

FILM REVIEW:

Thresholds of Personal and Communal Violence

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Thresholds. Live action short film (7 minutes). Directed by Linda Garcia Merchant; written by Yovani Flores, Linda Garcia Merchant, and Evon Flores Barrera; performed by Yovani Flores, Brent Brown, Evon Flores Barrera and Jeffrey Rysiewicz. Las Pilonas Productions, 2011.

Yovani Flores (writer, actor), Linda Garcia Merchant (director), and Evon Flores Barrera (producer, writer, and actor), are the founders of Las Pilonas Productions, an independent company based in Phoenix, Arizona, dedicated to creating films that represent people of color, the queer community, and transborder migrant lives. Their debut work filmed in March 2011, *Thresholds*, has screened at the Reel Rasquache Art and Film Festival in Los Angeles, California; Dyke Delicious May Shorts in Chicago, Illinois; Media Arts & Literacy Institute (MALI) Film Festival in Austin, Texas; and most recently, the 2011 MALCS Summer Institute at California State University, Los Angeles.

Thresholds is a narrative film that explores the dynamics of racism and homophobia and what happens as they escalate. The seven-minute film explores both the physical and social thresholds that exist in our world. The story centers on Benny, an Afro-Latino student in high school “navigating the treacherous waters of ignorance and stereotypes when his identities clash with the expectations of those around him” (film blurb). From the very first scene, we see the depth of Benny’s humanity, illustrated by Benny’s care toward his mother, exemplified when he kisses her goodbye, and his aspirations to

be a good student and achieve the best education possible. Through such moments, the audience is positioned to wonder about the motive of the atrocious crime of Benny's murder, killed on his way to school.

The most obvious physical threshold depicted in the film is that of a doorway, the space that forms the bottom of an entrance or passage from one room to another. We pass through a threshold each time we enter or exit a house or room. Notably, Benny's mother, Nancy, never crosses the threshold of her house, not when she gives Benny a textbook that he forgot on his way to school and not when she speaks with the female detective who comes to tell her the news of his death. Similarly, Detective Gomez makes no move to enter the house or to console the grieving mother. Neither one crosses into the other's world, even though it is clear that they know each other. Nancy greets the detective in Spanish, Gomez refers to Nancy's son by his full name, "Benjamin," and simply says, "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry." With this, Nancy clearly understands what has happened to her son. The relationship between Nancy and Detective Gomez is conveyed by the brevity of this exchange and precisely suggests their emotional intimacy because so much of the encounter is without words. After hearing about her son, Nancy makes no move toward Gomez for comfort; in fact, she steps back, toward her house, her place of safety. Her world is in her home, where she can control what happens. Recalling an earlier moment, when Benny returns to pick up the textbook he has forgotten, Nancy holds on to his backpack, trying to keep him with her, within safety. She cannot and will not cross the threshold into the world that would kill her son.

Society creates not just physical barriers, but also social ones. Along with Gomez, there is another detective, O'Brien, assigned to the homicide case. O'Brien's first reaction is one of disbelief when he hears that the "black male"

who was killed was taking AP calculus. Gomez counters, but O'Brien persists with his stereotype, replying, "Yeah, right, sure." Even before he learns the boy's identity, he instantly dismisses the fact that Benny could be both smart and black. By accepting the stereotype that society has created about young people of color, O'Brien creates another threshold for students like Benny to overcome. When Gomez asks about suspects, O'Brien retorts, "You know how it is, they won't point fingers in *this* neighborhood." His prejudice against people of color only amplifies the already existing threshold. This is not just any doorstep made of wood or metal, but one constructed from histories of prejudice and hate that separates O'Brien from the neighborhood community. Unlike O'Brien, Gomez possesses a level of insight and sensitivity about community that allows her to see the tragedy that has occurred. She understands that Benny's life crossed many thresholds.

Adding to the horror of O'Brien's bigotry is the type of weapon that killed Benny. We see a knife tossed onto the ground, bloody to the hilt. Instead of a pocketknife or a switchblade, it is an easily recognized as a kitchen knife meant to cut fruits and vegetables or to slice meat. We do not typically define a kitchen knife as a weapon, but rather an everyday tool of the domestic. This makes the crime read as personal and intimate rather than impersonal and random, the knife removed from the domestic space where it is used for making food—something that brings people together—and exported to the social space where it is used to enact violence and tear people apart. With O'Brien's character, the film signals the borders created by racism. The borders created by homophobia are signaled in the visual details of the crime scene, especially the final shot of Benny, lying on the ground, a bloody stain on his shirt; the camera follows his arm, and we see a rainbow bracelet.

When Gomez tells Nancy of her son's death, the devastated mother responds by yelling, "Mentira!" Her outcry of "Lies!" expresses outrage over both the news of Benny's death and the failure of the American Dream, the myth of entitlement to freedom and the idea that effort equals opportunity. For Nancy, this dream has become a nightmare. Her son was a good student, staying up late to study for his finals, working hard to get into AP calculus, yet he was still killed. Instead of finding freedom and liberty, the film suggests he encountered racial bigotry, homophobia, and injustice. Education provided Benny a means to cross one threshold, but he was violently stopped before he could fully enter larger spaces of discovery.

Thresholds conveys an emotional message with which everyone can connect. As a high school student, this film moved me deeply, and I believe it to be a wonderful way to show an audience the horrors of violence, racism, bigotry, and homophobia. We must stop creating these barriers that hold people back. Everyone should be able to open the door of opportunity and cross the threshold. My viewing of the film in Los Angeles was informed by the context of the current trial of Brandon McInerney for the 2008 killing of fellow student Larry King, who was openly gay and cross-dressing. McInerney felt his view of the world threatened by King and is reported for having said that he could not stand being humiliated by King's flirtations. As in *Thresholds*, both weapons came from the home. The film left me asking some important questions: Where do young people learn—and unlearn—the lessons of racism and homophobia? What different lessons are found in domestic and national spaces?