

# ADJUSTING THE LENS

## an introduction

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In a recent essay, Laurel C. Smith describes the reception to *Dulce convivencia* (Sweet gathering) (2004), a documentary short directed by the Mixe filmmaker Filoteo Gómez Martínez, when it was screened during an academic symposium at a university in Xalapa, Veracruz.<sup>1</sup> While some members of the audience praised the film for its visually striking depiction of Mixe cultural tradition, an anthropologist attending the event criticized this even-paced meditation on the rural production of *azucar panela* (unrefined whole cane sugar) as an essentializing celebration of indigenous life. Although apparently opposed, both those who praised the film and those who criticized it inscribe a similar framework for understanding community-based media in general, especially media made in indigenous languages. They attest to the limited scholarly expectations associated with independent, community-based, collaborative, and indigenous-language audiovisual productions, and the tendency to conflate them with what has been termed “indigenous video.” Both often assume that these productions will depict cultural traditions and speak to their survival or need for protection. Smith’s essay, in contrast, highlights the complexities of accessing audiovisual technology and the filmmaker’s transnational travels and collaborations with other filmmakers and advisers from outside his community.

Most importantly, she draws attention to how *Dulce convivencia* acts politically on two levels. According to Smith, *Dulce convivencia* intervened in a Mixe community that was politically and socially divided. Tensions exist-

ed in part due to the struggle over economic resources and local decision-making power in a context marked by increased autonomy for municipal administration and the Mexican government's neoliberal adjustment policies. The community also experienced divisions and a waning commitment to social service in light of religious diversity and migration to urban centers. Smith concludes that the video intervened from a distance in a community that Filoteo Gómez Martínez still considers his own by offering a vision of collaboration and reconciliation in a context marked by "privilege and state sanctioned corruption."<sup>2</sup> *Dulce convivencia* also intervenes politically in the context of knowledge creation. It questions the hermeneutic privilege to read, interpret, and set the parameters of understanding to which academia holds fast, and the privilege to apply these same parameters to audiovisual works. The video opens a gap between "idealism and essentialism," where an indigenous man's access to visual technology and his "transnational experiences through theoretical frameworks for identifying and discussing indigenous communities" has, in Smith's view, the potential to engender "more inclusive conversations about development, governance, and sustainability."<sup>3</sup>

This volume is inspired by the diversity of independent, community-based, collaborative, and indigenous-language videos in Mexico and how they come to act politically in unexpected ways and on unexpected terrain. Our contributions seek to unmoor the notion of independent, community-based, collaborative, and indigenous-language video from its ethnographic constraints, but without reducing such media to mere aestheticism. As Elías Levín Rojo puts it in his contribution to this volume, we are not so much asking what the media does to a culture, but what members of culture do with the media. How do these media intervene through and beyond their place of production? How do they inspire and link up with other communities trying to reshape the structures of racism, sexism, homophobia, Othering, and profound economic injustice? How do these media forms come to resignify the hegemonic discourses that have sustained these structures?

The appropriation of media technologies by indigenous peoples in Mexico, Canada, Australia, and elsewhere to control their own representations inspired many of the early scholarly approaches to collaborative production in indigenous languages. Since then, the terms "indigenous media" and "indigenous video" have become globally recognized labels for collaborative media production by indigenous peoples and usually in indigenous languages. At the same time, the popularization of anything indigenous has spawned a hugely lucrative industry that has added to the complexity and ambiguity of the terms "indigenous" and "indigeneity."<sup>4</sup> Thus, global indigenous media, as the editors of the volume by that title explain, is shaped by the debate over "what does and does not constitute 'Indigenous media.'"<sup>5</sup>

In Mexico the term *video indígena* obscures a plural genealogy of independent collaborative media and art activism. As Byrt Wammack Weber argues in his contribution to this volume, in Mexico “indigenous video” generally refers to a certain style of video making, originally promoted by the state in the context of its *Transferencia de Medios Audiovisuales* (TMA) program of the early 1990s, and guided since then by both state and nonstate actors. Video indígena tends to limit our view of community video to ethnographic questions about cultural persistence or rescue in the context of neoliberal multiculturalism. It casts a shadow over parallel genealogies of contemporary homegrown, vernacular video making and its increasingly transnational travel, as Ingrid Kummels’s chapter in this book lays out. The term “video indígena” also conceals collective video art and video activism that can be traced back at least to the artistic and political fervor erupting in the response to repression in the 1960s, the student massacre in 1968, the civil society efforts to deal with the aftermath of the massive earthquake of 1985, and the electoral fraud of 1988. Referencing video artist Sarah Minter, Wammack Weber observes that “indigenous community-based video developed in parallel with experimental video and video art, and . . . there were at least some important encounters between the two tendencies.”

In his insightful discussion of *Día dos* (2004), Dante Cerano’s experimental, genre-defying video about a family fiesta in his P’urépecha community, Jesse Lerner briefly makes a similar case. He argues that “Super 8 enabled the effort sometimes called the *transferencia de medios*, or media transfer, which explored the possibility that nonprofessionals, with minimal technical training, could represent themselves and their culture ‘from within,’ with minimal aid (or interference) from media professionals, anthropologists, and bureaucrats.”<sup>6</sup> The Super 8 movement carved out a space outside of the state institutions and their sanctioned discourses, creating at once an aesthetic proposal and a kind of *personalidad colectiva* (collective personality) that raised issues and problems that did not form part of the official cultural agenda of the moment.<sup>7</sup> The parallel and overlapping movements of Super 8, video art, and collaborative community video in indigenous languages explain the high degree of participation in the 1987 *Primera Muestra de Videofilme*, which helped to inspire the state-sponsored TMA program and video indígena in the 1990s. But this movement also continued to spin off in other directions, including experimental, sometimes urban-based social video and video art movements, as Wammack Weber shows.

While some of the essays collected here engage with existing scholarship on the indigenous video projects initiated by the TMA since the early 1990s, we mainly focus on the much broader experience of independent, community-based, collaborative, and indigenous-language video production, both in

Mexico and through transnational forms of media activism. We relate the various audiovisual styles and forms to socially critical, transformative, resistant, or constitutive processes offscreen. Without aspiring to an exhaustive presentation, together these chapters open up a view onto the continuities and encounters between filmmakers, communities, social activists, and artists within and beyond Mexico, both rural and urban, indigenous and not.

To address the specificities of and differences among the complex local histories and culture-specific knowledges that these different styles and contexts imply, we have used the concept of diaspora to guide the individual contributions to this volume. This has required recuperating diaspora from both hegemonizing readings, which would limit the concept to physically displaced cultures and ethnic groups, and postmodern readings, which would apply it to any experience of otherness. We open up the concept, recognizing that the diasporic experience of foreignness, hybridity, multiplicity, difference, and transcultural collaboration is shared also by peoples who remain in their places of origin. We understand diaspora here as conditioned by the persistence of structures of power shaped by colonialism but also opening up potential sites for transforming oppressive relations and structures. In our understanding, diaspora has corporeal and spatial dimensions but it can also reference a symbolic terrain of meaning making. Diaspora in this sense entails an epistemological dimension, where ideas and philosophies travel and are reshaped in the encounter with affected others. These others are not the product or agents of colonial Othering, but rather sympathetic others, often themselves inhabiting marginalized spaces and open, for instance, to inspiration by indigenous experiences with *comunalidad* (community governance and community life). In this process of epistemic diaspora, ideas and philosophies long negated in the history of knowledge geopolitics take up residence on the terrain shaped by these very histories and transform the place for thought.

In this sense our contributors steer the concerns about individual and collective identity toward a broader examination of the political and what that notion means within the diverse contexts of independent, community-based, collaborative, and indigenous-language media. In each case we seek to address how diasporic media-makers map new relationships between image and sound into the existing fields of audiovisual practice and discourse, which are structured by power differences and by conventions of visual and auditory representation that have been shaped by colonialism and its successors. Together the chapters in this book suggest, more specifically, that within such contexts, these media communicate and contribute to social and cultural changes within communities; often, they critically counter existing conventions of representation in television, commercial cinema, and ethnographic film, and help shape the constitution of a new sense of community. We show

that they may also treat the overt confrontation of social movements or indigenous and rural communities with the state or the armed forces, and that they often challenge Eurocentrism and globalization as modes of understanding and analyzing the relationships between political change and audio/visual practice and aesthetics. The notion of the political thus ranges from intimate collaborative interventions into the realm of meaning making that constitute new communities to the treatment of social uprising. It may also include the diasporic incursion onto hegemonic terrains of knowledge where those formerly uncounted and without a part, to paraphrase Jacques Rancière's influential understanding of the political,<sup>8</sup> assert their relevance to a newly constituted community of often transnational artists and activists.

This book offers a broad understanding and detailed analyses of a selection of contemporary independent, community-based, collaborative, and indigenous-language audiovisual production in Mexico and in Mexican migrant communities in the United States. Its authors include scholars, artists, and media makers who discuss the social, political, economic, aesthetic, and technological aspects of such production. Some of these chapters examine the textual aspects of films/videos, while others focus on the audiovisual as a practice, thus contributing to the growing recognition that indigenous-community and collaborative video create effects at multiple levels, including those of the social relations of production, distribution, and reception, and of the textual effects produced by different styles and their various receptions.

The first part of the book articulates our critical recuperation of the notion of diaspora. Byrt Wammack Weber critically appropriates the concept as he examines the term "indigenous video" in light of diasporic film and video art in Mayan communities. He argues that although the Mexican state's initiative to give indigenous communities access to video technology (the TMA) has been instrumental in promoting indigenous video makers, diasporic film and video owes much more to initiatives and movements that have remained independent of the Mexican state, such as the many community-based video art movements. The term "indigenous video" falls short of capturing these diverse genealogies of politicized art. Inspired by Hamid Naficy's notion of an accented cinema, Wammack Weber analyzes Mayan video's accented styles and argues that the hybrid styles contribute to a diaspora aesthetic that destabilizes hegemonic notions of Mayan culture.

Elías Levín Rojo further complicates the idea of diaspora, politics, and community by engaging recent video work with communities of disabled people in Mexico who have been inspired by indigenous community media. He argues that the concept of diaspora here comes to signify the diasporic occupation of a media space of which disabled people have been dispossessed but which rightfully belongs to them. Levín Rojo demonstrates the ways in

which disabled communities' diasporic appropriation of the symbolic terrain on which radio and video create meaning allows them to challenge discriminatory and patronizing traditions of representation and to create the very community from which they speak.

Chapters 3 through 5 elaborate different forms of diaspora within and across national borders. Ana Rosa Duarte Duarte, a Mayan anthropologist and filmmaker, looks at an intimate case of diaspora and community by offering an account of the production and aesthetics of her experimental autoethnographic video *Arroz con leche* (1997–2009). Her film and her critical essay here recuperate the Mayan concept of *K'óol uti'al k'kuxtal* (which Duarte translates as “the desire and passion for life”) through the local knowledge of women in her community. Juxtaposing this notion with the hostile reaction of her dissertation committee and the chairperson's equation of indigeneity with violence, the author intervenes in the not-uncommon politics of disciplinary gatekeeping in academia. Duarte Duarte refuses to maintain a critical distance toward herself and her subjects, instead giving voice to a collective subject and a primarily intracultural communication without abandoning the hope that it may also contribute to an intercultural dialogue. She argues that her film highlights the need for bypassing the conventional ethnographic documentary genre, and that the very technologies that “serve the empires of control” can be appropriated.

In her chapter, Argelia González Hurtado examines the notion of diaspora in view of the performative documentary style in the work of Taraspanglish, a media collective that brings together P'urhépecha migrants from Michoacán to California. She looks at video as a form of diasporic autoethnography where hybridity fractures stable notions of indigenous identity. But this is not to say that migrant subjects become fragmented. Rather, González argues that the video shorts by Taraspanglish reveal a notion of identity based on acts of self-definition, an active and constant process of choice and positioning, of constructing belonging in light of migrant experiences and powerful discourses.

Based on extensive and in-depth fieldwork, Ingrid Kummels details the links and intricacies of indigenous multimedia production and consumption between Tamazulapam, Oaxaca, and the town's diaspora in Los Angeles. Her chapter sheds light on the continuities between radio shows, home videos, and the local contracted services documenting festive gatherings that shape transnational practices of survival and decolonization. Her chapter opens up an alternative history of video in indigenous language, highlighting how video in the Sierra Mixe evolved long before the state-sponsored video indígena movement, and how it has continued autonomously since then. She draws attention to film aesthetics and commercialization, and concludes that this

complex diasporic media production does not fit the paradigms of using video to intervene in the public sphere with a communal focus.

The final section of the book focuses on instances of collaboration between transnational diasporic media activists residing in Mexico and local social movements. Livia Stone's ethnography examines the association between Canalseisdejulio and Promedios/Chiapas Media Project in the production and distribution of the video *Romper el cerco* (2006), a video about state repression and the negative mass media representation of a local social movement that has resisted the appropriation of communal lands for the construction of an airport on the outskirts of Mexico City. The chapter offers an in-depth look at how diaspora and the political are articulated in the context of transnational activism and the independent media sphere.

Finally, Freya Schiwy reflects on the idea of radical politics, aesthetics, and communities of shared affect through an examination of activist videos created in the context of the 2006 Oaxacan political protest and the EZLN's Other Campaign. She suggests that some of these videos amplify an emotional charge that differs from the committed revolutionary filmmaking of the sixties and seventies. They become emblematic of a particular understanding of the political and its relation to affect, one that arises from travel and displacement, or diaspora, and occupies unfamiliar physical and theoretical spaces. Together these last chapters shed light on how transnational activists and media productions cultivate diasporic spaces in the midst of corporate media power while traveling back and forth across the border between the United States and Mexico as they seek to forge common political projects and new forms of collaboration.

The essays in our volume thus engage a selection of independent, community-based, collaborative, and indigenous-language media productions that straddle the boundaries between radio, home video, cinema, art, and activism within and beyond Mexico. We relate the various audiovisual styles and forms of media production to socially critical, transformative, resistant, or constitutive processes offscreen. This collection seeks to open a new perspective on the understanding of community media in Mexico by redefining its scope well beyond the documentaries and other audiovisual works sponsored by the Mexican state, mass media, and NGOs since the 1980s, and beyond the limited geographical range of existing scholarship. Perhaps most ambitiously, we intervene in a globalized and interdisciplinary debate over video art and activism and politically invested documentary film, drawing attention to the insights that can be gained from the vantage point of collaborative media in indigenous languages.

Community and collaborative video made in indigenous languages constitute a rich and varied media practice that has compelled scholarship across

a variety of disciplines, including film studies, communication studies, anthropology, cultural geography, studies in visual culture, and cultural studies. Much of the inquiry into this plethora of collaborative media production has been guided by *Media Worlds* and *Global Indigenous Media*, the two key edited books on the topic, which focus on narratives of collaboration and production of community media and their impact on indigenous identities and local cultures.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, studies in alternative communication, such as *Making Our Media: Global Initiatives toward a Democratic Public Sphere*, have offered glimpses of the globally varied practices of community media, in this case inquiring into the way these media practices inform democratic processes and broad access to media representation.<sup>10</sup>

Scholarship on Latin American collaborative film and video in indigenous languages is dispersed among different journals and chapters in edited volumes, including the ones referenced above. There is also a growing number of monographs focusing on regional practices. In the case of Mexico, there are now two notable book-length studies: Claudia Magallanes-Blanco's *The Use of Video for Political Consciousness-Raising in Mexico* focuses on videos made in solidarity with the uprising of the Zapatista National Liberation Army in Chiapas, while Erica Cusi Wortham's *Indigenous Media in Mexico* offers a detailed examination of a range of media practices in Oaxaca and Chiapas. Essays and book chapters about community media in Mexico have largely focused on the initiatives evolving out of the Mexican state's media transfer program (TMA), but they have often overlooked parallel collaborative media practices in indigenous languages that arise from connections with the video art movement and from the transnational activism of indigenous and non-indigenous media artists and collectives. In addition, scholarship has rarely focused on the role that collaborative audiovisual media have played in the transnational connections of the globalized movement for social justice and against the World Trade Organization, where autonomist activism and indigenous social movements often encounter each other.

Similar histories of collaborative and at times transnational art activism, however, inform indigenous and collaborative video making elsewhere. Although couched in ethnographic methods and concerned with the boundaries of aboriginal identity, Kristen Dowell's study of urban intertribal aboriginal video art in Vancouver, British Columbia, in the late 1990s chronicles its origins in the 1970s as a coming together of Native artists and avant-garde activists "pushing the boundaries of media arts, new media, performance art and video installation."<sup>11</sup> In some cases the trajectories of militant and testimonial filmmakers and their collaborations with indigenous communities have been well established. For example, in Bolivia, so-called indigenous video has evolved in part out of the political and anticolonial activism of documentary



filmmaking collectives such as the Grupo Ukamau, which in the 1960s and '70s sought a new aesthetic language capable of countering the Hollywood industry's global promotion of consumer capitalism.<sup>12</sup> David Wood has traced the roots and the morphing of much indigenous media activism in Colombia to the militant filmmaker and visual anthropologist Marta Rodríguez and her collaboration with Jorge Silva in the making of testimonial cinema during the 1970s and '80s.<sup>13</sup> The media interventions by the Bolivian video makers associated with the Centro de Formación y Realización Cinematográfica and the Coordinadora Audiovisual Indígena Originaria de Bolivia, better known by the acronym CEFREC-CAIB, have thrived in collaboration with independent documentary filmmakers like César Pérez from Peru and others who formed part of the New Bolivian Film and Video Movement (Movimiento de Cine y Video Boliviano) that was created in 1984,<sup>14</sup> and that from the outset has been committed to promoting political change.<sup>15</sup> In 2011 CEFREC-CAIB temporarily joined with the acclaimed Wapikoni Mobile, a traveling film studio that provides workshops for First Nation youth in aboriginal communities in Quebec and Labrador, resulting in a DVD titled *Desde nuestras miradas*, featuring nineteen video shorts made collaboratively in different rural and urban contexts in Bolivia.<sup>16</sup>

Independent and collaborative media in indigenous languages must therefore be reconceptualized as forms of media art and activism with diverse roots in the subfields of visual anthropology, militant fiction and documentary cinema, and the diverse and global video arts movement, but also in the homegrown and vernacular audiovisual projects of media makers in their own places of residence. Each of these forms of media art and activism has incited multiple disciplinary and interdisciplinary lines of inquiry that have examined the “ever-morphing state of video’s deployment as examiner, tool, journal, reportage, improvisation, witness, riff, leverage and document.”<sup>17</sup> Independent, community-based, collaborative, and indigenous-language media attest to the dynamic and diasporic ways of visualizing and engaging cultural change and political struggles that involve foremost the diasporic travel of people and ideas. As Schiwy argues in this volume, such collaboration can indicate a new valence of indigenous epistemologies as they encounter and help shape decolonial visions for social and political alternatives to the status quo.

Our volume thus expands on the work of scholars and students of independent, community-based, collaborative, and indigenous-language media studies who recently have begun to acknowledge that such media warrant careful analysis of production and distribution as well as broader theoretical and textual analyses that consider both social and aesthetic practice. We situate independent, community-based, collaborative, and indigenous-language film and video in the larger context of film, media, video art, and cultural

studies, and seek to foster scholarly awareness of film and video practices in Latin America beyond individual independent art house film and the new wave of commercially successful coproductions that have commanded a renewed interest in Latin American cinema. While our collection cannot offer an exhaustive engagement with this diversity, we hope that by focusing on Mexico and its internal indigenous and transnational diasporas, this book may open up new perspectives on the variety and complexity of independent and collaborative media practices and on some of the critical lines of inquiry that emerge from these contexts and that may well resonate with other histories of media art and activism.