

Mediating Female Stories of Violence through Film

Maria Mendez

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Professor Mary Beltran

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“How do you define yourself?” (*Paulina* 1998)

As people, we strive to define ourselves, our community, and our conflicts through our life experiences. But some tragic experiences, like the infliction of violence, can leave us in darkness and obscurity. Yet, defining who we are and our troubles is essential to finding a path toward conflict resolution and improvement. As an important Latina film, Vicky Funari’s *Paulina* tackles the issue of gender violence in Latino communities. Focusing on Paulina Cruz Suarez’s identity conflict and formation process as a survivor of sexual assault, the experimental documentary’s narrative construction and creative story delivery highlight the complexities of combatting gender violence and promoting women’s rights.

Even though the story of Funari’s film takes place on the other side of the border, in Mexico, the film shapes itself to be an integral part of the Latina film canon through its Chicana feminist work and characteristics. As Rosa Linda Fregoso documents in “Chicana Film Practices: Confronting the ‘Many-headed Demon of Oppression,’” Chicana filmmakers historically produced short, artistic documentaries, which often focused on female-centered and social justice topics (Fregoso 168-170). However, these innovative, experimental films usually received little funding and little attention in the industry, even in Latino film festivals. Since it took ten years to fund and produce *Paulina*, the lack of funding and distribution of Funari’s masterful film mirrors the difficulties faced by many Chicana filmmakers. More importantly, as a final product, Funari’s 1998 full-length film utilizes Chicana poetic visuals, a female-centered protagonist, and documentary reporting to discuss a “small piece of the larger puzzle” of gender violence against women (Fregoso 178). Working with Paulina Cruz Suarez, the protagonist and co-writer of the film, Funari constructs a Latina feminist narrative that probes and enhances our understanding of sexual assault in Latin American and among Latino communities.

“When you were hurt as child . . . and you were neither a girl nor a woman. I feel I can’t define myself as a complete woman” says Paulina Cruz Suarez on screen in response to Vicky Funari’s question of self-definition, reflecting on her unique story of sexual assault (*Paulina* 1998). According to Paulina’s account, as a 7-year-old girl in the rural town of Puntilla, Mexico, Paulina fell, injuring her private parts. After having been found bleeding, she was ostracized by the town for allegedly being raped. Eventually, she was given to Mauro, the man who supposedly raped her, and was then actually abused by him until she fled to Mexico City, remaking herself as a maid named Paulina. Depicting these events, Funari’s artistic documentary follows Paulina’s return to Puntilla and to her past.

As we revisit Paulina’s story in the film through Paulina’s own words, Funari also presents us with interviews with multiple perspectives and sometimes even contradicting accounts. Initially, this confounds viewers, but ultimately helps further our understanding of Paulina’s identity crisis and the difficulties of ending gender violence. Soon after beginning Paulina’s journey into her childhood, Funari embeds interviews with Paulina’s now elderly parents in which the mother denies having cried rape after her daughter’s accident. Rendering different versions of the events that ensued after Paulina’s initial fall and injury, these interviews with Paulina’s mother and father are alarming and characterize the young Paulina as rebellious and troublesome rather than as an innocent victim. Though these parental accounts contrast with Paulina’s narration, they do capture in the parents’ own words the necessity of land and the power of Mauro, the wealthy town leader or *cacique*, who promised Paulina’s family land in exchange for her. Since these accounts reveal the socioeconomic environment and factors of Paulina’s experience, they are important to the investigation and analysis of Paulina’s sexual assault and of general domestic violence. More importantly, the contradictory interviews with

Paulina's parents and with the townspeople of Puntilla make us sift through varying tales of the events, leaving viewers to piece "back the the puzzle" of what happened, much like Paulina, herself, had to do (*Paulina* 1998). "When I was a girl . . ." Paulina begins to say in one interview scene beside Don Lino, another town *cacique* and friend of Mauro, but she is interrupted by Don Lino who corrects her by stating "no, remember you were a woman" (*Paulina* 1998). These uncomfortable interviews with citizens of Puntilla, including Paulina's parents, Don Lino, and even Mauro's other wives (or mistresses), give "visibility to the silences around sexual assault and domestic violence [in communities] and ultimately [politicize] gender violence by testifying to its dehumanizing effects" (Fregoso 46). Towards the film and story's finale, Funari presents scenes and interviews where Paulina reunites with people, including an elderly lady who helped her hide from Mauro and a cemetery worker who remembers Paulina sleeping among the dead for safety, that help corroborate Paulina's own narrative. Together, these varied and even contradictory interviews construct a film narrative which highlights some of the causes of gender violence in communities and the traumatic effects that sexual assault inflicts on victims.

Presenting multiple accounts, Funari prioritizes Paulina's own perspective through the use of reenactments and poetic visual effects, which evoke understanding and empathy of Paulina's painful life. Opening with images of an older Paulina engaging in domestic chores while describing her daily routine, the film creates an initial portrait of a seemingly normal, functioning Paulina complying with her role as a woman in Mexican society. However, the film quickly breaks the silence of normalcy in our next encounter with Paulina in the shocking bus scene, where we witness an older man try to grope a young Paulina only to find his finger bitten off by Paulina. The perspective then begins to shift to demonstrate how fellow bus passengers see and characterize Paulina as either a *lucha libre* hero in the eyes of a girl, as a witch to a teen

boy, a floozy to an elderly lady, or as an exotic indigenous goddess to a tourist (Fregoso 42). Reenacted moments in the film, like this one and Paulina's infamous return to Puntilla, help place us in Paulina's position and feel the varying reactions of stigma (and, rarely, admiration) from other people. Additionally, Funari shows Polaroid photographs that reference the Paulina from the bus scene, embedding them throughout the film and Paulina's journey. When the real Paulina confesses not being able to define herself, the young Paulina disappears from the photograph on-screen. These artistic choices are meant to accentuate Paulina's words and painful identity crisis. Furthermore, dramatic visuals in reenacted scenes of Paulina's childhood, including when Paulina smears mud on her face as she imagines escaping through the earth beneath her like Alice in Wonderland, stress the surreal and perturbing effects of Paulina's traumatic experience. These creative visual techniques become an important persuasion mechanism in the film, appealing to our human emotions of shame, confusion, and helplessness. In the end, the creative delivery of Paulina's story effectively pushes past any controversy and skepticism, leaving us rooting for Paulina as she confronts her past and redefines herself.

The film *Paulina* reopens the case of Paulina, putting it on trial and into question. However, the film ultimately defends Paulina's account through its narrative construction and creative visuals, allowing viewers to witness Paulina's "experiences of resistance, survival, and empowerment" (Fregoso 40). Through Paulina's identity journey, the film evinces the trauma, ostracization, and difficulties survivors of gender violence undergo in Latino communities. When done appropriately, documentaries like *Paulina* can highlight and focus issues that are hard to investigate, serving as important tools for human and women's rights promotion. Redefining human rights, violence, and even Paulina, herself, Funari's work is emblematic of the power and significance of Latina films.

## Works Cited

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