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**Title:**

**Whose Impact is it? A Decolonised Approach in Intercultural Communication and Creative Methods in Practice-based Research**

**Abstract**

This project report focuses on the complexities, dynamics and impacts of intercultural communication, with the example of indigenous video productions by the Zhigoneshi Collective from the Arhuaco community in Colombia. A decade-long filmmaking journey undertaken by the collective targeted the violent political situation in the region and challenged some of the past films made about the community by external filmmakers. A collaborative self-reflective research film concludes the project; it explores the researcher’s positionality, inevitable power struggles, tensions around indigenous agency, intellectual ownership of the footage, politics of representation (who has the right to represent whom) and the importance of contexts of dissemination. More importantly, it explores the complex role of external filmmakers who must strike a balance between inevitable pre-assumptions, cultural stereotyping and their own privileged positionality.

**Keywords:** decolonised indigenous filmmaking,politics of representation, contexts of dissemination, intercultural collaborations, collaborative filmmaking

**Introduction**

The initial objective of this project was to explore the potential of indigenous filmmaking in a traditional community in Colombia (the Arhuacos) to reach international audiences and contest local violence. I aimed to assess the impact of small non-professional productions on wider dissemination practices on a global scale by examining the way in which these productions can come into being and successfully participate in film festivals and national and international screenings and events. I also aimed to assess the results of these screenings for the community and their initial concerns for safety. Furthermore, the investigation explored the different approaches between current indigenous productions contrasted with past Western productions in the region. Through the combination of extensive collaborative filmmaking, textual analysis of the existing films produced in the region, structured and unstructured interviews, and visits to multiple film festivals and screenings, an image of complex power struggles underlying the film work in the region emerged. As such, the project evolved and became an investigation into attempts to decolonise the representational practices targeting symbolic violence, challenging the politics of representation and the right to represent the ‘other’.

Soon after the filmmaking process commenced, the focus inevitably shifted to the exploration of the researcher’s own positionality and potential bias. Given the community’s unfavourable opinions about the past filmic work in the region, it was crucial to re-assess the role my planned film was to play, as well as the nature of the collaboration. I quickly decided to give up on the idea of a bigger crew and to do all the filming myself. This allowed me to spend more time with the community, get to know them better, offer my assistance with their filmmaking and editing, and participate in multiple meetings and trips to various indigenous villages. This was not only to respect their reserved approach to the presence of filmmaking crews on their territories, but also to build a more genuine connection and trust. I was more interested in getting to know them and understanding their motives than in securing a higher quality film with no soul, based on business-like instrumental relations.

As a result, the nature of the project shifted from the impact of indigenous filmmaking to evaluation of collaborative ethnographic methods and the assessment of the role ‘external’ researchers play while working with traditional communities. Going further, the project became an evaluation of the impact intercultural, collaborative, audio-visual work can have on the communities, the researcher and the process (methodology) itself. That, in turn, led to a re-design of the training for future creative methods/practice-based researchers working with film.

**A Long and Nuanced Journey to Get the Bigger Picture**

This project lasted nearly a decade from its early conceptualisation to the final version of the film. Initially, I intended to explore the dynamics of indigenous production in the region of Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, Colombia, and document it in a film. The preparatory research also focused on the dissemination and distribution with the aim of measuring whether the reasons behind indigenous filmmaking match the effectiveness (and actions) resulting in the final output and its distribution. For that reason, multiple film festivals were visited and analysed, among others the Indigenous Film Festival in Bogotá, Colombia, the RAI Ethnographic Film Festival, Native section of the Berlinale and the Native Spirit Film Festival. The region I selected for the investigation is inhabited by three indigenous communities, Kogui, Wiwa and Arhuaco, descendants of an ancient Tayrona civilisation. Apart from early ethnographic photographs and texts (Bolinder 1914–1915, 1920) and particularly unfavourable films (Rozo 1964) and writings (de Vilanesa 1964) which present the community in a very negative light, I identified some more contemporary films made in the region (Ereira 1990, 2012). The initial visit to the Sierra took place in 2012, and the main fieldwork was carried out in 2015–2016. The most fundamental collaborators were Pablo Mora, an anthropologist, filmmaker, and the main link between the Zhigoneshi Collective and the non-indigenous world, and Amado Villafaña, the leader of the Zhigoneshi and now the Yokosovi collectives. Between October and December 2015, I joined the Zhigoneshi Collective on their extensive trips to multiple indigenous settlements in the region: Kankawarwa (Kogui village) (16–18 October), Dumingueka (Arhuaco) (24–26 October), Sabanas Crespas (Arhuaco) (31 October–2 November) and Nabusímake (Arhuaco) (20–23 November). In between these visits, I circulated between Santa Marta and the Indigenous House, and Valledupar, where the collective continued their work.

The underpinning theoretical context for the research was multi-layered and interdisciplinary. It started from the ideas of describing cultures and the ‘Other’ (Geertz 1973), tracing the theories of representation (Hall 1997), the gaze in cinema (Mulvey 1975) where the female is replaced by the ‘Other’, the ideas of ethnographic spectacle (Tobing Rony 1996) and the closely related idea of culture on display (Dicks 2004). Following that, visual economy in relation to race played an important part (Poole 1997), as well as the complexities of describing cultures in film (Ruby 2000), the aesthetics in relation to the indigenous world, and how (in)compatible they might be when compared with Western expectations (Leuthold 1998; Mora 2015). Finally, this research was contextualised by thoughts on non-fiction film (Nicholls 1991, 1995, 2010), transcultural cinema (MacDougall 1998, 2006), and local and global indigenous media (Schiwy 2009; Gleghorn 2013), as well as the idea of indigeneity as a performance (Graham and Penny 2014) and Ulloa’s idea of ‘the ecological native’ in Colombia (Ulloa 2005).

 This project was approached from a widely interdisciplinary perspective, which, I argue, works very well in these types of research. The filmmaking itself was at the core of knowledge generation, leading to the process of understanding my position and addressing the initial research questions. As such, the film addressed the fundamental part of the research aims and objectives. The findings reflected simultaneously on the intentions, methods and outputs, which were linked together by means of addressing the complexity of the assumed task.

Borrowing from Desmond Bell’s idea of the primacy of practice (2018), the making and contextualising of research *through* making became central in the case of this project, and the creativity embodied the ‘fusion of creative and critical elements’ (48). It also linked to what Dawn Mannay (2016) warns about in relation to participatory methodologies, that is, underlying assumptions, inevitable power relations and, most importantly, the positionality – all so familiar to my research. Mannay tries to conceptualise the idea of ‘giving voice’, an attempt I found deeply problematic following my fieldwork in Colombia. Allowing participants to ‘give voice’ assumes a position of power occupied by someone who has the right to manage this permission. The voices and opinions are already there, so what gives me the right to materialise them? Hence the importance of working ‘with’, ‘alongside’ your participants, and not ‘on’ them. Also, could the idea of an ‘authentic voice’ ever be fully materialised? Points of view are inevitably entangled in complex socio-political interdependencies and narratives, some of them subservient to the idea of making a film which can appeal to wider audiences, others to the anthropological curiosity to describe cultures, and others to protecting the land and the relative autonomy of one’s own culture. None of them is, by definition, malevolent or sinister, although they often seem to work in opposition to one another. Inevitably, the clash of intentions influences all the parties involved, effectively impacting the methodology. Mannay suggests that many creative participatory projects are unable to transcend the hierarchies between researcher and participants (2016, 52). Removing myself as far as possible from the hierarchy of power was crucial for my project. The most immediate way to achieve that was nearly giving up on the idea of making my film as soon as I learnt about the community’s resistance to external filmmaking in the region. My curiosity to learn about their filming initiatives and complex reasons behind them was stronger than the artistic (and research) ambition to make a film. My research diary from that phase of the project reveals my arrogance in assuming that I could just go there and make my film, as well as my decision to make a video essay about why I could not make the original film instead. Having accepted the status quo, I was still invited to accompany the collective in their filmmaking journey. I offered my assistance to hold microphones, film some interviews and meetings, assist the editing process and help with subtitling and translations. At one point, Villafaña asked: ‘So when will you start making your film?’ I signed the release forms and legal documents, and I continued my role as the collective’s assistant while now also gathering footage for my own film. The crucial goal was to keep the community involved in my process at all times. This became particularly critical at the time of editing. We did collective edit reviews, and I stayed in Colombia until every person involved was happy with my version of the story. I also discussed it with Pablo Mora who now uses fragments of my film for his project exploring all the existing filmmaking projects with the Arhuacos. This approach, potentially risky for the film, allowed me to properly explore my position in the collaboration and find a comfortable compromise. At the same time, it was the most revealing experience which shaped my research identity, my priorities and my future interests.

**The Multi-layered Impact**

UK Research and Innovation defines impact as a ‘demonstrable contribution […] to society and the economy’ and ‘the effect on, change or benefit to the […] society, culture […] or quality of life beyond academia’ (from Research England’s definition for the Research Excellence Framework [REF]). We can argue that there is not much difference between traditional and practice-based research in relation to that. Reflecting on REF impact, the Filmmaking Research Network(FRN)confirms that, despite a large number of films submitted to the 2014 REF, very few could claim strong impact. Instead, there was a variety of uses of film, with many cases of film being used as a form of dissemination of research. The FRN identifies five ways in which film can create impact: film as dissemination of research (leading to impact); content informed by research; non-academic filmmaker conducting academic work; novel aspects of filmmaking; and filmmaking as underpinning research with impact on individuals and researchers. My project falls into the last category (where the filmmaking starts earlier in the research cycle), but the impact of this project could be evaluated on multiple levels.

The research in question resulted in several publications, conference presentations and two versions of the film (lasting1 hour and 30 minutes respectively); the first one shared only with the community, and the second one made public. The film was recently shortlisted for the AHRC Film in Research Award, which I consider to be a significant recognition of its research value. (Interestingly enough, the film was rejected from most traditional film festivals, failing to fit in the traditional non-fiction category. As mentioned, there was a price to pay for accessing the work of the community, their difficult-to-access sacred places, meetings with elders and lengthy gatherings or film projections – all that was possible because I was the only crew member for the documentation of the process. As the result, the film is often technically flawed, but, I argue, it brings a thorough reflection on the process, methodologies and the researcher’s own positionality).

The most immediate beneficiaries were the Zhigoneshi Collective and the closest collaborators. Together with Pablo Mora, the collective reuses fragments of my film for their work, the same way I used their past productions in my film. As such, this is an ongoing conversation which mutually recycles and reuses the material for creative and research purposes. In Erik Knudsen’s investigation of ‘the madness of filmmaking’ (2018), he suggests that rich research opportunities with the film production sector provide ‘exploratory space for filmmaking’ (122) which promises new knowledge, understanding or applications to their art. My own experience proves that there could be a significant gap between one’s artistic ambitions as a creative practitioner, and the aesthetic (dis)satisfaction when creative media practice is applied in research. I echo Knudsen’s argument that ‘documentation and critical reflection form the core methodology of the project’ (123), which leads me to the next argument.

On a second level, the impact could be assessed in relation to re-evaluating decolonised, ethical approaches to creative methods, which in turn could benefit other researchers working in the field. Writing about the reach and impact of ethnographic research, Philip Vannini and Sarah Abbott (2019) stress the importance of going beyond the obvious routes of distribution for academic outputs (highly ranked journals and books).

Perhaps the biggest impact of this research can be seen in the area of pedagogy and in understanding the training needed for future practice-based researchers working with collaborative ethnographic methods, despite the fact that ‘academics are not activists’ (Vannini and Abbott 2019, 689) and that there is value in remaining objective. A meaningful community engagement means a constant battle between targeting reputable academic publishers and reaching out to niche communities which might benefit from the research. Following this category, public engagement could be measured by the circulation of the research work, with websites, podcasts and research videos reaching much further than reputable academic journals. By the same token, this research has resulted in the establishment of an international interdisciplinary conference and art/film festival focused on Communities and Communication, which, between two editions, attracted nearly 6000 submissions from 126 countries. The theme of the latest edition is Diverse Voices, and it aims to address a decolonised approach to intercultural and interdisciplinary communication. The research has also resulted in a seminar series which addressed the principles of practice-based research. The seminar, in turn, will result in a Special Issue for the *International Journal of Creative Media Research* (planned for summer 2022). Additionally, the experience gained has taken material form in the development of a Master’s module on practice-based research, multiple conference presentations, invited talks and several publications. Finally, it has led to the creation of a research group which explores practice-based research across two research centres, and extensive doctoral supervision for practice-based candidates working in film.

Finally, the researchhas also contributed to the re-examination of ethics and the decolonised approach to telling stories. The project secured my roles in both the Ethics Research Committee and the Decolonisation Steering Group, overseeing both research and curriculum development. Focusing on Eurocentric centrality, Martin-Jones (2019) argues that ‘the coloniality of power functions by freeing itself of its past so that it can repeat its former abuses with impunity’ (208), and much depends on how stories are told. Similarly, this research uncovered the layers and interrelations of points of view (colonial representations of the Arhuaco community, modern points of view of European filmmakers, Arhuaco re-appropriation of archives and decolonisation of local knowledge, and my humble attempts to analyse all these representations and my own positionality in creating yet another perspective, without eradicating the inconvenient past through Orwellian doublethink).

With all that said, could that equal impact, as understood in academic requisites? How can this be captured and measured to ensure that it complies with the set requirements? According to Vannini and Abbott, ‘relevant and accessible channels and models of dissemination’ do fulfil that need (2019**)**.

In summary, the impact of this research project is complex, and it avoids easy classification. The discovery-based, multi-layered planning enabled dynamic and innovative methodologies which prioritised rigorous investigation over technical qualities of practice. The extensive duration of the project allowed for careful consideration of the validity of the research questions; it also re-evaluated the researcher’s role and the dynamics of intercultural collaborations. As such, the project turned into a self-reflexive research exercise which assessed the principles of impactful creative collaborations within research contexts. Despite challenges and unpredictability, it offered great insight into the nature of practice-based approaches with their uniqueness and originality. There is no doubt that it led to a tangible impact on at least several communities and disciplines. Furthermore, it continues to inspire the design of a successful toolkit and support for practice-based research training, making it a highly valuable endeavour.

**Links to the practice**

The voice of Sierra Nevada (teaser): <https://youtu.be/CAYah05Udxo>

The voice of Sierra Nevada (film): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bLdEZ1nBJKo>

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