

CSWS Research Matters

Whatever Happened to Zulay?

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Recent theoretical studies of Latin American testimonial literature offer insights to filmmaking and the study of cultural heritage and folklore. These testimonials, which have long made Latin American women a focus, have become increasingly open about considering the relationship between the “researcher” and the “researched.” The 1984 publication of Guatemalan woman Rigoberta Menchú’s story, as told by Venezuelan anthropologist Elisabeth Burgos-Debray, raised some serious questions about how much the researcher edited and shaped Menchú’s words while translating them from Mayan to Spanish. The resulting book also made people think about how much the researcher might have gained (financially in terms of publication, career advancement, and reputation) vis-à-vis the researched. Over the years, researchers have become more self-reflexive about their roles, often including a long preface or a chapter explaining their relationships to those testifying and increasing the transparency of their own methods. For example, the beginning of *Don’t Be Afraid Gringo* (1989), about the life of Elvia Alvarado in Honduras, highlights the camaraderie between Alvarado and researcher/activist Medea Benjamin from California.

Over twenty years ago, Argentine filmmaker Jorge Preloran and anthropologist



Professor Sharon Sherman shoots documentary footage on location in a small Andean village in Ecuador.

Mabel Preloran filmed a documentary in Quinchuqui, a small Andean village in Ecuador. The film concerned a young woman, Zulay Sarabino, her expression of local folk culture, and traditional life. During the making of the film, Zulay expressed her interest in visiting Los Angeles, where the filmmakers lived. She traveled there numerous times and eventually assisted the filmmakers in finishing the film in the editing room—the ultimate in reflexive ethnographic filmmaking. Zulay and Mabel edited the film into a story about themselves as uprooted, eternal wanderers. The film explored in a reflexive way how the experience of fieldwork transformed the participants, the fieldworker and “informant.” The result was a feature-length film that is still shown and widely appreciated within ethnographic

and documentary circles and well known to documentary filmmakers. But viewers always ask, “Whatever happened to Zulay?” Did she stay in Los Angeles or return to her village? A new video I am currently working on, supported by a grant from CSWS, explores Zulay’s life today and the decisions she has made since the earlier film. Moreover, I appear along with Zulay as we make changes to the new video being created and talk about our project.

My research discovered that Zulay’s traditional life was forever changed by her previous interactions with filmmakers. She learned many ways of making her life coalesce with a more global world. She opened her own tourist agency, learned

to sell textiles from her village around the world, and even thought of opening a bed and breakfast in her village to appeal to a western audience. Tourism in Otavalo (two miles from Quinchuqui) is frequent, but few tourists travel to indigenous communities or visit artesanias outside the framework of the mercado. These ventures earned Zulay financial success, but also brought her legal trouble and much envy from her friends and family. Because she has kept many of her traditional ways, such as always wearing Otavaleña clothing; growing, harvesting, and using corn; participating in ritual events; and continuing her indigenous embroidery and jewelry craft work, she does not “fit in” in western culture either. In Los Angeles, she looked like

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a princess; in her own society she was considered “deviant.”

My project explores: (1) how Zulay’s life has been affected by the original research about her, (2) how she has used her experiences as a film subject to improve her life, (3) how these experiences have negatively or positively impacted her life and social standing, (4) how Zulay mediates between traditional Andean life and the western world, and (5) how being a woman and an indigena affects these choices.

Folklore studies and anthropological studies have shifted from trying to objectively study indigenous peoples to becoming their allies in attaining political power and financial freedom. For example, in the first film about Zulay, Zulay and Mabel take over the filmmaking process, an act that epitomizes the way that feminist filmmakers often stretch the limits of documentary film practice by personalizing their work and presenting their narratives through experimental editing (Sherman,



Professor Sherman records details of village life.

Documenting Ourselves: Film, Video, and Culture 1998).

My video also looks at the mechanisms of globalization that may allow for gender equality and economic improvement in developing countries, with a focus on one person’s oral history to demonstrate the significance of local contexts. Zulay reveals the resources used and the economic strategies she developed, from planning to open a kiosk in the local market to establishing herself as a successful entrepreneur. The filmic construction analyzes how she develops those strategies and implements them. My objective is to specify what aspects of “cultural competence” allow her to balance her traditional values while adopting aesthetic and behavioral approaches that appeal to tourists.

This video research presents globalization through the eyes of one woman who is representative of many indigenous women caught in the dilemma of whether to break free from their original locales, remain to affect change, or attempt to do both. In contrast to the common view that globalization is intrinsically associated with homogenization and the destruction of cultural variation, I hypothesize that in certain cultures and contexts, globalization, rather than provoking fragmentation and dependency, may be a positive force, especially for women. In some ways, as in Zulay’s life, it has generated unity (indigenism), reinforced ethnic identity, and created economic independence for women. Moving from the gendered domain of the marketplace where women are



Zulay Sarabino (l) and her daughter Paola at the festival of Inti Raymi.

accepted (and invisible) to one in which women are entrepreneurs in a more visible capacity (Zulay’s tourist agency), women must often juggle and re-create their roles. Zulay represents a number of negotiated processes that many indigenous women are currently facing: living between two worlds. To capture these processes and cultural dynamics, my video moves between Ecuador and the United States, as those involved re-examine their relationship and the influence of the first film on each of their lives today. This story is about women, by women. Through video, the complexities of women’s lives and experiences are revealed in ways that provide insights the written word cannot, showing the triumphs and tensions exhibited by an individual with whom viewers can identify. *Whatever Happened to Zulay* is the story of a woman who went through several life changes and maintained some continuity in her life—a continuity that made her adapt to a new world—and, surprisingly, at the same time, remain attached to her own traditional one.