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Challenging the “ethnographic gaze”: Indigenous video and shared anthropology in post-war Guatemala

This paper deals with the role of indigenous video and collaborative filmmaking among Maya-Q’eqchi’ communities in Alta Verapaz, Guatemala. It analyses the historical conditions that provided the context for collaborative video production between local film-makers, communities and anthropologist and the implications, possibilities and contradictions this had both for the Q’eqchi’ and for my own anthropological practice. It argues that this particular community video project not only provided an important ethnographic tool, but also new mechanisms for cultural reconstruction and social healing after an intensely traumatic and violent period of civil war. In this context, the video documents produced provided a space within a wider practice of shared anthropology where each party could advance their own goals. Thus, the project represented an opportunity to explore ways in which anthropology and ethnographic filmmaking could be of use not only to the researcher, but also to the communities studied.

Contrary to written texts, anthropological visual texts offer a unique opportunity not only for the coding but for the decoding of information by everybody involved in such projects. In methodological terms, the practice aimed to challenge the idea of an “ethnographic gaze” by combining different cultural “ways of seeing” through the collective construction of visual texts. Although this multivocality has been long proposed by post modern currents within the discipline, rarely, however, have they addressed the issue of consumption of the outcomes of the anthropological practice, which normally takes place solely within Western circles.

Carlos Y. Flores obtained his PhD in the department of anthropology of the University of Manchester, specialising in visual anthropology. His PhD thesis focused on shared anthropology and was based around a research project involving collaborative film-making with Maya-Q’eqchi’ communities in post-war Guatemala. He has also participated in other Maya and community based video projects in Chiapas, Mexico, and Guatemala. He is currently working as a visiting tutor in the masters programme in visual anthropology at Goldsmith’s College, University of London.