

### **Slide 1.**

The Paradoxes of Applying Ethnography at a distance: Dürer's Rhinoceros.

**Ethnography is 'the recording and analysis of a culture or society, usually based on participant-observation and resulting in a written account of a people, place or institution' (Simpson & Coleman 2017)**

### **Slide 2.**

Distance and Representation.

The artist Albrecht Dürer was not only the master printmaker of the age but a Renaissance man, interested in sciences, geometry, religion and the objects that arrived to Europe from the Americas and India. In 1515, he received news of an animal encased in armour: it was an Indian rhinoceros which was being transported towards Rome as a present for Pope Leo X. The rhinoceros was exhibited in Lisbon. A description and a sketch of the animal, by an unknown artist, arrived in Dürer's hands. He would never see an actual rhinoceros in his life.

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At the time the only description of a Rhinoceros was in Pliny's classical text 'Natural History'. The excitement that Dürer's woodcut brought was because nobody had seen such a beast in more than a thousand years.

Dürer's Rhinoceros is an animal far from reality. A legendary creature whose folds of skin were mistaken for plates of armour. Dürer shaped the public perception of what a rhinoceros was for the next two hundred years. It became a symbol of power inspiring the coat of arms of Alessandro de Medici.

Is it art's idealisation of the natural world the answer to overcoming distance? Or are metaphors just another type of truth?

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##### REPRESENTATIONS

Nevertheless, it was Dürer's woodcut that Europeans adopted as the *true* depiction of the rhinoceros. Not even the presence of Clara another Indian Rhinoceros who was toured and exhibited around Europe 200 years later, and who also had her portrait painted by a famous artist, would change the perception imprinted by Dürer.

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##### **Who supplies the information?**

In the case of Dürer's Rhinoceros it was brought to Europe by the Portuguese, who along with the Spanish were the two maritime forces, who were looking to gain access to Asian goods.

I was prevented from going out to the field to conduct my research by the Covid-19 pandemic. I attempted to find solutions and other ways to reproduce the same proximity at a distance. In a moment of enthusiasm, and encouraged by early online investigations, I wrote: "To recreate the proximity that this research needs, it is necessary to devise a new methodology, incorporating a strong network of collaborators, between researchers in the field, leaders of organisations and individuals prepared to communicate at a distance in a collective and polyphonic documentary." I was very optimistic.

In this presentation I will analyse **the paradoxes and pitfalls** of producing a documentary at a distance, from the participants' perspective and in times of pandemic and crisis, to determine how narratives are created. As with Dürer's woodcut 'Rhinoceros', reality is very different.

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During my research, Dürer's *Rhinoceros* has become more than a metaphor. It is a symbol of the effort of conducting research and directing an ethnographic documentary at a distance. Despite implementing new strategies on a daily basis, it was difficult to find solutions to the problems I encountered. This gave me many doubts: What is the best way to represent something you heard or lived many years ago? Memory holds tremendous pitfalls, but it is all we have in order to exist. And yet, the documentary filmmaker is committed to truth.

### **Slide 7.**

Documentary is a form of art. As a genre, it is optimal in addressing social conflict, due to its capacity to register the human experience and its power to communicate those feelings to an audience. Moreover, this experience can trigger actions and changes in those involved in the process.

Using Alexander Astruc's image from his essay: 'The Camera Pen,' filming in a non-intrusive way allows us to write with the camera, a style that I prefer, but the lockdown forced me to explore other paths.

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In my documentary film practice, I like to construct the narrative through the protagonists' voices in a simple, clean ethnographic style that enables the audience to relate to them without a narrator. When filming, I use an 'eye level' camera to draw the viewer into the intimate world of the community, and give a human perspective. I avoid the exoticisation of remote tribes or indigenous peoples who supposedly live-in harmony with nature. I look to depict the continuation of their knowledge and traditions in a modern world.

## **Slide 9**

I began my study with an online ethnographic exploration, via Facebook, on the strategies of organisation and communication used by the National Movement of Midwives '*Nim Alaxik*' in Guatemala.

Looking for a better understanding on how indigenous women sustain their communities, while adapting to the changing circumstances of the Covid-19 pandemic, and if this creates a fairer society.

And analysing the online development of horizontal communication from a critical ethnographic, feminist and decolonial perspective.

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The Maya are not part of the past and their organisation and resistance take place in the virtual public sphere.

As Gladys Tzul Tzul noted, in an online meeting during the Covid-19 pandemic in May 2020, the indigenous population were able to organise themselves and support each other, not because of the state, but in spite of it, resorting to horizontal communication. The subsistence strategies used in Guatemala during the internal armed conflict were applied. Horizontal communication took place through the communal radios and cars with megaphones, they informed the population of the local indigenous authorities' decisions.

## **Slide 11.**

Initially I performed a non-participant online ethnographic research, and then moved to participant observation of live conferences, for more than a year, from May 2020 to today.

The National Movement of Midwives *Nim Alaxic* were organising themselves in the face of the Covid-19 pandemic emergency. It was through this Facebook group that they coordinated the majority of their Zoom meetings, some of which were live-streamed via Facebook. This has been invaluable in understanding the

communal mind-set and how the strategies of communication work in Maya organisations.

Furthermore, and it's here where the PARADOX emerges, before the Covid-19 pandemic, to attend this type of meeting, as a researcher, would have involved a series of negotiations and the presence of a gatekeeper. Now the meetings are available to anyone on their Facebook page.

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*Nim Alaxic's* aim at the time that I began my research, was and still is to become part of the Guatemalan official health system, on the basis of the undeniable importance of the work that they do without pay. Through the following months, their work came to be recognised and supported not only by the rural, but also the urban population, and was praised in the local media.

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*Prensa Libre*, a newspaper of national circulation, covered their story in a special feature.

Midwifery knowledge has been preserved and transmitted through generations. Many of these women come from a lineage of midwives. Others say that their path was revealed to them in dreams. Their body of knowledge involves specialist techniques and therapies. Traditional midwives provide their service free of charge not only to rural areas, but also in the urban periphery.

In the rural areas, they attend 90 % of all births. Their ethos is reflected in their defiant motto: "a midwife is born not made," which commits them to a life of service. A Maya midwife does not receive a salary. She receives a donation from the woman giving birth or from her family. Donations can range from a monetary contribution to animals or provisions. The adverse conditions of traditional midwives' work has not improved in all these years: they continue to travel at their own risk and expense to remote sites to attend their patients. They

are discriminated against at hospitals; Western practitioners have appropriated their knowledge, and until recently they were not recognised by the Guatemalan healthcare system.

**Findings:** *Nim Alaxic* have communal organisation and communication strategies that differ from Western individualism.

They have an inclusive participatory system which overcomes access to the online information.

With their live streams they do not depend on established media.

They are proud of their cultural knowledge.

They are leading a successful campaign to gain recognition for their work.

They coordinate with the government sexual education campaigns.

And more midwives want to be part of the movement.

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#### **ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH AT A DISTANCE.**

- What the organisation expects from the researcher?
- Ethnographic research at a distance requires commitment from both parties and online access for the participants.
- Zoom, WhatsApp and other platforms are useful for the non-participant observation of the meetings' dynamics.
- Social media permits insights into the organisation's politics.

#### **DOCUMENTARY MAKING**

- Bad quality footage.
- It is likely to end up with a collection of talking heads or/and voice overs that need to be illustrated.

POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS: performances, resort to metaphorical or poetic images filmed by the participants or the researcher, animation, use of archive footage.

## **Slide 15.**

### **DIRECTING AT A DISTANCE –COLLABORATION STRATEGIES**

#### **Preparing to Film in Situ**

Reduced film crew (max, 3 people).

– Define vision and filming style.

Film professionals, including myself, **have their own ideas** about how things need to be done.

– Follow ethical protocol, be aware of **unconscious bias**.

– Follow health guidance to avoid contagion.

– Check costs.

#### **Preparing the Crew**

They need to receive:

ethnographic research training,  
filming style instructions,  
practice interviews  
and ethical protocol explanations.

Listen to their concerns:

The cameraman for my project, a Guatemalan man from European origin, had serious concerns about being accepted by the participants, despite having worked as a cameraman in similar productions before. This was a problem that affected the continuity of the project later on.

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### SETBACKS AND SOLUTIONS FILMING AT A DISTANCE

- Social prejudices and stereotypes could be difficult to overcome.

Not everybody can gain access.

- There is a constant need to maintain a critical and vigilant eye.

Analyse critically every situation, not only the filmed footage.

- Gatekeepers: be aware of relations based on power.

Unconscious bias needs to be addressed.

- Falling into stereotypes: participants repeat only what they think the researcher wants to hear. This is a recurrent problem in areas where participants are used to the presence of NGOs and researchers.

- Different perspectives, every person has a different point of view and style of filming.

How can we take advantage of this situation to enrich our research and our story?

- Explore collaborative options: contact **indigenous production** companies and visit their archives.

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### REPRESENTATION AT A DISTANCE

Social media cannot be fully representative of the indigenous midwives' culture. The process of conveying meanings by words in a language that is not one's own and in contested media, such as an online/virtual place, certainly implies a process of surrendering. As Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui (2020) argues: 'In colonialism there is a very particular function for words; they do not name, they mask.' Nevertheless, it was possible for me to discern the dynamic of their horizontal communication and organisational system in their meetings.

For them the social media platforms, like Facebook, provides them with rapid and daily communication during the pandemic, whilst allowing them to maintain their traditional knowledge and participate in new initiatives.