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“J’ey Alex, Let’s Talk About Unos Proyectos”: Reflections on Mestizo and Indigenous Collaboration in Indigenous Latinx Community Filmmaking

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Abstract

In this narrative essay, I engage in storying as a form of practice to reflect on several ruptures in a community filmmaking project that happened across Oakland, California, and San Juan Atitán, Huehuetenango, Guatemala. These ruptures disclosed possibilities for anti-racist, pro-Indigenous practices through the shifting roles of authorship and authority among *ladino*, the term for "mixed-race" Mestizos used in Guatemala, and Indigenous Guatemalan collaborators from Maya communities. I reflect on how these ruptures were negotiated, focusing on the orientations that emerged toward my role as a *ladino* artist-researcher working with a Maya community in the Cuchumatán mountains of Western Guatemala, and how these emergent possibilities were both nurtured and foreclosed on at various stages of the project. All names are pseudonyms chosen by collaborators.

Keywords: community filmmaking, Indigenous diasporas, Maya-Mam, Mestizos and ladinos

I met Mintz initially at one of his Mam language classes in Oakland, California. I was starting my ethnographic fieldwork at a continuation high school for students institutionally labeled as “Newcomers,” recent immigrants, and the vast majority of the students at the school were from Maya-Mam communities in Guatemala. I attended the language class because it was a rare opportunity to study a Maya language in a community-based setting that would potentially help me with my fieldwork. While I wasn’t able to stick it out with the class long-term that time around (I’ve since rejoined), I knew that Mintz was doing important work in the community around civic participation, public health, and language education. For this reason, I was excited to learn that the following school year he had taken on a job as office manager of the continuation high school where I was doing my dissertation fieldwork.

One day, during the pandemic shutdown and while the classes were meeting entirely on Zoom, I came to volunteer with the food distribution program happening on the school campus. In order to get into the building, the principal had put me in touch with Mintz. He didn’t remember me from the class, but I mentioned to him that I had taken a few sessions of the Mam language class and that I was excited to re-join it in the coming semester. He politely asked me about the work I was doing with the school, and I explained to him a bit about my dissertation research, the audiovisual recordings I was having some of the students do in their homes while they were on their Zoom classes, and how this intersected with my interests in filmmaking, video art, and audio production generally. When I mentioned this, I noticed that Mintz’s attention piqued in a way I hadn’t noticed

before. He asked me, "Do you work with video editing?" and I responded yes. He went on to explain that he wanted to learn to fly a drone so that he could film in his hometown in the Cuchumatán mountains of Guatemala. I froze for a moment . . .

Here I was, a 2nd generation Guatemalan-American *ladino*, talking with a community leader of the Mam diaspora in Oakland about his interest in filming with a drone. While I didn't fly drones, a member of my film collective, Jabari Jones, was an excellent drone pilot, and I knew that Jabari would probably be down to coach Mintz on the basics of drone filming. I hesitated though--was it my place to suggest someone that could help him? Was there any problem with me seeing this as a possible intersection of our joint interests in filmmaking? Was I acting like the leftist guerrilla that came into the community during the civil war and claimed to lead the community in the anti-oligarchic insurgency? Sure, this last question was a bit extreme, but the resonance of my immediate present with those historical experiences of cross-cultural collaboration and interaction between *ladino* activists and Indigenous community members certainly came into sharp focus for me. I went for it—I asked Mintz if he would be interested in me talking to Jabari about doing a drone tutorial and he responded, "Yeah, that would be great!"

From Drone Practice to Diasporic Soccer

Mintz instructed us to meet up on Sunday at the park where he was going to be playing soccer with his friends. I imagined a pick-up game, but when I arrived at the park the first Sunday, I realized it was much more than this. The soccer game that Mintz had talked about playing with his friends was actually a full-blown soccer league called el Torneo Chapín. For the next few months, every Sunday, Jabari and Mintz and I would meet up at the Torneo Chapín, or Guatemalan Tournament, where over a dozen teams, each with over a dozen players, would compete. Decked out in jerseys with customized names--both team names and each player's individual name—the teams would compete with one another while friends and players waiting to play would hang out on the sidelines, eating food from the two tents selling chips, pozole, and gatorade. After the first two weeks, I started bringing my own handheld camera with the idea that maybe I could do some interviews with people since some of the folks hanging out each Sunday were relatives of the youth that I was working with at the school. Even though I had this initial intention, one of the friends of the team that we hung out with—called La Vieja Escuela, or "the old school," all of whom were from San Juan Atitán—asked me if I could share my footage with him. I agreed to this and this began a regular practice where I would compose 15-30-minute edits of the footage from that week's game and share it with the players on Mintz's team so that they could circulate the footage among their friends and family in Guatemala.

It was from this weekly filming practice that I started developing the idea of producing a video installation out of the footage. The social dynamics of food, camaraderie, and transnational solidarity that happened on a weekly basis impressed me, and I felt like it would be amazing to develop an immersive three-channel video installation out of the footage I was already producing and sharing. I started to organize the footage into categories--social interactions, penalty kicks, attempted goals, passes, drone practice, food, etc--and made a mock-up version of the three-channel installation and shared it with film mentors, visual anthropologists, and academic mentors. I got positive feedback from everyone I shared it with initially, and I felt excited to share it with the team. I texted Emiliano, the goalie for La Vieja Escuela, explaining a bit about what I'd been working on with the footage and sent him the link to the draft triptych. He responded, "This is cool, but

what about just having it be a single video so that you can focus on it easier?" I read the text and froze. Here I was again, the ladino artist-researcher-filmmaker, coming up with a fancy idea for an immersive triptych, but my new found Maya acquaintance was basically telling me to scrap the idea and turn it into a single-channel video, completely challenging the aesthetic vision and choice that I had been leaning into and getting good feedback on. What was the decolonial option in this situation? What would be the anti-racist and caring way to approach this situation where a community member, whose likeness is represented in a visual composition, proposes an entirely new direction for the work?

I hesitated. Anxious, nervous, and full of self-doubt, I waited to respond and thought about what was happening. Here I was, engaging in an open-ended community filmmaking project that I hadn't planned out in advance; I was making weekly edits of footage for the team to share, while simultaneously working on this immersive triptych for my own artistic purposes. I debated myself about whether the responsible thing would be to follow Emiliano's lead and scrap the triptych approach, or whether something else was in order. I finally landed on the following approach: I realized that Emiliano and I weren't completely on the same page about what the purpose of the triptych was. While we had been talking for months at that point about audiovisual production on a technical level, we had not talked concretely about questions of aesthetics, spaces for display of the work, nor genres of visual arts that I was drawing on in conceptualizing the triptych. I decided that it would be good to talk about some of these questions as a way of at least getting on the same page about the thinking behind my triptych proposal, which would open up space to revisit his proposal for a single-channel version of my proposed project.

That following Sunday we chatted about these questions after their victory over the opposing team, and what we landed on was that it made sense to continue making the single—channel edits that the team could share, and to also experiment with the triptych for the sake of creating different works with the same footage. The situation resolved itself by doing both of our approaches, but in so doing we effectively set out to create two separate projects with the footage--one project aimed at sharing footage from the soccer tournament with friends and family of the players, and another project aimed at creating a visual representation of the themes that I had been focusing on related to diaspora, community, and placemaking. Two separate projects, each respecting our individual orientations to the space, the footage, and to our imagined audiences.

"Proyecto Audiovisual" and The Meeting After the Meeting

After the soccer tournament ended in May, Mintz invited me to come along on a trip to his hometown of San Juan Atitán, Huehuetenango, Guatemala. This felt incredibly special because I had spent the previous months hanging out with him and his friends, all of whom were from San Juan Atitán, so the invitation to come along on the trip with some of Mintz's other collaborators was exciting. Not only did he invite me to come on the trip, he told me that we could work on a video project using drone and handheld camera footage. This was a dream come true. I hustled and found a community arts fellowship that would provide some funding to carry out a community-based project, so Mintz and I met, developed a proposal, submitted it, and ultimately got the funding. Excited, we developed a plan to purchase a set of cameras, audio recorders, and projectors to bring down on the trip and use to facilitate a filmmaking workshop with a group of youth that Mintz would organize to attend and that I would facilitate.

The group was composed of five youth, ranging from 17-20 years old, who met with me several times throughout the course of our six-week trip. Throughout our sessions we practiced using the audiovisual equipment, doing mini projects and presenting them during the course of workshop sessions, and talking about the larger documentary project that Mintz and I had gotten the community arts fellowship to produce.

During the course of our second meeting together, we went through the stages of pre-production, production, and post-production on a mini project aimed at documenting a cultural practice that they had chosen: dancing to marimba music. The session was full of interesting discussions about storyboarding, angling cameras, punching in and out of shots in post, etc. Once the session was reaching its conclusion for the day, we planned out the date for the next meeting, set some goals for what types of work to bring in, and then started saying our goodbyes for the day.

While I was packing up the projector and laptop set-up, three of the students remained seated at the table. One of them, Geovani, turned and said to me, "Excuse me, Alex, would it be okay if we stayed and talked for a while?" He was referring to himself and the other two youth who were sitting on either side of him. I said, yes, of course, and continued packing up. They spoke to one another in Mam, though there were a few Spanish words sprinkled in that I understood. Since many of the youth who were participating in the audiovisual workshop (or "proyecto audiovisual" as they titled our WhatsApp group chat) were also part of the Asociacion Maya-Mam that was planning a big cultural festival in the coming weeks, I figured they might be discussing this.

After a few minutes, Geovani turned to me again and said, "Um, excuse me, Alex, we have something we want to share with you." I turned and listened as he continued, "We'd like to make a complete documentary." Again, I froze a bit. How would I respond to this? My whole reason for being in San Juan Atitán was to work on a documentary project—we'd gotten funding to make a documentary! —and the youth who I was hoping would help me produce the documentary now wanted to do something on their own. Separate from me. What was I going to do? Since I wasn't clear on what they were asking of me, I decided to ask questions: What did they want to make the documentary about? They explained that they wanted to focus on the past and present of the town, or "el pasado y la actualidad," as they explained to me in Spanish, accommodating my beginner status as a Mam speaker. Another moment of panic: this was more or less the approach I was hoping to take in the documentary that Mintz and I were developing. Would I be stealing their idea if I were to continue? Did I need to propose to Mintz that we abandon our project and just help the youth produce theirs? What was at stake in how I responded to their proposal to develop their own documentary project independent of me?

What helped me through the anxiety of uncertainty I experienced in this moment was grounding myself in the perspective that I was there as a guest on their lands, and that my main purpose in this project was to learn about their own filmmaking goals and to see what opportunities for collaboration might emerge. I responded to the three of them and told them that I was excited about what they were proposing, that it would certainly be important to produce something from their perspectives, and that I would be happy to help them in any way they might like. I put aside the anxiety about the documentary film project that I was directly involved with, and centered the fact that this group of youth that I had the honor to collaborate with was proposing something huge and that I needed to recognize the potential for me to support their initiative and not center myself.

"Alex, I Want to do a Short Film"

During the course of the trip, it became clear that the documentary project would need to be something that I took charge of and focused on. Mintz was invested in it, but from the start we knew that he would be pulled in a variety of directions during the trip as a result of his multiple commitments, including the important cultural festival that he was leading along with his collaborators in the Asociacion Maya-Mam. My path forward in relation to the documentary project was to collaborate with some of the youth from the Proyecto Audiovisual to begin making a list of people we wanted to interview and film in their everyday contexts in San Juan Atitán. I started engaging in daily outings to carry out the tasks on the list and got into a rhythm that began to feel streamlined, effective, and exciting. It was in the midst of this generative filming routine that Mintz pulled me aside one evening, the regular time we had to check in once each day was over, and told me he wanted to talk to me about something.

Excited to hear his idea—perhaps a proposal for including some of the cultural festival in the documentary—I waited for him next to the wood fire stove in the kitchen as he finished putting his baby to sleep. When he arrived, he sat down across from me and said, "Alex, I want to make a short film." Excitement, concern, confusion . . . a rush of emotions moved through me. We were just getting into a groove with the documentary project and now here we were, with three weeks left in the trip, and he was proposing an entirely new project. Should I propose that we double down and just focus on doing the documentary? Was that the right move? Should we do a narrative short film on top of the documentary? Wouldn't that just split our already short time left? . . . What was the right response in this context?

I listened to him explain his idea about doing a short film about a young man's last day in San Juan Atitán before leaving to go to the U.S. and I kept thinking to myself, "Couldn't we incorporate this type of story into the documentary project?" But, once again, I was reminded of the fundamental reality--I was there to learn from the community and figure out ways to work in solidarity with them; and if a member of the community, especially one of my most important collaborators, had energy around carrying out a narrative short film project, then the wise thing to do would be to roll with the energy and make it work: make the documentary project work around the narrative project, or abandon the documentary project altogether. I realized as I thought about it while sitting there with Mintz that he was demonstrating an excitement for this project that I hadn't felt around the documentary, and that this was meaningful. We could still carry out the documentary project since it was in motion and some of the youth from the Proyecto Audiovisual were collaborating with me on it. We could figure out a way to make both work, even if focusing on the narrative film project would take away time and resources from the documentary project. Simply put, whatever hit the documentary project would take would be worth it because it was something that my community collaborators wanted to happen.

The documentary project did take a hit. We continued working on it, but the priority slowly morphed over the last few weeks into the narrative short. At a certain point, we realized that this would be the first narrative film in the Mam language, so the project's importance started to take on a larger scale than originally anticipated. From writing the script, shooting scenes, carrying out editing, and, finally, planning a premiere of the short film in San Juan Atitán, this project became the focal point of our time in the town.

Orienting Toward Filmmaking Projects as a Practice of Caring Labor

Throughout these three examples I see an underlying structure of interaction within the tensions that arose in each multimodal project. In each example, an existing project that I was pursuing was interrupted by separate proposals from one of my collaborators. In the case of the triptych, Emiliano's comment was an aesthetic proposal that differed from the existing approach I was pursuing. In the second two examples, separate projects were proposed altogether that potentially put the projects that I was pursuing at risk. Rather than see this as a purely contingent set of circumstances, I want to think through each of these tensions as part of a dialogic process that was constitutive of the community-based media arts compositions we were all orienting toward. While there were constant attempts to define projects as "mine" or "theirs," the degree to which the projects were actually bounded in neatly defined spaces of ownership and authority was not at all clear. The fact that Mintz and I had secured funding to engage in a documentary film project did not stop the narrative film from emerging as the central project that we both oriented toward. The fact that I was working with youth from the Proyecto Audiovisual on a documentary project did not stop them from pursuing their own documentary film project, and the emergence of their film project did not end up becoming completely separate from the original documentary project that Mintz and I got funding to produce.

Rather than conceive of the porous and evolving projects as indicative of a singular set of filmmaking experience, I find it generative to consider them as moments where community collaboration morphed into moments of co-authorship where each author maintained their positionalities. Instead of obliterating the distinctions between me as a ladino artist-researcher and these Maya community collaborators, the moments of porousness and tension between the various projects we were pursuing reinforced our racialized positionalities. The expertise and insight of the Mam youth I collaborated with was never subsumed into a documentary film project that I was in charge of. Instead, the understanding that I had of myself as an outsider from the US *and* as someone socialized as a ladino/Guatemalan-American provided me opportunities to carefully and intentionally orient toward tensions in the filmmaking production process in ways that contributed toward self-determination for my participants. Instead of foreclosing on their proposals from the position of a more expert and technically equipped audiovisual producer, I held back and encouraged them to pursue their ideas and asked them how I could help them in realizing them. I made these decisions based on ongoing reflection about how the ways that I oriented toward their proposals carried the racialized weight of hundreds of years of anti-Indigenous racism on the part of ladinos who, despite their class status and Maya ancestries, still looked down on their Maya neighbors and colleagues.

The space that we all jointly created through my collaborators making proposals and me stepping back and encouraging them to develop their ideas came at the expense of the projects I originally set out to produce. In the case of the soccer triptych, I ended up spending more time making single-channel edits of the soccer footage which cut into the time that I had left over to develop the triptych. Similarly, the time I spent filming and exporting footage from the narrative film took away time from filming and exporting documentary footage that I was able to schedule and film. Rather than see this recalibration of time, energy, and resources as the result of the contingencies of community-based art projects, I want to think of these as signs that the work that I engaged in with my Maya collaborators was precisely that: collaborative. If the work had simply gone according to

my plans, with my collaborators helping execute what amounted to my plans and ideas, the project would not be collaborative in the sense of being co-authored. It would be something that might better be described as community supported art and filmmaking practice. However, the shifting roles of authorship, emergent proposals, and changing priorities of time and energy indicated that there was a collective between all involved in the project. Our distinct experiences and positionalities were never abandoned through this co-authorship, but, rather, they became the basis for a thoughtful and careful set of experiences that drew on each individual's strengths and insights. This careful engagement with each person's ideas and skill sets was always approached through the lens of Maya self-determination, while still maintaining a sense that I was invited to collaborate as precisely that: a collaborator. I had a dual responsibility: to be careful of not taking up too much space, while simultaneously needing to not recede into the background. I needed to take leadership and be willing to share my opinions and perspectives, but to do so from the respectful position of a guest on Mam lands.

Two Years Later: "Can We Not Show the Short Film Anymore?"

Two years after the work that we did on the short film, I got a call from Mintz. We caught up for a few minutes since it had been a few weeks since we'd last talked. After catching up for a bit, he said, "Alex, I want to tell you that I'm done being a cultural activist. I will always be Indigenous, but now I'm going to be an activist for Christ." I was caught off-guard, but I was also excited; I'd recently made the decision to get confirmed in the Catholic Church as part of preparing to get married, so I was freshly reconnected with Christian traditions. For me, this was a contradictory process: pretty much everyone I knew was shocked that I would affiliate myself with a church that had such contradictory relations with colonialism. However, in this instance, the person I was talking to, one of the most strident anti-colonial and pro-Indigenous Maya friends I had, was explaining to me that they were taking action for Christ now.

I told him that I was excited for him, and that I felt like there didn't have to be a tension between promoting the culture and promoting Christ. After talking for a bit about our interest in reading the Bible together, he brought up what turned out to be the biggest point: "Alex, you know the short film we made, you know how there's that scene in it where the character gets possessed? I don't believe in that anymore, and I don't want to promote that. Is it ok if we don't show the film anymore?" I was thrown off for a moment–here I was again, a Mestizo artist and academic, being told by an Indigenous collaborator that we shouldn't show the film we made because it goes against the Christian faith. I took a breath and responded, "yes, of course we can stop showing it. It's not listed on YouTube, so we can consider it a thing of the past." It somehow felt relieving to say this, to agree to honor the wishes of my friend and collaborator and decide to not showcase this project of ours anymore.

Some might say that putting the first ever Mam-language narrative film into a private archive as a result of one of the director's turns toward Christianity is a form of internalized oppression, a form of colonial gaze. There's something to this–Christianity certainly has a direct history with colonial dispossession and attendant ideologies that have shaped how Indigenous practices of spirituality are perceived. The complication in this case was that the person enacting the Christian viewpoint was a Maya educator, artist, and community leader, not me, the Mestizo collaborator. Complexities like this are part of what makes community-engaged work like Ethnic Studies what it is: a tradition of emancipatory and empowering educational practices that don't seek out easy answers. The key

to being in line with the traditions of Ethnic Studies pedagogies is to center the relationships between community members and the epistemologies that we enact, no matter how contradictory they might be. In this case, it meant deciding to do the right thing and agree to the terms set by Mintz and his rejuvenated Christian faith.

Not all things can be shared at all times. Sometimes the archives that we construct and relate to need to be closed. While I won't be including the link to the film in this essay as I originally intended, I feel proud to have been part of the collaborations that I've reflected on here. My gratitude extends not only to everyone involved in the project, but to all the educators I've learned from over the past 18 years of being a student and teacher of Ethnic Studies. From my undergraduate years in the Latina/o Studies department at San Francisco State, to my fourteen years working as an educator and teaching Ethnic Studies in middle schools and high schools, to my work now as a scholar and artist drawing on these traditions as part of my creative work–I am grateful for the lessons I've learned about what it means to center the people and perspectives that colonialism has constantly undermined.

This will always be a complex process, and it's precisely this complexity that Ethnic Studies pedagogies help us to navigate. My own teaching, working to support the development of student-teachers, continues to grow based on navigating these complexities. Many of the student-teachers I work with are focused on building caring practices that support the self-determination their students. I learn from their reflections of what this looks like in their classrooms, and I share about what I've learned from working alongside collaborators in ways that center forms of self-determination. I hope we all continue improving in our navigation of complex and contradictory trajectories across teaching contexts in secondary school classrooms, Ethnic studies classes, and teacher education programs. Centering self-determination practices through all of these educational spaces takes intentional reflection. I hope that sharing experiences from a set of audiovisual projects helps inspired you to identify further examples of how creative collaborations can provide insights on power, authorship, and self-determination.