



P.O.V.'s "CALAVERA HIGHWAY"

By Renee Tajima-Peña

Tuesday, Sept. 23, 2008 at 10 p.m. on PBS (Check local listings)

Filmmaker's Statement

The inspiration for **Calavera Highway** began at home, where I live with my husband, Armando Peña, and our son, Gabe. Years ago, I began to find yellow post-it notes and scraps of paper that Armando left around our house. He'd jot down names, birth years, places - a personal hieroglyphic of family chronology and speculation - as if he was trying to figure out his identity by decoding his family's past. Armando was also deeply connected to Juan Rulfo's classic magic realist novel, *Pedro Páramo*. In the story, the protagonist returns to the backwater town of Comala after the death of his mother, who has told him to claim what "belongs to you." There he searches for his father, Pedro Páramo, and encounters a society of ghosts, full of murmurs and gossip, in a haunting that is metaphor to Mexico's past in its transformation to modernity.

For Armando, the novel's off-kilter sensibility of phantasms linking past and present and the search for a father in a dusty ghost town, reminded him of his own imaginings of his family's legacy — one that is intricately tied to the ebb and flow of people across the border between Mexico and the U.S.. He compares his family's experience to that of generations of Mexican Americans, cut off from their roots and never feeling legitimate in either country.

I knew the outlines of his family's story, and had heard the speculation and rumors over the years. Armando was born in 1953 in the poverty-stricken Rio Grande Valley of South Texas. The man he knew to be his father, a migrant worker from Mexico named Pedro Peña, disappeared the next year in the midst of the U.S. government's massive deportation program, dubbed "Operation Wetback." Over a million Mexicans, including American citizens of Mexican descent were deported back to Mexico. Why did Pedro leave? Was it because of personal reasons, or was he caught up in the chaos of the deportation raids?

All of my films have, in some way, touched upon the dislocation of family and identity brought on by migration and the diaspora experience. I have been fascinated by the similarities, and differences, of Asian and Latino communities, which I have documented previously in the stories of Mexican and Vietnamese meatpackers and labor organizers. My own grandparents migrated from Japan to the U.S. as laborers, around the same time Armando's grandparents began crossing over from Mexico in the early 1900s. Like the Peña's, my family also endured displacement by U.S. government fiat. For us, it was being rounded up and incarcerated in Japanese American internment camps during World War II.

Although Armando was obsessed with his family's past, he always seemed reluctant to venture too deeply into the truth. Much was left unspoken in his family.

Although I urged him to look for Pedro, he would dismiss the idea: "Why bother? I never knew him; he doesn't mean anything to me." Yet there were his notes and chronologies, the incessant search through literature and history for illumination of his own story.

When his mother, Rosa, died, the past and present collided for Armando and his brothers. In the aftermath of her death, there were years of estrangement and arrests, births and regrets.

All the while, the brothers could not bring themselves to find a place for Rosa's ashes, and she was left in limbo at our house, amidst the post-it notes and questions. Ironically the brothers had chosen an urn in the likeness of a book, as if any answers to their family's story rested, and would be buried, with her.

When our son Gabe was born, Armando faced with becoming a father himself, and his family's unfinished business resurfaced. He contacted his brother Carlos, and asked him to help bring Rosa's ashes back home to Texas. They decided to use the journey to try to reunite with their brothers, and perhaps for Armando, answer some of the questions that had haunted him. Gabe and I joined them, along with our extended filmmaking family, Evangeline Griego, Jonathan Schell, and Sara Chin to document the journey. As it happened, while we filmed, the tide was turning once more against Mexican immigrants, as during the "Operation Wetback" days when Pedro disappeared. Everywhere, we were reminded of the fragility of family ties, when separated by the vagaries of borders and citizenship.

We called the film **Calavera Highway (Skeleton Highway)** because of the ever-present sense of ruins and ghosts, and public and private histories, along the way. But, like the traditional *calaveras* embodied in Jose Guadalupe Posada's work, the ghosts are full of life, humor and as always, travel with us.

— Renee Tajima-Peña, Producer/Director

