



Veronica Gonzalez

¡Tú Cuentas! Cine Youth Festival Award Show

October 16, 2022

We have been brought to the finale of this year's, *¡Tú Cuentas! Cine Youth Festival* and the winner have been announced. Third place went to Emilio Miguel Torres with his film *The Fix*, second place went to Andrew Reid with *Noche De El Infierno*, and first place went to Guillermo Casarin with *Bad Hombrewood*. Congratulations to all of the winners, and I look forward to their future. The judges, Lizza Monet Morales, Raymond Arturo and Chelsea Rendon had a tough call to make with this year's excellent submissions.

The *¡Tú Cuentas! Cine Youth Festival* is an incredible opportunity that more young Latinx filmmakers need to take. The film industry is not easy, especially because of the lack of Latinx voices that are heard. The Latinx community is conscious of the few of us we see in the media and if there is a Latinx visibility, we are shown through a stereotype, a lens. We need to change that and a festival like this is doing that. The *¡Tú Cuentas! Cine Youth Festival* is not about the quality of your equipment or the professionalism of your films, but it's there to enforce the ideology that a film does not need but it needs driven filmmakers who want to tell a story, their stories. This is evident in the submissions for this year's festival; each film told a different story, a different perspective, with all different voices and styles. These Latinx filmmakers exemplify the range of stories we can tell. Latinx filmmakers are constantly being excluded from telling certain stories through a certain lens but we need to break these barriers and tell stories we believe others could relate to or tell a story that matters to you as a filmmaker. Use your voice and creativity and change that discourse for generations to come.

Lastly, I would like to thank Alejandro Molina, Cynthia Rivera, and HITN for allowing me to work on the *¡Tú Cuentas! Cine Youth Festival* this year. Films have always been a passion of mine; I love writing/screenwriting, acting, and directing. As a young Latinx filmmaker who wants to work in the media and film industry working at HITNs' *¡Tú Cuentas! Cine Youth*

Festival was an experience that allowed me to learn immensely. I have acquired a wealth of knowledge by working with experts who work in the media, but also by watching the *¡Tú Cuentas! Cafecito* and *Film Chats* of people who are in the film industry who are writers, directors, and actors. What I have learned here at HITN is what I will carry with me in future projects. I hope to come back and work again at HITN and the *¡Tú Cuentas! Cine Youth Festival*.

TCCYF Film Chat: Latinos/as – The New Cut: Developing a Film Pipeline October 5, 2022

Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IN0cpmtc-DA>

The final *¡Tú Cuentas! Cine Youth Festival* Film Chat titled *Latinos/as – The New Cut: Developing a Film Pipeline*, features Jessie Fuentes, an activist who has worked on empowering young people in the community, education reform, and anti-gentrification work, and panelists Johnny Rey Díaz, an award-winning Latino actor and filmmaker, and Yareli Arizmendi, an award-winning actress, writer, and producer, discussing developing a film pipeline.

The overall discussion of this new panel can be encapsulated with a few words. At the beginning of every filmmaker's career, they have to take a step back and listen in order to learn and grow in the film industry.

There has been an explosion of non-profit and commercial institutions teaching classes, acting, cinematography, digital editing, and audio production at the high school level and beyond. But our guests argue that these skills are not the only ones a young filmmaker should know. Young filmmakers should know that they can create art that emphasizes the story. The skills filmmakers have to direct and produce are just as important as the skills in storytelling. Filmmakers must use a story that has significance to them to drive creation. Filmmaking has become so accessible and filmmakers need to take advantage of that but not rush to create content but instead be aware of what stories they want to tell.

The film industry, to outsiders, is a dream they cannot enter. Arizmendi and Díaz are aware of this as Latinx actors, especially Díaz who started out with no connection to the industry. Starting in the film industry is about having the will and power to persevere. The beginning of every filmmaker's journey starts by being a fly on the wall. Just listen to the people around you and understand the language and then incorporate what you have learned and apply it to the films and stories you strive to create.

As Latinx filmmakers, your job is to rewrite the current narrative. We perpetuate culture by the act of creating. There are many gaps in our culture and you need to fill them with what has not been written or seen. Many films that are considered a “new” take on culture are not new but instead just a perspective we have yet to see. There are many traditional Latinx stereotypes in Hollywood that have been slowly changing but Latinx filmmakers have to do it. We need to

focus the narrative on us and change it constantly. You need to use your voice to create stories that matter and are authentic to you. The first step is to listen and learn, because the film industry is not a place that gives a platform to many.

TCCYF Film Chat: Up The Stream Without A Paddle: Latinos & The Streaming Wars

Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7FAHf4zbsrA>

September 28, 2022

The 2nd *¡Tú Cuentas! Cine Youth Festival* Film Chat, *Up the Stream Without A Paddle: Latinos & The Streaming Wars*, features moderator Flaco Navaja, a spoken word artist, performer, poet, actor, singer, and writer, and panelists Jorge Xolalpa an award-winning filmmaker, CEO at Mighty Aphrodite Pictures, creator of NYTA Films, Not Your Typical Asshole Films, and Kristian Mercado Figueroa, an award-winning Puerto Rican filmmaker discussing possibilities for Latinx in streaming platforms.

In every form of the film industry including streaming platforms, Latinx filmmakers are constantly looking for a space where we can tell our stories. The lack of Latinx content on streaming platforms is not new, there have been several recent cancellations. Most Latinx content on these streaming platforms have been destined for cancellation after its immediate release. Why is that?

Jorge and Kristian are aware that streaming platforms have only made critics more brutal that films and shows have received because of these streaming platforms. Streaming platforms have changed what television means. When television was only available through cable it would allow television shows to produce at a slower pace giving them more room for critiques and feedback to evolve. Between seasons of a television show that would air on cable, show producers could go through the critics of the show and apply it to the new season making them better. On the other hand, streaming platforms have changed that television shows from the first season that airs have to be at great risk of cancellation, they are not given the time in between seasons to change. Latinx filmmakers are not given a second chance to redeem ourselves and many of our stories are not being heard because they are told to start from perfection.

Latinx filmmakers are put in a box as to what content they create, they tend to self-censure, never allowing themselves to venture into other content because they know it will not get accepted for not being “Latinx” enough. Latinx filmmakers need to focus on creating content for themselves that they love and have a passion for regardless if it does or doesn’t fit the “Latinx” category. Latinx filmmakers should not settle for anything less than what they want for their projects. Latinx are so used to being pushed to the side that at any given moment we hear “yes” we take the opportunity in fear that it might be the only one we are given disregarding the consequences. When we say “yes” to things that don’t align with our vision, we lose our integrity and the impact of our story.

The problem with the ideology that Latinx filmmakers should not be afraid to say no in order to not lose the integrity of our stories, only comes to those with privilege. Not every Latinx filmmaker can afford to not take every opportunity that comes their way, especially at the beginning of working in the film industry. At the beginning, Latinx filmmakers might have to lose their integrity a bit and say “yes” to projects that don't align with their ideals because doing this will allow Latinx filmmakers to create momentum and build their own career. It is then when Latinx filmmakers can start saying “no ” and create their passion projects.

Persistence is the key to getting our stories out there, but we must strive to be authentic. Don't be afraid to tell your stories, learn to work with what you have, and value your storytelling and perspective. If you have something to say and only you can say it, say it. Specificity is important. There is so much difference in the Latinx community that specificity is key to telling stories that are more universal because it zones in on the human conditions and experiences. Only we can tell our own stories organically, and authentically.

TCCYF Film Chat: Still Unseen? A Discussion of Latinos/as in Film September 21, 2022

Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BiAv6aCEd1o>

The 1st *¡Tú Cuentas! Cine Youth Festival* Film Chat titled *Still Unseen*, features our host is Caridad de la Luz, is a Puerto Rican spoken word artist, activist, dancer, screenwriter, and actor, panelists Manuel Betancourt, a writer, film critic, and cultural reporte and Zoé Salicrup Junco, an award-winning director who has produced multiple films such as *Maria*, *Marisol*, *Fluff*, and *Gabi*, discussing Black and Brown representation, presence, as well as erasure in the entertainment industry.

The discussion starts with Caridad de la Luz saying a quote from Maria Hinojosa, a Mexican-American journalist, “My stories didn't appear. We were invisible. I was invisible from the media narrative. No one in the reporting that I saw looked like me [and] looked like my family, so I began to think that maybe somehow my life -- my story -- was less valuable. Less important.” This quote first hearing it resonates because it speaks a level of truth for all Latinx filmmakers. Latinx have been taught as filmmakers to believe that our stories do not matter and that the only stories that should be getting told should not be from our perspective. This quote ends up being the backbone of this discussion.

We start with Zoe saying that films are like a mirror meaning, films can allow you to mirror your own culture leading doors to open up for conversations. Manuel agrees with this but adds that films are also a window because they allow viewers to educate themselves about new cultures that do not pertain to them. These stories that filmmakers are creating and writing do not have to be a good reflection of your culture or your own experiences, filmmakers should be allowed to

talk about the nuances and complexities that come with telling a story about their realities. This gets brought back into the discussion when Zoe mentions that as a filmmaker, she feels pressure from producers to tell stories about perfect characters, yet Zoe in her films wants to unpack the humanities of Latina characters. Humanities are about imperfections and embracing them as well as allowing the audience to create empathy. How as a filmmaker are you not allowed to talk about the complexities of a human being? Being narrowed down to a small box of what you can write especially in a story about the Latinx community generalizes us.

Don't be afraid to dive into a character's soul and focus on that or drop the term Latinx because it is a double-edged sword. Even though it is a way to unite us, the term can generalize us into a group that is so complex and we should celebrate these complexities. For a young filmmaker, don't say "I want to write a Latinx film," but go deeper into what it means to be Latinx. People will connect more with specificity than with something generalized. We underestimate our audiences — when you consume TV, you can feel when someone has an agenda behind the content, you can feel when the content is curated to please people, but you can also see when a filmmaker's voice is genuine.

As Latinx filmmakers, you should not fear that the Latinx community will approve of your work because of the bad light you might represent the community in. As viewers and Latinx, we should celebrate all stories even the bad light that our community gets shined on through the story that other Latinx filmmaker paint, because it will allow us to reveal more about the complexities within the community and destroy the generalized image the media has associated us with

In the media, the term Latinx, inclusion, and representation get thrown around, but the Latinx community needs to not accept these terms just as. Inclusion and representation should be the baseline for the film industry, it should not be something that needs to be asked or strived for. When there is a rising Latinx star or rising Latinx story, as a community, we feel seen, which we should, but we should not stop there because it does not save or solve our community's problem. There will just continue to be a lack of representation and inclusion in the film industry. We need complex filmmaking and complex stories; however, it should not only be stories that represent the best of us but all of us.

As artists, we should reconfigure the meaning of success because in this society we value fame, money, and power. All of this gets lost when we make art — we should do things for ourselves because it comes from a place where it needs to come out, from you. You need to tell your story. Your most authentic one. Everyone will benefit from the wealth of storytelling.

Cafecito Chat #3: Cafecito Chat con Jessie Fuentes y Carlos Ruiz

September 1, 2022

Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rY76luIQ9Ks>

In this third episode of *Cafecito Chat* with Jessie Fuentes and Carlos Ruiz, they tackle “The Power of Storytelling” and the question, “How will you tell your story to future generations?” Carlos Ruiz is a writer, producer, and director who has been making art for over two decades. He has been making award-winning content since 2001. He studied filmmaking in Chicago, where he learned about cinema from countries worldwide, such as Argentina and Spain. Ruiz’s medium contains films, documentaries, web series, commercials, and music videos. Ruiz has also worked in groups on the development of fresh ideas of content for clients like Coca-Cola, Direct T.V., T-Mobile, and McDonald's. Ruiz’s first film he created was a film called *Paperball*, which told the story of a kid running around San Germán, Puerto Rico, with a ball. In 2007, his film *Maldeamores* premiered at the Tribeca Film Festival and received a positive reception.

Carlos Ruiz was raised in the theater because his mother worked there. At age fourteen, his brother took him to a film festival, and he watched a Cuban movie that impacted his life. The Cuban movie was about poverty and how this family could still be happy in a poor financial situation. This is when it clicked for Ruiz because he realized that we see this duality in Latinx countries. After all, issues like poverty are prevalent in Latinx countries, and happiness can still be seen all around. This duality is what Ruiz wanted to showcase in his art. He was also inspired by the film classes he took in Chicago because they taught him that he could travel to Puerto Rico. Also, he could tell a story from Puerto Rico that can be as beautiful as those told in Argentinian and Spanish cinema.

Storytelling is an essential thing in life. Carlos Ruiz states that we tell stories all the time, but how we tell stories can make a difference in what is considered popular because they are a legacy of our story. Additionally, he goes on to say that as a storyteller, your stories must come from the heart because that is what allows people to form a connection with it. Ruiz states that a story that has impacted him is the story of Desi Arnaz. Arnaz wrote his autobiography about his life as a Latino in America and the difficulty it brought. What stuck to Ruiz and has driven his art is this idea from Arnaz's autobiography that if you can dream it, you can make it happen, but you need to find the tools. Ruiz also states that storytelling does not come from the outside but the inside, our hearts; we just need to learn the ways to make it entertaining. Latinx people need to learn these tools because the media has always been dominated by white male voices that have misrepresented the Latinx culture. Carlos is aware that Latinos have been put into a box, but the Latino community is aware that we are different and have different stories to tell. Ruiz encourages the Latinx creators to use their voices to tell a story that is authentic to them because there will be so many people that can relate to it worldwide.

Cafecito Chat #2: Cafecito con Flaco Navaja y Eli Vazquez

August 16, 2022

Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YdE8kdZ9I3U>

Recap

For this second episode of *Cafecito Chat*, Flaco Navaja and Eli Vazquez tackle the steps in making a film and what the process looks like. Flaco Navaja is an actor, poet, singer, and activist, and Eli Vazquez is a writer, director, entrepreneur, digital storyteller, and a proud Afro-Mexi-Rican. Vazquez is a former producer for BuzzFeed's Latinx digital production, *Pero Like*, and the founder and CEO of the production company *Hype Media House*. Also, Vazquez has a social media-brand coaching program, *Self-Hype*, and is a recent Netflix and Los Angeles Latino International Film Festival fellow. This fellow included nine other filmmakers, and they were given 20,000 dollars and six months to make a film, which premiered at the Chinese Theater.

As an artist, Vazquez aims to create inclusive stories that have never been told before. Vazquez grew up with many indie 2000s films such as *The Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* and *Lost in Translation*. He also grew up with directors like Edgar Wright, Wes Anderson, Robert Rodriguez, and Quentin Tarantino, but this is not what inspired him. Vazquez did not see himself in these films; he understood the human experiences told in these stories, but this is not what he experienced personally. Instead, he admires filmmakers from diverse backgrounds who tell stories like his, such as Jordan Peele and Taika Waititi.

Eli Vazquez went to film school, but he states that he learned more outside his classes than within. He believed there was no room for growth or mistakes in film school and that he was not given the liberty he wanted when making his art. What he did gain from film school were the connections he made there. He still speaks to many of his schoolmates and continues working with them. As an artist, there is always a starting point; for Eli, it was his first ever T.V. class. Vazquez always knew he was a creative person, but he was just shy. He embraced the opportunity when he took a T.V. class at his new school. The first video he made for this class was a music video to *Ch-Check It Out* by the Beastie Boys. The music video involved them dressing up as *Ghostbusters* characters and saving a girl from a demon. Vazquez described the process as stressful, but from that day on, he knew that making films was for him.

Flaco and Eli discuss the steps that making a film entails and the hardships that come from it. From a director's perspective, Vazquez tells the viewers that no film will ever go as planned and that even blockbuster films must plan for the worst. Vazquez states that as a director, you must plan for the worst-case scenario and every scenario possible. As a director, you do not want to be overwhelmed or too stressed, as that will change the dynamic of the crew team and stress them out. Vazquez retells a story about when he made his film *Quince Til' Infinity* which came out in 2022. The film is about two kids who escape a quinceañera, steal a car, and raise havoc in Los Angeles. He had planned to film at a park in Los Angeles with the landscape as the background, and they had been prepping it for a while. However, days before the shoot, they were told they could no longer film at this location because a Dodgers game was occurring, so they had to switch everything around. Vazquez wants young filmmakers to know that no one cares about

your film as much as you do. You must take care of everything, your team is there to support you, and you must make sure everyone on your team is making the same movies.

The film industry is a complex one that no one can deny. The lack of representation for Latinx communities is a hurdle that Latinx people must overcome, and Vazquez knows that. Vazquez states that we are in the best era to be a creator of color, but we are still so far from where we need to be. It takes accountability from everyone, on every level, and we must make everything more accessible than before. The Latinx community should understand that there should be no competition, and we must let go of our egos and support each other blindly. That's why Eli Vazquez does what he does. He wants to advise young filmmakers and content creators so that the Latinx community can thrive. People like Pete Corona, an executive at Netflix, are doing so by granting opportunities for Latinx creators, which is what Eli Vazquez was able to take part in.

Cafecito Chat #1: Cafecito con Caridad de la Luz y Paloma Sierra

June 30, 2022

Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5XRbWtEY5U0>

In the first episode of *Cafecito Chat*, we have Caridad De Luz with Paloma Sierra, the winner of *¡Tú Cuentas! Cine Youth Festival 2021*. Paloma Sierra is Puerto Rican originally from Cataño who specializes in writing, translating, and filmmaking. However, she currently resides in San Juan, Puerto Rico. Sierra graduated from Carnegie Mellon University with an MFA in dramatic writing and a BHA in creative writing and drama. Currently, she attends La Universidad de Buenos Aires. Sierra takes part in an all-girl emerging Poet Laureate of Allegheny County.

In 2021, Sierra entered the *¡Tú Cuentas! Cine Youth Festival* with her short film titled, *I Am Soil Breaking Off*, also known as *Soy Tierra Desgajandome*. *I Am Soil Breaking Off* is a three-minute and twenty-seven-second short film animated by Andrew Edwards. It is recited in Spanish and subtitled in English. Sierra has been working on this film on and off for four years. Many of her influences come from a Puerto Rican style of poetry called Decimas and Jibaros, which is musically based. These styles of poetry-making are flexible and can be improvised but are usually meant to be sung. By using this style of poetry, Sierra is incorporating her Latina culture into her writing, allowing Latinx countries to connect with her art.

Paloma's process in creating *I Am Soil Breaking Off* comes from a more extensive project that she later translated into her award-winning film. The poetry has three verses involved; the first talks about identity and how nationality is rooted in the land. The last verse combats this idea and argues that nationality does not have to be rooted in the land itself. Sierra did intensive research when it came to understanding the Puerto Rican experience. She did that through reading material on the Latino experience like reading *La Carreta* and *In the Heights*, both of which are considered plays. Sierra's process also included interviewing Puerto Ricans about their identity. The origin of her poetry started as one verse, but she realized that it was heavy with metaphors

and feared it would not translate the way she wanted it to. With the help of Andrew Edwards, the animation part of her film helped tell the story because it allowed viewers to see specific messages that Sierra believed they could have missed.

Throughout the interview, Sierra praises the film as a medium for poetry because she could add visuals to her words. Paloma Sierra has a different perspective on how to showcase her poetry; however, it is a tribute to her Puerto Rican influences.