

# JACQUELINE DONNET EMERGING FILMMAKER AWARD

## Transcending Borders: Natalia Almada

BY THOMAS WHITE

**N**atalia Almada was born in Sinaola, Mexico, to a Mexican father and American mother, grew up in Chicago, and now maintains residences in both Brooklyn and Mexico City. It is this dual citizenship that best informs her work, that enables her to both transcend the mythical border between two nations and two cultures, and engage it with a deeper gaze—capturing the inherent dualities, nuances and grey areas, and infusing her inquiries into the predominant socio-economic issues that define Mexican-American relations with an abiding sense of poetry and music.

Almada received her master's degree from Rhode Island School of Design—not in film, but in photography. That discipline, so predicated upon finding and capturing a soul in a frame, led her to the moving image. The three works she has produced in the past decade (*All Water Has a Perfect Memory*, *Al Otro Lado* and *El General*) demonstrate a singular vision, a resolve to take various sub-genres in documentary—the essay, the personal documentary, the social issue documentary and the history documentary—and make them her own.

*Documentary* talked with this year's Jacqueline Donnet Emerging Documentary Filmmaker honoree about photography, duality, and the territory between history and memory.

**Documentary:** *You earned your MFA from Rhode Island School of Design (RISD), where your main artistic discipline was photography. Talk about how that art form has informed your documentary work. How did your initial training in photography evolve into your documentary career?*

**Natalia Almada:** I had a really inspiring video teacher at RISD and fell in love with moving images, so I proceeded to insert myself as much as I could into the film department. Yet, I still think that I think as a photographer in terms of my relationship to the image and to the frame. In some regards, I was lucky to have studied something related but different because I felt much more free to invent my own way of doing things.

Sometimes when I'm working on grant proposals and feeling frustrated trying to write a clear treatment about a film that I haven't begun making, I think back to making my short film *All Water Has a Perfect Memory*. I didn't have a clue about what I was doing or what the film would be like in the end, and it was wonderful. I had an impulse and I went for it. And I let that lead to the next impulse... until one impulse after the next, I had a film. I was driven by a set of inquiries and ideas that I wanted to materialize, rather than by a desire to make a film per se.

I think I use the camera as a way to see what I see. It is almost like a mirror, in that sense. It is the process of making documentaries that I love. I really do begin from a point of curiosity and pick up my camera to go explore that thing which caught my attention. It is a pretext to look at something more closely, to look at it differently, to understand how I see it and relate to it. If I didn't have this curiosity, I'm not sure if I would feel driven to make films.

**D:** *You are the daughter of an American mother and a Mexican father, and you currently maintain homes in both Brooklyn and Mexico City. How has your bi-national/bi-cultural identity helped facilitate your inquiries into border dynamics, into larger questions about assimilation, immigration and multiculturalism?*

**NA:** I was flying from Mexico City to New York this past September when I noticed that the plane was full of unaccompanied minors. A boy who must have been about 10 was taking his little brother to the bathroom, and I had a flashback to flying with my brother back and forth when we were little. In many



ways, these flights defined our childhood. Everything changed, from what we ate to the language we spoke. Without knowing, we were inside and outside in both countries and perhaps most at home in that space hovering in between. Back then, my brother and I were usually the only minors on the plane. It filled me with both sadness and hope to see all these children who I imagine were somehow inhabiting that same space in between.

Edward Said begins his biography with a quote about language that I think really describes the experience of growing up in a bicultural family and always living between two cultures. He writes, "I have never known what language I spoke first...or which one was really mine beyond any doubt. What I do know is that the two have always been together in my life, one resonating in the other, sometimes ironically, sometimes nostalgically, most often each correcting and commenting on, the other."

I don't think that my being bicultural triggers my interests in these issues as much as it shapes the way that I see things. I am interested

in making the dualities and contradictions that Said describes in language, intrinsic to my films.

**D:** *Your first film, All Water Has a Perfect Memory, addresses a tragic personal loss—that of your sister in a drowning accident—through home movies, photographs and manufactured images, and the off-camera recollections and reflections of your mother, father, brother and you. You were two months old when your sister died. As your brother says in the film, "You came after... That made you more independent." How did that independence better enable you to render this memory cinematically?*

**NA:** I am not sure that it was the feeling of independence that led me to make *All Water Has a Perfect Memory* as much as it was the feeling that everyone in my family had a memory of something which I did not have. It was a sense of exclusion from this moment that deeply affected my family and led me to create a fictitious memory of my sister from the time I was very young.

Perhaps photography, more than cinema, has often been related to memory because of its relationship to the past and to time. The photograph is the memory object which tells us that something happened, that something was, and therefore that there is a memory of something. Making *All Water Has a Perfect Memory* was a way for me to fabricate a memory of something that I did not remember. I was interested in exploring the process of remembering and the subjectivity of memory. How could such an intimate event be remembered so differently? What were the points of amnesia, of contradiction, of similarity between each person's memory of the same moment?

**D:** *In your first feature-length film, Al Otro Lado, you assemble a range of characters from both sides of the border—fishermen and farmers, corrido composers and performers, coyotes, Border Patrol agents and vigilantes—to help address a complicated array of interconnected issues, all related to the post-NAFTA world of illegal immigration and drug trafficking. But to me, the*



From Natalia Almada's *El General* (Prod.: Daniela Alatorre), which airs on PBS' *P.O.V.* in 2010.



Left: From Natalia Almada's *El General* (Prod.: Daniela Alatorre). Right: From Natalia Almada's *Al Otro Lado*, which aired on PBS' *P.O.V.* in 2006.

corrido, as channeled through Chalino, the Tupac-esque martyr/icon of the genre, and Magdiel, the struggling artist, is the heart and soul of the film. Talk about the challenges of maintaining the corrido through-line, while effectively addressing an ongoing sociopolitical issue.

**NA:** I spent much of my childhood on a cattle ranch in Sinaloa, Mexico, and I remember the cowboys and fisherman talking about opium fields in the mountains and their adventures across the border. These issues were just a part of everyday life that everyone encountered in one shape or another. Meanwhile in the States, I went to elementary school in Chicago during

the "Say No to Drugs" campaign, and I was always hyper-aware that my dual citizenship was not a privilege shared by most Mexicans. I was interested in making a film that would look at immigration and drug trafficking not from a moral perspective, but from an economic perspective, one that would look at the economic crisis as the catalyst for one to illegally immigrate or traffic. I also wanted to make a film in which the immigrants and traffickers were not reduced to being just immigrants and traffickers without history and culture.

The *corrido* tradition has existed for over 200 years in Mexico and has historically served as an underground musical newspaper of sorts.

The protagonists of most of the contemporary *corridos* are drug traffickers and immigrants who've beaten the system, so I wanted to use the music in much the same way that one might use a narrator in a more traditional documentary. Rather than a voice of authority who speaks from the outside, it is the voice of the people in the film who are most often disempowered and silenced. It was also a very obvious decision to use the *corrido* because it is such an integral part of Sinaloan culture. It is the music you hear coming out of car radios when you drive down the street and in every bar and bodega you walk into.

**D:** *Your most recent film, El General, in a way picks up where All Water Has a Perfect Memory leaves off, in that personal memory—the audio tapes of your grandmother telling the story of her father, President Plutarco Elias Calles—serves as a touchstone for a broader and deeper exploration of how it connects to national history. While the former film is inspired by Toni Morrison's quote from her essay: "All water has a perfect memory and is forever trying to get back to where it was," El General evoked for me a Tom Waits lyric: "And the things you can't remember tell the things you can't forget/That history puts a saint in every dream."*

*Talk about how you addressed the challenge of rendering history and reconciling it with personal memory.*

**NA:** The film is precisely about that contradiction between history and memory. In her recordings, my grandmother was trying to reconcile her memories of her father with history's portrait of him. So my goal was not to render history and create a biography of Calles but rather to look at how we remember and how history is fabricated. I was not interested in resolving the contradictions but rather exploring them and allowing them to be the heart of the film.



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From Natalia Almada's *Al Otro Lado*.

In many regards the film is like a stream of consciousness between past and present. As I listened to my grandmother's memories over and over again, I had the sensation that her voice

accompanied me in the present and changed the way in which I saw the things around me. She was not simply giving me a memoir of my family's past, but really changing the way I saw

and understood Mexico today. It was for this reason that it became rather intuitive to begin filming on the streets of Mexico City as a way to further complicate the very contradictions that my grandmother was dealing with and look at the shadow that the past casts over the present.

There is a beautiful quote from [Chris Marker's] *Sans Soleil* that I use in the film: "We do not remember, we rewrite memory much as history is re-written." The narrator then asks, "How do we remember thirst?" I was very moved by this idea of trying to understand how we remember thirst and how we film the memory of thirst.

**D:** *You both direct and edit your work, and you have edited other documentaries. How do you both reconcile the roles of director and editor and keep them separate?*

**NA:** I decided to become an editor because I didn't go to film school and I thought it would be the best place to learn how to make films.

**D:** *What documentaries and documentary makers have served as inspirations for you?*

**NA:** Perhaps because my background is not in film, I find that I am inspired as much by fiction, painting, literature and other art forms as I am by documentary. There are bits and pieces of different films, quotes from certain books and feelings that I remember having while standing in front of given paintings that have inspired different aspects of my work.

I think I find encouragement to keep making films when I look at someone like Lourdes Portillo, who in many regards opened the door and paved the road for someone like me. And I don't think I could keep making films if I didn't have the support of my peers like Cristina Ibarra, Alex Rivera, Bernardo Ruiz and Vangie Griego, who are all out there making their films.

*El General* and *All Water Has a Perfect Memory* are both distributed by *Women Make Movies*; *El General*, for which Almada earned the *Documentary Directing Award* at the 2009 *Sundance Film Festival*, will air on PBS' P.O.V. in 2010. *Al Otro Lado* is distributed by *Subcine*; it aired on P.O.V. in 2006. For more about Natalia Almada and her work, go to [www.altamurafilms.com](http://www.altamurafilms.com). □

*Thomas White* is editor of *Documentary* magazine.

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