

Weaving the Life of Guatemala:

A Participatory Approach to Cross-Cultural Filmmaking

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November 2009

Abstract

This conference paper explores the challenges of producing a digital film for Trama Textiles, a Guatemalan association of indigenous Mayan women weavers. This case demonstrates how the development of the video through participatory digital filmmaking practices, contributes to the process of social and economic development. While examining how empowerment and self-assertion of identity were transformed through this collaborative process, issues surrounding the complexities and tensions of producing cross-culturally with a student production crew are discussed. The author's experience contributes to enduring concerns about ethics of representation in video production, while also contributing to the discourse of education of video production in international settings.

**Weaving the Life of Guatemala:  
A Participatory Approach to Cross-Cultural Filmmaking**

The casualties of Guatemala's devastating civil war fought from 1960 through 1996 gave birth to *trama textiles*, a 100 percent worker-owned association, comprised of more than 400 weavers, from 17 different cooperatives, in five different regions of the western highlands of the country. The indigenous Mayan women of the cooperatives proudly continue the ancient textile art of backstrap loom weaving that has maintained their cultural traditions and community ties for over 1,500 years. It is in the aftermath of the civil war that the Mayan women of the highlands have paid special attention to the trade of their weavings, not only as a means for familial sustenance, but also for the continuation of traditions and values that are passed on to new generations of women through the art of weaving.

In an effort to make a living, preserve their cultural traditions and empower their community, the women of *trama textiles*, in collaboration with a student video production crew I directed produced a digital film or video<sup>1</sup> that functions as an engagement tool to highlight the women's plight, as well as their mission toward a better future. Through an auto-ethnographic account, I examine my reflections on the many challenges and opportunities posed by producing films cross-culturally. The purpose of this analysis is to employ the theoretical framework of development communication with a strong emphasis on participatory practices of filmmaking, meanwhile illuminating the idiosyncrasies of cross-cultural filmmaking and how it reflects on the concept of authenticity as a result of the cross-cultural production process.

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<sup>1</sup> The terms digital film or video will be used interchangeable throughout this document.

Some of the questions this auto-ethnography seeks to examine is how can we as individuals portray others when we don't belong to that particular reality? How do we go from our own reality, engrossed in our own concerns, to retaining a profound sense of responsibility for those we are representing? And more importantly, how does the use of video function as an engagement tool of collaborative ethnography and thereby empower lives?

In a self-reflexive approach to this experience, I examine the significance digital filmmaking has in providing a space for empowerment and self-assertion of identity, particularly with respect to marginalized communities like the women from trama textiles. Furthermore, I consider the moral and ethical responsibilities of representation as relevant to the notion of authenticity in relationship to the academic instruction of students developing cross-cultural media. This analysis contributes to the dialogue of collaborative ethnographic fieldwork in connection to participation as a key component of development.

To construct this piece, I draw from interview and field notes, as well as journal observations collected during my 28-day stay in Guatemala. The narrative is not particularly constructed in a chronological manner; rather, it describes moments relevant to the theoretical foundation of this document. Many hours of video footage were recorded during this trip – as well as a number of photographs were taken, and for this paper, they constitute my primary source of information. The act of revisiting the many images and video footage, helped bring about emotions and memories of the time spent in Guatemala, as well as triggering deeper reflections of this experience. This video was completed and sent to the women of trama textiles in the Fall of 2008. Since then, the

video has been circulating in the US and Europe through small public venues to help promote the cooperative's work. Reproductions of the video were donated to the women of trama textiles for their use and sale, and the proceeds have been used to build the scholarship fund for the children of the community.

The thrust of my argument is that strategies of participatory development as a practice, not only aid the developmental needs, but these practices also help empower people and communities. The collaborative process helped achieve a more authentic representation of the Mayan cooperatives; it brought about some of the tensions of representation that developed through the process of production, which ultimately had an effect on the shaping of the video. I propose to examine this particular case by first providing a brief background of the women of trama textiles. Following the context of the Mayan cooperatives and the association, I explore the importance of participatory filmmaking to evaluating the process of change, the relationship among identity, representation, agency, and self-assertion. Finally, I evaluate my experiences of doing the international fieldwork in an auto-ethnographic approach, which will let me reflect on the debates of authenticity of representation in cross-cultural settings.

### **Trama Textiles: The past is shaping the future**

“For us, the Spanish word TRAMA, the weft or binding thread, is interchangeable with the word comida, food. Our weavings clothe us, warm our families through highland winters, and carry our babies on our backs. They unite our people from generation to generation and sustain us as much as any food.” – from the Trama Textiles website.

For the indigenous women of trama textiles, their weavings are an intricate part of their past and a means to shape their future. It is difficult to speak about the Mayan indigenous women of Guatemala without considering their social, political, economic and cultural history. The atrocious violence of the civil war spanning from the 1960s through

1996, was ignited by a foully inequitable distribution of income and land, which resulted in a brutal history of ethnic genocide and discrimination, and the elite's unwillingness to entertain peaceful organizing around civil reforms and economic rights (Pessar, 2001). This 36-year civil war brought about a number of attacks where local villages were razed and thousands of civilians were killed. Men of indigenous descent became the primary victims of military and guerilla attacks, and many disappeared or were murdered during the turmoil (Clouser, 2009). As a consequence, the women were left as heads of households to support and defend their children.

In post-colonial society, the women of *trama textiles* have and continue to face tremendous adversities; a lengthy political past spanning more than three decades of oppression from government, to a history of exploitation of indigenous labor, and civil uproars in the fight against unequal land distribution (Galeano, 1969). As a consequence to Guatemala's civil unrest, the women of the various Mayan communities came together to support each other through the difficult times and to find a way to survive. It was in realizing the benefits of collaboration that in 1988 *trama textiles* was formed.

*Trama textiles*, an association of women for artisan development in backstrap loom weaving, is a worker-owned weaving cooperative that aims at creating work for fair wages in order to honorably support the families and communities affected by the war; as well as helping preserve and develop their cultural traditions through the maintenance of their textiles and history ([from trama textiles website, 2009](#)). The various women cooperatives are located throughout the five regions in the western highlands of Guatemala, which are in Sololá, Huehuetenango, Sacatepéquez, Quetzaltenango and Quiché (see Figure 1 and 2). In the city of Quetzaltenango, commonly known as Xela

(pronounced *shay-la*), the association has a store where all of the women's *telares* or textiles are sold, and where their weaving school is located.

Traditionally, Mayan weavings have been a symbol of social status and depending on the color and patterns found in the weaving, it identifies the particular indigenous region a community belongs to. The patterns vary among the villages, anywhere from the highlands to the lowlands of the country. Each one of the designs and patterns tells a different story, representing the unity of past histories and present cultures. While history contributes to the formation of Guatemalan indigenous society, for the women of trama textiles, the ancient art of weaving is a symbol of past Mayan identity; and presently, it has also become a catalyst for shaping a new history that reflects who they are today.

Historically, Mayan women grow up learning the art of weaving on backstrap looms. Backstrap looms are warp yarns stretched between two sticks or end bars that are attached by a backstrap around the hips of the woman on one end, while the other end is affixed by a rope to a tree or post. The word “trama” or “weft” is interchangeable with the word “comida” or “food.” In essence, the women of the association see their *trama's* as the binding thread that unites their weaving; and it is in their practice of weaving that the women can provide sustenance for their families (see Figure 3). This is a tradition passed on from one generation to the next, and it continues to be a distinct part of the Mayans past, present, and future.

As a symbol of cultural tradition and respect to their ancestors, the women of trama textiles have taken their art of weaving to a new level and have given it a new meaning. Trama textiles is an association where women can employ their tradition of weaving as a way to make a living. However, it has also become a place for

empowerment and personal healing. The cooperative unites the women and brings them to a place where they can openly discuss their past, continue to heal at present, and build a promising tomorrow.

### **Developing communication across borders**

Development communication from a grassroots participatory communication orientation merits an evaluation of how knowledge and techniques for producing knowledge are generated. Participatory communication theories emerged as one of the alternatives to the dominant paradigm in development communication and have gained recognition in communication research since the late 1990s (Melkote & Steeves, 2001). Several development communication scholars have enunciated the need for illustrating the connection between theory and practice (Beltrán, 1975; Escobar 1995; Huesca, 2002), and much of this approach has been couched in Freirian liberation-oriented theories. Some of the key points of Paulo Freire's *pedagogy of the oppressed* address the notions of conscientization and radical social action that reject perceiving the oppressed as powerless. Freire (1993) argues that no person should be treated as objects passively receiving knowledge, but that in order to “surmount the situation of oppression, people must first critically recognize its causes, so that through transforming action they can create a new situation, one which makes possible the pursuit of a fuller humanity” (p. 29).

Participation has been defined and operationalized in multiple ways; from pseudo participation, to genuine efforts at generating participatory decision making (Melkote, 2003, p. 138). Nair and White (1999) conceptualized participation as a two-way interaction between the grassroots ‘targeted groups’ and the ‘information source’ mediated through development communicators. Participation in this analysis is embedded



in the understanding of the communicative praxis that transpired between the participants and researcher. I use praxis in the liberating approach that attempts to eliminate the separation between participants and researcher; while generating mutual collaboration in order to create a “fruitful dialectic for the construction of knowledge, which is systematically examined, altered, and expanded in practice” (in Huesca, 2002, p. 502).

Steeves (2002) sustains “development communication is emancipatory dialogue that leads to the expanded individual and communal consciousness and power, with no hierarchical distinction among participants in dialogue” (in Gudykunst & Mody, eds., p.528). It is then that through the act of participation that a genuine dialectical relationship with participants can take place. With this project, the experience of developing a digital video opened channels for dialogue and personal interaction. However, in accounting for the fact that the video reproductions or DVDs would be used as both a means of education and for the marketing of products, an evaluation of social marketing strategies was necessary to assess effective audience reach.

The idea that fuels the notion of social marketing comes from the application of strategically developed commercial advertising and marketing techniques to development campaigns (Kotler and Zaltman, 1971). Social marketing, as defined by Andreasen (1995), aims at applying “commercial marketing technologies to the analysis, planning, execution, and evaluation of programs designed to influence the voluntary behavior of target audiences in order to improve their personal welfare and that of their society” (in Snyder, 2003, p. 171). In this particular case, it was necessary to first evaluate the use of the video as a tool for the local promotion of the association, as well as considering the sale of the DVD as a product that could reach international public spaces and audiences.

In regards to local and global reach lies a dilemma of the effectiveness of social marketing strategies. Originally implemented to aid health campaigns, such as the USAID diarrheal diseases or family planning campaigns in the 1970s, to immunizations, nutrition and mosquito control campaigns of the 1990s, and more currently, AIDS prevention programs, social marketing tactics are employed to promote awareness of social issues (Melkote & Steeves, 2001). Within development communication campaigns, the use of social marketing strategies has increased at the local level (Clift, 1989; Wilkins, 1999), and marketing strategies are built on the “four Ps”: product, price, place, and promotion (Kotler, 1984; Manoff, 1985) to reach socially desirable outcomes.

The common thread amongst these types of campaigns is the use of mass media technology to mediate communication. The use of video as a participatory tool of communication creates the opportunity to select and frame the social issue through a grassroots approach. It is a framework of communications research that “emphasizes communication as dialogue, communication as social practice, and communication as a social right” (Richard, Thomas and Nain, 2001, p. 8). Since it aims at involving the people and community, it legitimizes the experiences of those who are seeking social change. In other words, it is empowering the voices of the community through participation in the development of the social marketing product.

Working definitions of empowerment vary depending on whether we speak in an individual, organizational or community context; nonetheless, empowerment implies a manifestation of social power (Speer & Hughley, 1995, p.730). In the case of the women of trama textiles, I subscribe to Rappaport’s (1995) definition of empowerment as “the ability to tell one’s story and to have access to and influence over collective stories” (p.

803). Rappaport endorses the idea of combining the narrative framework with empowerment theory because it can be about “understanding and creating settings where people participate in the discovery, creation, and enhancement of their community narratives and personal stories” (p. 805), therefore moving in the direction of social change and community development.

### **Participatory Filmmaking: Collaboration as an ingredient for change**

For the purpose of this study, I consider documentary from a more activist point of view that allows broader scholastic analysis of the participation process. As way from which to discuss how the documentary is a medium for giving ‘voice to the voiceless,’ Ruby (1993) suggests “portray political, social and economic realities of oppressed minorities and other previously denied access to the means of producing their own image. From this perspective, the documentary is not only an art form, it is a social service and a political act” (in Enghel, 2008, p. 43).

With digital filmmaking, the adoption of the portable cameras offered the possibility for new ways of filming that included the participation of communities and audiences. Craig Hight (2008) argues that digital filmmaking created a more democratic form of participation between professionals and amateurs alike to engage in collaborative work, thereby suggesting “a radical shift in the basis of documentary culture itself” (p. 3). In this sense, what was understood as traditional documentary, took more of an activist role in the goal of addressing social and political issues that could help foster social change, in both domestic and international fronts. Locally produced video implies the production of cultural codes and values; and if we consider its global implications, video production can be said to strengthen community identities at a large scale. For example,

there is case of Colombian women living in the margins of Bogotá, who began producing video stories as a way to reject the images coming from the state-controlled systems. As a way of presenting their own realities and social milieu, the women were able to set in motion the process of deconstruction of mass-mediated representations of feminine qualities, and reconstruct their individual and collective identity (Riano, 1994).

Collaboration with participants is important for nonfiction production work at a historical, political, and financial level. Producing documentary style films or videos, are recognized by many as a way of getting their stories told, which can be important for promotional reasons, such as gaining audiences, donors, grants, and for journalistic purposes in order to gain political exposure (Coffman, 2009, p.62). Alexandra Halkin's media project with indigenous Mayan Zapatistas in Chiapas, México, aimed at demonstrating how local and global perspectives can operate as agents of social change. By teaching and promoting video production at grassroots level, demonstrates the way "outsiders can facilitate the process of indigenous media production and distribution that not only document and educate but that will also help to integrate new media into other forms of cultural production" (Halkin, 2008). Through conscientization the process of liberation and building of social solidarity helps resist dominant power structures while opening a path to empowerment. Within this framework, it is possible to think of development communication projects as one's that don't anchor themselves solely on the idea of economic gain that is assumed through the modernist approach; rather, we can think about the notion of development as one that supports empowerment as a means of change.

### **In the pursuit of a reflexive methodology**

This particular account describes the case of the production of the 2008 DVD video for trama textiles. The indispensable element for the development of this digital film was the participation of the women from the association. This project highlighted the stories of the past and it expresses the visions for the future of the community. The active participation on part of the women occurred in several ways: they spelled out the goals of the association, they shared their history and personal stories, they provided an understanding of the process of weaving, and became involved in the production process, as well as becoming the first-person narrators of the video.

The germane idea behind the collaboration of the women from trama textiles in the production of the video, was that I wanted to create a space of trust that could encourage their participation, cultivate a mutual respect and understanding, thereby provide a greater sense of authenticity to the representation of the indigenous Mayan women. Ethnographic documentary works like Wissler's (2007) recount of the creation and reception of the documentary *Kusisqa Waqashayku (From Grief and Joy We Sing)* on the musical rituals of the indigenous Quechua of Perú, discusses the importance for addressing the ethnics of representation and personal reflection through the ethnographer's experience, and notes that personal reflections contribute to the ongoing concerns of ethics of representation in video production.

Through the lens of auto-ethnography Hayano (1982) argues that we can “look more deeply at the self-other interactions [which] display multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural” (in Subedi, 2008, p. 1071). Hayano's reflection from his experience in Papua New Guinea, sheds light on the concept of auto-ethnographic research where he describes his encounter as a genuine participant

observer approach that “could not have possibly taken place in any way other than full, complete, long-term submersion, even communion, on the part of the ethnographer...” (in Wolcott, 1999, p. 173). Although I agree with Hayano’s argument that suggests the study of oneself with one’s own people, Reed-Danahay (1997) offers a succinct definition that describes the auto-ethnography as “a form of self-narrative that places the self within a social context” (in Wolcott, 1999, p.173). Furthermore, Lievrouw’s (1996) position of how narratives serve to partially constitute identity (or multiple identities) rather than to just reflect them (p.223), serves as a way of contextualizing the experience of producing the video in Guatemala.

Therefore, auto-ethnographic accounts “move from a broad lens focus on individual situatedness within the cultural and social context, to a focus on the inner, vulnerable and often resistant self” (Boyle & Parry, 2007, p. 186). In a pragmatic sense, the auto-ethnography concentrates on the study of personal and biographical documents which, intentionally or unintentionally, offer information about structure, dynamics and function of the consciousness of the author, especially in relation to the cultural context (Sarantakos, 1993, p. 209).

It is also worth noting that although I am focusing on the significance of the ethnographer’s experience as one that contributes to the discourse of ethics, it is equally important to this work to recognize the impact of the collaborative efforts on issues of self-assertion, authenticity and education in cross-cultural settings. Furthermore, a limitation to this article, which I consider to be equally important to the analysis of participatory action and collaboration, is the lack of a formal evaluation of the final video

by the women of trama textiles; as well as assessment of the sales of the video to their economic development.

I use a self-reflective tone in the narrative of this article in order to articulate some of the idiosyncrasies of this experience; and in doing so, I hope to use the long-standing feminist debate around issues of empowerment. To an extent, my standpoint is partly driven by Spivak's (1988) attitude toward subaltern<sup>2</sup> cultures, which argues that "there is no single standpoint for the subaltern subject who lives a series of hybrid identities on the borderlands between home, America, Mexico, India, China, and elsewhere" (in Denzin, 1997, p. 57).

The data consists of journal entries, interview notes, and many hours of video footage that was recorded during this trip – as well as a number of photographs taken. For this paper, they constitute my primary source of information. The act of revisiting the many images and video footage, helped bring about emotions and memories of the time spent in Guatemala, as well as triggering deeper reflections of this experience. The approach to the analysis of data will consist of looking for patterned regularities in data in order to evaluate standards, interpret connections between the culture-sharing group, looking at how issue-relevant meanings emerge, and see how they connect to the larger theoretical frameworks (Wolcott, 1994).

While I highlight the concept of identity as one that provides cues of the past, but that is continually reshaping itself, I must reflect on my own ethnicity. Because I am of Mexican descent, I feel a sense of familiarity with some of the customs or ways of life of Central American countries. Perhaps it is because there are traces of Mayan ancestry

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<sup>2</sup> Subaltern defined as those persons who are socially, politically, and geographically outside of the hegemonic power structure.

present both in Guatemala and México, a common language, comparable customs and a familiar colonial past. However, I do not live the realities of the indigenous women and do not claim to be fully vested in those realities. From the perspective of indigenous culture, I am a *mestiza*, and therefore, have a privileged position within Latino societies compared to those of the indigenous communities.

I am suggesting that through the course of this experience, the women from trama textiles and I have learned from each other, and have appreciated our experiences as unique and different. The representation of the indigenous woman via the documentary became an important element in this experience that opened the discussion of identity. Therefore, I feel it is appropriate to reflect on how documentary films of participatory nature are thought of, while addressing the construction of the video itself as a means to reflect on my own involvement and understanding of the events that took place. Finally, I should note that the participation and collaboration with trama textiles was primarily in the pre-production and production stages of this video. Although the women of trama were able to see a rough cut of the video before my departure from Guatemala, the final edited version was completed back in the U.S.

### **Analysis**

My journal entries reveal three distinct types of themes that I will divide thematically: notes that reflect the stories and experiences of the women of trama textiles; notes that pertain to the logistical and production aspects of the video; and notes that I will refer to as the ‘active reflections of production,’ which point to personal and philosophical questions that came about during the production process itself. The combination of these notes, help me identify patterns of issues I dealt with while in



Guatemala, which are now more salient through the process of analysis. Overall, I have found themes that relate to ethics involved in representation, self-assertion as a key component of personal and collective change, and the impact of working in cross-cultural settings to authenticity and the process of education. Furthermore, revisiting the many hours of video footage helped me remember more distinctively (and viscerally) the experiences of my time in Guatemala.

As a matter of clarity, I would like to note that trama textiles is led by two very unique women named Amparo de León de Rubio and Oralia Chopén (see Figure 4), president and vice-president respectively. Together, Amparo and Oralia are the guiding voices of the association (and video) who granted much of their time to work with us during our stay. Furthermore, most of the women of trama textiles are monolingual groups who primarily spoke languages like Quechua, Kiché or Kachiquel, among others. Amparo and Oralia were the primary translators for the women of the cooperatives, while the accompanying professor and I became the translators between Amparo, Oralia, and the students.

### ***Ethics in Representation***

One day, Amparo and Oralia were teaching me how to weave. It was a slow day at the school, so the three of us had the opportunity to engage in leisurely conversation. I began to share my personal trajectory –what part of México I was from, how I had family across borders, where I worked, how I engaged in my education, etc., and I realized that there was a clear difference of experiences and lifestyle that separated us in ways that went beyond our ancestral connection. Our lives had been shaped in distinct and unique ways that made our views about life completely different. This conversation led me to

emphasize to Amparo and Oralia how important it was to have their direction in terms of what cooperatives we should visit, who we should interview, and how we should communicate their message. We talked about the amount of work involved in producing a video, as well as the importance of having a target audience in mind so that we could be effective about delivering the cooperatives message.

Oralia suggested the possibility of going to Pujujil to document the cooperative. She wanted us to meet her family and interview the women weavers who lived close to her. Among them, was Juana Cojtín (see Figure 5). Juana had visited the weaving store several days earlier where I had the opportunity to meet her. She made a big impression on me because she shared her difficult personal story with great emotion. Oralia translated as Juana spoke in Kiché; she had survived a severe experience of war violence that resulted in the loss of her husband and father, and she was very much in the process of emotional and psychological healing. Oralia was insistent that we visit Pujujil and speak further with Juana Cojtín. Oralia said to me *“I think it would be good to visit Juana and her family in Pujujil because, pobrecita<sup>3</sup> she is really needy, sería bueno.”<sup>4</sup>* To an extent, I was persuaded by Oralia to do an on-camera interview with Juana. Oralia believed that although it was hard for Juana to tell her story, by telling it, she would continue healing. Oralia felt that Juana’s story epitomized the many stories of tragedy among the women, so particular example would resonate with the rest of the women we didn’t have time to interview. I agreed.

This village is located around at the outskirts of Lake Atitlán, the largest lake in the country. As I prepared for our trip, I wondered what the implications would be for

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<sup>3</sup> Pobrecita is translated from Spanish as *‘poor little thing.’*

<sup>4</sup> Sería bueno is translated from Spanish as *‘it would be good.’*

recording Juana's story. Having shared her story with me before, I wondered how she would react in front of the camera. I worried that by interviewing her I would be capitalizing on her story to make an emotional appeal to the audience. Her story was incredibly moving, and as a producer/director, I knew that this was the type of story that was compelling enough to trigger an emotional exchange with viewers. Looking at it pragmatically, I knew that all the right elements for the emotional appeal were there. Nonetheless, I felt conflicted. Knowing that Oralia really wanted me to interview Juana meant that this was significant for her and her community, I felt the responsibility to do it, but how would I approach doing an interview with Juana? How would I manage to convey her story, which merited sharing; but was this ethically or morally responsible?

Lassiter (2005) notes that a tremendous sense of moral responsibility and ethical practice becomes inevitably entrenched in ethnographic work, however, regarding ethics and the work in academia, he further argues that moral and ethical dilemmas are fluid, and that no one solution is the same for all situations. I had met Juana prior to the official interview at Pujujil, and that time, she was very emotional. So in thinking about the on-camera interview, I became conscious of how visual representations are not a harmless activity; things such as emotional behavior, ultimately impacts everyone involved and the scope of the work (Newton, 2001).

In relation to documentary film, it has long been argued that the presence of the camera alters the behavior of participants, usually making them think twice about what they are going to say, how they are going to say it, how they look, etc. In this case, the camera certainly affected Juana's attitude, but instead of making her hold back feelings – which is what I had expected, the camera became an outlet for expression. In other

words, the presence of the camera mediated her experiences and opened a space where she could share her grief with others.

For an image producer there should be a personal moral contract in documenting an image that reflects reality. This contract should require being true to one's self. There is a moral obligation of the producer to his or her subjects; and there is a moral obligation of the producer to the potential audience (Barnouw, 2005). Ultimately, I realized that Juana's emotional state was part of who she was as an individual; she was a sensitive person. Her account was an expression of her most intimate sorrow; and the fact that she wanted to share this made me realize that what I had considered to be a vulnerable moment was really a moment of healing unfolding before the camera. It became apparent that Juana wanted to talk, and more importantly, she did of her own free will in front of the crew, the camera, and me. It didn't matter what interview questions I asked, or how I asked them. Juana shared more than what I had anticipated and she displayed those same raw emotions I had seen before. I realized that this is who she was in the most authentic of ways. I was just lucky enough to have been able to see it and hear it.

### ***Self-Assertion as an Agent for Change***

The women of trama textiles are challenging the way first world nations have traditionally viewed and represented them. The traditional construction is a "homogeneous powerless group often located as implicit victims of particular socioeconomic systems" (Mohanty, 1988, p.54), but this old paradigm is changing. These women are resisting traditional ideologies and are redefining their identity at the intersection of a traditional past and a clear empowering vision of the future.

During a meeting in the town of San Martín Sacatepequez, a group of about 20-25 women gathered with the production crew and me to tell us about their work and experiences (see Figure 6). Amparo hosted this meeting at her home. She had a small and narrow patio where the women sat all around the floor filling the space to maximum capacity. I sat with Amparo directly across from the large group of women. Although we needed to sit in this way to accommodate the spatial restrictions of the room and production recording needs, I realized how ‘separated’ I was from the women. I do not mean to imply a simple difference of seating arrangements, but my personal position of outsider was clearly drawn in relation to their close community.

To facilitate a cordial conversation, I began to ask them general questions about their weavings, their families, and the future. Through their responses, it quickly became evident that they saw me as an outsider, but also as a facilitator. They knew I was unfamiliar with their past and unable to truly know what the loss of entire communities of family and friends would feel like. However, their responses conveyed an educative tone, which helped foster an honest and meaningful conversation between us. I began to sense that they saw me as a conduit to deliver their message to foreign audiences. In other words, they viewed me as a person who had a history that related more to that of the many tourists they met, than to a person with a historical past that to a degree, connected to their own.

Prior to our visit, the women were briefed on why and for what reasons we were making the video; in turn, I felt the women viewed this opportunity as a way to erase particular historic representations, over which they had no control –especially those that represented them as powerlessness and victims of war. An elderly woman in the group

said “...*we aren't asking for charity, we are asking for work. We work hard for our families, and by god's grace, we can continue to work. That is what we want to say to people...*” It dawned to me that we had not been invited to the community to be simple witnesses to these women's living conditions or to feel sympathy for how they lived; rather, we had been invited to be part of their space and their homes, in order to make a stronger connection between their weavings and the families who created them. Their work symbolizes more than simple economic reward, it is a form of personal and communal validation that empowers individuals, women and community.

Prior to visiting this cooperative, Amparo told me that the women wanted to participate in the video and communicate a message. For me, this seemed like a logistical impossibility because we would be meeting dozens people. To interview each one of them would have been very difficult given our time constraints and resource availability. Amparo said to me, “*we want people to see who make the weavings and how they make them... we want people to know that if they support us, they will be helping all of us... and they [viewers] can see that the money goes directly to the women...*” In this context, self-assertion demands the recognition of particular people, cultural recognition of beliefs, rights, or claims about their own identity. Documentaries help voice self-assertion by allowing the people themselves to (re)define who they are by granting a space where their personal voices can be heard. They provide a way of creating a line of discourse that goes against the grain of prevailing ideologies, thereby offering the point of view of people outside of the Western lens perspective.

As I continued to listen to the stories of the women, I noticed patterns that resonated similar experiences and wondered how I could validate all of their stories in

one short video. I felt it was not possible; there were too many people and not enough time within one 25-minute video. However, the overarching story patterns revolving around the civil war, around the loss of loved ones, around strength and goals for the future, I realized that I could illuminate all of these issues by telling the story through the voice of both Amparo and Oralia. I envisioned a sort of collage of faces that would provide a ‘picture’ of the many women who were part of the association, while hearing the stories of Amparo and Oralia. Their voices would act as the binding thread that connected the women together. Although this was a strategic approach to the overall aesthetic of the video and a logistical move to advance the production, this undertaking helped validate the time and collaboration of all the women who so willingly banded together to share their stories.

The self-assertion of women’s identity through the use of video was a crucial element of empowerment in this experience. It elucidated the transformative force of participation in their everyday lives. In reflecting, one major issue emerged, that of their capacity for being their own agents of change. Orford (1992) discusses the emergence of agency “when a relatively powerless group take some form of social action to improve its power position, this power can be thought of as a collective quality. This requires the often difficult tasks of collective awareness of a common cause, the development of group solidarity” (in Siddiquee and Kagan, 2006, p.191).

### ***Negotiations in Cross-Cultural Productions: Authenticity and Education***

Within the discourse of authenticity, Trilling (1971) reflects on the concept of sincerity in both the private and public as a means to honest social relationships: “authenticity has to do with our true self, our individual existence, not as we might

present it to others, but as what ‘really is’, apart from any roles we play” (Handler, 1986, p. 3). In recounting the creation, challenges and numerous intricacies of the video process that occurred between the women of trama textiles, the production crew, and myself, I begin by asking the questions: how do we capture accurate representations of people outside of our own culture without distorting reality? And how do instructors teach students the necessary production skills to work in cross-cultural settings?

Considering the representation of trama textiles, I first had to situate my role(s) with the production crew in order to assess the impact of my decisions on the authenticity of the work. While in Guatemala, my roles included that of being the production director and instructor. As director, I made the final decisions on the direction of the video and saw the project through its completion. As instructor, I taught students various production techniques; I emphasized the importance of everyone working together as a team, and to carefully observe the events happening around them. By emphasizing this, I was hoping that students would get a better pulse of their lived experiences and reflect on them while working on the video. This, I believed, would add to the understanding of collaborative work, as well as develop a sense of engagement with the women of trama textiles, which would ultimately contribute to the overall shaping of the digital film.

However, what I found most challenging during the production was getting the crew to work together on the various production aspects, mainly, dealing with issues of control over content, personal egos, and striking a balance that was collaborative and not individual. Collaborative work entails “complicated power plays and difficult negotiations” (Barbash and Taylor, 1997, p.74). With a student production crew, the nature of collaboration between crew, crew and instructor, or crew and participants, had



serious implications for thinking about the authenticity of representation. I realized that the root of some of the issues stemmed from the environment we were in were beyond our control. After all, I could not attempt to change culturally embedded understandings of the crew when each one of them would make sense of the environment based on their personal experiences and beliefs. As it turned out, the women of trama textiles became natural equalizers to some of the crew's apprehensions about the direction of the video. In the course of our daily work with them, the women communicated their sense of self by giving patience and attention to the multiple set-up and logistical tasks of the production crew. More succinctly, I feel this experience became more authentic because of the continuous interactions with the women, which gave the crew and me a greater sense of who they were as individuals and community.

Pryluck (1976) discusses the fact that "...no one can know a culture as well as its members, it is a practice in the social sciences for investigators to state their understanding in their own words and check these formulations with members of the culture" (p. 26). Through this experience, I came to understand that my decisions were culturally conditioned and even justified by the fluid circumstances of the social environment. Teaching students to produce in cross-cultural settings, must then employ techniques that help them work both as community liaisons and media producers, therefore developing a deeper trust and rapport with participants.

It was important that the women be active participants in the process of production thereby providing a sense of agency necessary to communicate the video's authenticity. But they also, whether consciously or unconsciously, alleviated some of the tensions surrounding the direction of the video. It was through the process of immersion

and collaboration that began we all began to learn from each other. Mediating experiences between students and participants required that we all recognize our personal standpoint. Despite any logistical issues or differences is the approach to the video; I came to realize that the collaborative work and participatory strategies throughout our time in Guatemala transcended what I could appreciate at the time. Nonetheless, it became an experience of growth, understanding and responsibility for those we were working with.

### **Conclusion**

A developing nation like Guatemala, and more specifically, trama textiles as a locally rooted organization, provides a good example of how the participatory model for development can operate. The organization was formed as a way to create unity and collaboration among women, and it has become a force that has challenged the concept of indigenous identity and strength from the bottom-up. Despite the cultural differences, socio-economic and political environment, trust between filmmaker and subjects, language barriers, ethical considerations, and aesthetical concerns were challenges faced while producing the video, the women and I were able to find a space for frank dialogue and communication.

Sensitivity to the reality of the Mayan women and an awareness of portraying a humane story became central to the filmmaking process. Ultimately, and in a more self-reflexive fashion, it is important to recognize ourselves as somehow part of the circumstances of those we are filming. We need to be sensitive to the lives of others to claim we understand who and what we are representing. We need to be conscious of the environment we are involving ourselves with when filming; and finally, we need to truly

listen to what are participants are saying. These reflections might seem obvious, but I think that they are often overlooked when we are engrossed in the act of “being tourists” in a particular place. The development of the documentary, the creative approach to filming, along with a deeper philosophical reflection about the experience, were primordial elements in the analysis of this case. Furthermore, literature that discusses collaboration cross-culturally, with an emphasis on advocacy and empowerment continues to be a space of much needed scholarly attention. This experience has solidified my commitment to cross-cultural education and I hope it is an example of exercising the mind, heart, and practical skills as academics, professionals, or otherwise.

The lives of the women of trama textiles are as intricate and colorful as their weavings, and their history is reflected in their art: their weavings have diverse patterns which represent past struggles, new beginnings, and a changing present; but together, they articulate a complex past with multiple shades of color. Their weavings are a sign of an enduring respect to their ancestors; this tradition has been alive for centuries and continues to thrive in modern times. In myriad ways, their weavings represent the long fight of the past and the challenges of the present. It is in the beauty and distinguishable patterns of these women’s weavings that perhaps in a less obvious way, their courageous stories are told through the video.

Figures



Figure 1. Map of Guatemala.



Figure 2. Map of location where the cooperatives are found.



Figure 3. Backstrap loom weaving.



Figure 4. Amparo (left), Oralia (middle) with student.



Figure 5. Juana Cojtín.



Figure 6. Group of women from San Martín Sacatepequez.

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