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Methods as a Process: The Accidental ~~Tourist~~ Researcher

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ABSTRACT

The Lacandón Rain Forest is the largest neotropic rainforest in North America. Located in the State Chiapas, México it has been the home of the Maya Lacandón community, and other indigenous and non-indigenous residents. My research examined the socio-economic drivers impacting rain forest resource-use and deforestation among women and men. I required a bricolage of theoretical models combined with personal Lacandón narratives. My study revealed that rain forest resource-use, work activities, gender perspectives, and landscape awareness were tied to evolving community identity perceptions and federal government intervention. Self-reflexivity became the means by which I came to understand the change in my role from tourist to researcher in the Lacandón community.

Ricky Maynard, an ethno-photographer, stated at a panel discussion at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney, Australia, in June 2009 “how being part of a community was an accomplishment apart from studying a set of behaviors among people.” Listening attentively to Maynard in Sydney, I reconfirmed my situated position that I could never be a Lacandón woman. Instead, my identity remained fixed between two countries, Mexico and the United States. I understood my role as a woman born in Mexico, and as a person living out a performance of graduate study work activities versus being a single parent gainfully employed in New York City (Schechner 1985:6). I had gone beyond being an accidental tourist in a geographic location and discovered a stage of community engagement through self-reflexivity.

By self-reflexivity, I mean “a turning back on oneself, a process of self-reference” (Davies 1999:4). Cultural expectations were always different for me and many challenges existed in both geographical and cultural locations. At best, I was an “outsider-within” (Collins 1986:14). Within my field site, I was a researcher privileged by Lacandón community members to live and experience life in their town. I could never truly be a member of the community. I was not married to a Lacandón man nor did I possess cultural attributes defining me as a Maya woman. For Lacandón women, their engagement with their rain forest locale informed their gender roles, along with the federal government’s external expectations of them being auto-conservationists. I, too, was defined in the ethnographic process by multiple sets of perceived gender roles in two countries, but was free from several gender and cultural traditions and restrictions in town.

Unlike male researchers in the field, my ability to have discussions and spend time with women and their children without male family members around gave me a unique opportunity to hear their personal narratives without censorship. Women shared their life’s narratives and, in doing so, communicated their Maya history through talk (Burns 1988:99). Their narratives became liberated in a public space. Participant-observation methods also meant opening a door into my personal life. Lacandónes were curious about my life and my reasons for coming to their town. “Porqui aqui?” [Why here?] was a common question that I faced on every visit I had made since 1991. From the onset, a Lacandón elder asked me if “I had permission to be in town?” His son jumped in and said, “Es Mexicana” [She is Mexican]. His father responded, “Ah, Mexicana esta bien” [Oh, Mexican that is fine]. Fine and acceptance were two different cultural concepts that would take years to unveil. Families in town first kept me at a distance. I was never invited to meals or offered anything to eat or drink for free. Social distance and privacy were undercurrents that I managed to swim through on a daily basis.

I also quickly realized the extent to which the Lacandón community understood their role in anthropological discourse. Historically, since the twentieth century, the state of Chiapas has been an epicenter for anthropological research. Since the Mexican Revolution of 1910, anthropological research contributed toward understanding socioeconomic disparities found in stratified localities populated by indigenous communities—refuge areas (Aguirre Beltrán 1979). Several universities in the United States had established research field schools in Chiapas, including the Harvard Chiapas Project 1957-2000 under the tutelage of Evon Z. Vogt, University of Chicago under Norman A. McQuown, Stanford University under A. Kimball Romney, Cornell University under Allan Holberg, and University of Illinois under Joseph B. Casagrande. All universities worked in cooperation and collaboration with the Instituto Nacional Indigenista (INI) under Alfonso Caso, director of INI; Manuel Gamio, director of the Interamerican Indian Institute; Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán, deputy director of INI; and Alfonso Villa Rojas, director of INI Center for the Tzotzil-Tzeltal Zone. Research focused around each researcher’s interest and,

as Vogt wrote, “We dropped the effort to understand the influence of government programs on the Indian community, and moved to a study of a number of basic domains of culture” (Vogt 1994:142).

Simply put, I was one more face among a sea of graduate students in Chiapas. Dr. Jan de Vos, an expert on Chiapas history, asked me humorously in 1991, “Como de gusta Chiapas, el Club-Med de los antropologos?” [How do you like Chiapas, the Club-Med of the anthropologists?] His comment was one facet of the complexities that the Lacandón faced every day. How exactly does one act or speak when your family life story and community history has been shared with people you do not know? To what extent do you reveal yourself to a stranger knowing that what you say or do will be recorded and in a language that is not your own or understood? But, equally important, what was my theoretical and personal history in ethnographic process?

As a community, the Lacandón had reports written about them as early as 1639 by Antonio Rodriguez de Leon Pinelo, court reporter to the king of Spain (Pinelo et al. 1986). Now in 2010, exactly 371 years later, the Lacandón were still in the public eye. Yet, the female voice was at best a patina in ethnographic research. Lacandón history was neatly tied to a governmental ideal of rain forest guardianship and structural socioeconomic inequalities. Social realities in town changed as “tourism was used as an economic justification for the preservation of heritage, although tourism also served to preserve artifacts and folk life in the gaze of the tourist” (Hall 1994:180). The Lacandón community was imagined vis-à-vis geographic and cultural landscapes promoted by government bureaucrats and appreciated by sightseers. Political agendas in the end navigated federal intervention and local rain forest governance policies.

My research objective was to understand the social-economic ecological complexities in the Lacandón Rain Forest in Chiapas. I sought to amplify the multiple voices among the Lacandón through direct research and discourse. I sought to understand the similarities and differences in how women and men used rain forest resources, and the types of work activities they performed in and outside of the rain forest. I analyzed whether rain forest policy or lack of policy affected direct management and governance. Finally, I examined if land and resource use had direct impact on rain forest landscape modification or change. My data supported the importance of a genderscape (Krishna 2004) approach for understanding how labor choices, opportunities, and responsibilities were not only gender driven, but also are part of the federal government’s means of promoting tourism in the region.

Even now, in 2010, I think about the Lacandón community asking me 19 years earlier why I was conducting research in Chiapas. My answer: to fully comprehend socioeconomic drivers causing resource use and deforestation in the Lacandón Rain Forest, and because I simply felt at home in Chiapas.

I confess that I thrive in population density. The bigger the city, the more attached I am to the urban metropolis. Feelings of security come from a city being economically, and geographically, and socially diversified. Hence, a rural setting would keep me alert. Over-romanticizing the lowlands of Chiapas as a Henri Rousseau portrait or a bucolic setting was not an issue. My field site was not a gateway to transcendence or innate nature remembrance.

My familiarity with Chiapas came from distant states in Jalisco and New York. My family’s reaction to me conducting research in Chiapas was not surprising, “Que te vas a Chiapas? Necesitas un pasaporte para ir allí!” [What you are going to Chiapas? You need a passport to go there!] Remarkably, Chiapas felt more like home than Guadalajara, Jalisco, or Manhattan, New York, ever felt to me.

Ecological anthropology and gender questions grew in and out of the field. Questions pending since my first fieldwork experience in Chiapas in 1991 became more multifaceted and in many ways had morphed from micro- to macro-issues over the years. And like a construction worker building a new structure, I needed different tools every step of the way. In my case, I required a bricolage of theoretical models combined with personal Lacandón narratives. Merging private intellectual models with intimate voices of the Lacandón was my accomplishment of being as close to as I ever will be to being part of the Lacandón community.

I first conducted research in Chiapas in the summer of 1991, under the direction of Dr. June Nash. As an anthropologist Dr. Nash had extensive research spanning several decades in the highlands of Chiapas, both as a graduate student at the University of Chicago and as a faculty mentor at City College and the Graduate Center of the City University of New York (CUNY). I was a member of Nash's Research Experience for Undergraduate Program 1991, funded by the National Science Foundation. I quit my job as associate director of the National Council of Women of the United States (NCW-USA) in New York City to pursue my study in anthropology in Chiapas. And in the spirit of the second-wave feminists whom I worked for at the NCW-USA, I was adamant about documenting the most unheard in the research field—the female voice.

In 1991, in San Cristóbal de las Casas, Chiapas, I met a small group of indigenous street vendors selling their crafts in the main *zocalo*. Later, I invited a few craft vendors to eat at a local eatery with their mothers' permission. When the waiter saw the young girls, he quickly asked them to leave, and I had to insist that they were my guests at his restaurant. The waiter was not happy, but the girls' smiles made it all worthwhile. We left for the bathroom to wash our hands before eating, and while we looking at ourselves in the mirror, one girl swiftly remarked, "Te pareces como nosotros, eres bonita" [You look like us, you are pretty]. I answered, "Si me veo como ustedes" [Yes I look like you], and I smiled, feeling ethnic camaraderie for the first time at age 25.

Being born into a family of pallid complexions and blue and green eyes was always a point of distinction in my family in Guadalajara and San Miguel el Alto, Jalisco. Seldom did I look like my family, even though I am one of 43 maternal cousins scattered throughout Mexico, the United States, and Spain. Conducting research in Chiapas allowed me to peripherally feel that I was part of a larger community. I was ready to go into the Lacandón Rain Forest with fewer hesitations and with many inquiries.

Early on, I decided to focus on ecological issues in the Lacandón Rain Forest after my initial discussions with several people in the Centro de Investigaciones Ecológicas del Sureste (CIES-ECOSUR), and other anthropologists such as Dr. Ronald B. Nigh, Dr. George Collier, Dr. June Nash, and the co-founder of Na Bolom Gertrude (Trudy) Duby-Blom. We discussed how deforestation was a prevalent problem in the rain forest, and how additional research was sorely needed. They all mentioned how mostly male scientists and graduate students undertook ecological studies in the rain forest. Determination became my guiding light in a research field where I was one of only a few women working in the rain forest.

Trudy Blom had advised me about conducting rain forest conservation research in 1991. She stated, "You can slow it down but you cannot change it. People have to eat so the government had to do something. Do what you can for today and forget about tomorrow!" I chose not to forget, and in fact that was the catalyst to my many years of travel and research into the rain forest.

Traveling to Lacanjá from Palenque in 1991 took more than six hours by car. Both the state and federal governments concentrated on projects other than infrastructure development,

leading to hazardous road conditions. The drive seemed endless on that unpaved road to the Lacandón town. There were numerous road potholes all along the way. Dirt clouds made it nearly impossible to see the road ahead. Dr. Naptali Ramirez-Marcial, a botanist from the Centro de Investigaciones Ecológicas del Sureste (CIES-ECOSUR), commented in 1991 that at “one time you could leave Palenque and within a short time be in secondary rain forest. Not anymore.” For miles one could only see countless tree trunks—a testimony that modernity had direct impact on rain forest landscape.

The Lacandón town lacked grid electricity, indoor plumbing, telephone access, washing facilities, and indoor latrines. What it did not lack was social and community resilience. It became evident that the town did not offer a glimpse at the past, but rather offered a modern snapshot of an indigenous community struggling for economic subsistence and identity within the global economy. Research in town during most of its ethnographic time, was dominated by male anthropologists. The notable exception was French anthropologist Dr. Marie Odile Marion Singer and Mexican anthropologists Dr. Lourdes Arizpe, Dr. Fernanda Paz, and social psychologist Dr. Margarita Velezquez. I felt that it was time to hear Lacandón women speak. Solutions regarding ecological issues in the Lacandón Rain Forest had to involve speaking, hearing, and working with both women and men as equal stakeholders in natural resource management and economic development.

In January 1995, I made the journey back to my initial field site, but this time not in the company of agronomists or botanists from CIES-ECOSUR. I was alone. As a result of the Zapatista Uprising in Chiapas on January 1, 1994, investigators from CIES-ECOSUR had temporarily halted all their research in and outside of Lacanjá. Traveling from San Cristóbal de las Casas to Palenque by bus involved being stopped four times at military checkpoints. Rain forest landscape had changed between 1991 and 1995. It took only three and half hours and the formerly dirt road from Palenque to the Lacandón town had been impeccably paved. More colonies existed than in 1991, resulting in further deforestation in the area. Colonists’ homes replaced fields of tree trunks.

In 2003 and 2004, I conducted additional qualitative and quantitative research in the Lacandón town. Ethnographic data was collected from a census of 56 Lacandón households out of the 90 family households in town. The census included 30 women and 26 men (age 18 years and older) out of the 352 people in the overall local population in 2003 and 2004. The census data revealed that rain forest resource use, work activities, gender perspectives, and landscape awareness were tied to evolving community identity perceptions. Some scholars had argued that “identity is also formed through relations of power” (Rose 1993:6). In the case of the Lacandón both women and men had to find their way through governmentally imposed power structures. Using genderscape (Krishna 2004) helped me identify gender roles, work activities and perceptions of gendered work, responsibilities, and resource ownership, and illustrated the internal divisions of labor between men and women. Finally, I utilized a community visioning self-assessment tool (Green and Haines 2002) that allowed each Lacandón to envision her or his community’s needs and goals in the future.

In the end, the ethnographic methods process provided me with a tool for self-reflexivity. I questioned my own research and personal goals and needs in the field. I was forced to question my own beliefs and history between two countries during the past, present, and future. But perhaps more important, I became accountable for everything that I wrote. I had to care about what and whom I wrote about even when events and conversations led to compromising moments in my life. Scholarship involved my personal recognition and awareness that every

word I typed pushed me closer to creating a history and future that was not mine by birth or marriage. Yet, I had to take responsibility for the impact of my work in the Lacandón town in both the present and future. Without self-reflexivity, I could not be part of a community base that I was privileged to live in throughout many years. In the end, being part of a community involved the basic element of caring.

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