



Why Loira Limbal Spotlights Invisible People in Her New Film

When she read about a 24-hour daycare center, the producer and director knew it would become the heart of her next verité film. Filmed over two years, “Through the Night” offers an emotionally searing portrait of the unpaid, often invisible work of motherhood and caregiving, and a masterclass on intimate storytelling.

Alicia Menendez:

Director and producer Loira Limbal knows the power of showing rather than telling. Her newest verité film, *Through the Night*, follows three working moms whose lives all intersect at a 24-hour daycare center. It is a compelling portrait of the care economy and the love and strength that is demanded of working moms.

Loira, thank you so much for doing this.

Loira Limbal: It’s my pleasure. Thank you for having me.

Menendez: I watched the doc. I loved it. I cried. I think this entire pandemic has just brought into focus what moms are up against, what caretakers are up against, the amount that we rely on our caretakers in order to build our own careers, so I don’t know that this documentary could have come at a better time.

Limbal: Thank you, first of all, for the kind words. It means a lot. It does, it really does. You have to think. I haven’t seen the film with audiences. We were supposed to premiere at Tribeca last April, and Tribeca was cancelled, so I have yet to see the film with an audience, so every time someone shares their thoughts about the film, I’m like holding onto that feedback for dear life, because it’s all I have to go on. And yeah, in terms of the timing, it’s just sort of ironic, and serendipitous, all the things combined, because we started working on the film in 2016. So, it really was long before COVID. We were wanting to highlight the importance of the people in the film, their lives, their labor, because it was already overlooked and undervalued, and then with the pandemic it’s just really laid all of it bare for everyone to see.

Menendez: Take me back to the moment when you said, “Okay, this 24-hour daycare center, this has to be the nexus of my next documentary.”

Limbal: So, I learned about Dee’s Tots, the daycare in the film, through an article that I read. I’m a mother myself. I have two children and I’m part of several mothers’ groups online and things like that, and someone shared an article that was looking at the fact that people in the U.S. increasingly have to work more than one job to make ends meet, that many times those jobs require overnight hours, or irregular hours, and then pulls you in the question of given that reality, who looks after people’s children? There was a lot of statistics and then there was a bit about the daycare providers and some of the parents who rely on them for care.

And as I was reading their stories, it immediately brought me back to my childhood in a very visceral way, because my mother was also a caregiver. She worked as a home health aid and she worked the night shift. She worked from 8:00 PM to 8:00 AM and raised four kids in New York City on minimum wage. I'm the oldest, so at a really young age I became her right hand. I think a lot of her struggles, I was hyper aware of from very young, and marked me in a lot of different ways.

And so, in reading these folks' stories, it was this kind of feeling of recognizing and seeing your own story, or a bit of your story, in the lives of people that you haven't even met, and that creates a real sense of connection. And subsequently I thought about the fact that I'm now 42, so things really have not changed, and this is like a 30-plus-year difference from when my mother was raising me to today, and sitting with that and just being angered by that, and then as a filmmaker, really feeling like part of the reason that things don't change is because you sort of can't change what you can't see, and what you can't name, and these stories are very invisible in our mainstream. And there's a way in which I think feminist spaces often miss the experiences of low-income and working-class women of color, and then the labor movement and labor conversations miss the experiences of that very same population, and we fall in this gap. We fall through these cracks, you know?

So, that's what I sort of became obsessed with telling the story and sharing first with the community itself, to have a depiction or portrait of itself, but also with the world beyond.

Menendez: I love any project that begins with an obsession. *Through the Night* follows the lives of three moms. Their lives intersect at this daycare. So, you had to engage several people about being a part of the film in order to make it work. What did that look like and how do you convince someone that they want to be a part of something like this?

Limbal: So, part of my ethos as a filmmaker is that I don't ever want to convince anyone. I approach people and share what my vision is and share what is driving that vision and what my intentions are, highest hopes, some of the fears, and then make the proposal. Do you want to join it? And part of what was beautiful about working on this film was that in many ways, it really felt like a true collaboration because Nunu, who is in many ways the heart of the film, was very clear around why she wanted to participate in this. Marisol, who is one of the mothers in the film, also was clear, and Shanona, as well.

So, they were active and enthusiastic participants, which is the kind of projects that I need to work on. I don't like to feel like I'm cajoling or convincing folks to share their stories with me. Because it's so delicate. You're asking people to open the doors to their homes, their lives, their children. It's something I don't take lightly.

Menendez: How do you earn that trust?

Limbal: Part of my process is spending time with folks before bringing cameras into a space, and also sharing about myself in personal sort of terms, as well. I think about as a filmmaker, a documentary filmmaker, you're often asking people to share intimate details of their lives with you. And I think there is a power dynamic. Obviously, for you as a filmmaker, you're coming in with a camera, and particularly when you're working with communities that are underrepresented or misrepresented, and part of the way that I like to at least address that power dynamic is sharing back some of the intimate details of my life, which in this case had a lot to do with why I was obsessed to begin with.

There's my mother's story, but there's also my own experience of being a single working mother of two children, and grappling with a lot of things, and I think there was a part of me that really needed to bear witness to the experiences of other mothers who I see as myself, as my community, as my sisters. To bear witness to their experience to sort of make sense of my own.

Menendez: It's the first moment in the film when I cried, which was watching just a mom and her kids go down the stairs, and one kid trips, and they're in a rush, and they have to sit there and cuddle the kid, but the other kid wants to be cuddled. You know, and it's like it is such a universal experience of being a mom who's just totally exhausted, has nothing left to give. At that exact moment, there's a mini crisis and everyone needs you to be at 110%. My heart just broke for her because I was like, "I have so many more resources at my disposal and I still know that deep, deep core exhaustion of having nothing left to give and having to find it."

Limbal: Absolutely. And I think this is part of on a kind of deeper level some of what I was interested in making visible. You know, one of my questions that I've had about my mother, but I have it about a lot of women and mothers in my life, is precisely what you're saying. Like how do you give when you're running on empty? You know, where do you draw from? Where do we draw from? And some way, somehow, we continue to give, and nurture, right? With flaws, and no one is perfect, obviously, but some way, somehow, so many mothers are still able to pour out even when there's nothing being poured in.

And that was part of the question because I think there is a way in which our conversation about motherhood and mothering in the United States, it's very reduced and very sanitized. I would say that's changing over time, but there's so much about this experience that's perhaps one of the most complex, sacred, universal, all the things, right? All the big adjectives that you could think of, parts of the human experience, but because of sexism, and patriarchy, and all of the things, it's been reduced, and sanitized, and kind of dismissed. And then we're all left individually to grapple and struggle with whatever we're confronted with, and we feel like we have to do that on our own, in private, quietly, because to say anything is to be open to judgment, and criticism, and then all the shame, and all the guilt that comes along with that.

And so, there was a part of me too that wanted to surface that. For someone like Shanona, who is a nurse, who works the night shift in the pediatric ER, and as a single mother. There's a part in the film where she says, "I feel guilty. I'm exhausted. I don't know what rest is. I don't when that happens or when people get it. And I feel guilty because even though I'm with my children during the daytime, I really can't give them as much of myself as I would like to." And these things I think are important to surface and make visible because there's so many mothers in that same position who are walking around with all of that guilt, and that guilt turning into shame, when in reality they're doing the best that they can.

They're not struggling because of some sort of personal shortcoming or personal failure. They're struggling because it's hard, because our system is inhumane and very cruel. And there is not support for working families, not for mothers, and certainly not for single mothers, you know?

Menendez: I want to ask you a few more questions about filmmaking itself. I had a conversation with Cristina Constantini, who's also a documentarian. She did the doc about Walter Mercado

and she talked about how verité is hard because you are around, and some days you get something amazing, and some days people are just living their lives, and nothing is quite popping. And in her case, of course, she was with Walter Mercado, so he kept mugging for the camera and performing for her, but I think that happens even a little bit with people who aren't performers, right? That when there is a camera around, there is a desire to perform. How do you make yourself as unobtrusive as possible? How do you make sure that you are not with your presence changing the dynamic of what is happening in the room?

Limbal: I think part of the way to be unobtrusive in my case was keeping our crew small. So, it was typically myself, and one cameraperson, sometimes the sound person, and that was it. And we tried to distribute ourselves throughout the space as best we could. But also understanding that there's always a natural period of people adjusting to the camera. And in a space like the daycare, because there is this really critical thing happening, which is caregiving, the kind of the attention, and the interruption that the cameras and the equipment cause does dissipate, because people eventually have to get back to what they're doing.

Menendez: My understanding is it took four years to make the film. I think it's hard if you haven't done this to wrap your mind how four years goes into 90 minutes worth of product, so can you walk me through what was happening over the course of those years?

Limbal: One huge thing I would say for documentary films, part of what takes so long is fundraising. It's not necessarily that you're producing, and editing, and actually making the things the whole time. A lot of the time gets spent applying for grants, or applying for things, or pitching, waiting to hear back, getting rejections, doing it again, and so that's a huge part of the process for documentaries if it's a truly independent sort of passion project, if it's not commissioned by an entity that's coming in with a full budget. So, that's one part of it, which is probably at least half of the time is that.

And then the other half of the time when you're making a verité film is that for me, it's important to meet protagonists at whatever point I meet them, and then follow them over time to allow for the natural change and growth that happens in everyone's lives. And also, for me to get kind of perspective on the story that I'm telling. So, you come in with your original premise and the things that excite you, then you have to confront the reality like Cristina said of what is actually happening in people's lives, and then you have to sort of adjust. Sometimes you have to let things sit and marinate, then you have to pivot.

For us, because time was perhaps the scarcest resource in everyone's lives, both the protagonists' and my own, so in our case, we shot about 21 or 22 days over the course of four years, and because time was such a kind of scarce resource in everyone's lives, both the protagonists' and my own, because I was making a film while I was working my full-time job, my kind of 9:00 to 5:00, and raising my kids. I sometimes joke that I made this film on my third shift and that's... I named my company 3rd Shift Media. We were sort of really deliberate on when we would shoot.

You know, so we shot on days like the first day of school, for example, because as a parent, I know that there's chaos always on the first day of school. Holidays, because for obvious reasons, if you're a parent who is working throughout the holidays, there's obviously things that come up that would speak to the main themes that I wanted to address. So, there was that piece of being very deliberate about when we shot.

And then there was the edit, which we sort of started, we would stop, we would start again. All in all, that's how you end up with a four-year process.

Menendez: You studied history at Brown. You're a graduate of the Third World Newsreel Film and Video Production training program. But how did you really become a filmmaker?

Limbal: I became a filmmaker over time. I worked on one film. I codirected a film called *Estilo Hip Hop* in the early... We started working on it in the early 2000s and finished around 2008. And I started working on that film with no real training or any experience, and my codirector didn't have experience, either. It was a story that we found ourselves immersed in and that once again really spoke to us in this way that was undeniable, and we couldn't kind of ignore it. There are these ideas and these things that you try to talk yourself out of doing and they won't leave you alone. And that was the case with *Estilo Hip Hop*. Passionate about culture, and music, and hip hop, and I was living in Brazil, and my codirector was from Chile, and the hip hop movements in Latin America and the Caribbean were so strong and vibrant that we felt like this was the story that we absolutely had to tell.

I jumped into it and in the process of making that film I realized I really enjoyed documentary filmmaking. So, when I finished, I needed a job. I needed some stability. I needed some health insurance. I had some health issues. So, there was an opening at my job, which is my full-time job now, which is Firelight Media. There was an opening for an office manager. And I was like, "This is perfect, because I'll have a regular paycheck, I'll have health insurance, and I'll be learning and working alongside some of the most amazing and prolific documentary filmmakers of color in the United States."

And so, it was kind of the process of jumping into something that I was passionate about and then realizing like, "I really love this thing, and this is the space that I want to stay in."

Menendez: This is an industry, like almost in most of the industries that we talk about, that is just so opaque. So, I read all of these distinctions you have, like a Sundance Institute Warner Fellow, and a Ford Foundation JustFilms Rockwood Fellow. What do those things actually mean in your journey?

Limbal: Some of them come along with grants, right? So, they're like recognition that you're an important filmmaker, or your voice matters, and they want to support you via money. Other times, it's been fellowships that provide the recognition, and when I say recognition, it's like for the field and the rest of the industry to take note, and it's almost like providing you with a stamp of approval or some validity, like you matter and you're a filmmaker that other people should take note of, which obviously is really problematic, because they're gatekeepers and they're deciding whose stories and whose voices matter.

But you know, in my journey, it has meant that, and kind of every one thing that you get does end up opening other doors or coming along with other opportunities. The fellowships have also meant a space of community, and a space of creative rigor, which really has been invaluable. For example, with *Through the Night*, we went through... We were selected for the Sundance Documentary Edit Lab, and that's an experience that's really rigorous, and was really meaningful. You know, my editor, Malika Zouhali-Worrall and I, were able to spend nine days together on the Sundance Resort, in the mountains, with all of these amazing, super prolific, and experienced editors, looking at all of our projects, and workshopping things with us, and giving us master class. Those kinds of experiences are really invaluable in many ways.

Menendez: To say nothing of having nine days away from your children to focus on anything.

Limbal: Absolutely. Malika is also a mother. And for us, it was like we were working 10-hour days, but we felt like we were on vacation. You know? It's like because we could wake up by ourselves, go to the bathroom by yourself, shower, all of the things that are luxurious.

Menendez: I haven't gone to the bathroom by myself in four years. That in and of itself sounds like a vacation. You know, a lot of this stuff is very chicken and egg, like we can debate whether you need the training and institutional support to fund and create these projects, but so often that support is predicated on your having made or produced something, so how do you work around that? Do you have to put your own capital in at the beginning?

Limbal: It's a real issue because there isn't a lot of money or opportunities out there to support the process of developing a project, right? Like doing research and development. And so, for *Through the Night*, what I did was I negotiated a bartering reduced rate situation with the DP that I worked with in the beginning, and with the editor, and these were people that I knew, whose work, and I knew I wanted to work with them on the project long term, and I sort of said like, "If we could do this at this rate, then I will use what we create here, and use it to raise money, to raise the R&D money." To actually raise the research and development money.

But I had to do the research and development before I had... to even be able to get the R&D grants. Which is another huge problem because it means that you need to be able to do that.

Menendez: You said something profound. You put something a way that I had not thought about, which is that over the past few years we have seen so many images of children at the border being separated from their parents, being treated inhumanely, we've seen so much over policing of Black and Latino youth, that it was important to you to show children of color being cared for and loved by people of color. That punches right through in the film. I did wonder as you were producing this if you ever caught yourself producing for the white gaze and how you then caught yourself and corrected.

Limbal: I did not find myself thinking about the white gaze. I had names and faces of people that I was making the film for and they literally were like people that I know in real life from different parts of my life, and they were, and I was thinking about Nunu watching it, and Shanona watching it, and Mari watching it, and their kids watching the film, and my mother watching the film, and my best friend, who is also a nurse, watching the film. So, that's who I made the film for, really, like I literally had names and faces that I was thinking about. And that's part of the reason that I say I was trying to create a cinematic love letter to women of color.

And you know, that's not to say that everything is kind of rosy or romanticized. Obviously, people are struggling and up against quite a lot of difficulties and challenges. But I did want to create something that would allow these women, these people that I had in mind, that would allow them to see themselves the way that I see them. And I see them as like just amazing, and radical, and visionary, and to do the work that they do to be who they are and in the world that they live in, to me is nothing short of visionary, and radical, and subversive, you know?

Menendez: I'm so excited for the world to see this film. Loira, congratulations. It is exquisite and I can't wait to see what you do next.

Limbal: Thank you so much. Thank you so much. And thank you for having me. I've enjoyed this so much.

Menendez: Thank you for joining us. Latina to Latina is executive produced and owned by Juleyka Lantigua-Williams and me, Alicia Menendez. Paulina Velasco is our senior producer. Our lead producer is Cedric Wilson. Kojin Tashiro is our associate sound designer. Manuela Bedoya is our social media editor and ad ops lead. We love hearing from you when you email us at hola@latinatolatina.com, when you slide into our DMs on Instagram, when you tweet at us @LatinaToLatina. Remember to subscribe, follow us on RadioPublic, Apple Podcasts, Google Podcasts, wherever you're listening, and please, I know I ask this all the time, but do leave a review. It is one of the fastest, easiest ways to help us grow.

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