "Into the snowstorm," is the result of this further collaboration. Debra Castillo invited Melissa Castillo-Planas, then a student at Yale University and former Teatrotaller participant, to collaborate on one of the short films drawn from the videos, proposing that she view the footage and allow the video clips to inspire her. Melissa wrote new poetry inspired by the images, and repurposed relevant lines from previous poetry of hers that she felt matched the affect of the video clips. After consultation with Schvarzberg, García, and Vidal, Debra arranged these poetic fragments along with thumbnails for proposed image matches, generating a first proposal for the sequencing of video and text, and returned the proposed material to Melissa. Melissa then added/rearranged text and proposed new relations to the videos as the sequences developed, finally including her audio reading of the poem, along with suggestions for music and other sound effects. Thus, the sound track layers the ambient sounds of the woods and the actor's footsteps in the snow with Melissa's voice.

For Melissa, who was raised in Ithaca, NY, the harsh images of frozen landscapes invoked memories of the coldness from familial and cultural disconnects she felt growing up. Like Frida Kahlo, whom Melissa invites into this poetic tundra, Melissa grew up with a mixed background and an artistic sensitivity that didn't seem to fit anywhere. So, she imagines Frida in this setting, drawing on her strength to imagine a warmer existence, a more forgiving climate. From among the video clips, Melissa chose ones that focused on images of digging up/uncovering artifacts associated with her Latinx heritage, often buried in the snow. The poem interrogates the possibility of recovering these communal memories and heritages:

*De todo lo que no hay  
en medio  
de nowhere  
I mourn you  
without rest  
without sleep  
tethering myself to the  
va y ven de nieve constante  
If I can dig for others  
excavate memories pull meaning from their  
silences make meaning  
out of meagres  
can I uncover her?  
do I dare?*



These images suggest a range of emotions, but mostly the pain and effort of accommodating two contrasting realities—taking the frozen landscape into herself, bleeding her warmth into the snow, looking for home and warmth where there is only an abandoned sofa set across a winter stream. Here she mourns those lost like her “*en medio/ de nowhere*,” a frozen borderland of linguistic, ethnic, and racial confusion in which the winter seemingly goes on forever. Like Wallace Stevens, Melissa knows that sometimes she “must have a mind of winter . . . and have been cold a long time... [to behold] nothing that is not there and the nothing that is” (“The Snow Man”<sup>3</sup>). Amongst snow covered forests, illness, depression and heartache, she charts an alternative path of remembrance and survival through Frida: “we have endured / we endure.” When everything looks the same because of the “*vaiven de nieve constant*,” creation is the only roadmap that makes sense.

The year-long project ended when the set of four films were shared with the public in two events that took place at Cornell University. The film was later shown on the big screen at a Latina/o heritage month film festival in October 2015, in Cinemapolis theatre in downtown Ithaca.

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<sup>3</sup> *Poetry Magazine* 1921. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45235/the-snow-man-56d224a6d4e90>. Accessed 22 Sept. 2019.