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Building *Precious Knowledge*: An Interview with Documentary Filmmaker Eren Isabel McGinnis

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Eren Isabel McGinnis and Ari Luis Palos (see Figure 1) have been telling distinctive ethnic stories for well over a decade. Partners in the Tucson, Arizona-based film company Dos Vatos Productions (McGinnis produces and does sound; Palos shoots and directs), the two make documentaries and shorts that bring local color, human complexity, and a keen sense of historical context to the kind of urgent social issues—immigration, race relations, and public education—that are too often misunderstood or oversimplified in contemporary discourse.



Figure 1: Ari Palos and Eren McGinnis on location at the Catedral Santo Domingo, Oaxaca, Mexico. Photo by Kirsten Waa Earley.

One of their earliest collaborations, *Beyond the Border* (2001), movingly chronicles the struggles of four Mexican immigrant brothers to make a living in the Kentucky Bluegrass region while coping with cultural barriers, homesickness, alcoholism, and the potential erosion of their Mexican

identity. In *The Spirituals* (2007), Palos and McGinnis examine the history and vitality of African American spirituals through the performances of a choral ensemble whose majestic renditions of slave songs help keep the music alive. Shot in a poetic visual style and rooted in a concrete sense of place—be it Lexington, Oaxaca, or their current home base of Tucson—Dos Vatos's films “give voice,” as McGinnis puts it, “to communities often silenced or stereotyped by mainstream media.” In doing so, they affirm the vibrant but unheralded contributions of Latino Americans and African Americans to the cultural heritage of the United States.

In their rich and varied body of work, their current project—*Precious Knowledge*, a documentary about the fight to save the embattled Ethnic Studies program in Arizona's Tucson Unified School District—may be their most politically urgent film to date. Filmed at Tucson High Magnet School during the 2008-09 school year as the controversy over Ethnic Studies began to reach a fever pitch, *Precious Knowledge* details the dramatic efforts of students, teachers, and community activists to prevent state legislators from gutting Mexican American (*Raza*) Studies at Tucson High and shutting down Ethnic Studies across the state. (At this writing, a legal effort is underway to challenge House Bill 2281, the legislation that was signed into law last May by Arizona governor Jan Brewer that calls for a ban on K-12 Ethnic Studies classes in the state's public and charter schools.) While much of the public face of the controversy has been dominated by opportunistic politicians who condemn Ethnic Studies as reverse-racist or anti-American without bothering to understand its true aims, *Precious Knowledge* takes us inside classes at Tucson High to capture lives transformed by a socially conscious curriculum. We meet flesh-and-blood students whose words and actions testify to the role Mexican American Studies has played in helping to reduce dropout rates among Chicano high schoolers and to equip the students with the personal agency and critical self-awareness to become productive citizens in their communities.

As McGinnis and Palos neared completion of *Precious Knowledge* last fall (the film is slated to air nationally on PBS in 2011), I interviewed McGinnis about the film and her work. McGinnis earned her BA in Anthropology from San Diego State University and a certificate in film and video theory and production from University College, Dublin. In addition to her Dos Vatos projects, she has also made several documentaries as one half of Café Sisters Productions, a collaboration with director Christine Fugate that has yielded, among other films, the PBS *POV* documentary *Tobacco Blues* (1998). In our interview, conducted over e-mail in October and November 2010, McGinnis reflects on the challenges of making

Precious Knowledge; the role that her own Mexican-Irish-American background has played in the movies she makes; and some of the intricacies of telling socially relevant stories through the medium of documentary film.

Andrew Sargent: How did you and Ari originally come up with the idea to make *Precious Knowledge*?

Eren McGinnis: I met Sean Arce, Director of Mexican American Studies in the Tucson Unified School District, at a National Association of Latino Arts and Culture (NALAC) mini-conference in Tucson in April 2008. Sean is impressive, being a former San Jose State University football player, and moves with a lot of grace. It was an amazing conference filled with a lot of funk and flavor, performance artists, indigenous hip-hop musicians, Chicano muralists, and local people mingling with Latino artists from all over the US. Sean told us that the state government was on a mission to shut down Ethnic Studies programs at the high school, community college, and university level. Ari and I had also been shooting Tucson High School students at the May Day/immigrant rights marches over the years and already knew the high school students were badass, being very involved in activism and engaging in the political process. This clicked as an important story immediately. My son Max is also a student at Tucson High School, so I knew about the Arizona public school system as a parent. We started shooting a month after meeting Sean.

AS: Could you explain to *MELUS* readers what *Precious Knowledge* is most centrally about?

EM: The documentary illustrates what motivates Tucson High School students and teachers to form the front line of what is, at its core, an epic civil rights battle. While 54 percent of Mexican American students currently drop out of high school nationwide, Tucson High's Mexican American Studies Program has become a national model of educational success, with 100 percent of enrolled students graduating from high school and 85 percent going on to attend college. However, Arizona lawmakers are trying to shut Ethnic Studies classes down, because they believe the students are being indoctrinated with a dangerous ideology that embraces destructive ethnic chauvinism.

AS: Why do you feel it's important to tell this story now, given what has pretty clearly been a rightward turn in the country's current political climate?

EM: President Obama was elected while we were shooting [during the 2008-09 academic year], and we could feel a sense of excitement in the classroom. For the Latino and African American students, and even the other students, too, the election provided a sense of hope and possibility as questions of race and identity were being discussed in the classes. At the same time, Obama's election also seemed to renew a sense of fear, ignorance, and racism in the state and the country, and the students in these classes have been deeply affected by this "anti-Latino" climate. We want to tell their story.

AS: What does the title "Precious Knowledge" refer to, exactly?

EM: The Mexican Studies teachers at Tucson High School use ancient Mayan tenets to remind the students of who they are and also where they've come from, all with the goal of developing a proud Mexican American community within the school. The students learn how to use these Mayan tenets as a guide to live their lives. They're encouraged to self-reflect (Tezcatlipoca), seek out precious and beautiful knowledge (Quetzalcoatl), begin to act (Huitzilopochtli), and ultimately transform (Xipe Totec). The documentary is about "Quetzalcoatl/Precious Knowledge" and the fight to have access to it. These tenets are in Nahuatl, a language that has been spoken in Central Mexico since the seventh century, was used by the Aztecs, and is still used by 1.5 million people in Mexico. They are a reminder to the students that their ancestors are indigenous to this continent and that the students are not "outsiders" or invaders. So one of the first steps of the students' process is to embrace their own ethnic identity, to love themselves, and to love and respect others.

Our film shows that there are a lot of myths out there about what the classes are actually about, and that politicians will make up things or focus on one negative aspect, while ignoring or dismissing the classes' overwhelmingly positive benefits. The lawmakers also tend to overlook the obstacles that prevent Latino youth from graduating from high school. This can be something as simple as being the first person in your family to go to college. If that's your situation, there's a lot to figure out! Some of the students we show in the film have parents who left school at thirteen to work to support their families.

AS: One of the most memorable images in the *Precious Knowledge* footage I've seen is the students' ceremonial run from Tucson to Phoenix (see Figure 2). Can you explain what this run was all about?



Figure 2: Ethnic Studies students participate in a ceremonial run in support of their classes. Photo by Eren McGinnis.

EM: As one effort to save the Ethnic Studies program, the students and their teachers did a traditional ceremonial relay run from Tucson to Phoenix (a distance of 110 miles), during the hottest month of the summer of 2008 (it was 113 degrees!). This run was done with the support of the local Native American and African American communities and was rooted in historical indigenous traditions that take the energy and the momentum of the runners to create healing and positive change in the community, one neighborhood at a time.

AS: What was that like to film?

EM: Hard. It was unbelievably hot and we were constantly in motion. It was a two-day run and the runners ran in “packs” with two or more students running. On the first day of the run, the students ran from 5:00 a.m. to midnight! But what I remember most is that the spirit and intent of the run was incredibly powerful, and the run did end up helping to save the Ethnic Studies program for another year. I still marvel at what happened those two days. A group of high school students and teachers *ran* from Tucson to Phoenix to show the world how much they love their Ethnic Studies classes.

AS: You and Ari have established a pretty impressive track record of socially conscious filmmaking. Would you say that *Precious Knowledge* is your most overtly political film? How do you see *Precious Knowledge* fitting into your body of work as a whole?

EM: Well, I made another documentary, many years ago, called *Tobacco Blues*, which aired on the PBS series *POV*. It focuses on tobacco farmers and their efforts to save their family farms. These farmers are unique in the sense that a family can make a living farming just five acres of tobacco, in an era when most farms are monstrous in size. The farmers we filmed were trying to figure out how to stay in the farming business, and some were supplementing their income by growing and selling organic vegetables in addition to their core crop of tobacco. At first, it didn't make any sense to me, this combination of tobacco and organic vegetables. But after I learned more about the farmers, I was able to see how much they valued the farming life. To me, *Tobacco Blues* and *Precious Knowledge* share a heightened sense of the political because they illustrate the process of people—be they tobacco farmers, students, or teachers—being forced to engage in the political process in order to hold on to what is dear to them.

AS: I'm glad you said that, because "holding on to what is dear" feels to me like a recurring theme in nearly all of Dos Vatos's films. I'm thinking of the vital but endangered African American oral tradition in *The Spirituals*, the Ayala brothers' native Mexican culture in *Beyond the Border*, even the landmark downtown movie palace in *The Kentucky Theatre* (2003). All of these films examine how ordinary individuals and communities struggle to preserve a unique form of culture that, due to larger political and economic forces, is threatened with extinction. Do you see your documentaries as ethnographic preservation efforts of sorts? If so, what's interesting to you about this struggle?

EM: We appreciate the craft of old things, and we value the stories of people, cultures, histories. When a beautiful and well-crafted building is torn down to build a parking lot or when spirituals are forgotten, these things are tragic, and tragedy is one of the building blocks of dramatic story structure, particularly if you're a filmmaker. Our documentaries are about topics or issues we want to know more about, and we just hope the audience will share our curiosity.

AS: You tell these stories through the medium of film—high definition video, to be exact—whereas most of the artists discussed in *MELUS* are

writers. What do you see as the advantages of storytelling on film rather than through, say, the novel, short story, or print journalism? What are the limitations, or the challenges, of working with film?

EM: I'm inspired by writers all the time. Writers put in the hard work and research that provides a foundation and structure for our visual medium. A great short story, novel, or print journalism is often what inspires a filmmaker to pursue a project. In another sense, Ari and I also work with text (writing) and the visual (either digital video or photography), and, ideally, these elements work together to support the film itself. For example, when I'm writing about our documentaries in the fundraising stage, I need to convey in words precisely what the viewer will see in the film and try to make the film come alive on a visual and emotional level. But it's hard to do this before you start shooting or even while you're shooting, because you don't always know what's going to happen. We always know the basic story structure and themes, but we can't anticipate all those intricate and interesting details, since they haven't happened yet. So sometimes I'm able to accomplish this, but many times I'm not. Writing about our films is a lot easier to do once we've finished shooting.

We also want our still photography to support the story and themes of the documentary, and we use a lot of stills on the Web. Ari shoots most of our stills, because we usually can't afford to hire a professional photographer while we're filming our documentaries. We also have plans in the coming months to do an artistic photo shoot with the "women" of *Precious Knowledge*. I have a lot of traditional, hand-embroidered clothes from Mexico, and we want the photos to invoke the style of Frida Kahlo, again illustrating how Mexican culture has infused our Chicano culture and in turn benefits our US culture. I am in awe of the incandescent beauty of the students in our film—not just their real physical beauty, but also the fire and passion that comes from being leaders in a social justice movement.

AS: Do you think it's fair to say that stories told on film can potentially have a greater political impact than those told in other mediums?

EM: Yes, they can, but the context has to be right for that impact to take place. Television can have an impact, and PBS does have a huge audience. But I also think that a lot of positive political change happens through screenings on university campuses and at high schools and community groups. These are ways that a documentary can help bring awareness and inspire action. It's not surprising that our Arizona lawmakers want

to expand their Ethnic Studies ban to the university level. One lawmaker said, “This [the university] is where all this dangerous ideology starts.” So, yes, a good documentary can be a part of a movement to create social change, but the change won’t happen unless people screen it and share it.

AS: One thing you get from film, too, is the ability to capture people *in performance*, which seems to me to be one of the signature features of a Dos Vatos film. I’m thinking of the traditional Mexican dancers in the high school gymnasium in *Precious Knowledge*; the elderly Mexican marimba players in your short film *Bola de Oro* (2004); and, of course, the gorgeous singing of Everett McCorvey’s American Spiritual Ensemble in *The Spirituals*. As filmmakers, what draws you to performance? What are you trying to capture when you shoot a performer in action?

EM: It’s exciting to film performance and to bask in the presence of talent. It also helps with the rhythm and texture of a documentary, making it a more pleasurable experience for the audience. It’s spectacular to hear twenty-six opera singers performing together, especially of the American Spiritual Ensemble caliber. That said, film can’t really capture the full experience of a live performance. We spend a lot of time trying to figure out how to bring the magic of a live performance to the screen, and it’s not easy.

AS: You also clearly work hard to capture teachers in performance. As a literature professor, I enjoyed the footage from *Precious Knowledge* where we see Ethnic Studies teachers in action, particularly [Mexican American Studies teacher] Curtis Acosta’s class on Latin America’s magical realist writers. How hard is it to capture on film the “magic” that happens inside a dynamic classroom without falling into the trap of reinforcing the movie-made myth that learning only happens when students are lucky enough to have charismatic/heroic teachers?

EM: We focus on two teachers in *Precious Knowledge*. One is the wildly charismatic Mr. Acosta and the other is the more subtly powerful Mr. Gonzalez. Their teaching styles and personalities are completely different; however, they’ve been trained to use techniques that can be used by anyone. One of the goals of *Precious Knowledge* is not to mythologize or mystify great teaching, but instead to provide an examination of what Mr. Acosta and Mr. Gonzales do, why they do it, and how they do it—their purpose and their process. Our film illustrates critically compassionate intellectualism—a model that includes a counterhegemonic curriculum, a

pedagogy based on the theories of Paulo Freire, and student-teacher interactions centered on authentic caring. For Latino students, these components create both a Latino academic identity and an enhanced level of academic achievement.

After we finish this documentary, we have some ambitious plans to create a Web site for teachers and students with lesson plans to democratize the tools of social justice research and knowledge creation. We want to reach out to academics, teachers, and students to make this web site really useful. We'll need a lot of help with this part, since the goals of this Web-based project go way beyond our skills, knowledge, or experience. Perhaps your readership can help us!

AS: I know that many will be eager to help. As teachers and scholars of multi-ethnic literature, *MELUS* readers understand the urgency of these issues and the value of critical pedagogy. I think it is also affirming to see that politically engaged teachers can use the resources of ethnic literature to awaken students' minds to be critically aware of the world around them. By the way, I saw in the online clips from *Precious Knowledge* that Mr. Acosta teaches Shakespeare and Sandra Cisneros in his literature class, as well as the Latin American magical realists. Who are some of your favorite writers? Is magical realism part of your world?

EM: I love reading Jorge Luis Borges, Gabriel García Márquez, and Sandra Cisneros (I loved *Caramelo!*). Too, the Irish Mexican cultural history of my family includes embracing what I call the magical real world. Like many cultures, we have magic in our everyday lives. Dead friends and relatives regularly visit; we always travel with Saint Christopher; and *La Llorona* (the Crying Woman) walks slowly down by the river at night, crying for her dead children. Ari and I lived in the tropics of Mexico (Oaxaca) for a year and loved it, because everything was so fragrant and alive. For example, I learned that fresh basil is not just used to make pesto. Small business owners will have clumps of fresh basil on the counter to bring in good fortune and to ward off the evil eye. I was also told that you can brush a crying baby with fresh basil to release whatever is bothering the child and stop the crying.

Our short film *Kit Kat* (2001) [about a young girl who explores the streets of Oaxaca City on a quest to save her father's soul] also incorporates the magical real world. For example, when Kit Kat asks her grandmother why she is tying red ribbons around her aloe plants, the grandmother explains that this is done to ward off evil spirits. Her grandmother has signaled that something dreadful is about to happen. Or when Kit Kat

visits a fortuneteller in the market as a way to seek out information, the fortuneteller works with a canary. When Ari and I lived in Oaxaca, we would see all of these interesting details and want to incorporate them into Kit Kat's journey.

But to go back to your original question about writers . . . I like to read all kinds of literature, and have enjoyed the work of (for example) Cyprian Ekwensi, Cormac McCarthy, William Butler Yeats, and many others. Right now, I read *The New Yorker* very late at night, and I'm looking forward to reading some novels when we are finished with *Precious Knowledge*.

AS: Who are the filmmakers whose work has inspired you?

EM: I am a huge film buff and watch a lot of films as a part of my continuing education. We have a local art-house cinema in Tucson called The Loft that I frequent regularly, since I enjoy the "cinema/audience" experience. I'm also an organizer of the annual Tucson Cine Mexico, an excellent and unique Mexican Film Festival here. We bring in the best of Mexican film and filmmakers every March. I'm also a heavy Netflix user, and my tastes skew toward foreign film. I enjoy the work of Werner Herzog, Michael Moore, Kar Wai Wong, Mira Nair, Fatih Akin, Lucrecia Martel, and many others.

AS: How did you first get into filmmaking?

EM: My gringo grandfather (I am Irish Mexican) worked in the motion picture business. He was a special effects man, and I always had a desire or dream to work in the "family business." My grandfather was very glamorous to me . . . tall, handsome, built contraptions with his hands, and found a way to combine work and travel. He worked with a lot of the greats, including Dennis Hopper (who was indeed the wild man you might imagine), and went to Chinchero, Peru, for a few months to work on Hopper's *The Last Movie* (1971). Grandpa returned with some cool gifts, beautiful photographs, and big tales. He said that everyone on the plane to Peru enjoyed a "contact high" because the cast and crew were smoking so much herb! He absolutely did not approve of that, but was never very judgmental; he was more interested in the nuts and bolts of making a "picture," which is what he called a movie.

I was also born in Hollywood, where everyone works in the "business" in some form or fashion. I used to go on location with my grandfather, and I once spent a month in Cuernavaca while he worked on a movie. I thought I would enjoy working in the art department, or help design the "look" of the film. I went to college at San Diego State University, and, at that time,

they did not have a film or video production department, so I ended up getting a degree in Cultural Anthropology, mainly because I found the courses to be the most interesting. And then I moved with my boyfriend, a college professor, from San Diego to Lexington, Kentucky. I had to give up my idea of being an Art Director since I could never find work, and I ended up becoming a documentary filmmaker after meeting another young filmmaker, Christine Fugate, at a café in Lexington. We formed Café Sisters Productions and made four PBS films together, including *Tobacco Blues*. Christine had already made some movies, and she became (and still is) a mentor, best friend, and inspiration to me.

AS: How and when did you and Ari become collaborators in *Dos Vatos*?

EM: While working on *Tobacco Blues*, I needed a shooter. Ari had just moved from Oklahoma, which is where he is from, to Lexington, and I hired him the first day he was in town. We drove to Brandenburg, Kentucky, and spent the day on a tobacco farm filming [African American farmers] Bill and Mattie Mack, who star in *Tobacco Blues*. Ari was quiet, calm, competent, and good looking, which impressed me. He later ended up shooting one of my favorite scenes in *Tobacco Blues*, the annual tobacco-cutting contest, where the most talented workers compete to see who can cut several rows of tobacco the fastest. They cut hundreds of six-foot-tall, twenty-pound tobacco plants with a razor-sharp tobacco axe, and then spike the tobacco stalks on an even sharper stick. The plants are covered in a nicotine-rich oily excretion that absorbs into your skin. This is the work the farmers and the workers do during the tobacco harvest, and it's extremely difficult and dangerous work. Ari brought a sense of fun and excitement to this scene, and I saw immediately that he was talented and hardworking.

AS: Could you explain the role that your own (and Ari's own) Mexican American heritage has played in the kind of films you make?

EM: Both of our fathers are *Mexicano* and we have a deep reverence and love of all things Mexican! We also had the extreme privilege of working on different documentary projects in Oaxaca for two and a half years. We did the postproduction on *Beyond the Border* (2000-2001) while living and working in the capital of Oaxaca, and I had a 2003-2004 Fulbright to work on film projects in a fishing village called Juchitán. My dream is to eventually live in an adobe house in Mexico filled with flowers, friends, family, and citrus trees.

AS: How far back do you trace your Mexican roots?

EM: My great grandfather, Gustavus McGinnis, was from El Paso, Texas, and lived there during a time when there was not really a border between the US and Mexico. He had always felt more comfortable in Mexico, became Gustavo McGinnis, and lived in Casas Grandes, Mexico, for most of his life. His son, my Mexican grandfather (not the movie-making grandfather), came to the US when my father was a child, and so the journey of a Mexican “immigrant” family was an important part of my own story. Too, the Irish are revered and honored in Mexico because they came to the aid of the Mexicans during the Mexican-American war.

AS: I’d like to ask you about the nuts-and-bolts *process* of making a documentary like *Precious Knowledge*. I read that you spent an entire academic year shooting in the classrooms at Tucson High. Do you start with an outline and know in advance which “characters” you want to build the film around?

EM: We are very organized, and we usually nail down the structure of the documentary on paper or in a grant proposal before we start shooting. The film medium calls for this kind of structure—otherwise, you do end up shooting too much. With *Precious Knowledge*, though, we had to shoot more than we normally do because we were trying to capture the pedagogy of the classroom, which required us to spend a lot of time *in* the classroom. But most often, if you shoot first and then try to “find” the film in the editing process (rather than while you are shooting), your editor will end up hating you and probably won’t work with you again.

Additionally, the structure and themes of the film should be encapsulated in each shot, which also demands that you know what you’re doing before you start shooting. For example, one of the stars of *Precious Knowledge*, Pricila, is a runner, and she runs in South Tucson, which is a hub of Chicano culture and is filled with beautiful ceramic and painted murals depicting the heroes of Mexican American history. So we often filmed her against that backdrop. And, yes, we usually do know in advance the characters we’ll be working with, because characters are usually found while you’re doing research, and, in some cases, are even what inspire you to begin shooting in the first place.

AS: What qualities do you look for when you build a film around an individual person—as you do with Pricila in *Precious Knowledge*, or, say, Marcelo Ayala in *Beyond the Border*?

EM: I think almost every person has a good story, but not everyone is able or would want to be the star of a documentary. We have enough experience to know a good doc character, but it's always a good idea to film someone first to see how their presence comes across on the screen. It's difficult to be relaxed in front of a big camera, heavy tripod, and lights, and to be wired with a microphone and have a large shotgun microphone shoved in your face. The equipment can be very intimidating. Some people can be compelling or "be themselves" in front of a camera, and others cannot.

AS: How do you gain such personal access to your subjects' lives? How do you get them to trust you so that they open up on camera? Some of the scenes in your movies are almost painfully emotional.

EM: We are "community filmmakers," which means we usually do our long-form projects with people in our community, our neighborhood, or people who are our friends. To gain this kind of trust, you need to be very clear about your intentions and what you hope to accomplish in the documentary. I am a very intuitive person and have a lot of trust in the unspoken part of communicating. A large part of our process is also just putting in the time, like an anthropologist. One of my favorite examples of this process came during the filming of the emotional climax of *Precious Knowledge*. It was the last day of class, and the teachers did a talking circle where the students just let it all out. The students were crying; I was recording audio and crying. I still find this scene, even after multiple viewings in the editing room, to be very powerful. This happens because the students and teachers, after we've spent a year with them, do feel very comfortable with us. At that point, we were not documentary filmmakers but rather a part of the class. This footage is *golden*. You could never get this footage without putting in the time and also having a pure intent in your heart. Your characters can intuit what's going on within you, too.

AS: Do you feel that it's necessary to have this kind of emotional involvement in the lives of your characters in order to make a successful documentary? I think there's an idea that a documentary filmmaker should be detached, or at least distanced from his/her subjects. But you and Ari reject this model.

EM: Yes, we do reject the detachment, because it would be extremely difficult to detach from people you've been working with for such a long time. It's not our style at all to be detached.

AS: Do you ever return to your subjects after you've finished a film? After watching *Beyond the Border* and being so moved by it, I wanted to know how the Ayala brothers—Marcelo, Horacio, Gonzalo, and Juan—are doing now, a decade later. Would you and Ari ever consider doing a sequel to *Beyond the Border*, if the subjects were willing?

EM: We keep in touch with all of the people in our movies, and they become a part of our film family. We saw the Ayala brothers the last time we were in Kentucky. Marcelo did an academic panel with us, and it was nice to see how he had grown older and to hear news of his family. As a documentary filmmaker, you spend *so* much time with the people in your movies (mainly on a computer screen), and the finished film becomes this frozen historic memory, so it's sometimes weird to see the subjects in different contexts and "alive" beyond the film. Because we're intense observers, we get to know our subjects well. But I would have to say that . . . we would find it hard to revisit a movie. So much time and effort goes into making a film that we are happy to preserve it and then move on to new movies and fresh obsessions.

AS: I'd like to ask you about the look of your films. Your films are visually distinctive—beautiful, even—in their use of color and landscape. And yet they also feel almost improvisational and off-the-cuff, as if you just happened upon a particular location. How do you achieve your films' beauty while maintaining such a spontaneous feel?

EM: This is Ari's area of expertise. He puts a huge amount of mental effort into the look of our work. I think cinematographers get better with age as their skill continues to grow. Shooting documentaries is a constant scramble to stay in front of the action, and what Ari does is not easy. With the action sequences of our work, he shoots a few steps ahead of the action so the viewer is not just an observer, but becomes a participant in the scene unfolding. Ari has developed several shooting techniques through trial and error, such as shooting from the back of his car (an old and reliable Toyota 4Runner). During the run from Tucson to Phoenix in *Precious Knowledge*, for example, Ari would shoot from the back of the vehicle and the driver would have to try to time the driving to the speed of the runner. This footage is special, because it combines the movement of the run, the grace of the student runners, and the fantastical beauty of the Arizona landscape. He does a tremendous amount of preproduction and takes his inspiration from great cinematographers such as Vittorio Storaro, Gabriel Figueroa, Néstor Almendros, and Christopher Doyle.

As for locations, we shot *Kit Kat*, for example, after having lived in Oaxaca for a year, and by the time Ari shot it, he knew exactly where he wanted to go. However, with *The Spirituals*, we were at the location in Alabama [a farm near Montgomery] and it just happened to have this surreal, million-dollar foggy mist on the day of our shoot. We wanted to shoot some impressionistic sequences of slaves rather than try to do reenactments, which usually end up looking pretty fake in documentaries. The goal was to remind the audience of where the spirituals come from, and the mist worked perfectly. As a rule, we strive to make the visual elements surrounding our characters be supportive of the themes and story. In *Precious Knowledge*, we wanted to show the beauty and contributions of Mexican and Chicano culture and illustrate how Mexican and Chicano culture is a part of our American story, so we tried to shoot everything with a subtext of this aesthetic. One way we did this was to have kids dancing in a folkloric troupe with traditional Mexican costumes, or playing music with the Tucson High School Mariachis.

The same thing holds for our on-camera interviews, too; we want the visual elements to support the story. We've shot a lot of interviews and have a ton of experience, and we believe that interviews should look good. In *Precious Knowledge* Ari went for some interesting interview setups with a lot of complexity and visual depth in the classroom. This would be accomplished by waiting for the 4:00 p.m. sunlight to stream through the windows, setting up some lights, moving the classroom chairs around, and placing the student in the middle of the class so that the viewer can see the depth of what is behind the student. For example, Mr. Acosta has his students redecorate his classroom each year with artwork, collages, posters, and photographs of the heroes of our social justice movements so that they feel like the class is their own space. The classroom carries the energy of the students, and they feel comfortable in this dynamic space. We wanted to capture that.

AS: Another distinctive element in your films is the use of music—not only as the subject matter of several of your movies (e.g., *The Spirituals*, *Impresario* [2001], and *The Kentucky Theatre*), but also as a part of the soundtrack of your films. How do you choose the music for your movies?

EM: My parents have wonderful taste in music, and the soundtrack of my youth was heavy with mariachi classics. Ari is constantly in search of our next documentary soundtrack and does a lot of research on our music choices. We like working with the musicians and composers directly, and hate working with music publishing companies—the latter is just too diffi-

cult, time-consuming, and expensive. For example, Marcelo in *Beyond the Border* sings 34 seconds of a song that is owned by EMI Music Publishing, and it has cost us thousands of dollars over the years to license this music. It's much easier and more pleasant to work with a composer or musicians who work independently, and I would much rather pay the artists/creators of the music for their work than have to pay a big corporation.

AS: A standout scene in which all of these elements—sound, image, camera setup, etc.—come together is the last minute or two of *Beyond the Border*, with Marcelo riding in the back of the pickup truck. That scene moved me deeply, to tears. Could you describe this scene and explain what you and Ari were trying to accomplish?

EM: A lot of people have commented on that scene. We were out on a horse farm in Kentucky with Marcelo, against a backdrop of rolling green hills and split-rail fences. Marcelo was working, and Ari thought it would be nice to have movement in the shot, so Ari just jumped in the back of the truck with him and started shooting. As if on cue, two thoroughbred race horses began to run in the distance, just over Marcelo's shoulder! I remember Ari telling me that he had just filmed the big last shot of the film, although at that time we were not finished. Our superb editor, Jacob Bricca, who is an Adjunct Assistant Professor of Film Studies at Wesleyan University, found the perfect music (Will Oldham on acoustic guitar), and this was combined with the voice-over of Marcelo reading a letter that he had written to his parents and sisters back in Mexico. It's also significant that this is the first and only time in the film that we use music that's not Mexican; we did this to signal Marcelo beginning his life in the US.

AS: I have another question related to your filmmaking method, this time circling back to *Precious Knowledge*. How do you find the right balance between advocacy and documentary in a film like *Precious Knowledge* that seeks to intervene in a public controversy? Do you see your role in *Precious Knowledge* as documenting a debate with two equal sides or advocating for one side of that debate?

EM: We wanted to make a film that provides a space for the students themselves to speak on this controversy. The students and their voices are often left out of the public discourse, and we've found that audiences are hungry to hear what the students have to say. The politicians always seem to get the coverage, and our lawmakers in Arizona are especially provocative. Part of the Mexican American Studies pedagogy is the idea that "we are all students and we are all teachers," and I think the high school stu-

dents have a lot to teach the audience. No, we were never interested in doing two “equal sides,” because we have a firm belief in providing a space for a counternarrative—i.e., the voice of Latino youth—rather than politicians who find it hard to stray from their talking points.

AS: Part of the reason I ask that question is that your project description for *Precious Knowledge* emphasizes that the film will be “much more than an advocacy story about at-risk youth beating the odds and graduating from high school. This is a complex story of the intersection of politics and education, illustrating the grey areas of a civil rights movement and the different layers of the Ethnic Studies controversy.” How did you achieve that complexity while trying to make a film that argues for the rich and lasting value of Mexican American Studies in the lives of disadvantaged Latino public high school students?

EM: You are right: this is a lot to fit in a movie! It has also been a challenge to find the balance between the issue (the students fighting to save their classes), the pedagogy, the classes, and the individual stories of the students. We try to have a personal or individual story humanize a large and complicated issue. And we work closely with our editor, Jacob, who works hard to achieve this sense of balance and structure.

AS: Part of the film’s balancing act also entails giving at least some airtime to the legislators and their anti-Ethnic Studies position. How obligated did you feel to acknowledge their views, given that they’re arguably poorly informed and often just plain disingenuous?

EM: The lawmakers express their views in our documentary so that we can show what the students are up against and also illustrate what’s actually going on in Arizona. When we first started pitching the show to raise money for the project, people outside of the state did not believe us! They did not believe that there was a focused political campaign to ban Ethnic Studies. It just seemed too outrageous, too racist. It was not until things blew up in Arizona this summer with the anti-immigrant legislation that people finally started to believe. It is very discouraging. The lawmakers are wearing down the students and teachers. However, the more they [the lawmakers] push, the more energized the community becomes. It takes a Bull Connor to mobilize a civil rights movement.¹

AS: Is Tom Horne your Bull Connor? As we speak, he just won his bid to become Arizona’s new Attorney General. [Horne served for eight years as State Superintendent for Public Instruction and led the public campaign against Ethnic Studies.]

EM: We have several Bull Connors in our state, and they seem to bolster and encourage each other with their policies. Plus, only about 1.5 million people voted in our last election (November 2010), and the Bull Connors were able to win a lot of the close races. That means that about half the voters in Arizona are siding with Bull Connor, and half are not.

AS: What kind of pushback, if any, have you gotten from people who don't support *Precious Knowledge* or the point of view it takes? I ask because I know that you're still in the process of obtaining funding to complete the film. Do you think the financial challenges are always there no matter what film you're making, or is *Precious Knowledge* somehow harder than usual?

EM: This has been the most challenging movie we've ever been involved with. We've had to deal with every criticism that those who support Ethnic Studies have faced. We've heard, "If you give the Mexicans a class, then you'll have to give the Laotians a class! Where will it end?" "Why not just make it [Mexican history] a chapter, rather than a whole book?!" "The kids should be studying the 'classics' and not be reading Sherman Alexie or Luis Valdez!" Of course we didn't know how "controversial" the concept of Ethnic Studies is before we started this project. ITVS [the International Television Service, a funder of independent documentaries for TV] and Latino Public Broadcasting (LPB) did believe in our documentary and have provided us with partial funding; however, we are still trying to raise our finishing funds, which we hope will provide us with a living wage.

AS: Whom do you see as the primary audience for your films?

EM: PBS is our main audience, and, for an independent filmmaker, it is a *huge* audience. The Corporation for Public Broadcasting funds culturally diverse programming and supports LPB, which has been absolutely vital in serving the Latino community and nurturing Latino filmmakers. However, our industry is changing rapidly, and a lot of our work will be available digitally, making it viewable any time, any place, anywhere, and this opens a huge new market for us. And we do have a following in Mexico, especially in the state of Oaxaca.

AS: What do you hope will happen once *Precious Knowledge* airs nationally in 2011? You wrote in the original project description that you want the film to "contribute to a national dialogue concerning race, identity, and ethnicity."

EM: We hope the movie educates our audience and inspires people to vote. We want to bring attention to the horrible dropout rate for Mexican American youth and other youth of color (more than 50% of Mexican Americans drop out of high school in the US) and to provide hope that with creative curriculums, a kid on the way to dropping out can become reengaged in education. We also see our movie as a part of the effort to recognize the value of Ethnic Studies classes. We hope the classes do not become a forbidden curriculum. The Tucson 11 [a group of instructors and community leaders who are currently mounting a legal challenge to the state's ban on Ethnic Studies programs] need the support of the nation just as the Civil Rights activists needed help in the 1960s when they were fighting racism and ignorance.

AS: So in a way, *Precious Knowledge* could become a part of the story it is telling—the film might help the cause of saving Ethnic Studies.

EM: I really don't know what's going to happen. But, yes, I do hope the documentary helps save the classes. I hope our movie will be a part of the larger effort, because until our Bull Connors get voted out, it will continue to be a struggle.

AS: What is next for Dos Vatos Productions? Do you ever worry that you'll run out of ideas for new films, or is there always something fresh in the pipeline?

EM: We have more ideas for movies than we have years left in our lives. The ideas are the easy part! Right now we have several projects in development. One focuses on a group of entrepreneurial Oaxacans who live in San Diego, California, and Ayoquezco, Oaxaca, who are trying to stop the tide of migration out of Mexico. The women in Oaxaca grow and can nopales, the prickly pear cactus. They also prepare a sublime chocolate and the famous *mole* of Oaxaca, and then sell them in Mexico. But the immigrant men in the US are trying to figure out a way to sell these specially prepared goods in the US, too, in the hope that, eventually, the men can stay in Ayoquezco and not have to come to the US to work. We like this project because it has the potential to please everyone in the polarizing immigration debate.

I also want to do a fun fictional project with the street dogs of Mar del Plata, Argentina, the happiest dogs in the world. Although they live in the street, they are not wild or feral, but look and behave even better than extremely well-behaved pets. For example, at crosswalks, they wait for

the green pedestrian light and politely cross busy streets alongside people. And people don't treat them like a nuisance, but greet the dogs as good friends as they pass by. We want to film the dogs in their actual habitat and voice it over with an imagined story. We'll record the voice-over into several languages, because dogs have fans all over the world.

And finally, I want to make a "magical real" movie about my Mexican grandfather, who was a beloved family member with a big story. He was a dashing young pilot who found love, *mole*, and Pancho Villa while working at the Hearst Hacienda in Chihuahua, Mexico. I'll use my grandfather's memoirs to tell the story of his life. When my grandfather was a teenager, his older sister Pilar was scorned by a love interest. She became an ascetic and lived in a cave for three months to practice strict spiritual discipline and show her devotion to God. Pilar made a vow of chastity and never married. When I was growing up, my grandfather would drive to Chihuahua every summer to pay Aunt Pilar's taxes.

AS: So how can our readers lend support to *Precious Knowledge* right now if they want to?

EM: They can visit our Web site, www.dosvatos.com, and purchase one of our movies, or, even better, recommend that their university libraries purchase one of our films to use in their classes. All of the proceeds of our DVD sales will help us finish *Precious Knowledge* and make it possible for us to keep on making movies. Or you could invite us to screen *Precious Knowledge* at your university. We love meeting and exchanging ideas with faculty, students, and community members, because the screenings are a key part of educating and inspiring action.

AS: I want to wish you good luck, and thanks.

EM: Thank you for taking the time to watch our movies and being part of the effort to save Ethnic Studies. Your support means a lot to us in Tucson. I will say farewell with an old Yaqui expression that I discovered in my Grandfather's memoirs:

*Deseo que el camino que tienes
Para viajar será contento.*

I hope that the path you have to travel is joyful.

Note

1. Eugene “Bull” Connor was the notoriously racist Public Safety Commissioner in Birmingham, Alabama. In 1963 he ordered the use of fire hoses and dogs on Martin Luther King, Jr., and supporters who marched to protest segregation.

Selected Filmography**Dos Vatos Productions: Eren Isabel McGinnis (Producer) and Ari Luis Palos (Director)**

Al Garete/Adrift. Fictional short. A young woman from Juchitán, Oaxaca plans a journey to the United States to seek a better future. In the final hours before her departure, she opts to be seduced by the powers of her hometown. Partial funding from the Fulbright Scholarship Board, the Paul Robeson Fund for Independent Production, the Kentucky Arts Council, and the Kentucky Foundation for Women. 22 minutes. 2006.

The Beauty Salon. Fictional short. A young child bakes a cake and gets a haircut for the first time. Super 8 mm short employs Judith Butler’s concept of performativity to undermine preconceived notions of male and female. 6 minutes. 1997.

Beyond the Border. Documentary. Follows Marcelo Ayala and his brothers, recently arrived from México, as they find their way culturally and economically in Kentucky. Coproduction of Dos Vatos Productions and Kentucky Educational Television, Independent Television Service, and Latino Public Broadcasting. Additional funding provided by the Kentucky Humanities Council, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Kentucky Oral History Commission, the Kentucky Arts Council, the Hugh M. Hefner Foundation, and Lexington Partners for Youth. 56 minutes. 2001.

Bola de Oro/Ball of Gold. Documentary. Investigates the unique musical heritage of the Isthmus of Oaxaca, Mexico. Partial funding from the Fulbright Scholarship Board, the Paul Robeson Fund for Independent Production, the Kentucky Arts Council, and the Kentucky Foundation for Women. 9 minutes. 2004.

Day of the Dead in Teotitlán del Valle. Documentary. Captures the color and emotion of the annual Day of the Dead celebration in the Mexican village of Teotitlán del Valle, as residents beckon Zapotec spirits back to the pueblo to enjoy tamales, mescal, and other sensory favorites of their living life. 12 minutes. 2001.

Dos Vatos México. A collection of mystical fiction and ethnographic films inspired by the beauty and indigenous magic of Oaxaca. Includes *Day of the Dead in Teotitlán del Valle*, *Bola de Oro/Ball of Gold*, *Kit Kat*, and *Guigu Bicunisa/The Otter River*. 50 minutes. 2010.

Guigu Bicunisa/The Otter River. Documentary. Mixed-media ecological video promotes conservation of Juchitán's sacred river. Produced in association with the Foro Ecológica de Juchitán, an environmental NGO. 14 minutes. 2004.

Impresario. Documentary. Examines the creative process of African American opera star Everett McCorvey as he stages Mozart's *Don Giovanni* and nurtures young talent. Partial funding provided by Kentucky Educational Television's Fund for Independent Production, the Kentucky Humanities Council, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Kentucky Arts Council, and the Lexington Area Chamber of Commerce. 28 minutes. 2002.

The Kentucky Theatre. Documentary. Recounts the life and history of a landmark movie palace in downtown Lexington, Kentucky. Partial funding provided by Kentucky Educational Television's Fund for Independent Production, the Kentucky Humanities Council, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Kentucky Arts Council, the Kentucky Oral History Commission, and the Lexington Area Chamber of Commerce. 28 minutes. 2003.

Kit Kat. Fictional short. A young girl embarks on a quest to save her father's soul amid the beauty and magic of Oaxaca, México. 14 minutes. 2001.

Mi Otro Yo. Documentary short. Features high school students in Arizona taking part in the political process during the 2008 election season. Produced for WGBH/Boston and *POV*. 5 minutes. 2008. <http://lab.wgbh.org/open-call/election2008/final/mi-otro-yo>

Precious Knowledge. Documentary. Chronicles the experiences of Latino/a high school students in Tucson, Arizona who, with the help of charismatic teachers and a rigorous Ethnic Studies curriculum, complete high school and realize their dreams to go to college, even as a threatened ban on Ethnic Studies inspires them to fight for their classes. Partial funding provided by Arizona Public Media/KUAT, the Independent Television Service, and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. In postproduction. 75 minutes. 2011.

The Spirituals. Documentary. Traces the birth and development of African American spirituals from slavery to the Civil Rights era, with present-day performances by the American Spiritual Ensemble. Funding provided by the Independent Television Service, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, and Kentucky Educational Television's Fund for Independent Production. 26 minutes. 2007.

Café Sisters Productions: Eren Isabel McGinnis (Producer) and Christine Fugate (Director)

Tobacco Blues. Documentary. Follows four tobacco-farming families in Kentucky as they struggle to maintain their small farms and their way of life amid the increasing demonization of tobacco and corporatization of the industry. Narrated by Harry Dean Stanton. Funded by the 1996 Station-Independent Partnership Production Fund, ITVS, the National Educational Telecommunications Association, Kentucky Educational Television, the Kentucky Foundation for Women, and the Kentucky Humanities Council. 55 minutes. 1998.

Eren Isabel McGinnis (erenmcginnis@hotmail.com) has produced nineteen movies, including *POV's Tobacco Blues*, *The Girl Next Door* (shortlisted for an Oscar), *Mas Allá de la Frontera/Beyond the Border*, *The Spirituals*, and *Dos Vatos-México*. McGinnis has a degree in Cultural Anthropology from San Diego State University and a certificate in Film and Video Theory and Production from University College in Dublin, Ireland. A Fulbright scholar, McGinnis spent a year living, writing, and filmmaking in Juchitán, México.

Ari Luis Palos (aripalos@gmail.com) has directed and shot a number of films, including *The Beauty Salon*, *Mas Allá de la Frontera/Beyond the Border*, *Impresario*, *The Kentucky Theatre*, *El Rio de los Perros/The River of the Dogs*, *Al Garetel/Adrift*, *Corazón del Plata/Heart of Silver*, and *The Spirituals*. Palos enjoys participating in Tucson's All Soul's Procession, a performance art extravaganza, where he transforms into a dead vaquero to mourn and celebrate loved ones who have passed.