2010

More than Ever We Need to Listen: Juchitán Zapotec Experience According to Blossoms of Fire

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Available at: https://via.library.depaul.edu/dialogo/vol13/iss1/6
More than Ever We Need to Listen: Juchitán Zapotec Experience
According to Blossoms of Fire

Cover Page Footnote
This article is from an earlier iteration of Diálogo which had the subtitle "A Bilingual Journal." The publication is now titled "Diálogo: An Interdisciplinary Studies Journal."
A few decades ago, Bolivian director Jorge Sanjines— one of the most prominent figures in the new Latin American Cinema whose work was primarily centered on Indigenous and lower class peoples- defined filmmaking as a horizontal process that simultaneously made the community being filmed the central agent and the recipient of the documentary product. In this way, the filmmaker fulfilled the responsibility of engaging in the creation of a genuinely “self-conscious historiography” that came from “within” and that fostered the subaltern’s resistance to western modes of representation and knowledge. As ever, at the beginning of this new millennium, notions of Indigenous identity have thus visibly come to intersect with discourses on self-representation and self-determination. Because of its role as a mediator and of its hybrid nature, Indigenous video can be considered an example of border crossing project. In fact, the appropriation of the technological media allows for a mutual renovation between “modern” and “traditional” systems of signification. In contrast to most traditional ethnographic filmmaking that often times objectifies Indigenous peoples as static, cultural icons, and relegates them to a long gone, mythic past, Indigenous video comes to terms with the present and aims at solving the daily tensions and contradictions between mainstream and traditional societies.

Given that the history of documentary filmmaking about Indigenous peoples intersects with anthropological and ethnographic research, for the purpose of this essay I would like to focus on the ways non-Indigenous videomakers has recently begun to problematize mainstream visual representations of Indigenous peoples lives and experiences. The works of grassroots videomakers who do not necessarily belong to local Indigenous communities, but who are genuinely involved in their struggles for political, social, cultural and religious rights, speak to new ways of shaping relationships between “outsiders” and “insiders” that effectively question the hegemonic construct “subject/object” of investigation/representation. Collaborative work between community and video makers being key in this process, I will examine how the documentary Blossoms of Fire produced and directed by U.S. (non-Indigenous) documentary filmmakers Maureen Gosling and Ellen Osborne helps deconstruct mainstream stereotypical images of Indigenous peoples as subjects and presents them as the enunciators of their own histories.

In her work on Australian aboriginal media and art production, Marcia Langton critiques the assumptions of authenticity claimed by some aboriginal artists that are exclusively based on the recognition of one’s own ethnic background. According to her, this is symptomatic of an “ancient and universal feature of racism” that ultimately portends the view of an undifferentiated “other,”

More specifically, the assumption is that all Aborigines are alike and equally understand each other, without regard to cultural variation, history, gender, sexual preference and so on. It is a demand for censorship: there is a ‘right’ way to be Aboriginal, and any Aboriginal film or video producer will necessarily make a ‘true’ representation of ‘Aboriginality.’ This thinking is as much based on fear of difference as is white Australian racism (“Aboriginal Art and Film. The Politics of Representation”).

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DE NUESTRA AMÉRICA

MORE THAN EVER WE NEED TO LISTEN:
JUCHITÁN ZAPOTEC EXPERIENCE
ACCORDING TO BLOSSOMS OF FIRE

DVD cover (modified) of film, Blossoms of Fire
Although Langton's claim revolves specifically around the Australian aboriginal context, it nonetheless fleshes out the influential role that, nowadays, essentialist thinking still has on the understanding and theorizing of creative work both by and about Indigenous peoples. The testimonio genre offers a viable response to this concern in that it encourages collective work between the subaltern (in some cases Indigenous men and women) and mainstream intellectuals. Most importantly, it tends to erase the centrality of the author and the notion of literary "authority" that has characterized bourgeois writing since the Renaissance period and to legitimize, instead, the narrator's voice (Beverly 35).

Similarly, video projects informed by cooperation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultural producers highlights the oral and visual power of the participants' own stories, thus stimulating new critical and cultural perspectives. These validate cross-cultural work as a viable tool in the legitimization of Indigenous voices' representational value, as well as in the construction of knowledge that stems from the theoretical, ethical and ontological principles of specific local communities. In this regard, it is worthwhile mentioning that the recent flourishing (throughout Latin America) of Indigenous videomaking (most commonly known as video comunitario and, often times, carried out also by non-Indigenous videomakers such as Guillermo Monteforte in Oaxaca, and the Chiapas Media Project in Chiapas) has provided fertile ground for academic discussions about the influential role of communication technology in Indigenous peoples' lives.

Considering that these projects usually arise in response to the political and social circumstances of the moment, it is no surprise that, until recently, issues of power, resistance and political agency have been some of the most popular topics of research among scholars across the disciplines. Nonetheless, the prolific video production of the past few years and experimentation with the fictional genre (as in the case of Bolivia) have called specific cultural and aesthetic approaches that examine, in depth, the epistemological structures of video narratives (Cusi Wortham, 2004; Faris 1992, 1993; Ginzburg 1991, 1994, 2002, 2008; Himpele, 2004, 2008; Schiwy, 2009; Smith, 2003, 2006; Turner, 1992, 2002ab; Wilson and Stewart, 2008). As a way to contribute to this scholarly conversation, I find it important to explore also how the voices included in a non-Indigenous documentary such as Blossoms of Fire articulate ways of representing the world and human experience that conform to traditional knowledge and societal values. In light of Howard Campbell and Susan Green's study, we will also proceed to interrogate the role of the documentary makers' "western" feminist gaze in the representation of Indigenous women, and try to identify what stories could still be told.

MORE THAN EVER, WE NEED TO LISTEN . . .

Produced in 2000, Blossoms of Fire is a 74 minutes documentary that portrays the lives and colorful "matrifocal" culture of the Juchitán Zapotec community in Oaxaca, Mexico. Here, women appear in their elegance, power and intelligence in response to the damaging, stereotyping descriptions that British journalist Jocasta Shakespeare published in an article for Elle magazine in a 1994. The documentary addresses the central role of women both within and outside the family, and shows how traditional notions of gender and gender roles managed to survive in the community despite Spanish, Mexican and North American cultural hegemony. Blossoms of Fire demonstrates that Zapotec women are the real protagonists in the passing down of local traditions, knowledge, and language, as well as in the preservation of community and family values. The narrative consists of a significant number of interviews with both women and men, and represents what I would call an outstanding example of testimonial documentary. Drawing from Freya Schiwy's work, I read Blossoms of Fire as a possible combination between Latin American testimonial cinema and contemporary Indigenous media. Similarly to testimonial cinema, this documentary is an example of "cinematic practice with the people" and "history being made by the people themselves" (Schiwy 75). Conversely, the emphasis on collective and individual voices over the omniscient narrator's "objectivity" and the interpretation of traditional cultural values within the context of the community reveals the project's affinity to most Indigenous videomaking. The first person accounts of local community members prove that "outsider" documentary filmmakers can succeed in creating a text that gives full voice to its subjects and therefore call into question the stereotypical notion of inarticulate Indigenous peoples. As we will see, these testimonies are illustrative of a sense of womanhood, of being in society and of looking at the world that specifically pertains to Juchitán Zapotec culture.

The documentary opens with an introduction on its genesis by director-narrator Gosing: the project came about as a response to a scandalous article which described Isthmus Zapotec women as "red-hot mamas" and as part of a "culture in which hyper-sensual women rule their hen-pecked husbands, take teenage lovers at will, and live to dance, drink, and make money" (Acosta, 2000). In these scenes, groups of women comment on and express their profound disappointment towards the article, thus setting the stage for the video's ultimate goal: to legitimate its subjects' viewpoints, emotions and individual experiences as primary sources of knowledge. This also seems to invite the viewer to question the rationale behind which, throughout time, mainstream media here and in many other colonial contexts shapes our knowledge of Indigenous peoples. In Mexico, cinematic, literary, and artistic projects often times financed by institutional organisms such as CDI (Comisión Nacional para el Desarrollo de los Pueblos Indígenas) have produced a set of "institutionalized stereotypes" (Taylor, Analisa 113) that depict Indigenous peoples either as cultural relics of the past (usually the Aztec civilization) or as poor, uneducated peasants. Since post-revolutionary times, this has helped forward the rhetoric of a unified homogenous nation whose Indian roots have been simultaneously defined, celebrated and held in contempt by the ruling mestizo elites.

In this documentary, the participants themselves deconstruct institutional images of "Indianness." They present viewers with their own definitions of local cultural values and, at the same time, overtly criticize the biases and common places that portray Zapotec culture as matriarchal and conservative. In the opening scenes some of the speakers propose their own perspectives on matriarchy and gender, bringing to our attention the reductive "if not misleading"- effects of "abstract" definitions and categorizations of Indigenous ways of life. The excerpt below illustrates this pretty eloquently and introduces, as if in a nutshell, some of the motives that will unfold in the documentary narrative,

\ldots el patriarcado no avanzó totalmente como en la mayoría de las sociedades que han sido dominadas, verdad, por un desarrollo industrializador o modernizador. En Juchitán no avanzó de esta forma. O sea, aquí se mantuvieron estructuras matriarcales. O sea, una forma de vida en donde la mujer tiene peso para dirigirla, para orientar esa vida hacia una seguridad
Between home and the workplace) which draws our attention to the gap between the archive and the repertoire. If, throughout colonial history, the relationship between the archive and the repertoire has been mistakenly polarized as, “it too readily falls into a binary, with the written and archival constituting hegemonic power and the repertoire providing the anti-hegemonic challenge” (22) this case shows, instead, that the digital media allows “the subaltern other” to literally embody her/his own agency. The women appearing in this documentary lay the ground for the shaping, in their own terms, of what Jorge Sanjinés would call a self-conscious historiography. That is to say, they reverse the derogatory, colonial equation “Indigenous women-submissive nurturers” by articulating, on the screen, their own protagonism in the daily transmission of cultural and ethical values. Furthermore, even if we are not dealing with the type of “revolutionary” documentary-making proposed by Latin American directors between the sixties and the seventies,5 Blossoms of Fire significantly contributes to rescue Zapotec experiences against a backdrop of globalizing cultures and increasing devaluation of local identities.

One distinctive feature of this documentary is that some of the personal accounts are reminiscent of traditional, oral ways of passing down local knowledge. For example, in the second part of the documentary -which focuses on motherhood and on the complementariness of gender roles- the viewers are briefly introduced to the amusing story of a young woman who gives birth to her child while her husband also “tries” to feel the pain.

A gifted “storyteller,” the midwife offers such an engaging, entertaining interpretation that -also due to some close-ups on colorful, pictorial representations of parenthood- the experience and memory of the event seem to come alive on the screen. For a few seconds, we are pleasantly captured into a charming, performative moment; into a space where the narrator, the story and its listeners come together. The intimate, emotional proximity between the speaker and the viewer that this scene so effectively generates, defies any idea of objectivity and critical distance as it has been traditionally pursued by much ethnographic documentary. We are not asked to step back and watch these narratives unfold, as if they were re-creating a world outside our own. Rather, we are invited to step in, laugh and empathize with the speaker: like Indigenous storytelling teaches us, it is only by sharing in other people’s stories that we can truly understand human experiences. While in Walter Benjamin’s perspective, the invention of printing and of twentieth century modern society technologies were detrimental to the art of storytelling,6 we can otherwise argue that, for most Indigenous peoples today, visual technology is an invaluable tool to re-discover and share traditional repertoires and personal anecdotes with Indigenous and non-Indigenous audiences alike.

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Note that the participant does not necessarily give us a definition of the concept in question. Rather, she stresses on how she and the rest of the women experience and -even more so- feel (sentimos) the centrality of their roles as mothers and wives. From her statements we gather that they have acquired full consciousness, acceptance, and pride in their societal responsibilities. Although this passage -and, for that matter, the entire documentary- does not tell us how much say women have in choosing their roles, it nonetheless delivers a strong statement about emotional strength and individual confidence. The fact that the entire community regards these women as powerful decision makers (para orientar esta vida) leads us to conclude that, within the context of today’s struggles for cultural re-claiming, they themselves can be main agents of change.4

The question of “who defines who (and how)” is quite relevant to this discussion in that it points to the ways traditional academic research has been interpreting Indigenous cultures throughout centuries. The colonial framework informing such knowledge is one that, by default, usually dismisses the voice, the language and worldviews of the “subaltern other” by resorting uniquely to western categories of interpretation. Often times, ethnographic documentary filmmaking and, along with it, the imposition of foreign systems of signification such as European languages and linear writing have been pivotal to cement the supremacy of colonial discourse over Indigenous epistemologies. In her study of performance in the Americas, Diane Taylor refers to this as a process that has resulted in the fashioning of “archival memory.” This is preserved in documents, literary texts, videos, archaeological items, films, cd, videos, etc. and is traditionally housed in the public, institutional building (i.e. the archive). By contrast, she goes on to explain, the “repertoire,”

enacts embodied memory: performances, gestures, orality, movement, dance, singing -in short, all those acts usually thought of as ephemeral, nonreproducible knowledge. Repertoire, etymologically “a treasury, an inventory,” also allows for individual agency, referring also to “the finder, discoverer,” and meaning “to find out.” The repertoire requires presence: people participate in the production and reproduction of knowledge by “being there”, being a part of the transmission (20).

The personal accounts (or “repertoire” material) presented in Gosling-Osborne’s narrative reinstate the value of the visual image and of the oral utterance over the hegemony of the archival document. Each participant is presented in her/his own daily setting (this being the house, the local market, or the streets between home and the work place) which draws our attention to the entire social, cultural and “geographic” context whence their experience stem. Even more interesting, in articulating their own specific cultural identity through the oral utterance and body language, the participants exemplify the possibility of bridging the gap between the archive and the repertoire. If, throughout colonial

5 

Estaba un papá muy desesperado que quería ver a su bebé. Quería él participar en el parto. Le dije, “buena entrada, pásale.” Y empezó a empujar a la mamá, y pujaba mucho él, pujaba mucho (…). por fin de que, cuando nació el bebé, y hace “Uff! Nos cansamos dice.” “¿Por qué?” le dije, “Como nos dolió tener este hijo” dice, “porque yo también lo tuve,” dice. “Yo sentí igual al dolor que mi esposa.”

6

A gifted “storyteller,” the midwife offers such an engaging, entertaining interpretation that -also due to some close-ups on colorful, pictorial representations of parenthood- the experience and memory of the event seem to come alive on the screen. For a few seconds, we are pleasantly captured into a charming, performative moment; into a space where the narrator, the story and its listeners come together. The intimate, emotional proximity between the speaker and the viewer that this scene so effectively generates, defies any idea of objectivity and critical distance as it has been traditionally pursued by much ethnographic documentary. We are not asked to step back and watch these narratives unfold, as if they were re-creating a world outside our own. Rather, we are invited to step in, laugh and empathize with the speaker: like Indigenous storytelling teaches us, it is only by sharing in other people’s stories that we can truly understand human experiences. While in Walter Benjamin’s perspective, the invention of printing and of twentieth century modern society technologies were detrimental to the art of storytelling,6 we can otherwise argue that, for most Indigenous peoples today, visual technology is an invaluable tool to re-discover and share traditional repertoires and personal anecdotes with Indigenous and non-Indigenous audiences alike.

The documentary soundtrack reinstates the centrality of elements of popular elements in constructing a narrative that helps shape specific ideas about Juchítan ways of life and relationships between community members. Quite effective are, in this sense, the traditional songs in Zapotec whose nuances and meanings can be barely matched by the English subtitles. The following lines tell a local story of love and marriage,
The kind of romantic love described here affords interesting hints at traditional perceptions of gender differences. It is a trope that, after all, is not unique to Zapotec culture: a quick glance at traditional music, literary and artistic repertoires worldwide proves this promise of idyllic life and eternal love to be quite recurrent especially in rural societies. What is specific about Juchitán, however, is the centrality of the mother in the proposal ritual, “I’ve spoken with your mother.” While, in a patriarchal society, we would expect a father to have the last word in his daughter’s future life, the idea of maternal authority conveyed by these lines repositions Zapotec matrifocality as a marker of Indigenous identity.

In relation to the rest of the documentary, these lines effectively accompany the sequences on both rural and maritime daily lives, as well as the participants’ comments on social and economic activities. Doing so, they contribute to reinstate, over and over again, peoples’ intimate bonds with the place and sense of belonging to the community. This is, indeed, a theme that contemporary Zapotec writers have also been attending to quite prolifically. Some extra-textual references to the poetry by two young writers from Juchitán, Natalia Toledo and Irma Pineda prove vital to complement our understanding of the visual elements, sounds, and personal accounts that Gosling-Osborne’s camera catches. Mostly in Zapotec, their poems speak to young people’s Zapotec lives and childhoods that were forged in the city of Juchitán, its backyards, its natural landscapes, and among people who still honor the beliefs and ethical values of older and ancient generations.

In the poem “La Casa de Olga,” the speaker remembers the patio where, as a child, she would watch a woman embroider a piece of velvet fabric, “Una mujer indómita / bordaba el terciopelo de la espera. De sus manos / surgía un manojo de formas / para los telares que tienen su anochecido oficio…” (Toledo 73). Accompanying also the video’s opening scenes, these few lines provide a literary counterpart to the colorful and captivating shots on local clothing that play a significant part in the documentary’s visual design. We see Zapotec women in their embroidered dresses and huipiles while working in the market place, at home and during major community celebrations. Even though casual clothing is nowadays predominant in the whole state of Oaxaca, it is not uncommon to see women dressed in their traditional outfits, especially in Juchitán. The ancient etymology of the place name being Ixtaxochitlán, “lugar de flores blancas,” it does not surprise that the typical women’s dresses of this area are embroidered with a variety of big, colorful flowers. We can infer that the recurrence of such images throughout the entire narrations helps lay stress on one of the most “visible” ways in which local women deliberately choose to manifest and claim their own sense of Zapotec identity. Given that globalized production of commodities and non-Indigenous aesthetic values are not foreign to Juchitán -television, radio programs, internet, and large economic investments in the area are certainly influential in this respect -ongoing practice (and use) of handmade local clothing can be regarded as an adamantly statement of cultural survival and resistance to the homogenizing forces of neoliberal markets.

Refer to Toledo’s poem, the image of the marine tree7 “Dormíamos colgadas bajo un pochote marino” in the poem’s following lines is reminiscent, this time, of the place at the speaker’s house where the neighboring fishermen would meet. This image also takes us back to some of the documentary scenes, such as those of the fishermen’s gatherings by the shore where the families come to meet them. A brief, traditional song from the coastal region accompanies one of these sequences and foregrounds the role of the strong assertive woman who is now “scolding” her husband for bringing back a turtle,

The other afternoon I went home  
When I arrived you’d already gone  
Now you’re back.  
What did you bring?  
A turtle from San Mateo!

Interestingly, the turtle is a trope that is shared by several American Indigenous cultures from North and South America. Not only does it represent physical nourishment, but it also carries a variety of symbolic, sacred meanings. Called bighu in Isthmus Zapotec and pego in 17th century Valley Zapotec,8 it is an important symbol of the earth and of several creation stories.9 In the poem “En el vienbre de la noche avanzo” (In the womb of the night I move), Zapotec writer Irma Pineda ingeniously weaves this traditional image of the animal world into that of a quite “anthropomorphized” being, a noble embodiment of attachment to the earth, time, wisdom, knowledge, healing, and moral power,

Busco  
Una tortuga sabia cargadora de mil años  
Una tortuga comedora de tierra  
Bebedora profunda de los días  
Curadora de nostalgias  
Para sanar un alma que me duele tanto ( . . . )  
Busco  
Una tortuga que me regale  
Sus afilad dientes . . . (En el vienbre de la noche avanzo).

If we were to use these lines to better understand the documentary’s cultural depth, we could venture to say that the image of the turtle described by the poet somehow seems to evoke the human qualities of the women appearing on the screen. Within the context of Indigenous philosophies, parallelisms between the animal and the human world are not uncommon: often times, they help explain where people’s actions, beliefs, and dispositions come from. The “tortuga sabia cargadora de mil años” clearly embodies the wisdom of an immemorial past that she will continue to carry on during years to come. For instance, one of the male participants in the video reminds us that women play a central role in the continuity of the Zapotec language and, consequently, of the wisdom that it has been encoding since time immemorial,

Es através de las madres como adquirimos todo el sabor de nuestros guisos. Y el gusto del paladar se va conformando con toda esa sabiduría que tienen. Es a través de las madres como se transmite y como se enseña la lengua zapoteca. Es a través de las madres como vamos adquiriendo una serie de elementos para poder ir valorando nuestra propia cultura.
The turtle is also a creature of the earth (comedora de tierra), which evokes the portrayal of Doña Cecilia, a middle aged woman from a rural neighborhood who is remarkably devoted to her inherited plot of land. By the same token, as a bebedora profunda de los días, the turtle conjures up the image of several Juchitecan women who, in addition to raising their families, work at the local marketplace from dawn to dusk.

While capitalism and neoliberal thinking insist on consecrating the youth as the only and main actor in the “progress” of society and in the reproduction of culture, the profound respect for the knowledge and for the intellectual protagonism of mothers and grandmothers in the life of Juchitán Zapotec society are indicative of a system of ethical values that has survived the effects of modern alienation. Rather than being merely based on the accumulation of wealth, authority and respect are concepts that are contingent to women’s autonomy and to their pivotal roles within their families and society at large. Along with the eloquent, visual imagery on traditional clothing and on daily activities, the video’s several allusions to the oral traditions and Zapotec cultural milieu further the idea of a community that still holds in great value communal life, the continuity of Indigenous traditional knowledge and ways of symbolizing the natural environment. In this sense, the women presented in the video manifest a physical, emotional and spiritual connection to the place that is unique to their culture. In their day-to-day professional and domestic activities they therefore reproduce not only their roles as mothers and administrators of the family wealth, but also as wives that stand in an equal and reciprocal relationship with their husbands.

**MOTHERHOOD AND WOMANHOOD**

As I discussed above, motherhood in Juchitán is what primarily constitutes the value and strength of a woman. It usually grants her a central function in the forging and the reinforcement of generational bonds, as well as in the passing down of the Zapotec language and culture. Moreover, as some of the participants claim, far from being considered an experience that stereotypically condemns to a life of endless household tasks, motherhood is the quintessential embodiment of pleasure and of women’s agency, “there are strength and value in being mothers, we enjoy it . . .”

The mother is an omnipresent, central figure in the life of the individual, and not least in the preservation of family, generational, and emotional ties. In the central part of the documentary, we are presented with the two touching testimonies of an older and a younger woman who generously share with us the feelings that they nurture for their mothers. Interestingly, these scenes are introduced by the voice of a little school girl, who tells a traditional story about the love that will always hold mother and daughter together. The first one, a Zapotec speaker, sadly remembers the recent death of her mother; now she goes to visit her to the cemetery twice a week, “Thursdays and Sundays I go to the cemetery. If I don’t go, I can’t eat. I just lie down in my hammock feeling sad . . .” She was very old. She’d sit in her hammock and talk to me. We can’t forget our mothers, because we live so closely with them. In a similar way, the second one expresses the central place that her mother will still occupy in her life, “Mi madre es todo, es el núcleo de mi vida. No concibo a la idea de estar sin ella. Mi deseo tan grande es que ella siga estando a mi lado. Es lo que en este momento yo deseo, que mi madre siga viviendo muchos años más y que esté contigo.”

In *The Isthmus Zapotees. A Matrifocal Culture of Mexico*, cultural anthropologist Beverly Newbold Chiñas provides some interesting insights into the significance of motherhood among Isthmus Zapotees.11 Explaining the role of the mother in this society, the author borrows Nancy Tanner’s definitions of matrifocal cultures, according to which the mother is “structurally, culturally and affectively central” (85): women are the decision makers, and relations between sexes are based on equity. Quite interestingly, Newbold Chiñas goes on to articulate her outlook on the cultural and affective centrality of Zapotec women in contrast with North American notions of motherhood. While the Zapotec mother is the primary agent in the “functioning whole of the culture” (85) and the family figure that usually establishes the most enduring bonds with the children, in U.S. culture matrifocality “has no legitimacy because it is seen as an aberrant, dysfunctional family form that sometimes occurs but should not be encouraged” (86).

The substantial difference between North American and Juchitecan perceptions of motherhood relates to specific material and cultural conditions that would go beyond the scope of this essay to analyze. What I consider relevant to point out, however, is that the experiences presented in *Blossoms of Fire* afford us with the possibility to envision new critical approaches to Indigenous women’s lives. As Langston would probably contend, it is not a matter of finding “authenticity” in the director’s ethnic background but of, I would say, looking at this documentary as an attempt to formulate indigeneity from within. Therefore, a culturally appropriate feminist understanding of these stories requires us to acknowledge the limits of North American gender analysis and to reflect on the theoretical significance of women experiences as well as the longstanding societal values that regulate the life of the community.

Traditional gender complementariness and equity are fundamental traits that are shared by several Indigenous cultures across the Americas (in Indigenous rural societies from the Andes, for example, men and women are seen as inseparable halves that cannot subsist without each other) but that colonialism has profoundly altered, if not eradicated. In Indigenous societies where women too use to share in land ownership and to have access to economic and natural resources, privatization and new colonial systems of development came to the detriment of community cohesion, generalized reciprocity and symbolic complementarity (“Gender and Indigenous Peoples. Briefing Note,” 1). In contrast, and according to the women appearing on the documentary, Isthmus Zapotees view the centrality of the mother as “the way things should be” -and, for that matter, have always been.

Rather than being perceived as counter-discourse to patriarchy, “matriarchy” is the ultimate articulation of a system of interdependent gender roles that has endured throughout time. Specifically, the documentary shows that Juchitán Zapotec women derive their strength and power from their own economic independence as entrepreneurs in the public space, and from the responsibilities that they take in the physical and emotional sustenance of the family, “Pues si, somos como una yunta de ganado. El ganado si no van parejo, no jala. Así es que somos acá, nosotros jalamos parejo.” Even more so, some of them are still the direct inheritors of family plots, which further confirms their roles as primary agents in the preservation of gender complementariness and of the ancient ties that hold the community and the land together. Cecilia and her husband tell us the story of the plot that she inherited when she was younger and explain how, throughout their life together, collaboration and a balanced distribution of

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daily tasks between the two was vital for the cohesion of the entire family. Cecilia’s husband emphasizes and acknowledges her qualities as a family administrator and “leader,” thus displaying profound respect for her as a woman, as well as for the traditional, ethical values of husband and wife relationship, “Nuestros sueldos, los que hemos tenido sueldos, se le deposita en manos de ellas, y ellas van administrando y van resolviendo y van programando económicamente para que así de esta manera fructifiquen.” Similarly, another male participant clarifies,

Las actividades de los hombres y las de las mujeres están muy marcadas en la sociedad… las actividades que realizan las mujeres se complementan con la actividad del hombre. Eso hace que tanto los hombres como las mujeres tengan una seguridad en sí mismos. Y además, así como el hombre puede sostener una familia, las mujeres también lo pueden hacer porque tienen un trabajo valioso.

The comments of male community members on gender roles and on women’s centrality in Juchitán powerfully add to the fabric of the documentary. While the women’s polyphonic testimonio is explicitly dominating, men’s voices contribute to the narrative’s sense of “impartiality,” thus keeping us from suspecting a biased, “Zapotec women-centric” view. That is to say, Blossoms of Fire seeks to provide a gender-balanced, emic representation of Juchitán Indigenous societal structure that validates, per se, both women and men’s experiences alike. The endeavor to build a narrative based on a multiplicity and variety of voices is further expressed in the section dedicated to homosexual identity. Similarly to the opening sequences, this too presents testimonies in which the interviewees give their own fluid definition of homosexuality and gender in response to the inaccuracy and biases of western patriarchal and heteronormative discourse,

Las lesbianas aquí en Juchitán son más aceptadas dentro de la sociedad dentro de todos los ambientes, ¿no? ya sea homosexuales, bisexuales, heterosexuales, o trissexuales, ¿no? En el Estados Unidos, lógico, ¿no? es diferente porque ese es un país primermundista. Las lesbianas no se aceptan, los homosexuales no se aceptan. Pero aquí todo el mundo es libre de ser lo que quiera ( . . . )

Once again, we are presented with the idea that, despite the tragic events of colonial history, this is how life has continued to be in Juchitán up until today. Furthermore, the several individual perspectives on local perceptions of gender, family roles and sexual identity contribute to emphasize not only the community’s shared values, but also the importance of the individual voice in the unfolding of the visual narrative. This is an issue that, as Laurel C. Smith observes, community videomaking sometimes overlooks,
To distinguish their productions from other visual media, most Indigenous videomakers (and their advocates) point to the community-center focus of their work; although very few talk about how the video-mediated visions of some community members may potentially conflict with the interests of other community residents (114).

If, as Blossoms of Fire testimonies concur to illustrate, the strength of Isthmus Zapotec identity relies on the preservation of traditional cultural and collective values, we can also ask ourselves whether or not there are other sides to this story. Can we think of other individual voices missing from this narrative? And if so, what could they tell us?

**WHAT THE DOCUMENTARY COULD STILL TELL US . . .**

In the article “Historia de las presentaciones de la mujer zapoteca del Istmo de Tehuantepec,” Campbell and Green explore the extent to which, throughout history, travelers and scholars from the United States, Europe and Mexico City have been re-constructing and circulating “colonial” images of Zapotec Indigenous women. They observe that while feminist scholars, artists, and magazines such as Elle and National Geographic have been particularly attracted to this group, their political agendas have ultimately led them to aestheticize and exoticize Zapotec women,

A su vez, las intelectuales feministas mexicanas y extranjeras se han apropiado de las mujeres zapotecas como un símbolo de liberación femenina que debería ser emulado por sus menos afortunadas hermanas del primer mundo (ver, por ejemplo, Bennholdt-Thomsen 1989; Giebeler 1993). Las feministas han celebrado el poder de las mujeres zapotecas, la belleza de sus ropas, así como los costumbres locales que exaltan el estatus de las mujeres (105).

Overall, and in light of our previous reflections, Gosling-Osborne’s work makes a step beyond what Campbell and Green would consider “anthropologically suspicious” (105). As we have seen, the straightforward and highly communicative quality of the audiovisual testimony breaks away from the objectifying aura of the still picture. The experiences being presented and the use of the Indigenous language by some of the speakers legitimizes ways of looking at and conceptualizing the world that have been in place since colonial times and that, as such, testify to the survival of Zapotec cultural ancient traits. The sense of mutual confidence and intimacy between the filmmakers and the community is also a salient, palpable aspect that pervades the entire narrative. In fact, the participants’ relaxed demeanor in front of the camera and in-depth comments about cultural and family values are symptomatic of a significant level of trust towards the documentary troupe.

Along with the “absence-presence” of an implicit interviewer, the shifts -in the opening sequences and elsewhere in the video- from the “background” narrator’s voice to Zapotec women’s personal accounts effectively convey the idea of a “mixed-mode” documentary that articulates both the filmmaker and the “subjects” viewpoints. This constitutes a fundamental step towards the abolition of a traditional, western, monolingual narrative in favor of an Indigenous-centered documentary that helps reconstruct individual and collective histories from within the specific cultural constructs of the enunciators themselves. In terms of filming strategies, the directors also point out the pivotal role of Florinda, a local collaborator who, thanks to her bilingual skills and familiarity with the place helped reduce the distance between the filmmakers and the community members, thus fostering friendship and a trustful collaboration between the two. As Gosling herself claimed once with regard to a film she shot with Les Blank, this type of mutual reliability and exchange should be, indeed, the foundation of the documentary filmmaker’s agenda,

When I worked with (documentary filmmaker) Les Blank, we always wanted to be careful about how we dealt with people. And most of the time, they were happy with the outcome, which is a good testament. For a film made in Cajun country, some of the elite, upper-class didn’t like it because it was about the poor people, but the poor people loved it. Often times, it’s very emotional for them to see the film because they see family members who are gone, kids that are grown up. It’s a record for them (Acosta, “An Indomitable Culture”).

Nonetheless, the celebratory tone that envelops the entire documentary and, along with it, the visual, colorful imagery that foregrounds traditional clothing and exotic-looking natural landscapes leave room for some reconsideration of Campbell-Green’s statement. Understandably informed by a feminist perspective, the deep appreciation for human experiences that put gender balance and women’s successful lives at the center of the narrative eventually tends to sacrifice a more thorough analysis of Isthmus Zapotec society. For example, the documentary does not delve into possible forms of subjugation or domestic violence that some Zapotec women experience on a daily basis. This would have helped the viewers formulate a more solid idea of how, despite the resilience and ethnic pride of Zapotec people, centuries of colonialism and of patriarchal ideology at the state and community level may have altered women’s agency in particular. Obsdulia Ruiz Campbell addresses this quite eloquently in her personal essay “Representations of Isthmus Women: a Zapotec Woman’s Point of View.” Here, she tells us how, as a young woman from the neighboring town of San Blas Atempa, she refused to comply with the traditional ritual of abduction (rapto), which she viewed as an act of denigration and humiliation,

Rapto (when a man carries off a woman to be his bride) is a shameful and denigratory action for women, and they know it ( . . .) My mother and other relatives told me that they were abducted with violent force, that they received blows to their legs so that they would not resist so much and were later pulled by their hands to the houses of their boyfriends were they deflowered (139).

Domestic violence and, along with it, the imposition of rules that clearly put women in a subordinate and disadvantageous position are factors that have been plaguing the lives of Indigenous (and non-Indigenous) women worldwide. Although I am in no position to pass judgment on the ethical and philosophical principles governing any Indigenous society, as a woman I feel nonetheless obligated to at least pose the question as to how young Zapotec women are responding not only to violence, but also to traditional ways of defining the sense of womanhood in society.

In a similar way, the impact of transnational migration on younger generations could have been another relevant point worth discussing. Towards the end, Blossoms of Fire does indeed tackle
recent issues of economic development, globalization and major governmental initiatives in the area (such as the Plan Puebla Panama) that are critically compromising the existence and prosperity of local economies. Yet, it only briefly mentions how these policies are especially affecting the lives of younger generations and families that, as a result, are often attracted by professional opportunities in Mexico City and in the United States. Migration has a number of consequences both on the family and on the community’s sense of cohesion. When the children leave, will they be able to speak their native language away from the native place? Besides, who will take their mothers’ place in the market? The disruption of national borders, and people’s ever-increasing tendency to migrate elsewhere in search of better living conditions prompt us to look at Indigenous individual and collective identities as “itinerant,” and not necessarily physically rooted in place any longer. Although the connection between the individual and place has been recently dismantled by postmodern theories in order to justify the formulation of a hybrid, “uprooted” and -I would add- “placeless” identity, I concur with Sandy Grande who explains that while American Indigenous scholars attempt to formulate the notion of “transcendent subjectivities” they also look at transcendence as something rooted in historical place and in the sacred connection to the land (482). What are therefore the strategies that, especially younger generations of Juchitán Zapotec men and women are devising in order to re-connect the community as a whole and to re-unite, at least symbolically, with the home place?

Whether resulting from male, patriarchal authority or from economic policies that discourage local initiative, the aforementioned forms of individual and collective “dismemberments” are equally worth our consideration. In the same way as the documentary exposes us to the successful lives of those women who are proud of abiding to the their traditional heritage, we should, as viewers, feel compelled to interrogate possible “dissident” voices, and differing experiences.

Despite its several question marks Blossoms of Fire remains an accomplished “testimonial” documentary about a group of contemporary Indigenous women from Mexico. Its sprawling narrative on the ways Zapotec women and men have been negotiating gender and ethnic identity since ancient times opens the path for engaging and illuminating discussions on the cultural resilience of Indigenous peoples’ and on the agency that they display in critically dealing with, or deliberately refusing, the imposition of “foreign” models of cultural development and societal organization.

NOTES

1 For further information on Jorge Sanjinés’ and New Latin American perspectives onto social film and documentary see Zuzana Pick.

2 By this I mean the use of western technology in the shaping of Indigenous narratives.

3 NGOs such as Ojo de Agua Comunicación and Chiapas Media Project are especially inclined to document the ongoing struggle of Indigenous peoples within the context of national political life. However, we should also bear in mind that the body of work presented at recent Indigenous video festivals worldwide also testifies to community videomaking’s orientation towards more culturally and less politically charged topics.

4 The documentary devotes an entire section to the history of Zapotec women from Juchitán, and underlines, among other things, their active participation in the Coalición Obrera Campesina Estudiantil del Istmo (COCEI).

5 In particular, Freya Schiwy reminds us that Jorge Sanjínés and his Bolivian group Ukumau looked at the plight of Indigenous peoples from a Marxist standpoint and considered cinematic production as a means of propelling revolutionary struggle (Schiwy 77).

6 The art of storytelling is reaching its end because the epic side of truth, wisdom, is dying out. This, however, is a process that has been going on for a long time. And nothing would be more fatuous than to want to see in it merely a “symptom of decay,” let alone a “modern” symptom. It is, rather, only a concomitant symptom of the secular productive forces of history, a concomitant that has quite gradually removed narrative from the realm of living speech and at the same time is making it possible to see a new beauty in what is vanishing (Benjamin 87).

7 As the editors indicate in a footnote annotation to the poem, pochote derives from the Nahuał pochtli or puchotli. It provides good wood for construction and carries the symbolic meaning of father, mother and protector. This tree stood in the poet’s patio and constituted a gathering place for fishermen living in the neighborhood (Montemeyor and Frischmann, 72).

8 For further references on the cosmology and cosmogonies of ancient Zapotec see Víctor de la Cruz.

9 On page 153, in Mexico South. The Isthmus of Tehuantepec (London: KPI, 1946), Miguel Covarrubias traces back the origin of Tehuantepec as it is recorded in the oral tradition, and includes references to a “gigantic turtle,” the name Tehuantepec is a Nahuatl word meaning “Jaguar Hill,” a name given in Zapotec as dá:ni gie’ be’zé, “Hill of the Stone Jaguar,” to the principal hill around which Tehuantepec is built. [ . . . ] The legend of the hill is still well remembered in Tehuantepec: “Jaguars of a particularly bloodthirsty type infested the hill, killing and terrorizing the inhabitants. The townspeople appealed to a famous Huave sorcerer to exorcise the jaguars. To this end he caused a gigantic turtle to come forth from the sea and crawl slowly to the hill. The monster reached its base just as the jaguars descended in a double row and upon sight of the turtle they were paralyzed with fright and were turned to stone. The Zapotes were equally terrified by their liberator and begged the Huave sorcerer to dispose of the turtle, which he did, turning it conveniently into a great rock at the foot of the hill.”

For further references on the cosmology and cosmogonies of ancient Zapotec see Víctor de la Cruz, El Pensamiento de los Binnigulasa’sa’: cosmovisión, religión y calendario con especial referencia a los Binnizá (México: Instituto nacional de Antropología e Historia, centro de Investigaciones y Estudios Superiores de Antropología Social, Instituto Estatal de Educación Pública de Oaxaca, Casa Juan Pablos, Centro Cultural, S.A. de C.V., 2007).

10 Translation from Zapotec.

11 Although, as I anticipated before and as I discuss in the rest of this section, Campbell and Green observe that most ethnographic discourse on Isthmus Zapotec women has tended to reproduce the structures of feminist western thinking and of the colonial gaze, Chiñas’ work portends a cross-cultural approach to the issue that leaves more room for a feminist dialogue between women from different locations.

12 Quite interesting are, in this sense, their observations on the works of Mexican painters such as Diego Rivera, Frida Khalo and Miguel Covarrubias. The rhetoric of post-revolutionary Mexico’s nation building and indigenist ideology found some of their best translations in the State’s new educational programs as well as in
Khalo’s ultimately subscribed to the imperialist treatment of Indigenous people, according to Campbell and Green, "Las más que favorables representaciones de las mujeres zapotecas que hicieran Rivera y Khalo, si por un lado no forman parte del discurso de negación y dominación que, según Pratt, caracterizan las descripciones occidentales, por otro lado aún cometen el pecado de estetizar al otro, una técnica retórica asociada con las crónicas de viajes y la expansión europea. (93).

13 This, however, is not to say that identity is static and predetermined -and even less so, is this the case for place and time; rather, they are positional and strategic. See also Kwame Anthony Appiah, “…our individuality is not produced in a vacuum; rather, the available social forms and, of course, our interactions with others help shape it” (18).

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


**NOTE**

DINA FACHIN received her Ph.D in Native American Studies at the University of California, Davis. She is currently working on her manuscript about the self-representation of Indigenous people from Oaxaca, México in literature and videomaking. She is also preparing an edited volume, with Stefano Varese, on Indigenous and afro-mexican communities from the Costa Chica of Oaxaca. She is also interested in poetry. She recently had an article accepted for publication in the Ethnic Studies Review Journal.

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**DE NUESTRA AMÉRICA**