

# Rosa-Linda Fregoso

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**Rosa-Linda Fregoso** is Professor and Chair of the Latin American and Latino Studies Department at the University of California, Santa Cruz. She received her PhD in Comparative Studies, Language, Society, and Culture from the University of California, San Diego. She is the author of *Lourdes Portillo: The Devil Never Sleeps and Other Films* and *The Bronze Screen: Chicana and Chicano Film Culture*. Her most recent book is *meXicana encounters: The Making of Social Identities on the Borderlands*.

**OSA:** Can you say your full name and when you were born?

**ROSA-LINDA:** Rosa-Linda Fregoso, and I was born in Corpus Christi, Texas in 1954.

**OSA:** You wrote one of the first books for, by, and about Chicanas. Can you talk about this experience? Do you draw from your own life in your writing?

**ROSA-LINDA:** I actually wrote the first full-length book on Chicano and Chicana cinema. Since then, there have been edited books, but I think I wrote the first one, and I wrote the first one from a feminist perspective as well. It was one of my areas in graduate school, but I didn't write my dissertation on Chicano film. I wrote my dissertation on telecommunications policy – the political economy of information systems.

But one of my areas was Chicano film. In my latest book, *meXicana Encounters: The Making of Social Identities on the Borderland*, I talk about how the project drew from my own life. The last chapter is called "Ghosts of a Mexican Past," and it talks about my family's history in the movie industry. My great uncle, *mi tio* Dan, was one of the first projectionists in Corpus Christi, and he worked in silent cinema. I tell that story of Mexicanos in *las vistas*, in movie industries in south Texas in the 1910s-1920s. I grew up with these stories about *mi tio* Dan and about my grandmother working with



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him on the projections, and about the warehouses with these crates where they would sit. The audience were all Mexicanos. My grandmother was really into U.S. movies, and she would talk about Mary Pickford, Clark Gable, all of the silent cinema stars...I grew up with that all around, so I was interested in the movies early on in my life. Also, my father was in media, he was a *locutor*, a radio announcer, in south Texas, and then he became news director of a Spanish-language station.

**OSA:** How do you think images of Chicanos and Chicanas in the media have changed over the years?

**ROSA-LINDA:** It's cyclical because there was a period in the 1930s when you had stars like Lupe Velez; she starred in B films, but she was the main character. There was also Dolores del Rio, who worked in Hollywood, there were many more actors. Now there are more Latino directors, and they are able to do more mainstream projects like Robert Rodriguez, Greg Nava. And Jennifer Lopez portrays a broad range of characters. I don't know what that means – there are more of us up on the screen, which I guess is important to some people. For me, inclusion is not the only issue. More is not necessarily better; I think it's what you do with that. I'm not sure there's a lot of progressive politics for social transformation just with more images up there.

**OSA:** What would more of an ideal film?

**ROSA-LINDA:** There are the feel good films that talk about the Latino/Latina and Chicano/Chicana contributions to U.S. history. It's important, it's about giving members of our communities more visibility in history and more protagonism in the making of the history of this country or in the cultural dimensions of this country. There are those kinds of films

that are important because they give groups visibility and counter the erasure of groups.

Although the country's self-image is as a nation of immigrants, the problem is this idea of a nation of immigrants is very racialized; it refers to "white immigrants." So the more that we get these stories out about the Chicano/Chicana experience that date back to the Native experience in this country, and more recently the Latino immigrants since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, I think it helps to correct that white racialized vision of this country. That's one aspect. I think that the second aspect is that our communities are still – and I include the more recent immigrants, but even second, third, fourth generation communities of color...I mean you just saw what happened with Katrina in New Orleans. People are really still suffering, and part of it has to do with institutional racism – that class and race are so coupled in this country. So, I would like more films that deal with those kinds of issues, that talk about those serious social problems. The documentarians take on those things, but you don't see it as much among the mainstream filmmakers like Rodriguez or Nava. I don't want to name the names, but the mainstream filmmakers are not taking on those big issues.

Now that you have Latino directors that have stepped into the "owner's box," perhaps they weren't able or willing to do it, but perhaps they can open the doors for other people to do it. I do think that there is a market. People are doing stuff for niche markets. You may not have a blockbuster, but you can have a film that will do the 3:1 return. You can make a film, and cheap is \$5 million, and get \$10 million or \$15 million back. It's not a blockbuster, but we're talking about building blocks. You can make films that give you a return. The U.S. is not the only market; you have Europe and Latin America, that have a

much bigger audience for these kind of art house films. I think repeating those same mantras: ‘they don’t make money’ is copping out.

Why can’t there be a Chicana lesbian film that is a good story? There’s an audience out there for it. Why can’t we do it? It won’t make the money *Superman* or *Spy Kids* did, but it will make a dent.

**OSA:** I’ve been thinking about ways to increase diversity education in the university system, and I thought a DVD would be a useful educational tool. How do you think we can best teach diversity and transcultural awareness in the schools? What are you working on now?

**ROSA-LINDA:** I think that would be great. I think there could be an audience for it, especially a lot of community colleges could use it, also multi-cultural curriculum. Alvina Quintana did this book on Latina writers; it’s now in the second edition. It’s been a big hit, so, yes, I think there would be an audience for that.

I’m doing research on sexual violence and human rights, similar to the work I did on Juarez, but extending it to other parts of the *Américas*. I’m looking into the way in which human rights get taken up by grass roots activists—how they work to change policies at home and make demands on national and local governments. I’m very interested in how human rights law gets used by grass roots groups. Also, how culture is very much part of the human rights project and the way culture is used by grassroots activists to raise public awareness. Like the film, *Señorita Extraviada*, which was important to groups that were mobilizing in Mexico on issues of sexual violence, feminicides.

**OSA:** Can you talk about how our local Chicana situation is or is not connected to

transnational feminism?

**ROSA-LINDA:** My work is framed by a transnational feminist analytics of culture, but one that departs from the current conceptual paradigm of “transnational feminism” particularly since “transnationalism” as it is currently formulated within the U.S.-based academic feminist community is actually a euphemism for feminism from far away places, mostly from South Asia or South East Asia, (i.e. postcolonial feminism) but curiously the citational practices of U.S.-based “transnational feminism” rarely refers to “Latin@ America nor the Latina diaspora, nor for that matter Chicana feminisms. That’s a very parochial view of transnationalism because the way the world operates now is no longer in those bi-national migratory flows. Migration is much more fluid and much more multi-sided. So those models, for me, are very limiting.

There’s a lot of work that Chicanas have been doing that is about the movements back and forth between global cities – what we could call the movements of space and the movements of scale within global cities and the movements between various points from the global South and the global North. There are also vertical and horizontal movements across Latino communities. There’s a lot of research by Chicanas and Latinas that involves rethinking nation-centered paradigms. So I think part of it is that marginalization, but at the same time I try to say, ‘Let’s get over it. Let’s just do the work. Name it a particular name, and that’s it.’ You can keep talking about how much we’re marginalized here and there, but let’s just intervene, be at those places, put our work out there and struggle at that level.

I think it is also about theory and practice. Part of it is what your own practice and politics are, but I think also



you can document the kinds of practice and politics that are going on in various communities and have your work be at the service of those various communities. Your research can be helpful to those communities as well. I think there are all these various levels. Chicano student nationalism for instance had a very limited view of the “community.” The belief was

that the community was out there and that those of us in the university weren’t a part of it. We were in the academy. This was limiting in many ways because even in the academy you are part of the community; you’re teaching people from the community who are going to be school teachers or journalists who will have an impact. So, as academics we need to

be aware that we are also in the trenches because we're training the young people who will return to the community and hopefully work for social justice. So I don't think you can bifurcate things that way – community is there, academia is here. Some people choose not to take teaching seriously and their work is more ivory tower, but most of us don't choose that path. Some of our research has application to community problems, like the work you're doing. If you're doing films, they may very well have an impact on community change and social justice issues. . . You don't only exist in the university; you exist in these multiple spaces at the same time. Sometimes you don't know what your impact is.

**OSA:** I'm so grateful to you, Rosa-Linda, for the work that you did, *The Bronze Screen*, and the work that you do. It was one of the first major things that made me realize, in a practical way, how important criticism is.

**ROSA-LINDA:** I've had several filmmakers tell me this. I didn't write the book just to get tenure but to document and analyze the work of a community of artists. I think of your work in the same way. Whomever you interview, whenever you show your films, those people's voices get out there. You're also helping, and never forget that. I try to tell younger scholars when they think 'I'm working in this community and I'm doing this research but how is it helping the community?' you can't even imagine just how important that research is because the truth is that you're entering centers of power. By publishing articles you are changing knowledge formations. Never underestimate the impact of your work for the community—however you define it.

**OSA:** I think dialogues and conversations are just as important as more traditional academic articles in terms of

communicating ideas, producing criticism. But, the academy doesn't really seem to value that form as much.

**ROSA-LINDA:** I guess because it's considered the data – it's like the raw materials. I think some schools do. Anthropology does, and there's a whole tradition in film studies of publishing interviews with filmmakers and with critics. I think you have to be really clear on what the purpose of it is.

**OSA:** And what about the future?

**ROSA-LINDA:** (Laughs) Oh, I don't want to talk about the future.

**OSA:** Ok, then let's talk about the present, and your chairperson duties at UC Santa Cruz.

**ROSA-LINDA:** I'm the chair of Latina-American and Latino Studies. I think we're unique in that we're a department that is really trying to go beyond the Latin American area studies model and the ethnic studies model and talk about the synergy between both. Recognizing that we live in a world where transnational migration and transnational media is a fact of everyday life. The global North/South flows are at all different levels. They're at the level of capital, the level of people, the level of media, of goods, and circulation. We're at the beginning of a paradigm shift in Latin American and Latino Studies. We're letting it happen. We have theorized about the limits of both Latino and Latin American Studies models. Now we're trying to think about how to conceptualize the synergism between both knowledge formations. This is our fourth year as a department, so are working on a big project, a proposal to get a PhD program and to hire more faculty. So that's the future there and I'm pretty excited about that.