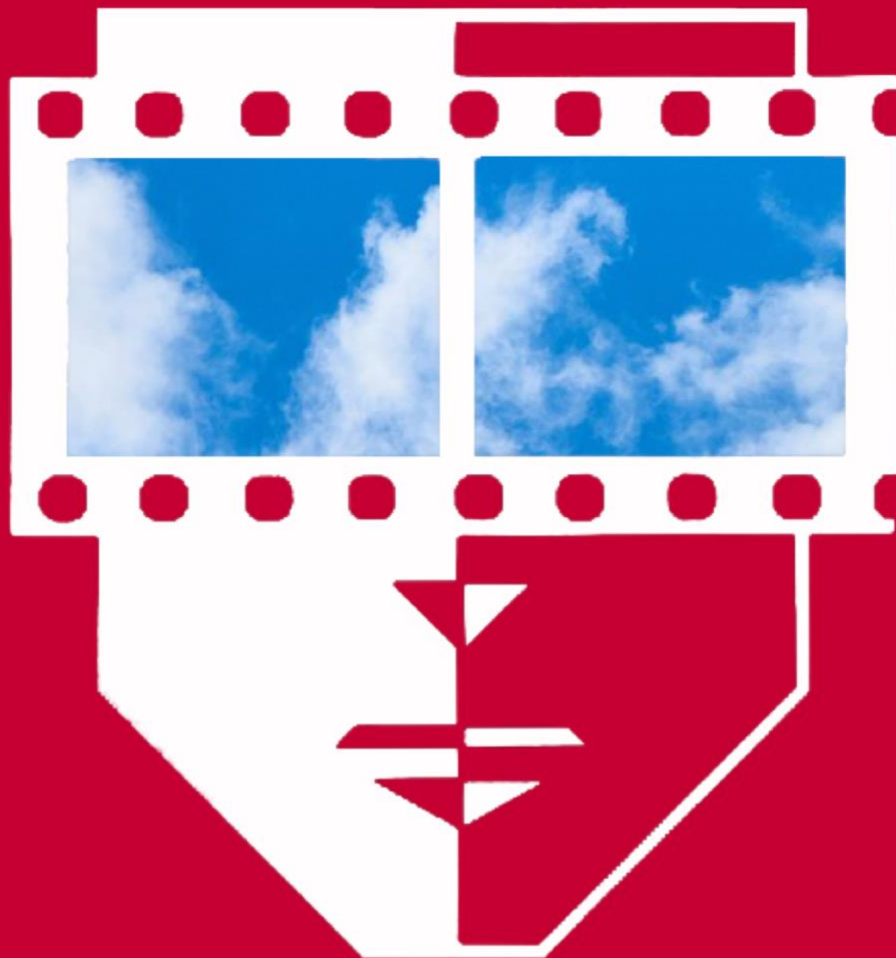


# EXTRAORDINARY FILMMAKERS

## HOW TO MAKE FILMS AGAINST ALL ODDS

**13 Stories of Creativity and Resilience  
from Independent Filmmakers**



**Edited by Carole Dean and Alexandra Hidalgo**

# **Extraordinary Filmmakers: How to Make Films Against All Odds**

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from Independent Filmmakers

**Co-edited by**

Carole Dean and Alexandra Hidalgo

From the Heart Productions



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# Filmmaking As Paying a Debt of Love: An Ode to My Father Wherever He May Be

By Alexandra Hidalgo

My dad disappeared in the Venezuelan Amazon when I was six years old.

I always tell my students in writing classes to open their essays with something compelling, a hand that will hold the readers' interest and invite them to come in and sit for a while. For 37 years that sentence has been the most astonishing thing I can offer an audience. In 13 words it encapsulates a mystery, a devastating loss, and an enigmatic location. It also invokes a sense of compassion for the child I once was and perhaps for the woman I've become. As a little girl growing up in Caracas, Venezuela, whose world had just crumbled into unrelenting uncertainty, I would utter it to anyone I met and watch a battle between compassion and curiosity emerge on their faces. There was so much they wanted to know, but they weren't sure how to ask a child who looked so wounded and broken.



My dad and me in Caracas months before he disappeared. Photo by Yarima Hidalgo.

Yes, I was wounded and broken, but I was also memorable. I stood out with my tragedy. As I grew older, I stopped telling the story to everyone, reserving it instead for those I wanted to develop deep bonds with, offering the 13 words and the required context that came with them as a gesture of deep intimacy. I also labored on various artistic ventures to bring my father and his vanishing to life for audiences. In my late 20s, I researched and wrote a novel about him for half a decade. Before completing it, I decided that since the story was true, a memoir would be a better fit. I never got too

far on the memoir version, though, because it didn't feel like the right direction either. For years now I've been making a feature documentary about his life and disappearance and I have no doubt now that I'm finally working on the right medium for this tale. The working title, which we have to change because it no longer suits the story, is *A Family of Stories*. As I type this, our latest rough cut is exporting, ready for another round of feedback from fellow filmmakers and film lovers.

We usually host focus group screenings at our home. We set out trays of Brie cheese and berries and squares of dark chocolate to go with the wine and beer we offer our guests. They eat and drink, we watch the film together, and I ask questions and let them answer them and converse with each other, silently taking notes about what they think and feel. The conversations go on for hours and surface the issues that have finally been resolved since the last draft we shared with audiences and the fractures that stubbornly remain draft after draft. Although in our times of social isolation we will now share our draft online and will miss those interactions, I look forward to figuring out how close we are to making a film that finally lives up to the potential of its premise, that mantra of mine: My dad disappeared in the Venezuelan Amazon when I was six years old.

It turns out having a good premise is only the beginning. Once that premise works and audiences walk into the home you created for them, you have to keep them there with a cohesive, entertaining tale that moves them and enriches the way they see the world and themselves. The story of my father's life and his disappearance is a messy, unwieldy one. It's rich but overly complex—a tangle of geography, chronology, and generations of a colorful family with a penchant for histrionics and bold endeavors. When my father, Miguel Hidalgo, vanished, he left me with the potential for a captivating story, but I had to learn to how to be a storyteller first. That's exactly the sort of quest that can give a brokenhearted six-year-old purpose and drive.

## **Blending Our Vision of Others With Their Vision of Themselves**

As you inhabit this world I built for you, dear reader, I want to argue that personal filmmaking, the kind that blends our lives with the lives of those we've shared our days with, represents our payment of a debt of love. And we pay not just through the final product but through the filmmaking process itself. As filmmakers, we pay our debt by bringing our relatives, friends, and lovers onto the screen in a way that presents them truthfully and shares their humanity with others. To get there we must be open to their suggestions, concerns, and feedback as we make our work. We must listen to their vision for themselves and for the project—a tricky task that invites us to share creativity and ownership.

Those we represent pay their debt by trusting us with a keenly vulnerable and precious possession—their story. They let us bring our cameras to places strangers never go and ask questions about moments they would rather forget. They trust us to tenderly hold that information, to treasure it as we treasure our own lives because our lives are intertwined with theirs, because our soul is also under the microscope in this story we're telling.

For *A Family of Stories*, I've gotten to pay and claim that debt of love with my mother, my aunts, my cousin, and Dad's best friend, David, who's been a father figure to me for decades. I've also paid and claimed that debt of love with my father, although he has been missing since 1983. The story he left me with and the many versions I've drafted of it over the years have taught me to become a

storyteller, and once I finish this film I will share my father's remarkable and strange legacy with the world, bringing his longings and accomplishments to life for audiences. That part is straightforward enough, but I'm about to go a little mystical on you. As I'll show you in the remaining pages, Dad has been an active participant in my storytelling process, guiding me, whispering ideas, and leading crewmembers to the project. He has been a frequent if not constant collaborator in the making this tale.



My dad (left) and David as teenagers before going to a dance in Amagansett, New York in the 1950s.  
Photo courtesy of the Tyson Family Archive.

### **Sauntering Beyond What We Understand As Real and Logical**

It's not a coincidence that I write this essay the summer I received tenure at the Department of Writing, Rhetoric, and American Cultures at Michigan State University. Even for a professor whose scholarship is primarily focused on documentaries and on video essays that examine the creative process, it's tricky to venture into stories where people who've been missing for decades play an active, creative role. Not being a scientist, I don't utilize the scientific method. However, there is still a certain claim to objectivity and reproducible evidence that professors—even in the much-maligned within academic hierarchies Arts and Humanities—are supposed to uphold. The moment



apparitions and objects that move without visible cause come into the picture, our ability to be objective, maybe even sane, begins to be questioned.

As the chapters in this book argue, however, those of us who work in the arts draw from a propulsive and sometimes elusive blend of intuition, happenstance, and encounters with an infinitely rich and timeless realm of feelings, stories, and ideas. Many of the award-winning films and scholarship that resulted in me being granted tenure came to be as a result of my connection to such unverifiable forces. This is the story of how those forces represented a paying and a claiming of a debt of love between a father and the little girl he left behind.

My dad was driven by a desire to reach beyond the reality we can see and touch. He meditated every morning and invited me to join him whenever we were together. Being a fifth dan black belt in karate, he moved his body with limber focus. He walked on his hands and would ask me to hold cards as he concentrated on whether they were red or black, guessing with an accuracy that did not satisfy my childhood standards for magic, although the fact that he even tried made him magical in my eyes. When he vanished, I lost not only my father but the one person in my life for whom the reality perceived by our senses—what I would in college learn to call empirical evidence—was only part of the picture.



My dad during his daily Karate practice in Amagansett, New York in the late 1970s.  
Photo by Antonieta Aagaard.

The hole he left behind was gargantuan and it made sense that, wherever he is now, he would use the very channels he taught me to believe in to remind me he's still invested in my upbringing and my development as an artist and intellectual. It started with various maids—members of the

Venezuelan middle class, to which I belong, had live-in maids when I grew up—saying they saw a white shadow around our apartment. The very term seemed contradictory (a shadow that was white?) and raised the hairs on the back of my neck. Although I never saw this shadow, I could picture its silhouette and its purposeful walk.

### **Dad Displays an Inexplicable Penchant for the Culinary**

His visits to me were different from whatever the maids were seeing. When I first started being left alone at home as an 11-year-old, it would sound like all the dishes had suddenly broken in the kitchen, but when I walked in, everything was intact. Some mornings I'd be setting the breakfast table and, halfway through the task, I'd return to the kitchen and reenter the dining room, silverware in hand, only to find that everything had already been set with precision. None of it scared me. If I closed my eyes, the gestures felt like melancholy hugs from arms that didn't have enough strength tightly squeeze.

For a man who never cooked a thing in his life—he was born in 1941 in Venezuela and raised as an aristocrat in New York, Washington DC, Havana, and Tokyo—my father's appearances seemed strangely fixated on kitchens and dining rooms. Whether it was my perception or his ability to communicate that sharpened—it was likely both—by the time I became a college student, his messages became more purposeful. The fact that I was even able to pay for college as a Venezuelan girl living in the US can be, in part, linked to him. My grandmother Olga, his mother, paid for the first year of my schooling at Ohio University. Then, days after she told me she couldn't afford it anymore, his best friend David called to check in on me, as he did a few times a year. I explained that I wasn't sure how I was going to pay for college anymore, since international students were not eligible for financial aid or most scholarships. He said that his family had a fund that could help with that. All the way through my undergrad and my MFA in Creative Writing at Naropa University, that fund covered most of my tuition the way my own father would have had he been around.



My dad (far right) with his mother Olga and his sister Yarima singing Venezuelan songs for a Manhattan radio station in the 1940s. Photo courtesy of the Briceño Family Archive.

It was at Naropa University—the Boulder, Colorado institution founded by Allen Ginsberg and a Buddhist monk—that my dad went from table-setting helper and provider (via proxy) of college tuition to an urgent presence in our home. I had married my husband Nate the summer we both graduated from Ohio University. After a couple years living in New York City, we moved to Boulder in 2002 so I could get my MFA and in the process learn how to tell my father's story in novel form. The writing dream had been with me for as long as I could remember. Dad had published short stories and a philosophical treatise, and my grandmother Olga had been a celebrated writer of historical fiction in Spain and the US back in the '30s and '40s. Writing was in my blood.

During my first month at Naropa, I befriended Bhanu, a poet and faculty member in my program. She'd often come for dinner at our small apartment that overlooked a parking lot but vibrated with energy from the Kundalini Yoga courses I taught in our living room. Bhanu was at once earthy and ethereal, a lyrical being who seemed forever split between her discerning perception of what stood in front her and her ability to read between the lines of what we consider reality. I guess you would call her a medium, though to me she was always much more than that. Able to open unseen doors, she generously translated between two people who had once been so close and now were separated by the rules of physics or some other discipline I've never quite grasped.

At first only she could feel my father during our dinners together, a quiet, yet insistent presence hovering around us. She'd mention his visits, still unclear as to why he'd make a point to join us so often. After months of this ritual, I finally saw him, sitting cross-legged on the corner of the living



room where I taught yoga. And now, unless apparitions are a common occurrence in your life (and for some of you, they may be), you'll want to know what I mean when I write that I saw him. I didn't see him in the way I could see Nate serving us his spinach lasagna or Bhanu rhapsodizing about its seasoning. Dad was only half there. Not translucent but a presence that was missing parts of itself and required some usually dormant senses to be perceived. When I saw him, I felt like I do when I start to walk into the ocean. Half of you is in the element your body was made for and the other, your legs and belly, have entered a different, unknown domain.

I have no idea what it would be like to dive headfirst into the world my father opens during his visits. I'm glad, however, that I get to gaze at him from the world I inhabit and that he gets to gaze at me from his. Over the years, I've learned to trust that clear sense of connection. We always lock eyes and stare at each other for a while. Then I welcome him with my voice. He never speaks in return, but his visits make me feel heard. Loved.

### **The Ringing Bells Send Us On a Quest**

He did speak to Bhanu back in our Boulder apartment, though, and his message was urgent. He wanted me to find out what had become of him. If he and I had been having an actual conversation, I would have chuckled at the request because there was nothing I'd ever wanted more than to solve that mystery. One fall evening we were sitting with Bhanu on the living room carpet (it took us over a decade of marriage to get our first couch). I can't remember what we were doing. Talking, no doubt, but I'm not sure about what. We were near the apartment's front door from whose handle hung a string of eight copper bells of diminishing size so that whenever someone opened the door the bells rang to greet them. As I was staring at the bells, it was as if an invisible hand had grabbed the smallest one at the end of the string and lifted it so they all rang together. Bhanu and Nate turned to the door at the sound and caught the tail end of the motion.

We stared at each other in silence for a while and then Bhanu said that Dad wanted us to go to the Gran Sabana, the region of the Venezuelan Amazon where he'd vanished. It was the only place where we could figure out the truth. Not only that, but he wanted us to go soon. I was in grad school and bringing in miniscule funds through my yoga classes and Nate was working at Barnes & Noble. We couldn't even afford a couch, let alone a trip to the depths of the jungle, but the bells had rung and we couldn't deny their call.

I told my cousin Glen—my dad's nephew who looks spookily like him—about the apparition and he said that if we got ourselves to Venezuela, he'd handle the rest. We asked for cash for Christmas that year, pooled our meager savings together, and got on a plane that December. From Caracas, Glen's red Jeep drove us deeper and deeper into the wilderness. Although I was working on the novel version of the story at the time, I had the inkling that I should film the journey. I figured if the novel did well, we could make a companion documentary about our search. We borrowed my brother-in-law's Hi-8 tape camcorder and filmed every day with zero training or any sense of what we were doing. It is that footage that over a decade later became the thread that weaves through the heart of *A Family of Stories*. As amateurish and grainy as they are, those scenes reach the viewers' hearts and satisfy their aesthetic cravings during focus group screenings.



With my cousin Glen during our 2004 trip to the Gran Sabana. Photo by Nathaniel Bowler.

As Dad had promised, we did find out exactly what became of him. He'd helped me solve the mystery that had defined my life and now I had to shape that mystery into a story that could connect with those who'd never met him. In the midst of struggling to write the novel about him, I began my PhD in English at Purdue University and decided to learn filmmaking while I was there. I had an identity crisis during the second year of my PhD and realized that, even though Grandmother and Dad had been writers and I'd spent my whole life refining my way with language, I was a filmmaker. I was better at constructing worlds with images and sound than with words, although much of what I'd learned about writing shaped the films I made.

This time I knew better than to jump into the story about Dad right away. I made a few documentaries so I could learn the craft, but even then I didn't feel ready. The story of my father had stumped me so many times that I was reticent to return to it. Dad himself had vanished for over a decade. After ringing those bells in Boulder and leading us to the answers he wanted us to find, he'd stopped appearing in any form. I thought we were done seeing each other. I was an adult now, happily married with two little boys and a job as a faculty member at a university I loved. The vulnerable girl had grown into a woman with children of her own and a creative, satisfying existence. There seemed to be little impetus for him to return.

Then on New Year's Eve of 2015, he was back. New Year's is arguably the most important day of the year for Venezuelans. We have a number of rituals we follow to make sure that the year that's about to begin is a happy one. We eat twelve grapes in the first twelve seconds of the new year—one grape to bring luck for each month. We wear yellow underwear inside out for good luck. The traditions go on and on, filling the night with music, champagne, and dreams for the year to come. Nate and I were spending New Year's at his mother's house. The music was roaring, the cousins

were running around, and my American family members were trying their best to play along with my Venezuelan traditions. And yet I felt detached from the evening. Everyone but Nate was humoring me in doing things that were understandably meaningless to them. I missed being back in Venezuela with people for whom these traditions came with the heft of childhood memories.

I walked off to an empty room to try to recapture the feeling of anticipation that the last night of the year evokes for me. As I sat there, reflecting on how much I always missed my motherland on New Year's Eve, I saw him. Unlike his previous visits in which his body was proportionate to mine, all I could see was his face in closeup, bathed in some kind of orange light, as if I were looking at a portrait taken as the sun was going down. He stared at me for a while, then smiled and nodded a few times, once again relaying some burning sense of purpose I couldn't decipher at the time. He vanished as Nate, wondering where I'd gone, entered the room.

It didn't take me long to figure out what Dad's visit had been about. The College of Arts and Letters, where my department is housed, soon announced a new summer fellowship for faculty who pitched compelling projects (and I had quite the compelling project to pitch). Then my dad's sister, my beloved aunt Yarima, with whom I'd lost touch for almost a decade, finally got a Facebook account. We could communicate once again. Having gotten the grant, my husband, who is the film's cinematographer, our sons, and I spent the rest of the year traveling to Madrid, Lisbon, New York, Washington DC, and Tampa to piece together parts of my dad's story and interview those he loved. I also went alone to Caracas in the fall to interview Aunt Yarima and my mom. The time had finally come to tell my father's story in a way that would connect with audiences.



My husband Nate filming in Madrid with our sons William and Santiago in 2017.  
Photo by Alexandra Hidalgo.

## **How Dad Brought Me Home Without Breaking My Exile**

After a year of watching and editing dozens of hours of footage that spanned multiple decades and was filled with copious characters and locations, I decided to work with an editor for the first time in my filmmaking career. I had gotten other grants for the film and had funds to bring someone in, but I had no idea whom it should be. I wanted it to be a bilingual Latina because, being a feminist filmmaker, I make a point to hire women and people of color whenever possible. I sent a message on Facebook to a childhood friend who'd become a filmmaker in Argentina, asking if he knew anyone who could help me transcribe and time-code the Spanish scenes in the film, something I'd been told an editor would require. He left me a voice message asking if we could talk instead because he was trying to curtail his screen use.

I called him and heard his voice for the first time in over two decades. As we talked about our lives, I told him about the project. He remembered the mystery of my dad's vanishing and said that he knew an editor, Cristina Carrasco, who might be perfect for the project. She was bilingual and a fellow Venezuelan living abroad, splitting her life between Argentina and Spain. I watched a documentary she'd edited that evening and, after a Skype conversation the following afternoon, I knew I'd found my editor. Just like I've learned to identify my father during his visits, I've learned to identify collaborators who will make a project thrive. It's a whispered sense of certainty, an affirmation that feels all-encompassing but is uttered so quietly that if you don't shut off everything else, you won't hear it.

Cristina and I decided we needed more footage of Venezuela for the film, but by then my Venezuelan passport had expired. Due to ongoing conflicts between Venezuela and the US, I couldn't use my American passport to leave my motherland once I entered it. Instead we collaborated with La Pandilla, a Caracas-based production company that Cristina has worked with for years. It always seemed clear to me that my father visited me on New Year's Eve to announce that it was time to make a documentary about him. However, I've also come to realize that he not only chose that moment for its symbolic significance on the cusp of a new year but because of what I was going through at the time. My frustration when I walked into that room had nothing to do with my professional aspirations but rather with a sense of detachment from the country where I was born and grew up.





During one of my zoom meetings with Cristina to work on the film in 2020.  
Photo by Nathaniel Bowler.

While making *A Family of Stories* I found myself working with Venezuelans for the first time in my adult life. I've never met any of them in person, but over Skype, Zoom, and phone conversations I feel a deep connection to Cristina and the members of La Pandilla. I have lived in the US for most of my life, so my relationships with Americans are comfortable and effortless, yet working with Venezuelans feels natural at a deeper level. I feel this fundamental sense of belonging with them, even as they have to teach me how to say filmmaking terms in Spanish and introduce me to a region of the industry I know little of. I've always missed my family and friends and the vast pleasures of going home and revisiting beloved places and flavors, but I didn't know working with fellow Venezuelans would be so transformative. You can't miss what you never had, and now, thanks to this project, I will seek to collaborate with Venezuelans every chance I get. Dad is not only paying his debt of love by helping me learn to be a storyteller, but he has also brought me back to my motherland, to my childhood, and to the ease of being with those who were shaped by the same landscapes, music, scents, and humor as I was.

The crew from La Pandilla filmed my aunt Yarima in early 2018, and as I was directing them over the phone, she asked to speak to me. She was feeling exuberant from working with these young, talented filmmakers. They'd just seen a sloth walking down the street and she, who's always loved animals, had gotten to pet it. That was surreal enough, but even more surreal was what she told me about Amanda Pérez, the young cinematographer on the shoot.

"She grew up in El Paují," my aunt said, full of excitement.

"El Paují? That can't be," I replied.

"I thought that's why you hired her."

El Paují is the town where my dad disappeared, a conglomeration of houses with a few hundred inhabitants in the middle of the jungle. I'd never met anyone outside of La Gran Sabana who'd been to El Paují, let alone anyone who'd grown up there. Because Venezuela has become increasingly chaotic since our trip to La Gran Sabana in 2004, getting to El Paují was now a labyrinthine task that prevented us from even considering sending a crew with costly filming equipment into such an uncertain, hard-to-reach location. I hadn't hired Amanda for the reason Yarima thought. She happened to work with La Pandilla and they'd invited her to be part of the project. Still, her presence opened essential doors for us. With her knowledge of the area and the contacts she still had there, we managed to safely send her and two fellow crewmembers to El Paují to get high-definition footage of the place and film a crucial interview that Nate and I had done orally back in 2004 but hadn't filmed.



Amanda filming in La Gran Sabana in 2018. Photo by María Carolina Agüero Altuve.

As we were planning the trip, Amanda's father, the gifted composer Rudy Pérez López, contacted me and said he'd always been intrigued by my dad. My father's story had turned into an urban legend back in El Paují, the sort of tale you share over beer when the night grows long and a yearning for mystery descends upon the room. He offered to be the film's composer and within weeks wrote emotive tracks that captured the uncertainty I felt when Dad vanished.

It was while the crew was in El Paují, a trip in which we'd talk during the rare moments they had cellular service, that my father appeared for the last time. I was taking my daily walk around our neighborhood and I felt him walking by my side. I turned toward him and we stared at each other in silence for a while, enjoying a rare moment of contentment together—the kind of moment that should have happened thousands of times during our lives. It was June, and a few spring flowers were still blooming. He eventually blended into them and vanished once again.

The moment I got home, the crew called me to report a key discovery they'd made for the film. Their call gave the visit a deeper meaning but it also stole some of its quotidian charm. I realized

when speaking to them that Dad had come to be with me as moral support before I received the information they delivered. While I appreciated the gesture, I was sad that he'd needed a momentous event to come see me instead of simply stopping by to walk among the spring flowers by my side. It's of course silly to think that way when I don't understand what it takes for him to come to me, but our relationship still has its petty quirks and vicissitudes, even in the strange format in which it unfolds.

He hasn't appeared since that day two years ago. Cristina and I have struggled through countless versions of the film, pulling and poking and cutting and battling its intrinsic complexity into something that finally feels whole, if not yet like a final cut. Over months of looking at our drafts on Adobe Premiere, I wondered if when Dad showed up on New Year's Eve as a closeup of his face bathed in sunlight, he was foreshadowing the hours I would spend with the dozens of closeup photographs of him in years to come. My mom loved to photograph her husband and meticulously stored those images in family albums that I've since scanned. We use them to visually bring my father into the film. Taken mostly in the 70s, these photos have the orange tint of paper losing its grip on the original shades it once captured.



One of the closeups my mom used to take of my dad. Here he is with me as a newborn in 1977. Photo by Antonieta Aagaard.

After all these years away from each other, it is those photographs, tangible yet two-dimensional, that have kept him visually present on my walls and shelves. He is a person but also an image, a memory that sometimes comes to life and shares a few moments with me. I don't know if he'll ever visit me again. If he does, I don't think it will be with the same urgency he once displayed. I have



given years of my life, effort, and talent to telling his story and he has helped me do so with diligent support, guiding me as I become a storyteller and returning pieces of my motherland to me in the process.

My dad disappeared in the Venezuelan Amazon when I was six years old, and now, decades later, we've both finally paid our debts of love to each other.